

# THOMAS COOK OF LEICESTER

*by*

JACK SIMMONS

Thomas Cook is, beyond question, the most famous man who has ever lived and worked in Leicester: the only one whose name has been heard all over the world. Even more important: the business he built up was itself something new. He was not, as it might be, one more hosier or grocer who stood out from his fellows in an established line of commerce simply by superior shrewdness and energy and skill. The work he undertook was entirely novel, springing from an idea of his own. In developing it he made the largest single contribution of any man to the growth of a new industry: what a Victorian could describe rather genteelly as "the Business of Travel",<sup>1</sup> and what we have agreed to call the tourist industry. The travel agents in Leicester, or any other large town, the sheets of advertisements in the newspapers and the glossy, brightly-coloured brochures announcing package holidays—they all derive from the work that Cook began in 1841 and from the foundations that he laid in his business, carried on exclusively in Leicester until 1865, when he opened an office in London. It is with that first phase of his work that this paper is chiefly concerned.

## I

He was not a Leicester man by birth. He was born at Melbourne, just over the Derbyshire border, on 22 November 1808, in a very small cottage in Quick Close. He was an only child. His father, John Cook, played little part in his life; he died when the boy was four. His mother's influence on him was more important. She was the daughter of Thomas Perkins, one of the pastors of the Melbourne Baptist Church, and a firm and devoted member of the New Connexion of General Baptists for nearly 50 years of her life. She was left poor by her husband's death; but she married again in 1812 and gave the boy some schooling. He was taught by three successive masters until he was ten. He was then employed as a gardener's lad for four years—first at Melbourne Hall, at a penny a day, and afterwards in the service of a market gardener, who was often tipsy and sent the boy to cry his wares round the villages near by or to sell fruit and vegetables in Derby market.<sup>2</sup>

Tiring of this occupation, in 1822 he entered the service of John Pegg, to learn the trade of a wood-turner and cabinet-maker. Meanwhile his mother had started a small shop, in which he helped her, selling—it seems a somewhat odd conjunction—earthenware and books.<sup>3</sup>

He evidently went through some intense religious experience at 17, which brought him forward in his community, and in 1828 he was chosen



Plate 5 Thomas Cook—*date unknown*

you shall have the train", and gave Cook a contribution towards the expenses of the enterprise.

Everything went well. The train duly ran, on Monday 5 July 1841, carrying 570 passengers, who paid a shilling each for the return journey. No one drew much attention to the man who had organised it. The account given by the *Leicester Chronicle* commends the liberality of the Midland Counties Company in running the train, observing also that "Mr. Cook of Market Harborough sounded the 'note of preparation' for the speechifying".<sup>7</sup>

## II

The idea of the railway excursion—that is to say, of a party of pleasure travelling by train specially provided for the purpose, at a low fare—was not new. It had been tried on a number of railways in the 1830's. To take one example, from the remote South-West on 14 June 1836: two trains set off from Wadebridge, hauled by the locomotives *Elephant* and *Camel* and one of them accompanied by the band of the Duke of Cornwall's Rangers, to travel over the whole 13 miles of the Bodmin & Wadebridge Railway to Wenford Bridge. Advertisements having been issued some days before, stating that "the trains would be fitted up for the purpose of taking parties on an excursion of pleasure, almost the whole of the waggons were engaged some days previous, and several hundreds of persons were disappointed at not being able to procure places on the morning of the day". On the return journey the two trains parted at Dunmere, one running to Bodmin, the other going back to Wadebridge. The whole affair passed off splendidly, and everyone was pleased.<sup>8</sup>

Similar plans were soon adopted here and there on other railways. Sometimes they were called forth by special events: like the church bazaar at Grosmont in the North Riding of Yorkshire in August 1839, to which the Whitby & Pickering Railway arranged to provide an hourly service of horse-drawn coaches at reduced fares.<sup>9</sup>

From 1840 onwards—perhaps before—special trains began to be run at fares well below the normal, by arrangement between railway companies and private organisations. The Newcastle & Carlisle ran a special train at half-price on a Sunday in June 1840 for the employees of R. & W. Hawthorn, the Newcastle locomotive builders, the firm guaranteeing a minimum number of passengers. That was a striking innovation. When another Sunday excursion was announced by the same railway in the following year, a Scottish minister who was then visiting Newcastle put up handbills to proclaim

A Reward for Sabbath Breaking.  
People taken safely and swiftly to Hell!  
Next Lord's Day by the Carlisle Railway for 7s. 6d.  
It is a Pleasure Trip!<sup>10</sup>

That tune was to be played, with many variations, in the years to come.

It was in 1840 also that the Mechanics' Institutes—then in their brief efflorescence—began to use the railway for the benefit of their members. The

Leeds Institute organised a trip to York at half-price, by ordinary trains, in June. On 20 July the Nottingham Institute chartered a special train to allow its members to visit an industrial exhibition in Leicester at a low fare. The Leicester Institute reciprocated a week later. Indeed, the notion excited it so much that it also announced another excursion by the Leicester & Swannington line to Ratby, where J. F. Hollings was to lecture on the antiquities; but this had to be called off for lack of support.<sup>11</sup> In the following month the Midland Counties Railway went into the business itself, running another pair of excursions between Leicester and Nottingham.<sup>12</sup> The idea caught on, and by June 1841 the adjoining North Midland Company and the Sheffield & Rotherham were making arrangements of the same sort.<sup>13</sup>

We can assume that Thomas Cook observed all these things. He may well have heard, from his fellow-Baptists and from other temperance workers, of the excursions that were suddenly multiplying in other parts of the country. All he did, in the first instance, speaking strictly, was to harness these new facilities to the cause of temperance, and to make himself personally responsible for the arrangements with the railway company, for selling tickets, and—by travelling with the train himself—for the comfort of his passengers.

In the autumn of the same year 1841 he moved to Leicester.<sup>14</sup> He does not say why, or precisely when; but the motives are easily inferred. The most powerful, we can be sure, was the larger opportunities the change afforded him to promote the cause of temperance, to which he was now dedicated. At the same time he gave up his woodworking business in favour of printing,<sup>15</sup> with the sale of books and perhaps other merchandise as well. Already in Market Harborough his wife had been persuaded, reluctantly at first, "to open her house for the accommodation of temperance travellers, who desired freedom from the drinking practices of licensed hotels"; and as soon as they arrived in Leicester she offered the same facilities there.<sup>16</sup> This must have provided a modest income from the start. Before long it led to the establishment of a Temperance Hotel; and in 1853 to the large purpose-built edifice in Granby Street.

It is easy to see why Cook was attracted to Leicester. He and his wife had not been happy in Market Harborough, where there was a good deal of rowdyism, directed against those who professed temperance. In a larger town their singularity would go almost unremarked, and they were sure of finding congenial society. As a missionary centre Leicester offered much greater opportunities, above all because it was served by railway to London, to Yorkshire, rather circuitously to Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester. (No railway reached Harborough until 1850.) It may well have been the success of the July excursion that determined Cook's decision to move.

The first four years of his residence in Leicester are the most obscure in his adult life; and that is tantalising, for they were also critically important. He lived first at 1 King Street, and from that address he printed and published two directories. They bore different titles, and were rather different inside too. The first was *The Leicestershire Almanack, Directory, and*

*Advertiser for the Year 1842*; the second *A Guide to Leicester, containing . . . a Directory* (1843). There were no more until 1848, when he produced *The Annual Guide to Leicester; containing a Sectional Directory*. In the preface to this third publication, he explained that competitors had driven him out of the field in 1843. Evidently the 1848 *Guide* was not a financial success, for although called "annual" in its title, this seems to have been the only issue.<sup>17</sup> In some respects his little books are superior to the usual run of such things. The second and third editions both have a useful and painstaking account of the town's places of worship (anticipating some of what was to be included in the census of 1851), and list its schools. In 1842 he declared himself in business not only as printer and publisher but also as bookbinder, bookseller, and stationer; next year he was keeping a registry office for servants as well. By 1848 he has moved his main premises to the east side of Granby Street (No. 26), with his "commercial boarding house" above; and he has a branch, for book-selling and a news agency, at 1 Campbell Street, close to the station.

We hear a little, from time to time, of his activities in the cause of temperance. As Secretary of the Leicester Temperance Society he corresponded with the celebrated Father Mathew in 1843 about a projected visit that apostle was to pay to the town.<sup>18</sup> A procession was planned for the occasion, with a vast tea party in the Amphitheatre at which it was hoped that the Mayor would preside. But Father Mathew, then in the first flush of his fame in London, was too busy to come; and we next hear of Cook addressing a meeting 15 months later to raise a subscription to render financial help to the Father, which was urgently needed.<sup>19</sup> That meeting was presided over by the Rev. John Babington, Rector of Cossington, who had been converted to total abstinence himself by Cook and remained friendly with him and his wife into extreme old age.<sup>20</sup> The first speaker was James Silk Buckingham, a celebrated and engaging oddity. Others included two leading politicians in the town, Richard Harris (lately Mayor) and William Biggs. And finally there was John Ellis, who had been a director of the Midland Counties Railway when Cook ran his first excursion and was now Deputy Chairman of the amalgamated Midland Company—at that moment the largest railway in Britain. Throughout his business career the association of Cook and his firm with the Midland Company remained close. It was facilitated at the outset by his association, in a common cause, with another Leicester man so powerful in railway politics.

Cook followed up his first success quickly, going on to organise "a succession of excursion trains alternating between Leicester, Nottingham, Derby, and Birmingham extending over two or three years; and these visits were all of a decidedly temperance character".<sup>21</sup> There, for the moment, he remained: a valuable and energetic promoter of a cause, but unknown outside it. His name is not mentioned in connection with these excursion activities in the Leicester newspapers in 1842-4; nor does it figure anywhere in the records of the Midland Counties Company. That company was, however, enlarging its excursion business on its own account. On 22 June 1842 it offered a trip to Matlock—by train to Ambergate and thence by boat on

the Cromford Canal.<sup>22</sup> In August it was more ambitious. Special trains at low fares were then being run from Preston and Liverpool to London. It was rumoured that something of the same sort was being contemplated from Leicester. The Liberal newspaper, the *Leicester Chronicle*, supported the notion warmly:

Some plan of procuring and arranging for special trains [it wrote] is much wanted at the present time. We have no doubt the directors of the Midland Counties Railway would meet the reasonable wishes of the public on all occasions if a certain number of passengers were ensured for a special train. The only mode of securing the desired end would be for a large party of persons who feel anxious to have a trip . . . to head a list with their own names, and each gentleman to state the number of tickets he will take. They might also negotiate with the company as to terms and the day of return. The lists could be left at the newspaper offices and booksellers' shops for signature.<sup>23</sup>

There could be no clearer statement of the cumbrous mechanism then required for promoting railway excursions. It is an open invitation to an intelligent entrepreneur.

The idea of the excursion to London was taken up at once. The trip was advertised a week later.<sup>24</sup> One presumes the Midland Counties Company assumed the responsibility. Next year it authorised Bell, the Secretary, to run special trains, at cheap fares, from Leicester to Rugby and from Nottingham to Derby in connection with another special train to Liverpool. The Committee of Management also resolved that "provided a sufficient number of passengers can be guaranteed" Bell should arrange for a special train to be run at any time from Derby to Nottingham at single fare for the return journey.<sup>25</sup>

The same business was under way in many parts of the country. It began to attract national notice, as a new phenomenon, in August and September 1844.<sup>26</sup> Excursion trains were now growing to gigantic proportions. As early as 1840 we read of one comprising 73 carriages, drawn by five engines, from Sheffield to Leeds.<sup>27</sup> The Brighton Company announced one for Sunday 1 September 1844, and the demand for places was so great that it had to run in four parts, conveying 88 carriages in all.<sup>28</sup> The business was growing even faster in the North. On 23 September a single train of 72 carriages, behind six engines, conveyed nearly 3,000 passengers from Gateshead and Sunderland to York.<sup>29</sup> Another train, not much smaller, had been arranged to go from Leicester to York on the same day. It progressed so slowly that some of the passengers preferred to stretch their legs by walking alongside it; others, during one of its frequent prolonged stops, went nutting in a wood near the line. It left Leicester at five in the morning and stumbled into York at two. By that time the train from Gateshead had already arrived, and its occupants had settled down like a swarm of locusts on the city; the no less famished passengers from the Midlands had difficulty in finding anything to eat. Both trains were heavily delayed, through mechanical and other failures, on the journey home.<sup>30</sup>

The mismanagement of such excursions brought odium—very reasonably—on the railway companies. The *Leicester Chronicle* had other complaints to make about trips run to the Nottingham Goose Fair. It came to the sententious conclusion that “the directors of the Midland Company either do not or will not understand the Philosophy of Special Trains”.<sup>31</sup> Experiences like these were not only unpleasant. They threatened danger. The Board of Trade sounded a warning in a circular letter sent to the railway companies on 17 October. There it spoke bluntly of “the disastrous result which must ensue if the practice of conveying great multitudes along railways be not accompanied by a better system than that which has hitherto prevailed.”<sup>32</sup>

Those who watched this new phenomenon were divided in their attitudes towards it. We all know of the vehement opposition shown by Wordsworth to the extension of railways into the Lake District. It was grounded largely on his fears of excursion traffic, and memorably expressed in this same year 1844.<sup>33</sup> To him it threatened intolerable damage to the country he passionately loved. Though few people felt so strongly as he did, there were many others who showed a wary coolness towards the whole notion of excursion trains. It is significant that, among the railway papers in London, the senior, *Herapath's Railway Journal*, practically ignored them throughout this summer, evidently considering them unworthy of notice. But the newly-established *Railway Chronicle* welcomed and encouraged them generously. “Railway excursions are now becoming our chief national amusement”, it remarked at the beginning of June.<sup>34</sup> “They form a new element”, it argued, “in the usefulness and in the profitableness of railways which deserves immediate and favourable attention from railway proprietors and directors. They are an experiment easily made, of which the risk is small.” And then, in words that must have delighted Thomas Cook if he read them: “Would to God . . . [railway excursion travelling] could be universally substituted by our population for those deleterious excitements, the ginshop and the alehouse”. The conclusion the paper came to at the end of the excursion season in October was that “the campaign has been successful—satisfactory equally to both parties”; though it showed it was not blind to the deficiencies that had been revealed, adjuring the companies to provide themselves with more second and third-class carriages in time for the season of 1845.<sup>35</sup>

### III

Thomas Cook must have watched all this, and as he watched, calculated. He had now a child to support: a son born in 1834 and christened John Mason. In a small way the family was probably just making a livelihood, by his printing, by such odd jobs as came to him, and from his wife's temperance boarders. But he was not committed to his present way of life, any more than he had been to gardening as a boy or to woodworking. He had struck no roots, given few hostages to fortune. His wife and he were both people of very modest expectations; their one enthusiasm was for the cause they had both embraced. He could afford, better than another man

in a more established position, to take a risk at this point. He had little to lose. If the risk did not succeed, he could fall back again on the work he had been doing in Leicester since 1841.

All that is clear enough, though it is a matter of conjecture, not of documentary evidence. We can easily understand why it was at this moment that he began to develop the idea he had first tried out four years earlier, with two trips from Leicester to Liverpool in August 1845.<sup>36</sup> We are still left guessing, however, how he got started. A little capital was needed here and there, if only as a float. How did he finance the travelling he himself had to undertake in preparation? From the very outset he left nothing to chance, or to other people who might let him down. The success of his business was founded in large measure on this infinitely painstaking care to get all the details settled exactly before hand. It was his practice to write and print a handbook for each of his excursions, a copy of which was given to every traveller. They show his meticulous acquaintance with the route and with the main points of interest in the places to be visited, as well as his forethought in giving necessary counsel to his customers and deciding exactly what was, and what was not, included in the price of their tickets.

These early handbooks are now extremely rare. Let us look at two of them, of which we are fortunate enough to have copies in the City Reference Library.

The two trips to Liverpool were successful enough to justify Cook in a more ambitious enterprise for 1846: an excursion to Scotland, by railway from Leicester to Fleetwood (through Normanton and Manchester), thence by steamer to Ardrossan, and again by railway to Glasgow and Edinburgh.<sup>37</sup> The *Handbook* for this trip is quite substantial. It begins with an essay on excursions, a defence of them against charges that they were a waste of money, promoting only dissipation and the decay of religion. It then sets out the itinerary, culminating in the travellers' arrival at Edinburgh, where a Public Breakfast was to await them and they were to be entitled to see the regalia and other principal sights of the Scottish capital free of charge. The chief point of difficulty for Cook was evidently the securing of the steamer *Falcon*, which could not be engaged unless 1,000 passengers were guaranteed. "That was a responsibility", says the *Handbook*, "which the directors of the Midland Railway would not undertake, and therefore the conductor of the trip had no alternative but to take the responsibility, or wait till it was seen what tickets were sold."<sup>38</sup> The minimum number was forthcoming, however, well in advance of the appointed date.

The other of these two early *Handbooks* is rather different. It is for a much less elaborate excursion, from Leicester to Belvoir Castle, not by train but by coach, on 29 August 1848. Again, though this is only a very small pamphlet, there are the points of interest carefully noted on the way. Cook tells his customers that, "having had much experience in working out the details of excursions to interesting places, [he] has been deeply impressed with the necessity of placing in the hands of strangers descriptions of objects and places visited". Among the details of the journey we note that



“musicians have been engaged to perform through the towns and villages on the route, and at the Castle”; and that on arrival there the company would be split up into parties of 25 for a tour of the building. At the end we find a note: “The special privileges secured will only be extended to those who hold the Excursion Ticket, sold by T. Cook, 26 Granby Street, Leicester”.<sup>39</sup> That is couched in a tone one soon comes to recognise in all Cook’s literature: terse, civil, but firm beyond mistake. He made it quite plain that he would stand no nonsense. Here is another of the secrets of the success he ultimately won.

This last excursion was a small enterprise, interesting because it helps to indicate the range of Cook’s activities. He was now becoming well known, his name mentioned with respect in other parts of the country. Preston (where teetotalism originated) took up the excursion idea with enthusiasm. It owed much there to Richard Stanley, and to Joseph Dearden, who proclaimed himself the friend of “Mr. T. Cook of Leicester”, imitating his *Handbooks* and quoting remarks of his on railway travelling.<sup>40</sup> The Scottish trip of 1846 was repeated annually for the four succeeding years.<sup>41</sup> The tourist trade there was then beginning to boom, assisted by Queen Victoria’s visit in 1847.<sup>42</sup> How pleased Cook must have been when in 1850, passing through the Crinan Canal, he overheard a stranger remarking that the fame of the west coast of Scotland was due largely to “one Cook, of Leicester, an excursion manager, whose Handbooks have circulated through a large part of the country”.<sup>43</sup> Those books, which must have cost him a great deal of trouble, had justified themselves, not only as a useful piece of equipment for his customers but also, more widely, as a good advertisement of his work. At that moment he might well feel that he had arrived.

In a business like this—as anybody can see from looking at the tourist industry today—no one can long enjoy a monopoly. Fresh ideas are constantly bubbling up. If Cook was now beginning to attain some national reputation, it was for his excursions inside the United Kingdom—extended for the first time to Ireland, to Killarney, in 1852. Others were already engaged further afield, notably Joseph Crisp of Liverpool, who was a pioneer in organising excursions to the Continent. He had begun to run trips from Liverpool to Paris (by way of Brighton and Le Havre) at least as early as the summer of 1845.<sup>44</sup> He described himself in his advertisements as “contractor”, and he seems to have done no more than make some arrangement with the railway and shipping companies concerned, to secure a special price for the journey—seven guineas from Liverpool to Paris and back first class, five guineas second, permitting a fortnight’s stay. Cook’s ideas, matured in Scotland from 1846 onwards, went much further than that, to the provision of hotel accommodation and of all the services the travellers might need, at a single inclusive price. He is the undoubted originator of the “package tour”.

It seems a little odd that when, encouraged by the success of his Scottish trips, he turned his eyes abroad, he should not have looked to Europe in the first instance. Perhaps he felt inhibited by his lack of any language other than English. In such a visionary, it is not surprising that

he should have conceived the idea of taking parties to Palestine and Egypt, the lands of the Bible: nor can we wonder that 20 years went by before that dream was realised—requiring facilities for travel quite beyond what were available in the 1840s, and much greater experience that he had gained as yet. His mind turned much more immediately, however, to America, and he actually began preparations for an excursion there in 1850. On his way to Liverpool to negotiate with the Atlantic shipping companies, he changed trains at Derby, and there by accident he met his Leicester acquaintance John Ellis, now Chairman of the Midland Railway, and Joseph Paxton, who was one of its directors. The Midland had been quick to discern in advance the demand there would be for travel to the International Exhibition planned to be held in London in 1851, and Ellis and Paxton, talking to Cook, recognised that he was the man to organise this special business for them. On the spot, at Derby, Ellis persuaded him to abandon his American tour and to assume the main responsibility for the Midland Company's Exhibition traffic.

It was a great chance—just the chance that Cook needed to demonstrate his peculiar capacity on a national, not just a provincial, stage; and he seized it with both hands. To another man it would have been a great business opportunity. That never came first with him—though he did not ignore it altogether. To fire his enthusiasm, a project had to appeal to his ideals, his emotions; and the concept of the Exhibition, to promote international goodwill, did that strongly. He was also much stirred by the thought of moving thousands of working men and women up to London for the purpose of enlarging their experience, of giving them something to remember all their lives. He and the young John Mason Cook (who was now 17, and had joined his father in the business) threw themselves into the task with the energy that characterised the Victorians. For the five months during which the Exhibition was open they travelled incessantly between Bradford and Leeds, the Midlands, and London. At the end they could claim that they had brought 165,000 visitors to the Exhibition. If that number is only a small part of the six million who attended in all, it must be remembered that the great majority of the visitors lived in or near London, and that many of them went to it again and again. The task of the Cooks was to bring up people from the provinces. In that, proportionately, their contribution was substantial.

In 1851 the regular series of Scottish excursions was interrupted. It was resumed in 1852. We can now see Cook entering on a period of consolidation. True, he moved abroad cautiously in 1855, to convey similar parties (though much smaller) to the Paris Exhibition; and two years later his activities helped materially to save the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition from financial disaster. But in general he was developing and improving an established business. He was not yet ready to extend it further.

At home in Leicester he became increasingly prominent. He was the driving force behind the erection of the Temperance Hall in Granby Street, which was opened in 1853; and at the same time he put up a new Temperance Hotel, designed as such, next door. It is piquant to notice that the

two buildings stood immediately between the Waggon & Horses and the Nag's Head.

They made a distinctive contribution to Leicester. The Temperance Hall gave it something it needed badly: a new public hall for large meetings, which remained superior to any other for exactly 60 years, until the De Montfort Hall was opened in 1913. The hotel helped to fix the character of the town in the visitor's eyes. As he moved from Campbell Street station towards its centre, this was the first substantial hotel to confront him. When that station was replaced by the present one in 1892, another hotel, the Wyvern, was erected near by: but again it was a temperance house. Leicester stands alone among the large towns of Britain in that no licensed hotel, offering accommodation to travellers, ever stood close to its principal station. That may be attributed largely to the influence, direct and indirect, of Thomas Cook.

As we consider these years, and Cook's life, we are perhaps disposed to be impatient with his fervour in the cause of temperance. It has to be seen in the right perspective. The movement had its absurdities. It lived a good deal on exaggeration, and its adherents were too often smugly superior, determined to impose their rules on other people. John Stuart Mill's case against them is as cogent now in its reasoning as it was when he published it in 1859.<sup>45</sup> Yet the movement sprang up as a protest against a great social evil, which it undoubtedly did much to curb. And Cook, if he was fervent, was yet not a fanatic. He recognised the limits within which he could seek to insist on the observance of his principles. Unlike John Frame for example, his later rival in business, he never asked his customers to sign the pledge. He did everything he could to see that non-alcoholic refreshment was available to those who travelled in his parties; but nothing to stop those who wished to do so from buying strong stimulants and drinking them when abroad—beyond addressing a courteous, reasoned plea to them once in Italy: "Gentlemen, do not invest your money in diarrhoea".<sup>46</sup> Again, he was also a strong opponent of smoking, and wrote against the practice. Yet in each of his hotels and boarding houses he was careful to set apart one room in which smoking was permitted. Nor was he so strait-laced as to refuse to consort with those whose principles were different. In developing his business in the Near East, for example, he collaborated closely with Robert Etzensberger, manager of the Grand Hotel Victoria in Venice—and subsequently of the Midland Grand Hotel at St. Pancras, when it opened in 1873; neither of them, certainly, temperance establishments.<sup>47</sup> In all such ways as these one can see Cook as belonging to the wisest, the most truly liberal school of Nonconformity.

He belongs there too in another way: in his compassionate benevolence. During a prolonged period of distress in Leicester in the early part of 1856 he organised an efficient distribution of soup to the poor on a very large scale. Two years later his connection with Scotland, now well established, enabled him to go and buy there 250 tons of potatoes, when the harvest had failed in the Midlands, selling them at cost price. If he was a great hand at "speechifying"—to use the derisory word of the journalist of 1841—he was

no windbag, a pre-eminently practical man rather, in charity as well as in business: not only a temperance worker and a Nonconformist, but a free trader also and a Liberal of the left.

By this time, though he had shed none of his ideals, his growing travel agency was beginning to demand greater concentration from him. In 1854 he gave up his printing business. For the moment things seemed to be on an even keel. His sally into France in 1855 was not followed up, because the southern English railway companies were unwilling to collaborate with him; and though he ran a few excursions in conjunction with the Eastern Counties Railway, through Harwich, they were as yet a minor development. His work now extended throughout the United Kingdom. There was still room for growth there. In 1860, for example, he was engaged in organising a series of excursions from South Wales to north-eastern England and Scotland.<sup>48</sup> Again in 1862 the facilities he provided were in demand for the second International Exhibition in London—though this time the railway companies did not give him their exclusive agency, calculating that they could make a greater profit by handling the business themselves.

We can detect in these years a certain stagnation. Rivals were springing up: Harry Gaze of Southampton for example, well established in collaboration with the London & South Western Company and able in 1868 to secure the Continental Agency of the London & North Western—a prize that Cook himself much desired.<sup>49</sup> The whole firm was run by Cook himself with one full-time assistant. His son, apparently because there was not enough work for him, had gone to a post with the Midland Railway in 1856. He stayed there till 1859, and then set up in trade on his own, as a printer in Leicester. There is a hint here already of divergence between father and son. But however that may be, in 1864 they reunited, to promote what was clearly a major development in the business. For some time past Thomas Cook had owned a boarding house in Great Russell Street, London. Now he and his son decided to start an independent office in the City. They took premises by Ludgate Circus and opened them in 1865.

#### IV

There is little to show the spirit in which this step was taken by the two partners. They probably looked on it in different ways. Thomas no doubt saw it idealistically, as a move towards the wider promotion of the causes he had at heart. He may well have failed to discern what must appear to us now the almost inevitable consequence. From the outset the arrangement was that the younger Cook should manage the London office, while his father continued to live in Leicester and work from there. John Mason was a very energetic, physically powerful young man. Even Americans, when he negotiated with them, soon came to recognise him as a tough guy. Almost at once, as we can see looking back, the real power in the firm passed from Leicester to London, from Thomas to John Mason Cook.

At first it made little apparent difference, and there is nothing to show that it caused friction. It freed Thomas to pursue his interests, the routine repetitions of the successes of past years being handled competently by his

son. In 1865 he went across to the United States (aided by introductions from leading Liberals like John Bright and W. E. Forster); his son began to lead excursions there in the following year. Continental travel now started to open up on a large scale, and in 1868 Thomas achieved what was perhaps the dearest ambition of his life when he took a party to Egypt and Palestine—the first of a long series, for which the firm became especially famous.

Still, it is plain what had happened; and soon Thomas Cook became unpleasantly aware of it too. In the seventies a most unhappy rift opened up between himself and his son—a rift that affected the whole family. Thomas felt himself harshly treated, pushed out by the next generation. John Mason clearly regarded his father as a dreamy and inefficient back number. In 1878 John Mason Cook became sole manager of the firm, and thenceforward Thomas enjoyed from it no more than a fixed pension.<sup>50</sup> His life was a sad one at its close. In 1880 his daughter was accidentally asphyxiated in her bath one night at Thorncroft—the house he had built for himself in the London Road in Leicester (No. 244 today).<sup>51</sup> Though his wife bore this fearful shock well, it undermined her health, and after a long illness she died in 1884. By that time Cook himself was slowly going blind. In the little memoir he wrote of his wife he explained that he was unable to answer letters of condolence because of “dimness of sight”. Though he could still contemplate revisiting France, Italy, and Switzerland, he made it clear that this was “not to travel in his original capacity as a personal conductor of tourists, for which ample provision is made at Ludgate Circus, London”.<sup>52</sup> He lived, as we might expect, much in the past. His thoughts turned back often to his early life. At the age of 81 he took an American friend to Melbourne, and they looked at his birthplace together. A man even older than himself was living with his daughter in the cottage, evidently in great discomfort. Cook therefore decided to build a set of new cottages there, to provide better accommodation. There were 14 of them, including three a little bigger than the others, which Cook reserved for his own use and as a place of rest for Baptist ministers. The whole group was occupied in 1891.

On 22 July of that year the firm he had founded held a great dinner in London to celebrate its jubilee. He himself was not strong enough to attend. He had a stroke at Thorncroft a year later, on 18 July 1892, and he died the same night. He lies buried in the Welford Road cemetery.

His will is curious. It is a very simple document, bequeathing some modest legacies. They total £4,225; but the whole estate amounted to no more than £2,500. What can have happened? The will had been made before he undertook his building operation at Melbourne, and that must have accounted for something—say £2,000-£3,000. But he must surely have acquired—as he had certainly earned—a comfortable fortune during his life. It would not be consistent with his character to suggest that he had deliberately turned it over to his son, or any one else, to avoid paying the death duties introduced in 1889. He was a most frugal man; one cannot believe he had any secret extravagance or vice. Where then had his money gone? The oddity becomes greater if one turns from this modest little fortune

to look at what his son left, when he died only seven years later: the enormous estate of nearly £700,000.

Whatever may be the answer to this private conundrum, Thomas Cook's public position and his place in history are assured. He, more than any other one man anywhere in the world, must be regarded as the founder of organised tourism. He did not do it all himself. He had competitors—and he had the good sense to learn from them. But the firm he established outlived nearly all its British rivals: the Gaze company was taken over by the London & North Western Railway in 1898; Dean & Dawson's passed to the Great Central six years later. Thomas Cook & Son continued in proud autonomy—until it lost its independence from causes quite beyond its control, in the slump of 1929. As a world-wide business it had in the end no competitor at all in Europe, and only one in America. It owed everything to Thomas Cook's initiative, to his care, his tireless energies, and his complete integrity. His son had many of these qualities too. If he showed little of his father's attractive enthusiasm, he was a better man of affairs, growing with the business itself to the very end of his life. As *The Times* put it when Thomas Cook died, the two of them were "the Julius and the Augustus Caesar of modern travel".<sup>53</sup>

## NOTES

1. This is the title of the first history of the firm, by W. F. Rae, published in 1891. Two others have been published since: J. Pudney, *The Thomas Cook Story* (1953), and E. Swinglehurst, *The Romantic Journey* (1974).
2. Here may be the origin of the tradition, long continued when Cook had become famous, that he kept a stall in *Leicester* market. Cf. I. C. Ellis, *Records of Nineteenth Century Leicester* (1935), 252.
3. The best accounts of Cook's boyhood and youth are in J. R. Godfrey, *Historic Memorials of Barton and Melbourne General Baptist Churches* (1891), 170-2, and in J. Pudney, *The Thomas Cook Story*, chap. ii.
4. J. Bland, *Bygone Days in Market Harborough* (1924), 53.
5. It was first published at Manchester, probably in 1836; a Welsh translation appeared in 1841; by 1868 it had reached its 11th edition.
6. *Leicester Chronicle*, 23 July 1892.
7. *Ibid.*, 10 July 1841.
8. *West Briton*, 17 June 1836; cf. *Falmouth Packet*, 18 June.
9. W. W. Tomlinson, *The North Eastern Railway* [1915], 372.
10. *Ibid.*, 373.
11. *Leicester Journal*, 30 July, 6 August 1841.
12. *V.C.H. Leics.*, iii. 117.
13. C. E. Stretton, *History of the Midland Railway* (1901), 45.
14. T. Cook, *In Memoriam. Brief Notes on . . . Mrs. Marianne Cook* [1884], 8. (Leicester City Reference Library, Local Pamphlets—cited below as LRLP—vol. 69).
15. Godfrey, 172.
16. *Ibid.*.
17. Copies of all three books are in Leicester City Reference Library. The first issue is recorded in Miss Jane Norton's *Guide to . . . Directories of England and Wales* (1950), 142-3, but not the second or third.
18. *Leicester Chronicle*, 5 August 1843.
19. *Ibid.*, 23 November 1844.
20. *In Memoriam*, 4.
21. *Temperance Jubilee Celebrations at Leicester and Market Harborough . . . 1886. Arranged and compiled by Thomas Cook*, 27-8.
22. *Leicester Journal*, 17 June, 1 July 1842.

23. *Leicester Chronicle*, 13 August 1842
24. *Ibid.*, 20 August 1842
25. British Transport Historical Records, MC1/4, min. 776; MC1/11, min. 1002
26. In London, for example: cf. F. Sheppard, *London 1808-70* (1971), 134-5
27. *The Times*, 9 September 1840
28. *Ibid.*, 3 September 1844
29. Tomlinson, 452
30. *Leicester Chronicle*, 21, 28 September, 3 October 1844
31. *Ibid.*, 5 October 1844
32. *Railway Chronicle*, i (1844), 755-6
33. *Kendal & Windermere Railway*, in *Wordsworth's Guide to the Lakes*, ed. E. de Selincourt (1926), 146-66
34. *Railway Chronicle*, i (1844), 166
35. *Ibid.*, i (1844), 516-17, 700
36. The first is briefly noted (without mention of Cook) in *Liverpool Albion*, 11 August 1845
37. Cf. *Hand Book of a Trip to Scotland* (1846): LRLP, vol. 40. This excursion coincided almost exactly with the first ever run from Scotland into England: J. Thomas, *The North British Railway*, i (1969), 29-30
38. *Ibid.*, 103
39. *Hand-book of Belvoir Castle: designed as a Guide to an Excursion Party . . . Compiled by T. Cook, Manager of the Trip* (LRLP, 2 copies, vols. 3 and 23)
40. See Dearden's *Hand-Book of the Cheap Railway Trip from Lancaster, Preston, etc. to Liverpool*, published by the Temperance Excursion Committee (1846); *The Poor People's Annual Excursion from Preston to Fleetwood* (n.d.); *Guide Book of a Railway and Steam Packet Excursion . . . to Liverpool . . . and the Britannia Tubular Bridge* (1849). Copies of these pamphlets are in Lancs. Record Office, Preston: DD Pr 35/1, 3, 6
41. *Hand-Book of Excursions to Liverpool, Chester, North Wales, and Inland* [1852], 3: LRLP, vol. 40
42. Cf. the Queen's *Leaves from the Journal of our Life in the Highlands* (1868), 66-95
43. *Hand-Book of Excursions to Liverpool*, 3
44. Particulars are advertised in the *Liverpool Journal* and *Liverpool Mail* of 12 July and the *Liverpool Albion* two days later. Rather strangely, they had already been given earlier in the *Leeds Mercury* (5 July, Supplement)
45. Mill, *On Liberty*, chap. iv: *Utilitarianism, Liberty, and Representative Government* (Everyman ed.), 144-6
46. *Temperance Jubilee Celebrations*
47. The last endpaper of J. Burns, *Help-Book for Travellers to the East . . . with Tourist Arrangements by Thomas Cook* (1870), contains an advertisement for Etzensberger's hotel in Venice, with a tribute from Cook to him. Cf. also J. Simmons, *St. Pancras Station* (1968), 56
48. G. P. Neele, *Railway Reminiscences* (1974 ed.), 62
49. *Ibid.*, 140-1
50. This unhappy story is told more fully than before by Mr. Swinglehurst: *The Romantic Journey*, 116-21
51. Cf. *A Father's Tribute . . . elicited by the sudden and distressing Death of Annie Elizabeth Cook* [1880]: LRLP, vol. 13
52. In *Memoriam*, 3, and note inside front cover
53. *The Times*, 20 July 1892 (leading article)