

# The Charles Lamb Bulletin

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## ‘There never was his like!’: A Biography of James White (1775-1820)

By DAVID CHANDLER

Lamb always insisted that for hearty joyous humour, tinged with Shakspearian [*sic*] fancy, Jem never had an equal. ‘Jem White!’ said he to Mr. Le Grice, when they met for the last time, after many years’ absence, at the Bell at Edmonton, in June 1833, ‘there never was his like! We shall never see such days as those in which Jem flourished!’

–Thomas Noon Talfourd, 1837<sup>1</sup>

JAMES—‘JEM’—WHITE WAS CLEARLY of enormous importance to Lamb. One recent scholar has suggested that he was ‘[o]f all Lamb’s many friends the staunchest’.<sup>2</sup> Yet biographies of Lamb contain disappointingly little information about White. The nineteenth-century memorialists accepted that Lamb had spent a great deal of time in White’s company, especially in the mid- and late 1790s, and admitted he always had a high regard for White, a figure of high spirits and exuberant fun. They mentioned, too, that White had been another Christ’s Hospital boy, that he had written *Falstaff’s Letters* (possibly with Lamb’s assistance), and that he had subsequently founded an advertising agency. Beyond this no enquiries were made, though a visit to Fleet Street could have secured any of them an interview with White’s eldest son, Robert, who lived until 1895. It might be inferred from their remarks that they thought Lamb had rather overrated White, and that it was their business to dwell on his relationships with more talented and important people. It was not until the 1890s that William Carew Hazlitt, who felt that Lamb was ‘not altogether without obligations to James White’,<sup>3</sup> actually attempted any sort of archival research to discover more about the latter.<sup>4</sup> His information appeared in time to give some respectability to E. Irving Carlyle’s *Dictionary of National Biography* article (1900), which also added, with reference to the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, the date of White’s death. Despite the poignant conclusion of Lamb’s ‘Praise of Chimney-Sweepers’, this was, strikingly, the first time such a basic fact had been established. In the next century biographical knowledge of White was advanced mainly by Ernest G. Crowsley, erstwhile president of the Charles Lamb Society, the first Lamb scholar to examine the materials on White held by White’s company—then known as R.F. White and Son Limited. In a paper presented at the Society’s Annual General Meeting on 15 January 1951, Crowsley presented some of this new information; the paper, however, was not published, only a very brief summary appearing in the *C. L. S. Bulletin*.<sup>5</sup>

The materials Crowsley had access to were assembled by Gilbert White (1883-1962), White’s great-grandson, who developed an interest in his family and company history in the aftermath of World War I. After Gilbert’s death this collection was broken up. An extensive

<sup>1</sup> *The Letters of Charles Lamb, With a Sketch of his Life*, 2 vols. (London, 1837), i. 12.

<sup>2</sup> J. E. Morpurgo (ed.), *Charles Lamb and Elia* (Manchester, 1993), 290 (hereafter Morpurgo).

<sup>3</sup> *Mary and Charles Lamb: Poems, Letters, and Remains* (London, 1874), 154 (hereafter Hazlitt).

<sup>4</sup> *The Lambs: Their Lives, Their Friends, and Their Correspondence* (London and New York, 1897), 24.

<sup>5</sup> A typescript of the talk, given by Crowsley to Gilbert White, is in the History of Advertising Trust archive, MS RFW 2/3/4a ([www.hatads.org.uk](http://www.hatads.org.uk)).

family tree which he had assembled, some letters, and miniature portraits of James White and his wife passed to his daughter, and are now in the possession of his granddaughter, whom I have been fortunate enough to trace. She has given me every assistance with my research, but does not wish to be named here. Other papers, mainly concerned with the company, were retained in R.F. White's Fleet Street office. When the company was bought out by Lopex in 1971 these passed into the hands of the last manager, Tony Clark, who in 1983 donated them to the History of Advertising Trust, where they can now be inspected. A few other items have doubtless gone elsewhere; a watercolour portrait of White, for example, went to a new advertising company that emerged from the Lopex shake-up—Whites Bull Holmes Advertising Ltd—and was subsequently given to the director, John W.C. Bull, on his retirement.<sup>6</sup> Another major source of information concerning White is the Christ's Hospital archive, now in the Guildhall Library, London, which has not been examined thoroughly in relation to White's career.

James White was 'born in the Month of February in 1775', making him almost exactly the same age as Lamb.<sup>7</sup> He was the third son of Samuel White of Bewdley, Worcestershire, and his wife Mary, née Willies. He was baptised on 17 April in the church of St John-in-Bedwardine, Worcester. His paternal grandfather is represented on the family tree as the 'Rev. White (Herefordshire)'. Reference to Foster's *Alumni Oxonienses* suggests that this was almost certainly the Benjamin White who obtained his B.A. at St. John's College, Oxford, in 1713 and was subsequently the vicar of Birley, Herefordshire. Our main source of information on White's family background is a typed transcript of a letter of 20 May 1889 by Charlotte Wade, White's niece:

Mr. SAMUEL WHITE, the Father of Mr. JAMES WHITE, was the son of a Clergyman of the Established Church, holding a Perpetual Curacy in Herefordshire on the borders of Wales. Mr. Saml. White's father wished his son to succeed him in the living and had him educated accordingly at College, but he was never ordained. He was a conscientious man and could not assent to the established Articles of Faith. His Father discarded him and would have nothing to do with him, but friends obtained for him an appointment under Government, which he retained many years and was highly esteemed, retiring upon a very handsome annuity. He resided in Staffordshire<sup>8</sup> and married a very pretty wife. I distinctly remember her and though elderly very pretty still, having dark waving hair, bright blue eyes and very clear complexion [*sic*]. There were 12 children, nine of whom reached maturity. Mr JAMES WHITE was the third son. There were five boys and four girls.<sup>9</sup>

Samuel White's 'appointment under Government' was as an 'Officer of Excise'.<sup>10</sup> Nothing is known of White's early boyhood, though a sight of the Malvern hills in 1805 brought him an

<sup>6</sup> Information from John W.C. Bull, who now lives in Alderbourne, Buckinghamshire. The picture has, fortunately, been reproduced: see T. R. Nevett, *Advertising in Britain: A History* (London, 1982), facing p. 19 (hereafter Nevett).

<sup>7</sup> Christ's Hospital Presentation Paper. Guildhall Library MS 12818A/55, no. 115. This and other documents are quoted by kind permission of Christ's Hospital and the Guildhall Library.

<sup>8</sup> There is a mistake here, as other sources clearly locate Samuel White in Bewdley, Worcestershire. But Bewdley is just a few miles from the Staffordshire border.

<sup>9</sup> History of Advertising Trust MS RFW 2/2/3. The location of the original letter is unknown. This and other documents are quoted by kind permission of the History of Advertising Trust.

<sup>10</sup> Christ's Hospital Presentation Paper.

apparently happy recollection of ‘the Neighbourhood of which many of the earliest days of my youth were spent’.<sup>11</sup>

In 1783 White was sent to Christ’s Hospital, London, as a ‘Charity Boy’. Samuel White had followed the standard procedure of petitioning the school, stating that he had ‘a Wife and six Children to provide for and is unable to maintain his Family and educate his Children without Assistance having only a small Income’.<sup>12</sup> John Lamb, Lamb’s father, had used very similar wording two years earlier.<sup>13</sup> The school’s register for 11 April 1783 reads: ‘James White, son of Samuel White, bapt. 17 Apl. 1775, admitted from Bewdley, Worcestershire. (Thos Coventry Esq.)’.<sup>14</sup> Thomas Coventry, who ‘presented’ White, was one of the school’s directors, and is well known to readers of Lamb, being described in ‘The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple’. Samuel White’s sister, Sarah, lived at Coventry’s house, probably as his housekeeper, and it is reasonable to suppose that it was through this connection that the possibility of White’s being educated at Christ’s Hospital emerged. White entered the school on 18 September 1783, and was formally ‘Clothed’ the next day. The abilities and character he revealed in the following years impressed his masters, as will be shown in a moment. He also managed to impress the other boys, no doubt in the way that clever extroverts often do. Leigh Hunt later wrote: ‘We remember, as he [White] passed through the cloisters, how we used to admire his handsome appearance, and unimprovable manner of wearing his new clothes.’<sup>15</sup> The reference to White’s ‘new clothes’ suggests that his family’s circumstances had improved, or perhaps he was benefiting from his connection with Coventry. It seems reasonable to assume that Lamb became acquainted with White while they were both at the school, but there is no record of any exceptional degree of friendship this early.

White’s schooling ended on 30 April 1790, earlier than planned. This was the direct result of a decision made by the Committee of Almoners on 14 April:

The Committee . . . considered the present State of the Counting House, and the necessity of providing a succession of Clerks trained in the Service; and were unanimously of Opinion to take a Lad into the Office to secure such succession. And after inspecting the performances of James White one of the Senior Boys in the Writing School, and hearing his Character from his Master, & other Officers of the Hospital the Committee were well satisfied therewith, and with their Report of his Abilities and Disposition, and agreed to recommend to the Court that he should be immediately taken into the Service of the House, and be placed with the present Wardrobe Keeper upon the usual Fee of Twenty one Pounds, and an allowance of Thirty Pounds P<sup>f</sup> Ann. to provide him Board, Apparel, and all other Necessaries in his Family.<sup>16</sup>

Coventry was present at this meeting and it is likely that he influenced the appointment. Samuel White was quickly acquainted with the prospect that had opened up for his son, and apparently welcomed it, for the Christ’s Hospital record for 30 April reads:

<sup>11</sup> British Library Add MS 44,991, f. 6. This manuscript is quoted by kind permission of the British Library.

<sup>12</sup> Christ’s Hospital Presentation Paper.

<sup>13</sup> E. V. Lucas, *The Life of Charles Lamb*, 2 vols. (London, 1905), i. 46 (hereafter Lucas). On the facing page Lucas reproduces Lamb’s Presentation Paper, identical in form to White’s.

<sup>14</sup> Guildhall Library MS 12818/11 p. 296.

<sup>15</sup> *The Indicator*, 2 vols. (London, 1820, 1822), ii. 122 (hereafter *Indicator*).

<sup>16</sup> Guildhall Library MS 12811/14, p. 126.

James White is this day discharged from this Hospital for ever by Sarah White, his Aunt, living at M<sup>r</sup> Coventry's, by desire of his Father as appears by a Letter produced; the Boy being to be trained in the Business of the Counting House of this Hospital, and to be boarded with Thomas Wilby, the Wardrobe Keeper. [signed] Sarah White<sup>17</sup>

White's indentures, one of them containing his earliest known signature, are owned by the History of Advertising Trust. They describe Wilby simply as 'one of the Clerks of the . . . Hospital'.<sup>18</sup>

White's apprentice years, 1790-7, saw his friendship with Lamb thoroughly ripen. By the winter of 1794-5, if not earlier, he had become Lamb's 'most familiar friend'.<sup>19</sup> Another close associate was John Matthew Gutch, again an ex-Christ's Hospital schoolboy. At this time, Gutch later recollected, the three were 'in the habit of meeting at the "Feathers" in Hand Court, Holborn, to drink nips of Burton ale, as they were called.'<sup>20</sup> *OED* defines a 'nip' as half a pint—probably this was all they could afford. But there were other sources of stimulation. Presumably in addition to other literature, Lamb introduced White to Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and the latter, a natural humorist, developed a powerful imaginative identification with Falstaff. He would 'talk you nothing but pure *Falstaff* the long evenings through', Lamb later recollected,<sup>21</sup> and among his friends he became known as 'Sir John' while The Feathers became The Boar's Head. On one occasion White even dressed up as Shakespeare's comic hero, with consequences described by Gutch:

I was present with him [White] at a masquerade, when he personated Sir John Falstaff, in a dress borrowed from the wardrobe of Covent Garden Theatre, through the kindness of [John] Fawcett, the comedian. His imitation of the character, or I should say personation, excited great mirth and applause, as well as considerable jealousy from some of the company present, supposed to be hired actors for the occasion; who, with much ill will, procured a rope and held it across the room (at the Pantheon in Oxford Street), and White was obliged to take a leap over the rope to escape being thrown down. The exertion he underwent by this interruption, added to the weight of the dress, injured his health for some days afterwards.<sup>22</sup>

It is an arresting story, evidencing both White's charm—his being able to borrow the costume—and his tendency to give offence. As regards the latter aspect of his character, though, Gutch's account seems strangely evasive. It is difficult, if not impossible, to suppose that 'hired actors' at

<sup>17</sup> Guildhall Library MS 12818/11, p. 296.

<sup>18</sup> History of Advertising Trust MSS RFW 2/1/1 and 2/1/2. There is no reason to doubt that White 'boarded' with Wilby. Winifred F. Courtney's claim in *Young Charles Lamb 1775-1802* (London, 1982), 357 n.9 that he lived at Coventry's house derives from her misreading of a note by Edmund Blunden.

<sup>19</sup> *The Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey*, ed. C. C. Southey, 6 vols. (London, 1849-50), vi. 286 (hereafter Southey).

<sup>20</sup> Gutch's account of White was written in his copy of *Falstaff's Letters*; it is quoted in Hazlitt, 155-7, then with corrections in *Falstaff's Letters by James White . . . With Notices of the Author Collected from Charles Lamb, Leigh Hunt and Other Contemporaries* (London, 1877), xix-xx (hereafter *Falstaff's Letters*).

<sup>21</sup> *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, 7 vols. (London, 1903-5), i. 195 (hereafter *Works*).

<sup>22</sup> *Falstaff's Letters* xix.

a masquerade could threaten White ‘with being thrown down’ simply because they were jealous of his acting ability, and we are left to wonder what else he had done to anger them. An amusing story Lamb tells about the actor James William Dodd (1740?-96), which must refer to approximately the same period, highlights White’s impudent humour:

My merry friend, Jem White, had seen him one evening in Aguecheek, and recognising Dodd the next day in Fleet Street, was irresistibly impelled to take off his hat and salute him as the identical Knight of the preceding evening with a ‘Save you, *Sir Andrew*.’ Dodd, not at all disconcerted at this unusual address from a stranger, with a courteous half-rebuking wave of the hand, put him off with an ‘Away, *Fool*’.<sup>23</sup>

Both stories point to White’s innate theatricality, and suggest he may have been a regular theatre-goer, even as an apprentice.

White’s fascination with Shakespeare, and Falstaff in particular, culminated in 1796 in a work originally published with the cumbersome title of *Original Letters, &c. of Sir John Falstaff and His Friends . . . From Genuine Manuscripts*, but which quickly became known simply as *Falstaff’s Letters*. It was probably written with Lamb’s assistance; Gutch, who was well placed to know, recorded that Lamb had supplied ‘incidental hints and corrections’.<sup>24</sup> The volume was designed pleasantly to ridicule William Henry Ireland’s recent ‘discovery’ of Shakespeare’s manuscripts, but Lamb later liked to emphasise its purely literary value, deriving, he said, ‘from the fullness of a young soul, newly kindling at the Shakspearian [*sic*] flame, and bursting to be delivered of a rich exuberance of conceits’.<sup>25</sup> *Letters* is indeed a work of surprising ability, combining earthy vigour with a constantly inventive use of language in a very Shakespearean way. Its main fault, perhaps, is that it is too dense—something Lamb slowly came to recognise when it turned out not to be the popular success he had hoped for. Recommending the work to Thomas Manning in 1800, he wrote: ‘I should have advertiz’d you, that the meaning is frequently hard to be got at; and so are the future Guineas, that now lie ripening & aurifying in the womb of some undiscoverd [*sic*] Potosi; but dig, dig, dig, dig . . .’<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately readers and reviewers in 1796 were not prepared to do this much digging, and *Falstaff’s Letters* did not sell well. Lamb was soon informing Coleridge that ‘Poor fellow [White], he has (very undeservedly) lost by it; nor do I see that it is likely ever to reimburse him the charge of printing, etc.’<sup>27</sup> Lamb himself was always tireless in promoting the book; as late as 1832 he presented a copy to Landor.<sup>28</sup> The demand for *Falstaff’s Letters* slowly rose with Lamb’s own literary stock, and there were several posthumous editions.<sup>29</sup> The work has been the subject of two fine

<sup>23</sup> *Works* ii. 138.

<sup>24</sup> *Falstaff’s Letters* xix.

<sup>25</sup> Lamb i. 194.

<sup>26</sup> *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, ed. Edwin W. Marris, Jr., 3 vols. (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1975-8), i. 187 (hereafter *Letters*).

<sup>27</sup> *Letters* i. 57.

<sup>28</sup> *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers*, ed. Edith J. Morley, 3 vols. (London, 1938), i. 410 (hereafter *Crabb Robinson*).

<sup>29</sup> The most important is the 1877 edition ‘With notices of the Author’ added as an introduction. The unknown editor of the work offers it to readers as ‘no unwise or unacceptable tribute to the memory of Elia’ (*Falstaff’s Letters* vi).

descriptive essays in recent years, which means no more need be said about it here.<sup>30</sup> It is White's only known attempt at authorship. Shakespeare became part of his identity, though. Gutch recollected that 'White was an idolater of Shakespeare. He had always several of his expressions and epithets at his ready command, and generally interlarded his conversation with them.'<sup>31</sup>

Apart from drinking Burton Ale and reading and discussing Shakespeare, little is known of what White and Lamb did together at this period, or indeed later. No letters between them are known to survive, perhaps because they saw each other too often to bother writing them. But one activity of which we do have a record is visits to the South Sea House on Threadneedle Street, where Lamb was briefly employed between September 1791 and February 1792, and where John Lamb, Lamb's brother, worked for most of his life. Sarah White, White's aunt already introduced, was appointed Housekeeper of the South Sea House on 6 October 1791, possibly through the arrangement of Coventry, who was a Governor, and lived there with her brother, Joseph White, until her death in 1811.<sup>32</sup> The source for Lamb's visits is the Charlotte Wade letter, quoted above:

CHARLES LAMB and his two sisters used to visit Mr JOSEPH WHITE and his sister MISS WHITE with Mr. BENJn. and Mr. JAMES WHITE their nephews. Miss MARY WHITE [James White's younger sister] at that time resided with her Uncle and Aunt and had an invitation to spend a week with the Misses LAMB, which Miss MARY accepted, but was very pleased to return to her Aunt as she thought the Misses LAMB were not quite Compos Mentis—her words.

Although Charlotte Wade errs in remembering that Lamb had 'two sisters', there is no reason to doubt the rest of her account, which suggests that Lamb was close to several members of the White family. It also throws an interesting sidelight on Lamb's first 'Elia' essay, 'The South-Sea House'.<sup>33</sup> And if Lamb was close to the Whites, White seems to have been equally close to the Lambs. Gutch records that he was 'very intimate with the Lamb family'.<sup>34</sup> A point which can be made here is that Lamb clearly shared his friends with White. From Lamb's letters, and other contemporary sources, it is clear that White became acquainted with such diverse talents as Coleridge, Godwin, Hazlitt, Crabb Robinson, John Rickman, Thomas Manning and others through his friendship with Lamb. Presumably White, too, shared his friends with Lamb: if we knew more of his world we would know more of Lamb.

In 1797 White reached the end of his apprenticeship, and on 11 January his formal petition to be 'established' in the 'Service' of Christ's Hospital was read out at the meeting of the Almoners. White emphasised that he had 'uniformly endeavour'd to persevere in that line of conduct towards his Superiors in Office, which he conceived would most merit their confidence, & recommend him to the future favors of this Worshipful Committee'. The result was that he was

<sup>30</sup> Reginald Watters, 'Falstaff in Miniature: James White's *Original Letters of Sir John Falstaff . . . 1796*', *CLB* ns 72 (1990), 265-76; T. W. Craik, 'Jem White and *Falstaff's Letters*', *CLB* ns 91 (1995), 118-29.

<sup>31</sup> *Falstaff's Letters* xx.

<sup>32</sup> British Library Add MS 25,523, p. 118; Add MS 25, 530, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> I discuss this matter further in 'Charles Lamb and the South Sea House', *Notes and Queries* ccxlix (June 2004), 139-43.

<sup>34</sup> *Falstaff's Letters* xx.

appointed ‘Assistant to the Clerks at the Salary of Eighty Pounds a Year’.<sup>35</sup> This was a good first salary for a young bachelor in clerical employment, which can be compared with the £40 that was Lamb’s starting salary at the East India House in 1795. The following year, however, White sought to improve his lot, and on 13 May the Almoners heard another petition from him, ‘praying some Allowance for an Apartment, a material part of his Salary of 80£ P<sup>r</sup> Ann. being necessarily appropriated to that branch of expenditure’. I think it is possible to see here some of White’s confidence in his charm, and ability to seize the initiative, which would later make him a successful advertising man. The result was favourable: ‘After considering the conduct of the said James White & what has been done for Persons in a similar situation, it was agreed to recommend to the Court to allow the said James White Twenty Guineas P<sup>r</sup> Ann. to enable him to provide himself a suitable Apartment’.<sup>36</sup>

It was just before this time, in the winter of 1797-8, that White lodged for a while with Charles Lloyd, another exact contemporary. Perhaps this was a choice he made to save costs. Lamb had become friendly with Lloyd in 1797 and the following year Southey found ‘Lamb, Lloyd, and White [. . .] inseparable’. Southey mentions White and Lloyd’s lodging together, and the fact prompts his observation that ‘no two men could be imagined more unlike each other. Lloyd had no drollery in his nature; White seemed to have nothing else.’<sup>37</sup> Southey was certainly wrong in his estimate of White’s character, though he was probably influenced by Lloyd’s views, and it not difficult to imagine White baiting the serious, morally upright—and sometimes uptight!—Southey with displays of outlandish humour. Lloyd felt that White needed moral guidance. In a letter to Southey of April 1798, he explained his reasons for staying in London instead of returning to Bath: ‘I am sure that I have have [*sic*] *here* created a sort of settled dependance upon myself for the happiness of one or two individuals—there are no beings in Bath so forlorn as Lamb—nor none to whom I can be of so much moral service as White’.<sup>38</sup> The last claim can only be read as an enormous exaggeration, one that doubtless reflects the character difference remarked by Southey. Nevertheless, Lamb too was sensing some limitations in White’s character at this time, as he confessed to Coleridge:

. . . he [Lloyd] was hurt, that I was not more constantly with him—but he was living with **White**, a man to whom I had never been accustomed to impart my *dearest feelings*—tho’ from long habits of friendliness, & many a social and good quality, I loved him very much—. I met company there sometimes — — indiscriminate company, any society almost, when I am in affliction, is sorely painful to me.<sup>39</sup>

Two years later, Lamb declared that ‘White has *all kindness*, but not *sympathy*’.<sup>40</sup> The evidence is slight, but I think it might be inferred that Lamb’s period of greatest intimacy with White ended in September 1796, when his family tragedy took him into regions of the spirit untrodden by his ‘merry friend’. Nevertheless, at the time of the tragedy White appears to have had the role of best friend and trusted helper. That is surely the implication of Lamb’s letter to Coleridge of

<sup>35</sup> Guildhall Library MS 12811/14, p. 417.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 470.

<sup>37</sup> Southey vi. 287.

<sup>38</sup> Gurion Taussig, *Coleridge and the Idea of Friendship, 1789-1804* (Newark, DE, and London, 2002), 238.

<sup>39</sup> *Letters* i. 126.

<sup>40</sup> *Letters* i. 204.

27 September, which begins ‘White or some of my friends or the public papers by this time may have informed you of the terrible calamities that have fallen on our family’.<sup>41</sup>

On 24 January 1800 White’s salary was increased to £150 a year with an additional allowance of £30 for housing.<sup>42</sup> Rather surprisingly, this was the last increase he received, and for the next seventeen years the Treasurer’s Ledgers of Christ’s Hospital show him getting the same £180, in quarterly payments of £45. Nor was he ever promoted: throughout this period he is always referred to as the ‘Junior Assistant Clerk’. J. E. Morpurgo has described White’s Christ’s Hospital career as a ‘remarkable record of under-achievement’.<sup>43</sup> It was actually not an exceptional career at a time when promotions generally depended entirely on the death or serious ill health of someone further up the office ladder. However the emphasis should properly be put on the remarkable fact that White was able, and willing, to hold on to his clerical job for so long when simultaneously building a second and far more lucrative career for himself. It speaks much for the goodwill he enjoyed with his superiors at Christ’s Hospital, and I think we should probably imagine that White was allowed to progressively reduce his working hours in lieu of any further increase in salary.

White became one of London’s first advertising agents, and this, apart from his friendship with Lamb, is his claim to fame. The advertising business he founded would later claim to have commenced operations in 1800. There is no reason to doubt the date if some flexibility is allowed in the definition of what constitutes a ‘business’. The beginnings appear to have been very casual. T. R. Nevett says:

Tradition has it that Jem White was called upon to place occasional advertisements for the school [Christ’s Hospital], and was thus drawn into the world of newspapers and advertising which had long centred upon the taverns and coffee-houses in and around Fleet Street. Before long, White found himself also handling advertisements for other people, and for a time acted as agent while still retaining his post in the counting-house—a feat by no means impossible since his own house, from which he operated the agency, was next door to the school.<sup>44</sup>

A few details can be quarrelled with. Nevett’s ‘for a time’ greatly underestimates the seventeen years during which White managed two jobs. It is almost certain, too, that White’s entry into the advertising world was a little more complicated than Nevett suggests. By 1800 White was living in the now-vanished Warwick Square to the south of Newgate Street, close to Christ’s Hospital (not quite ‘next door’), and it is a striking coincidence that the only known advertising agency then in London, that of Tayler and Newton, had its office in the same square. White may have begun by helping Tayler and Newton; even if this was not the case, he must have heard about the nature of their business, and perhaps sensed the commercial possibilities in advertising. More generally, White was living close to the heart of commercial London and with his confident, extrovert personality, intelligence and curiosity, he was well positioned to learn where business opportunities lay. The fact that he eventually died a rich man speaks eloquently for the shrewdness of his recognition that advertising had a big future.

<sup>41</sup> *Letters* i. 44.

<sup>42</sup> Guildhall Library MS 12823/8, p. 177.

<sup>43</sup> Morpurgo 289.

<sup>44</sup> Nevett 62. This ‘tradition’ was also reported to me by John W.C. Bull.

What did a London advertising agent actually do in the early 1800s? His principal job was to act as a middleman between London advertisers and the fast-growing provincial press. Nevett quotes a useful account, which he dates to 1829:

The means of communication between the provincial papers and the metropolis, are very simple. There are two newspaper agency offices; the respectable and old established firm of Newton and Co, formerly Tayler and Newton, in Warwick-square, and that of Barker and Co. [the company founded by White] in Fleet-street. At these offices, advertisements are received for all the country papers without increased charge to the advertiser, the commission of the agent being paid by the newspaper proprietor, and these agents also send to the country the stamps necessary for the papers, and undertake the collection of accounts owing in London.<sup>45</sup>

This seems simple enough, and William Tayler, ‘the first recognisable advertising agent’ as Nevett calls him,<sup>46</sup> was doing this as early as the 1780s, at a time when the provincial press had grown sufficiently to warrant the existence of such a middleman. The writer of the above account clearly believed that Tayler, who later took a Mr Newton into partnership, was the first agent of this type. However the matter of priority is a little complicated because the company White created would later boast of being ‘The World’s First Advertising Agency’—a claim repeatedly made in its own advertisements, as a search through the materials at the History of Advertising Trust reveals. Not surprisingly, this claim was sometimes disputed, and, when it was, White’s tended to qualify the assertion a little. Thus when W. A. ‘Tony’ Clarke, a director, claimed on the radio in 1960 that White’s was ‘the first agency’,

A. P. Jones, of Davies & Co., of Bishopsgate, challenged the statement that White’s were the oldest agency, on the grounds that his company had been formed some 15 years earlier.

Mr. Clarke and Mr. Jones later talked the matter over, and they agreed that Davies & Co. was the older company—though when formed it went under a different name, conducting the business of book and newspaper sellers—but that Jem White was the first man to earn his living exclusively by conducting the business of an advertising agency.<sup>47</sup>

This claim is complicated by the fact that White did not ‘earn his living exclusively by conducting the business of an advertising agency’ until 1817, by which time other advertising firms were emerging. In any case, five years later T. F. ‘Tommy’ Clarke, Tony Clarke’s father, defended the claim to primacy on rather different grounds:

In the old days there were many newsagents who set up as agents for the newspapers to accept advertisements.

But White’s were the first agency to introduce the idea for writing copy for their clients’ advertisements which is the essence of a modern advertising agency and very

<sup>45</sup> Nevett 63-4. Nevett states that this account comes from the *Edinburgh Review* for 1829. I have not been able to locate it there, however.

<sup>46</sup> Nevett 62.

<sup>47</sup> “‘World’s oldest advertising agency’ dispute ends in compromise’, *Advertisers’ Weekly* 4 March 1960, p. 16.

different from simply receiving advertisements which are then passed on to the various newspapers.<sup>48</sup>

The evidence for Tommy Clarke's claim here is very slight, and in my view quite unconvincing. It will be considered in a moment. But the obvious conclusion, based on admittedly scanty evidence, is that White was the *second* advertising agent to emerge in London, and there is some evidence that he made a considerable impact on a still very limited industry. In the earliest editions of *The Post-Office Annual Directory*, which commenced publication in 1800 and attempted to list all London's businesses, neither White nor Tayler (and Newton) are included, though Tayler was being listed in the long-established *Kent's Directory* simply as an 'Agent' (*Kent's* ceased publication in 1810 and never listed White). In 1803, 'Tayler and Newton, Printers' Agents, 5 Warwick-square' made a first appearance. It is not until 1809 that we find 'White James, Newspaper Agent, 33 Fleet-street'. White had opened the Fleet-street office, which was his company's home until 1928, in 1808. Intriguingly, 'Tayler and Newton', who had previously always appeared as 'Printer's Agents', now changed their designation and appeared in 1810 as a 'Country Newspaper-office'. In 1811 they changed again, and appeared as a 'General Advertising Office'. In 1814, after the death of Tayler, 'Newton & Co.' reverted to being a 'Country Newspaper-office'. We should be cautious about reading too much into this, but it seems that White decided to make a much more serious commitment to advertising around 1808, acquiring a business premise, promoting himself as a 'Newspaper Agent', and forcing the one company he was in competition with to reconsider its product. By this time, too, he must have been employing someone to help him with his business.<sup>49</sup> These were plainly good years for White, and it is intriguingly in 1808 that we find Lamb describing him as 'a **Wit** of the first magnitude, but had rather be thought a gentleman, like Congreve'.<sup>50</sup>

White's friendship with Lamb continued in these years, though there is little evidence concerning it. When 'quite out of spirits' in May 1800, following Mary's collapse and 'removal to a place of confinement', Lamb went to live with White for a while, presumably at Warwick Square.<sup>51</sup> It was during this stay that he made the remark, already quoted, about White having 'all kindness, but not sympathy'. The following year they attended one of the celebrations that followed the signing of the Preliminaries of Peace between Britain and France on 1 October, which occasion gave White the chance to display his boyish humour. As Lamb reported to John Rickman, 'peace is all the cry here—fireworks, lights &c. abound—. White stationed himself at Temple Bar among the boys, and threw squibs; burned one man's cravat'.<sup>52</sup> This is another story which points to White's ability to give offence, and it can be related to that of his falling foul of the 'hired actors' at the masquerade. Lamb, like other friends, benefited from White's increasing prosperity. When he started work at the East India House in 1792, Lamb had to have two friends

<sup>48</sup> 'Standing firm', *City Press* 5 February 1965, p. 7.

<sup>49</sup> It would be difficult to make a fuller statement concerning the development of White's advertising business before 1808. A thorough examination of all the provincial papers published in these years (an enormous task) might yield some clues, but a considerable proportion do not survive, and others do not list a London agent, even when they almost certainly had one. My impression, based on a fairly random sampling from the British Newspaper Library, is that they tell the same story as the Directories: that is, Tayler and Newton dominated the industry until at least 1808 and only began to be seriously challenged by White after 1810.

<sup>50</sup> *Letters* ii. 274.

<sup>51</sup> *Letters* ii. 203.

<sup>52</sup> *Letters* ii. 28.

willing to enter into bonds of £500 as a guarantee of his good behaviour. His bondsmen were Peter Peirson, one of his Old Benchers of the Inner Temple, and his brother, John. When Pierson died on 27 December 1808,<sup>53</sup> White took his place.<sup>54</sup> In 1811 White assisted the improvident Godwin, helping secure a loan of £500 from Josiah Wedgwood.<sup>55</sup> He also placed advertisements for Godwin, and was lenient when it came to payment. On 26 September 1815 Henry Crabb Robinson visited White and recorded that they ‘spoke of Godwin. He [White] complained of Godwin paying him for his advertisements only by bills. But we agreed in ascribing his irregularities to distress and not want of principle.’<sup>56</sup>

Lamb, and perhaps other literary friends, also benefited directly from White’s move into advertising. In 1809 Mary Lamb wrote to Sarah Stoddart Hazlitt that ‘A man in the India House has resigned by which Charles will get twenty pounds a year, and White has prevailed on him to write some more lottery puffs, if that ends in smoke the twenty pounds is a sure card, and has made us very joyful.’<sup>57</sup> It seems unlikely that White needed Lamb’s literary talents, but he probably found this an unobtrusive way of giving his old friend some financial assistance. In his 1905 biography of Lamb, E. V. Lucas drew attention to Mary Lamb’s statement and added ‘Of his [Lamb’s] lottery puffs we shall probably never know any more’.<sup>58</sup> Gilbert White, I assume, discovered Mary Lamb’s statement in one of Lucas’s publications, in the course of his researches on his great-grandfather. From the 1920s, if not earlier, it was made a good deal of by ‘White’s’, and was the main emphasis of several of the articles on the firm which were published to celebrate its removal to 72-78 Fleet Street in 1928. *The Times*, for example, offered ‘A Link with Charles Lamb’ (14 January, p. 14), while the *Daily Telegraph* ran an article entitled ‘When Elia wrote “Puffs”’ (17 January, p. 14), and *Advertiser’s Weekly* had a piece called ‘Charles Lamb—Copy-writer’ (20 January, p. 102). These articles, incidentally, point to how high Lamb’s reputation was in the 1920s. For the next quarter century no examples of Lamb’s work for the firm could be found, but in 1953 a newspaper advertisement from *Bell’s Weekly Messenger* for 22 December 1806, published in the *Evening News*, was hopefully seized upon as possibly his:

A SEASONAL Hint.—Christmas gifts, of innumerable descriptions, will now pervade the whole kingdom. It is submitted whether any present is capable of being attended with so much good to a dutiful son, an amiable daughter, an industrious apprentice, or to a faithful servant, as that of a SHARE of a LOTTERY TICKET.<sup>59</sup>

Gilbert White promptly contacted the *Evening News*, and two days later they reported his view that it was ‘very probable’ the advertisement was by Lamb, adding that ‘the quotation is certainly very much in his [Lamb’s] style’.<sup>60</sup> Although scepticism is surely warranted, ‘White’s’ set enough store by this to have a copy of the advertisement mounted, to be exhibited to visitors as ‘very probably’ the work of Lamb. Mary Lamb’s comment is, as far as I can tell, the slight foundation on which the later theory that ‘White’s’ was the first agency which wrote advertising

<sup>53</sup> *Gentleman’s Magazine* 79 (1809), 89.

<sup>54</sup> Lucas i. 76.

<sup>55</sup> Crabb Robinson i. 33.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid* i. 175.

<sup>57</sup> *Letters* iii. 31.

<sup>58</sup> Lucas i. 299.

<sup>59</sup> ‘This Day in London’s Past’, *Evening News* 22 December 1953, p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> ‘Charles Lamb Memory’, *Evening News* 24 December 1953, p. 1.

copy was built. It appears, indeed, to be the earliest evidence of any agency (and there were probably still only two!) writing copy, but too little is known of London advertising at this time for a larger claim to be made.

If the early 1800s were, first and foremost, the period in which White established and consolidated his position in the advertising world, he also found time for some holidays. In autumn 1801 he visited Oxfordshire, Lamb reporting to Manning that ‘White writes me word from the country, where he is gone to recruit his strength, that he goes groping in all the hedges and copses about Oxford among daisies, Kingcups, and pissabeds [dandelions], for the seeds of poetry, which George Dyer will still have it are to be found there!’<sup>61</sup> In August 1805 White made a ‘Picturesque Excursion into South Wales’ with an antiquarian friend. He clearly regarded this as a special treat, perhaps never to be repeated, and made up a notebook in which to record his experiences. ‘As I glance my eye over the Sheets destined to receive the fruits of this Excursion, I can scarcely repress a smile at my own vanity in having appropriated so many’, he remarked at the beginning.<sup>62</sup> The notebook, beautifully bound, is now in the British Library, and it makes August 1805 by far the best documented part of White’s life. White refers to his companion on this trip simply as ‘B’. The two men set out from Brompton on 2 August and travelled at a leisurely pace via Windsor, Burford, Gloucester and Ross-on-Wye. They then sailed down the Wye to Chepstow, before embarking in a carriage for their tour of South Wales. They visited Usk, Caerleon, Caerphilly, Barry Island, Cowbridge, Neath, Swansea, Tenby and Pembroke before turning north to take in Fishguard, Cardigan, Aberystwyth, Devil’s Bridge, Llanidloes and Bishop’s Castle. Here the ‘Excursion’ essentially ended, and they headed back to London via Ludlow and Worcester. Throughout his journal White shows keen appreciation of the ‘Picturesque’ scenery, as well as considerable interest in historical monuments—though in the latter respect his enthusiasm fell well short of his friend B’s. The journal reveals, too, his constant alertness to the comedy of life, and in this sense probably better illustrates the White loved and celebrated by Lamb than the denser, more literary humour of *Falstaff’s Letters*. Here is an example, taken from White’s account of his time at Cardigan:

Finding myself deserted by my Companion [. . .] I proceeded in quest of him, and at length found this unhappy Youth in the deepest perspiration at the foot of a stone in the Church yard—At first I hesitated to intrude on the sacredness of his sorrow, being convinced that the first agonies of grief should be suffered to exhaust themselves; but on reflection, having reason for doubting whether the family ashes could be deposited in a spot so remote from it’s residence, I ventured to approach and found myself abundantly relieved in ascertaining that the real cause of his agitation was nothing more than a rude upright stone with some characters on it out of the usual place, & grown unintelligible; to ascertain the meaning of which he was scratching up the earth with such dispatch as to bring on this lamentable fit of perspiration.

Having endeavoured to restore to him his accustomed tranquillity, nothing remained but to leave Cardigan as soon as possible . . . .<sup>63</sup>

<sup>61</sup> *Letters* ii. 25.

<sup>62</sup> British Library Add MS 44,991, f. 2.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid* f. 42-42<sup>v</sup>.

The humour here glances back to Smollett, but also looks forward, quite specifically, to the Scott of *The Antiquary* (1816) and the Dickens of *Pickwick Papers* (1836). A final point to be made about the 1805 journal is that it supports Lamb's slightly later judgement that White 'would rather be thought a gentleman'. White nowhere sounds like a 'Junior Assistant Clerk' on a rare holiday, but rather manages the tone of a genteel young man quite familiar with travelling in a carriage. A particularly remarkable thought is one he details on first glimpsing the Malvern hills: 'Like the generality of my Contemporaries I ought here to have taken out my Pen & Ink horn & laboured out a Sonnet extempore, but I honestly confess that my mind was busily employed in devising a Plan for becoming Member of Parliament, & retiring to my birth place one of the Quorum',<sup>64</sup>

When in Wales in 1805, White and his friend B visited the Lover's Leap on the Piercefield Estate near Tintern. Here, White says, they 'bestowed' 'a soft recollection on our Mistresses [. . .] anticipating their friendly welcome at our return'.<sup>65</sup>



Whoever White's 'Mistress' was in 1805, it seems most unlikely that she was Margaret Faulder, whom he married in 1811. Born in 1792, Margaret was about half White's age when they married. She was the daughter of Robert Faulder (1748-1815), a successful bookseller whose shop was in Bond Street, and his wife Margaret (1755-1836). Robert Faulder enjoyed some celebrity in the 1790s when an action was brought against him for selling William Gifford's *Baviad*; in the first decades of the nineteenth century new editions of Gifford's poem were accompanied by 'Proceedings on the Trial of Robert Faulder, Bookseller'. It is not clear how White came to know the Faulders. It was possibly through his advertising business, possibly through friends, like Lamb, who were connected with the bookselling world, or possibly through his own, unprofessional association with that world. At the time of their marriage, James and Margaret had miniature portraits painted, probably by Sir William Newton (1785-1869);<sup>66</sup> that of White is reproduced

here. They had several children over the following years: the first, Mary, was born in 1812, James followed in 1813, but died in 1815, Robert Faulder White, the eventual heir, in 1815, John Bent, who again died young, in 1817, Annie in 1818, and Walter in 1819. Two boys and two girls grew to adulthood.

In 1817, with his advertising business booming, White finally gave up his old job at Christ's Hospital. He must have announced his decision to leave in April, for it was on 30 April that the Almoners discussed the question of his replacement. White worked through to the end of June,

<sup>64</sup> Ibid f. 6.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid f. 17.

<sup>66</sup> They have been thus attributed in the family. Newton married Margaret's younger sister, Ann, in 1822, and appears to have been a friend of the family for some time before that event.

then his successor, Frederick Murgatroyd, took over.<sup>67</sup> The fact that White held on to this job for so long seems to point to a cautiousness in his character somewhat at odds with contemporary descriptions of his exuberant temperament. He was certainly doing very well for himself now, for by 1818, if not earlier, he had acquired a house in fashionable Burton Crescent, Bloomsbury, and was employing several servants. Burton Crescent was a luxurious new crescent built in the early 1800s by James Burton (1761-1837), the architect responsible for redeveloping much of Bloomsbury at this period. (Burton Crescent was later renamed Cartwright Gardens after the residence there, between 1820 and 1824, of the radical politician Major John Cartwright; another distinguished resident, in the following decade, was Sir Rowland Hill.) The crescent is largely unspoilt today, though much of it has been converted into hotels, and a visit still conveys some idea of the Georgian elegance that ‘gentleman’ White had been able to aspire to with one of the first fortunes made through advertising. By this time, too, it can be assumed that he had inaugurated the annual feasts for London’s sweeps that Lamb affectionately describes in ‘The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers’. I have discovered no record of when these were commenced, but as described by Lamb they were surely beyond the financial resources of a modestly-paid clerk and must be a product of White’s later prosperity. Leigh Hunt noted that White’s ‘merry anniversary meal[s] of sausages’ ‘followed up’ (my emphasis) Elizabeth Montagu’s Mayday feasts for London’s sweeps,<sup>68</sup> and as Montagu died in 1800, this can be taken as a *terminus a quo* for White’s events. Gutch, who had known White since the 1790s, recalled being present ‘at two of the Sausage feasts’, a possible suggestion that there had not been too many of them.<sup>69</sup> The ‘Sausage feasts’ took place at Smithfield, close to Christ’s Hospital, and thus reflect White’s continuing commitment to the part of London where he had spent much of his life. His ability to sympathise with, and socialise with, the unfortunates at the bottom of society is clear.

As suggested already, there was another side to White, one which was perhaps not readily apparent, even to Lamb. His one surviving business letter, which may well have been preserved because of its reference to an exceptional event in the early days of ‘White’s’, reveals the tough-minded businessman. It is addressed to James Savage at Ilchester Gaol. Savage (1767-1845), who is included in *DNB*, had been the proprietor of the *Taunton and Bridgewater Journal and Western Advertiser*, a weekly newspaper which had commenced on 30 March 1811 and ceased publication by December 1816.<sup>70</sup> Very few copies of this paper have survived, unfortunately, but those that do advertise that it was ‘regularly filed at . . . White’s, 33, Fleet-street, London, where Orders and Advertisements are received’. The Ilchester Gaol Debtors Register reveals that Savage owed White £100; the warrant for his arrest was dated 17 June 1817 and he was received at the Gaol on 21 June.<sup>71</sup> It was in this context that the following was written:

Fleet St.  
3 Sept. 1817

<sup>67</sup> Guildhall Library MS 12823/9, p. 205.

<sup>68</sup> ‘New May-day and Old May-day’ in *Leigh Hunt’s Literary Criticism*, ed. Lawrence Huston Houtchens and Carolyn Washburn Houtchens (New York and London, 1956), 215-229, p. 218.

<sup>69</sup> *Falstaff’s Letters* xx.

<sup>70</sup> L. E. J. Brooke, *Somerset Newspapers 1725-1960* (privately printed, 1960), 69.

<sup>71</sup> Somerset Record Office Q/AGi 17/2, p. 110.

Sir

There are eight proprietors in & about Taunton, whose names are now before me, of the late journal—you must therefore excuse my declining to put the smallest faith in the *Stamp Office Evidence* the nature of which I know of old—

I am sorry to keep you thus in confinement but my entire conviction of your want of candour in this business precludes me from the exertion of any lenity & I now tell you that whatever expence it may put me to I will face you at the sessions when you apply for your discharge & see whether the Oath there administered will not make you a little more communicative.

I am Sir  
Yrs &c  
J White<sup>72</sup>

English law protected debtors if they could convince a court that they had been fully cooperative in revealing the extent of their liabilities and assets. The issue here seems to have been that White believed Savage to have effectively disguised assets by withholding information about the number of proprietors potentially liable for debts incurred by the *Taunton and Bridgewater Journal*. The Gaol Register records that Savage was discharged ‘By Insolvency Act, 5 November 1817’, meaning that if White were a sole or principal creditor he had accepted by then that Savage was unable to pay his debt. Whether White managed otherwise to recover his £100 is unclear.<sup>73</sup>

There is only one surviving glimpse of White as a husband and father, but it is, fortunately, a vivid one. It takes the form of a letter White wrote to his wife when she was briefly absent from home, staying with friends. The letter is not dated, but from internal evidence it can be dated to about 1818 with some confidence. The location of the original, if it still exists, is unknown. Gilbert White’s granddaughter has a copy made by one of Robert Faulder White’s children, and this copy has the marginal note: ‘Letter in possession of L. H. from my grandfather White to my grandmother mentioning Aunt Salkeld & Papa’. The ‘Aunt Salkeld’ here referred to is White’s eldest daughter, Mary. Looking at the family tree, ‘L. H.’ is likely to be Lucy Helen White, née Blatch (1853-1923), who married Arthur Robert White (1854-1922) in 1880: Arthur Robert was the son and heir of Robert Faulder, and the father of Gilbert White. The letter reads as follows:

Burton Crescent  
Thursday evening

My dearest Love

These are to inform you that in defiance of your prognostics about the uncleanly swelling of the Venison, we have just had a jury sitting upon it, & the pannel

<sup>72</sup> History of Advertising Trust MS 4/2/2.

<sup>73</sup> On 13 November Savage placed an advertisement in the *Taunton Courier, and Western Advertiser*:

J. SAVAGE

TAKES the earliest opportunity of offering his respectful and grateful thanks to his numerous subscribers in Taunton and its Vicinity, and the Public in General, for the many favours conferred on him and his family, during the late peculiar circumstances in which he was unfortunately involved . . . .

[sic] pronounces it keepable till Wednesday next—The frost has set in again threateningly[?], & God willing I shall send Molly [Mary] & little Robin [Robert] with this. Take the following anecdote of Molly – As I sat at breakfast yesterday, the morning after your departure, she gravely drew her chair to your side of the table and sat with her hands before her—after an interval, some of M<sup>r</sup> Hannam’s[?] people making a rumbling noise with stoking the fire she turned her head alarmingly round— “Didn’t you hear that noise, *White*, what could it be”? I had scarce recovered from my surprise when she added—“Would not you like a little Ham with your Tea, *White*”? In short, my Dear, I bid you prepare to have the palm of supremacy in the house disputed on your return—I suspect, too, that she has been playing your poor Mama a bitter trick—for I gather from her own confession that she removed a chair on a late visit & that “Grandmama came all down on the carpet” and said she was a very naughty child—Now this was an unchristianlike enormity[?], since *we youth* are enjoined to uphold & cherish age instead of encouraging its backslidings—Apropos, my dear, of your own complaint—Milton designates the malady at which you are so alarmed, a

“Divine oblivion of low-thoughted Care”<sup>74</sup>

I can at any time induce a fit of it upon myself; but then it costs at least two bottles of old port, besides bitters & *Max*.<sup>75</sup>

Robin & I begin to wish you at home again—and we argue the Case thus: Robin says the Maids are up sooner, when Mama is snug below, & then his milk has not time to cream—Papa says the best restorative for deranged nerves is the speechless prattle of such a fellow as Robin, relieved by the seasonable converse of an old friend like Harriet Gattie [? or Gatlie]<sup>76</sup>—*argal*, as the grave-digger in Hamlet says, bring Miss Gattie home with you.

I will not fail to meet you in Argyle St.,<sup>77</sup> should the elements be congenial—At all events we meet in Brompton Row.<sup>78</sup>

Ever, my dearest Love, your affectionate Husband

J. White

The letter gives an attractive picture of White’s vibrant, irrepressibly humorous personality, and suggests that his children had inherited his sense of fun—a conclusion supported by a letter the young Robert Faulder wrote his step-father in the late 1820s, which also survives in the family collection. The house at Burton Crescent appears to have been a happy, fun-filled home.

White’s days of drinking ‘nips of Burton ale’ were now long behind him. His reference in the above letter to ‘two bottles of old port’ alludes to his gentlemanly pastime of putting together an impressive wine cellar. This was auctioned off soon after his death, by desire of his wife, and was then described as ‘A Small Cellar of remarkably fine flavoured Wines, consisting of 150 dozens of Port Wine, 7, 4, and 3 years in bottle; 23 dozens of East India Madeira, 49 dozens of excellent Sherry, and about 18 dozens of Plasket’s Claret and Sauterne, and a small quantity of

<sup>74</sup> Not Milton but Pope, *Eloisa to Abelard* l. 298. White probably confused this with Milton’s ‘low-thoughted care’ in *Comus* l. 6.

<sup>75</sup> Gin (*OED*).

<sup>76</sup> A note added in the margin explains ‘Mrs. Masson’.

<sup>77</sup> A note added in the margin explains ‘Newtons’. That is, it would appear, the house of Sir William John Newton.

<sup>78</sup> A note added in the margin explains ‘Gatties’ [? or ‘Gatlies’].

very fine and old Antigua rum and other spirits.<sup>79</sup> It clearly represented a considerable financial investment.

It is difficult to know how seriously, if at all, we should read White's reference to 'deranged nerves' in the letter of c. 1818, or Lamb's much earlier reference to White's going into the country 'to recruit his strength', or Gutch's account of White's health being 'injured . . . for some days' after the 'hired actors' made him jump the rope. Taken together they may suggest that White did not enjoy very robust health. What is certain is that on 13 March 1820 he died at his home, of unknown causes, at just forty-five years of age. It was 'after a short illness', according to *The Times* of the following day. White was buried in Paddington churchyard. His passing created hardly a ripple in the larger world, and even his business activities continued without interruption. But there are surely few advertising men who can boast of being memorialised by three of the leading literary men of their day. Later in the year, in his essay 'On the Conversation of Authors', Hazlitt remembered 'Jem White, the author of Falstaff's Letters, who the other day left this dull world to go in search of more kindred spirits, "turning like the latter end of a lover's lute"'.<sup>80</sup> The quotation is appropriately taken from the description of Slender's death in *Falstaff's Letters*, a passage which was a favourite of Lamb's. The following year Leigh Hunt paid his tribute: 'many who knew nothing of him [White] as a writer, will recollect being familiar with his name in the unromantic title of an Agent for Newspapers. Not the least indeed of his Shakespearian qualities, was an indifference to fame. He was also, like his great inspirer, a gentleman.'<sup>81</sup> And finally, in 1822, after detailing the sausage feasts, Lamb commemorated his old friend with one of the most touching epitaphs ever composed: 'He carried away with him half the fun of the world when he died—of my world at least'.<sup>82</sup> In 1833, close to his own death, Lamb's thoughts were still turning to the man whose 'hearty joyous humour' had done much to enrich his life: 'Jem White! [. . .] there never was his like! We shall never see such days as those in which Jem flourished!'

White left some £12,000 and a thriving advertising agency to his widow.<sup>83</sup> Margaret appears to have decided, quite quickly, that she wanted to keep the business going. Family tradition remembers her as a strong woman. She installed one of her relatives, a Faulder, as a temporary manager.<sup>84</sup> That, apparently, did not prove satisfactory, and James Buller, who was later influential in the formation of the Newspaper Society, took over instead. On 5 August 1822 Margaret married Richard Barker of 14 Fitzroy Square, London,<sup>85</sup> and he ran the business, to which he gave his own name. With Barker she had a further five children. In 1831 Robert Faulder White joined Barker, and the business became known as 'Barker & White'. In 1850 Barker retired, and the firm took the name of 'R.F. White'. Barker died in 1856, Margaret in 1864.

This article can reasonably conclude with a brief account of the subsequent history of White's advertising agency, which, literary considerations apart, was his principal legacy to the

<sup>79</sup> *The Times* 31 May 1820, p. 4.

<sup>80</sup> *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. Duncan Wu, 9 vols. (London, 1998), viii. 33.

<sup>81</sup> *Indicator* ii. 122.

<sup>82</sup> *Works* ii. 114.

<sup>83</sup> Public Record Office PROB 6/196 f. 230.

<sup>84</sup> Information about the various changes of management and name of White's company comes mainly from History of Advertising Trust MS RFW 2/2/1, which I assume was prepared by Gilbert White. Other documents in the archive support and in some cases enlarge this potted history.

<sup>85</sup> International Genealogical Index.

world. In 1871 Robert was joined by his son, the previously mentioned Arthur Robert White, and the business acquired its enduring name of 'R.F. White and Son'. As late as the turn of the century it was still a very small firm, employing just four staff.<sup>86</sup> In 1928 it made a well publicised move from its 'century-old home' at 33 Fleet Street to new offices at Chronicle House, 72-78 Fleet Street, and the following year became a limited company. Gilbert White, the fourth generation of Whites to work in advertising, had joined in 1900, and he and T. F. 'Tommy' Clarke were the company's directors from 1929. Gilbert White's death in 1962 ended the family connection with the business, and in 1971 R.F. White & Son was bought out by Lopex PLC. The old company was listed in the phonebook as late as June 1971, but for the last time.<sup>87</sup> Something of the prestige of 'White's' is reflected in the fact that when Lopex subsequently merged R.F. White and Son with similar operations to form a new company, they called it Whites Recruitment Limited.<sup>88</sup> Another company that took the old name was Whites Bull Holmes Limited, which became WBH Advertising Limited in 1987. Whites Recruitment was dissolved on 7 July 1992 and WBH Advertising followed on 1 March 1994, at which point it would appear that any visible connection of James White with the modern advertising world finally vanished.

In the 1900s White's advertising company liked to draw attention to its founder's connection with Charles Lamb. Company stationary featured a letterhead incorporating a small likeness of White, taken from the portrait reproduced here, and under it the legend "*My pleasant friend, Jem White.*" – / Charles Lamb'.

*Doshisha University, Kyoto*

<sup>86</sup> History of Advertising Trust MS RFW 3/2/-.

<sup>87</sup> I am indebted to Ms Barbara Griffiths, British Telecom archivist, for this information.

<sup>88</sup> The information here is from Mr B.A. Warman, a former director of Lopex, and from the Companies House website ([www.companieshouse.gov.uk](http://www.companieshouse.gov.uk)).

## ‘Only What Might Have Been’: Lamb and Illusion

By MICHAEL O’NEILL

AT THE CLIMAX OF ‘DREAM-CHILDREN; A REVERIE’, Lamb opens an imaginative door into this, probably the most affecting transformation in the work of a writer much occupied by shifts of scene:

. . . – when suddenly, turning to Alice, the soul of the first Alice looked out at her eyes with such a reality of re-presentation, that I became in doubt which of them stood there before me, or whose that bright hair was; and while I stood gazing, both the children gradually grew fainter to my view, receding and still receding till nothing at last but two mournful features were seen in the uttermost distance, which, without speech, strangely impressed upon me the effects of speech; “We are not of Alice, nor of thee, nor are we children at all. The children of Alice call Bartrum father. We are nothing; less than nothing, and dreams. We are only what might have been and must wait upon the tedious shores of Lethe millions of ages before we have existence, and a name” – and immediately awaking, I found myself quietly seated in my bachelor arm-chair, where I had quietly fallen asleep, with the faithful Bridget unchanged by my side – but John L. (or James Elia) was gone for ever.<sup>1</sup>

As the phrases unfurl, they conduct us from an artful simulation of fond nostalgia into something altogether more compelling. There is a Virgilian note struck here, as Jonathan Bate has pointed out.<sup>2</sup> Bate detects an allusion to the *Aeneid* Book VI, lines. 748ff in the reference to Lethe. Virgil’s account of reincarnated souls resonates through the words ascribed to the dream-children: ‘We are only what might have been, and must wait upon the tedious shores of Lethe millions of ages before we have existence, and a name’. In Dryden’s translation of the *Aeneid* the relevant lines read:

But, when a thousand rolling years are past  
 (So long their punishments and penance last)  
 Whole droves of minds are by the driving god  
 Compelled to drink the deep Lethaeian flood;  
 In large forgetful draughts to steep the cares  
 Of their past labours, and their irksome years;  
 That, unremembering of its former pain,  
 The soul may suffer mortal flesh again.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Charles Lamb, *Elia 1823*, intro. Jonathan Wordsworth (Oxford: Woodstock, 1991) 237. Where possible, this edition, referred to hereafter as ‘Woodstock’, is used for quotations from Lamb’s essays. Subsequent references are given parenthetically in the main body of the essay.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Lamb, *Elia and the Last Essays of Elia*, ed. with intro. Jonathan Bate (Oxford, Oxford UP, 1987) 337 (second note to p. 118); hereafter this edition is referred to as ‘Bate’.

<sup>3</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. John Dryden, intro. James Marwood (Ware: Wordsworth, 1997).

Dryden's 'unremembering', not quite the same thing as 'forgetting', deftly suggests the unravelling of memory necessary for reincarnation. The process implied by the word has analogies with the simultaneous process of dissolution and manifestation in the extract from Lamb. In the essay, supposedly 'real' children dissolve, while 'dream-children' manifest themselves as voices yet to materialise. Their reality belongs to a dimension that is endlessly virtual. If Virgil is being recollected, it is with a chilling variation; the dream-children 'must wait upon the tedious shores of Lethe millions of ages', not a 'thousand years', as in Dryden and Virgil. Nor do they need to unremember 'former pain'; they are, instead, it would seem, projections of the narrator's unspoken pain at loss for what he never possessed. Behind the reference made by the dream-children to 'existence, and a name' is a famous passage in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare's Theseus discusses the operations of poetry thus: 'And as imagination bodies forth / The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen / Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name' (5.1.14-17).<sup>4</sup> Lamb's genius is to bestow on nothings and dreams a kind of existence, the existence that makes them akin to Virgil's dead. In fact, Lamb's allusion to Virgil recalls, too, another river of the underworld, Acheron, on whose shore in Book VI the dead 'press for passage, with extended hands' (Dryden's translation, line 432).

When you first read 'Dream-Children', it is the frisson of the denouement's turn and deepening that arrests. The imagining into existence of life that never happened pervades literature and is, arguably, at work in Cleopatra's panegyric memories of Antony after his death. But few works have to such a marked degree the capacity possessed by 'Dream-Children' to twist in and out of the awareness that what is presented is wholly imagined. In this respect, the essay takes one forward to the calm, desolate stanzas of Mark Strand's 'My Son', a poem 'after Carlos Drummond de Andrade', where the speaker talks of and with the son he 'never had' and hears him answer 'with a cold breath':

You never noticed  
though I called

and called  
and keep on calling  
from a place  
beyond,

beyond love,  
where nothing,  
everything,  
wants to be born.<sup>5</sup>

Although this intertextual dream-child parented by Lamb's essay may differ in genre and style, its breath-starved, ghost-voiced lines also shiver with ambivalence about the virtual life they

<sup>4</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, gen. eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, intro. Stanley Wells (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Mark Strand, *Selected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 2002).

broach, nowhere more so than in the appositional glide from ‘nothing’ to ‘everything’. To set the poem, in its melancholy, understated lyricism, against ‘Dream-Children’ is to be reminded how remarkable the mixture of effects in Lamb’s ending is. This mixture begins, after the dash at the start of the quotation, where the narrator has himself ‘suddenly turning to Alice’ in such a way that ‘the soul of the first Alice looked out at her eyes with a such a reality of re-presentment, that I became in doubt which of them stood before me, or whose that bright hair was’. In this, the first step in Lamb’s spectral closing dance, the child (still real) gives way to her supposed ‘pretty dead mother’ with ‘a reality of re-presentment’. That phrase haunts; it suggests, and it ramifies. The ‘reality of re-presentment’ is the domain crossed by Lamb as he moves from ‘faithful realism’, in Eugene O’Neill’s phrase, to a vision that calls reality and realism into question.<sup>6</sup> Such ‘reality of re-presentment’ involves the discovery, in the act of re-presenting, that writing itself is a means of creation.

This recognition passes into one long ‘while’, one strange take of imaginative dissolution and re-presentment: ‘and while I stood gazing, both the children gradually grew fainter to my view, receding and still receding till nothing at last but two mournful features were seen in the uttermost distance, which, without speech, strangely impressed upon me the effects of speech’. The endlessly receding figures annul and assert their reality. There is an uncanny presence about their ‘mournful features’, even as we experience the imminent disappearance of those features. The figures have an existence whose origins are laid bare in ‘mournful’. The writing reveals, in ‘mournful’, a pressure of latent grieving for what does not exist, which, as in some film by Ingmar Bergman, *Cries and Whispers*, say, creates the very thing whose existence is denied. Lamb then moves into speech which is a cancellation of the possibility of speech. The dream-children first bring the work’s sub-text into the open, the speaker’s thwarted longing for domestic happiness. Ghostly though they may be, the dream-children are sharp enough to speak of a reality that the speaker cannot bring himself to face: ‘The children of Alice call Bartrum father’. The dream-children go on to declare themselves, in an effect of enormous pathos, not to be, to be ‘nothing; less than nothing, and dreams’: a formulation which makes them dreams and less than dreams. I have used the word ‘uncanny’, and it may be that Freud’s meditation on the production of the uncanny can help us with this ending. The uncanny is precisely that sensation of something awry in the middle of what should be comforting, of the homely transformed into its unhomely double. The children who should comfort Elia speak to him of their non-existence. As Freud points out, ‘*there are many more means of creating uncanny effects in fiction than there are in real life*’. He goes on to point out the ‘*peculiarly directive power*’ of the storyteller over his audience (italics in the original). A source of the tale’s uncanniness is how Elia splits into ‘directive’ storyteller, on the one hand, and victim of his own spectral imaginings, on the other.<sup>7</sup> To adapt a half-line from Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life*, he suffers what he writes.

When I first read ‘Dream-Children’ (in, as it happens, a pub in North Oxford, waiting for friends), I recall being overwhelmed by Lamb’s ‘reality of re-presentment’; the surrounding scene of laughter and talk itself became ‘less than nothing, and dreams’. I was responding to the brief revelation of a power one does not normally associate with Lamb: a power close to sublimity. Irony one safely grants him, that dangerous possession in which he delights; but

<sup>6</sup> Eugene O’Neill, *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (London: Hern, 1991) 95.

<sup>7</sup> ‘The “Uncanny”’ (1919), in Sigmund Freud, *Art and Literature: Jensen’s ‘Godiva’, Leonardo Da Vinci and Other Works*, ed. Albert Dickson, Pelican Freud Library, vol. 14 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) 373, 375.

sublimity one feels he left to those intrepid Lake poets in their mountain fastnesses. But some of Lamb's finest moments involve an uncovering of mental or imaginative power, which is one aspect of Romantic sublimity. As he puts it, in the funny yet rapturously serious letter to Wordsworth of 30 January 1801, where he praises 'the motley Strand' above the ironically capitalised 'Beauties of Nature', 'the Mind will make friends of any thing'. This inclination to befriend may, for Lamb, lead towards what he calls 'local attachments'.<sup>8</sup> It also exhibits itself in the mind's reluctance to forego its own experiences, all those 'Surmises, guesses, misgivings, half-intuitions, semi-consciousnesses, partial illuminations, dim instincts, embryo conceptions' of which - to the discomfort of the systematising mind - he speaks in 'Imperfect Sympathies' (Woodstock 137).

An effect not dissimilar to that achieved by the end of 'Dream-Children' occurs at the close of 'The South-Sea House'. Here, after the detailed, mock-meticulous evoking of the various 'clerks', Lamb says: 'But is time to close - night's wheels are rattling fast over me - it is proper to have done with this solemn mockery' (Woodstock 14). This 'solemn mockery' is akin in the workings of its self-awareness to the 'reality of re-presentment' of which Lamb speaks at the end of 'Dream-Children'. In 'The South-Sea House', Lamb has been 'mocking "the dusty dead"'. (Woodstock 11) in the old-fashioned sense of imitating them; he implies, too, that he has been whiling away his time, and even his life, in such mockery, with that conceit (one in which Marvell's winged chariot and Faustus' Ovidian horses meet) of night's wheels rattling over him. He stages, as it were, a mock death-bed repentance, a confession of his imaginative crimes: 'Reader, what if I have been playing with thee all this while - peradventure the very *names*, which I have summoned up before thee, are fantastic - insubstantial - like Henry Pimpernel, and old John Naps of Greece' (Woodstock 14). Again, Shakespeare emerges as an imaginative precursor, Lamb alluding to the induction at the head of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Lamb plays at being a summoner of 'insubstantial' fantasy; at the same time, the emphasis on names suggests the creator's power. A sober final paragraph commands us to 'be satisfied that something answering to them has had a being. Their importance is from the past' (Woodstock 14): these words rebut the idea that the figures evoked are 'insubstantial'. But Lamb has had his reader guessing about and reflecting on the nature of illusion.

The ending of 'Dream-Children' may also seem to haul itself out of too harrowing an abyss. Lamb sets the experience in the framework of the dream or reverie from which he is, in the end, safely detached: 'and immediately awaking, I found myself quietly seated in my bachelor arm-chair, where I had fallen asleep, with the faithful Bridget unchanged by my side - but John L. (or James Elia) was gone for ever'. I say 'safely detached', having in mind the way 'quietly seated' turns its back on the unquiet that has just been stirred up, and reassures the reader that Elia has human companionship; it is good to know that the childless man has 'the faithful Bridget unchanged by my side', where 'unchanged' speaks volumes of the changes that can be wrought by time. But the bracketed '(James Elia)' moves in a different direction, implying that the reverie has its roots in biographical truth. To the degree that the reverie was merely fictive, we might find comfort; but the last twist says that 'John L.' is standing in for a real person (the writer's brother). Losses of two kinds, then, are experienced at the close: the loss of the dream-children

<sup>8</sup> *Charles Lamb and Elia*, ed. with intro. and notes J. E. Morpurgo (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993) 161; hereafter *Charles Lamb and Elia*.

who never were; the loss, too, of a man who definitely (in the story's understanding of definiteness) did exist. Biography and imagining twine round one another, as so often in Lamb.

Taking issue with the view that Elia represents a 'separate fictional character', Jonathan Wordsworth remarks that 'The truth is simpler and more elegant. Lamb marketed himself as a fiction [. . .], presenting as fiction experiences and opinions that in no important way deviate from his own'. But as he goes on to argue, this did not 'prevent Lamb's playing games with his public and his double self'.<sup>9</sup> That 'double self' emerges in the closing sentences, but it has been addressed, almost accusingly, by the dream-children, whose unspoken speech is heard by Elia in the following way: 'We are not of Alice, nor of thee, nor are we children at all. The children of Alice called Bartrum father'. That quasi-Biblical last sentence divorces the dream-children from any known genealogy, and implies, too, the biographical reality of Alice. The surname 'Bartrum' falls with an emphasis of proof, cruelly exposing the preceding paragraphs as make-believe fantasy conjured up out of compensating desire. The dream-children say, then, 'We do not exist, but Alice certainly did; she never had any children by you; the thought that she did was your hopeless attempt to lay claim to an experience you've never known'. Moreover, the very syntax and punctuation imply a lingering of reverie into waking consciousness: 'we must wait upon the tedious shores of Lethe millions of ages before we have existence, and a name - and immediately awaking, I found myself . . .'. It is as though, through some non-rational transition marked by the dash, the potential, orphaned dream-children have actualised themselves as Lamb and his sister, or as doubles for them as well as for the children whom Elia never had.

Once the shock of the ending has registered, one realises that it is produced by an effect deeper than that merely of surprise. Indeed, I would venture to say that the outcome of the ending has been known about, at some subliminal level, all through the 'story'. I emphasise 'story', as does the writing: 'Children', we are told at the outset, 'love to listen to stories about their elders, when *they* were children' (Woodstock 230); and soon we are engulfed, not merely in a story, but in the process of story-telling. It is interesting, in this respect, that the essay's sub-title 'A Reverie' appears to do the very thing that Lamb objected to vehemently and wittily in discovering that Coleridge had attached 'A Poet's Reverie' to the title of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. 'I am sorry', writes Lamb to Wordsworth 'that Coleridge has christened his Ancient Marinere "a poet's Reverie" - it is as bad as Bottom the Weaver's declaration that he is not a Lion but only the scenical representation of a Lion. What new idea is gained by this Title, but one subversive of all credit, which the tale should force upon us, of its truth?'<sup>10</sup> The Bottom-like clumsiness of Coleridge's sub-title jars on Lamb, 'totally possessed', as he had been, by the poem 'for many days'.<sup>11</sup> To be told he was only reading a 'scenical representation' is a maladroit deconstruction of illusion. Yet, in 'Dream-Children', he sets himself the challenge of proving that such a sub-title can be used without being 'subversive of all credit', or without subverting such credit in a damaging fashion. In the same letter to Wordsworth, he criticises the latter for being over-didactic in those sections of 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' devoted to conveying 'instructions' and comments: 'they don't slide into the mind of the reader, while he is imagining no such matter'. In the best fictions, he continues,

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Wordsworth, second page of Introduction to Woodstock facsimile edition (see footnote 1).

<sup>10</sup> *Charles Lamb and Elia* 159.

<sup>11</sup> *Charles Lamb and Elia* 159.

‘There is implied an unwritten compact between Author and reader’.<sup>12</sup> This ‘unwritten compact’, for Lamb, may include consciousness of being involved in imaginative experience; but there is, for him, a right and a wrong way of creating such consciousness. As metafactively aware as Calvino or Borges, he does not suppose that imaginative experience is innocent or naive, and yet (without thrusting his hands in his breeches pockets) he does associate it with feeling and sympathy. It is impressive, for example, as he points out in the same letter, that Wordsworth is able to articulate a ‘delicate and curious feeling in the wish for the Cumberland Beggar, that he may have about him the melody of Birds, altho’ he hear them not’. As a result of this curious delicacy, ‘the mind knowingly passes a fiction upon herself, first substituting her own feelings for the Beggar’s, and, in the same breath detecting the fallacy, will not part with the wish’.<sup>13</sup> Jane Aaron might point to that gendering of the mind in support of her view that Lamb imagines the ‘individual subject’ as ‘made up of both masculine and feminine elements’, capable of a non-assertive responsiveness.<sup>14</sup> But Lamb’s words, ‘the mind knowingly passes a fiction upon herself’, bring one close to the way in which ‘Dream-Children’ deals with illusion. We are told from the start, in the sub-title and, indeed, the title, that the essay is going to treat of imaginative, illusory things, representations not realities. It is less that Lamb plays at being Bottom than that he exercises fairness to his reader, obeying that ‘unwritten compact’ of which he writes to Wordsworth. Writer and reader are about to descend into a river of reverie, knowing that it is a reverie, but not knowing how it will be one. The authorial and readerly selves who emerge from it will be changed.

‘Children love to listen to stories’: Lamb’s ‘once upon a time’ opening is already instinct with adult awareness. Further consciousness of consciousness ‘slides’, to borrow the verb that Lamb uses in his letter to Wordsworth, into our minds straightaway, when we are told that children love ‘to stretch their imagination’. Involuntarily we do likewise. Lamb spins a yarn about telling a story (‘It was in this spirit that my little ones crept about me the other evening’). The sentence takes us into corridors of narrative. The children’s ‘great-grandmother Field’ (Woodstock 230)

. . . lived in a great house in Norfolk (a hundred times bigger than that in which they and papa lived) which had been the scene - so at least it was generally believed in that part of the country - of the tragic incidents which they had lately become familiar with from the ballad of the Children in the Wood. Certain it is that the whole story of the children and their cruel uncle was to be seen fairly carved out in wood upon the chimney-piece of the great hall, the whole story down to the Robin Redbreasts, till a foolish rich person pulled it down to set up a marble one of modern invention in its stead, with no story upon it. (Woodstock 230-1).

In an illuminating comment on the line ‘What, has this thing appeared again tonight?’ spoken by Marcellus in the opening scene of *Hamlet* (line 19), Coleridge remarks that ‘Even the word “again” has its *credibilizing* effect’, and comparable effects of ‘credibilizing’ emerge from the

<sup>12</sup> *Charles Lamb and Elia* 159.

<sup>13</sup> *Charles Lamb and Elia* 159.

<sup>14</sup> Jane Aaron, *A Double Singleness: Gender and the Writings of Charles and Mary Lamb* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) 187.

story within a story here.<sup>15</sup> We forget that the whole essay is a story, as the storyteller implies the reality of his life and that of his listeners by contrasting this reality with the literary nature of the 'ballad of the Children of the Wood'. And yet, that ballad, too, it is suggested, may have its roots in grim reality. At any rate, it is 'Certain' (a word whose effect is to credibilise) 'that the whole story of the children and their cruel uncle was to be seen fairly carved in wood'. That a story appears in a medium of representation confirms the reality of the storyteller's world. The reader relies on him to guide us through what begins to turn into a labyrinth. A world without 'story' is destitute, the writing continually implies, cut off from history and feeling; it is a scene of destruction, as when the 'foolish rich person pulled down' the 'chimney-piece' 'to set up a marble one of modern invention in its stead, with no story upon it'.

Story exorcises even as it alerts to danger. That, Lamb seems to say, is part of our need for it. The 'children and their cruel uncle' enter the essay as counterparts to the narrator and his loving attitude towards his supposed children. In fact, his story is serving to introduce these children to the rigours of experience. Their responses mime their efforts to behave in appropriately adult ways: 'Here Alice put out one of her dear mother's looks, too tender to be called upbraiding' is one example; another is John's smiling response to the narrator's mockery of the new owner's attitude to the great house, stripping it bare of its 'old ornaments' and carrying them off to 'the owner's other house, where they were set up, and looked as awkward as if some one were to carry away the old tombs they had seen lately at the Abbey, and stick them up in Lady C.'s tawdry gilt drawing-room' (Woodstock 231). One might notice how 'story' serves as a form of revenge for a sense of social inferiority. To speak of 'the owner' is mockingly to depersonalise, and to allow, furthermore 'great-grandmother Field' to be seen as the true genius of the place.

Lamb is writing about story in the process of telling a story. No essay he wrote uses indirect speech so consistently: 'Then I went on to say'; 'And then I told how' (Woodstock 231); 'Then I told what'; 'Then I told how' (Woodstock 232, 233); 'Then in somewhat a more heightened tone, I told how' (Woodstock 234). Indirect speech alerts us to the storyteller's role, as do the sentence shapes, which increase in length and conform themselves to the way someone recalling a story they have told would tell someone else of this story. To get the full effect of this, one needs to quote at length, as in the account of the great-grandmother:

Then I told what a tall, upright, graceful person their great-grandmother Field once was; and how in her youth she was esteemed the best dancer - here Alice's little right foot played an involuntary movement, till, upon my looking grave, it desisted - the best dancer, I was saying, in the country, till a cruel disease, called a cancer, came, and bowed her down with pain; but it could never bend her good spirits, or make them stoop, but they were still upright, because she was so good and religious. Then I told how she was used to sleep by herself in a lone chamber of the great lone house; and how she believed that an apparition of two infants was to be seen at midnight gliding up and down the great staircase where she slept, but she said "those innocents would do her no harm" and how frightened I used to be, though in those days I had my maid to sleep with me, because I was never half so good or religious as she - and yet I never saw the infants. Here John

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures and Notes on Shakspeare and Other English Poets*, ed. T. Ashe (London: George Bell and Sons, 1897) 349.

expanded all his eye-brows and tried to look courageous. Then I told how good she was to all her grand-children, having us to the great-house in the holydays, where I in particular used to spend many hours by myself in gazing upon the old busts of the Twelve Caesars, that had been Emperors of Rome, till the old marble heads would seem to live again, or I to be turned into marble with them . . .' (Woodstock 232-3).

The use of 'Then I told' ceases to be formulaic, but it involves the reader in a deepening trance of absorption. Indeed, the process of narration grows elegiac. Elegy communicates through the flow of the syntax, through the emphasis created by the repetition of 'great', and even through the old-fashioned spelling of 'holidays' as 'holydays'. The writing shapes a sense that Elia is always recovering what is always lost, and is lost again, in the act of recovery. So, great-grandmother Field's dancing prowess is recalled, and its waning relived in the first sentence, pointed up by the 'cruel' rhyme between 'best dancer' and 'a cruel disease called a cancer'. 'Little Alice's' 'involuntary movement' of her foot pays tribute to her ancestor's dancing ability and suggests, however indirectly, the inevitable repetition from generation to generation of youth passing into age. The next sentence turns the screw and brings us close to the story's heart, as it records great-grandmother Field's belief that 'an apparition of two infants was to be seen at midnight gliding up and down the great staircase where she slept', before we break into her direct, if reported speech: 'but she said "those innocents would do her no harm"'. Those two infants recall the infants mentioned in the ballad, though the use of 'infants' rather than 'children' brings in the notion of speech or speechlessness, and anticipates the emergence of the dream-children at the end of the story. Intriguingly, they serve, these gliding, ghostly infants, as a half-way house between real children and dream-children. They are, for all their spookiness, conventional enough in their spookiness to belong comfortably within a 'story'. Intriguing, too, is the way the old lady's speech is, as said, both direct but reported, as in the words 'those innocents would do her no harm'. One feels less sure that she said these words than that it seems appropriate for the narrator so to record them for the benefit of children in need of comfort. The fact he 'never saw the infants' again prepares us, by contrast, for the shock of the essay's conclusion, and the visionary seeing that is recorded there. The fascination with 'marble' at the end of the quoted passage also touches on the relationship between life and its 'mockery' in a breathless medium, a relationship at the heart of the essay.

A second passage that requires quotation for its full effect (though it is too long to reproduce here) is that beginning 'Then in somewhat more heightened tone' (Woodstock 234) and ending 'the doctor took off his limb' (Woodstock 236). Via Milton's 'somewhat loudly sweep the string' in *Lycidas*, Virgil enters the essay, here by way of an echo of the opening of his fourth Eclogue, '*paulo maiora canamus*' (let us sing a somewhat loftier strain).<sup>16</sup> The long, sweeping sentence is the vehicle for mixed emotions. Throughout, the reader hears as an undernote the wish to pay tribute, indeed to express grief. One notices here that the auditors, while always implied, drop away (there are no parentheses), though they reappear in the following sentence ('Here the children fell a crying', Woodstock 236). Elia's cadences are pitched at a childish audience, with their endless 'ands', and yet the narrative gaze turns inwards, not upon the story's effect, but

<sup>16</sup> *Lycidas*, line 17, quoted from *John Milton*, Oxford Authors, eds. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991). See the same edition, p. 754, for an explanation of the Virgilian allusion.

upon the capacity for self-revelation, even self-discovery, that is offered by the act of telling. Such a capacity builds to a quiet crescendo in the response to the death of John L., the narrator recalling

how when he died, though he had not been dead an hour, it seemed as if he had died a great while ago, such a distance there is between life and death; and how I bore his death as I thought pretty well at first, but afterwards it haunted and haunted me; and though I did not cry or take it to heart as some do, and as I think he would have done if I had died, yet I missed him all day long, and knew not till then how much I had loved him. I missed his kindness, and I missed his crossness, and wished him to be alive again, to be quarrelling with him (for we quarrelled sometimes), rather than not have him again, and was as uneasy without him, as he their poor uncle must have been when the doctor took off his limb. (Woodstock 235-6).

The sense of the huge gulf between the living and the dead which is asserted by Elia is denied by his telling, which resurrects his brother. Elia confesses himself to be a repressed, traumatised subject, without one moment asking for the reader's pity. In the words 'but afterwards it haunted and haunted me', the repetition, by this stage, implies how solitary and muddled a business it is to be a human being with a consciousness.

Elia discovers that one is always thrown back on the mind, its attachments, its illusions; the dimension of the possible, 'what might have been', in the sense of regret for what did happen and therefore desire for what did not happen, emerges strongly. All this while, the reader is being prepared for the discovery that to be haunted by what does not exist (dream-children) is, illogically but potently, hard to extricate from the state of being haunted by someone who did exist. Both hauntings are known only through and in the act of telling, with its necessary fictionalising and reshaping of experience.

Lamb's delicate but robust awareness of the role 'Illusions' play in life is among the most bracing and rewarding things to emerge from reading him. I fancy he would approve a wise speculation in W. J. Bate's biography of Keats: meditating on what is at stake in Keats's *Lamia* (admired by Lamb), Bate writes:

In fact, 'illusion' ceases to be a very meaningful concept when we pass from a simple notion of it to the thought of the vast range of human reactions that are constantly playing against - or interpenetrating - the human experience of reality [. . .] the extent to which we live vicariously in the past, the future, or in conjecture of what is occupying the minds of others. If most of the happiness and misery of life - indeed of all of it except that determined by direct sensation, and possibly a good deal of this too - is within the imagination, then where and how do we draw the line between the 'real' in our experience and the virtual omnipresence of what we call the illusory.<sup>17</sup>

Lamb introduces further nuances and distinctions. Unsurprisingly he is drawn back over and over to the theatre, that realm where illusion has its head, and yet his response is, arguably, more

<sup>17</sup> W. J. Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1963) 549.

nimble-footed than the 'willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which', for Coleridge, 'constitutes poetic faith'.<sup>18</sup> 'On the Acting of Munden' represents the actor Joseph Munden as a kind of virtuoso wizard, able to 'throw . . . a preternatural interest over the commonest daily-life objects'. Capable of converting a 'tub of butter' into 'a Platonic idea' (Woodstock 341), Munden breathes new life into the stalest of commonplaces: 'He, and he alone, literally *makes faces*: applied to any other person, the phrase is a mere figure, denoting certain modifications of the human countenances' (Woodstock 340). Munden literalises metaphor. A glorious charlatan, who 'is not one but legion' (Woodstock 339-40), so versatile is his capacity for make-believe, he lies at the extreme end, of the spectrum half-adumbrated by Bate's account of the pervasiveness in life of illusion. Lamb loves in Munden the total commitment to illusion.

He feels quite differently about another sort of fictionalising, that involved in 'Modern Gallantry', where in one of the deadliest critiques of masculine behaviour, Lamb dismisses 'a certain obsequiousness, or deferential respect' (Woodstock 181) from men towards women as, in a suggestive phrase, 'a conventional fiction' (Woodstock 183). Elsewhere, when a metaphor discloses its emptiness, Lamb's revenge on the illusory cheat it would perpetrate is swift; so, in 'New Year's Eve', Elia declares himself 'not content to pass away "like a weaver's shuttle"'. Those metaphors solace me not, nor sweeten the unpalatable draught of mortality' (Woodstock 66). This essay clings to the real, though 'irony', that Janus-faced figure, is included in Lamb's catalogue of things he cannot bear to live without: 'Sun, and sky, and breeze, and solitary walks . . . and candle-light, and fire-side conversations, and innocent vanities, and jests and *irony itself*'. As though turning on his commerce with ghosts elsewhere, Lamb poses the Falstaffian question: 'Can a ghost laugh, or shake his gaunt sides, when you are pleasant with him?' (Woodstock 67).

On the other hand, in 'Witches, and Other Night Fears', Lamb shows himself to be more than half inclined towards sympathy with superstition. He describes how as a child he 'was dreadfully alive to nervous terrors' (Woodstock 153), and while there is humour in the hyperbole of memory, there is grave belief in the view that the forms of superstition are 'transcripts, types - the archetypes are in us, and eternal' (Woodstock 155). That said, the essay finishes in a long, complex diminuendo of self-mockery (about how 'tame and prosaic' (Woodstock 157) his dreams now are), which makes subtle assertions about the very medium (prose) which he seems to downgrade. For one thing, there is no better evocation of Coleridge's dream-inspired imagination than is offered by Lamb. Again, Barry Cornwall may have 'his tritons and his nereids gambolling before him in nocturnal visions' (Woodstock 158), but it is Lamb who plays with him, even as he subsides 'into his proper element of prose' (Woodstock 159). The essay mocks the high Romantic imagination, but it shows and shares a fascination with the workings of dream and nightmare, and gives a full sense of their connection with the ordinary, unheroic consciousness.

Two of Lamb's most significant treatments of the subject of illusion are 'Sanity of True Genius' and 'On the Tragedies of Shakespeare'. In 'Sanity of True Genius' Elia distinguishes between true genius and the 'state of dreaminess and fever imputed to the poet'. The 'true poet' 'is not possessed by his subject but has dominion over it'. Again, one notes the consciousness and control ascribed to the poet. It is a superb example of Lamb's fascination with true and false forms of imaginative activity. The capacity to create illusions that 'the waking judgment ratifies':

<sup>18</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1983) II. 6.

this is the achievement of the great poet controlling illusions so as to illuminate experience. The illustration that Lamb gives (Spenser's account of the Cave of Mammon in the *Fairie Queen*) shows his wish simultaneously to have imaginative experience, to know that it is imagined, and to enjoy with the author an appropriately 'unwritten compact'. It is among the great passages of Romantic literary criticism, delighting in the reader's ability to be 'at one moment in the cave of an old hoarder of treasures, at the next at the forge of the Cyclops, in a palace and yet in hell, all at once, with the shifting mutations of the most rambling dream, and our judgment yet all the time awake, and neither able nor willing to detect the fallacy'. We are, as we were with Wordsworth's Cumberland Beggar, hearing the bird's melody he could not hear, complicit in illusion in a way that Lamb represents as enlarging our grasp of experience rather than being merely escapist: '[N]either able nor willing to detect the fallacy', we are illusionists who respect 'that hidden sanity which still guides the poet in his widest-seeming aberrations'.

'Sanity of True Genius' emphasises the poet's 'dominion': 'He ascends the empyrean heaven, and is not intoxicated'.<sup>19</sup> 'On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to their Fitness for Stage Representation' asserts, by contrast, the reader's rights. Here Lamb is an unabashed celebrant of readerly pleasure, but he seeks, too, to protect the full imaginative power of Shakespeare's plays against the limitations imposed on them by stage representation. Unlike comedy which depends on a knowing compact between actor and audience, on what Lamb in 'Stage Illusion' terms 'a tacit understanding',<sup>20</sup> the hero of *Hamlet*, given over to 'light-and-noise-abhorring ruminations', should not be expected, as an actor must, '*to be thinking all the while of his appearance because he knows that all the while the spectators are judging of it*' (italics in original). It is unfashionable to concede the cogency of Lamb's case. But to the degree that one believes with Lamb that the 'characters of Shakespeare are . . . the objects of meditation rather than of interest or curiosity as to their actions', one will recognise that he is fighting bravely for the right of readers to be spared 'a controversy of elocution'.<sup>21</sup>

Does this mean that for Lamb the only reality is mental? It would be absurd to press the point, given his fascination with particulars, and yet there is a way in which, for him, all things exist to convert themselves into materials for a work of art. He is an aesthete but never precious. His writings enrich us with their alertness to the role played in all human dealings by illusions and imaginings. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his own self-representation. In his 'Preface' to *The Last Essays of Elia*, he offers a spirited apologia for his way he is himself present in his work: 'If it be egotism to imply and twine with his own identity the griefs and affections of another - making himself many, or reducing many unto himself - then is the skilful novelist, who along brings in his hero, or heroine, speaking of themselves, the greatest egotist of all; who yet has never, therefore, been accused of that narrowness'.<sup>22</sup> Throughout his essays, it is Lamb's great distinction to use imaginative illusion as part of the process of 'making himself many, or reducing many unto himself'. He makes us aware, too, how the most real experiences become the most ghostly and the most ghostly become the most real, anticipating, in this respect, aspects of Thomas Hardy's poems. In his finest writing, in such masterpieces as 'Dream-

<sup>19</sup> Bate, 213, 215, 214-15, 215, 213.

<sup>20</sup> Bate 185.

<sup>21</sup> *Charles Lamb and Elia*, 246, 252, 245. For a thoughtful defence of Lamb's position in this essay, see Roy Park's introduction to *Lamb as Critic*, ed. Roy Park (London: Routledge, 1980), esp. 17-39.

<sup>22</sup> Bate 171-2.

Children; A Reverie' or 'The Old Familiar Faces', this two-way traffic between the real and the ghostly, the actual and the virtual governs the diction and cadences of the writing with poignancy and high accomplishment: 'Ghost-like, I paced round the haunts of my childhood. / Earth seemed a desert I was bound to traverse, / Seeking to find the old familiar faces', he writes in 'The Old Familiar Faces', his iambic metre adjusting itself to the stops and starts of feeling. The process of 'Seeking to find' those lines describe is central to Lamb; it involves hope and desire, yearning and loss, and an interplay between artistic awareness and the stubborn power of illusions.

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## Society Notes and News from Members

### CHAIRMAN'S NOTES

#### *C.L.S. Bulletin No. 126*

Mary Wedd wishes to reassure members that she does realise that Virgil's line (translated by Wordsworth) and mentioned in her appreciation of the late Professor Richard Clancey in Bulletin No. 126 reads "*sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt*".

She is particularly keen not to have it thought that the two misprints reflected her own poor recollection of the Latin.

Members will have received by separate mailing their invitations to the Birthday Celebration Luncheon to be held on Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> February. Tickets for this popular event are available from the Membership Secretary, Cecilia Powell. The guest speaker will be Professor David Fairer of Leeds University.

Before that, we look forward to hearing our Vice-Chairman, Professor Duncan Wu, on Hazlitt and "Byron in Love" on Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> December; this meeting taking place at a very special venue. We have been fortunate enough to be allowed the use of the historic first floor rooms of 50 Albemarle Street (just off Piccadilly) in the publishing house of Mr. John Murray. These rooms are hardly changed since the days of Lamb and Byron, and are not normally open to the public, so it is hoped that as many members as possible will take the opportunity to come to this special event.

FROM D.E. WICKHAM

*'But see how early I leave'*

*The Daily Telegraph* recycled from a modern viewpoint a famous bit of Eliana, perhaps unconsciously, on 17 July 2004.

You will remember that Charles Lamb was reprimanded for arriving late at the office and is said to have replied, presumably without any repercussions, 'Yes, but see how early I leave'.

'Alex' is the protagonist of a 'serious' strip cartoon in the *Telegraph*. He is a banker, overbearing, sarcastic, intolerant, rude, and generally unpleasant. Redundancy and a new job have placed him in a subordinate position under his former and perhaps slightly junior colleague, the flustered, ineffectual, easily embarrassed Clive.

Clive's secretary points out to him that Wallace (not Alex!) is late for the third time this week ('Oh . . . er . . . yes') and that, as Head of Department, Clive should take firm action; he has given Wallace several warnings and should now dismiss him. Is there nothing else to be done? asks Clive, blushing. His secretary suggests the option of personal training: the bank offers courses on time-management, responsibility at work, and how to be a team player. Clive accepts this as a good idea: 'Book me on all three . . . that should keep me out of the office till someone else gets round to sacking him'.