William Hone’s Peterloo

Editor, journalist, publisher, pamphleteer, reformer, writer of doggerel and coffee-house keeper, William Hone was hugely famous between 1815 until 1830. The range of his literary and political interactions, the collaborations with George Cruikshank, the blend of high and low characteristics in his work, and his infamy after three trials for blasphemous sedition made him one of the best-known radical writers in the country. His readership encompassed the full range of society, from Cabinet ministers to the barely literate and disenfranchised. He was a prolific publisher, producing 175 publications between 1815 and 1821,¹ the main focus of which is injustice and hypocrisy. Hone attacks the treatment of inmates in lunatic asylums; a judicial system that hangs people for the possession of forged paper money; the conditions of the urban working class; the Regent and the government of mediocrities he identifies as being responsible for the plight of the poor; he champions Queen Caroline; publishes Keats’s poems and John Clare’s – he even publishes Blake during the poet’s lifetime – as well as Hazlitt’s Political Essays at a loss; forges canto three of Byron’s Don Juan; embarks on a history of parody and eventually pursues his antiquarian interests in books such as Ancient Mysteries Described and the Every-day Book. He was friendly with the literary elite: William Hazlitt, Leigh and John Hunt, John Cam Hobhouse and Charles Lamb were counted as friends, and yet he maintained ties with the sometime pornographer William Benbow, reformers such as William Cobbett, Major Cartwright and Henry Hunt, and revolutionaries such as ‘Doctor’ Watson and Arthur Thistlewood. Since the 1970s Hone’s work has been examined by Edgell Rickword, Olivia Smith, Iain MacCalman, Marcus Wood, Kyle Grimes and Sally Ledger, there has also been a biography by Ben Wilson – the first since Frederick Hackwood’s excellent study published
in 1912. This chapter follows these works by examining, specifically, Hone’s cross-class engagement with the Peterloo controversy, for which he produced three popular publications, which combine text and image: *The Political House that Jack Built, The Man in the Moon* and *A Slap at Slop* (which had combined sales of around 250,000 copies) and an important, but less well-known poem that purports to be by Byron, *Don Juan Canto the Third*.

Two days before the Peterloo massacre Hone published Hazlitt’s *Political Essays*, the publishers Taylor and Hessey having previously rejected Hazlitt’s proposal for the book. Edgell Rickword says of the arrangement:

> I do not think any one of Hazlitt’s biographers has been generous enough in recognising the courage of Hone’s action, for the book runs to over four hundred pages, and he paid the author a hundred pounds into the bargain. It does not seem to have done the publisher much good, for we find the sheets bound up with a cancel-title under the imprint of Simpkin Marshall in only three years time.

Duncan Wu notes that the first edition was still on sale at a reduced price as late as 1840. But as Tom Paulin points out: ‘Angry, rough, vigorous, wild, Hazlitt’s *Political Essays* draws sustenance from its identification with Hone. Though Hone was viewed as an opportunist, ruffian journalist, Hazlitt obviously welcomed the association with him, and enjoyed his and Cruikshank’s company.’

There seems to have been a very close relationship between Hone and Hazlitt, as Patmore recounts: ‘If I were required to name the person among all Hazlitt’s intimates in whose society he seemed to take the most unmingled pleasure – or should I say with whom he felt himself most at ease and ‘comfortable’ – I should say it was the late William Hone, author of the celebrated “Parodies.”’ In a review of Hazlitt’s *Table Talk*, the reviewer for *The Quarterly Review* also associates Hazlitt and Hone: ‘Apollo . . . finds us occupied (as Perseus found the Hyperboreans of old) in his favourite amusement, the sacrifice of asses – Hone, Hunt, Hazlitt.’ The reviewer affects a high style to distance himself from the accessible and therefore vulgar styles of Hazlitt, Hone and Hunt. He then labels them with Washington Irving’s recently coined term ‘slang-whanger’ and then defines it as ‘One who makes use of political or other gabble, vulgarly called slang, that serves to amuse the rabble.’ And in order to ‘amuse the rabble’, ‘the disciplines of the Radical school lose no opportunity of insinuating their poison into all sorts of subjects;