The Henry Crabb Robinson Project

(http://www.crabbrobinson.co.uk/)

James Vigus

HENRY CRABB ROBINSON'S TIME HAS COME. He has long lurked in footnotes, his voluminous writings mined for information about more famous figures in the Romantic and Victorian periods. There is as yet no adequate biography. The sheer quantity of his unpublished manuscripts has hitherto deterred scholars from producing more complete and accurate editions than Thomas Sadler's *Diary, Reminiscences and Correspondence of HCR* (1869) or Edith Morley's selections in the early twentieth century (most notably *HCR on Books and Their Writers*, 1938). Now in preparation, however, is a critical edition of Robinson's *Reminiscences* in 4 volumes, followed by his extensive *Diary*, to be published with Oxford University Press. The series editors are Timothy Whelan (Georgia Southern University) and James Vigus (Queen Mary University of London); Philipp Hunnekuhl (University of Hamburg) is preparing the OUP edition of a sequence of *Early Diaries*. Full information appears on the project website, housed by the new Queen Mary Centre for Religion and Literature in English, www.crabbrobinson.ac.uk.

Who was Robinson? Readers may know him as the provider of unique reports on some of Coleridge's literary lectures; the patcher-up of the quarrel between Coleridge and Wordsworth; the author of the first critical article on William Blake (published in German in 1811) and a major source for Alexander Gilchrist's Blake biography of 1863; or as the indefatigable walker and companion, prompt with 'kindnesses' and 'self-sacrifice', celebrated in Wordsworth's *Memorials of a Tour in Italy* (1837): 'Companion! by whose buoyant Spirit cheered,/In whose experience trusting, day by day/ Treasures I gained with zeal that neither feared/The toils nor felt the crosses of the way.'

Not only did Robinson walk and talk his way around Britain and Europe, but his energy propelled him into many other fields, too. On returning to England after a five-year trip to Germany (1800-1805) enabled by a legacy from an uncle, he qualified as a barrister. It was as an expert on German literature that he gained membership of the Athenaeum club in London. With his characteristically excessive modesty, he doubted the sincerity of Coleridge's praise of his translation of the German fairy-tale *Amatonda*. As a student at the University of Jena, Robinson gained an intimate understanding of the (post)-Kantian revolution in German philosophy before Coleridge began to study it—knowledge that served him well when he later reviewed works of Coleridge such as *Aids to Reflection*. When Madame de Staël, exiled from Napoleonic France and travelling with Benjamin Constant, visited nearby Weimar in 1804, Robinson was called upon to give her private lectures on German aesthetic theory. Staël took his manuscripts with her, annotated them, and used them as a source for her bestseller *On Germany*, which Robinson helped her to publish with John Murray in London in 1813. Staël was quick to appreciate Robinson's exceptionally clear and accurate accounts of German thought, now collected in

Essays on Kant, Schelling, and German Aesthetics, ed. James Vigus (2010). Genial and generous to his many friends, Robinson was a consummate networker, as well as promoter of female writers and their interests. In later life, settled in London, he would often take the long walk from his home in Russell Square to visit Mary Hays in Greenwich, reading continuously as he went.

As a religious dissenter, specifically a Unitarian, Robinson bequeathed his manuscripts together with much of his library to Dr Williams's Library, which had been established in the eighteenth century for the use of nonconformists. When Coleridge and Southey visited the 'library belonging to the Dissenters' it was still at its original location in Red Cross Street; in 1890 it came to its present home at 14, Gordon Square, where it remains open to readers today (see dwl.ac.uk). This building was formerly University Hall (as described at www.ucl.ac.uk/bloomsbury-project/institutions/university_hall.htm).

Robinson's role as a co-founder of University College London was honoured shortly after his death by a huge fresco in the dining hall—now the lecture hall of Dr Williams's Library. The artist, Edward Armitage, depicted Robinson surrounded by his most famous friends in larger-than-life monochrome portraits. The mural was covered in the 1950s, but the Library recently exhibited a set of photographs, which revealed the fact that Robinson appeared above the door, next to Coleridge—though not present in the image below. Conservation of the extensive Robinson collection, as with other unique collections at Dr Williams's Library, is a long-term challenge. Readers may wish to explore the Dr Williams's Library Adopt Scheme (dwlibadopt.org), through which the following image from Armitage's fresco has been kindly provided.