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# “I have confessed myself a devil”: Crabb Robinson’s Confrontation with Robert Hall, 1798-1800

By TIMOTHY WHELAN

## I

ON 26 MAY 1811, HENRY CRABB ROBINSON traveled across the Thames to the Borough to hear the celebrated Baptist minister Robert Hall. Hall’s sermon, Robinson says in his *Diary*, “was certainly a very beautiful one. He began by a florid but eloquent and impressive description of John the Baptist, and deduced from his history, not with the severity of argument which a logician requires, but with a facility of illustration which oratory delights in, and which was perfectly allowable, the practical importance of discharging the duty which belongs to our actual condition.”<sup>1</sup> The fact that Robinson considered Hall’s sermon a “beautiful” discourse is not surprising. For years, Hall had been held in the highest rank of speakers, the “*facile principis* of English descent” who “outstripped all his contemporaries,” the Scottish critic George Gilfillan contended in 1846.<sup>2</sup> F.A. Cox wrote in the *North British Review* that had Hall been a Parliamentarian, he would have “displayed in felicitous combination much of the splendor of Burke, the wit of Sheridan, the flow of Chatham and of Pitt, and the eloquence of Fox.”<sup>3</sup> Comparing Hall with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Fox asserted that “Coleridge was more to be heard; Hall to be remembered. Coleridge had the advantage of a more universal knowledge; Hall of a more unencumbered and clearly perceptive intellect. Each was in his day the first of his class, rarely equalled, and probably never surpassed.”<sup>4</sup> Bulwer Lytton supplied lavish praise for Hall as well in his popular novel *The Caxtons: A Family Picture* (1849).

Even at the end of the century, Hall’s name would continue to surface among critics of British religion and literature. In *The History of Religion in England* (1881), John Stoughton contended that Hall’s legacy as a preacher was “sufficient to place him amongst the first pulpit orators of the last, or any other age.”<sup>5</sup> Mrs. Oliphant, in *The Literary History of the Nineteenth Century* (1889), described Hall as a “preacher whose name ranks with the highest in England,” a man in whose writings “the literature of the pulpit attained its highest development” and whose personality made “a distinct mark upon [his] age, [touching] the most diverse intelligences with a sense of fervid sincerity, truth, and genius.”<sup>6</sup> She confessed she could not possibly “set him in the history of literature in a place at all proportioned to that which he occupied in his generation,” for the “appreciation of those who heard and knew him was so thorough and

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Sadler, ed., *The Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1872) 1: 173.

<sup>2</sup> Sadler 1: 174.

<sup>3</sup> F. A. Cox, “A Review of *The Entire Works of the Rev. Robert Hall, A. M.*,” *North British Review* 4 (1845): 68.

<sup>4</sup> Cox 66.

<sup>5</sup> John Stoughton, *The Church in the Georgian Era*. vol. 6 of *The History of Religion in England*. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1881) 375.

<sup>6</sup> Mrs. Oliphant, *The Literary History of England in the End of the Eighteenth and Beginning of the Nineteenth Century*. 3 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1889) 3: 318-19.

enthusiastic, that its warmth still lingers with a genial glow about his name.”<sup>7</sup> She then mentions an incident known to few of her readers in 1889—

an encounter of arms between [Hall] and the well-known Crabb Robinson, in the early years of that friendly commentator on literature—against whom Hall had opposed all his influence, in consequence of the youth’s adoption of the principles of Godwin’s *Political Justice*. But the frankness of the young free-thinker, who wrote to him protesting against such treatment, called forth a reply, so “prompt and respectful,” that injury was forgotten in admiration. He [Hall] was not to be beguiled by the dazzling of a great literary reputation from instant hostility to everything that savoured of unbelief . . . .<sup>8</sup>

This “encounter” took place in 1798, and Robinson noted the incident in his *Reminiscences*, along with complete transcriptions of the two letters involved in the dispute. Hall’s prominence was not lost on the youthful Robinson, for his comment about the controversy suggests less the meeting of equals and more the impudent student reproaching the teacher for what is perceived to be unfair criticism, only to be humbled by the response of the master:

In my visit to Bury I found I had already acquired a bad character for free thinking. This led to a correspondence between the famous Robt. Hall and me. I heard that he had told Mr. Nash<sup>9</sup> it was disgraceful to him as a Christian to admit me into his house. I remonstrated with Mr. Hall for this officious interference, and asked him why he had defamed me. He answered me in a letter which I have preserved as a curiosity. It is an excellent letter of the kind. He said he believed me to be a professor of infidelity, or pantheism, and therefore as became him he warned a Christian brother of the peril of intercourse with me. On his own principles he was right. My letter I have also preserved. It is as ill as his is well written.<sup>10</sup>

Surprisingly, since Mrs. Oliphant’s comments in 1889, no editor of or commentator upon the life and writings of either Robinson or Hall has considered their encounter worthy of

<sup>7</sup> Oliphant 3: 319.

<sup>8</sup> Oliphant 3: 319.

<sup>9</sup> William Nash, a long-time member of the Baptist congregation at St. Andrew’s Street in Cambridge and a friend of Crabb Robinson’s brother Thomas and their uncle the Rev. Habakkuk Crabb, had published in 1791 *A Letter to the Right Hon. Edmund Burke, Esq. from a Dissenting Country Attorney*, in which he countered Burke’s position concerning the role Dissenters should play in England. Rev. Crabb mentioned to Crabb Robinson in a letter that he had “read it, and [I] think it contains solid judgement, expressed in a manner animated and manly” (9 November 1791, Crabb Robinson Correspondence, Vol. 1 (1725-99), Dr. Williams’s Library, London). Robinson wrote many years later that Nash had been a Methodist in his youth, but turned Baptist and eventually Unitarian, and “Robert Robinson was the object of his admiration. His single publication, in which he called himself “A Country Attorney,” was one of the hundred and one answers to Burke on the French Revolution” (Sadler 2: 228). At a meeting of the Society for Constitutional Information in London on 24 January 1783, among the members in attendance were Robert Robinson, Thomas Nash, and Benjamin Flower (see *Tracts Published and Distributed Gratis by the Society for Constitutional Information* (London, 1783, pp. 5-7).

<sup>10</sup> On the back page of Hall’s letter, Robinson wrote many years later, “Copy Ltr to Hall very bad Kept only on acc<sup>t</sup> of the answer” (13 October 1798, Crabb Robinson Correspondence, vol. 1 (1725-99), Dr. Williams’s Library, London). See also Sadler 1: 27-28.

consideration. No mention of Hall's acquaintance with Crabb Robinson and their letter exchange of 1798 can be found in Olinthus Gregory's *Memoir of Robert Hall* (1833), John Greene's *Reminiscences of the Rev. Robert Hall, A. M. Late of Bristol* (1832), John Webster Morris's *Biographical Recollections of the Rev. Robert Hall, A.M.* (1833), or Graham Hughes's *Robert Hall* (1943). Edith Morley, Robinson's primary editor in the twentieth century, in *The Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson with the Wordsworth Circle* (2 vols., 1927), *The Life and Times of Henry Crabb Robinson* (1935), and *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and Their Writers* (3 vols., 1938), never mentions Robert Hall. Her focus on Robinson's "literary" development evidently precluded any interest in his activities and correspondence involving a Dissenting minister, even one of Hall's stature. The omission, though, given the frequent and sometimes lengthy references to Hall in the letters of Crabb Robinson and his brother Thomas, seems puzzling at best.<sup>11</sup> Thomas Sadler, Robinson's nineteenth-century editor, in *The Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson* (2 vols., 3rd ed., 1872), includes the reference to Hall above, as well as the letter exchange between Hall and Robinson in 1798 and Robinson's account of his accidental meeting with Hall in late 1799, but he does not include any other portion of the Hall material found in the letters between 1795 and 1805. John Milton Baker's *Henry Crabb Robinson of Bury, Jena, The Times, and Russell Square* (1937), discusses at length Robinson's association with Godwinism and makes much use of Crabb's correspondence with his brother Thomas, yet never mentions the Hall controversy, nor does Derek Hudson in his Introduction to *The Diary of Henry Crabb Robinson: An Abridgement* (1967), based on Morley's *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers*. Hudson's judgment seems representative of most Robinson researchers: "On writers and their works Crabb Robinson is an irreplaceable commentator and witness—on other subjects he is interesting but dispensable"<sup>12</sup> After completing her examination of all the letters in the Crabb Robinson Correspondence at Dr. Williams's Library, Morley admitted that there was much in the letters that could be "conceivably of interest to specialist investigators in other directions" (than the Wordsworth circle, presumably, and other literary figures).<sup>13</sup> The substantial material on Robert Hall, given the light it throws upon his interaction with and influence upon Crabb Robinson during the latter's Godwinian phase, though unnoticed by Morley, Baker, Hudson and others, clearly warrants such an investigation. In fact, it may well have been Hall's confrontation with Robinson, both in their exchange of letters in 1798 and their unexpected meetings and interviews in 1799, that finally led the brilliant dissenting minister to commit his views on Godwinism and infidelity to paper, resulting in his famous sermon, *Modern Infidelity Considered with Respect to its Influence on Society* (1800). Whatever the case, the incidents and anecdotes recorded in the Crabb Robinson correspondence concerning Robert Hall reveal Robinson's recognition of Hall's importance as a leading voice of dissent in the 1790s, as well as Robinson's own enduring allegiance to the community of Dissenters in which he was reared and from which, in many ways, he never departed.

<sup>11</sup> See letters 80, 106, 108, 114, 116, 117, 118, 127, 132, and 134 (Vol. 1: 1725-99); 5, 9, and 34 (Vol. 2: 1800-03); and 8, 12, and 17(Vol. 4: 1805-08) in the Crabb Robinson Correspondence, Dr. Williams's Library, London.

<sup>12</sup> Derek Hudson, ed., *The Diary of Henry Crabb Robinson: An Abridgement* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1967) xviii.

<sup>13</sup> Edith Morley, ed., *The Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson with the Wordsworth Circle*, 2 vols., (Oxford: Clarendon, 1927) x.

## II

After completing his studies at John Ryland, Sr.'s, Academy in Northampton, at Bristol Baptist Academy, and at Aberdeen (where he received his A.M. in 1785), Robert Hall (1764-1831) spent five years in Bristol as assistant to the Rev. Caleb Evans at the Baptist congregation meeting at Broadmead, as well as serving as classical tutor at the Academy. In 1791, Hall assumed the pastorate of the Baptist congregation meeting at St. Andrew's Street in Cambridge, succeeding the controversial Robert Robinson (1735-90) as leader of one of the most theologically heterodox and politically radical of all the Particular Baptist congregations in England. For most of that decade Hall would continue Robinson's liberal tradition of freedom of conscience, allowing many Socinians and Arians to remain within his congregation, all the while developing a ministry that would prove of great importance to himself and his denomination, both politically and ecclesiastically. Like Robert Robinson, Joseph Priestley, Richard Price, and his former Bristol mentor Caleb Evans,<sup>14</sup> Robert Hall bore an outspoken allegiance to the fundamental principles of political dissent, as his pen soon demonstrated, resulting in two classics of Dissenting literature from the 1790s, *Christianity Consistent with a Love of Freedom* (1791) and *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press* (1793). In *Christianity Consistent with a Love of Freedom*, Hall heaped lavish praise upon the principles of the French Revolution, scorning Burke and any who would deny its legitimate claims. "The empire of darkness and of despotism," Hall boasts,

has been smitten with a stroke which has sounded through the universe. When we see whole kingdoms, after reposing for centuries on the lap of their rulers, start from their slumber, the dignity of man rising up from depression, and tyrants trembling on their thrones, who can remain entirely indifferent, or fail to turn his eye towards a theatre so august and extraordinary. . . . Old foundations are breaking up; new edifices are rearing . . . . New prospects are opening on every side, of such amazing variety and extent, as to stretch farther than the eye of the most enlightened observer can reach.<sup>15</sup>

*An Apology for the Freedom of the Press* (1793), the culmination of Hall's political pamphleteering, set forth a brilliant argument for Parliamentary reform and became one of the most powerful treatises of anti-ministerial dissent written during the 1790s. Though still praising the original principles of the French Revolution, Hall could not overlook the excesses of the Reign of Terror, warning those in power that if England is "to avert the calamities" of anarchy and despotism that have so afflicted France, "the streams of corruption must be drained off, the

<sup>14</sup> Robert Hall, *Apology* 108. See, also, Robinson's *Arcana: or the Principles of the late Petitioners to Parliament for Relief in the Matter of Subscription* (1774), *A Plan of Lectures on the Principles of Nonconformity* (1778), *Christian Submission to Civil Government* (1780), and *The Doctrine of Toleration* (1781); Price's *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (1789); Priestley's *An Essay on the First Principles of Government; and on the Nature of Political, Civil, and Religious Liberty* (1768) and *A Letter to the Right Honourable William Pitt, on the Subjects of Toleration and Church Establishments* (1787); and Evan's *A Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley, occasioned by his Calm Address to the American Colonies* (1775), *British Constitutional Liberty* (1775), *The Remembrance of Former Days* (1779), and *British Freedom Realized* (1788).

<sup>15</sup> Robert Hall, *Christianity Consistent with a Love of Freedom: being an answer to a Sermon lately published by the Rev. John Clayton* (London: J. Johnson, 1791) 76-78.

independence of parliament restored, the ambition of aristocracy repressed, and the majesty of the people [left free to] lift itself up. It is possible to retreat from the brink of a precipice, but woe to that nation which sleeps upon it!"<sup>16</sup>

Robinson's knowledge of Hall began in the early 1790s, partly, no doubt, because of the latter's notoriety as a political writer and brilliant pulpiteer, but more likely it was a result of the friendship between Hall and Robinson's uncle, the Rev. Habbakuk Crabb (1750-1794), brother to Robinson's mother, the former Jemima Crabb (1736-1793). The Crabb family were leading members of the Independent congregation at Wattisfield, where the Rev. Thomas Harmer pastored from 1734-88. Habbukuk's and Jemima's father, Denny Crabb, was a long-time deacon in the church there.<sup>17</sup> According to the *Wattisfield Church Book*, Crabb Robinson's mother was baptized on 22 November 1736, and her younger brother Habbakuk on 28 August 1750.<sup>18</sup> Crabb's father, Henry Robinson, and several members of his family belonged to the Independent congregation meeting at Whiting Street in Bury St. Edmunds, where the Rev. Thomas Waldegrave pastored from 1771-1803 and where the Robinsons were baptized and initiated into the Calvinistic traditions of English Congregationalism.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, we should not be surprised when Crabb Robinson notes in his *Reminiscences* that he "was brought up with Calvinistic feelings"<sup>20</sup> In Vol. 1 of the Crabb Robinson Correspondence at Dr. Williams's Library, London, is a fragment of a letter, steeped in the language of piety, in which Jemima Crabb describes her conversion experience, or spiritual awakening. Written from Wattisfield on 21 January, 1759, Robinson's mother rejoices in "the Advantage of a Religious Education, which I enjoyed from my Cradel, and for which I desire to bless God." Nevertheless, she has experienced her own share of doubts and despair, and at one point was "tempted wholly to give up all Thoughts of Religion: but . . . the great & all merciful God interposed & did not suffer me to yield to such Temptations, for which I desire for ever to bless his Holy Name . . . I humbly hope he will enable me to hold out to the End."<sup>21</sup> Crabb would later comment that her account shows more concern with piety than doctrine. "The one sentiment which runs throughout is a consciousness of personal unworthiness, with which are combined a desire to be united to the Church, and a reliance upon the merits of Christ. Therefore her orthodoxy was indisputable."<sup>22</sup>

Habbakuk Crabb was educated at the Dissenting Academy at Daventry, ordained at Stowmarket in 1772, moved to Cirencester in 1776, became an assistant pastor at Devizes in

<sup>16</sup> Robert Hall, *Apology* 108. For more on Robert Hall and his politics, see Timothy Whelan's "Coleridge and Robert Hall of Cambridge," *Wordsworth Circle* 31.1 (2000): 38-47 and "Robert Hall and the Bristol Slave-Trade Debate of 1787-1788," *Baptist Quarterly* 38 (1999-2000): 212-24.

<sup>17</sup> Concerning Mr. Crabb, after his death the *Wattisfield Church Book* notes that he had "for near 50 years had been remarkably serviceable in assisting the perplexed in this neighbourhood in settling their civil affairs; & still more useful in managing the affairs of this Church and Congregation, first as a Counsellor and assistant to the then deacons, and afterwards as a deacon himself" (f. 93).

<sup>18</sup> *Wattisfield Church Book*. Originally compiled by Thomas Harmer and transcribed by Joseph Davey in 1849—see Dr. Williams's Library, London, MS Harmer 15 (f.45-56).

<sup>19</sup> See J. Duncan, *The History of the Congregational Church in Bury St. Edmunds*, at Dr. Williams's Library, London, Acc. No. 5106, SK.39.

<sup>20</sup> Sadler 1: 3.

<sup>21</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all references to the Robinson letters are from the Crabb Robinson Correspondence, Vol. I (1725-1799); Vol. 2 (1800-1803); Vol. 3 (1804); Vol. 4 (1805-08); and Vol. 5 (1808-17). Dr. Williams's Library, London. Quoted by permission of the Director on behalf of the Trustees.

<sup>22</sup> Sadler 1: 8.

1787, and returned triumphantly to his home church at Wattisfield in 1789, succeeding the legendary Rev. Harmer.<sup>23</sup> The *Church Book* describes Rev. Crabb as “a person of liberal education, good sense, easy and genteel manners, and of respectable connexions” (f.108). He was settled there on 25 February 1790 (his brother Zechariah was one of the signing deacons) in “much peace and harmony” (f.108), yet almost immediately “some objections . . . arose in the minds of some of the congregation to Mr. Crabb’s religious sentiments” (f.109). Though reared in the orthodox Calvinism of Thomas Harmer, Habbakuk Crabb, following the lead of his Baptist friend and mentor, the Rev. Robert Robinson of Cambridge, had adopted by 1790 an Arian position similar to the Unitarianism of Joseph Priestley and Richard Price. His heterodoxy proved too much for the Wattisfield congregation, and he resigned on 15 August 1790. He immediately assumed pastoral duties at the Independent congregation in Royston, about the same time Crabb Robinson became an articled clerk to a Mr. Francis, a Dissenting attorney in Colchester. During his first year at Colchester, Robinson evidenced a movement away from orthodoxy similar to that of his uncle, developing an appreciation of Dr. Priestley’s brand of rational Christianity yet maintaining a loyalty to “the importance of religious liberty and the rights of conscience.”<sup>24</sup>

Even though he was not an Independent, as a Particular Baptist Robert Hall shared a similar Calvinistic background with Robinson and his uncle Habbukuk Crabb, and all were involved in the Dissenting politics of the day. Though not agreeing with Priestley’s theology, Hall nevertheless appreciated Priestley’s right to dissent, defending him (against the advice of Hall’s ministerial friends) in his *Christianity Consistent with a Love of Freedom* and his *Apology for the Freedom of the Press*. Though he disliked the Socinianism of Priestley and others, Hall considered it much less a threat to orthodoxy than the brand of infidelity found within William Godwin’s *Political Justice* (1793). By the fall of 1794, Hall had already formed a public antipathy to Godwinism. In late September of that year, Hall breakfasted in Cambridge with a young and extremely radical Samuel Taylor Coleridge, shortly after Coleridge’s return from his initial visit to Bristol with Robert Southey. Coleridge was in the thralls of Pantisocratic idealism, which to Hall seemed little more than Rousseau revisited with a splash of Godwinism. Writing to his brother-in-law Isaac James in Bristol on 29 September 1794, Hall provided a terse but compelling observation of the brash Coleridge. “Pray how do politics go on with you at Bristol?” he asks. “Many are ripe [in Cambridge] for arbitrary power, and many go into the wildest extremes of democratic licentiousness, and Mr. Godwin’s theory is gaining ground.” Concerning Coleridge, Hall writes, “He is a very ingenious young man, but intoxicated with a political and philosophical enthusiasm, a sophic, a republican, and leveller. Much as I admire his abilities, I cannot say I feel disposed to cultivate his intimacy; it is difficult or rather perhaps impossible to come into contact with such licentious opinions without contracting a taint.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> From mid-summer 1787 to January 1789, Habakkuk Crabb assisted his brother-in-law, John Fenner (1751-1833), pastor of the Independent congregation at Devizes, both in the church and in Fenner’s academy; Crabb Robinson was a student at this academy from 1786-90. See C. J. Wright, “Crabb Robinson’s School Days: Daily Life in a late Eighteenth Century Unitarian School,” *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society* 16 (1975): 1-11.

<sup>24</sup> Sadler 1: 9.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Hall Warren, *The Hall Family* (Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith, 1910) 60-61.

On 25 December 1794, Habakuk Crabb died, and Robert Hall delivered the graveside oration, assisted by another family friend, J. T. Rutt of London.<sup>26</sup> Robinson, then nineteen and still a clerk at Colchester, most likely attended the funeral.<sup>27</sup> On this occasion, Hall's thoughts continued to remain focused upon the consequences of Godwinism "gaining ground" within the ranks of Dissenters around the Cambridge area (many of who had once been and some who still were members of his own congregation). In his oration, Hall advocated an orthodoxy which he believed mediated between the claims of Godwinian "enthusiasm" and the Priestleian materialism he perceived in the likes of the youthful Coleridge's Pantisocratic ideals, ideals he feared would ultimately lead, like Godwinism, to "licentious opinions." Despite this note of caution, Robinson moved steadily toward a heterodox position, much to the dismay of his family and friends. By early summer 1795, only a few months after Hall's words of warning, Robinson had read most of Holcroft's novels and purchased Godwin's *Political Justice*.<sup>28</sup> Although he says he never accepted Godwin's atheism, "his thinking," J. M. Baker asserts, "seems to have been completely dominated by the 'Philosopher' for about two years."<sup>29</sup> Robinson would later write,

I entered fully into its [Godwin's *Political Justice*] spirit, it left all others behind in my admiration, and I was willing even to become a martyr for it; for it soon became a reproach to be a follower of Godwin, on account of his supposed atheism. I never became an atheist, but I could not feel aversion or contempt towards G. on account of any of his views. . . . His idea of justice I then adopted and still retain . . . And I thought myself qualified to be his defender, for which purpose I wrote a paper which was printed in Flower's *Cambridge Intelligencer*.<sup>30</sup>

Robinson's "paper" was a letter, dated 22 July 1795 and signed "Philo Godwin."<sup>31</sup> The letter appeared in the *Intelligencer* on 1 August 1795, and was a response to a letter to the editor on 18 July from a Dissenting minister ("A.V."), who had proposed in a facetious manner that by means of the more radical and, to many reformers, offensive ideas of Godwin's work *Political Justice*—such as equality of property, "unrestrained communication between the sexes," general

<sup>26</sup> John Towill Rutt (1760-1841) was brought up an orthodox Dissenter. Though several Rutts attended Rylands's Academy at Northampton in the 1760s, J. T. studied under the General Baptist (later Unitarian) Joshua Toulmin at Taunton. Rutt could have "died rich," Robinson recounts in his *Reminiscences*, "if he had not been a man of too much literary taste, public spirit, and religious zeal to be able to devote his best energies to business" (Sadler 1: 20). Rutt married the cousin of Robinson's friend, William Pattisson, and became a leading member of the Unitarian congregation at Gravel Pit in Hackney. Rutt later wrote biographies of Gilbert Wakefield and Joseph Priestley, as well as editing the entire works of the latter, and remained a life-long friend of Robinson. Hall's brief sermon was published the next month in Halifax as *Funeral Oration, delivered at the interment of the Rev. Habakkuk Crabb, on the 1st of January, 1795*.

<sup>27</sup> Robinson's *Pocket Account Book* for 1795 begins with this entry for 1 January: "mourning Buckles 2s.6d." Dr. Williams's Library, London.

<sup>28</sup> In his *Pocket Account Book* for Wednesday, 3 June 1795, Crabb Robinson writes: "Pd M<sup>r</sup>s Haffenden for Godwin's Political Justice wch M<sup>r</sup> H. Bo<sup>t</sup> for me at Book Club 17s." "M<sup>r</sup> H" is probably Mr. Haffenden of Witham, from whom Crabb had originally borrowed the book in March (Corfield and Evans 30).

<sup>29</sup> John Milton Baker, *Henry Crabb Robinson of Bury, Jena, The Times, and Russell Square* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1937) 32.

<sup>30</sup> Sadler 1: 18.

<sup>31</sup> For a complete transcription of this letter, see Timothy Whelan, "Henry Crabb Robinson and Godwinism," *Wordsworth Circle* 33.2 (Spring 2002): 58-69.

depravity among princes and monarchs, and the vilification of all laws as “the fetters of the human mind”—Godwin had become “an instrument employed by Ministers, to bring the doctrines of Liberty, Freedom and Equality into disrepute.” In his letter Crabb Robinson defends Godwin against his antagonist point-by-point, boasting that Godwin’s “reasoning is perspicuous and (I think) convincing.” He agrees with Godwin that “we ought not ever to make promises, but to content ourselves with declaring our present intention,” but notes that, as a corollary to this doctrine, Godwin “no where considers gratitude as an evil positively.” He also declares Godwin to be a great friend to democracy and reform. The problem with A. V.’s complaint is that he is using Godwin’s purely speculative statements as the basis of his criticism, and to Robinson that is unfair. He notes that Godwin never advocates a “compulsive equalisation of property” nor does he “abolish any rights to what a man may esteem essential to his happiness.” Robinson does not attempt to defend Godwin’s views on sexual relations among men and women, but he is convinced Godwin’s “reasoning is too respectable, and his motives are apparently too pure, to excite my contempt or censure.” In closing, Robinson admonishes his readers to give Godwin’s ideas a fair and “Christian” consideration.

The next year Robinson would find himself defending Godwin again, this time at a meeting of the Royston Book Club. In his *Reminiscences* he notes that at one of the debates for 1796, the question was posed, “Is private affection inconsistent with universal benevolence?” “Not a disputable point,” he writes, “but it was meant to involve the merits of Godwin as a philosopher, and as I had thought, or rather talked much about him, I had an advantage over most of those who were present . . . Among the speakers were Benjamin Flower, Mr. Rutt, and four or five ministers of the best reputation in the place.”<sup>32</sup> We can assume that among those “ministers” was Robert Hall, for he was a regular attendant at the Book Club between 1791-97. Whether it was Hall, or “A.V.,” or members of the Royston Book Club, Robinson was creating a stir among what had been considered one of the more radical Dissenting groups in England in the mid-1790s. Since the early 1770s the Cambridge area had produced numerous “leading lights” of Dissent—Theophilus Lindsey, Capell Lofft, Robert Robinson, George Dyer, John Jebb, Thomas Fyshe Palmer, Gilbert Wakefield, William Frend, to name a few—yet Robinson was pushing limits many were not ready to allow. Progressively he found himself between two extremes, neither of which he could wholly support. As he writes to his brother Thomas in late December 1797, “The intolerance of Infidels & the illiberality of the Friends of Liberty will I fear become proverbial—Upon Speculative Topicks I feel myself gradually subsiding into fixed general Scepticism . . .” To the youthful Crabb Robinson, his version of “fixed general Scepticism” seemed harmless, for his moral virtues, he believed, were still very much in tact.

Whether Robinson “abandoned” Christianity at this time is doubtful, but even to his liberal Unitarian friend Anthony Robinson (no relation to Crabb), his movement toward scepticism gave cause for concern. His London friend, once the pupil of Robert Hall at the Baptist Academy in Bristol,<sup>33</sup> had been laboring hard that year to “ungodwinise” the youthful enthusiast, but, as Crabb Robinson confesses to his likewise concerned brother Thomas,

<sup>32</sup> Sadler 1: 21.

<sup>33</sup> As a student at Bristol, Anthony Robinson roomed with Joseph Kinghorn, who later became a Baptist minister of much repute in Norwich; see Martin Hood Wilkin, *Joseph Kinghorn, of Norwich* (Norwich: Fletcher & Alexander, 1853) 75-76. Introduced to Crabb Robinson at a meeting of a London debating society in 1796, Crabb would later write that Anthony Robinson had “powers of conversation . . . far greater than those of any other of my acquaintance” (Sadler 1: 21). In 1792 Robinson published *A Short History of the Persecution of Christianity*. A

I am not yet shaken but the Effect of Sapping is not perceived till the Evil is effected— You deprecate the Progress of that Philosophy which tends to diminish the individual & exclusive Attachm<sup>ts</sup>—But the utmost asserted by Godwin or any of the new Philosophers, as far as I understand them, is that our attachm<sup>ts</sup> sho<sup>d</sup> be regulated only by the moral & intellectual worth of the object regardless of the *Accidents* of Birth, Early Acquaintance, etc. etc. and surely this cannot be reasonably opposed by any one—(18 December 1797)

Though Crabb's friends and family may have over-reacted to his Godwinism, the "Progress of that Philosophy" was evident enough by early 1798 to lead to the dramatic exchange of letters and subsequent interviews between Crabb Robinson and Robert Hall from August 1798 through September 1799, partially recorded by Robinson in his *Reminiscences* and later mentioned by Mrs. Oliphant.

### III

Early in 1798 Crabb Robinson became the beneficiary of a legacy of £100 a year from a deceased uncle, freeing him from the drudgery of his work as a London law clerk. He returned to Bury in May and spent most of the year there. That summer, after a visit in the home of his brother, Robinson journeyed to Royston to spend a few days with William Nash and his son, Wedd. During this visit he was informed about statements made by Hall to Mr. Nash concerning Robinson's infidelity and the danger Mr. Nash was bringing upon his family by allowing Robinson to stay in his house. Outraged by what he felt to be an attack upon his character, Robinson eventually responded with a letter of protest to Hall on 30 August 1798. In the letter he informs Hall, who has recently been "displaying much zeal ag<sup>t</sup> certain very prevalent speculative opinions," that he has heard Hall has been associating him with such opinions, even warning his "friends [the Nashes] in a neighbouring County urging them no longer to honor me with their Friendship and declaring it to be a Disgrace to them to admit me into their Houses." Obviously offended, Robinson writes: "Indeed sir, I as little deserve the Honour of so much Notice from you, as I do, the Disgrace of so much Obloquy." He wants to know what Hall has said in particular about him while in the company of the Nashes. He already knows some of this, for on 22 August he had received a letter from Nash's son recounting a portion of what had occurred in his father's home. The younger Nash, who was not present during the conversation involving Hall, confesses that "Mr Hall has never said any thing disrespectful of you before me," nor is he able to "repeat with certainty any loose conversation" that may have occurred in his father's house. He admits that his father "was very much surprised & shocked that Mr Hall should take such liberties with the character of those with whom he was totally unacquainted & especially as he knew the representation was totally false." According to a conversation between Hall and Edward King Fordham (another friend of the Robinson family in Royston and an ardent

regular during the 1790s at the Royston Book Club as well, Crabb Robinson notes in a letter dated 9 June 1797, to his brother Thomas, that Anthony Robinson continues to speak "of our late Uncle Crabb with great kindness & esteem." Anthony Robinson would later have a major part in the *Analytical Review*.

Dissenter and Reformer),<sup>34</sup> Hall truly believed Crabb had “endeavoured to shake the belief of one of his Congregation in Xtianity.” Thus, Hall felt justified in declaring to William Nash, who had been a deacon in Hall’s congregation at St. Andrew’s Street since 1777,<sup>35</sup> that it would be “a disgrace to a father of a Family to admit any man who professed Principles,” such as those held by Robinson, “into his house.” William Nash could not recollect Hall saying anything to that effect in his presence, his son writes. Nevertheless, the younger Nash is convinced that words “to that Effect” were indeed spoken by Hall, and he “thinks it quite proper you should write about it if you think it of any conseq.<sup>e</sup> to you.” Nash ends his letter with the comment, “We [he and Hall] are no longer Friends ourselves in conseq<sup>e</sup> of what there passed bet. us.”

Based on this evidence, Robinson proceeded in his letter of 30 August 1798 to berate Hall for his uncalled for and, in many ways, unchristian behavior. Robinson charged Hall with deliberate recklessness in introducing Robinson’s “Name & Character” into conversations concerning the dangers of infidelity. Though not accusing him “of personal malignity,” Robinson nevertheless believed Hall was guilty of “wantonly casting Arrows & Death.” He writes, “I do not think y<sup>o</sup> capable of inventing Calumny but it seems that y<sup>o</sup> have heedlessly built Opinions on vague Report, drawn unwarrantable Inferences from general Appellations & carelessly trifled with the happiness of others as Objects below your regard.” He already knew of Hall’s position on Godwin’s *Political Justice*, learning from one friend how Hall, upon hearing “any Incident of unnatural depravity or abandoned profligacy,” would exclaim, “I could not have supposed any man capable of such an Action except Godwin.” Admitting Hall’s reputation and prowess, he writes that he cannot “despise” him, but he believes Hall’s actions prove “a most important Truth, that the possession of the greatest Talents is no Security against the grossest absurdities and weaknesses.” Robinson is certain his views on Godwin (and hence himself) are “confined and partial” because Hall has “reasoned absurdly” in the following manner:

R[obinson]. is a Godwinite—therefore an Atheist—therefore incapable of virtuous habits or benevolent feelings—therefore disposed only to commit Crimes & make Proselytes—therefore I ought to use my appropriate weapons of excommunication by exciting ag<sup>t</sup> him both his friends & strangers & depriv[ing] him of all Power to do Injury by blasting his Reput<sup>n</sup> and making him an Object of Hatred and Contempt—Thus by the ruin of one, I shall save many.

Had Hall not given in to his “imagination” and “passion,” he would have waited “for the dull inquiry” and the “tedious discrimination” of his better judgment to enable him to arrive at a more accurate opinion of Robinson, a basic consideration, he writes, “y<sup>o</sup> owed to y<sup>r</sup> Neighbor.” After completing the letter to Hall, Robinson immediately wrote to his brother Thomas, explaining that Wedd Nash had given him enough “information” with which to write, but he hopes he has written in a “spirit” which Thomas’s wife (a great supporter of Hall) will approve, though concerning the “style,” he confesses, he is “far from satisfied.” The import, however, he knows

<sup>34</sup> Fordham was a prominent Dissenter from Royston, a leader on many occasions of the debates at the Royston Book Club, and a close friend of the Robinson family for many years, especially Crabb’s older brother, Thomas (1770-1860). As Robinson says of Fordham in his *Reminiscences*, he was always “liberal in religious opinion and zealous for political reform” (Sadler 1: 21). Fordham was married to Thomas Robinson’s sister-in-law, Anne Clapton.

<sup>35</sup> Church Book 121.

will not be lost on Hall, and “What sort of a Dressing I shall have in return,” he admits somewhat fearfully, “I can guess” (2 September 1798).

Hall responded in a lengthy letter of 13 October 1798, but not with the violent tone Robinson anticipated. Hall apologized for his delay, then related what he had heard from his friends about Robinson and his admiration for Godwin. He notes that Robinson “makes no scruple on all occasions to avow [his] religious skepticism,” even

declaring, I believe at the Royston Book Club, that no man ever understood the *nature* of virtue so well as Mr. Godwin; from which I have drawn the following inference, either that you disbelieve the being of God and future state, or that admitting them to be true, in your opinion they have no connection with the nature of virtue; the first of which is direct and avowed, the second *practical* atheism. For whether there be a God is merely a question of curious speculation, unless the belief in him be allowed to direct and enforce the practice of virtue. The *theopathetic* affections, such as love, reverence, resignation, &c, form in the estimation of all theists a very sublime and important class of virtues. Mr. Godwin as a professed atheist is very consistent in excluding them from his catalogue; but how he who does so can be allowed best to understand the nature of virtue, by any man who is not himself an atheist, I am at a loss to conceive.

Hall says that another lady, in a conversation with him, heard Robinson refer to God in terms coinciding with the system of Spinoza, “in which everything is God, and God everything.” He has also heard from another source that Robinson’s chief objection to Godwinian philosophy is that it is “too delicate and refined for the present corrupt state of society,” which Hall remarks, “from a person of your acknowledged good sense surprised me much, because the most striking and original part of his system, that to which he ascends, through the intermediate stages, as the highest point of perfection,—the promiscuous intercourse of the sexes,—has been uniformly acted upon by all four-footed creatures from the beginning of the world.”

Hall admits that he has counseled others about Robinson, but not out of malice, nor has he impeached Robinson’s character. Hall has criticized certain beliefs, not actions, of Robinson, and they have been limited in the number of hearers involved. Hall says he has confined his efforts to a small circle in order “to warn some young people against forming a close intimacy with a person who by the possession of the most captivating talents was likely to give circulation and effect to the most dangerous errors.” His encounter with William Nash was entirely proper, Hall asserts, for he “is a member and an officer in our Church.” Since Nash desired Robinson to stay at his home on his next visit to Royston, Hall thought it unwise, due to Robinson’s non-Christian principles; he also did not believe Robinson should have been invited back to the Royston Book Club. Hall admits in his letter a growing frustration over “the rapid increase of irreligion among the polite and fashionable and descending of late to the lower classes.” “Principles of irreligion recommended by brilliant and seductive talents,” Hall contends, “appear to me more dangerous in the intercourse of private life than licentious manners.” Hall is attaching to Robinson the same criticism he levelled at Coleridge in his letter to Isaac James of 29 September 1794. By 1798, however, Coleridge had long rejected any Godwinian influences upon his then Unitarian position. In fact, Coleridge had talked for several years of composing a formal response to Godwin, all the while convinced that Robert Hall should enter the lists against Godwin as well. As early as November 1796, Coleridge had written to Benjamin Flower, mentioning a

forthcoming second edition of his *Poems*, as well as a proposed “Examination” of Godwin’s *Political Justice*, which had aroused “many enemies among the atheists by my prelusive skirmishes,” he says.<sup>36</sup> At the close of the letter he makes this oddly prophetic reference to Robert Hall, given Hall’s later confrontation with Crabb Robinson: “I hope, that Robert Hall is well—Why is he idle?—I mean, *towards the Public*. We want such men to rescue this *enlightened age* from general Irreligion.”<sup>37</sup>

Hall was not idle concerning politics and religion between 1795 and 1798, but he was no longer defending the tenets of radical reform the way he had between 1788 and 1795. In his letter to Robinson, Hall was indeed attempting to “rescue this *enlightened age*,” especially one young member of it, “from general Irreligion.” In so doing, however, his politics had experienced a significant turnabout. In his political pamphlets of 1791 and 1793, Hall defended freedom of speech and thought for English radicals (like Priestley and Price) as well as the French infidels involved in the Revolution of 1789. What had then seemed most essential to Hall concerning the relation of Christians to the state—the right to freedom of conscience—appeared now, in the face of growing infidelity, a political liability requiring intervention from the pulpit and Parliament. Robinson was obviously aware of this political revision on the part of Hall, but his appeals to Hall’s former positions concerning the interference of the state and church in freedom of thought and conscience were ineffectual in the face of Hall’s heightened zeal against the subtle insinuations of infidelity into the hearts and minds of his church members and fellow countrymen. Whereas by late 1797, Hall had retreated from radical reform into a militant orthodoxy and semi-acquiescence to the status quo, Robinson had all but “abandoned the profession of christianity” for a radical Godwinian skepticism. Such skepticism and infidelity, however, did not create the excesses of the French Revolution, Robinson contends. To Hall, though, these excesses *were* the direct consequence of infidelity, possessing such “mischief” that they

confound all the duties and perplex all the relations of human life: they innovate in the very *substance* of virtue, about which philosophers of all sects have been nearly agreed. They render vice systematic and concerted; and by freeing the conscience from every restraint, and teaching men to mock at futurity, they cut off from the criminal and misguided the very possibility of retreat. Atheism in every form I abhor, but even atheism has received from Godwin new degrees of deformity, and wears a more wild and savage aspect. I am firmly of opinion the avowal of such a system, accompanied with an attempt to proselyte, ought not to be tolerated in the state, much less be permitted to enter the recesses of private life, to pollute the springs of domestic happiness or taint the purity of confidential intercourse. For the first of these sentiments, Mr. Godwin’s disciples will doubtless regard me with ineffable contempt; a contempt which I am prepared to encounter, shielded by the authority of all pagan antiquity, as well as by the decided support of Mr. Locke, the first of Christian philosophers and political reasoners.<sup>38</sup>

In general, Robinson seemed pleased with Hall’s letter. Writing to William Pattisson on 31 October 1798, Robinson informs him that he has just “received a Letter from Hall—just what I

<sup>36</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956-71) 1: 247.

<sup>37</sup> Coleridge, *Letters* 1: 248.

<sup>38</sup> Sadler 1: 29.

expected, personally respectful, a Retraction of some Assertions on further Information, an Acknowledgm<sup>t</sup> that his Asperity was not to be justified but on the whole a Vindication of his Conduct as justified by general Report."<sup>39</sup> In the next few months, Robinson expressed some misgivings about the wisdom of having engaged Hall in any kind of debate, especially given Hall's reputation for severity in dealing with his enemies, but he refuses to grant Hall any victory. He confesses to his brother Thomas that "since I wrote it [Hall] has declared that I have *confessed myself a devil*. Look at the letter & see whe.<sup>r</sup> it be not an unfair construction---Rutt & myself are both of Opinion that the letter has no such acknowledgm<sup>t</sup> apropos" (4 February 1799). Within a few days, however, Robinson had an unexpected meeting with Hall. He writes to Thomas again on 13 February: "I have had an interview with *Hall* & leaving you to guess at what passed—And I have no doubt it will procure me a letter at least a week sooner as I know it will throw both you & my sister<sup>40</sup> into the *fidgets*." He swears that unless his brother writes a long letter he will not tell him "abo.<sup>t</sup> my Interview with Hall how I\_\_\_\_ . . . how he then sneered and I \_\_\_\_ when he started into a rage How I \_\_\_\_ and pacified him\_\_\_\_ Now \_\_\_\_ triumphed \_\_\_\_ Now I kicked his \_\_\_\_ et cetera et cetera et cetera." In another letter to William Pattisson, 19 February 1799, Robinson describes in some detail to his close friend his meeting with Hall and his "skeptical" critique of a Hall sermon he attended shortly after that encounter:

Some Evenings since I was at M<sup>r</sup> Rutts when Hall came in We bowed respectfully chatted with Indifference And both preserved a total Silence and disregard to our past Correspondence tho the Drollery of the Rencontre was heightened by M<sup>r</sup> Palmer<sup>41</sup> who was with him & who seein<sup>g</sup> me in black in a very quick manner jogged me & said 'I see you are in black *are you one of us*' this was almost too much for my muscles. I since heard Hall preach a very beautiful Sermon on 'giving our Hearts to God' it was highly eloquent but I think injudicious & possibly injurious for tho' it be perfectly true that all Religion be resolvable into the regulation of the Heart And in the direction of the Affections to the Deity; Yet by asserting it to consist in Sentiment & not properly explaining it to operate or diffuse itself by good Actions The Impression left upon our Minds was the Identification of Religion with certain warm enthusiastick Sensations which can be powerful only in proportion to the *temperament* of Individuals & might

<sup>39</sup> Penelope J. Corfield and Chris Evans, ed., *Youth and Revolution in the 1790s: Letters of William Pattison, Thomas Amyot and Henry Crabb Robinson* (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton, 1996) 163.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Robinson's wife, Mary Clapton (1768-1826).

<sup>41</sup> Rev. Samuel Palmer (1741-1816), minister at the Independent congregation at Mare Street in Hackney from 1766-1816, was the author of the *Protestant Dissenter's Catechism* (1772) and *The Nonconformists' Memorial* (1775-78). He was a friend of Robert Robinson, Habbakuk Crabb, Robert Hall, J. T. Rutt, and many other Dissenters known to Crabb Robinson. He preached a memorial sermon at Royston in honor of Rev. Crabb on 4 January 1795, to which (in the second edition) Robert Hall's *Oration* was attached. It was at Mare Street in late 1796 that Henry first heard Hall deliver a sermon. In a letter to his brother Thomas, 10 November 1796, he writes, with some disappointment: "On Sunday I went to Hackney to hear Mr. Hall—The high opinion I had formed of him much exceeded what I sho<sup>d</sup> myself have conceived from the Display of his Talents that Day I did not find that one flower fell from him as a mark of his brilliant genius his Discourses had nothing in them of Novelty nor did he employ any metaphorical or allusive language Tho' as an extempore Preacher he discovered unusual Powers of Correct Speaking and Perspicuous Narrative Had I not known his Name I sho<sup>d</sup> certainly have placed him above the Ordinary Pulpit Standard. . . I might in justice to observe that Mr King Fordham (whom I had the Pleasure of seeing him there) declared that he thought him remarkably dull—We are told that 'Sometimes the good Homer sleeps.'"

throw such apathetic cold blooded Animals as yourself into despair: And seems favourable to the fanatical Spirit of Enthusiasm.

But I fear any Criticism from *me* will be thought absurd But I write this in the Spirit of hypothetical Religion.<sup>42</sup>

Several months later, while on an extensive walking tour of Western England and Wales, Robinson accidentally met Robert Hall again, this time at the home of the Rev. James Phillips,<sup>43</sup> a Dissenting minister in Haverfordwest. In a letter to J.T. Rutt in London, 18 September 1799, Robinson writes:

After breakfast I immediately waited on Mr Philips, he received me with the greatest civility, and in Mr Hall there was more. He behaved with unnecessary politeness & showed a kind impression which I co<sup>d</sup> not expect. This first made me accept an invitation to dine—then to tea & then to accompany them to a supper. Mr Hall was to depart the next day. An Emigrant Priest & several dissenting ministers called to pay him their homage so that it was a busy day--You will imagine the subjects of our conversation Godwin and the New Philosophy—Socinianism—French politics—Taste—Infidelity—Toleration all had their turns. In all Hall spoke like himself . . . His vehemence & rashness of censure wo<sup>d</sup> be intolerable if there were not playfulness of manner wch makes y<sup>o</sup> think that the wounds he inflicts are without venom—I left him at night with a better opinion of him, certainly not thro' any complim<sup>nt</sup> on his part for we scarcely kept our tempers at last and he did not spare me, any more than poor Johns of Bury—Mrs. Barbauld Godwin & Kentish for his ans<sup>r</sup> to Fuller.<sup>44</sup>

Writing from Wales on 1 October 1799, Robinson adds more details about the visit in a letter to his brother Thomas:

Passing thro' Haverford West I was looking into a window and to my astonishment, saw—whom now can you guess—of all men living none other than Hall. I delayed calling on Mr. Philips till after breakfast when I was received by him with great attention

<sup>42</sup> Corfield and Evans 167.

<sup>43</sup> Phillips was an Independent minister who had been a friend of Hall's for several years and visited him frequently in Cambridge. He would leave Haverford-West not long after Hall's encounter with Crabb Robinson, removing to an Independent congregation at Clapham, where he would establish close ties with the British and Foreign Bible Society. Hall and Phillips would correspond regularly with each other for the next twenty years.

<sup>44</sup> Mrs. Anna Letitia Barbauld (1743-1825) was a leading female writer among the Unitarians in the 1790s. At the time of this letter she was most known for her early political pieces, *An Address to the Opposers of the Repeal of the Corporation and Test Act* (London: J. Johnson, 1790); *Sins of Government, Sins of the Nation; or, a Discourse for the Fast, appointed on April 19, 1793* (London: J. Johnson, 1793); and *Evenings at Home, or, The juvenile budget opened consisting of a variety of miscellaneous pieces, for the instruction and amusement of young persons*, a multivolume work which first appeared in 1792 and was last reprinted in 1915, compiled by Mrs. Barbauld and her brother John Aiken (1747-1822). Andrew Fuller (1754-1815), the Baptist minister at Kettering and first President of the Baptist Missionary Society, attacked Socinianism in his *The Calvinistic and Socinian systems examined and compared, as to their moral tendency* (1793). The Unitarian minister John Kentish (1768-1853) responded to Fuller in *The Moral Tendency of the Genuine Christian Doctrine* (1796). Fuller replied in his *Socinianism Indefensible: on the ground of its moral tendency* (1797), to which Kentish responded once more with his *Strictures upon the Reply of Mr. A. Fuller, to Mr. Kentish's Discourse* (1798).

& by Hall with marked respect indeed it was a kind of eagerness which Mr H. showed for my company that induced me to accept an invitation first to dinner then to tea & afterward to spend the evening with them at the house of a friend. I scarcely need say on what subjects we chatted . . . he says that my sister & Mr. Buck are the only persons whom he would chuse to call upon. I intimated that my sister was surprised he had not called upon her when he passed thro' the town; he said that he expected to return by Bury & on that account deferred his visit. He had before expressed himself of my sister in language that gave me the greatest pleasure we all are gratified by the compliments of men of talent And he spoke with more than usual seriousness & earnestness when he remarked that she was the most extraordinary instance he had ever known of a woman of superior talents preserving universal respect—Abilities being so rare in women & when found so seldom accompanied by amiable qualities. On the whole I like Hall much better than I expected and yet I assure you it was not that he bribed my judgement by personal civility. There was a friendliness of reception—which showed that he felt no bitterness but in our disputes on Godwin he did not spare either my opinions or myself and he was very far from flattering me. As I said before I enjoyed the day very much.<sup>45</sup>

## IV

Whether Hall relished these meetings as much as Robinson did cannot be known, but we do know that one of the outcomes of Hall's preaching tour through western England during the fall of 1799 would have significant consequences for the fate of Godwinism in England at the beginning of the nineteenth century. While Hall was visiting Rev. Phillips in Haverfordwest, he was finishing preparations for the initial presentation of his sermon *Modern Infidelity Considered with Respect to its Influence on Society* in Bristol in October 1799, the result of consultations with two ministers there, both of whom were acquaintances of Samuel Taylor Coleridge—the Unitarian John Prior Estlin, pastor of the chapel at Lewin's Mead in Bristol and the Baptist John Ryland, Jr., son of the former Northampton schoolmaster of Robert Hall and Benjamin Flower (now pastor of the Baptist congregation at Broadmead in Bristol).

In his sermon Hall sought to show “the total incompatibility of sceptical principles with the existence of society.”<sup>46</sup> In the “Preface” to the sermon, Hall proposed that the “principal object of modern Sceptics” is “to obliterate the sense of Deity, of moral sanctions, and a future world, and by these means to prepare the way for the total subversion of every institution, both social and religious, which men have been hitherto accustomed to revere.”<sup>47</sup> In an ecumenical appeal typical of Hall, he begs Christians of all denominations to “concentrate their forces against the common adversary” of skepticism,<sup>48</sup> before English society as they know it is destroyed, not so much by military might abroad or political corruption at home as by intellectual and spiritual

<sup>45</sup> Robinson notes in his *Reminiscences* about the incident that “the only allusion [Hall] made to our correspondence was by saying of one who thought himself ill treated: ‘He ought at once to have come forward, and in a manly way, as you did, have made his complaint’” (Sadler 1: 38).

<sup>46</sup> John Webster Morris, *Biographical Recollections of the Rev. Robert Hall, A. M.*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London: Houlston and Stoneman, 1846) 92.

<sup>47</sup> Hall *Modern Infidelity* v-vi.

<sup>48</sup> Hall *Modern Infidelity* vii.

heresy infiltrating England and Europe. He defines infidelity as “the joint offspring of an irreligious temper and unholy speculation, employed, not in examining the Evidences of Christianity, but in detecting the vices and imperfections of professing Christians.”<sup>49</sup> The main proponents of infidelity and thus the “abettors of Atheism” come from those “who pursue literature as a profession.”<sup>50</sup> Their skeptical system “subverts the whole foundation of morals,”<sup>51</sup> Hall believes, by replacing eternal consequences with temporal expedients, thus eliminating moral obligation on the part of man. Accordingly, as man becomes his own “law, his tribunal, and his judge,” morality becomes purely relative, resulting in “the frequent perpetration of great crimes, and the total absence of great virtues.”<sup>52</sup>

At the heart of this anti-social system is extreme self-interestedness, which leads to such “strife and hatred” that “domestic affection [is] extinguished, and all the purposes of domestic society [are] defeated!”<sup>53</sup> This distorted view of human nature, along with a hatred for its Christian counterpart, is what brought the French Revolution to such violence and degradation. Its leaders, Hall argues, have been all too “eager to displace a Deity from the minds of men, that they may occupy the void; to crumble the throne of the Eternal into dust, that they may elevate themselves on its ruins; and that, as their licentiousness is impatient of restraint, so their pride disdains a superior.”<sup>54</sup> Atheism lowers man to the level of brute creation without divine accountability, a costly devaluation. Since atheism cannot bear the least restraint, “its first object is to dethrone God, its next to destroy man.”<sup>55</sup> In reference to Godwin’s views on marriage and benevolence, Hall argues that a commitment to “domestic society” and “social affections” does not come from the reason, but from the heart.<sup>56</sup> “Infidels like Godwin propose,” Hall says,

to build general benevolence on the destruction of individual tenderness, and to make us love the whole species more, by loving every particular part of it less. In pursuit of this chimerical project, gratitude, humility, conjugal, parental, and filial affection, together with every other social disposition, are reprobated; virtue is limited to a passionate attachment to the general good. Is it not natural to ask, when all the tenderness of life is extinguished, and all the bands of society are untwisted, from whence this ardent affection from the general good is to spring?<sup>57</sup>

Hall then describes those individuals, like Robinson possibly, who seem to have been taken in by Godwin’s brand of infidelity, but who are miserable because their earlier religion still has some grasp upon them:

Is it surprising to find a mind thus bewildered in uncertainty, and dissatisfied with itself, court deception, and embracing with eagerness every pretext to mutilate the claims and

<sup>49</sup> Hall *Modern Infidelity* 12.

<sup>50</sup> Hall *Modern Infidelity* 15.

<sup>51</sup> Hall *Modern Infidelity* 19.

<sup>52</sup> Hall *Modern Infidelity* 22.

<sup>53</sup> Hall *Modern Infidelity* 38.

<sup>54</sup> Hall *Modern Infidelity* 42.

<sup>55</sup> Hall *Modern Infidelity* 51.

<sup>56</sup> Hall *Modern Infidelity* 56.

<sup>57</sup> Hall *Modern Infidelity* 58.

enervate the authority of Christianity, forgetting that it is of the very essence of the religious principle to preside and control, and that it is impossible to *serve God and mammon*? It is this class of professors who are chiefly in danger of being entangled in the snares of infidelity.<sup>58</sup>

Consequently, parents (like William Nash) have a great responsibility to protect the young from such views by watching, “not only over the morals, but the principles of those committed to their care; to make it appear that a concern for their eternal welfare is their chief concern, and to imbue them early with that knowledge of the evidences of Christianity, and that profound reverence for the Scriptures . . .”<sup>59</sup>

*Modern Infidelity* provoked praise from several former enemies of Hall, including Pitt and the Bishop of London. Glowing reviews appeared in numerous periodicals, and references to the sermon soon found their way into James Mackintosh’s *Lectures* (1800), Dr. Parr’s *Spital Sermon* (1801), Henry Kett’s *Elements of General Knowledge* (1802), and William Belsham’s *History of Great Britain* (1804). “From that time Mr. Hall’s reputation,” according to his Cambridge friend and biographer Olinthus Gregory, “was placed upon an eminence, which it will probably retain so long as purity and elevation of style, deeply philosophical views of the springs and motives of action, and correct theological sentiments, are duly appreciated in the world”<sup>60</sup> As William Willis noted in 1901, *Modern Infidelity* “gave at once fame and reputation to Hall; it went everywhere, even among the highest classes, and brought down upon Mr. Hall the eulogiums of scholars and politicians, and remains to-day one of the noblest discourses in our language.”<sup>61</sup> *Modern Infidelity* went through repeated editions (thirteen by 1834) and “carried [Hall’s] celebrity as a profound thinker and eloquent writer far beyond the limits of the denomination to which he was so bright an ornament”<sup>62</sup>

Not everyone, however, agreed with the lavish praise given Hall for his sermon. Later that year Benjamin Flower, in his *Proceedings of the House of Lords in the Case of Benjamin Flower, Printer of the Cambridge Intelligencer*, would castigate Hall as an “apostate” to the tenets of radical reform he had once so eloquently espoused. Flower was dismayed “that a total revolution has taken place in the mind of Mr. Hall, on subjects of the last importance, to the welfare of mankind. Those therefore, who entered into the spirit of his former sentiments, must deeply lament the change that has taken place.”<sup>63</sup> Whereas Hall once saw the French Revolution as “the most splendid event recorded in the annals of history,” he now saw it as the sole work of sceptics, infidels, and atheists.<sup>64</sup> Thus, to Flower, this “abominable sermon”<sup>65</sup> that so many were praising for its rebuke of infidelity actually promoted skepticism by demonstrating such radical

<sup>58</sup> Hall *Modern Infidelity* 78.

<sup>59</sup> Hall *Modern Infidelity* 81.

<sup>60</sup> Olinthus Gregory, ed., *The Works of Robert Hall*, A. M., 6 vols. (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1834) 6: 64.

<sup>61</sup> William Willis, *Robert Hall, Orator, Politician, Preacher: A Lecture by William Willis*. (Printed for private circulation, 1901) 24.

<sup>62</sup> Hall, *Works* 6: 62-63.

<sup>63</sup> Benjamin Flower, *Proceedings of the House of Lords in the Case of Benjamin Flower, Printer of the Cambridge Intelligencer...* (Cambridge, Benjamin Flower, 1800) 49.

<sup>64</sup> Flower 50.

<sup>65</sup> Flower 51.

“apostasy” in the person of Robert Hall.<sup>66</sup> Anthony Robinson, like his friends Benjamin Flower and Crabb Robinson, contributed as well to this campaign to discredit Hall in his stinging rebuttal, *An Examination of a Sermon, Preached at Cambridge, by Robert Hall, M.A.* (1800). Robinson accused Hall of being an imitator of Burke, teaching that it was excusable, if not meritorious, “to punish men for errors in religious opinions.”<sup>67</sup> Robinson believed atheism was morally neutral, but organized religion of any form was nothing less than an instrument which “changes the name and the nature of morality, saps the foundation of all benevolence, and introduces malice, hostility, and murder, under the pretext of love to God”<sup>68</sup> Even some of Hall’s Baptist friends and former associates in Bristol, the place where the sermon originated, questioned Hall’s political allegiance. Isaac James, Hall’s brother-in-law, writes to Hall on 24 September 1800, chiding him about learning “the particulars of your interview with the Bishop of London. The Democrats call you worse names than any in the tenth chapter of Nehemiah for your sermon, and your (as they would have it) Apostasy.”<sup>69</sup> Eventually, William Godwin would have his say about the “much vaunted Sermon of Mr. Hall of Cambridge” in his *Thoughts Occasioned by Dr. Parr’s Spital Sermon* (1801), complaining that “every notion of toleration or decorum was treated with infuriated contempt” by Hall.<sup>70</sup> Godwin, like Flower and the Robinsons, remembered a very different Robert Hall of 1791 and 1793:

I feel little resentment against those persons who, without any fresh reasons to justify their change, think it now necessary to plead for establishments, and express their horror at theories and innovation, though I recollect the time when they took an opposite part. But this I must say, that they act against all nature and reason when, instead of modestly confessing their frailty and the transformation of their sentiments, they rail at me because I have not equally changed.<sup>71</sup>

According to Morris, Godwin’s attack was clear evidence of the desperate state of all “infidel philosopher[s]”:

In stigmatising the author of the sermon as an enemy to toleration, the advocate of what was called “political perfectability” gave an apt exemplification of his doctrine, and showed that those who make universal philanthropy a substitute for religion, are either ignorant of their own scheme of morality, or they know not how to put it into practice . . . The manner in which Mr. Hall held up to public abhorrence the malevolence of this

<sup>66</sup> Flower had been a regular attendant at Hall’s congregation at St. Andrew’s Street since 1793 (he was the congregation’s song leader from 1795-98), but he left in 1798 over his increasing Unitarianism and his growing disappointment with Hall’s change in politics. See Greene 30; *Church Book* 143, 148.

<sup>67</sup> Anthony Robinson, *An Examination of a Sermon, Preached at Cambridge, by Robert Hall, M. A. Entitled, Modern Infidelity... in the Monthly Review for February 1800* (London, 1800) 33.

<sup>68</sup> Despite his Baptist origins and record of achievement at Bristol Baptist College under the tutorship of Hall and Caleb Evans, Anthony Robinson was ostracized more and more by orthodox Dissenters of all denominations, especially the Baptists. Crabb Robinson, however, steadfastly defended Anthony Robinson’s religious sentiment. See his obituary for Robinson in the *Monthly Repository* in 1827 (qtd. in Sadler 1: xvi); see also Gregory 6: 64.

<sup>69</sup> Robert Hall Warren, *The Hall Family* (Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith, 1910) 78.

<sup>70</sup> William Godwin, *Thoughts Occasioned by the Perusal of Dr. Parr’s Spital Sermon, preached at Christ Church, April 15, 1800...* (London, 1801) 9.

<sup>71</sup> Godwin 9.

apostate, and other scorners, was such as the interests of society demanded; and for this unanswerable and splendid performance he received the plaudits of the whole christian world.<sup>72</sup>

The earliest critique of Hall's sermon, however, appeared in the *Cambridge Intelligencer* on 5 April 1800, and it came from the pen of none other than Henry Crabb Robinson.<sup>73</sup> Using the *nom de plume* "Vigilance," Robinson's letter voiced sentiments many were fearful to express concerning Hall's apparent political "apostasy." Robinson believed the sermon reflected Hall's "literary excellence" as a gifted scholar and orator, but not his political heritage as a radical Baptist Dissenter. Nor did he believe Hall had been "candid and just" in his portrayal of the "character of atheism and scepticism," for to Robinson those who continued to prosecute the war with France were far more guilty of violating human and divine law than the sceptics he knew. In fact, by 1800 the war with France, always supported by the church and its emissaries, both Protestant and Catholic, was now, as Hall's sermon and its ensuing popularity revealed, fashionably accepted by large numbers of Dissenters as well. Robinson notes in dismay that "Religious zeal has been pressed into the service from the pulpit; and from the professor's chair, the bench of justice, and the senator's seat, one monotonous strain of alarm and terror has resounded," leaving in its wake "a domestic inquisition" of France "unexampled" in English history. Those "friends of Liberty" who once supported France and fiercely opposed the corruptions of the Roman Church, such as Hall in his pamphlets of 1791 and 1793,<sup>74</sup> had either turned "apostate" in relation to the French Revolution and Catholicism, or "been calumniated and terrified into silence." What horrified Robinson was that Hall, of all people, could have fallen for "THE GRAND POLITICAL LIE OF THE DAY,—that, the crimes of the French Revolution . . . are the result of . . . Atheism." Amazingly, the once radical reformer Hall had now "become undesignedly the humble follower of HORSLEY and RAMSDEN,"<sup>75</sup> and unconsciously compleated the triumvirate with his quondam adversary—the Rev. JOHN CLAYTON, and his brother baptist,

<sup>72</sup> Morris 91-92.

<sup>73</sup> Again, see Whelan, "Henry Crabb Robinson and Godwinism," *Wordsworth Circle* 33.2 (Spring 2002): 58-69.

<sup>74</sup> In the *Apology* Hall contended that the grounds for war with France were specious at best, led by a corrupt Parliament and Pitt administration, which were depleting the nation of its wealth and morale. "Under the torpid touch of despotism," he exclaims, "the patriotic spirit has shrunk into a narrow compass . . . Is not the kingdom peopled with spies and informers? Are not inquisitorial tribunals erected in every corner of the land?" If war will maintain the "national honour, and the faith of treaties," then Hall will support it. "But if the re-establishment of the ancient government of France be any part of the object; if it be a war with freedom, a confederacy of Kings against the rights of man; it will be the last humiliation and disgrace that can be inflicted on Great Britain" (105-06).

<sup>75</sup> Samuel Horsley (1733-1806), in *A Review of the Case of the Protestant Dissenters with reference to the Corporation and Test Acts* (1790) and *A Sermon Preached before the Lords Spiritual and Temporal*, on Wednesday, January 30, 1793 (1793), reiterated the doctrine of unlimited submission to the King and his Church, and in so doing greatly angered Dissenting ministers throughout England, including Hall, who viciously attacked Horsley in the Preface to his *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*. The Rev. Richard Ramsden (1761-1831), a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, became a frequent target of Benjamin Flower's anger during the late 1790s and early 1800s as a result of several sermons preached in Cambridge, such as *The Origins and Ends of Government* (January 1800), *Reflections on War and the Final Cessation of All Hostility* (March 1800), and *The Alliance between the Church and the State* (November 1800), in which Ramsden followed Horsley's advocacy of submission to the government and support of the war with France, with anyone opposed to such a position being nothing less than a "vile Jacobin."

the Rev. JOHN MARTIN.”<sup>76</sup> To Robinson, not even Hall’s early political triumphs could “save him from reproach,” nor could his former political allies, “when they find in his Sermon an elaborate attempt to prove that ferocity, is one of the effects of Atheism (in itself a very disputable position) by shewing that from its prevalence have arisen the cruelties which have recently disgraced the French nation.” Robinson says that one would expect a priest of the established church to propagate such a lie, but not a leading Dissenting minister like Hall.

Robinson’s letter was immediately attacked by “Moderation,” a Hall supporter, in a letter to the editor dated 12 April.<sup>77</sup> The letter, appearing in the *Intelligencer* on 17 May, was particularly sensitive to Robinson’s “insinuating” that Hall had now “apostasized” from his earlier views on religious and civil liberty:

What can be the meaning of your correspondent, when he talks of Mr. Hall compleating the triumvirate with the Rev. John Clayton, and the Rev. John Martin? Does he intend to insult the common sense of your readers in general, or only to impose upon the credulous, by *insinuating* that Mr. Hall has become an advocate for the present Ministry, a propagator of the doctrine that Christians have nothing to do with politics, and a villifier and accuser of his brethren the dissenters? He must be conscious [that] no part of Mr. Hall’s conduct will fairly bear the construction he was disposed to put upon it; and as he knows it would be *unjust* positively to *assert it*, I can only lament that *honour* did not restrain him from making the *insinuation*.

<sup>76</sup> Hall’s *Christianity Consistent with a Love of Freedom* (1791) was a response to a sermon by John Clayton (1754-1843), Benjamin Flower’s brother-in-law and pastor of the Independent congregation meeting at the Weigh-House in London. In *The Duty of Christians to Magistrates* (24 July 1791), Clayton chastised his fellow Dissenting ministers, such as Joseph Priestley and Robert Hall, for being disloyal both to the King and their vocation by engaging in political disputes with the government. John Martin (1741-1820), another London Baptist minister, irritated Dissenters in 1791 with *A Review of Some Things Pertaining to Civil Government*, in which he argued, much like Clayton, that “every *private* man is bound, by divine authority, to submit peaceably to the civil power of that country in which he resides or lives, in all cases where his submission would leave him in the enjoyment of a good conscience” (28). Martin was severely censured by many of his dissenting brethren for his conduct, “political subserviency,” and catering to the good graces of the Established church by being appointed (after appealing directly to the Archbishop of Canterbury and Mr. Pitt) almoner of the *Regium Donum* in 1795, at which the other dissenting ministers withdrew and left Martin with the entire sum to dispense with as he so chose (about £1500 a year). In reference to this, Robert Hall noted that “Judas had no acquaintance with the chief priests, till he went to transact business with them” (Morris 68). Later, in 1798 Martin would provoke even more wrath among Dissenters when, after defending the Test and Corporation Acts, he boasted that many Dissenters would be willing to join with the French should they land in England.

<sup>77</sup> Olinthus Gregory, who served briefly in the late 1790s as sub-editor for the *Intelligencer*, in his *A Brief Memoir of the Rev. Robert Hall, A. M.*, discusses Flower’s role in promoting the controversy surrounding Hall’s sermon by means of these letters to the editor: “Immediately after this sermon (*On Modern Infidelity*) issued from the press, the consistency and integrity of the author were vehemently attacked in several letters which appeared in the ‘Cambridge Intelligencer,’ then a popular and widely circulated newspaper. Its editor, Mr. Flower, had received in an ill spirit Mr. Hall’s advice that he would repress the violent tone of his political disquisitions, and had, from other causes which need not now be developed, become much disposed to misinterpret his motives and depreciate his character. He, therefore, managed to keep alive the controversy for some months, occasionally aiding, by his own remarks, those of his correspondents who opposed Mr. Hall, and as often casting illiberal insinuations upon the individual who had stepped forward in defence of the sermon and its author” (Hall, *Works* 6: 63).

Moderation also attacked Robinson's portrayal of Hall's new appreciation for the persecuted Roman Catholic priests as hypocritical for a Dissenting minister. If that be the case, Moderation argues, then Crabb Robinson is guilty of something far greater than hypocrisy, for

what must it be to defend the conduct of the atheists, to pretend that their principles do not produce ferocity, and to declare that he who opposes them has become a deserter from 'the holy cause of civil and religious freedom,' and is doing 'general injury to peace and liberty?' This is not merely *identifying* himself with the atheistical system: —it is, as it were *immersing* himself therein, making a panoply of its principles and prejudices, divesting himself of every feeling except that of concern for its success, and calling off every thing calculated to restrain him from running headlong in the path the atheists have chalked out. Whether conduct like this, or that of Mr. Hall, be most consistent with the profession of Christianity, I leave for your correspondent to determine.

Because of the severity of these charges by Moderation, Thomas Robinson expected a reply from his brother, but when none was forthcoming, he responded himself (using the initials "T.R.") on 21 June 1800.<sup>78</sup> Though Hall had long been, and would continue to be, a revered friend of the family, Thomas nevertheless agreed with his brother concerning Hall's political apostasy, though not Crabb's admiration for infidelity. Obviously familiar with Hall's previous political works, Thomas writes of his expectation of similar "liberal" sentiments in the *Sermon*:

but instead of those generous principles, and liberal opinions, which heretofore shed a transcendent lustre on his character, I was most deeply concerned to find them diametrically opposite to every idea I had formed; and alas! instead of a mirror to exhibit with additional clearness and strength, his former principles, he has encircled himself in a cloud that will dim, if not totally obliterate the splendour of his past efforts in the sacred cause of civil and religious liberty.

Thomas Robinson then chides Hall for failing to uphold the most basic principles of non-conformity he had so boldly championed in his *Apology* and his *Christianity Consistent with a Love of Freedom*:

It plainly appears to me, that Mr. Hall is infected with the contagion which is so peculiarly the diagnostic of the times,—considering the absence of the mere externals of christianity as the absence of all piety, and the abolishing the interference and support of human authority as annihilating all religion. Enlightened and capacious minds have ever considered the alliance between christianity and temporal power as the most formidable *hindrance* to the success of pure religion, and have looked forward with rapture to the period when it will be divested of all civil impediment, and be left to make its way in the earth, (unshackled and unsupported) by its own intrinsic excellence: such, has

<sup>78</sup> Two letters by a London respondent, signed "A Friend to Peace, Economy, and Reform," appeared on 26 April and 17 June 1800, both critical of Hall. These were probably the contributions of Anthony Robinson or J. T. Rutt, the latter a frequent correspondent and contributor of poetry to the *Intelligencer*.

heretofore been the opinion of Mr. Hall, but he now descends from the heights of philosophical grandeur, to invite establishments to an union as allies to extirpate Infidelity:—those very establishments which he has *repeatedly* asserted to be not only hostile to christianity, but the fountain from whence Infidelity receives its principal supplies—where prayers are morality, and kneeling religion.

After Crabb Robinson's return to London, his brother continued to inform him about Hall's activities and his ongoing notoriety. In a letter of 2 September 1800, after a review of the scathing attacks levelled at Hall in pamphlets by Flower and Anthony Robinson, Thomas writes:

Hall continues in high fame. The Bishop of London invited him to a dinner which he attended, and which he is making a merit of. Or he says (which may be true) that he removed some unjust prejudices, which the Bishop had conceived against the Dissenters. . . . To Mr. K. Fordham, Hall contrasted the personalities of [Anthony Robinson's] pamphlet with the respectful style of Vigilance. Mr F. informed him you were the author of the last mentioned letter—And now a super plum for your vanity—At this information, he expressed a good deal of surprise, and said, in point of style it was one of the most *elegant* or *eloquent* (I forget which epithet) production he had ever read—though he would not allow it contained much argument. It seems it has been attributed to John Taylor of Norwich,<sup>79</sup> which I imagine was occasioned by Mr. Fordham dating his letter from that place.

Once again Robert Hall found himself engaged in verbal combat with the young but gifted Crabb Robinson, who, though certainly heterodox in his thinking, was a thorough Dissenter nevertheless. Robinson's letters to his brother and to Hall, both private and public, between 1795 and 1800 reveal an ongoing interest in and even intimate acquaintance with the leading figures of Dissent and the key issues facing them during that turbulent period. In their first encounter in 1798, Hall was clearly on the offensive, attacking Robinson's youthful infatuation with Godwinism and warning him of its inevitable tendencies toward "licentiousness" and "infidelity." In their second exchange, however, Robinson turned the tables, attacking Hall for abandoning his earlier attachment to certain cardinal tenets of Dissent, which he had so brilliantly articulated only a few years before—such as freedom of individual conscience, separation of church and state, and a general religious toleration—and warning him of an unsightly union with the political and ecclesiastical establishment if he allowed the sentiments he expressed in his *Modern Infidelity* to reach full fruition. Whether due to Hall's efforts or not, Robinson, though clearly attracted to and influenced by Godwinism between 1795 and 1800, never became an "infidel," but instead actively supported the interests of the Dissenters throughout his long public career. Similarly, Hall, though courted in 1800 by several leading figures of the establishment, never left the ranks of the Dissenters. He did, however, remove himself from English politics for a number of years, finally re-emerging in the 1820s to engage

<sup>79</sup> Taylor (1750-1826) was a poet and Unitarian hymnodist from Norwich, who, along with a select group of radicals, published *The Cabinet* (3 vols.) in 1795 in Norwich. Crabb Robinson's first published essay, entitled "On the Essential and Accidental Characteristics of Informers," appeared in this publication.

once again in the anti-slavery debate.<sup>80</sup> Robinson astutely perceived, almost with a tinge of sadness, that Hall's sermon represented a change in his politics that indeed bordered on "apostasy." In his letter to the *Cambridge Intelligencer*, Robinson became the first voice to call public notice to this shift within the politics of one of the great voices of English Dissent in the 1790s. Neither man would bend thereafter in his respective position, yet after this second round of verbal exchange these two Dissenters were left with a mutual respect that would continue for the rest of their lives.

## V

Shortly before his death, Crabb Robinson related to the publisher of Sadler's volumes of his diary, reminiscences, and correspondence that, though never a great literary figure himself, he was pleased that "he had an opportunity of gaining a knowledge of many of the most distinguished men of the age," and that he had done a good thing "by keeping a record of my interviews with them."<sup>81</sup> Though not viewed accordingly by Morley and other twentieth-century students of his writings, Robinson, as his letters and *Reminiscences* reveal, clearly considered Robert Hall one of the "distinguished men of the age" and worthy a record of his interaction with him. Hall was to Robinson, as he was to Joseph Cottle in Bristol,<sup>82</sup> a person with individuality, a "character" whose "revelations" were always "interesting."<sup>83</sup> Though they differed sharply over Godwinism in the 1790s, Hall and Robinson shared much in common as Dissenters and political reformers. Robinson's deliberate placement of his correspondence with Hall in his *Diary* and *Reminiscences*, the obvious relish in which he and his brother Thomas recorded every meeting with Hall and any news of his activities, Robinson's engagement with Hall in public discourse in the *Cambridge Intelligencer*, and even his brief excursion to the Borough in 1811 to hear Hall preach, all attest to the compelling power of Hall upon the lives and minds of those who knew him. As Crabb Robinson's literary remains so aptly suggest, among the preachers of the day, whether Dissenter or Anglican, in matters of intellectual genius, rhetorical power, verbal brilliance, and political notoriety, Robert Hall had few if any equals. For one brief period in his life, however, Crabb Robinson held his own quite well with the celebrated divine, engaging Hall

<sup>80</sup> While pastoring in Leicester, Hall was asked by Thomas Babington, President of the Leicester Auxiliary Anti-Slavery Society, to compose a pamphlet against slavery, which was published anonymously by the Society in 1824, entitled *An Address on the State of Slavery in the West India Islands*. Hall was a member of the Executive Committee, and delivered a stinging critique of the practice as it continued among the British Colonies. Apparently some members of the Society may have felt that Hall went too far in his statements, for in a letter to Babington of 16 February 1824, Hall apologizes for any of his statements which might "suggest matters of cavil," and regrets that his address "was not more nicely sanctioned by the Committee" (Babington MSS, Trinity College, Cambridge). This may also explain why his name never appeared on the pamphlet, along with his continued reluctance to enter the political arena he so relished in the early 1790s.

<sup>81</sup> Sadler vii.

<sup>82</sup> Cottle, whose adoration for Hall was extravagant even among Hall's most loyal supporters, devoted a portion of his *Early Recollections* (1837) and his *Reminiscences* (1847) to Hall, whom Cottle first met as a young boy when Hall arrived in Bristol in the late 1770s to commence his studies at the Baptist Academy. He also mentions a meeting of Hall and Coleridge in Bristol in the mid-1790s, when he saw first hand, he says, "the collision of equal minds elicited by light and heat; both of them ranking in the first class of conversationalists" (*Reminiscences* 97).

<sup>83</sup> Sadler ix.

with personal confidence and rhetorical skill and provoking him, through private and public letters and conversations during 1798 and 1799, to publish what many considered at that time to be the definitive rebuttal to Godwinism and “modern infidelity.”

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## Romantic Presentations of the Lake District: The Lake District of *The Prelude* Book IV<sup>1</sup>

By MARY R. WEDD

A talk given to the Wordsworth Winter School at Grasmere, February 2002

WHEN JONATHAN<sup>2</sup> ASKED ME what this Winter School's subject suggested to me for a talk I thought at once of Book IV of *The Prelude* because it seems to me to epitomize in little Wordsworth's feeling for the Lake District. He tells here how, after being separated from it at university, he returns to Hawkshead for his first Long Vacation. I have never understood quite why, after some few years, Wordsworth looking back should have condemned himself so harshly for such normal undergraduate activities as drinking one toast too many to his mentor Milton in his old rooms, rushing to Chapel scrambling on his gown in the nick of time or reading to please himself instead of his tutors. 'Empty thoughts!' he says, 'I am ashamed of them' (III 322-3). Dear me! If one is not allowed to enjoy oneself at university when can one? And I'm jolly sure he did. Though he writes

my life became  
A floating island, an amphibious thing,  
Unsound, of spongy texture, (III 339-41)

He has to admit in the next breath

yet withal  
Not wanting a fair face of water weeds  
And pleasant flowers. (III 341-3)

He relished the privileged joys of Cambridge and of hobnobbing with the shades of Chaucer, Spenser and Milton. Though he felt himself to be in 'captivity' away from 'those delicious rivers, solemn Heights / And mountains', he did not despise Cambridge's own 'delicious river', on which he 'sailed boisterously'. Nevertheless, his vocabulary betrays him. His first approach to the place is 'over the *flat* plains of Huntingdon'. Of his life at Cambridge he says, 'for now into a populous *plain* / We must *descend*'. He tries, and to some extent succeeds, to preserve his link with 'the upholder of the tranquil soul' but in order to do so had to walk alone 'along the fields, the *level* fields'. He tried to compensate within his own mind for 'this first absence from those shapes sublime / Wherewith I had been conversant'. The blissful state from which he had descended he described as 'an *eminence*'. It is to this that he returns for his first Long Vacation. (Emphases mine.)

(One can't help wondering whether he might, like his young friend Matthew Arnold, have been happier at Oxford amid its modest hills, which were not then built on. But then I would say that, wouldn't I?)

<sup>1</sup> I am using the 1805 text of *The Prelude* unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> Refers to Professor Jonathan Wordsworth, Director of the Annual Wordsworth Winter School at Grasmere.

At the start of Book IV Wordsworth has left the coach at Kendal and sets out to walk the ten miles or so to Hawkshead. He follows the route of what is now the B5284 via Crook, which takes him directly to the Ferry on Windermere. In our usual Winter School coach, coming from Kendal to Ambleside and Grasmere, we take the A591 past Lowood and our hearts lift as we recognize what was Richard Wordsworth's favourite prospect, which his illustrious ancestor celebrates in his *Guide to the Lakes*, for its 'beautiful views towards each extremity of the Lake'.<sup>3</sup> In particular, perhaps, we delight in the characteristic shape of the Langdale Pikes, which Wordsworth repeatedly refers to in his prose writings about the area. For him as an undergraduate on his route over Cleabarrow there was a similar delighted shock of recognition. In 1805 he just says, 'I overlooked the bed of Windermer' but in the 1850 version he goes on,

Like a vast river, stretching in the sun.  
With exultation, at my feet I saw  
Lake, islands, promontories, gleaming bays,  
A universe of Nature's fairest forms  
Proudly revealed with instantaneous burst,  
Magnificent, and beautiful, and gay. (IV 1850 ll. 6-11)

This must have raised memories in his mind of the exploits of the schoolboys in their boats hired from the ferryman described in Book II and of the spiritual peace that succeeded their boisterous activity.

. . . oh then the calm  
And dead still water lay upon my mind  
Even with a weight of pleasure, and the sky,  
Never before so beautiful, sank down  
Into my heart and held me like a dream. (II ll. 176-80)

The reader thinks, too, of Wordsworth's Fenwick Note to 'Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yewtree' about the hillside bordering the road he would follow on the other side of the Ferry, on which the Rev. William Braithwaite of Satterhow, the Recluse of the poem, had a summerhouse constructed after he had bought the land. Wordsworth says,

The site was long ago pointed out by Mr. West in his Guide, as the pride of the lakes, and now goes by the name of 'The Station'. So much used I to be delighted by the view from it, while a little boy, that some years before the first pleasure-house was built, I led thither from Hawkshead a youngster about my own age, an Irish boy, who was a servant to an itinerant conjuror. My motive was to witness the pleasure I expected the boy would receive from the prospect of the islands below and the intermingling water. I was not disappointed.<sup>4</sup>

Alas! When all agog with expectation I walked there from Hawkshead some time in the mid-seventies, I found the ruins of the summerhouse still there – but no view at all. It was

<sup>3</sup> Prose Works, Eds. Owen and Smyser, II p. 158.

<sup>4</sup> Poetic Works, Ed. De Selincourt / Darbishire, I p. 329.

blocked by rampaging rhododendrons. After such a disappointment I'm afraid I have not been back to see whether it has been rescued.

But no wonder, with all his happy childhood memories welling up, that Wordsworth, the undergraduate, welcomed the view of Windermere with 'exultation' and 'bounded down the hill' to the familiar Ferry, feeling that he was coming home.

Wordsworth's mention of West's *Guide* reminds us of the fashionable cult of the Picturesque which influenced people's ways of seeing the Lake District in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Coleridge jokingly called his 1799 walking expedition with Wordsworth 'a pikteresk Tour' (*n.b.* I 508). The most popular exponent of this craze, William Gilpin, wrote a succession of books on the Picturesque, including *Observations Relative to Picturesque Beauty . . . in Several Parts of England, particularly the Mountains and Lakes of Cumberland and Westmorland*, published in 1786. He judged a natural scene by its suitability for a picture. If the Creator has not done His job properly, Gilpin does not hesitate to improve on His work, moving a tree here or a mountain there to create a better composition. Or one might import suitably decorative human figures, such as Druids at Castlerigg. He says of the way to Dunmail Raise from Grasmere, 'With regard to the adorning of such a landscape with figures, nothing could suit it better than a group of banditti'.<sup>5</sup> Then, sadly, 'Nothing however of this kind was ever heard of in the country'. We hear of such technicalities as 'light and shade', 'backgrounds', 'broken foregrounds', 'Off-skip', and 'foregrounds' for which ruins were a favourite ingredient. Parson though he was, the most that Gilpin would allow to God was an occasional *accident* of felicity, 'we sometimes however see a mountainous country, in which nature itself hath made these beautiful combinations'.<sup>6</sup>

Gilpin's work set a pattern which was delightfully illustrated by Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey*, where Henry Tilney gives Catherine Morland 'a lecture on the picturesque'.

He talked of fore-grounds, distances and second distances – side screens and perspectives – lights and shades – and Catherine was so hopeful a scholar, that when they gained the top of Beechen Cliff, she voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath, as unworthy to make part of a landscape' (Chap. 14).

The Wordsworth boys, William and Christopher, knew Gilpin's work and a number of the Guidebooks to the Lakes. Christopher as a Hawkshead schoolboy owned a copy of the 1789 Edition of West's *Guide*, which listed a series of 'stations' from which outstanding views were to be savoured, including the one I did not succeed in seeing. Absurd though the cult of the Picturesque may have been, it did make people look outward at their surroundings, which is more than many people do now, huddled in their enclosed worlds with their mobile phones.

These ideas which were part of Wordsworth's growing-up must have had some influence on the way he saw the Lake District and been a useful preparatory stage, though he soon saw through them.

. . . But through presumption; even in pleasure pleased

<sup>5</sup> William Gilpin, *Observations Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty made in the year 1772, in several parts of England, particularly the Mountains and Lakes of Cumberland and Westmorland*, first published 1786. My references are to the Third Edition 1808. Vol. I p. 174.

<sup>6</sup> Gilpin I p. 168.

Unworthily, disliking here, and there  
 Liking, by rules of mimic art transferred  
 To things above all art . . . (XI ll. 152-5)

A more lasting preoccupation for him was Burke's conception of the Sublime and the Beautiful,<sup>7</sup> on which he himself wrote a fragmentary essay, incidentally using the Langdale Pikes in a discussion of the Sublime.<sup>8</sup> When he wrote that he was 'Fostered alike by beauty and by fear', he was reflecting these concerns but putting his own slant on them. He was presenting the Lake District as both formative of and interactive with human life, capable of arousing both joyous exhilaration and the more sobering consciousness of something great and terrifying.

Fortunately, we have the means to get also a down-to-earth picture of this area as Wordsworth knew it in its day-to-day life. A number of rewarding books enable us to fill in the background, notably H.S. Cowper's *Hawkshaead*, 1899, Eric Robertson's *Wordsworthshire*, 1911, and, most of all, the invaluable *Wordsworth's Hawkshead* by T.W. Thompson, edited by Robert Woof and published in 1970. These and other sources help us to get a very fair notion of what this part of the Lake District was like then. For example, there were two ferries, one for foot passengers only from Miller Ground to near Belle Grange, called Little Boat, and the main one which Wordsworth was taking here, known as Great Boat. Cowper tells us that at the main Ferry the lake 'is 500 yards wide; at Miller Ground about 1,600 yards'.<sup>9</sup> Because of this greater distance it is thought that a bell was used there as a signal to the other side, whereas at the main Ferry a shout would do. It would, even so, surely have needed to be 'A *lusty* summons to the farther shore', as Wordsworth puts it. Cowper tells us that "Great Boat" . . . took packhorses, wagons and whatever came, and, being at the narrowest point, ran in most weathers'. Charles Farish, a Hawkshead pupil, older than Wordsworth and incidentally a nephew of Gilpin, in his poem about the schoolboys' doings, describes how the ferry continued to run even when the lake was frozen.

Nor yet the boatman's task be done –  
 He dips his hands into the tide,  
 And heaves huge ice-boards, one by one,  
 Heaping a wall on either side.

Winning his way across the lake,  
 With battering maul and iron crow;  
 The ice still closing in his wake,  
 In one the knitting fragments grow.<sup>10</sup>

It was certainly no sinecure being ferryman and rowing single-handed the loaded boat, directed in mist sometimes by a girl holding a light and singing to guide him.

<sup>7</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, published 1756.

<sup>8</sup> Prose Works II p. 349.

<sup>9</sup> Cowper 246-8.

<sup>10</sup> Robertson 77.

It is not surprising that from Wordsworth's account Robertson thought that it was George Braithwaite, who had been ferryman for the greater part of Wordsworth's time at school, who took him across on his return in the Long Vacation.<sup>11</sup>

I bounded down the hill, shouting amain  
 A lusty summons to the father shore  
 For the old ferryman, and when he came  
 I did not step into the well-known boat  
 Without a cordial welcome. (IV ll. 5-9)

But, if Robert Woof is right—and he always is!—it must have been the other George, Robinson, who took over in 1786.<sup>12</sup> Either way Wordsworth was sure of a welcome from one of the Georges.

Before we leave the Ferry, we must briefly notice the Inn there, from the partying at which Wordsworth was probably walking back after the Windermere Regatta when he met the Old Soldier. In a note to his poem *Windermere*, printed in 1798, Joseph Budworth wrote that the Ferry-house was ‘just hid in trees, amongst them the wild cherry, of amazing magnitude’.<sup>13</sup> William Hutchinson in his *Excursion to the Lakes* tells what it looked like in 1773-4 when one could still see it from above.

. . . the brow of this rock overlooks a pretty peninsula, on which the ferry-house stands, concealing its white front in a grove of sycamores – Whilst we were looking on it, the boat was upon its way, with several horse passengers, which greatly graced the scene . . .<sup>14</sup>

In the 1850 *Prelude* by what the De Selincourt/Darbshire note calls an ‘inapt allusion’, Wordsworth speaks of the Ferryman as ‘the Charon of the flood’. This may indeed just be the older poet feeling that he needs to provide *gravitas* by importing a classical tag; but perhaps there is a feeling that in crossing the ferry Wordsworth passed from one state to another.

Thence right forth  
 I took my way, now drawing towards home,  
 To that sweet valley where I had been reared;  
 ‘Twas but a short hour’s walk ere, verring round,  
 I saw the snow-white church upon its hill  
 Sit like a thronèd lady, wending out  
 A gracious look all over its domain.  
 Glad greetings had I, and some tears perhaps,  
 From my old dame, so motherly and good,  
 While she perused me with a parent’s pride.  
 The thoughts of gratitude shall fall like dew

<sup>11</sup> Robertson 340.

<sup>12</sup> Thompson (Ed. Woof) 138.

<sup>13</sup> Thompson 134.

<sup>14</sup> Hutchinson 186.

Upon thy grave, good creature! While my heart  
Can beat I never will forget thy name. (IV ll. 9-21)

As we know, Hawkshead Church is no longer white but there is a delightful early nineteenth century oil painting of it as it was, which the Grammar School Museum had made into a post-card.

How fortunate Wordsworth was in having Ann Tyson as his landlady, for she had all the best qualities of motherhood. She fed and sheltered him, loved him and was proud of him, but also gave him freedom to roam the countryside and drink in its life-giving power. On this return home, as he delighted in sinking back into the familiar, loved surroundings,

My aged dame  
Was with me, at my side; she guided me,  
I willing – nay, nay, wishing – to be led, (IV ll. 55-7)

As with pride she showed him off to the neighbours in his new status and posh clothes, of which he was half proud and half ashamed. But it was when he walked round Esthwaite, alone except for the faithful dog, that the deep effect of the countryside reached him with its restorative power.

Those walks well worthy to be prized and loved –  
Regretted, that word too was on my tongue,  
But they were richly laden with all good  
And cannot be remembered but with thanks  
And gratitude and perfect joy of heart –  
Those walks did now like a returning spring  
Come back on me again. When first I made  
Once more the circuit of our little lake,  
If ever happiness hath lodged with man  
That day consummate happiness was mine,  
Wide-spreading, steady, calm, contemplative.  
The sun was set, or setting, when I left  
Our cottage-door, and evening soon brought on  
A sober hour – not winning or serene,  
For cold and raw the air was, and untuned –  
But as a face we love is sweetest then  
When sorrow damps it, or, whatever look  
It chance to wear is sweetest if the heart  
Have fullness in itself, even so with me  
It fared that evening. Gently did my soul  
Put off her veil, and self-transmuted stood  
Naked as in the presence of her God.  
As on I walked, a comfort seemed to touch  
A heart that had not been disconsolate;  
Strength came where weakness was not known to be,

At least not felt; and restoration came  
 Like an intruder knocking at the door  
 Of unacknowledged weariness. (IV 131-148)

He had not been fully aware how deprived he had been in that ‘populous plain’ until he was back walking in solitude in his own country. It was as though he had been living in a kind of spiritual winter. The real weather of his first return to Esthwaite Lake was far from clement but it was the inner climate that now seemed ‘like a returning spring’. Partly his euphoria was due to its being his own familiar countryside like ‘a face we love’, but partly too it was the nature of that particular place with its lakes and mountains. There is a reference to Moses who, after he had been in the presence of God on Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, ‘put a veil on his face’ before the people because it shone so much that they were afraid.<sup>15</sup> But earlier, before they went up the mountain, ‘the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend’.<sup>16</sup> So Wordsworth felt himself to have removed the mask he had to wear in the ‘populous plain’ and stood alone before the illimitable.

Understandably, though, after his exile and joyous return, he found himself changed, in some ways for the better, for example, in noticing the changes in other people.

A freshness also found I at this time  
 In human life – (IV 181-2)

Yet he felt that ‘There was an inner falling off’. Those activities which ‘were a badge glossy and fresh / Of manliness and freedom’, allowing the adolescent to feel his feet, he calls ‘these vanities’. He had yet to learn that ‘books and nature’ and ‘This vague heartless chase / Of trivial pleasures’ are not mutually exclusive, a lesson that he was in the process of discovering. He has to admit

And yet, in chastisement of these regrets,  
 The memory of one particular hour  
 Does here rise up against me. (IV 314-16)

Then, in spite of himself, he gives a stunningly attractive picture of a dance, which reminds me very much of the barn-dances that used to take place in the north-country village where I lived as a young child. I particularly remember the mix of ages he describes. I would look on wide-eyed at the stout farmers’ wives, with their arms around each other’s waists, kicking up their heels in country-dances, not always so staid.

In a throng,  
 A festal company of maids and youths,  
 Old men and matrons staid – promiscuous rout,  
 A medley of all tempers – I had passed  
 The night in dancing, gaiety, and mirth,  
 With din of instruments and shuffling feet

<sup>15</sup> Exodus 34: 33.

<sup>16</sup> Exodus 33: 11.

And glancing forms and tapers glittering  
 And unaimed prattle flying up and down,  
 Spirits upon the stretch, and here and there  
 Slight shocks of young love-loving interspersed  
 That mounted up like joy into the head  
 And tingled through the veins. (IV 316-27)

Whether the puritanical side of Wordsworth approved it or not, it is evident that this was as much a part of Lake District life as the scenery and that he thoroughly enjoyed it. Anyway, on this occasion it served its purpose.

Miss Darbshire speaks of ‘the fact that many of the most impressive moments of the life of Wordsworth arose when they were least expected, in striking contrast with the triviality of the experiences which immediately preceded them’.<sup>17</sup> This is perhaps related to the cessation of strenuous activity comparable to the state Wordsworth described to De Quincey on Dunmail Raise, ‘if this intense condition of vigilence should suddenly relax’, which precedes an experience ‘carried to the heart with a power not known under other circumstances’.<sup>18</sup> So the dance, so vividly described, acts as a kind of trigger to the revelation on Wordsworth’s solitary way home, which we call the Dedication Walk. Throughout Book IV the domestic or convivial aspect of the Lake District interweaves with the moments of special revelation closely associated with the landscape and with solitude.

When I was fortunate enough to be given a sabbatical year in 1975, as well as working at Dove Cottage and the Armit Library, I walked alone following Wordsworth’s footsteps wherever possible. In relation to the Dedication Walk this was quite a task, as opinions about its location were a case of ‘*Quot homines tot sententiae*’. I was defeated in trying to test the location confidently asserted by Robertson, ‘Local feeling is now firm in considering that Sans Keldin was the platform whence Wordsworth surveyed that morning’s “memorable pomp”’,<sup>19</sup> coming from a farm at Grisedale. I followed Robertson’s instructions and even found the iron gate he recommends off Grisedale Hill still there, but what in his day had been ‘a track through the heather’ on open moorland had been planted with conifers to create Grisedale Forest, so that all landmarks were lost. I did my best but the waymarks which were supposed to help were in those days eccentric to say the least. A mark would be set, for example, at a T-junction with no indication of whether one should turn right or left and it was necessary to walk for half a mile looking for a further mark before deciding that there wasn’t one and that one should have turned the other way. If, after half a mile in the other direction, there still was no further mark, one had a difficult choice about what to do next. No one in their senses would choose this sort of walk, in any case, as there is nothing to see but the same tunnels of identical tree-trunks stretching in every direction. Wainwright says, ‘It is doubtful whether anybody ever did in fact look for a needle in a haystack, despite all the publicity given to this practice. If he did, and found it, his elation would be matched by that of a searcher, and finder, of Carron Crag today’.<sup>20</sup> Similar difficulties attend the search for Sans Keldin or for Ligging Shaw, Gordon Wordsworth’s preference. The objections to Sans Keldin given in the De Selincourt/Darbshire

<sup>17</sup> De Selincourt / Darbshire edn. *The Prelude* note on p. 536.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas De Quincey, *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets* (Penguin) 160.

<sup>19</sup> Robertson 143.

<sup>20</sup> A. Wainwright, *The Outlying Fells of Lakeland* (1974) 89.

note are compelling, notably that Wordsworth would have to have been walking backwards to see the sea! So I think I can be forgiven for giving up this quest, don't you? I tried out Canon Rawnsley's suggestion, cited in Knight's Edition, but was more impressed when he goes on, 'Of course, the Furness Fell, above Colthouse, might have been the scene. It is eminently suited to the description'.<sup>21</sup>

You can imagine my relief when, after my Hansel and Gretel journeys, I followed T.W. Thompson's suggestion, which coincided with Canon Rawnsley's afterthought, and took the righ-of-way from Colthouse to Belle Grange and then back by the way Wordsworth would have come. Conifers had spoilt part of this walk too. They are everywhere now; even when I went up to Penrith Beacon they had hidden most of the view. But one could still imagine the way from Belle Grange as it was. As one came out of the conifers and into a wood of indigenous trees, suddenly one could hear the birds singing. On another occasion I went up Latterbarrow from the top of which the De Selincourt/Darbishire note says, there is 'a really magnificent view of the sea in front'. Incidentally, looking back the way he would have come, there is a stunning view of Windermere. If the dance were at Wray, Wordsworth, being the walker he was, might well have decided to go up and over rather than round by the road. Coming from either of these, as one goes down to the High Wray – Colthouse road, one can also see the 'meadows and lower grounds' below, where Wordsworth might have seen 'labourers going forth into the fields'. The Syke Side farmer was hay-making when I was there in early June 1975. The field with the footpath between Hawkshead and Colthouse was also a hay-meadow then, full of wild flowers. It is years now since hay-making was a regular farming practice.

Wordsworth said in his old age that 'the first voluntary verses' that he ever wrote 'were written after walking six miles' from Whitehaven 'to attend a dance at Egremont'.<sup>22</sup> We know how Wordsworth conflated memories in his work and it may have been that this was a peripheral association too in the described experience but it is clear that the primary scene must have been near Hawkshead.

I hasten to say that, of course, it does not really matter exactly where this event took place. As Wordsworth said about the rock in 'To Joanna', 'Any place that will suit; that as well as any other'. But I do think one gets closer to his experience by following him not only on the page but also on the ground. One can appreciate Wordsworth's poetry without knowing the Lake District and I did for many years. Surely, however, one cannot begin to understand Wordsworth, however great a scholar one may be, if one is impervious to natural beauty.

Ere we retired  
 The cock had crowed, the sky was bright with day;  
 Two miles I had to walk along the fields  
 Before I reached my home. Magnificent  
 The morning was, a memorable pomp,  
 More glorious than I ever had beheld.  
 The sea was laughing at a distance; all  
 The solid mountains were as bright as clouds,  
 Grain-tinctured, drenched in empyrean light:

<sup>21</sup> Wordsworth's Poetical Works, ed. William Knight (1883) III. Notes to Book IV of *The Prelude*.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Moorman, *Life The Early Years*, 57.

And in the meadows and the lower grounds  
 Was all the sweetness of a common dawn –  
 Dews, vapours, and the melody of birds,  
 And labourers going forth into the fields.  
 Ah, need I say, dear friend, that to the brim  
 My heart was full? I made no vows, but vows  
 Were then made for me: bond unknown to me  
 Was given that I should be, else sinning greatly,  
 A dedicated spirit. On I walked  
 In blessedness, which even yet remains.

Wordsworth presents this Lake District scene as it presented itself to him but with the added lustre of carefully chosen language. Conventional categories of the Sublime and the Beautiful break down before such a passage. Surely the epithet ‘sublime’ jumps to mind but it is without the element of fear, what Burke calls ‘a sort of delightful horror’. Rather, the feeling is of reverent awe.

The break in the line after ‘Before I reached my home’, emphasizes the remaining word ‘Magnificent’, as does its position at the start instead of the end of the sentence.

Magnificent  
 The morning was . . .

Again, the pauses in the line put ‘a memorable pomp’ in apposition and give a cumulative effect, ‘More glorious than I ever had beheld’. The vocabulary here, ‘Magnificent’, ‘glorious’, ‘pomp’, suggests a superhuman, almost religious dimension, offset by the humanly delighted sea, which in 1850 is ‘in front’, ‘laughing at a distance’, an echo perhaps of Milton’s words ‘old Ocean smiles’ (*Paradise Lost* IV 165). The solid mountains, so earthy and uncompromising, become ethereal ‘as bright as clouds’. The Miltonic echoes in the next line contribute to the sense of a transformed world.

Grain-tinctured, drenched in empyrean light . . .

Is it perhaps significant that Wordsworth’s reminiscence of Milton’s ‘Sky-tinctured grain’ comes from a description of a divine messenger? In Book V of *Paradise Lost* (lines 277-87) Raphael is sent by God to warn Adam, as Mercury was to Aeneas, and to remind him of his responsibility. Like the seraphim in Isaiah (6.2) Raphael has six wings: ‘with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly’ (or as I heard read in Church from a modern version ‘with two he flew’). Milton writes,

six wings he wore, to shade  
 His lineaments divine; the pair that clad  
 Each shoulder broad, came mantling o’er his breast  
 With regal ornament; the middle pair  
 Girt like a starry zone his waist, and round  
 Skirted his loins and thighs with downy gold

And colours dipped in heaven; the third his feet  
 Shadowed from either heel with feathered mail  
 Sky-tinctured grain. Like Maia's son he stood,  
 And shook his plumes, that heavenly fragrance filled  
 The circuit wide.

A few lines earlier (253) he has been described as travelling ‘Through all the empyreal road’ . . . Whether or not Milton meant ‘blue’ when he wrote ‘Sky-tinctured grain’, the De Selincourt/Darbshire note gives examples from Chaucer and Spenser, both earlier writers than Milton whom Wordsworth knew well, using respectively ‘scarlet in grayn’ and ‘crimsin dyde in grayne’.<sup>23</sup> I always assumed that ‘grain’ here meant something like ‘engrained’ and had no difficulty with it till I started reading too many notes! In Book VI of *Paradise Lost* it is Abdiel who is travelling, in his case, away from the temptation to resist his true allegiance as ‘a dedicated spirit.’

. . . and now went forth the morn  
 Such as in highest heaven, arrayed in gold  
 Empyreal, from before her vanished night  
 Shot through with orient beams . . . (lines 12-15)

Wordsworth’s dawn is triumphantly crimson and gold and expresses its power and beauty as of a celestial messenger. It reconciles the transcendental and the commonplace.

And in the meadows and the lower grounds  
 Was all the sweetness of a common dawn –  
 Dews, vapours and the melody of birds,  
 And labourers going forth into the fields. (IV 336-9)

He does not yet affirm that he was called to be a poet but he does know that he has been challenged as well as consoled.

Ah, need I say, dear friend, that to the brim  
 My heart was full? I made no vows, but vows  
 Were then made for me: bond unknown to me  
 Was given that I should be, else sinning greatly,  
 A dedicated spirit. On I walked  
 In blessedness, which even yet remains. (IV 340-45)

Wordsworth goes on to say that that summer, despite the mixture in his life of ‘grave and gay’, there were still times when

I experienced in myself  
 Conformity as just as that of old

<sup>23</sup> In *Sir Thopas* and *Epithalamion* 226-8 respectively.

To the end and written spirit of God's works,  
Whether held forth in nature or in man. (IV 356-9)

In this book of *The Prelude* are examples of both these.

He had always from childhood had a feeling for the outcasts of society and here he takes an account of one of them which was written in 1798 and incorporates it very appropriately in the part of *The Prelude* which deals with that vacation. We are reminded of his description in Book I of the veteran playing-cards,

A thick-ribbed army, not, as in the world,  
Neglected and ungratefully thrown by  
Even for the very service they had wrought . . . (I 544-6)

But, before his meeting with the old soldier, Wordsworth shows us what had prepared him for the experience, its intensity and, in this case, its element of fear. This is one of the passages where one sees the mixed effect of revisions for the 1850 version, often being, as in the first part of this insertion, Victorian moralizing or inflation out of keeping with the context, but occasionally, as in the second part, adding something of real value. In this case we learn from the 1850 version that, similarly to the Dedication Walk, this incident began with strenuous activity. Wordsworth had been at the Windermere Regatta and the subsequent party at the Ferry Inn.

Once, when those summer months  
Were flown, and autumn brought its annual show  
Of oars with cars contending, sails with sails,  
Upon Winander's spacious breast, it chanced  
That – after I had left a flower-decked room  
(Whose in-door pastime, lighted up, survived  
To a late hour), and spirits overwrought  
Were making night do penance for a day  
Spent in a round of strenuous idleness –  
My homeward course let up a long ascent . . . (1850 IV 370-79)

But if we want to learn of the next stage in the process, we must return to the 1805 version. Both describe the effect of extra quiet given by a normally frequented road at night and tell of the young man's walk,

up a steep ascent  
Where the road's watery surface, to the ridge  
Of that sharp rising, glittered in the moon  
And seemed before my very eyes another stream  
Creeping with silent lapse to join the brook  
That murmured in the valley. (1805 ll. 370-75)

It has been noted that Wordsworth is echoing here an entry in Dorothy's *Alfoxden Journal*, which helps to decide its date of composition.<sup>24</sup> In the 1850 version Wordsworth cut what seems to me to be a vital part of the experience, which was present in the early Alfoxden text as well as in 1805. He says, 'On I went / Tranquil'. He is not in the sort of mood or circumstances for such an inspiration as on the Dedication Walk.

With an exhausted mind worn out by toil  
And all unworthy of the deeper joy  
Which waits on distant prospect – cliff or sea,  
The dark blue vault and universe of stars.  
Thus did I steal along that silent road,  
My body from the stillness drinking in  
A restoration like the calm of sleep,  
But sweeter far. (1805 IV 381-8)

Though he emphasizes the physical, 'A consciousness of animal delight', one senses an element of spiritual peace too in the description. Again he is deeply relaxed after strenuous activity, so that the unexpected sight of the old soldier has the greater impact, 'a power not known under other circumstances'. In this state of mind, Wordsworth encounters 'an uncouth shape'. Jonathan Wordsworth comments on this phrase, referring us to *Paradise Lost*, Book II line 666, where Satan meets Sin and her son Death at the gate of Hell. Death is described as 'The other shape / If shape it might be called that shape had none . . .' and Jonathan reminds us that 'Wordsworth would know Burke's comments on the sublimity of the encounter, and be aware, too, of illustrations by Fuseli and others'.<sup>25</sup> I think it was Hugh Sykes Davies who, at an early Summer Conference, pointed out the similarity of the first part of the picture of the old man to illustrations of skeleton-like spectres in the chap-books that Wordsworth would have known as a child.

While thus I wandered, step by step led on,  
It chanced a sudden turning of the road  
Presented to my view an uncouth shape,  
So near that, slipping back into the shade  
Of a thick hawthorn, I could mark him well,  
Myself unseen. He was of stature tall,  
A foot above man's common measure tall,  
Stiff in his form, and upright, lank and lean –  
A man more meagre, as it seemed to me,  
Was never seen abroad by night or day.  
His arms were long, and bare his hands, his mouth  
Showed ghastly in the moonlight; from behind  
A milestone propped him, and his figure seemed  
Half sitting and half standing. (IV ll. 400-13)

<sup>24</sup> Beth Darlington in *Bicentenary Wordsworth Studies*, Ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, 427.

<sup>25</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: The Four Texts*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, Penguin 1995, note p. 577.

Undoubtedly Wordsworth's first reaction was of fear but, as he gradually took in the 'military garb, / Though faded yet entire', and that the man was alone and without belongings, and as he heard his groans, sympathy displaced fear. 'Long time / Did I peruse him with a mingled sense / Of fear and sorrow.'

I had no trouble in following this walk, for Wordsworth had been returning from the Ferry via the two Sawreys to Hawkshead. According to T.W. Thompson, Wordsworth had gone 'up Briars Brow and on to Far Sawrey' and had reached 'the third milestone from Hawkshead' (139). There are no milestones there now and I think very few remain anywhere in this age of kilometers but I remember them well in my Cheshire village in the 1920s. The brook he hears 'That murmurs in the valley' was Wilfin Beck which, unlike most of the places Thompson mentions here, is still marked on the map.

Ashamed of his fear, the eighteen-year-old Wordsworth takes his courage in both hands and comes out from his hiding.

Without self-blame  
 I had not thus prolonged my watch; and now  
 Subduing my heart's specious cowardice,  
 I left the shady nook where I had stood  
 And hailed him. Slowly from his resting-place  
 He rose, and with a lean and wasted arm  
 In measured gesture lifted to his head  
 Returned my salutation, then resumed  
 His station as before. (IV 432-440)

In reply to Wordsworth's question the soldier answers 'with a quiet uncomplaining voice, / A stately air of mild indifference . . . .' He had served in the West Indies, where many died of fever and those who came home were discharged without any means of subsistence,

Neglected and ungratefully thrown by  
 Even for the very service they had wrought.

He is 'travelling to his native home' where the parish had a duty to look after its poor.

Seeing that there were no lights in the nearer village, Wordsworth led the soldier back, as Thompson says, 'about a quarter of a mile on the road to the Ferry and then branched off to Briers', where there was a cottager he knew would not refuse to help. What an insight this gives us into rural society in the Lake District in those days! It seems that Wordsworth as a boy and young man was equally at home with the gentry, despite what his distaste for those posh clothes tells us, and with the cottagers. He must have known this man well, probably from early childhood, to be so sure that he could safely wake him in the middle of the night and ask him to take in a vagrant. Despite the late hour, 'The cottage door was speedily unlocked'. One does not have to go back two hundred years, only to between the two World Wars, for a time when country people rarely locked their doors by day. Even when we moved from rural Cheshire to an industrial town in Lancashire, despite very real and dreadful deprivation, which might perhaps have excused theft when there was no adequate Welfare State, our Vicarage side-door stood open all day. My sister and I still shiver in retrospect at that cold draught!

Wordsworth reproaches the old soldier for not asking for help, but he has gone beyond such initiative.

Solemn and sublime  
He might have seemed, but that in all he said  
There was a strange half-absence, and a tone  
Of weakness and indifference, as of one  
Remembering the importance of his theme  
But feeling it no longer. (IV 473-78)

That last couple of lines stands out in its depth of understanding and, though it was written in 1798, illustrates his state of mind in that Long Vacation, the ‘freshness’ Wordsworth says he ‘found at this time / In human life . . .’. The old soldier’s reply is a kind of reproof to Wordsworth’s reproof.

At this reproof,  
With the same ghastly mildness in his look  
He said ‘My trust is in the God of Heaven,  
And in the eye of him that passes me!’ (IV 492-95)

His trust in this case had been justified and he shows the first sign of interest in life when he expresses his thanks.

The cottage door was speedily unlocked;  
And now the soldier touched his hat again  
With his lean hand, and in a voice that seemed  
To speak with a reviving interest  
Till then unfeet, he thanked me. I returned  
The blessing of the poor unhappy man,  
And so we parted. Back I cast a look,  
And lingered near the door a little space,  
Then sought with quiet heart my distant home. (IV 496-504)

Thompson says, rather scornfully, ‘He had some three miles to go, which at the end of such a day may have seemed a long way’. So much for Wordsworth’s ‘distant home’!

The whole background of the Lake District countryside and people informs this account of what was evidently a profound experience for the undergraduate Wordsworth. Coming back to his old surroundings in his first Long Vacation from Cambridge, he slips comfortably into the familiar secure environment, the love of his foster-mother, his place in local society and his almost mystical relationship with the impressive natural world around him. Yet he is in the process of growing-up and in some ways sees the world anew. ‘The things which were the same and yet appeared / So different’. (IV ll. 188-89)

Thus the Dedication Walk, which shares with other Spots of Time intensity of feeling and restorative power, does not have that sense of guilt and menace that characterizes a number of them. On the other hand, its inspirational joy carries with it an obligation on the young man,

'else sinning greatly' to fulfil his destiny as 'a dedicated spirit'. This incident, perhaps of them all, most convincingly supports A.C. Bradley's riposte to Walter Pater, when he says, 'I hardly think that "the poet of Surrey, say, and the prophet of its life" could have written this'.<sup>26</sup>

Wordsworth, first of all, puts us in touch with a real way of life as it was in Cumbria at that time. Some of us can remember when most country people had no central heating, no gas or electricity, no cars. If you wanted to get somewhere, you walked there. Except for using an occasional bus or train, if I am lucky enough to capture one, generally I still do, though not to the extremes of the old soldier or 'Old Man Travelling', who had to walk to their destinations, however far away.

I am very sure that 'the naked table, snow-white deal' round which the boys sat at their card-games on winter evenings was the scrubbed kitchen table, for in the kitchen was the coal-fired range, which cooked the meals and also rendered the kitchen often the only warm room in the house. As such, it provided a comforting contrast to the 'heavy rain', the frost 'with keen and silent tooth' and 'the splitting ice'. Once a group of my students asked me what I thought were the two greatest advances in my lifetime and without hesitation I answered 'Birth Control and Central Heating'. I am sure Wordsworth would have agreed with me. Just think of all those deserted women in his poems or of 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill'. Just as he, naturally, takes for granted what we would regard as the lack of amenities, common-placed then, so too he sees the inhabitants of the place with realism as well as affection. Coming back after Cambridge he no longer feels them just to be an accepted part of his surroundings.

Yes, I had something of another eye,  
 And often looking round was moved to smiles  
 Such as a delicate work of humour breeds.  
 I read, without design, the opinions, thoughts  
 Of those plain-living people, in a sense  
 Of love and knowledge; with another eye  
 I saw the quiet woodman in the woods,  
 The shepherd on the hills. With new delight  
 (This chiefly) did I view my grey-haired dame,  
 Saw her go forth to church or other work  
 Of state, equipped in monumental trim:  
 Short velvet cloak, her bonnet of the like,  
 A mantle such as Spanish cavaliers  
 Wore in old time. Her smooth domestic life –  
 Affectionate without uneasiness –  
 Her talk, her business, pleased me; and no less  
 Her clear though shallow stream of piety  
 That ran on Sabbath days a fresher course.  
 With thoughts unfelt till now I saw her read  
 Her bible on the Sunday afternoons,  
 And loved the book when she had dropped asleep  
 And made of it a pillow for her head. (IV 200-21)

<sup>26</sup> A.C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, 1909, (Papermac, 1970) 140.

What a wonderful character-sketch this is, totally without sentimental illusion, seen, as he says, with ‘humour’ yet also with unmistakable love and esteem.

So, in this Book, as in *The Prelude* as a whole, Wordsworth presents the Lake District as a fruitful combination of its inhabitants, ‘those plain-living people’, who, despite their limitations, made the place a secure domestic environment, and the countryside itself. This provided a source of inspiration and an occasional mysterious link with a spiritual world but could also be a strict mentor enforcing its message with ‘severer interventions’. I think the Lake District as Wordsworth presents it in Book IV of *The Prelude* can be summed up by the last line of his poem ‘To a Skylark’: ‘True to the kindred points of Heaven and Home’.

*Sevenoaks, Kent*

## Reviews

WILLIAM J. CHRISTMAS. *The Lab'ring Muses: Work, Writing, and the Social Order in English Plebeian Poetry, 1730-1830*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, Pp. xxxvi + 368. ISBN 0 87413 747 0. £35 / \$55 cloth.

*The Lab'ring Muses*, by William J. Christmas, examines the struggle of English laboring class poets to gain both recognition and financial support from polite literary circles during the long eighteenth century. In part a recovery project aimed at focusing critical discussion on little-known English laboring class writers like Robert Tattersal and Elizabeth Hands, *Lab'ring Muses* delineates the carefully regulated ways in which patrons introduced these writers to middle- and upper-class reading audiences. Christmas shows how the literary vogue for the natural genius like Stephen Duck led to the “discovery” and promotion of other laboring writers, who had to display three character traits—honesty, industry, and piety—in order to be acceptable to polite reading audiences. Despite the care with which patrons “managed” these poets in author introductions and in obtaining subscription lists for the publication of their books (the patron typically emphasized the writer’s contentment with a laboring class status), Christmas convincingly shows that the relationship between patron and poet was marked by complex negotiations about the place of the poet in the social hierarchy. Christmas further argues that far from being content with their social standing, laboring poets subtly critiqued a variety of cultural beliefs: the satisfaction of the rural poor with their hard lot; the idea of rural ease and plenitude; and the common assumption that the laboring writer was worthy of being read as a charity case only, instead of as a skilled and accomplished writer. Finally, *Lab'ring Muses* demonstrates how the shift away from patronage to market-driven publishing in the eighteenth century affected the negotiations between patron and poet from the 1730s, when Duck was discovered, to the Romantic era and John Clare. This shift allowed later writers like Clare to critique repressive class ideologies more openly, even as it allowed these laboring poets more range in how they represented themselves in their work.

The first chapter of the book, “Terminology and Methodology,” is devoted to “clarifying key terms” and examining “theoretical underpinnings” (39). Here, the author defends his use of the term “plebeian” in referring to the poets instead of using terms like “uneducated,” “working class,” “proletarian” or even “self-taught” (40-41), all of which are historically problematic, not to mention too narrow in scope for the purposes of this study:

[T]he term was current in the period and it accounted for a wide range of disenfranchised people: tenant farmers, agricultural laborers, servants, shoemakers, weavers, bricklayers, and so on. This broad inclusiveness I take to be a strength in that “plebeian” covers the often difficult problem of accounting for both the rural poor and their urban, artisan counterparts. (42-43)

After establishing terminology, Christmas embarks upon a discussion of his critical methodology as a cultural materialist; this section covers well-rehearsed ground, especially in its analysis of the production and reproduction of “ideology” and the “challenges of historical recovery” (48). More compelling is the subsequent extended analysis of the usage of “custom” in written documents of the eighteenth-century. During the time these plebeian writers were publishing, the

term “custom” was a site of ideological conflict, and to “invoke Custom in many contexts [was] to create a publishable discourse of social criticism.” Indeed, certain of the plebeian poets like Henry Jones and Ann Yearsley “mobilize the concept of Custom in their published poetry to fashion a critical discourse aimed at exposing upper-class interests” (61).

The second chapter begins with a brief description of plebeian writers before Stephen Duck. Writers like the seventeenth-century Thames waterman John Taylor and the Footman Robert Dodsley help demonstrate the overall assertion that the success of plebeian writers was not a series of fads punctuating the literary history of the long eighteenth century but a continuous feature of that period. The subsequent analysis of Duck’s career and writings are perhaps the most effective and compelling section of *Lab’ring Muses*, and Christmas shows in convincing detail the way in which the Thresher Poet was commodified and made palatable for “public consumption”—he was portrayed as the very image of honesty, industry, and piety. Working against the commonly held notion that Duck was held powerless by his own “success” as a poet and by the persona his patrons required him to play, Christmas argues in careful detail that the poet employs a “discourse on work” that utilizes classical allusions—reassuring to the polite readership of his work—with images that at the same time “call attention to certain oppressive conditions under which the laboring-poor live” (83). At the same time that Duck employed the discourse on work in some of the poems, he also was attempting to market himself as a professional writer in the mold of Alexander Pope in a conscious attempt to separate himself from the work of threshing in favor of the work of writing. Christmas suggests that this move has important consequences for the laboring poets that followed Duck in the early 1730s; writers like John Bancks, Robert Dodsley, and Robert Tattersal all employed the “discourse on work,” thereby critiquing the exploitation of laborers, but they also attempted—with varying degrees of success—to portray themselves as professional poets.

The third chapter is devoted entirely to Henry Jones, the mid-century bricklayer poet. Jones’s inclusion in this study is curious, given that he is Irish, not English, though Jones later moved to England under the patronage of Lord Chesterfield and then worked within the English plebeian tradition, consciously evoking the career of Duck in the minds of his readers. Because such little work has been done on Jones, this chapter on the poet is important recovery work, and the analysis of Jones’s use of “Custom” illustrates well the historical context of the term, effectively showing the ways in which plebeian writers critiqued “Custom” as a convention that—typically—was repressive to the poor and disenfranchised. Nevertheless, the argument that Jones’s work offers a “nascent critique of capitalistic tendencies taken up by moralists in the period” (146) seems a bit forced and is the one point in this study where Christmas seems to overstate the level of protest found in a poet’s work. On the other hand, Jones is shown to fit well into the plebeian writerly tradition; like Duck, he was forced to negotiate a complex set of expectations about laboring writers on the part of polite readership.

The fourth chapter displays how mid- to late-eighteenth-century plebeian poets like Mary Leapor and James Woodhouse wrote increasingly less about work and more about *writing as work*—an important shift by these writers in an attempt to legitimize their poetry as professional and worthy of aesthetic consideration (rather than as a curiosity, an example of “natural genius”). The close explication of Leapor’s “The Rural Maid’s Reflexions,” for example, demonstrates the poet’s “manipulation of cultural norms that govern the appearance of plebeian poetic genius at mid-century,” calling attention to Leapor’s plight as a working poet: “she has no time to read and ‘cultivate’ her mind” (164). In the poem “Crumble-Hall” Leapor revises the tradition of the

estate poem that lauds the virtue of great country houses (and their owners) by showing that these houses are “defined largely by labor, her labor of having to clean the house” (174). Like Leapor, Woodhouse is given as an example of “an emerging plebeian class consciousness” (187). Because of Woodhouse’s relatively long writing career, Christmas is able to demonstrate—quite effectively—the changing nature of the relationship between poet and patron in the late eighteenth century, resulting in Woodhouse’s break from his patrons, which enabled him to write pointed critiques of patronage itself as an exploitation of labor.

The fifth chapter shows the further breakdown of the patron/poet relationship, in a form of “class dialogue” between Ann Yearsley and Hannah More. In an excellent analysis Christmas chronicles the dispute between these two writers, in which the “milkwoman” Yearsley publicly rejects More’s attempts to control her work and her writerly persona. Yearsley’s public fashioning of herself as Lactilla (which Christmas suggests is a name Yearsley adopts with considerable irony), then her refashioning of herself as a professional poet in a pre-Romantic vein are well-analyzed in this chapter, displaying just how much things have changed since the 1730s. This chapter, along with the chapter on Stephen Duck, illustrates nicely how the plebeian poets were able to take some control over their own writing and their careers, and this change was in large part due to the shift away from the traditional system of patronage to a publishing culture that enabled at least some plebeian poets to earn a living through writing.

The epilogue traces the plebeian writing tradition into the nineteenth century, illuminating the careers of Robert Bloomfield and John Clare. As in previous chapters, we see how plebeian poets negotiated the ways in which they were presented and supported by their patrons. Though Clare is becoming ever more of an important figure in Romantic studies, the analysis here is a bit cursory, devoted mostly to Clare’s mounting anger at enclosure and how the “‘green’ world of the pastoral has been stripped of its clothes and cast in a new color because of enclosure” (284). Interestingly, Clare’s close identification with his immediate environment enables the poet to examine the exploitation of both laborer *and* land.

Finally, *Lab’ring Muses* is an ambitious work, but the arguments are based on careful and sensitive readings of the poems themselves. The book is extremely well-organized, showing a clear trajectory of the development of the plebeian tradition through a complex literary period, and it will no doubt create considerable critical interest in some of the less well-known writers like Henry Jones. *Lab’ring Muses* will do much to revise the notion that plebeian writers were domesticated and made silent by well-meaning but repressive patrons and show that these writers instead offered subtle but potent critiques of eighteenth century social rigidity. Christmas effectively shows how these plebeian poets were “important interlocutors in the ongoing cultural dialogue on work, writing, and social class taking place in pre-industrial England” (35).

Timothy Ziegenhagen

## Society Notes and News from Members

### NOTES AND NEWS FROM MEMBERS

#### CHAIRMAN'S NOTES

*The President*

Professor John Beer has retired as the Society's President with effect from the Annual General Meeting held last May. We shall be saying "goodbye" to John and expressing our thanks for his contribution to the Society at the forthcoming Birthday Celebration Luncheon to be held on February 15<sup>th</sup>. (Tickets are still available for that event from the Membership Secretary.)

The Council has invited Professor Dick Watson to take on the office of President, which he has kindly agreed to do. We do not have any formal "inauguration" but Dick may be said to have read himself in by giving the Elian Reading at our meeting on 7<sup>th</sup> December.

Dick Watson, who was Professor of English at the University of Durham from 1978 to 1999, comes from a Suffolk family, although he was educated at schools at Newbury and Oxford. After National Service in the Royal Artillery (which has caused him to become, like Chaucer's Wife of Bath, somewhat deaf in old age) he went back to Oxford to read English at Magdalen College. He taught for two years at Loretto, just outside Edinburgh, before going to Glasgow to do a PhD under Peter Alexander. At Glasgow he met his wife, Pauline, from Lancashire, a doctor who worked as a General Practitioner before becoming a Consultant Psychiatrist. They have three grown up children.

He taught at Glasgow before moving to Leicester in 1966. There he met Bill Ruddick, and through Bill and through Mary Wedd he became a member of the Charles Lamb Society, giving the Ernest Crowsley Lecture in 1985 on 'Lamb and Food'. His interest in Lamb was part of a general interest in Romantic period writers: under his initials, J. R. Watson, he has written books on Wordsworth, and on the poetry of the period in general. He has a particular research interest in two subjects: landscape and hymnology. His book *The English Hymn* was published in 1997, and this was followed in 2002 by *An Annotated Anthology of Hymns* (both OUP). In retirement he has written a book on *Romanticism and War* (to be published next year), and he is editing a new edition of John Julian's *A Dictionary of Hymnology*, a task which will keep him busy for the next five years. Julian's *Dictionary* was published in 1892, with additions in 1907, and it remains the Everest of hymnological scholarship: those who tried to revise it during the last century all died before they could finish it.

He was Public Orator of the University of Durham for ten years, Chairman of the Modern Humanities Research Association from 1989 to 1999, and President of the International Association of University Professors of English from 1995 to 1998. His recreations include playing the cello (amateurishly), book-binding, and trying to keep old age at bay by walking, swimming, and cycling. Two years ago, he and his wife did the medieval pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella from Le Puy in France on bicycles, an experience which he describes as 'deeply moving in a number of ways – spiritually, culturally, historically, artistically, and geographically'.

Dick describes himself as greatly honoured to have been asked to succeed John Beer as President. 'It is one of the nicest things that has ever happened to me'. At the same time, 'it is hard to follow someone who has done a job so splendidly'. Nevertheless, he hopes to continue the long tradition by which the Charles Lamb Society is not only a place where fine scholarship can flourish, but also a place where that scholarship is accompanied by the Elian qualities of humanity, friendliness, and good humour – even, dare we say it, by laughter, which has not always been seen as the natural accompaniment to scholarship: except, perhaps, in the work of Lamb himself, that great exemplar of human living.

#### *Claude A. Prance*

Just before Christmas, news arrived from Australia that our distinguished Vice-President, Claude Prance, had died on 20 November, after a short illness, at the age of 96. He was, of course, author of the invaluable *Companion to Charles Lamb* and a great Elian scholar and collector. His substantial Lamb collection is now in the National Library of Australia.

Claude Prance was born in Portsmouth, Hampshire in 1906 and was educated at the Philological School and St John's College, both in Southsea. He entered the service of the Midland Bank in Southsea at the age of seventeen and later served at branches in Farnham, Broadstairs and Eastbourne. In 1941 he volunteered for the Royal Air Force and was granted a commission, being subsequently posted to a Squadron based near Newcastle-upon-Tyne. In 1942 he was sent overseas for a tour of three years and saw service in North Africa and the Middle East, returning to England in 1945 to be released from the Royal Air Force. He resumed his career with the Midland Bank and after a period in North Wales applied for a position in the Bank's Intelligence Department at its Head Office in Poultry, London. He obtained a managerial appointment there and remained in the Department for seven years. The work of the Department comprised economic research and publicity. When in 1956 the Bank opened a Public Relations Department he moved to it with a similar managerial appointment, remaining there until his retirement in 1966.

His interest in English literature was kindled by an American schoolmaster at St John's College, but his leisure from his banking duties had to be devoted to professional examinations. He became an Associate of the Chartered Institute of Bankers and then an Associate of the Chartered Institute of Secretaries and was qualified to practise as a Chartered Secretary (but he never did). Much of his work at the Bank's Head Office was concerned with Public Relations, the Bank's publications and its advertisements.

On his retirement at the age of 60, he and his wife went to live on the Maltese Island of Gozo, buying and converting an old farmhouse. They remained there for fourteen very happy years, but spent some time travelling to Russia, India, Singapore, Hong Kong and Australia. They found a number of writers living on Gozo and among their friends were Nicholas and Anne Monserrat, Margaret Forster, the novelist and her journalist husband, Hunter Davis.

Claude Prance was married to Patricia Searle in 1932 and they celebrated their Diamond Wedding in 1992. They have two children, a daughter Romaine (now Mrs Temple) and a son Jon Prance. Romaine is a member of the staff of Canberra University and Jon, who is a Chartered Librarian, is Reference Librarian with C.S.I.R.O., an Australian Government scientific

organization. Patricia Prance is a great-grand-daughter of John Linnell, the Victorian painter, whose work can be seen in the Tate and other galleries. He is perhaps best known today as the friend and benefactor of William Blake and Samuel Palmer. Although born in England, Patricia spent most of her childhood in Hong Kong.

The Prances decided to leave Gozo in 1980 and went to Australia to be near their children, both of whom lived and worked in Canberra.

As soon as Claude Prance obtained his professional qualifications he was able to use his leisure for one of his main interests, and started to send essays and articles on English literature, mainly of the early nineteenth century, to a variety of journals. He acquired a fine collection of rejection slips, until gradually some of his essays began to appear in magazines in England, the U.S.A. and later in Malta and Australia.

Eventually he collected some of these and his first book of essays appeared in 1965 *Peppercorn Papers*, when he was still working for the Bank. Later volumes were *The Laughing Philosopher* 1976, *Index to the London Magazine* (with Dr Frank P. Riga) 1987, *Companion to Charles Lamb* 1982, *E.V. Lucas and his Books* 1988, *Essays of a Book Collector* 1989 and *The Characters in the Novels of Thomas Love Peacock* 1992. Most of the work published in these books was based on his own collection of English literature, mainly in the period of Charles Lamb and his Circle.

He has been a member of the Charles Lamb Society since 1936 and a Vice President since 1982. He was a keen collector of books and his library exceeded 8,000 volumes, mainly on English literature of the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, but including collections on the British theatre, natural history and cricket.

He was also a member of the Private Libraries Association, The Bookplate Society, The Society for Theatre Research, Selborne Society and the Keats-Shelley Association of America.

#### FROM D.E. WICKHAM

##### *A Coleridgean Note*

*The Listener* dated 13 March 1969 contained the following reference to the whaler *Diana* of Hull, which spent a winter trapped in the Arctic ice in 1866.

Beards and faces hung with icicles under the Northern Lights; ice in the medicine bottles; purple and green icebergs; *The Ancient Mariner* seemed round the corner – rightly, of course, since journals of much the same sort gave Coleridge his poem.

There was even a bird – a raven which flew over *Diana* with a ring of ice round its neck where its breath had frozen.