William Hazlitt and Radical West Country Dissent

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DUNCAN WU'S RECENT BIOGRAPHY of William Hazlitt (1778-1830)[1] has exposed a connection between Hazlitt's radical republican politics and his experiences in the West Country that deserves a closer look. Hazlitt's first visit to the West Country occurred in May 1798, when he walked from his home in Shropshire to Nether Stowey in Somerset to visit Coleridge and Wordsworth. After his marriage in 1808, Hazlitt became a regular visitant to the West Country, his Winterslow Hut (located just east of Salisbury near the border of Wiltshire and Hampshire) providing him a welcome retreat from the pressures of London life in the 'countryside he loved', as Wu puts it.[2] Though a resident of London for much of his adult life, Hazlitt nevertheless relished the simplicity of West Country village life, the romantic qualities of its landscapes, and the rich heritage of its dissenting tradition, both political and religious. As the son of a dissenting minister, Hazlitt knew firsthand both the unifying and divisive power of dissent. His journey to Nether Stowey in 1798 was an important moment in his life, as Wu demonstrates so dramatically,[3] not only because he met Coleridge, Wordsworth, Joseph Cottle, and Tom Poole, all of whom were in political agreement with Hazlitt at that time, but also because his journey to Somerset linked Hazlitt to a tradition of West Country dissent that predated the arrival of the Romantic poets and their notions of Pantisocracy. Within that West Country tradition, Hazlitt, far more than Coleridge, Wordsworth, or Southey, would prove a worthy 'son', raising his voice for more than two decades in scores of essays, newspaper articles, and magazine reviews, without compromise or abatement, against corruption and abuse of power in government and in praise of equality and power to the individual.

Benjamin Flower, Robert Hall, and Thomas Mullett

Hazlitt was once asked by his artist friend, James Northcote, why he had such difficulties controlling his temper when it came to matters of politics. 'Because I hate a hypocrite, a time-server, and a slave',[4] he responded, an expression uncannily similar to one that landed Hazlitt's journalistic predecessor, Benjamin Flower, in Newgate Prison for six months in 1799. In his editorial for the *Cambridge Intelligencer* on 20 April 1799 (exactly eleven months after Hazlitt sauntered into Nether Stowey), Flower (1755-1829), an ardent dissenter and political reformer, referred to Richard Watson, the Bishop of Llandaff, as 'the Right Reverend time server and apostate', a reference to Watson's acceptance of a lucrative preferment from William Pitt based upon Watson's recantation of his earlier position on political reform, not completely unlike

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[1] Duncan Wu, *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man* (Oxford University Press, 2008), reviewed by Timothy Whelan in the *Coleridge Bulletin* 34 (Winter 2010), pp. 69-74.
[2] Wu, *William Hazlitt*, p. 410.
[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 1-19.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 192.

Southey's 'preferment' in 1813 when he became Poet Laureate. It seems probable that Hazlitt and his father, even in the small Shropshire village of Wem, knew of Flower's newspaper, for in 1798 the *Cambridge Intelligencer* was the most widely disseminated and politically provocative provincial newspaper in England, with agents in nearly every county. On 7 May 1798, shortly before Hazlitt began his two hundred mile walk to Stowey and more than a decade before he would begin writing on politics for various newspapers and magazines, the *Anti-Jacobin*, a London Tory paper, lambasted the *Intelligencer* for spewing out a 'hell-broth… more false than the *Morning Post*, more blasphemous than the *Morning Chronicle*, and more devoted to the cause of Anarchy and Blood than that exploded vehicle of idiot frenzy, the *Courier*'.[5]

In the mid-1790s Flower shared with Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey the same political philosophy that would later capture the imagination of Hazlitt and draw him to Coleridge and the West Country in 1798. Before establishing his newspaper in Cambridge in 1793, Flower spent six years (1785-91) in the West Country, working as the European agent for a dissenting woollen manufacturer in Tiverton, Devon, and attending the politically-minded Independent meeting at the Steps. Coleridge met Flower during the former's time at Jesus College, Cambridge, when Coleridge first embraced dissenting culture and 'rational' Christianity; in fact, Flower, at that time an Arian Baptist, published some of Coleridge's earliest poems in the *Intelligencer* in 1794, as well as *The Fall of Robespierre*, the dramatic poem jointly composed by Coleridge and Southey. Flower was also known to two of Coleridge's Bristol friends, John Prior Estlin (1747-1817), Unitarian minister at Lewin's Mead, and Joseph Cottle (1770-1853), bookseller and Particular Baptist layman, the latter having several of his poems published as well in the *Intelligencer*. When Coleridge's *Watchman* failed in 1796, Coleridge recommended his readers switch to the *Intelligencer*, 'a Newspaper, the style and composition of which would claim distinguished praise, even among the production of *literary leisure*; while it breathes every where the severest morality, fighting fearlessly the good fight against Tyranny…'[6] Flower waged war against Pitt throughout the lifespan of the *Intelligencer* (1793-1803), describing him in 1802 as 'a man, who is justly considered the enemy, not only of his own species, but of the brute creation', who along with the rest of his cabinet should 'immediately retire from stations, for which their mad, inglorious war, and their ignominious, insecure peace, have in the most forcible manner, pronounced them utterly disqualified!'[7] Even William Wilberforce, the popular abolitionist and evangelical, did not escape Flower's ire; he accused the renowned legislator and author of the

[5] *The Anti-Jacobin*, 7 May 1798. Eliza Gould (1770-1810), who married Flower in 1800, was raised a Particular Baptist in Bampton, Devon. Like Flower, she too was a political radical in the 1790s, serving as Flower's representative for the *Intelligencer* in South Molton in 1794, a decision that eventually created such animosity toward her that she was forced to close her school in the spring of 1795. For an account of her difficulties in South Molton, see Timothy Whelan, ed., *Politics, Religion, and Romance: The Letters of Benjamin Flower and Eliza Gould Flower, 1794-1808* (Aberystwyth: The National Library of Wales, 2008), pp. 1-31.

[6] *The Watchman*, 13 May 1796, p. 324.

[7] Editorial, *Cambridge Intelligencer*, 20 November 1802.

influential *A Practical View of Christianity* (1797) of hypocrisy in his editorial on 11 November 1797. If Wilberforce 'is not an hypocrite', Flower posited, 'we beg he would retire to his closet, and ask himself—What he will say to the God who will summons him to his bar to answer for the long and continued support he has given to a horrid system of corruption, tyranny and bloodshed'. To Flower, Wilberforce's support of the war against France had 'done more towards the DAMNATION OF MILLIONS OF IMMORTALS!—than his book on practical Christianity can do towards saving them, were it to pass through not only five but five hundred editions'. Flower was as vituperative and unforgiving as Hazlitt would later become, writing of Wilberforce again in 1804, 'Where shall we find a senator who, during a long Parliamentary career, has been a more steadfast OPPOSER of the RIGHTS OF CONSCIENCE, and supporter of PENAL LAWS in matters of religion; or a more steadfast supporter of war, corruption, cruelty, in short of almost every species of ministerial profligacy, than Mr. W?"[8]

Flower ceased publication of the *Intelligencer* in 1803, but returned to political journalism with *The Political Review and Monthly Register*, which appeared in nine volumes between 1807 and 1811, composed from his new home in Harlow. The motto affixed to the title page read, '*What is morally wrong can never be politically right*', a statement with implications Hazlitt would readily have understood. In his preface to volume 5 (1809), Flower described the primary ideals he hoped to impart in his periodical:

> On the commencement of this work we professed our opinion, that the only radical, safe, and constitutional remedy for the continually increasing grievances of which we have so just a right to complain, and to insist on their removal, is a more FREQUENT, and a more EQUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE. … In the Preface to our last Volume, we again expressed our firm conviction, that nothing short of such a Reform "can afford us a rational prospect that our crying grievances will be redressed, our oppressive burdens lightened, and our deplorable situation ameliorated;" and that no PARTY, whatever might be their professions, if they are the enemies, or even the lukewarm friends of such Reform, are deserving of the confidence or the support of the people.[9]

Hazlitt would also have welcomed Flower's continued opposition to the proliferation of hostilities toward France, for only through 'PEACE, followed by a system of ECONOMY and REFORM', Flower argued, could he and his fellow Britons 'retrieve our misfortunes, and, amidst the wreck of the continental states, preserve our own independence'.[10] Flower's two journalistic

[8] See Flower's Preface to his edition of Micaiah Towgood's *A Dissent from the Church of England fully Justified* (Cambridge: B. Flower, 1804), p. xxx.
[9] *Political Register*, 5 (1809), p. xx.
[10] *Ibid.*

ventures, the *Intelligencer* and the *Political Review and Monthly Register*, not only reflected Hazlitt's political ideals but may also have helped shape them. Flower was an editor worthy of emulation, a writer whose steadfast refusal to compromise on such issues as the war against France, the need for parliamentary reform, the abolition of the slave trade and slavery, and the right to a free press, served as powerful prototypes for Hazlitt's own political journalism, most of which was published after Flower's retirement in 1811.[11]

In 1798, the year Hazlitt's political energies were so charged by his visit to Nether Stowey, Flower was busy confronting 'apostasy' not only among political and ecclesiastical figures but also within the ranks of dissenters, most noticeably his pastor, the celebrated Robert Hall of St. Andrew's Street, Cambridge. Hall came from Bristol in the fall of 1790 as the successor to Robert Robinson (1735-90), who in the 1780s had served as Flower's ideal of a political and religious leader.[12] Coleridge knew Hall from his student days at Cambridge, and later, in Bristol and the West Country, he worked closely with a number of Hall's friends, most noticeably Cottle and Isaac James (Hall's brother-in-law), both men known as well to Flower.[13] During Coleridge's time at Cambridge, Hall published two important political tracts, *Christianity Consistent with a Love of Freedom* (1791) and *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press* (1793), both praising the French revolution and opposing Edmund Burke and Bishop Horsley for their advocacy of 'passive obedience' and 'non-resistance to government'. In April 1797, about eight months before Hazlitt first met Coleridge during the latter's preaching engagement at Shrewsbury, Hall and Flower joined hands (literally) in fighting off a Church and King mob that had become enraged at the two outspoken dissenters for attending a public meeting in Cambridge in support of Charles Grey's bill for parliamentary reform.[14] Hall's political views through 1797 were in line, not only with such Whig leaders as Grey and Charles James Fox, but also with those of his former

[11] Flower's friend William Burdon (1764-1818), former fellow at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, political reformer and author of *Three Letters Addressed to the Bishop of Llandaff* (Cambridge: B. Flower, 1795), also refused to succumb to political expediency in the first decade of the nineteenth century. After his short political piece, 'Thoughts on the Nature of Reform', appeared in the June 1807 issue of Flower's *Political Review and Monthly Register* (pp. 455-56), Burdon wrote to Flower, praising him as 'the only public man of whose integrity I never had any doubt', a difficult feat given the fact that 'this world is not a world for honest men to thrive in; – rogues only fatten & flourish', sentiments Hazlitt understood well and praise he no doubt would have craved at the end of his career as a political commentator. See Whelan, *Politics, Religion, and Romance*, p. 329.

[12] Flower, like George Dyer, credited Robinson for influencing him toward Arianism (Flower was raised an orthodox Calvinist) and the principles of political reform in the mid-1780s; after his move to Harlow, Flower published the *Miscellaneous Works of Robert Robinson* (4 vols, 1807).

[13] For more on Coleridge and his involvement with Bristol dissenters between 1794 and 1798, including Robert Hall, see Timothy Whelan, 'Coleridge and Some Bristol Baptists, 1794-96', in *Wordsworth and Coleridge in the West Country*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Houndsmill, Hants: Palgrave, 2010), pp. 99-114.

[14] Ebenezer Foster (1777-1852), mayor of Cambridge in 1836-37 and a member at St. Andrew's Street in the 1790s during Hall's ministry, was also present at Frances Jennings's house in Bridge Street (where Flower boarded) when it was attacked by the mob. Many years later, in a letter to John Greene, 4 May 1832, Foster recalled: 'I was with the party who escorted Benjamin Flower, which we did almost at the hazard of our lives When the mob broke in Miss Jennings's shutter, Dr. [Olinthus] Gregory, with myself, were on the steps. Dr. G. made a speech to the mob, and I myself can swear I saw Mr. Hall in the shop, with the pestle in his hand, ready, I verily believe, to knock any man down that entered the shop with an hostile intention'. See John Greene, *Reminiscences of the Rev. Robert Hall, A. M., late of Bristol, and Sketches of his Sermons preached at Cambridge prior to 1806*, 2nd ed. (London: Frederick Westley and A. H. Davis, 1834), p. xiii.

roommate at Aberdeen, James Mackintosh. By 1799, however, both Hall and Mackintosh had reversed their earlier positions and were now condemning France and Napoleon, equating 'French principles' with 'infidelity', among other things. Hazlitt attended James Mackintosh's lecture 'On the Law of Nature and Nations' in June 1799, along with his new friend, Crabb Robinson, who, having identified himself with political reform and republican ideals throughout the 1790s, could only view Mackintosh now as 'an apostate from liberty', an expression, as Wu correctly notes, Hazlitt could easily have used himself.[15]

Hall's famous sermon, *Modern Infidelity Considered with Respect to its Influence on Society*, first preached at John Prior Estlin's congregation at Lewin's Mead, Bristol, in the fall of 1799 and published the next year in Cambridge, also greatly offended Flower and Robinson, and, it would seem, could hardly have escaped Hazlitt's ire. Hall advised Flower (no longer Hall's friend or a member of his congregation) 'to repress the violent tone of his political disquisitions',[16] but the political journalist was just as volatile and stubborn as Hazlitt would prove to be, attacking Hall in a series of letters, editorials, and in the Preface to *The Proceedings of the House of Lords in the Case of Benjamin Flower* (1800). In that work, Flower pondered how Hall, 'the strenuous defender of the French revolution, and opposer of corrupt establishments in the church, and of abuses in the state' in his political pamphlets of 1791 and 1793, could 'suddenly [change] his positions, preaching and writing with the same ardour against his former sentiments, and that without formally recanting what he had before written, or producing the least evidence to prove his former sentiments erroneous'.[17] Crabb Robinson, whose family had for many years enjoyed a close relationship with Hall, also attacked Hall's political apostasy in a letter printed in the *Cambridge Intelligencer* on 5 April 1800, a controversy that, most likely, did not escape the notice of Hazlitt, who by that time was closely connected to Robinson and many liberal dissenters in London and the provinces.[18]

Prior to his rise to fame in Cambridge during the 1790s, Hall was widely known for his preaching and politics in the West Country, having served as

[15] Wu, *William Hazlitt*, p. 76. The quotation is from an undated letter by Crabb Robinson to his brother, Thomas, *c.* February 1799, in which Crabb writes, 'Mackintosh's pamphlet which is one of the most elegant essays I have ever seen I am sorry to say that he is very strongly reported to be an apostate from liberty and I fear it is true—'. In another letter to Thomas, *c.* June 1799, Crabb writes of Mackintosh, just after attending the lectures on the British Constitution, 'If he be really an Apostate & Hireling of the Ministry as is said; he at least is not barefaced or flagrant… his politicks they are certainly moderate nor do I know that he has gone an Inch beyond pure Whiggism…' Crabb Robinson Correspondence, vol. 1 (1725-99), letters 152, and 125, Dr. Williams's Library, London, quoted by permission of the Director and the Trustees of the Library.

[16] Olinthus Gregory, ed., 'Memoir of Robert Hall', in *The Works of Robert Hall*, 6 vols (London: London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853), vol. 6, p. 63.

[17] Benjamin Flower, *The Proceedings of the House of Lords in the Case of Benjamin Flower, printer of the Cambridge Intelligencer… with prefatory remarks, and animadversions on the writings of… the Rev. Robert Hall, A. M.* (Cambridge: B. Flower, 1800), pp. 50-52.

[18] See 'Strictures on Mr. Hall's Sermon' [signed 'Vigilance'], *Cambridge Intelligencer*, 5 April 1800, reprinted in Timothy Whelan, 'Henry Crabb Robinson and Godwinism', *Wordsworth Circle* 33 (2002), pp. 58-69; also Timothy Whelan, "'I have confessed myself a devil': Crabb Robinson's Confrontation with Robert Hall, 1798-1800', *Charles Lamb Bulletin*, New Series 121 (2003), pp. 2-25.

classical tutor at Bristol Baptist Academy and assistant pastor to Caleb Evans (1737-91)[19] at the Baptist congregation at Broadmead in Bristol, 1785-90. During these years (the same years Flower was at Tiverton), Hall became known to the family of Joseph Cottle as well as that of Mary Steele of Broughton, Hampshire, whose prominent manor home, Broughton House, situated along the main road from Winchester to Salisbury, was only five miles from Hazlitt's country cottage, Winterslow Hut.[20] Steele (1753-1813), Cottle's distant cousin (and a far better poet), was the niece of Anne Steele (1717-78), the celebrated Baptist hymn writer known as 'Theodosia'. Mary Steele was also a close friend of the poet Mary Scott (1751-93) of Milborne Port, Somerset (her brother, Russell, was, like Hazlitt's father, a Unitarian minister),[21] and Thomas Mullett (1745-1814) of London, a Unitarian Baptist and former resident of Taunton and Bristol, friend of Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, radical reformer and member of the Revolution Society in the early 1790s, and Crabb Robinson's respected friend and advisor between 1805 and 1814.[22] Hall met Steele in 1786 when he first visited Broughton, staying with her and her family at Broughton House and quickly falling in love with Steele's younger sister, Anne (1769-1859). She rejected him, a great disappointment to Hall that led to his publication of 'Reverie', an essay on love that appeared in a West Country newspaper. Like many dissenters in the West Country, Steele first became a proponent of republican ideology and political reform in the 1770s during the war with the American colonies. She saw in Hall (besides his brilliant mind) a kindred political spirit, following his career at Cambridge and Leicester with great interest and, at times, disappointment. In March 1804, after reading Hall's latest sermon, *Sentiments Proper to the Present Crisis*, which attacked Napoleon and defended England's renewal of hostilities against France after the short lived Peace of Amiens, Steele was dumbfounded. 'Its Eloquence is enchanting', she wrote to her sister Martha, '& there are many melancholy truths in it & some parts of it are admirable but surely he must be the most *alter'd* of men from that high overbearing Spirit that outraged everybodys feelings & seemed to set the World at defiance'. In the early 1790s

[19] Evans was an outspoken opponent of the war against the American colonies in the 1770s and an active supporter of the movement to abolish the slave trade in the late 1780s. See his two pamphlets, *A Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley, occasioned by his Calm Address to the American Colonies* (London, 1775) and *British Constitutional Liberty. A Sermon, preached in Broad-mead, Bristol, November 5, 1775* (Bristol, 1775).

[20] Steele's cousin, William Steele Wakeford (1753-1819) of Andover, purchased the Manor House of East Tytherley, just to the southwest of Broughton and southeast of Winterslow, from Lord Rolle in 1800, and was Lord of the Manor when Hazlitt painted in the Tytherley woods in 1808, a place he visited often when at Winterslow Hut. Most likely Hazlitt met Wakeford or certainly knew of him, and would have passed Broughton House on his walks from Winterslow to Winchester.

[21] Scott's major publications are *The Female Advocate* (1774) and *The Messiah* (1788), both printed and sold in London by Joseph Johnson. For Mary Scott's poetry (published and unpublished), correspondence, and biographical details, see Timothy Whelan, gen. ed., *Nonconformist Women Writers, 1720-1840*, 8 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), vol. 4, pp. 1-105.

[22] Mullett, like Flower, continued to oppose the war against France into the second decade of the nineteenth century. Crabb Robinson had a short conversation with him on 2 April 1812, writing in his diary later that evening that Mullett's 'Gallicanism is inveterate. He maintains that Buonaparte was forced to occupy Spain in his own defence &c. &c. &c.' See Crabb Robinson Diary, vol. 2 (9 December 1811-22 January 1813), fol. 56, Dr. Williams's Library, London.

Hall had been, even more than Coleridge and his dissenting friends in Bristol in the mid-1790s, a model of the radical dissenting political commentator Hazlitt would later become. Accordingly, Hall's apostasy in 1804 was just as appalling to Steele as the political alterations in Coleridge, Southey, and Wordsworth were to Hazlitt in 1817. '[Hall] seems now perpetually to fear giving offence & almost servilely to cringe to Authority', Steele writes, a line Hazlitt could easily have used against a number of later targets. Hall had now embraced 'the School of M^r^ Wilberforce & Miss More', Steele complains, "'the illustrious Miss More" whom he used so much to dislike'. 'I am sorry I confess that so able an advocate for Religion', she concludes (with a nostalgia evoked often by Hazlitt), 'should cease to be an Advocate for that freedom he once so well defended but debase the former by calling in its aid to sanction the *once* exploded doctrines of passive Obedience & nonresistance'.[23]

Mary Steele's other acquaintance, Thomas Mullett, operated a prominent London trading company in partnership with his son-in-law (and nephew) Joseph Jeffries Evans (1768-1812), the son of Caleb Evans, Mullett's brother-in-law and Baptist minister at Broadmead in Bristol during Robert Hall's tenure there.[24] Mullett may have been more politically radical than Hall or Flower in the early 1790s, even more than two of his London friends and fellow reformers, George Dyer (1755-1841) and Anthony Robinson (1762-1827). Writing to his former Bristol friend, General Horatio Gates (then living in New York), on 24 November 1791, Mullett described his recent attendance at a meeting in London of the Revolution Society:[25]

> You would have felt an elevation at the Revolution Society at the London Tavern on the 4th November. 300 set down in the great Room to dinner; amongst them some of the ablest, and most distinguished of *the last* National Assembly, particularly *M.^r^ Pethion*,

[23] Mary Steele [Dunscombe], Broughton, to Martha Steele, London, 9 March 1804, in Whelan, *Nonconformist Women Writers*, vol. 3, pp. 360-61. Despite their political and religious differences, Hannah More was a friend of Mary Steele, the former having visited her at her home at Broughton in 1786, a return of the favour of Steele's visit to More in Bristol in 1784 (Steele's family had also visited More's home in Park Street, Bristol, in 1777). In the postscript to the letter to her sister, Steele toned down her criticism of both Hall and More, asking her sister not to 'mention my *hasty* comments on Halls Sermon except at home – Miss More perhaps it may be said is much alter'd too since the time I referred to' (p. 361). For Steele and More, including a poem by More addressed to Steele, see Whelan, *Nonconformist Women Writers*, vol. 3, pp. 169, 282-85, 304-05.

[24] J. J. Evans was also a close friend of Crabb Robinson and apparently met Coleridge in London in 1802 (several years before Robinson met Coleridge), for in September 1803, on a trip through the Lakes, Evans and his wife, the former Mary Anne Mullett, visited the Coleridges at Greta Hall. Evans's sister-in-law, Jane Mullett (1784-1837), married James Webbe Tobin (1767-1814) of Bristol, the son of a West Indies planter and brother to the playwright John Tobin (1770-1804). During the late 1790s, James Tobin moved in a circle of friends that included Cottle, Coleridge, and Southey, and was known to be sympathetic to the scheme of Pantisocracy. See Jane Mullett Evans, *Family Chronicle of the Descendants of Thomas Evans, of Brecon, from 1678 to 1857* (Bristol: privately printed, *c.* 1870), pp. 64-65.

[25] In the 1780s, Mullett, like Flower, was greatly attracted to the ministry of Robert Robinson at St. Andrew's Street, Cambridge, primarily for the latter's political activism and his theological leanings toward 'rational dissent'. In the 1780s Mullett corresponded with Robinson and probably met Dyer during his visits to Cambridge. Most likely he met Anthony Robinson in church, for both attended the General Baptist congregation in Worship Street, London, in the 1790s, the same congregation attended by the dissenting bookseller, Joseph Johnson. For Mullett and Robert Robinson, see George Dyer, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Robert Robinson* (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1796), pp. 122, 127, 256.

> who is just elected successor to M.r Bailly Mayor of Paris. He made a short speech of Congratulation to Englishmen on the examples they had often given the World of a hatred of Tyrants; he spoke with all the plainness, and firmness of a Republican, and with all the dignity of a Man. Common Sense *Paine* was invited—his health was drank, with thanks to him for his able defence of the Rights of Man; on which he thankd the Society, & proposd as a *toasts—the* Revolution of the World! The Republic of North America, and its first Citizen, was amongst the most applauded toasts; and Connected with one expressive of a Wish, that "Revolutions may never Cease—while the Cause of them exists!"[26]

Mullett boasted that he 'never witnessd a popular Assembly of more decorum', or one that exhibited discourse more indicative of the 'feast of reason, and the flow of Soul'.[27] It is likely that Hazlitt met Mullett through a mutual friend, either Crabb Robinson or Anthony Robinson (no relation to Crabb). Anthony Robinson, originally from Cumberland, studied under Hall at Bristol Academy, rooming with Joseph Kinghorn, later the Baptist minister at Norwich. By the mid-1790s Anthony Robinson had become a prominent Unitarian writer, political reformer, and wealthy sugar refiner in London.[28] The two Robinsons met in London in 1796, Crabb later describing Anthony as 'one of those who had the greatest influence on my character'.[29] Crabb probably met Mullett at the same time, and by 1799 may have introduced both men to Hazlitt. Hazlitt was meeting regularly with Anthony Robinson not long after Crabb Robinson's return from Germany in 1805, about the same time Crabb introduced Hazlitt to William Godwin. By the end of the decade, Anthony Robinson would assist Godwin in several literary endeavours, as well as help finance Hazlitt's *The Eloquence of the British Senate* in 1807.[30]

After 1800, Robert Hall was repeatedly criticised by Flower and other hard-line reformers for his support of the war against France, criticisms that eventually evoked a response from Hall in 1817, the same year Southey and Coleridge published defences of their political history (or as Hazlitt would have

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[26] Thomas Mullett to Horatio Gates, 24 November 1791, Thomas Addis Emmet Collection, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library.

[27] *Ibid*.; for more on Mullett, see "Memoirs of Mr. Thomas Mullett, by the Rev. John Evans," *Gentleman's Magazine* 85 (1815, Part 1): 83-85; and Evans, *Family Chronicle*, pp. 60-63; for Mullett and Steele, see Whelan, *Nonconformist Women Writers*, vol. 3, pp. 302, 356, 362-63, 377.

[28] In 1793 Robinson published *A Short History of the Persecution of Christians, by Jews, Heathens, and Christians* (sold by Joseph Johnson); during that same decade he served as an editor for the *Analytical Review* and later was a regular contributor to the Unitarian periodical, the *Monthly Repository*. Another prominent Unitarian writer, political reformer, and mutual friend of the Robinsons and Flower that Hazlitt probably met at this time was John Towill Rutt (1760-1841), who would later publish a biography of Joseph Priestley and an edition of his writings. Rutt (1770) and Flower (1766-69) both attended John Collett Ryland's dissenting academy in Northampton, just a few years after Robert Hall was there. See 'The Rev. John Collet Ryland's Scholars', *Northamptonshire Notes and Queries*, New Series 5 (1926), pp. 18-31.

[29] Thomas Sadler, ed., *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson*, 2 vols (London and New York, 1872), vol. 2, p. 47.

[30] See Sadler, *Diary*, vol. 1, p. 35; Wu, *William Hazlitt*, pp. 109-10.

called them, attempts at rewriting history).[31] Between 1804 and 1819, however, Hall redeemed himself somewhat, playing a major role in stopping Lord Sidmouth's efforts in 1811 to curtail village preaching, supporting significant changes in the charter of the East India Company in 1813, and defending the plight of the framework knitters in Leicestershire between 1816-19.[32] Hall came to the Baptist congregation in Harvey Lane in Leicester in 1807, and ten years later defended his radical past in a letter to William Wilberforce on 27 February 1817. Wilberforce had written to Hall expressing considerable surprise upon hearing news that Hall had signed a petition for parliamentary reform at Leicester, a petition that arose from a protest meeting organized by the local Spencean Society and Hampden Club, two radical political entities that advocated universal suffrage (groups to which Hazlitt was not altogether unsympathetic). Hall reminded Wilberforce that he had been 'educated in the sentiments of the late Charles Fox, & to his political creed… I could more entirely subscribe than that of any [other] man. Though an enemy to revolution & anarchy in every form, I am equally so to the doctrine of passive obedience & nonresistance, which I detest from my heart'.[33]

That would have been welcome news to Benjamin Flower and Mary Steele in 1804, when Hall seemed to be saying exactly the opposite. Such an admission, however, would have struck Hazlitt in much the same way as when he heard that Coleridge, also writing in 1817, had declared in his *Biographia Literaria* that his politics had not changed since 1795-98, when he 'was no friend of Jacobinism'.[34] Hazlitt similarly rejected Southey's *mea culpa* that *Wat Tyler*, his radical republican poetic drama written in 1794 but not published until 1817, was merely a 'boyish composition' full of 'the errors of youth and ignorance' and that the 'mischievous', 'dangerous' work should not be made public by a 'skulking scoundrel' of a publisher who had found booksellers 'not

[31] See Southey's *Letter to William Smith, Esq., M. P.* (London: John Murray, 1817), which was published as a pamphlet the same day as Hazlitt's initial review of *Wat Tyler* in the *Examiner* on 9 March 1817, what Wu calls 'one of Hazlitt's finest pieces of political journalism' (*William Hazlitt*, p. 205). Hazlitt published a second essay on *Wat Tyler* in the *Examiner* on 30 March as well as three reviews of Southey's 'Letter' in May 1817, all five essays on Southey appearing in Hazlitt's *Political Essays* (1819). For Coleridge's apologia, see *Biographia Literaria*, 2 vols (London: Rest Fenner, 1817), vol. 1, pp. 180-86; vol. 2, p. 208. Hazlitt responded with a scathing essay in the *Edinburgh Review* in August 1817.

[32] See 'Defence of Village Preaching', *On the Renewal of the Charter of the East India Company*, and *An Appeal to the Public, on the Subject of the Frame-work Knitters' Fund*, in Gregory, *Works of Robert Hall,* vol. 3, pp. 333-56, 203-54. Attacks by leading Anglican bishops and MPs against village preaching by dissenters began in 1801. That July, Eliza Gould Flower, visiting in the Walworth home of Joseph Gurney, shorthand writer for Parliament and a deacon in the Baptist congregation at Maze Pond, gained first hand knowledge of Hall's activities, writing to Flower in Cambridge that 'Hall has been lately in Town he came up on Monday afternoon, & returned on Friday... Hall is about they say to reply to the Bishop of Rochester's attack on itinerant preaching... I have heard nothing of the sort at Cambridge.' Hall put aside his pamphlet at that time, but revised it in 1810 after the introduction of the Sidmouth Bill; after the defeat of the bill in 1811, Hall decided not to publish it. His chief purpose for the pamphlet, he wrote, was to assure the public that 'as nothing is more remote from the views of those who are most active in promoting village preaching than an intention to promote political discontent, so nothing is more removed from the practice of the preachers', a statement probably true in 1801 and 1811 but not entirely accurate concerning the activities of every itinerant Baptist preacher and missionary during the volatile years 1795-97. See Whelan, *Politics, Religion, and Romance*, p. 239; Gregory, *Works of Robert Hall*, vol. 3, p. 337.

[33] Robert Hall to William Wilberforce, 27 February 1817, MSS. Wilberforce, d. 17, Bodleian Library, fols. 269-70.

[34] *Biographia Literaria*, vol. 1, p. 186.

more honourable than himself, to undertake the publication'.[35] After Southey defended the government's oppressive actions against political reformers organizing among the populace (like the Spenceans and Hampdens), William Smith, the Unitarian MP, read before the House of Commons a passage from *Wat Tyler* that extolled 'equality' as the 'birthright' of all men and vilified a corrupt, oppressive monarchy. Smith claimed that no 'Spencean plan' could compare with such radical views.[36] Thus, to Smith and Hazlitt, Southey's recent proposal in the *Quarterly Review* that a free press and *habeas corpus* should be curtailed in times of public unrest exposed him as an apostate of the first order. Southey was particularly incensed that he alone should have been singled out as a 'renegade' when his critics knew that many others 'who were republicans in the first years of the French revolution… [had] long since ceased to be so, with as little impeachment of their integrity as of their judgement',[37] men such as Coleridge, Sir James Mackintosh, and Robert Hall.

John Foster

In 1817 another West Country dissenter and popular essayist, better known to the general public at that time than Hazlitt, found himself similarly appalled by the political apostasy of Coleridge, Southey, and Wordsworth, men whose careers he had known from their beginnings in the West Country and who now were at opposite ends from his political ideals. John Foster (1770-1843), originally from Yorkshire, spent the academic year 1791-92 at Bristol Baptist Academy (he left the year before Hazlitt arrived at Hackney Academy to pursue a similar career), meeting Joseph Cottle, hearing stories of the already legendary Robert Hall, and imbibing an appreciation for the French revolution, republican principles and romantic notions of nature.[38] During his time in Bristol, however, it appears he studied women as much as his books (a preoccupation he would have shared with Hazlitt). 'I know not what you would think of the young ladies at Bristol', Foster writes on 6 January 1792 to his friend H. Horsfall,

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[35] Southey, *Letter to William Smith, Esq., M. P.* , in *Essays, Moral and Political*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1832), vol. 2, pp. 9, 10.

[36] Southey, *Letter to William Smith*, pp. 4, 5.

[37] Southey, *Letter to William Smith*, pp. 11, 18.

[38] Wu cites Hazlitt as remarking, not long after his first meeting with Wordsworth and Coleridge, 'with what eyes these poets see nature' (*William Hazlitt*, p. 12). Foster, in the late 1790s and early years of the following decade, was attempting to delineate in his journal his own version of a romantic view of nature, which he described *c.* 1802 as 'what may be called *physiopathy*, a faculty of pervading all Nature with one's *own being*, so as to have a perception, a life, and an agency in all things. A person of such a mind stands and gazes at a tree, for instance, till the object becomes all wonderful, and is transformed into something visionary and ideal. … But this is not all; the tree soon becomes to your imagination a *conscious* being, and looks at you, and communes with you; ideas cluster on each branch, meanings emanate from every twig. … If you observe a man of this order, though his body be a small thing, invested completely with a little cloth, he expands his being in a grand circle all around him. He feels as if he grew in the grass and flowers and groves; as if he stood on yonder distant mountain-top, conversing with clouds, or sublimely sporting among their imaged precipices, caverns, and ruins. He flows in that river, chafes in its cascades, smiles in the aqueous flowers, frisks in the fishes. He is sympathetic with every bird, and seems to feel the sentiment that prompts the song of each. (This, in one sense, is "inheriting all things.")' See J. E. Ryland, ed., *The Life and Correspondence of John Foster*, 2 vols (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1860), vol. 1, p. 141.

> Very few of them are at all capable of producing any emotions in the breast of a philosopher—I am a little acquainted with two or three very worthy & amiable females—& from them, you must know, my intellectual qualities have gained me great respect. *Miss Evans* particularly, esteems me much—she is a lady of refined taste, of a temper uncommonly sweet & pleasing of modest & engaging deportment, & of great piety, & very sensible & *sentimental.* A cousin of hers is another of my *admirers.*[39]

The 'Miss Evans' was Sarah Jeffries Evans (*c.* 1765-1845), eldest child of the Rev. Caleb Evans and sister of J. J. Evans, Thomas Mullett's soon-to-be son-in-law and Crabb Robinson's close friend. Her cousin, referred to by Foster as 'Laura', was Sarah Evans Norton (d. 1834), the daughter of Hannah Evans and Robert Norton of Bristol (and later Nailsworth). Both women were nieces of Thomas Mullett, friends of Mary Steele, and acquaintances of Robert Hall. Not long after Foster's removal from Bristol to Newcastle to begin a short stint as Baptist minister at Tuthill Stairs, Foster found himself reading Hall's 'Reverie' about the pains of unrequited love.[40] Foster wrote to Horsfall on 14 August that he was now 'convinced I shall never fully enjoy myself or life without love & a "dear object" of love, but O tell me where I shall find her'.[41] It would *not* be Miss Evans, five years his senior and who never married. Visions of 'Laura', however, continued to haunt Foster during his first pastorate. On 4 October 1792 he wrote again to Horsfall:

> I have been walking in the fields the woods & the gardens with her… I have been conversing with her on life—character,—books—nature—and religion—On such subjects who can discourse like Laura?—The more I think of her, the more I admire her:—With what rapture should I meet the hope, if the hope would meet me, of making her mine!—Perhaps I am to see her no more—and I despair of ever seeing her equals—I need not charge my heart never to forget her:—for to forget her is impossible.[42]

Sarah Norton, 'a woman of decidedly superior intellectual powers… [and] elegance of manner and… taste', according to Jane Mullett Evans, family historian, would soon marry Matthew Biggs, who lived only a few years thereafter, leaving Sarah a widow with three young children. Having received an excellent education at a boarding school in Devon, she established a

[39] Letters of John Foster to H. Horsfall, 1791-92, Box G95b, Bristol Baptist College Library, Bristol. The letters are in a bound volume titled 'The Works of J. Foster Knight of the Enchanted Pen'.

[40] The essay was republished in 1815 during Hall's tenure as Baptist minister in Leicester through the efforts of Mary Steele's friend, Elizabeth Coltman (1761-1838), a poet, author of several children's works and evangelical tracts, and member of Hall's congregation. See *A Reverie, the Character of Cleander, and An Essay on Poetry and Philosophy* (Leicester: T.Combe, 1815); on Coltman's role in the publication, see Whelan, *Nonconformist Women Writers,* vol. 3, p. 389.

[41] Letters of John Foster to H. Horsfall, 1791-92.

[42] *Ibid.*

boarding school for girls in Peckham, and later Denmark Hill, London, where Mary Steele's niece attended c. 1803-05.[43] Sarah Evans and Sarah Norton Biggs, like the families of Thomas Mullett and J. J. Evans, moved in a circle of West Country dissenters that included Mary Steele and John Foster, two Particular Baptists who, like the Unitarian Benjamin Flower and the former Unitarian Hazlitt, remained loyal to the ideals of religious and political dissent and became, like the others, friends and acquaintances of Crabb Robinson.[44]

After his year in Newcastle, Foster spent the next three years teaching in a dissenting boarding school near Dublin, associating for a time with some 'violent Democrats' who formed a political society called the 'Sons of Brutus', which, he later explained, 'exposed me at one period to the imminent danger, or at least the expectation, of chains and a dungeon'.[45] In Ireland *c.* 1794-95 Foster lived the kind of revolutionary life Hazlitt dreamed about when he walked to Nether Stowey in 1798. Upon his return to England, Foster preached at Chichester, Battersea, and Downend (1796-1804) prior to his arrival at Frome, Somerset, across the county from Stowey, to replace the Unitarian Job David (a contemporary of William Hazlitt, Sr.) as pastor of the Baptist congregation in Sheppard's Barton. Foster preached at Frome for three years, retiring due to a throat condition, but he continued his residence there until 1817, after which he returned to the Bristol area, settling at Stapleton, where he died in 1843.[46]

One of Foster's earliest essays, composed in the 1790s, explores the effects of a romantic sensibility upon the modern hero that Hazlitt would have found attractive, for both men believed that the Coleridge they first met in the 1790s held promise to become such a figure. These heroic intellects discover

> in the wide field of Nature, something indefinitely more than a mere indifferent ground on which to prosecute the journey and accomplish the ordinary business of life. They find it a scene marked all over with mystical figures. … They find it sometimes concentrating their faculties to curious and minute inspection, sometimes dilating them to the expansion of vast and magnificent forms; sometimes beguiling them out of all precise recognition of material realities, whether small or great, into visionary musings; and habitually and in all ways conveying into the mind trains and

[43] Evans, *Family Chronicle*, pp. 40-1; for connections between Mary Steele and Sarah Evans and Sarah Norton Biggs, see Whelan, *Nonconformist Women Writers,* vol. 3, pp. 305, 314, 327, 363-68, 372.

[44] On 8 June 1813, Crabb Robinson dined in the home of Anthony Robinson, whose guests included Thomas Mullett, Mary Mullett Evans (widow of J. J. Evans), and Sarah Norton Biggs; on Sunday, 30 July 1826, Crabb Robinson, on his way to Bristol, visited in the home of Mary Mullett Evans, then living in Melksham, Wiltshire. Her guests that day also included his old friends (and both of John Foster's former love interests) Sarah Evans and Sarah Norton Biggs. Robinson writes that they were 'glad to see an old acquaintance not so much from personal regard perhaps, as because he brought them tidings of common acquaint[an]ce & made them live over again some hours they might otherwise have forgotten for ever'. See Crabb Robinson Diary, vol. 3 (23 January 1813-15 June 1814) fol. 48; Crabb Robinson Travel Diary, vol. 13 (30 July-14 October 1826), fol. 2.

[45] Ryland, *Life and Correspondence*, vol. 1, p. 26.

[46] For more on Foster's career and his relationship with Coleridge, see Timothy Whelan, 'John Foster and Samuel Taylor Coleridge', *Christianity and Literature* 50 (2001), pp. 631-56.

> masses of ideas of an order not to be acquired in the schools, and exerting a modifying and assimilating influence on the whole mental economy.[47]

These individuals, Foster writes in another early essay, 'On the Greatness of Man', 'feel as if they possessed not enough of existence, and would occupy a wider space, and act in greater dimensions, among the ranks of intellectual being'. To Foster, 'the prime passion of their souls is for mental liberty. They find themselves restricted and confined within limits against which they most zealously rebel; and struggle eagerly to break forth on the infinite field of the universe, where they may expatiate without bound, and attain the amplitude and elevation of thought which they always desire.' 'Grand objects in the natural world' he concludes, 'affect them powerfully, and their images are adopted as a kind of scenery for the interior apartment of the mind, to assist it to form great thoughts.'[48] Foster's later dismay over the literary careers of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Southey, and, in some respects, Hall as well, can be traced to the ideals he imbibed, much like Hazlitt, in the late 1790s.

Foster emerged from his obscurity as a Baptist minister in 1805 with the publication of *Essays in a Series of Letters*, which went through more than thirty British and American editions between 1805 and 1920.[49] His essay 'On the Application of the Epithet Romantic', besides anticipating, according to Paul Kaufman, 'much that is fundamental in all subsequent discussion' of the term,[50] included a critique of '*Jacobinism*', a word, Foster notes, that 'has, of late years, been the brand by which all sentiments referring to the principles of liberty, in a way to censure the measures of the ascendent party in the State, have been sentenced to execration'. 'One may here catch a glimpse of the policy of men of a superior class', he writes, his memories of his radical activities in Dublin in the 1790s still vivid,

> in employing these terms as much as the vulgar, in order to keep them in active currency. … if a single word, devised in hatred and defamation of political liberty, can be made the symbol of all that is absurd and execrable, so that the very sound of it shall irritate the passions of this ignorant and scorned multitude, as dogs have been taught to bark at the name of a neighbouring tyrant, it is a commodious expedient for rendering these passions available and subservient to the interests of those who despise, while they cajole,

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[47] John Foster, 'On the Moral and Intellectual Effects of Natural Scenery', in *Brief Notes of Several Religious Lectures, with a few Occasional Tracts* (London: Holdsworth, 1837), pp. 74-75; much of this early essay by Foster appeared in his review of Charles Bucke's *The Philosophy of Nature; or, The Influence of Scenery on the Mind and Heart* (1813), in the *Eclectic Review*, New Series 1 (1814), pp. 457-70.

[48] Ryland, *Life and Correspondence*, vol. 1, pp. 103-04, 105.

[49] The *Essays*, along with *An Essay on the Evils of Popular Ignorance* (1821), were the two works that sustained Foster's fame through most of the 19th century, when critics often compared him to Coleridge and other contemporaneous writers. As Peter Bayne noted, Foster's politics were 'manlier than Southey's, saner than Shelley's, more stable and honest than Byron's': 'John Foster', in *Six Christian Biographies* (London: Duguid Bayne, 1887), p. 265.

[50] Paul Kaufman, 'John Foster's Pioneer Interpretation of the Romantic', *Modern Language Notes* 38 (1923), p. 2.

> their duped auxiliaries. The popular passions are the imps and demons of the political conjuror, and he can raise them, as other conjurors affect to do theirs, by terms of gibberish.[51]

Foster's language and sentiments would have struck a chord with Hazlitt, who in 1808 on his first visit to Winterslow (less than twenty miles from Foster at Frome) could easily have come across a copy of the immensely popular *Essays*.

In 1806 Foster commenced a connection with the *Eclectic Review* that would last until 1839, contributing 185 articles during those years. His book sales and earnings from the *Eclectic* enabled Foster to do what Hazlitt was unable to accomplish during his long career as a writer and essayist—earn a profitable income. Foster's successful transition from minister to journalist struck Cottle as worthy of Coleridge's attention when the latter paid a visit to Bristol in 1807 promoting a new periodical (what would later become *The Friend* in 1809). On two occasions Cottle tried to arrange a meeting between Coleridge and Foster (who described himself at that time as 'a decent journeyman, as the business in general goes'),[52] hoping Foster could offer some assistance and advice to Coleridge about his future prospects. Foster was flattered that he might be able to help Coleridge, a writer whose abilities he greatly admired and felt should be 'devoted strenuously to literary labor'.[53] Though he thought Robert Hall better qualified to do so, Foster agreed to write the first extensive review of Coleridge's prose for the *Eclectic* in October 1811.[54] Foster was quick to recognize that Coleridge had severely misjudged the necessary requirements for a weekly periodical, made worse by his obtuse, at times incomprehensible, prose. *The Friend* was at fault in another area as well, however, an area Foster could not ignore—the alteration in Coleridge's politics. If anything is evident in his reviews of Coleridge, Southey, and Wordsworth, it is that Foster's politics remained constant after the 1790s. Even more than Benjamin Flower, Foster provides a relevant comparison to Hazlitt, for both men, born in the same decade and quickened by republican ideals in the 1790s (Foster had even been willing to face prison for his political activities), would continue to hold to those ideals in the face of an onslaught of defections from the ranks of their former comrades. In 1808 Foster wrote that the primary motive for the majority of the policies of the Tories was their 'hatred and fear of Bonaparte', an indictment Hazlitt would make many times.[55] Foster always admired genius wherever he found it, but he never forgave Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Southey, and even Hall to a degree, for their 'impetuous recoil… from the

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[51] John Foster, *Essays, In a Series of Letters* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1872), pp. 130, 131.

[52] John Foster to Joseph Hughes, 15 February 1808, in Ryland, *Life and Correspondence*, vol. 1, p. 228.

[53] John Foster to an unnamed correspondent in Bristol (possibly Coleridge's benefactor, Josiah Wade), 15 January 1808, in Ryland, *Life and Correspondence*, vol. 1, p. 226.

[54] Besides holding similar political views, Foster and Hazlitt were not far apart in their general assessments of Coleridge's prose and poetry. Foster couches his obvious irritation with Coleridge's obtuseness by describing his prose as creating at times 'a kind of haze… through which this spirit transmits its light'. John Foster, *Contributions, Biographical, Literary, and Philosophical, to The Eclectic Review*, 2 vols (London: Thomas Ward, 1844), vol. 2, p. 7.

[55] From a letter to the editor of the *Eclectic Review*, quoted in Ryland, *Life and Correspondence*, vol. 1, pp. 259-60.

principles of violent democracy'.[56] Foster chided Coleridge for renouncing 'the visionary ideas and wishes which, under various modification of the notion and the love of liberty, elated so many superior minds in that eventful season' in Bristol from 1795 to 1798, when he wrote what Foster calls his 'sublime' *France: An Ode*. Foster was mystified that a man who presented himself in 'the spirit of a perfect moralist, philanthropist, and patriot' and who spoke so forcefully against governmental corruption and social inequities in 1795 should find ways in 1810 'to extenuate the evil of enormous taxation; to make light of the suggestion of the superior benefit of employing a given number of men rather in making canals and building bridges than in destructive military expeditions; to celebrate the happiness of having the much greater part of a thousand millions of a national debt, and the attendant benefit of a paper-currency; or to join in reprobating any party who are zealous for a reform of the legislature and political corruptions'.[57]

Foster understood fully Southey's embarrassment over the Wat Tyler affair in 1817, having inside knowledge of the manuscript himself.[58] Southey left it with another West Country dissenter and political radical, the Baptist minister William Winterbotham of Plymouth, Devon, during the latter's imprisonment in 1793-95 for seditious preaching, a circumstance that, when made known in 1817 after Southey's declaration of support for the government's repressive actions against political radicals and rebels, provoked Hazlitt to rebuke Southey for his hypocrisy. The prosecuting attorney against Winterbotham had put the government's case in much the same terms in 1793 as Southey would do in his 1816 article in the *Quarterly Review*. 'There are no absolute rights of man', the state's attorney declared, 'and if we talk of civil rights of man; *while in a state of civil society*, man has no rights *but what that society which he lives in allows him*.'[59] Flower supported Winterbotham in his editorials in the *Intelligencer*, and like Hazlitt and Foster, never accepted the government's privilege to abrogate the 'inalienable' rights of all human beings. The general shift in public opinion against political reform that began in 1795 had grown even stronger by 1817, yet despite their minority position, Hazlitt, Foster, and Flower refused to renege on the political principles each had first espoused in the 1790s.

If Hazlitt had still been alive in 1831, after the passage of the Catholic Relief Act and during the height of the debate on the Reform Bill, his response might

[56] Foster, *Contributions*, vol. 2, p. 20.
[57] *Ibid*., p. 21.
[58] See Foster to Cottle, 22 June 1843, MS. Letters of John Foster to Joseph Cottle, Bristol Library, B20878. In this collection of letters, Foster has much to say about Southey's poetry as well as his politics. He writes in an undated letter from 1843, 'I cannot get rid of the constant haunting feeling of its [Southey's ten-volume edition of his *Works*] being all shop-work. He made poetry as a regular trade, just as another man would make cabinet work. It is amusing, but in a most unpoetical way, to see him engaging to produce so much, and so much, in a given time, just as if it had been weaving in a loom, when the workman could calculate by the yard against time—More book! More book! It gives a rather low idea of literature'.
[59] *The Trial of Wm. Winterbotham, Assistant Preacher at How's Lane Meeting, Plymouth* (London, 1794), p. 78. Winterbotham's solicitor was John Saunders, Cottle's brother-in-law. Saunders's daughter, Sarah, whom Cottle adored, would later correspond with Foster just prior to her death at the age of eighteen in 1825. See John Foster, *Nine Letters Addressed to Miss Sarah Saunders, during her last Illness*, in Ryland, *Life and Correspondence*, vol. 2, pp. 339-79.

have been similar to that of Foster, who wrote that year to John Easthope (1784-1865), MP for Banbury, about how 'inexpressibly gratifying' it was that 'the principle, that things are to be maintained *because* they are ancient and established', had finally been exploded. 'Even that venerable humbug called "our admirable *constitution*" has suffered woeful assault and battery by this recent transaction', he writes. 'To think of all the nauseous cant there has been about the "constitution" whenever any old established evil has been proposed to be corrected or abolished!'[60] That same year, writing to another friend, Foster recognized that the justice of a cause he, like Flower and Hazlitt, had advocated for so many years had finally been validated: 'How long it has been to wait for a revolution, which, forty years since, many of us fancied to be near at hand; and what an enormity of evil perpetrated during that wide space, in the shapes of war, exhausting profligacy, and all diversities of delusion, oppression, and practised and patronized corruption!'[61]

In 1836, Robert Southey paid his last visit to Bristol and the West Country. Cottle invited Southey and his son, Cuthbert, to attend a dinner party at his sister's home in Bedminster with Walter Savage Landor (whom Hazlitt met in Italy), John Foster, the young poet Romaine Joseph Thorne, and the future essayist John Dix. Dix would later write about the evening, noting that Foster, in true Hazlittian fashion, refused to speak to Southey, remaining distant and moody the entire evening, angry that Cottle had not told him that the Poet Laureate would also be in attendance. Cottle, of course, had withheld the information from Foster deliberately, hoping Foster would finally forgive Southey for the alteration in his politics that had occurred more than three decades before. A few days later, Cottle tried once again to bring the two men together for dinner, but Foster remained firm and declined the invitation, declaring defiantly that he would never voluntarily sit down with an 'apostate'. Though Foster's actions continued to deny him Southey's friendship, it was a consequence Hazlitt would readily have appreciated.[62]

Hazlitt and the fate of the dissenters

Thomas De Quincey wrote in 1845 that Hazlitt, 'who would have drawn in the scales against a select vestry of Fosters, is for the present deeper in the world's oblivion than the man with whom I here connect his name'. Both writers, De Quincey argues, 'were splenetic and more than peevish'. Both were primarily essayists, he notes, and both 'bred at the feet of Dissenters', but the results that came from that connexion were astonishingly different. 'Foster turned it to a blessing', De Quincey confesses, 'winning the jewel that is most of all to be coveted,—peace and the *fallentis semita vitæ*. Hazlitt, on the other hand, sailed wilfully away from this sheltering harbour of his father's profession… only to

[60] John Foster to John Easthope, Esq., 9 March 1831, in Ryland, *Life and Correspondence*, vol. 2, pp. 74-75. For further correspondence between Foster and Easthope, see the John Easthope Papers, Duke University, Special Collections.
[61] John Foster to Josiah Hill, 16 July 1831, in Ryland, *Life and Correspondence*, vol. 2, p. 128.
[62] John Dix, *Pen and Ink Sketches of Authors and Authoresses* (London: Partridge and Oakey, 1852), p. 108.

toss ever afterwards as a drifting wreck at the mercy of storms'.[63] Though he may not have remained, like Foster, a dissenter, Hazlitt did not leave the 'sheltering harbour' of everything his father, as well as his fellow dissenting journalists Benjamin Flower and John Foster, professed, for in matters of politics, Hazlitt remained a child of 1790s radical dissent just like Flower and Foster. Duncan Wu places Hazlitt at the centre of a coterie of radical journalists (some of whom were connected with religious dissent), such as T. J. Wooler, William Hone, John and Leigh Hunt, Richard Carlile, and Daniel Isaac Eaton, during one of the most turbulent, divisive, even vicious, eras in the history of English political journalism.[64] Students of West Country dissenting politics, however, will recognize that Hazlitt's life as a journalist mirrors, with an almost uncanny precision, the actions and writings of another group of individuals who, though not discussed in Wu's biography, likewise espoused the same ideals and were bent on achieving the same goals as Hazlitt and his other London radicals. Whether voiced by its preachers and writers, such as Caleb Evans at Bristol, Robert Hall at Cambridge, Joshua Toulmin at Taunton, William Winterbotham at Plymouth, and John Foster at Frome and Bristol; or by those who, like Benjamin Flower and his wife, Eliza Gould (and Hazlitt, to a degree), were forever connected by circumstances of work and marriage and family history to the West Country; or by poets like Mary Steele at Broughton and her friends Sarah Evans and Sarah Norton Biggs; or two London businessmen once connected with Bristol, Thomas Mullett and Anthony Robinson—all were members of a dissenting circle framed geographically, culturally, and politically by the life writings of Henry Crabb Robinson, but, more importantly, all were part of a tradition of West Country radical dissenting politics, a tradition shared by William Hazlitt, grounded in the political ideals of equality, political reform, and individual liberty.

[63] De Quincey's comments first appeared in *Tait's Magazine*, November and December 1845, and January and April 1846; later reprinted as 'Notes on Gilfillan's Literary Portraits', in *The Collected Writings of Thomas de Quincey*, 14 vols, ed. David Masson (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1890), vol. 11, pp. 335-54. Quotations from p. 341.

[64] See Wu's blow-by-blow account of Hazlitt's battle in 1818 with William Blackwood, proprietor of *Blackwood's Magazine*, a 'malicious thug', Wu writes, 'with 'an utter hatred of competitors' (*William Hazlitt*, p. 245).