

This book tells the story of an East London family which, in the middle of the eighteenth century, started a small business in assaying the precious metals and analysing the ores that contained them. This continued through the period of the Napoleonic Wars and a fortunate preservation of their records enables their experiences in those times to be described. Later their activities spread and eventually gave rise to three separate companies working in various branches of the precious metal trade and still of considerable importance in this seventh decade of the twentieth century. The story follows them into the fourth decade.

The early eighteenth century was a fertile period in British commercial history. Among the family businesses to begin at that time was Johnsons of Maiden Lane, today perpetuated in Johnsons of Hendon, the photographic chemists, and in Johnson Matthey & Company, who absorbed the original Johnson assaying and smelting operation.

The assaying of gold has a touch of the romantic about it, but however that may be the Johnsons trod a hard road from their East London beginnings to Maiden Lane, where the first John Johnson set up as goldsmith and then as assayer in the 1770s.

The story of the progress of the Johnson undertakings contains some amusing and some socially illuminating digressions. The author examines, too, a curious Stuart legend in the family, and he shows that certain of the Johnsons made their mark in spheres outside the business. Soldiering, scholarship, music and botany were among the interests that claimed the allegiance of different individuals.

The assaying, smelting and photographic chemicals - kept together in one organization till 1925, when Johnsons of Hendon came into being to handle the last-named of these enterprises, while the assaying and smelting businesses joined Johnson Matthey & Company, in which other Johnsons in generations past had grown away from the main body of the family.

This book will have an appeal beyond its obvious audience, and will be of interest to students of British commercial history as a microcosm of business development during the past two centuries or so.



Donald McDonald was born in 1869 at Lee, then in Kent, and educated at Blackheath and University College, London. He joined Johnson Matthey & Co Limited as a chemist in 1910 and, after twenty years as manager of their bullion refineries, was appointed a director in 1939. When, in 1926, the firm took over control of Johnson & Sons Smelting Works Limited and Johnson & Sons (Assayers) Limited he was appointed co-ordinator and liaison officer in the subsequent changes. He became a director of both in 1940 and since 1955 has been chairman of Johnson & Sons Smelting Works Limited.

His other publications are 'Percival Norton Johnson' (1951) and 'A History of Platinum' (1960).