

**Stephen Burley, *Hazlitt the Dissenter: Religion, Philosophy, and Politics, 1766-1816*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Pp. 220. £60. ISBN 9781137364425.**

Hazlitt's reputation has, as Stephen Burley observes, enjoyed something of a renaissance in recent years, and a once peripheral writer has become a major figure within Romantic studies. We might feel that we know Hazlitt by now but this impressive new study offers a strikingly original departure: instead of focusing on Hazlitt's post-1812 career as a journalist and critic, it offers a detailed account of his background, education and early writings to show how his work was steeped in the eighteenth-century culture of Rational Dissent.

While drawing on the recent rich body of writing about Hazlitt, Burley differentiates his own approach from accounts that have emphasized Hazlitt's role in the creation of English Romanticism and a recognisably modern form of criticism. In particular, he shows how literary historians have persistently used 'My First Acquaintance with Poets' to date the start of Hazlitt's career to his first meeting with Coleridge in 1798. For Burley, Hazlitt's intellectual life begins much earlier, within the transatlantic milieu of radical Protestant Dissent. As he acknowledges, citing the work of Tom Paulin, Duncan Wu and Jon Mee, the 'shaping influence of Dissent' (4) has not been entirely neglected by Hazlitt scholars, but by finishing his study in 1816 Burley presents a very different and deeply convincing portrait.

The first of the four chapters is devoted to William Hazlitt Senior (1737-1820) and reveals the extent to which his son's passionate belief in religious and political liberty was an inherited faith. Burley presents Hazlitt Sr as a leading Unitarian polemicist and prominent member of the Joseph Priestley circle, whose mission as 'the first Unitarian apostle' (5) to the United States from 1783 to 1787 pre-dated Priestley's better-known work. Hazlitt Sr helped to convert the King's Chapel in Boston to Unitarianism but his time in America was not a complete success; like his son, his adherence to the Dissenting virtues of candour and plain-speaking would often work against him. Burley situates his theological writings within the context of late-eighteenth-century religious controversy and shows how he educated his son in preparation for his training for the Unitarian ministry at New College, Hackney.

The second chapter gives a detailed history of this institution, the most radical Dissenting academy of its day. New College was founded in 1786 as an embodiment of 'the buoyant spirits and high aspirations of late eighteenth-century Dissent' (52). By the time Hazlitt arrived in 1793, however, it was heavily in debt, the result of grandiose building schemes, and viewed by loyalists as a cradle of sedition. Burley presents new evidence on the connections between the academy and 1790s radicalism. He also gives a thorough account of the intellectual life of the academy, which continued to influence Hazlitt's intellectual development long after his decision in 1795 to abandon his ministerial training. The following chapter argues that Hazlitt's philosophical treatise on the disinterested imagination, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805), was rooted in the New College curriculum and, specifically, in Hazlitt's growing dissatisfaction with what he saw as the mechanistic epistemology of his tutors Priestley and Thomas Belsham, while more positively engaging with Richard Price's idealist model of the creative mind and Thomas Reid's 'common sense' philosophy.

In the final chapter, Burley moves from philosophy to politics and Hazlitt's early polemics. Here, once more, there is a basic inheritance from the traditions of Rational Dissent, formulated around narratives of liberty, revolution and martyrdom. But the ties to Dissenting culture were also loosened as a result of new influences and alliances. It is well-known that Hazlitt's *Reply to Malthus* (1807) was part-serialized in William Cobbett's *Weekly Political Register*, but Burley presents the fascinating discovery that Hazlitt's obituary of William Pitt, from *Free Thoughts on Public Affairs*, was published in the pages of

same newspaper the previous year. Here, in a pen portrait later re-printed in *Political Essays* (1819), Hazlitt condemns Pitt as an empty sophist: 'His reasoning is a technical arrangement of unmeaning common-places, his eloquence merely rhetorical, his style monotonous and artificial.' In his 'Character of Cobbett' (1821), Hazlitt wrote that he had only seen Cobbett on a single occasion (tantalisingly, 'I certainly did not think less favourably of him for seeing him') and we have no information on how Hazlitt's searing indictment of Pitt came to be published, under the pseudonym 'Verax', in Cobbett's *Political Register*. We can only conclude that it was sent, unsolicited, by an unknown writer to an editor always hungry for copy. There is a neat irony in the fact that Cobbett's own career had begun in Philadelphia in opposition to Priestley's religious and political views. By 1806, however, his views were aligned with Hazlitt's and directed against Pitt's legacy, Malthusian population theory and the conduct of the Foxite Whigs in parliament.

This is an important contribution to Hazlitt studies, written with great clarity and founded on rigorous scholarship. Burley's conclusion reflects on the potential for re-evaluating Hazlitt's later writings in the light of his research. Pointing to the 'rich interplay and co-existence of sacred and secular themes' (165), and joining with recent work by Kevin Gilmartin and John Whale, his thoughts suggest the limitations of our present conception of British Romanticism as a primarily secular formation. This can perhaps be detected in the scholarly preference for Rational Dissent over older or more enthusiastic forms of Dissent: not only was Unitarianism more closely connected to publishing and elite intellectual life, but liberal Dissent often formed the high road to atheism. This may have been true for Hazlitt, who left Hackney 'an avowed infidel', but Burley superbly demonstrates the continued relevance of his Dissenting heritage.

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