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The Letters of William Godwin, Volume II: 1798-1805

(Oxford University Press, 2015)

ed. by Pamela Clemit

THIS SECOND VOLUME OF A PROJECTED SIX once again displays Pamela Clemit's comprehensive and meticulous editorial work. The first volume charted William Godwin's rise to prominence, his circles of notable acquaintance, and his relationship with and subsequent tragic loss of Mary Wollstonecraft. Volume II traces a man who must negotiate his way through new tides of change. As with the first volume, Clemit's attention to biographical detail is outstanding: she brings to light much information about people who might otherwise have remained relatively obscure. She has successfully identified dates, collated published and unpublished texts, and footnoted relevant extracts from letters that precede and/or succeed Godwin's response, thereby ensuring maximum completeness of reading. Clemit's work has greatly enhanced the accessibility of a major portion of the Abinger Collection of the Bodleian Library.

Friendship forms the subject of many of the letters in this volume as Godwin gains, loses, and strives to maintain friends, and disciples, old and new. His correspondence with first Harriet Lee and subsequently Maria Reveley (later Gisborne) show his unsuccessful attempts at courting them. There is a poignancy to certain of these letters as Godwin seeks to recreate the intellectual compatibility and intimacy he had found with Wollstonecraft. Strains of the familiar Godwin can be detected as he appeals to moral equality, rather than the religious harmony Lee evidently desires in a prospective spouse. He writes: 'The sanction of morality derived from religion consists principally in rewards & punishments. I believe, & I dare affirm that you believe, that the man who is moral, merely from a conception of rewards & punishments, is not a virtuous man at all' (35). Godwin works hard at trying to 'strike out truth' through the healthy 'collision of mind with mind', as set out in *Political Justice*, but he cannot conceal his contempt for mistaken virtue, which he believes is intrinsically bound up with religious piety and a doctrine of faith grounded in fear, or good works.[1] His attempts to convince Lee that there are others who do not embrace his beliefs, but who still hold him in high regard are unsuccessful. As the letters show, Godwin went on to meet mother of two Mary Jane Clairmont and married her in 1801. His correspondence shows his devotion to her, but also reveals that she was a character who sat troublesomely between Godwin and his 'principal' friend, the actor, playwright, and novelist, Thomas Holcroft (GL I 106). [2]

The letters of Volume II contain evidence of Holcroft's struggle following

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[1] William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, ed. by Mark Philp, 1st edn. (1793) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 21.

[2] The letters of Volume I will be cited in the text as GL, followed by the volume, and page number.

the treason trials of 1794. His literary reputation was damaged due to his involvement in the trials, and he also suffered increasingly with ill-health. He made the decision in 1799 to move with his family, to Hamburg to live with his eldest daughter Sophy Cole.[3] A letter from Godwin to an unknown addressee reveals the significance of Holcroft's friendship and how acutely Godwin felt its impending loss: 'I am on the point of losing Holcroft,' he writes: 'if I lose you too, I shall have no instructor, no adviser, no pilot, but, trusted to my own devices, shall be left to make every day blunders as egregious as I am told I made in the publication of the Memoirs, where I consulted neither' (83-4). His letter refers to his supposedly misguided, certainly grief-stricken resolve to publish, in shocking detail, the memoirs of his late wife, Mary Wollstonecraft. The same letter indicates how strongly he relied upon the opinion of his 'principal' friend Holcroft, and expresses how mentoring formed an essential part of their friendship (and others among the 'English Jacobins'). Reflecting the fact that utility was a key principle of Godwinian friendship, correspondence once Holcroft arrived in Germany shows that Godwin worked hard to help his friend in his proposed ventures as a translator of successful European literary works, and an importer of European art. At times, Godwin felt that Holcroft was unappreciative of the efforts he made on his behalf, but true to shared principles he was honest and frank in recording such sentiment. Distance, and the reliance on communication by letter put a strain on their relationship, Godwin attempted to convince Holcroft to return home, arguing that the consequence of debtors' prison would be tolerable, if he were but here to oversee his new ventures for himself, and have physical contact with the friends who would help him.

However, the trials of friendship ensued: there was an 'insult' from Holcroft to Godwin's wife Mary Jane; Holcroft's extensive criticism of Godwin's manuscript play; and Godwin felt slighted by Holcroft during a toast. All this ruptured their intimacy. A stark letter finally breaking their friendship came from Holcroft, who simply wrote: 'instead of seeing you at dinner tomorrow I desire never to see you more, being determined never to have *any* further intercourse with you of *any* kind' (338). Godwin's novel *Fleetwood* had been published, and Holcroft read in the severity of Scarborough's character and subsequent suicide of his son a slight, believing that they were drawn from himself and his son William, who had shot himself in the presence of Holcroft and Godwin in 1789. Godwin, in a letter to his close friend James Marshall, protested his innocence. However, his parting letter to Holcroft, written on his fiftieth birthday, contained a measure of pomposity mixed with considerable sorrow: 'I will never think of you, but as a dear friend, who died on the 28th of February last […] I will think only of the friend I possessed for the period of nearly twenty years […] twenty years of an attachment difficult to be paralleled has expired' (340). As Clemit notes, Godwin and Holcroft did meet on occasion at the homes of shared friends and acquaintance. They were not

[3] For a revised chronology of Holcroft's life and works see, Miriam L. Wallace and A. A. Markley eds., *Reviewing Thomas Holcroft, 1745-1809* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), pp. xvii-xx.

properly reconciled, however, until the days leading up to Holcroft's death in 1809.

Marshall, who had been a close friend of Godwin since their days as students at Hoxton Dissenting Academy, was entrusted with the care of Godwin and Wollstonecraft's daughter Mary (later, Mary Shelley), and Godwin's step-daughter Fanny Imlay (daughter of Wollstonecraft and Gilbert Imlay), whilst Godwin visited the Irish Patriot politician and lawyer John Philpot Curran in 1800.[4] His letters to Marshall contain loving and affectionate messages to the two girls. He writes: 'Tell Mary, I will not give her away, & she shall be nobody's little girl, but papa's: papa is gone away, but papa will soon come back again, & look out at the coach-window, & see the Polygon across two fields, from the trunk of trees at Camden Town. Will Mary & Fanny come & meet me?' (147).[5] Some of the correspondence, including later letters to his wife Mary Jane, provides interesting depictions of London ('home') as it was.

Godwin's visit to Ireland, and to Curran in particular, spurred him to write to another man he held in high esteem, namely Samuel Taylor Coleridge. As Clemit notes, their friendship began in the winter of 1799-1800, and was continued by letters: 'Over the next few years, Coleridge provided encouragement and practical advice as Godwin sought to extend his literary repertoire by writing plays, biographies, and children's books' (xxxiii).[6] There are four letters in this volume, and numerous footnotes which either provide relevant extracts from Coleridge's response, or draw on Godwin's diary to note meetings and dinners together. The first letter, regarding Godwin's trip to Ireland and sketching Curran's character, was not sent to Coleridge. Instead, Godwin wrote on his return home: 'Immediately on my return I was met with the mortifying intelligence of your removal to Keswick' (168). Godwin tells Coleridge that he had written the unsent letter, but that he did not post it chiefly because his regard for Curran lessened on further acquaintance. Godwin found it hard to trace enough of the philosopher in a man 'devoted to the profession of law' (169). However, other letters within the volume demonstrate that Godwin's initial admiration for Curran was maintained, and the noteworthy traits Godwin had discerned in Irish national character are also reflected in Coleridge's response. Coleridge writes, 'Whatever I have read of Curran's has impressed me with a deep conviction of his Genius'. He continues: 'Are not the Irish in general a more eloquent race, than we?' (171-2, n. 8, quoting from CL I 619-20). A later letter invites Coleridge to dine at Godwin's with Curran and others, but Coleridge was out of town. (The poet-novelist Charlotte Smith was also unable to attend; she is mentioned in the above letter as Coleridge had sought her address from Godwin.) The letter is

[4] Clemit notes: 'During the 1790s, [Curran] was the defence counsel of choice for prosecuted members of the Society of United Irishmen […] After the implementation of the Union in 1801, he concentrated on his legal practice' (202, n. 1). On Godwin's trip, see further Pamela Clemit and Jenny McAuley, "'A nation in its last moments": William Godwin's Visit to Ireland, 1800,' in *History Ireland*, 23: 4 (July/August 2015), 22-24.

[5] The Polygon was home to Godwin and Wollstonecraft while she was alive.

[6] See further Pamela Clemit, 'Coleridge and Godwin: A Literary Friendship', Wordsworth Trust Blog, 19 May 2015: https//wordsworth.org.uk/blog/2015/05/19/Coleridge-and-godwin-a-literary-friendship/.

most notable for Godwin's honesty regarding the invaluable effect of Coleridge's friendship. He writes:

> There are many circumstances, which it might perhaps cost me some trouble to fully define, that render your conversation singularly adapted to amuse, to instruct & to interest me. This is partly because we have pursued dissimilar objects, & contemplated the same objects in a dissimilar spirit. I longed for the opportunity of engrafting your quince upon my apple-tree, & melting & combining several of your modes of feeling & deciding, into the substance of my mind. Perhaps too I mention something better than this, when I say, that I feel myself a purer, a simpler, a more unreserved & natural being in your company than in that of almost any human creature (169).

Godwin's reflections significantly combine both theory and practice. In *Political Justice* he had written of the importance of the first-hand observation of 'men and things', and of 'unguarded moments […] when the soul pours out its inmost self into the bosom of an equal and a friend.'[7] He would develop his model in a later essay, 'Of Love and Friendship' (1831), in which essential equality balances out tensions in mentoring and friendship and between moral superiority and inferiority; the result of this is 'true' friendship where 'man can come together as man merely to a man.'[8] The letter just quoted, and a later one in which Godwin responds to Coleridge's criticism of his second manuscript play, signal Godwinian friendship in progress. As William St Clair notes concerning the manuscript play and Coleridge's criticism: 'Many an established writer would have taken offence at such treatment from a younger man whose own reputation owed more to promise than achievement', but Godwin, 'perhaps recalling the undiluted sincerity which he himself always inflicted on his own friends' manuscripts, thanked Coleridge politely.'[9] Accepting criticism did not always come easily to Godwin, and there is often the impression in the letters of Volume II of a heightened degree of sensitivity. Godwin's reputation, like Holcroft's, had suffered, and the letters in this volume show how acutely he felt this. However, his polite response to Coleridge's criticism may also be seen as further evidence that 'combining several of Coleridge's modes of feeling & deciding, into the substance of his mind,' was clearly desired, yet difficult to practice (169).

Earlier letters record Godwin's public loss of reputation and friendship assisted by, for example, the publication of James Mackintosh's *Law of Nature and Nations* and Dr Samuel Parr's *Spital Sermon*. Although Godwin's circles had decreased in size, letters still arrived from writers such as Elizabeth

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[7] *Political Justice*, p. 209.

[8] William Godwin, 'Of Love and Friendship', in *Thoughts on Man his Nature, Productions, and Discoveries*, in *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin: Essays*, ed. by Mark Philp, Vol. 6 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1993). Hereafter cited as *PPW*.

[9] William St Clair, *The Godwins and the Shelleys: The Biography of a Family* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 236. For a fuller account of Coleridge's annotation see pp. 233-7.

Inchbald, John Horne Tooke, and Mary Robinson.[10] Continuing correspondence with Thomas Wedgwood, mainly with a financial concern, forms a substantial part of the volume; further noteworthy correspondents include John Philip Kemble, Richard Brinsley Sheridan and others connected with the theatre, as Godwin tried to turn playwright.[11] Other letters provide valuable insight into the complex world of publishing, and chart Godwin's move to the publisher Richard Phillips, founder of the radical *Leicester Herald*, revealing the difficulties in their relationship. Elsewhere Godwin giving advice to a would-be writer documents how difficult it was for an unknown author to publish. A letter 'To the Commissioners of Property Tax' provides insight into taxation systems of the day, whilst those to Marshall, while Godwin is away, mention payment of Godwin's maid. Clemit's annotation embraces the mundane and everyday, so that the letters feel like a window on late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century life. St Clair notes that Mary Godwin Shelley became 'the possessor of… one of the richest literary and biographical archives ever seen, spanning two generations and more of a family that wrote everything down and covering both sides of many fascinating exchanges of correspondence with some of the leading thinkers of the age.'[12] *The Letters of William Godwin* contain an important portion of what St Clair refers to, and Clemit's tireless attention to detail enhances the insight they afford. *The Letters* read like a story, and through the annotations are richly intertwined with many other tales, from the everyday, to the political, the contemporary, to the historical. The diligent work of Mark Philp, David O'Shaughnessy and Victoria Myers editors of the Godwin Diary Project is also evident in the *Letters*, as this source is frequently a key one for Clemit's identifications of people, venues, and dates.[13] Contextualised in this way, *The Letters* become a vital reference tool for scholars of varying disciplines, and will be essential reading for scholars of the Romantic period.

[10] See, William Godwin, *Thoughts Occasioned by the Perusal of Dr Parr's Spital Sermon, Preached at Christ Church, April 15, 1800: being a Reply to the Attacks of Dr Parr, Mr. Mackintosh, the Author of an Essay on Population, and Others*, in *PPW* 6.

[11] See further William Godwin, *The Plays of William Godwin*, ed. by David O'Shaughnessy (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009); David O'Shaughnessy, *William Godwin and the Theatre* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2010).

[12] *The Godwins and the Shelleys*, p. 490.

[13] William Godwin, *The Diary of William Godwin*, ed. by Victoria Myers, David O'Shaughnessy, and Mark Philp (Oxford: 2010): <http://www.godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/reading/index-disc.html>.