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The Inquiring Sort: Ideas and Learning in late  
Eighteenth-Century Birmingham

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Thesis submitted in part fulfilment for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy

University of Warwick, Department of History

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## **Declaration**

I declare this thesis to be wholly my own work, completed since the beginning of my period of doctoral study in 2000. It has not previously, in whole or in part, been submitted for any other degree at any other university. Elements of the material in Chapter 6 have been presented at the Fifth Conference of the North Western Section of the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, 'Ordering the World in the Eighteenth Century', 2002.

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**PAGE  
NUMBERING  
AS ORIGINAL**

## Abstract

The conflicting visions of eighteenth-century society offered by J C D Clark and the historians of the English Enlightenment are here used as a means by which to examine aspects of the public sphere of Birmingham. Whilst it was a town of conviviality and consumption of culture, these activities were suffused with a serious purpose born of religious conviction. The concept of the Inquiring Sort has been developed to describe this aspect of Birmingham Society. A case study has been made of Freemasonry in Birmingham, as an example of a group within the Inquiring Sort. The public sphere of ideas and learning, in which the Inquiring Sort spent leisure time, included lectures, libraries, bookshops and debating societies. The spaces in which they moved, marked both by places of fashionable consumption and places of cultural consumption, have been mapped and their world of books and texts analysed. The role of religious inquiry is a key thread in these areas. The roles played by ideas and learning in three elements of Birmingham industry are examined: gaining skills through the printed word, the marketing of goods and the place of fashion. Knowledge of the self is seen to be key in each case. Religion in eighteenth-century Birmingham is explored, focusing particularly on the previously under-researched Established Church there. Finally the reaction of the Established Church to controversial ideas, particularly to the radical Unitarianism of Joseph Priestley, is analysed. It is argued that disputes over such ideas were central in the development of hostilities in the town during the 1780s, which culminated in the Church and King riot of 1791.

## Introduction

This thesis presents a study of the place of ideas and learning in eighteenth-century Birmingham. The world of ideas and their acquisition is one which has recently occupied several areas of historical research. Work on consumption, consumerism and luxury has found that books, lectures and even ideas themselves were increasingly viewed as commodities to be acquired and displayed by the middling sort during the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> In the last two decades, historians of print culture have begun to see the physical expression of ideas and learning as a subject worthy of study in itself.<sup>2</sup> Recent work on the Industrial Enlightenment has seen networks of ideas and learning as crucial to the progress of the Industrial Revolution.<sup>3</sup> However, these historians have, in general, not made detailed studies of single locales. An exception is Denise Fowler who, in her recent PhD thesis *Social Distinction and the Written Word*, made a study of Warwick and Draguignan (in Provence).<sup>4</sup> Looking at two small towns, she made a close study of the way in which the written word and advanced aspects of literacy became tools of social distinction during the last decades of the eighteenth century. The value of such a detailed study is manifest: Fowler was able to study the schooling, work, leisure, correspondence and general papers of two families, one in each town. Her 'micro-history' enabled her to discover the nuanced social distinction that came with the acquisition of

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<sup>1</sup> John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination. English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1997); John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London, 1991); Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (eds), *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century* (Basingstoke and New York, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Roger Darnton and Dared Roche (eds), *Revolution in Print: The Press in France 1775 - 1800* (Berkeley, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Joel Mokyr, *The Gifts of Athena: Historical Origins of the Knowledge Economy* (Princeton and Oxford 2002); also the work of Margaret Jacob, for example: Margaret Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment. Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (New York and Oxford, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Denise Fowler, 'Social Distinction and the Written Word: Two Provincial Case Studies, Warwick and Draguignan, 1780-1820' (PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1998).

'linguistic capital'.<sup>5</sup> In concentrating on the place of ideas and learning in eighteenth-century Birmingham I hope to make a similarly detailed study.

Historians of print culture, the Industrial Enlightenment and consumption have not, in the main, made detailed studies of their ideas in specific locales. There has also been little attempt to integrate studies of what had been traditionally called Adult Education into the literature of print culture and consumption. Yet, especially in a town such as Birmingham, where many of the middling sort were newly arrived to that state, and many of the workers needed and wanted to learn, learning by adults should be a central aspect of the world of ideas.

This introduction will first look at definitions and concepts surrounding ideas of what it meant to learn and what it meant to be an adult who learnt. I then give a brief introduction to eighteenth-century Birmingham. There follows an outline of the major historiographical ideas which have been central to the thinking behind the thesis and a section on methodology. Finally there is a chapter synopsis.

## **The Adult who Learns**

### Why learning?

This study focuses on learning, specifically on adult learning, rather than the education of children. To study 'learning' gives capacity for breadth and depth that is not available in a thesis limited to 'education'. It is first necessary to define concepts of both 'adult' and 'learning', particularly in relation to the concepts of 'education' and 'child'. For twenty-first-century usage the definition of child/adult might seem to be more obviously achieved, by utilising such tools as age of consent, criminal responsibility or leaving

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<sup>5</sup> Fowler, 'Social Distinction and the Written Word', 'Introduction', p. 9.



formal schooling, and the idea of education/learning more amorphous, without obvious legal definitions or convenient social cut-off points. When applying these ideas to the eighteenth century, however, it is the child/adult boundary which seems frustratingly blurred and the learning/education one which seems clearer.

For the writers of a basic modern book on the philosophy of education, their terms of reference are clear.<sup>6</sup> They are talking about children and schooling. That schooling might be of a more or less formal structure, but its fundamental concern is with methods of transmitting knowledge to a younger generation. Educational practitioners might not see their work as quite so clear cut; they might think of teaching adults or of teaching done beyond the confines of school. But for them, as it was for the philosophers and educators of the eighteenth century, education means the active imparting of ideas, facts, skills or behaviour from one possessing them to one without.

The eighteenth century was a time of extensive debate on the subject of education. The publication of John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*<sup>7</sup> in 1690 provoked an ongoing debate amongst philosophers and theologians about the nature of mind and ideas, as well as how the human mind acquires ideas. Locke's dismissal of the concept of innate ideas provided an unwelcome challenge to many in the Established Church, bringing as it did the possibility of intellectual and moral independence amongst all of its parishioners. Together with his rejection of the Cartesian idea of regaining a prelapsarian perfect knowledge, Locke's rejection of innate ideas paved the way for Enlightenment theories of progress and improvement.<sup>8</sup> Ideas of progress and improvement, theoretically achievable by all, were the background to much influential

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<sup>6</sup> Robin Barrow and Roland Woods, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (London, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (abridged and edited by John Yolton, London, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Hans Aarsloff, 'Locke's Influence', in Vere Chappell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Locke* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 225-6.

eighteenth-century writing on education.

Locke categorised the education of children as a fundamental duty of parents. He challenged Robert Filmer's assertion that parents had an absolute power over their children, deriving from an Adamic, eternal superiority. For Locke

The *Power*, then, *that Parents have* over their Children, arises from that duty which is incumbent on them, to take care of their off-spring, during the imperfect state of Childhood. To inform the Mind, and govern the Actions of their yet ignorant Nonage, till Reason shall take its place, and ease them of that Trouble, is what Children want, and the Parents are bound to.<sup>9</sup>

When the child was educated, part of the power of the parent would wane: 'The first part of *Parental Power*, or rather duty [the education of offspring] . . . terminates at a certain season; when the business of Education is over'.<sup>10</sup> It was not simply a theoretical duty.

According to William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 'The law of duty of parents to their children is that of giving them an *education* suitable to their situation in life: a duty pointed at by reason, and of far the greatest importance of any'.<sup>11</sup>

Appropriate education was, therefore, both a legal duty and the basis of parental power.

During the course of the eighteenth century, the influence of Locke's idea that custom is 'a greater power than nature', resulted in a new set of arguments amongst philosophers and theologians.<sup>12</sup> As children were seen as malleable during their upbringing, there was an ideological battle concerning the balance of power in rights to educate children. Writing a hundred years after Locke, Joseph Priestley – a resident of Birmingham during the late eighteenth century – was concerned, less with the duty of a

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<sup>9</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (ed. with an introduction by Peter Laslett, Cambridge, 1970), Book II, Chapter VI, 58.

<sup>10</sup> Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, II. VI. 69.

<sup>11</sup> William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England. Book the First* (Oxford, 1765), p. 439.

<sup>12</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1.3.25.

parents to educate their children, and more with the rights of parents to educate their children in the manner they thought fit.<sup>13</sup> His *An Essay on the First Principles of Government* developed out of arguments with Dr Brown on state intervention in education. Brown had argued for the creation of a Spartan system with children educated by, and in the interests of, the State. Priestley, who was vehemently opposed to State intervention in almost all areas of life, argued that such a system would be injurious to liberty, to religious toleration and to the development of the art of education. He wrote, 'It is possible indeed, that the preservation of some civil societies, such as that of Sparta, may require this sacrifice [putting the education of children exclusively in the hands of the state]; but those civil societies must be wretchedly constituted to stand in need of it, and had better be utterly dissolved.'<sup>14</sup>

The practicalities of the education of children were issues of debate and concern to many during the eighteenth century, especially to the Dissenting middle class, whose religion excluded their children from the established paths of education. However, it was not simply exclusion from Oxford and Cambridge which led some parents to consider the manner in which their children were educated. For many, there was a concern that the established mode of education for a gentleman was not fitting or useful for a young man who was to make a living in the world.

Many parents turned to published advice on education. Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* was hugely popular during the eighteenth century.<sup>15</sup> He presented the child as a creature of pure potential, who, with observation, appropriate training and play, could be moulded into a happy and productive citizen. Locke was concerned with

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Political Writings* (ed. by Peter N Miller, Cambridge, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> Priestley *Political Writings*, p. 47.

<sup>15</sup> John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (ed. by John W and Jean S Yolton, Oxford, 1989).

the education of a male child of the gentry. However, the appeal of his scheme was wide. The *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* had rejected the idea of both innate ideas and Original Sin as contrary to reason, the Bible and the idea of a benevolent God.<sup>16</sup> His humane vision of the child in *Some Thoughts* was informed by those theories, and was attractive both to Protestant Dissenting parents, and to many amongst the English nobility and middle class who were influenced by a general change in attitudes to children during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, stressing the importance of nurture and education of children, rather than seeing them of objects to control.<sup>17</sup> For Locke the ideal course of education should be fitting, not only to the capacities and propensities of the child concerned, but to his future course in life. He stressed the importance of appropriate education; to those who wondered that he had omitted Greek from his course of studies he explained ‘[that] I am not here considering of the Education of a profess’d Scholar, but of a Gentleman, to whom *Latin* and *French*, as the World now goes, is by every one acknowledged to be necessary’.<sup>18</sup> Priestley, himself a lecturer on a wide variety of subjects, rejected the education offered by Oxford and Cambridge as ‘pools of stagnant water’ recommending instead to any child destined for an active life, the Dissenting Academies and their wide and practical schemes of learning.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast to the idea of education, with its possibility for passivity (‘I was educated’), learning is the activity which is undertaken by the recipients of education. And it is by its nature a polymorphous activity. One does not have to ‘be learned’, one can learn without the input of a third party or from a third party who had no active intent

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<sup>16</sup> Aarsloff, ‘Locke’s Influence’, pp. 255 - 258; Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

<sup>17</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage* (London, 1977), pp. 4-9.

<sup>18</sup> Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, p. 249.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Works*, XIX, 128, cited Ruth Watts, ‘Joseph Priestley and Education’, *Enlightenment and Dissent 2* (1983), p. 97; Joseph Priestley, *Miscellaneous Observations relating to Education* (London, 1780).

to educate. However, for the purposes of studying 'adult learning', it is important to restrict research to learning which is both active and with intent.

Epistemology during the eighteenth century owed much to the influence of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Locke's rejection of innate ideas and revealed truths as 'empty and socially disruptive', and his insistence that God had given, not self-evident rules, but the facilities to investigate His rules, was influential in the development of empiricism and the idea of experimental method.<sup>20</sup> The major educational impact of these ideas, stretching from Locke to Priestley, via David Hartley's associationism, was that anyone could learn. For Locke, differences in learning amongst people in England and between the peoples of the world, came not from the natural capacity of individuals to learn, but from unequal opportunities. Most obvious were differences in time and leisure to learn. But, fundamental to Locke's ideas about learning, was the fact that unequal opportunities of communication lay behind the differences in people's learning. 'A Plough-man of your Neighbourhood, that has never been out of his parish' would be in language and demeanour according to 'those he uses to converse with'; it was only the circumstances of the ploughman's life which made his behaviour and learning that of a ploughman.<sup>21</sup> For Locke, levels of communication led to gradations in intellectual potential, with rural labourers having little opportunity compared with urban workers.<sup>22</sup>

John Locke was a fundamental influence on David Hartley in his development of the theory of associationism, by which the state of a person's mind is the result of nothing but the sensory experiences to which he has been exposed.<sup>23</sup> Priestley, who reprinted Hartley's *Observations on Man* in 1775, found that these ideas gave him a

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<sup>20</sup> Aarsloff, 'Locke's Influence', p. 256; John Yolton, 'Introduction', in Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p. xxviii.

<sup>21</sup> Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, p. 204.

<sup>22</sup> Aarsloff, 'Locke's Influence', pp. 258-9.

<sup>23</sup> Watts, 'Joseph Priestley and Education', pp. 83-6.

theoretical basis, informed by Hartley's experiments, for his idea of the possibility of discovering and comprehending perfectly the creation of the Divine Being, leading to the end of the world being 'glorious and paradisaical'.<sup>24</sup> Associationism led Priestley to the belief that anyone could learn anything. He believed that women could, and should, learn the same things as men. However, he did not advocate an extensive programme of education for the poor. He thought that society and individual morality would benefit if the poor could read and write, and instituted classes in his capacity of minister. However, his belief in individualism and associationism meant that he thought that it was possible for individuals to change their circumstances. Writing about dangers to the conspicuous individual in a tyrannical state he said '. . . the poorest can hardly be without some degree of ambition . . . and if he have sense and think differently to his neighbours, he must do the same [keep it private], or risk the fate of Galileo'.<sup>25</sup> He also believed in the right and the possibility of even the poorest to choose their own religion, citing the conversion of slaves to the early Christian Church before their masters.<sup>26</sup>

During the course of the eighteenth century there was a growing interest in learning of all kinds, driven by the increased wealth, security and leisure of the middling sort. The revival of interest in Classicism, the mania for collecting and the formation of book clubs and subscription libraries were all part of the increasing popularity of inquiry as a pleasurable occupation. Learning was part of the lives, not only of scientists and philosophers, but of a wide range of people, from aristocrats collecting classical sculptures to artisans at a humble book club. Priestley and Locke also both encouraged individual study beyond formal education. Although the recipient of Locke's ideal

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<sup>24</sup> Joseph Priestley, *An Essay on the First Principles of Government* (London, 1771), p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 79.

education would not have learnt Greek, 'When he comes to be a Man, if he has a mind to carry his studies farther, and look into the *Greek Learning*, he will then easily get that Tongue himself'.<sup>27</sup> Locke also recommended that an educated gentleman would benefit from learning a manual art, such as wood turning, so that he might have a non-intellectual leisure activity. Priestley, like Locke, thought that communication was vital for intellectual enquiry; his own involvement in the Lunar Society is an example of this. However, he stressed that the basis for any collaboration should be '*independent individuals*, giving voluntary information and advice. For whenever numbers have truth or knowledge for their object . . . the interests of knowledge will certainly suffer, there is so little prospect of the prejudices of the many giving way to the better judgement of the individual.'<sup>28</sup> Priestley did believe that man, as a species, would go on learning and improving throughout his life, but his emphasis was on individual action and benefit.<sup>29</sup>

### The Transition to Adulthood

#### Theory and the Law

For a historian of the eighteenth century, defining the difference between an adult and a child is a difficult task and one which will have no definitive outcome. The definition of an adult is most easily achieved backwards, through an examination the concept of the child, which has more often been the subject of explicit study. Sherwin Marshall, although he does not use the definition in his own work, suggests that the early modern view of the transition between childhood and adulthood might have been based on the first three of the Seven Ages of Man: infancy between birth and seven years, childhood

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<sup>27</sup> Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, p. 249.

<sup>28</sup> Priestley, *Essay on the First Principles of Government*, p. 30.

<sup>29</sup> Priestley, *Essay on the First Principles of Government*, p. 45.

between seven and fourteen years and youth between fifteen and twenty five.<sup>30</sup> This concurs with the conclusion of Joseph Hiner and Ray Hawes, that across cultures and periods there is a continuity in the concept that children undertook new roles between the ages of six and eight and again at puberty and youth.<sup>31</sup> These possible normative ideals, however, are of little practical value in deciding where the line should be drawn between childhood and adulthood in the study of adult learning.

One important aspect of the transition from childhood to adulthood is the changing relationship with parents. For John Locke, this relationship was a crucial element of his debate with Robert Filmer over power and authority. Filmer wrote that ‘Not only Adam, but the succeeding Patriarchs had by Right of Fatherhood Royal Authority over their Children [. . .] This Subjection of Children being the Fountain of all Regal Authority’.<sup>32</sup> Locke needed to establish the basis of parental authority, and how it changed, to challenge Filmer’s ideas on royal authority and prove that man had natural freedom. ‘Children’ he wrote

. . . are not born in this full state of *Equality*, though they are born to it. Their Parents have a sort of Rule and Jurisdiction over them when they come into the World, and for some time after, but ‘tis but a temporary one. The Bonds of this Subjection are like the Swaddling Cloths they are wrapped up in, and supported by, in the weakness of their infancy. Age and Reason as they grow up, loosen them till at length they drop quite off and leave a man at his own free Disposal.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Sherwin Marshall, ‘Childhood in Early Modern Europe’, in Joseph M Hawes and N Ray Hiner, *Children in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (Westport, Connecticut, 1991), p. 55.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph M Hawes and N Ray Hiner, ‘Standing on Common Ground: Reflections on the History of Children and Childhood’, in Hawes and Hiner, *Children in Historical and Comparative Perspective*, p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> Locke, *Two Treatise of Government*, I, VI, 50.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, II, VI, 55.



Parents had a duty to ‘*preserve, nourish and educate*’ and it was from this, and that children had insufficient understanding of the law under which they lived, that parental power derived.<sup>34</sup> Parents could even abdicate some of their power, by handing over their children to a school-master or apprentice-master, who would then command obedience from the child. Only the duty to honour a parent could not be altered.<sup>35</sup> Locke was unambiguous as to the moment that a child becomes an adult; it is the ‘State of Maturity wherein he might be suppos’d capable to know that Law [civil law], so that he might keep his Actions within the Bounds of it’.<sup>36</sup> Although he is more ambiguous about when this might be, ‘at the Age of one and twenty years, and in some cases sooner’, it is the capacity to live within the law which will make a child an adult, and for Locke ‘If this *made* the Father *free*, it shall *make* the Son *free* too.’<sup>37</sup>

In English law itself, there were a variety of relationships which throw light on the problem of when a child became an adult. William Blackstone, like Locke, saw parental duty to children under the law as encompassing maintenance, protection and education.<sup>38</sup> He saw that the law provided limits within which this duty fell.

No person is bound to provide a maintenance for his issue, unless where the children are impotent and unable to work, either through infancy, disease, or accident; and then is only obliged to find them with necessaries . . . For the policy of our laws, which are ever watchful to promote industry, did not mean to compel a father to maintain his idle and lazy children in ease and indolence<sup>39</sup>

Parental power, under the law, also derived from those duties.<sup>40</sup> However, the moment at

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<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, II, VI, 56 and 58.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, II, VI, 69.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, II, VI, 59.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, II, VI, 59.

<sup>38</sup> Blackstone, *Commentaries*, pp. 434 – 447.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 437.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 440 – 1.

which those duties ceased and a child became fully responsible was not a clear cut one, as a glance at Blackstone's section on 'who it is, that is said to be within age' shows.

Age		Aspect of Law
Male	Female	
7	7	'may be capitally punished for any offence' [only if the child could be show to be able to 'discern between good and evil at the time of the offence committed']
	7	'may be betrothed or given in marriage'
	9	'is entitled to dower'
12	12	'not having any visible livelihood, are compellable by two justices to go out to service, for the promotion of honest industry'
12		'may take the oath of allegiance'
14	12	'is at years of discretion, and therefore may consent or disagree to marriage . . . if his discretion be actually proved, may make his testament of his personal estate'
14	14	'may choose his guardian'
14	14	is considered no longer an infant in criminal trials
17	17	'may be an executor'
21	21	'is at his own disposal, and may aliene his lands, goods, and chattels'

*Table 1. Ages at which aspects of English law come into force. Blackstone, Commentaries on the Laws of England, pp. 413 and 451.*

In the eyes of the law a child became an adult slowly, between the years of seven and twenty one. The crucial stages were at the of twenty one, when there was no longer any distinction between that person and one of much greater age, and that between the years of twelve and fourteen when the child became responsible for its keep and began to take responsibility for choices concerning its own life.

### Responsibility and Decision Making

Philippe Ariès, whose work is the initial reference point for so many studies of childhood, formalised the basic principle that childhood is a social construction and variable in time and space.<sup>41</sup> Accepting his principle it should be possible to construct an artificial, but heuristic, category of 'adult'. There are several ways in which it is possible to consider if someone is an adult or a child. Are they economically dependent? Are they constrained in making choices about the conduct of their lives? Is someone else responsible for their actions? The difficulty faced when constructing the category of adult for the purposes of studying the eighteenth century, is that there were such dramatic differences in experience of the transition between adult and child for different types of people. For the nobility during the eighteenth century, issues of property and deference, meant that children might not be economically independent and free to make their own life choices until their parents were dead. Although absolute parental control over their children's choice of marriage partner and career was diminishing during the eighteenth century there was still, especially for women, an expectation of submission to parental wishes, even if it was only respecting their right of veto.<sup>42</sup> For the very poor, lack of property and the necessity of each child earning its own living as soon as possible meant

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<sup>41</sup> Hiner and Hawes, 'Standing on Common Ground', p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Stone, *Family Sex and Marriage*, pp. 179 - 80, 298 - 320.

that parental control was massively lessened. With the growing practice of sending away young children to work in low skill, labour intensive industries, the social control of parents was further lessened and children might make their own choices in life as soon as they were financially able to do so.<sup>43</sup>

The eighteenth century saw changes in family organisation which affected the place of children in society. The pre-industrial practice of sending children into another household at the age of about seven was dying out.<sup>44</sup> Although the very poor were compelled to send their children out as live-in servants or farm labourers, and some children were sent away to school from a young age, the general practice became far more centered around the child leaving home at between the ages of twelve and fifteen to apprenticeship or university. This point, coinciding as it did with the age of important legal changes, was becoming established as the time at which a child moved from infancy into youth. The change from youth to adulthood was just as unclear. Much evidence seems to point to the mid-twenties being the time at which individuals would be considered fully adult.<sup>45</sup> At that point apprenticeships would be ending, legal majority would be achieved, many must have received inherited property or businesses, or have had their fathers retire in their favour, and many women would marry. Given evidence of late physical and sexual maturation, it was also the time at which individuals would be seen to be physically adult.

The most complicated category to deal with is those children who were apprenticed. The background of these children could range from younger sons of the

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<sup>43</sup> Stone, *Family Sex and Marriage*, p. 297; Joan Lane, *Apprenticeship in England, 1600 - 1914* (London, 1996), p. 14.

<sup>44</sup> John R Gillis, *Youth and History. Tradition and Change in European Age Relations, 1770 - Present* (New York and London, 1981), pp. 1 – 37.

<sup>45</sup> Gillis, *Youth and History*; Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England* (New Haven and London, 1994), pp. 236 – 9.

nobility being apprenticed to a great merchant – from which position they could hope to make a large fortune – to the child of an artisan apprenticed to a humble trade, or a destitute child apprenticed to 'housewifery' by the parish. The majority of children were apprenticed when they were fourteen, for a seven year tenure. Exceptions to this might be younger children apprenticed for ten years to a low skill, sweated trade, such as nailing, or older ones apprenticed to a trade needing physical strength, such as baking, or a certain level of sophistication, such as millinery.<sup>46</sup>

Most people, when they were financially independent in their mid-twenties, would be free from parental and apprentice-master control and able to lead their own lives. However, this leaves the period of youth, between childhood which ended with apprenticeship and adulthood which began with the potential for financial independence, possibly a period of over ten years, when individuals were no longer children, yet not fully adult.

For the purposes of this study of adult learning, I propose a pragmatic approach to the issue based on what learning was being done. For apprentices, learning done as part of their apprenticeship should not be considered adult learning. Being taught a trade, to read or to do accounts by an apprentice-master or attending classes to learn a necessary skill, such as a language, should be considered part of the education process, ongoing from childhood, much as a university degree would have been. However, apprentices attending Sunday School, evening classes or lectures of their own volition, even if they were intent on improving their professional skills, should be considered to be participating in adult learning. The difference is in the motive behind the learning, one a necessary part of training imposed by parent or apprentice-master, the other the free

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<sup>46</sup> Lane, *Apprenticeship in England*, pp. 13 – 15; Katrina Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation in England 1700-1870* (London, 2000).

choice of a curious mind. Youth in the eighteenth century was considered a problematic time, beyond childhood yet not fully adult, and it would make an artificial and unhelpful distinction, for the purposes of this research, to say either that all learning done above the age of twelve, or none done below the age of twenty five, was adult learning. For the purposes of this study, I intend to consider as adult learning that which is done with the active intention to learn, and falls outside the confines of apprenticeship or other continuing education.

## **Birmingham**

The town of Birmingham is an extremely useful conduit through which ideas and learning in the eighteenth century can be examined. By the end of the eighteenth century it was one of the major provincial centres, with a position at the centre of road and water transport systems, its own Assay Office and a national profile as an industrial centre. It was a growing town, with a fast increasing population, an expanding economy and a vibrant political culture.<sup>47</sup> Most importantly, it was a town in which ideas and learning were becoming central to both the economic and the social lives of its inhabitants.

### The physical environment of Birmingham

One of the earliest published reports of Birmingham comes in 1586 in William Camden's *Britannia*: it was 'swarming with inhabitants, and echoing with the noise of anvils, (for here are a great number of smiths)'.<sup>48</sup> The abundance of metal workers and their attendant noise and bustle are attested to in the accounts of other early visitors to

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<sup>47</sup> For a comprehensive picture of political life in eighteenth-century Birmingham, see John Money, *Experience and Identity, Birmingham and the West Midlands 1760-1800* (Manchester, 1977)

<sup>48</sup> William Camden, *Britannia*, 1586, cited J A Langford, *A Century of Birmingham Life: or a Chronicle of Local Events, from 1741 - 1841* (Birmingham, 1868), p. xix.

Birmingham, and indeed its situation at the southern end of the industrial heartlands of the Midlands meant that Birmingham's industries were in prime position to take advantage of the growing metal production there. However, William Westley's 1731 *Plan of Birmingham* shows a town still connected with the countryside from which it had grown.<sup>49</sup> There were two cherry orchards within the streets, and numerous little pockets of gardens and agriculture; surrounding the town are farms and fields. The prominent buildings were the churches, both Anglican and Dissenting, and the dominant domestic buildings of the Establishment - the Parsonage and the Manor House. The houses of the fifteen thousand or so inhabitants were, for the most part, in the higgledy piggledy networks of courts and alleys that made up the majority of the town. The sense of a town aware of its own rise and expansion is encapsulated in the areas of blank space on the map, marked out and labelled 'Land for Building'.

By 1795, when Charles Pye published his *Plan of Birmingham*,<sup>50</sup> the area of the town in Westley's *Plan* had been dwarfed by new expansion: Birmingham's population was approaching 70,000.<sup>51</sup> Whereas Westley had carefully marked out the surrounding fields and woods, the land beyond the town itself was not of interest to Pye: where there are no streets there is mere blank space. The churches are still prominent in Pye's picture of the town, but in addition are the signs of Birmingham's change over the past sixty five years: factories, inns, schools, wharfs, hospitals, breweries and theatres. Traversing the city were not only the roads, but the new means of Birmingham's connection to the rest of the country - the canals.

Although the wealthy of the town were building themselves elegantly facaded

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<sup>49</sup> William Westley, *The Plan of Birmingham Survey'd in the Year 1731* (Birmingham, 1789).

<sup>50</sup> Charles Pye, *Plan of Birmingham Survey'd in the Year 1795* (Birmingham, 1795), Birmingham Central Library.

<sup>51</sup> Dennis Smith, *Conflict and Compromise: Class Formation in English Society 1830 - 1914. A Comparative Study of Birmingham and Sheffield* (London, 1982), p. 65.

town houses around the Square, St Philip's Church and Colmore Row, on the streets of Birmingham an air of chaos and disorder prevailed for most of the eighteenth century. The workshops of the metal workers were, for the most part, within the dwelling house, so there was little distinction between residential and industrial areas for the working people. The heat, noise and smells of the workshops meant that they must have been a prominent part of the experience of traversing the streets of Birmingham. Even the areas which were becoming more exclusively patronised by the middling sort were little insulated from the working life of Birmingham - the Beast Market was held on the High Street, close to St Philip's and the Square until 1769.<sup>52</sup>

Throughout the eighteenth century, the development of the physical structure of Birmingham was hamstrung by its archaic system of administration. After a failed attempt at incorporation in 1716, Birmingham retained its manorial system of administration - meaning that voluntary officials were struggling to maintain a fast expanding town with tools intended for the running of a village.<sup>53</sup> The administration of Birmingham was complicated by the overlap of manorial and parish responsibility. The parish was responsible for Poor Relief, maintenance of the roads and keeping the peace.<sup>54</sup> The manorial officers, elected by the court leet, were responsible for regulation of the retail trade and also keeping the peace and some aspects of the roads. They were High and Low Bailiffs (with responsibility for the markets, weights and measures and presiding over town meetings (High Bailiff) and nominating the jury for the court leet (Low Bailiff)), High and Low Tasters (supervising the sale of ale and meat), Leather Searchers (whose function had declined with the recession of the Birmingham leather

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<sup>52</sup> Langford, *A Century of Birmingham Life*, p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> Conrad Gill, *History of Birmingham*, (2 Vols, London, 1952), 1, pp. 70 – 73.

<sup>54</sup> 'Political and Administrative History: Local Government and Public Services', in Stephens, W B (ed.), *A History of the County of Warwickshire: Volume 7: The City of Birmingham* (1964).



trade), two Afferors (who set fines for offences connected with the markets) and two Constables and a Headborough (assistant constable).<sup>55</sup> However, the two areas of responsibility were not discreet: for example the Constables were elected by the court leet, but paid by the vestry.

By the early eighteenth century it had become customary for the High Bailiff to be a Churchman and the Low a Dissenter.<sup>56</sup> The position of Low Bailiff, although symbolically less important than that of the High Bailiff was a powerful one. As the Low Bailiff nominated the jury of the court leet, the Dissenters held a considerable lever of power. The overlap of powers between the parish and the manorial officers meant that for Birmingham to be able to function effectively, the Dissenters and those of the Established Church must have had to work together. However, it is clear that at times of tension between the two groups, the administrative system of Birmingham could become a target. The early decades of the eighteenth century saw several incidences of such conflict, including the attempt at incorporation in 1716. The reason given for the attempt was that a better police system for the town was needed - there had recently been riots against Dissenting Meeting Houses in the area. Conrad Gill, writer of an official history of Birmingham in 1952, considers that the impetus came not from Dissenters wishing to protect their property, but from Established interests attempting to extend their control of the town by gaining borough status for Birmingham, in which case they would be more likely to hold power.<sup>57</sup> In 1722 there was a more direct endeavour at wresting control from the Dissenters, when there was an attempt to pack the jury, usually elected by the Low Bailiff, with Churchmen. This attempt was successfully challenged in the courts in

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<sup>55</sup> Eric Hopkins, *The Rise of the Manufacturing Town. Birmingham and the Industrial Revolution* (2nd edn, Stroud, 1998), p. 4; and Stephens (ed.), 'Political and Administrative History', pp. 2-3.

<sup>56</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'Political and Administrative History', p. 2.

<sup>57</sup> Gill, *History of Birmingham*, 1, pp. 73-4.

1723. After this crude attempt there seems to have been no other overt conflict in the administration of the town until the campaign to repeal the Test and Corporation Act late in the century. It was claimed by many pamphleteers after the 1791 riot that the Dissenters and Churchmen of Birmingham had harmoniously worked together for most of the eighteenth century. However, it is also possible that the powers of the parish and manor were so limited in the main areas of overlap (constables and road maintenance took up only around fifteen percent of the vestry budget, the rest going to poor relief<sup>58</sup>) that there was little opportunity for conflict or gain to be had from it.

The management of the streets of Birmingham had become so inefficient by the middle of the eighteenth century that trade in and passage through the town were being hampered. The extension of houses towards the street, the lack of lighting, obstructions of the highway by objects and refuse and the driving of large loads on the main thoroughfares meant that action had to be taken.<sup>59</sup> In 1769 an Improvement Act appointed fifty Street Commissioners to take specific actions that would improve the streets of Birmingham. Amongst their number were several prominent Dissenters including the Presbyterian doctor and Lunar Society member, William Small, and the Quaker gunmaker, Samuel Galton.<sup>60</sup> Although they achieved some of their objectives, including widening New Street and introducing street lighting, they were hampered by the limited nature of the terms of the Act and by the apathy of many of their members. In 1773 a new Act was passed appointing new Commissioners and giving more on-going powers, including the power to appoint watchmen, for Birmingham had no night watch to protect against fire or robbery until this point. However, Gill considers that, despite the

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<sup>58</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'Political and Administrative History', p. 4.

<sup>59</sup> Gill, *History of Birmingham*, 1, pp. 156-8.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, p. 157.

appointment of new Commissioners, they were still apathetic, inefficient and concerned with trifling matters of street decorum rather than the enormous problems of public health or the lack of co-ordinated street construction that plagued the town.<sup>61</sup> It was not until the very last years of the eighteenth century that the Street Commissioners began to make serious efforts to take on the major improvements so desperately needed on the Birmingham streets.

### The Economy

During the Middle Ages Birmingham had been sufficiently isolated from the main transport networks not to merit the granting of borough status. With the opening up of the road, canal and river systems from the seventeenth century, and the rising demand for small consumer metal goods of the type produced in Birmingham, manufactures and investors were able to expand, unhindered by such restraints as apprenticeship or trade guilds.<sup>62</sup> The inscription on a 1751 plan is explicit in its account of Birmingham's growth '...it [Birmingham] is now become very large and Populous, which is greatly owing to the Freedom it yet Enjoys, as well as the Industry of the People, and their Extensive Trade.'<sup>63</sup> This growth had several consequences. Birmingham's industry attracted people looking for work, but also attracted many to invest in the town. They brought in new ideas: industrial, social, religious and cultural.

Birmingham had a considerable impact upon its agricultural hinterland. The Midland region was described by William Marshall in *The Rural Economies of the Midland Counties*, as fertile with a favourable climate, but with bad roads and low

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<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, p. 160-75.

<sup>62</sup> H W Dickinson, *Matthew Boulton* (Cambridge, 1936), pp. 17 – 20.

<sup>63</sup> Bradford's 1751 plan of Birmingham, cited Langford, *A Century of Birmingham Life*, pp. 15-16.

wages.<sup>64</sup> Birmingham dominated the region as a '*metropolitan* market . . . which bears a similar relation to the market towns of the country round it, as London does to those in its neighbourhood'.<sup>65</sup> Westley's 1731 plan of Birmingham shows market gardens and orchards surrounding Birmingham.<sup>66</sup> However, the expansion of the footprint of the town, together with the vast rise in its population of industrial labourers, meant that, by the end of the eighteenth century, the demands of Birmingham for meat, dairy produce, vegetables and grain were felt at least twenty miles away. Marshall found that rents in Tamworth in Staffordshire were raised as a result of its market gardens supplying Birmingham.<sup>67</sup> The markets of Birmingham took a wide range of products from the countryside around it: as well as fruit and vegetables, wheat and potatoes poured into the town, oats and barley were also grown in the area and butchers from Birmingham travelled as far as the Fazeley Fair in Staffordshire to buy cattle.<sup>68</sup> It was not only food that was bought in Birmingham: the wood products of the Arden area of Warwickshire were used in Birmingham industries, such as lock making.<sup>69</sup> Farmers also purchased products from Birmingham. Industrial waste, for example by-products of the brewing, soap-making and dyeing industries, was used as manure.<sup>70</sup> The manufacturers also provided agricultural equipment, some of it of unique design, to the surrounding areas.<sup>71</sup>

The interaction of Birmingham with its agricultural hinterland went beyond

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<sup>64</sup> William Marshall, *The Rural Economies of the Midland Counties; including the Management of Livestock, in Leicestershire and its Environs . . .* (2 vols, 2nd edn, London, 1796), 1, pp. 3-9, 97.

<sup>65</sup> Marshall, *Rural Economies*, 1, pp. 179-80 (original italics).

<sup>66</sup> Westley, *Plan of Birmingham*.

<sup>67</sup> Marshall, *Rural Economies*, 1, p. 17.

<sup>68</sup> Marshall, *Rural Economies*, 1, p. 188 and 202 and 2, p. 22; 'Economic and Social History: Agriculture', in Stephens (ed.), *A History of the County of Warwickshire: Volume VII: The City of Birmingham* (1964), pp. 81-139. URL: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.asp?compid=22964>. Date accessed: 15 July 2005.

<sup>69</sup> Marshall, *Rural Economies*, 2, pp. 336-7.

<sup>70</sup> John Wedge, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Warwick, with observations on the means of its improvement* (London, 1794), p. 20.

<sup>71</sup> Marshall, *Rural Economies*, 1, p. 178.

marketing. In the surrounding agricultural areas, wages for labourers were raised by twenty five per cent in comparison to villages further afield.<sup>72</sup> Marshall considered that the small-scale farmers of the Midland region, both yeoman and tenant, were well travelled, sociable and inclined to 'the SPIRIT of IMPROVEMENT'.<sup>73</sup> This trend towards improvement, comprising such innovations as drainage, new crops and rotations as well as enclosure of commons, meant increased land productivity, but also a decline in labour demands.<sup>74</sup> The demand for labour in Birmingham gave employment to rural workers made redundant by changes in agricultural practices in the neighbouring regions. There was extensive conversion to pasture in the Midlands during the mid-eighteenth century; however there has been debate as to the extent to which Parliamentary enclosure resulted in rural unemployment.<sup>75</sup> Contemporaries seemed to believe that enclosure had caused unemployment. Wedge wrote that fewer hands were needed, and that one of the beneficial effects of a manufacturing town on its agricultural district was that it gave 'employment to superfluous hands'.<sup>76</sup> Analysis by Alan Parton of Settlement Certificates, which were given to migrant labourers by their home parishes, also suggests that Birmingham was drawing in labour from the surrounding area. Parton found that, of those who presented Settlement Certificates to the Birmingham Parish officers during the period of 1726 to 1757 (by no means all did), sixty per cent had come from Birmingham's surrounding counties of Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Staffordshire.<sup>77</sup> Birmingham had a dominant influence on the counties surrounding it. Farmers supplied

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<sup>72</sup> Wedge, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Warwick*, p. 23.

<sup>73</sup> Marshall, *Rural Economies*, 1, pp. 81-2.

<sup>74</sup> Wedge, *Agriculture of the County of Warwick*, p. 21.

<sup>75</sup> K D M Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor, Social Change and Agrarian England 1660-1900* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 219-220.

<sup>76</sup> Wedge, *Agriculture of the County of Warwick*, p. 20.

<sup>77</sup> Alan Parton, 'Poor-law Settlement Certificates and Migration to and from Birmingham 1726-57', *Local Population Studies*, 38 (Spring 1987), pp. 23-9.

its increasing need for food and raw materials and bought its by-products and manufactured goods. Rents and wages were increased, even at considerable distance, as a result of Birmingham's influence. The demand of Birmingham manufacturers for labour exerted a pull on agricultural labourers, who were both attracted by the higher wages available and were drawn to the town's industries during times of low demand for farm hands.

### The People

Eighteenth-century Birmingham had a reputation for both radicalism and popular conservatism. Its radicalism had been evident during the seventeenth century - it had supported Parliament during the Civil War, and was sacked by Prince Rupert. During the eighteenth century, the influx of manufacturers with money and new ideas gave Birmingham its reputation for industrial innovation.<sup>78</sup> It also existed outside the confines of the Five-Mile Act. This legislation forbade any Non-Conformist preacher who refused to submit to the theological requirements of the Church of England to preach within five miles of a Cathedral. As a result of this Birmingham became a haven for religious dissenters, attracted by the religious freedoms and the opportunities offered by a growing and populous town.<sup>79</sup> In 1687, soon after the Act of Toleration was passed, a Unitarian chapel, Old Meeting, was built in Birmingham.<sup>80</sup> The first Quaker Meeting House was built for an existing Meeting in 1703 and the Baptists built their first chapel in

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<sup>78</sup> Gill, *History of Birmingham*, 1, pp. 62 – 67.

<sup>79</sup> The distinction between Nonconformity and Dissent is a subtle one, but, at this period, crucial. Nonconformists were those who were unable to conform to the strictures of the Church of England as laid down by the Act of Uniformity (1662). They generally considered themselves unjustly excluded from the national church, rather than rejecting it themselves. Dissenters rejected theological tenets of the Established Church, and were usually opposed to the whole concept of a national church. *Oxford English Dictionary*. The distinction becomes blurred during course of the eighteenth century, and for the most part I shall use the term Dissent, although occasionally a distinction is necessary.

<sup>80</sup> J A Langford, *Birmingham: A Handbook for Residents and Visitors* (Birmingham, 1879), p. 118.

Birmingham in 1738.<sup>81</sup> They contained large numbers of the wealthiest manufacturers, causing William Hutton to comment in 1789 that ‘The proverbial expression, "as rich as a Jew," is not altogether verified in Birmingham; but perhaps time is transferring it to the Quakers.’<sup>82</sup> The Dissenting congregations were also the most innovative in the field of education, both child and adult. Despite Birmingham’s reputation for radicalism this influx of Dissent often created an atmosphere, not of toleration, but of conflict. The 1714 to 1715 Sacheverel Riots touched Birmingham, and there were hostilities against the Methodists in 1751 and the Quakers in 1759.<sup>83</sup> Martin Smith, in a PhD thesis examining the 1791 Church and King riots, went so far as to suggest that these riots were in a large part driven by the traditional, Anglican ruling class’s resentment towards the much wealthier and more dynamic Dissenters.<sup>84</sup>

The nature of relations within Birmingham society has been a subject of much debate in recent years. Asa Briggs’ idealised view of the harmonious nature of Birmingham’s class relations, which had been so much accepted and reproduced, has recently been offered various challenges, summed up in a review article by Clive Behagg.<sup>85</sup> What emerges from the debate is a picture of complex social relations: the strength of radicalism and religious Dissent in the eighteenth century tempered by the violence of the 1791 Church and King riot; the profusion of small masters making ‘toy’ goods along-side a growing factory sector; the observation of Cobden that ‘there is a freer intercourse between all classes than in the Lancashire town [Manchester], where a

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<sup>81</sup> Langford, *Birmingham: A Handbook*, p. 116; William Hutton, *An History of Birmingham* (2nd edn, Birmingham, 1783), p. 116.

<sup>82</sup> Hutton, *An History of Birmingham*, p. 121.

<sup>83</sup> Martin Smith, ‘Conflict and Society in late eighteenth-century Birmingham’ (PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge, 1977).

<sup>84</sup> Smith, ‘Conflict and Society’, pp. 6-12, 20.

<sup>85</sup> Asa Briggs, ‘Social History Since 1815’, in W B Stephens (ed.), *A History of the County of Warwickshire: Volume 7: The City of Birmingham* (1964); Clive Behagg, ‘Myths of cohesion: capital and compromise in the historiography of nineteenth-century Birmingham’, *Social History*, 2, 3 (1986), pp. 375-84.

great and impassable gulf separates the worker from his employer', contrasting with the words of a clerical magistrate preventing a reform meeting that these were 'riotous and disgraceful proceedings - clamour and violence of a misguided populace - tumultuous proceedings . . . machinations of a few designing individuals . . . wicked artifices'.<sup>86</sup>

There is perhaps a pattern of change alternating between fierce religious conflict and co-operation necessary for administering the town. The disputes of the early eighteenth century were tempered during its second half by the need to co-operate over local government.<sup>87</sup> The return of those hostilities in the period leading up to, and after the Church and King riot raised the temperature again, until the re-emergence of co-operation at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the overlapping complexities of governing the various elements of a large city cooled the violence of antagonism, at least within the ruling sectors of the middling sort.<sup>88</sup>

### The importance of ideas and learning

During the eighteenth century there was increasing availability of the materials of ideas, the physical means by which ideas, information and opinions were promulgated. Books and printed matter were available from late seventeenth century, through book shops, travelling book sellers and circulating libraries. There were publishers operating in the town from the last decades of the seventeenth century, and printers within the first half of the eighteenth. From 1741 Birmingham had its first newspaper: *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*. At the same time there were more and more means of making connections for

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<sup>86</sup> Cobden cited in Briggs, 'Social History Since 1815', p. 223; also for small workshop industry, Behagg, 'Myths of cohesion', p. 376; on the factory sector, E P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1991), p. 745.

<sup>87</sup> Smith, 'Conflict and Society', p. 8.

<sup>88</sup> Derek Fraser, *Power and Authority in the Victorian City* (Oxford, 1979); Smith, *Conflict and Compromise*.



the spread of ideas. There were a wide variety of institutions concerned with learning and the spread of ideas in operation from the middle decades of the century creating a Habermasian world of letters in the public sphere.<sup>89</sup> It was not simply in the world of letters that ideas and learning were valued. Many industries required a trained workforce; factories such as the Soho Works were in need of trained draughtsmen and, amongst the myriad of small workshops of Birmingham, literacy and numeracy could be useful acquisitions for even the smallest of masters. Eighteenth-century Birmingham was a town in which ideas were increasingly available, there were convivial places in which those ideas might be discussed and exchanged, and learning was a critical aspect of the economy of the town.

More than being a town which had access to ideas and a need for learning, Birmingham was a town in which significant sectors of society valued new ideas. Some parts of the Dissenting community, especially the Unitarian New Meeting, saw rationality in religion as both desirable and necessary. In order to understand better God's creation, new ways of looking at the world – from chemistry to theology – could be embraced. Innovations in industry were crucial to Birmingham's economy. Large manufacturers, like Matthew Boulton at the Soho Works, were constantly on the look out for innovations in the fields of engineering or chemistry which would improve their industrial processes. But even amongst the mass of small manufacturers, innovation was valued. Many of the small Birmingham workshops produced 'toy' goods, little items such as buttons, buckles, japanned goods or cheap ornaments. They needed to be aware, not only of changes in methods of production, but of changes in fashion in both the types of goods required and their style. For important sectors of Birmingham society, from the

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<sup>89</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (trans. Thomas Burger, assisted by Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge, 1989).

influential citizens of New Meeting, to the small 'toy' manufacturers, new ideas were an integral part of everyday life.

Birmingham was a town linked to many eighteenth-century natural philosophers. It had a variety of connections to continental Europe and America, as well as to London. Individuals, such as Joseph Priestley, were part of networks of intellectual innovation. Priestley corresponded with French chemists such as Lavoisier, English radical theologians such as Richard Price and had connection to America through men such as Benjamin Franklin. Through the medium of the post the latest experiments in electricity would be soon known in Birmingham, and the latest experiments in chemistry could spread from Birmingham to London and beyond. Receiving information and ideas from beyond Birmingham was integral to many of the groups and societies of the public sphere. Whilst the Lunar Society corresponded widely, the middling sort of Birmingham read the London periodicals in taverns and coffee houses and the Freemasons spread a network of conviviality based on secret knowledge across the country and beyond, to Europe and America. Much of Birmingham industry relied on national and international communication. The Birmingham industries exported their goods widely. Guns, buttons or fancy goods were shipped to Russia or America. The organised campaigns in Birmingham for the building of canals – popularised and spread through ballads such as John Freeth's *Inland Navigation* – demonstrate that efficient and effective methods of communication were crucial to the economic well-being of eighteenth-century Birmingham.

## **Historiography**

My study of ideas and learning in eighteenth-century Birmingham comes within

the orbit of several of the current dominant theoretical ideas concerning the eighteenth century. Most crucial are those of Jürgen Habermas establishing the idea of the Public Sphere; Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's different vision of the public/private sphere; work concerned with the Establishment and Dissent; ideas about Print and Print Culture, especially those of Roger Chartier, Roger Darnton and Margaret Spufford; ideas concerning the Enlightenment and the consumption of culture, for example work by John Brewer and Roy Porter; work done by Jenny Uglow on the Lunar Society; and recent ideas about the Industrial Enlightenment from Joel Mokyr and Margaret Jacob. Ideas underpinning the thesis include those of Pierre Bourdieu on *Distinction*. It has also been crucial to examine the historiography of adult education and to bring that work within the sphere of more recent historiography.

### The Public Sphere: Habermas and *Family Fortunes*

One of the central theories dominating current historical thinking about the eighteenth century is the Habermasian idea of the public sphere.<sup>90</sup> Habermas put forward the idea that, during the eighteenth century, bourgeois society evolved an authentic public sphere operating distinctly from, and in opposition to, the sphere of public authority, that is the State, the Church and the Court.<sup>91</sup> Central to the public sphere is the world of letters. This network of book clubs, discussion societies and coffee houses was a crucial aspect of the dissemination of ideas and the process of learning in eighteenth-century

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<sup>90</sup> Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Historians using his ideas include: Margaret C Jacob, 'The Mental Landscape of the Public Sphere: A European Perspective', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 28, 1 (Autumn 1994), pp. 95-113; Daniel E White, 'The "Joineriana": Anna Barbauld, the Aikin Family Circle, and the Dissenting Public Sphere', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 32, 4 (1999), pp. 511-33; Paul Elliott, 'The origins of the 'creative class': provincial urban society, scientific culture and socio-political marginality in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', *Social History*, 28, 3 (2003), pp. 362-8.

<sup>91</sup> Dena Goodman, 'Public Sphere and Private Life: Towards a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime', *History and Theory*, 31, 1 (1992), pp. 1-20.

Birmingham, especially for the Dissenters of the town. The public sphere for Dissenters during the eighteenth century was necessarily part of the private realm; the very fact of their dissent excluded them from the sphere of public authority. A whole network of ideas and learning built up, from Academies to printing presses to taverns, which gave public identity to those excluded from the traditional public arms of the state. However, Peter Clark in *British Clubs and Societies, 1580-1800* cautions against seeing clubs and societies as being exclusively of the public sphere.<sup>92</sup>

Crucial to Habermas's theory is, not simply that the public sphere exists, but that it exercises eventual active opposition to the authority of the State. Although the state in eighteenth-century Britain was not absolutist in the manner of the French monarchy, many of those who played a central role in the sphere of ideas and learning in Birmingham were excluded from aspects of the state mechanisms of power. The Dissenters, who were central to the dynamism of the public sphere in Birmingham, were excluded by the Test and Corporation Acts from participating in national, and much of local, politics. However, they were generally unwilling to cast themselves as opponents of the state; they wished to participate rather than overthrow. By the end of the eighteenth century the activities of Dissenters active in the public sphere in Birmingham had come under the scrutiny of the state at both a national and a local level. Although they stressed their loyalty, through such mechanisms as their published writings or public toasts to the King, their activities, whether political or not, were condemned as a threat to the safety of the realm. By examining pamphlets and ballads, as well as popular literature such as sermons and clerical letters, this study engages with the suggestion of writers like Craig Calhoun that Habermas overlooked the more humble aspects of print

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<sup>92</sup> Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies, 1580-1800. The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford, 2000), p. 463.

culture in his construction of the public sphere.<sup>93</sup>

Ideas about the public sphere are crucial to an analysis of ideas and learning in Birmingham. However, it is important not to artificially partition that public sphere into opposing forces: masculine and feminine; republican and monarchist; Establishment and Dissent. In Birmingham the institutions of the public sphere were rarely exclusive to Dissenters or to the Establishment. Although Daniel White stresses that the participants in his 'Dissenting public sphere' participated in all areas of public life, and so cannot be seen as a 'counterpublic', he does not make the point that public spheres of Dissent were rarely exclusive.<sup>94</sup> The publisher Joseph Johnson, who White casts as providing 'a coherent identity for the network of authors associated with Warrington [the Dissenting Academy]',<sup>95</sup> represented men of the Established Church such as William Cowper and Erasmus Darwin. In the same way, few of the elements of the public sphere in Birmingham, whether they were tightly-knit town-based institutions or wider networks such as that which included Anna Barbauld and the Aiken family, were exclusively the bastions of the Establishment or the Dissenters.

A different conception of the public sphere was explored by Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall in *Family Fortunes*, which examined the gender-divided public and private spheres of Birmingham and Essex in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.<sup>96</sup> Davidoff and Hall argue that during the period of 1780 to 1850 women in Birmingham were pushed into retreat from the public sphere of 'market forces' and 'rational activity' to the private one of 'morality and emotion' by the domestic ideology

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<sup>93</sup> Jürgen Habermas, 'Further Reflections on the Public Sphere', in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1992), pp. 464-5.

<sup>94</sup> White, 'The "Joineriana"', pp. 512-13.

<sup>95</sup> White, 'The "Joineriana"', p. 511.

<sup>96</sup> Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes, Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London, 1987).

which developed during the period.<sup>97</sup> *Family Fortunes* has been extremely influential, but the story it tells of late-eighteenth-century Birmingham is one which is flawed in several areas. Davidoff and Hall's concept of the public sphere is limited in comparison to the Habermasian Public Sphere: they are concerned almost entirely with economic activity and with strictly gender-delineated institutions. The Habermasian concept is far more flexible and, for Birmingham at this time, far more useful. The worlds of work and letters were not strictly separated – for example, the work of Jenny Uglow on the Lunar Society has shown the way in which they were intimately connected.<sup>98</sup> Their image of Birmingham in the late-eighteenth century is a rather partial one. The picture they create of Birmingham at this time is one of grime, smell and absence of civilisation and culture.<sup>99</sup> Their primary concern with economic activity and the physical manifestation of the town has meant that the exciting and vibrant public sphere has been underplayed. Whilst the built environment of Birmingham during these decades was generally far from elegant, the culture of social interactions and individual thought was lively, informed, serious and sometimes extremely sophisticated. Although they give a small account of the riot of 1791, the extraordinary printed disputes over the place of ideas in the public sphere are hardly mentioned.<sup>100</sup> Finally, Davidoff and Hall's account of religion in late-eighteenth-century Birmingham is almost exclusively focused on the prominent Dissenting congregations of the town.<sup>101</sup> Their picture of the emergence of Evangelical Christianity is interesting, but the suggestion that it emerged from a Birmingham Established Church in stasis is misleading. In the 1780s and 1790s a coterie of extremely able, educated and well-connected Anglican clergymen were in place in the town. This

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<sup>97</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p. 13.

<sup>98</sup> Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men. The Friends who made the Future, 1730 - 1810* (London, 2002).

<sup>99</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, pp. 36-43.

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 78-99.

thesis aims to enable a more balanced picture of religious life at the end of the eighteenth century to be built up. I argue that *Family Fortunes* has misrepresented late-eighteenth-century Birmingham, and that by examining the public sphere of the town both more widely and more deeply, a very different story emerges.

### Establishment and Dissent

The publication of J C D Clark's *English Society 1688-1832* in 1985 opened a new debate on the relationship between the Establishment and Dissenters during the eighteenth century.<sup>102</sup> Clark's revisionist history placed the Church and State firmly at the centre of an *ancien regime* in England, which retained its power until the Great Reform Act of 1832. Since then Roy Porter has argued in *Enlightenment* that, by the end of the eighteenth century, rational religion had effectively won the battle against enthusiasts of both conformist and non-conformist ilk.<sup>103</sup> Yet the published words, as well as the actions, of Church of England ministers and prominent laity in Birmingham show that it was far from the case that 'Threats to a gentleman's privilege of being religious on his own terms . . . had been resisted, had withered away or were becoming marginalized to a "lunatic fringe"'.<sup>104</sup> Whilst Porter rightly shows that, amongst bishops and theologians, reason and rationality were becoming an accepted part of religious faith, the experience of the Unitarians in Birmingham shows that, at the sharp everyday interface of Establishment and Dissent, hostility against rational religion could still be powerful enough to spill over into violence. In a recent publication Boyd Hilton has argued that the 'neo-conservative' ideology of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was a

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<sup>102</sup> J C D Clark, *English Society 1688-1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice during the Ancien Regime* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 2000).

<sup>103</sup> Roy Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London, 2001), pp. 96-129.

<sup>104</sup> Porter, *Enlightenment*, p. 98.

new manifestation rather than an *ancien regime* survival.<sup>105</sup>

The divisions which existed between the Established Church and the Dissenting congregations, especially the Unitarians, in eighteenth-century Birmingham, and the way in which those divisions are highlighted in disputes over learning and knowledge, throw interesting light on recent historical work on Rational Dissent and the reaction of the Established Church to rationality and the Enlightenment. The hostility between the Established Church in Birmingham and those Dissenting clergy and laity who espoused rational Christianity erupted into violence in the 1791 Church and King riot, but had been evident for at least a decade previously. Disputes had included arguments about the admissibility of certain books to the Birmingham Library and a struggle for control over the town's Sunday Schools.

Donald Spaeth, in his study of the diocese of Salisbury from 1660 to 1740, found that, although the Anglican clergy were eager to prosecute Non-Conformists, these moves were unpopular with the laity, who lived happily beside non-conformist neighbours.<sup>106</sup> Yet in Birmingham it was the laity who burned Joseph Priestley's library and destroyed his laboratory. A study of the pamphlets which preceded and followed the Church and King riot in Birmingham shows that the presence of Priestley in the town, a prominent symbol of rationality, together with what Robert Hole has called 'a fear of abstract argument'<sup>107</sup> after the French Revolution, could create a situation in which the people of Birmingham would attack their Dissenting neighbours. My work on late eighteenth-century Birmingham shows that, far from being the preserve of the 'lunatic fringe', attacks on rationality, on the spread of knowledge, and on learning played an

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<sup>105</sup> Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846* (Oxford, 2006), p. 30.

<sup>106</sup> Donald A Spaeth, *The Church in an Age of Danger: Parsons and Parishioners, 1660-1740* (Cambridge and New York, 2000).

<sup>107</sup> Robert Hole, *Pulpits, Politics and Public Order in England 1760-1823* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 250.



important role in relations between the Established Church and the Dissenting congregations.

### Print and Print Culture

The historiography of Print and Print Culture is central to this study of learning and knowledge in eighteenth-century Birmingham. Margaret Spufford's *Small Books and Pleasant Histories* gave a ground breaking account of the growth of popular fiction in the seventeenth century.<sup>108</sup> Spufford showed that the rise of basic literacy, together with the increasing availability of cheap chap-books, created a reading public amongst both the rural and urban poor. Her contention that there could be a market for the printed word amongst those outside what has traditionally been considered the limits of the book-buying classes is pertinent when studying eighteenth-century Birmingham. Books were available in Birmingham, first at market stalls, then from libraries and bookshops, throughout the eighteenth century. There were school-masters offering classes to those who wished to gain skills missed out on in childhood. By the end of the eighteenth century elements of the printed dispute between the Establishment and the Dissenters and Radicals was taken directly to the working people of Birmingham in the form of pamphlets, allegedly written by Button and Buckle Burnishers.

Over the last fifteen years historians have been looking at printed matter in new ways. Roger Darnton in his introduction to *Revolution in Print: The Press in France 1775 - 1800* described the historian's traditional way of looking at print thus: 'Historians generally treat the printed word as a record of what happened instead of as an ingredient

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<sup>108</sup> Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories. Popular Fiction and its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1981).

in the happening'.<sup>109</sup> The contributors to *Revolution in Print* wanted to look at the printing press as an active political force in revolutionary France. This idea has since been taken further. Historians such as John Brewer and Roy Porter have shown that, from the arrival of the printing press in Britain, the printed word became both an economic and cultural commodity.<sup>110</sup> This way of looking at printed matter is crucial in a study of learning and knowledge.

Birmingham in the late eighteenth century provides an excellent example of the way in which print should be seen as 'an ingredient in the happening'. Printed matter was the cause of an ill-tempered dispute within a group of leading men who were involved in the library in the town. The disagreement between leading Dissenters and Established clergy and laity, centred on the attempt to acquire certain books with religious content for the library. Accusations of both bringing dangerous ideas into the public domain and censorship were taken beyond library committee discussions to the public of Birmingham, via the medium of the printed pamphlet. These opening salvos, in what was soon to become a war in print between the Establishment and certain Dissenters and Radicals of the town and eventually erupted into riot and violence, show the importance in Birmingham of ideas in their printed form, and of print as a medium through which to conduct these battles.

### Friendship and the *Lunar Men*

Jenny Uglow's account of friendship and intellectual enthusiasm in *The Lunar Men* tells the story of many of the key players in the world of ideas and learning in eighteenth-

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<sup>109</sup> Darnton, Robert, 'Introduction', in Darnton and Roche (eds), *Revolution in Print*, p. xiii.

<sup>110</sup> Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*; Porter, *Enlightenment*.

century Birmingham.<sup>111</sup> She concentrates on the diverse interests of the members of the Lunar Society and the nature of their connections with each other. Whilst Uglow's work is undoubtedly valuable in its placing of the Lunar Society coterie centre stage in the development of the Industrial Revolution in Britain and its account of the diverse and spirited work of the members of the Society, its value for a study of Birmingham is necessarily limited. The Lunar Society was a key element of the intellectual life of late eighteenth-century Birmingham, but to allow it to dominate the study would be a mistake. Many of the Lunar Men were only loosely connected with the town, and there were many aspects of town life into which its tentacles of influence did not reach. The other major historian of the Lunar Society is Robert E Schofield. His pioneering archival work on the history of science in the Lunar Society aimed to show the importance of connections between 'theoretical' and 'applied' science to the members.<sup>112</sup> He has also written a biography of the early life of Joseph Priestly, stressing the importance of his religious faith in his development as a philosopher.<sup>113</sup>

### The Industrial Enlightenment

Joel Mokyr, in *The Gifts of Athena*, develops the idea of the Industrial Enlightenment, 'a set of social changes that transformed the two sets of useful knowledge [propositional and prescriptive] and the relationship between them.'<sup>114</sup> The value of his thesis, that the spread of 'useful' knowledge through networks of social institutions and groups of

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<sup>111</sup> Uglow, *The Lunar Men*.

<sup>112</sup> Robert E Schofield, 'Industrial Orientation of Science in the Lunar Society of Birmingham', in A E Musson, *Science, Technology, and Economic Growth in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1972); Robert E Schofield, *The Lunar Society. A Social History of provincial Science and Industry in eighteenth century England* (Oxford, 1963).

<sup>113</sup> Robert E Schofield, *The Enlightenment of Joseph Priestley: a study of his life and work from 1733 to 1773* (Philadelphia, 1997).

<sup>114</sup> Mokyr, *The Gifts of Athena*, pp. 34-5.

individuals was key to the growth and sustainability of the Industrial Revolution, is demonstrated by the central importance of ideas and their communication to the industries and industrialists of eighteenth-century Birmingham.

However, Mokyr's thesis is limited by his decision to confine himself to 'knowledge of natural phenomena that exclude the human mind and social institutions'.<sup>115</sup> Although it is superficially true that the Industrial Revolution was driven by knowledge about natural phenomena, most eighteenth-century natural philosophers would have been perplexed by the distinction. They were, for the main part, polymaths. The diversity of interests, not only within the Lunar Society, but of its individual members shows the multifaceted nature of most eighteenth-century enquiry.<sup>116</sup> For a philosopher such as Joseph Priestley the study of chemistry, the human mind, education of the poor or New Testament theology must have not only have had equal importance, but were closely related aspects of the same project - to more fully understand and discover God's creation. To understand the network of people and institutions that were at the core of the development of the Industrial Revolution in Birmingham, itself central to the wider Industrial Revolution, it is crucial to move beyond Mokyr's examination of the 'natural phenomena' and examine the world of ideas.

Margaret Jacob, for whom networks of knowledge exchange are also crucial to an understanding of the eighteenth century, looks far beyond Mokyr's 'natural phenomena'.<sup>117</sup> In her work, science, the Industrial Revolution and Enlightenment thinkers are bound together. Her thesis of radical Enlightenment ideas, spread across Britain and Europe by networks such as the Freemasons, is essential in understanding the

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<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>116</sup> Uglow, *The Lunar Men*.

<sup>117</sup> Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment*; or Margaret C Jacob, 'Newtonianism and the Origins of the Enlightenment: A Reassessment', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 11, 1 (1977), pp. 1-25.

complexity of the world of ideas and learning in Birmingham. The town was alive with networks of ideas. Small groups met in taverns, in private houses and in coffee shops under the auspices of book clubs, debating societies or sociable groups. These men (and they generally were men) discussed ideas, news, inventions, discoveries or the finer points of Freemasonry. Moreover the memberships of these groups were interconnected and overlapping. The membership of one small, but prominent group illustrates this well. The Jacobin Club, whose members were immortalised in paint by Jacob Eckstein,<sup>118</sup> met for convivial discussion, dinner and drink. Amongst the twelve were John Freeth, poet, tavern keeper and Unitarian, also leader of the Birmingham Book Club, a teacher of the use of geographical instruments and a Freemason; James Murray a linen draper who was also a member of the Antiquarian Society of Scotland and another Freemason; and James Bisset who was a medal coiner, artist, publisher and writer of verses, who had connections to the Lunar Society. Throughout the eighteenth century there were groups like this in Birmingham, who were brought together by ideas, or for whom ideas and learning played an important part in their leisure or work lives. They were connected across occupation, religious and class divides by networks of conviviality, discussion and discovery.

### Adult Education

Early historians of adult education, writing in the first half of the nineteenth century, were concerned with the ongoing struggle to make adult education acceptable. Men such as J F Winks and J W Hudson hoped to show, through their histories of early adult

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<sup>118</sup> Johannes Eckstein, 'John Freeth and his Circle', oil on canvas, 1792, 1909P6, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. See Appendix 1.

education, that it was morally and socially beneficial.<sup>119</sup> Eager to prove that educating, not only the respectable working classes but also the underclass of industrial Britain, would create neither a radical organised political working class nor a class of workers disaffected with their lot in life, but rather a class of morally educated, bible-reading, quiet and respectable workers, they peppered their accounts with tales of the morally uplifting results of educating poor adults. Historians of the later nineteenth century, who chronicled more wide ranging institutions such as book clubs and philosophical societies in their histories, saw the adult education movement as part of the inevitable civilisation of the industrial city.<sup>120</sup> During the 1960s and 1970s there was a revival of interest amongst historians in adult education. They concentrated on ideas such as working class radicalism, democratisation and social control.<sup>121</sup> From the 1980s there has been little research into adult education; no satisfactory theoretical framework has emerged with which historians can look beyond the concerns of the 1960s and 1970s.

## **Methodology**

For this study examining ideas and learning I have confined myself almost exclusively to the town of Birmingham during the eighteenth century. In limiting myself to a restricted geographical area my design was to use recent historiographical ideas, such as Print Culture and the Industrial Enlightenment, to examine a single town. To make such a close study is extremely valuable - the way in which networks of ideas and learning stretch across a town and the links between that town to the rest of the country, and to the

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<sup>119</sup> J W Hudson, *The History of Adult Education* (London, 1851); J F Winks, *History of Adult Schools* (1821).

<sup>120</sup> For example, Langford, *A Century of Birmingham Life*, pp, 58-60, 241-6.

<sup>121</sup> For example, J F C Harrison, *Learning and Living 1790 - 1960* (London, 1961); Brian Simon, *Studies in the History of Education 1780 - 1870* (London, 1960).

wider world, can be properly investigated. The impact that the world of ideas had upon the more tangible aspects of the town, such as its industry, can be examined. The three-day riot suffered by Birmingham in 1791 makes an interesting case study of the way that ideas - the freedom to spread them, the power to repress them - were so important that they could spark physical violence.

Eighteenth-century Birmingham makes an excellent town on which to base case study. London's complexities and size mean that it is not useful for a single-town study. By the beginning of the nineteenth century only London, Liverpool and Manchester exceeded Birmingham in terms of population.<sup>122</sup> However Liverpool, as a port city as well as an industrial one, had a quite distinctive social, economic and industrial make-up. For a study with a fairly long time-span, which looks at subjects as complex as ideas and learning, a town with a more straightforward economic base is a sensible choice.

I have kept my study of archive material fairly well confined within the town of Birmingham. In contrast to Jenny Uglow's *Lunar Men*, which follows the men of the Lunar Society, and is consequently extremely wide-ranging in terms of its geographical spread, I have used records relating almost exclusively to Birmingham itself. This has allowed me to concentrate on the complexities of the town, the interaction between the individuals, groups and institutions, and the relationship with both its surrounding area and with places further afield. The archival holdings for eighteenth-century Birmingham held at Birmingham Central Library, either in the Local History section or in the Records Office, used include: papers relating to prominent Birmingham inhabitants; records of various Birmingham groups and institutions; published letters and sermons covering the

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<sup>122</sup> John Langton, 'Urban growth and economic change: from the late seventeenth century to 1841', in Peter Clark (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain. Volume II, 1540-1840* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 473-4.

Birmingham Library, the riot and its aftermath, Birmingham Freemasonry, funeral sermons; song lyrics and music; Directories of Birmingham; maps and plans. I have also used records relating to Joseph Priestley at Leeds District Archive, Leeds Local History Archive, Warrington Central Library and Bowood House, Calne, Wiltshire. The Warwickshire Provincial Grand Lodge allowed me access to their printed and archive material relating to the Masonic Lodges of Birmingham. I have also made extensive use of *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, first published in 1742 and continuing throughout the eighteenth century. In my use of the eighteenth-century documents I have been mindful of Darnton's maxim that the printed matter relating to a historical event is 'an ingredient in the happening'.<sup>123</sup> In creating the maps which I have used to analyse the physical space of the Inquiring Sort, I have used the GNU Image Manipulation Programme.

## Summary

In my consideration of the place of ideas and learning in eighteenth-century Birmingham I concentrate on six related areas:

In Chapter 2 I concentrate on ideas of identity and imagination. The inhabitants of an industrial town such as Birmingham are very often seen solely in terms of their roles as producers. Conversely historians looking at identity and the imagination, although noting islands of provincial culture such as Lichfield, rarely ask questions about the place of these ideas in an industrial town such as Birmingham.<sup>124</sup> In this chapter I introduce the concept of the Inquiring Sort and give a detailed case study of one example of a group within them, the Freemasons.

Chapter 3 will concentrate on ideas and learning as commodities to be consumed

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<sup>123</sup> Darnton, 'Introduction', in Darnton and Roche (eds), *Revolution in Print*, p. xiii.

<sup>124</sup> For example, Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, has no mention of Birmingham at all.



and the physical space in which these interactions took place. The recent literature on consumption tends to be London-centric in its emphasis. As a major provincial city, what kind of market was there for cultural commodities? I analyse the physical location of print outlets and fashionable service providers to map the town of Birmingham and the changes which came about during the eighteenth century. I also look at the acquisition of books and the use of texts in Birmingham after 1750.

In Chapter 4 I look at the place of ideas and learning in the world of Birmingham's producers. During the course of the eighteenth century, Birmingham moved from being principally a producer of blades, guns and ironwork, to being world-famous for the myriad objects that came under the umbrella-term of 'toys'.<sup>125</sup> How much was this change helped along by the free-flow of new ideas into and around Birmingham? I will look at the training of skilled workers and opportunities for workers, producers and innovators to learn; also at the way the marketing of Birmingham goods was influenced by ideas; finally I look at the impact of fashion on Birmingham industry.

Chapter 5 focuses on religious life in Birmingham. I examine the place of the Established Church in the town, including popular pamphlets. I then look at the Dissenting Churches, particularly the Unitarians. Finally I look in more detail at Joseph Priestley, and the reaction to him in Birmingham

Struggles for power and disputes over what ideas were admissible to the public sphere are examined in chapter 6, which concentrates on the events leading up to the Church and King riot of 1791. Joseph Priestley, who actively proselytized his belief in the benefits of ideas and learning to all, was an unwelcome presence to those of the Established Church who felt deeply threatened by such beliefs. The output of the

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<sup>125</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'Economic and Social History: Industry and Trade, 1500-1880'.

'pamphlet wars' of the late 1780s and early 1790s will be analysed as will the publications which came in the period of recrimination after the 1791 riots.

## **Curiosity and Identity: The Inquiring Sort in late**

### **Eighteenth-Century Birmingham**

Birmingham in the eighteenth century was a place of diverse sorts of people. Its metal industries ranged from units of single men working their forges, to the vast works of Matthew Boulton. Its religious denominations ranged from the conservative of the Established Church to Quakers and Unitarians. Its social structure was also diverse with a strong, populist 'Church and King' aspect, along side the wealthy, urbane radicalism of many Dissenting congregations of the town. With such diversity of opinion and experience there cannot be said to be a single 'Birmingham' identity. However, I have identified a group of people, cutting across many of these divisions, for whom ideas and learning were at the core of their sense of identity. The 'middling sort' of people in Birmingham contained a significant element – not of any particular denomination or political conviction – who were interested in ideas, discussions and debate, discoveries and experiments. They formed a sector of Birmingham society that I have called the Inquiring Sort.

#### **The Inquiring Sort**

The concept of the Inquiring Sort is one that encompasses the aspects of curiosity and interest that are found amongst the inhabitants of eighteenth-century Birmingham. Other historiographical ideas about intellectual curiosity for ideas and learning in some way neglect aspects that are crucial to this view of Birmingham society. John Brewer in *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, for example, deals with high culture, and serious culture, in the provinces as well as in London, although his book does not consider

Birmingham.<sup>1</sup> But he does not take account of the central importance of religion to the majority of curious minds in the eighteenth-century provinces. The dominance of religious subjects amongst published books, the popularity of good preachers, the number of published sermons or the practice of going to hear the services of other denominations all point to an abiding interest in religious matters. Roy Porter's *Enlightenment*, on the other hand, whilst taking full account of religious enquiry as part of intellectual life, is concerned with bigger fish than the curious of Birmingham who bought the sermons of famous preachers or attended the travelling lecturers when they came to town. The Inquiring Sort is an attempt to describe these many and various people who were central to the public life of Birmingham – from Julius Hardy, a sober and dour Methodist going to hear Joseph Priestley preach, to the convivial, drinking Birmingham Book Club ordering two copies of Hutton's *History of Birmingham*.<sup>2</sup>

Maria Edgeworth (1768-1849), in her novel *Belinda*, gave an idealised account of the domestic circumstances of the Inquiring Sort.<sup>3</sup> Edgeworth was the novelist daughter of one of the Lunar Society members, Richard Lovell Edgeworth. Although resident for much of her life at the family's estates in Ireland, her father's acquaintance with the Lunar Society gave her close contact with the apogee of Inquiring domesticity in Birmingham, the households of the Boultons and Priestleys.<sup>4</sup> Her description of the Percival household, which gives the heroine, Belinda, a glimpse into an exemplar of companionate marriage, is one of rationality and conviviality. Mr Percival was 'a man

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<sup>1</sup> John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination. English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, (London, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Birmingham City Archive, Julius Hardy, 'Journal', MS218/1 or MS 839/53, 31 May 1789; William Hutton, *An History of Birmingham, to the End of the Year 1780* (Birmingham, 1781).

<sup>3</sup> Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda* (1994), Ch. 16, 'Domestic Happiness', pp. 211-224. *Belinda* was first published in 1801.

<sup>4</sup> Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men. The friends who changed the future, 1730 – 1810* (London, 2002), pp. 124-30, 315, 320.

of science and literature' whilst Lady Anne had 'much accurate knowledge, and a taste for literature'.<sup>5</sup> Edgeworth portrays the mutual spirit of inquiry as the core of the marriage, allowing Mr Percival to pursue his interests within the family group. The children are included in this idyllic picture – their views and queries respected, each with their own area of interest. However, Edgeworth shies away from any suggestions of threatening gender equality, giving the boy children interests in chemistry or gardening, whilst the girls have talents for music and painting. The boys make intellectual choices and pursue them, the girls nurture the talents which lie within them. Similarly Lady Anne's accomplishments are firmly placed in service to her husband's philosophical work. But in contrast to the ideals of domestic succour that were beginning to dominate the notion of wifely duty, Edgeworth's portrait of the companionate marriage is one of intellectual interaction and support. The striking feature of Edgeworth's description of the Percival household is the pleasure and enjoyment the family derive from their rational interests. She hints that this is not a fantasy on her part, hoping the reader will not find the depiction 'visionary and romantic' but 'will feel that it is drawn from truth and real life'.<sup>6</sup> Some of the portrayals of Enlightenment 'types' in *Belinda* verge on caricature, for example the Rousseauesque perfect, innocent beauty of Rachel/Virginia, a child/woman found in the woods.<sup>7</sup> However, the Percival family, whilst certainly idealised, has a life and vitality that suggest Edgeworth may well have been thinking of her time spent with the wealthy, cultivated aristocracy of the Inquiring Sort in Birmingham.

Missing from Edgeworth's account, however is the picture of the public arena of

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<sup>5</sup> Edgeworth, *Belinda*, p. 216.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, Ch. 26, 'Virginia', pp. 362-389.

the Inquiring Sort, where ideas of place and self are central. This chapter will explore the public arena in which the Inquiring Sort moved. I will first discuss ideas about the Public Sphere and the self, both central to my analysis of eighteenth-century Birmingham. I will then look at two distinct yet related areas – intellectual inquiry and religious inquiry. Intellectual curiosity was at the core of the Inquiring Sort, it was what drove men and women to buy books, to attend events and to discuss ideas, whilst both intellectual curiosity and religious duty led the Inquiring Sort to religious investigation. I will look at three areas which were central to the world of the inquiring of eighteenth-century Birmingham, first at personal dissemination of ideas, that is by public classes and lectures, then I will look at discussion and debate, and finally I will look at religious inquiry. Within the Inquiring Sort was another group for whom ideas and learning were central to their identity, cutting across other lines of association in eighteenth-century Birmingham – these were the Freemasons. The Birmingham Freemasons were more akin to the radical, enlightenment models of eighteenth-century European masonry, than the conservative, strongly establishment-based one which was to emerge so strongly in nineteenth-century Britain. However, the masons had distinct identity within the Inquiring Sort. They were a closed society, membership was restricted, there were no women permitted and secrecy was at the core of their activities. I have made a study of Freemasonry as an example of a group within the Inquiring Sort. As a formally constituted group which exists to the present, research on Freemasonry is easier to analyse than any of the other groups within the Inquiring Sort. The second part of this chapter is concerned with the Freemasons and their particular relationship with ideas and learning.

## The Public Sphere and the Self

A study of identity in eighteenth-century Birmingham has two main facets: individuals within the town and key elements of the society of the town. An examination of the *Inquiring Sort of Birmingham* is, to a significant extent, an examination of the public sphere of the town. Since its publication in English in 1989, studies of urban culture in eighteenth-century Britain have, rightly, been strongly influenced by Jürgen Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.<sup>8</sup> Habermas's theory of the public sphere suggests that during the eighteenth century, bourgeois society developed a public sphere operating distinctly from, and in opposition to, the sphere of public authority, which in Britain essentially meant the State and the Established Church.<sup>9</sup> Eighteenth-century Birmingham society is, in many ways, a good example of the the working of the public sphere in an English town: it had a strong network of cultural institutions – book clubs, debating societies, libraries – making a visible world of letters; its strong population of Dissenters meant that there was a group within the town without a stake in the world of State authority; finally, at the end of the eighteenth century there were riots in Birmingham, sparked by perceived threats to authority by elements of this public sphere. However, the picture of eighteenth-century Birmingham life does not conform to Habermas's theory as neatly as might be imagined at first glance. Dissenters in Birmingham, as in the rest of the country, were explicitly excluded from public office

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<sup>8</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (trans. by Thomas Burger, assisted by Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge, 1989). Historians who have used his work include, for example: Margaret C Jacob, 'The Mental Landscape of the Public Sphere: A European Perspective', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 28, 1 (1994), pp. 95-113; Daniel E White, 'The "Joineriana": Anna Barbauld, the Aikin Family Circle, and the Dissenting Public Sphere', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 32, 4 (1999), pp. 511-33; Paul Elliott, 'The origins of the 'creative class': provincial urban society, scientific culture and socio-political marginality in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', *Social History*, 28, 3 (2003), pp. 362-8; Dena Goodman, 'Public Sphere and Private Life: Towards a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime', *History and Theory*, 31, 1 (1992), pp. 1-20.

<sup>9</sup> Habermas, *Structural Transformation*.

by the Test Acts. These Acts (1673 and 1678) were tools of the Restoration regime aimed at protecting the State from the threat of Catholics within British society attempting to gain power, by imposing religious tests on all office holders of the State. They also excluded Protestant Dissenters from participating in the institutions of the British State, a situation which the Established Church fought to uphold during the eighteenth century. The situation in Birmingham, however, was not so clear-cut as this.<sup>10</sup> The town's arcane administrative system had evolved to allow members of the Established Church and Dissenting Congregations to share power.<sup>11</sup> The High Bailiff was in general a Churchman, whilst the, *de facto*, more powerful Low Bailiff was Dissenter.<sup>12</sup> There was extensive agitation for the repeal of the Test Acts in the later decades of the eighteenth century in Birmingham, but the Dissenters of the Town were not excluded from positions of power within their own locality. The campaign for repeal was strong in Birmingham, but it should not be thought that this meant the public sphere of the town was in opposition to the State, and Church, as suggested in the Habermasian model. Although Joseph Priestley embraced a republican theory of government after 1791, the majority Dissenters were explicit in their support for the State, Parliament and the monarchy in their public pronouncements, the toasts at their meetings and in the literary ephemera they produced. John Freeth for example, although a Unitarian and a political radical was a loyal subject in his published verse. His glee 'On the Illumination for His Majesty's Recovery', wished life and health for the

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<sup>10</sup> John Money, *Experience and Identity, Birmingham and the West Midlands 1760-1800* (Manchester, 1977), gives extensive and detailed exposition of the political life of the town.

<sup>11</sup> see Introduction pp. 18-21.

<sup>12</sup> 'Political and Administrative History: Local Government and Public Services', in W B Stephens (ed.), *A History of the County of Warwickshire: Volume VII: The City of Birmingham*, 1964, online version at <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.asp?compid=22973>, date accessed 24/06/05, p. 2; Anon., *The Duty of the Respective Officers appointed by the Court Leet, in the Manor of Birmingham*, (Birmingham, 1789).



King, as well as equating his reign with freedom and prosperity.<sup>13</sup> In addition, several of John Freeth's privately circulated ballads include toasts to George III, and in 1787 explicitly supported him against Prince George.<sup>14</sup> Although Freeth's ballads are frequently critical of the government, particularly Pitt, they are full of messages of support for Britain's naval heroes and fighting men and are always loyal to the crown. The Dissenters of Birmingham wished to participate rather than overthrow.

The public sphere of eighteenth-century Birmingham was also a diverse one. There is a tendency to regard the public sphere of Birmingham and its wider connections as an exclusive group of Dissent and radical politics. Daniel E White, for example, in his study of 'Anna Barbauld and the Aikin Family Circle', although rightly pointing out that the level of participation by Dissenters of this group meant that they cannot be seen as a 'couterpublic', does not deal with the religious diversity of the circles of which the Aikins were a part.<sup>15</sup> In Birmingham circles, for example, the Anglican James Keir was a Lunar Society Member and also part of the Constitutional Society that met to celebrate the French Revolution in 1791.<sup>16</sup> William Hutton, a prominent Dissenter in Birmingham, described his personal friendship with the Rector of St Philips, Mr Newling, in his autobiography.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, whilst eighteenth-century Birmingham might not fit neatly into the Habermasian model of the public sphere, the concept is extremely valuable for an examination of identity in eighteenth-century Birmingham.

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<sup>13</sup> 'On the Illumination for His Majesty's Recovery', in John Freeth, *The Political Songster or, a Touch on the Times, on various Subjects, and adapted to common Tunes, the sixth edition, with additions*, (Birmingham, 1790), p. 155.

<sup>14</sup> Birmingham Central Library, John Freeth's Invitation Cards 1770-1801, L23.3 523407, 27 November 1782 and Invitation Ballad 6 June 1787.

<sup>15</sup> White, 'Joineriana', pp. 511-513.

<sup>16</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004); Uglow, *The Lunar Men*, p. 440.

<sup>17</sup> William Hutton, *The Life of William Hutton, F.A.S.S. including a particular account of the riots at Birmingham in 1791 . . .* (London, 1816), pp. 167-8.

The other facet to a study of identity in eighteenth-century Birmingham is that of self. The idea of the self was a matter of concern to eighteenth-century philosophers. At the end of the seventeenth century John Locke's *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* and *Some Thoughts concerning Education* had raised ideas about the alterability and perfectability of the self that had wide ranging influence in the eighteenth century.<sup>18</sup> The idea that the self was bound up with consciousness, reason and experience – begun with Locke, but pushed onwards by the Earl of Shaftesbury, David Hartley and Joseph Priestley – would have been, if not explicitly known, part of the intellectual milieu of the Inquiring Sort in Birmingham at that time. Shaftesbury's *Characteristics* was published in Birmingham in 1773 and Priestley's presence in the town from 1780 brought into the public sphere his own ideas, as well as those of Hartley, with whose philosophy he was closely concerned. Whilst Shaftesbury's concern with the possibility of pursuing the malleability of the self so far that he might 'have lost My Self',<sup>19</sup> was probably a matter sufficiently esoteric in nature not to have troubled the majority of even the educated and inquiring of eighteenth-century Birmingham, it is clear from the writings of the relatively humble Julius Hardy, that the idea of the self as a malleable entity was current throughout a wide strata of Birmingham society.<sup>20</sup>

The subject matter of this study has, necessarily, made it one concerned more with men than with women. Women were, of course, very much present in the authentic public sphere of Birmingham and elsewhere: they attended lectures, ran coffee

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<sup>18</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (abridged and edited by John Yolton, London, 1993); John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (ed. by John W and Jean S Yolton, Oxford, 1989).

<sup>19</sup> Roy Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London, 2001), p. 166; Brewer *Pleasures of the Imagination*, p. 112.

<sup>20</sup> Hardy, 'Journal', 22 October 1798.

houses, enjoyed discussion, purchased books and wrote them.<sup>21</sup> However, the majority of written material from this period is concerned with or produced by men and Peter Clark found women 'largely notable by their absence' from eighteenth-century British clubs and societies.<sup>22</sup> Since the late 1980s, masculinity has been the subject of increasing study by historians.<sup>23</sup> Especially pertinent to this study of eighteenth-century Birmingham is the work of Lenonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall. *Family Fortunes* is concerned with men and women from the last two decades of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth. Their discussion on manliness during this period is mainly concerned with masculine identity through work and its moral purpose, however, the majority of their work is concerned with tensions between work and domesticity.<sup>24</sup> Occupation must have been an important defining feature for men of the late eighteenth century. However, as Davidoff and Hall point out, at this time 'the equation of masculine identity with occupation was by no means complete' - occupational tasks were vaguely defined, people used a variety of means to support themselves and their families and many occupations were not evenly paced throughout the seasons.<sup>25</sup> Indeed the range of occupations pursued by John Baskerville demonstrate this admirably. He began his working life in Birmingham as a writing master and stone cutter when he was in his twenties. He then set up a Japanning business when he inherited his father's

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<sup>21</sup> Brian Cowan, 'What was Masculine about the Public Sphere? Gender and the Coffeehouse Milieu in Post Restoration England', *History Workshop Journal*, 51 (Spring, 2001), pp. 127-157.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies, 1580-1800. The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford, 2000), p. 130.

<sup>23</sup> For example: G J Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in eighteenth-century Britain* (Chicago and London, 1992); Philip Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society, Britain 1660-1800* (Harlow, 2001); Mary Ann Clawson, *Constructing Brotherhood. Class, Gender and Fraternalism* (Princeton, 1989); Margot Finn, 'Men's things: masculine possession in the consumer revolution', in *Social History*, 25, 2 (2000), pp. 133-55; Tim Hitchcock and Michèle Cohen, *English Masculinities, 1660-1800* (London and New York, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes. Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*, (London, 1987), pp. 108-13.

<sup>25</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p. 229.

estate. However, printing and type-founding were his passions and major interests for much of his life.<sup>26</sup> Although Davidoff and Hall acknowledge that a man in the last decades of the eighteenth century would not have defined himself in relation to his occupation in the same way that a man in the mid-nineteenth century would, they offer little in the way alternative means of thinking about masculine identity.<sup>27</sup> In *Family Fortunes*, a man was either at work or at prayer, missing from their thesis is the man at leisure. Even Julius Hardy, a most committed Methodist and button manufacturer, considered the management of the Birmingham Library a matter of extreme importance and took time to devote to its cause.<sup>28</sup> For men such as Julius Hardy or Joseph Priestley, their identities were deeply, but not exclusively, tied up with their religious faith. 'Religion . . .' wrote Priestley 'is the great business of our lives'.<sup>29</sup> But, as will be seen in this thesis, the men of the Inquiring Sort were members of a wide variety of groups and undertook a number of activities which had an impact on the way in which they were seen by others and in which they saw themselves.

Michael Mascuch, writing on 'Narrative Subjects, Individualism, Autobiography, Authority' asks 'What is an individualist self?'<sup>30</sup> In thinking about the way that autobiographers, including those of the eighteenth century, viewed their own sense of self, he uses, amongst others, two theoretical ideas about the self which place the audience for the self in a central role. He uses Erving Goffman's idea of the 'identity performance', making the point that 'each personal script . . . depends heavily upon

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<sup>26</sup> William Bennett, *John Baskerville, The Birmingham Printer, His Press, Relations, and Friends* (Birmingham, 1937), pp. 22-32, 41.

<sup>27</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p. 230.

<sup>28</sup> Birmingham City Archive, Julius Hardy, 'Journal' MS218/1 Transcript at MS 839/53, December 3, 1790.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Priestley, *A serious Address to Masters of Families, with forms of Family-prayer* (2nd end., London, 1770), pp. 1-6.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Mascuch, *Origins of the Individualist Self. Autobiography and Self-Identity in England, 1591-1791* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 13.

actual and imagined audience response'.<sup>31</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre's concept of agency is also central for Mascuch's understanding of the importance of autobiography to an understanding of the concept of the individualist self. MacIntyre goes further than Goffmann in his concept of the interaction between the autobiographical self and the imagined audience, for him the self can only ever be co-author 'because an agent is never entirely in control of the theatre in which he creates and acts out his life'.<sup>32</sup> However, Mascuch does not take the step to make the link between these two ideas, which is crucial to understanding the eighteenth-century idea of self – that of the alteration of self, or concept of self, as a result of an audience reaction. In Chapter 4 I will explore how Julius Hardy, a minor button manufacturer, felt that his self could be altered in the face of the reaction of an audience to his presented self.<sup>33</sup> For another Birmingham autobiographer, William Hutton, there was also a sophisticated sense of the possibilities of self-audience interaction. Hutton, although in many ways a more sophisticated autobiographer than Julius Hardy, also came from a humble background.<sup>34</sup> He had had very little education, his mother had died during his childhood, his father, although informed and interested in his children, was an alcoholic, and Hutton had been apprenticed to a silk mill at the age of seven. He decided to become a book-binder in his mid-twenties, and by the time his *History of Birmingham* was published in 1781, he had been in the book trade for over thirty years. His 'Preface' to the *History* is typically diffident – he is not an author by profession so 'unacquainted with the modes of authorship'; he has no dedication 'being wholly unknown to the great names of literary

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<sup>31</sup> Mascuch, *Origins of the Individualist Self*, p. 18; Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in everyday Life* (London, 1969).

<sup>32</sup> Mascuch, *Origins of the Individualist Self*, p. 22; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue, a Study in Moral Theory* (2nd edn., London, 1995).

<sup>33</sup> See Chapter 4, pp. 147-9.

<sup>34</sup> Hutton, *Life of William Hutton*.

confidence'; he laid out his lack of education; his book is 'a temporary bridge [which] may satisfy the impatient traveller, 'till a more skilful architect shall accommodate him'.<sup>35</sup> It took the reaction of the reading public to his *History* to alter his view of himself: 'I did not know I was an Antiquary till the world informed me, from having read my History; but when told, I could see it for myself'.<sup>36</sup> Once Hutton came to see himself as a literary man his confidence grew, as did his output. He published again in 1785, 1788 (twice), 1791 (twice), 1798, 1801 and 1802, not counting numerous poetical publications during those years. The reaction of those who read his *History* gave Hutton a new sense of himself, and allowed him to recast himself as a literary man.

### **Personal Dissemination**

Public lectures on natural philosophy were first seen in London's coffee houses during the early decades of the eighteenth century.<sup>37</sup> Leading philosophers gave, not simply talks, but demonstrations. The skilled lecturer conveyed the latest ideas and experiments with words, but he also gave practical demonstrations using the dramatic equipment of Enlightenment natural philosophy – the air pump with its asphyxiating possibilities, the Leyden Jar administering electric shocks, orreries showing the movements of the planets, explosive chemical reactions. These lecturers soon began to appear in provincial towns, touring their demonstrations almost as one-man shows.<sup>38</sup>

The curious could attend one-off lectures or whole series on a single topic or a range of subjects. The first mention of public lectures in Birmingham comes in *Aris's*

*Birmingham Gazette* in 1747. This was clearly not the first public lecture in the town,

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<sup>35</sup> Hutton, *An History of Birmingham*, pp. ii, iii, vi.

<sup>36</sup> Hutton, *Life of William Hutton*, p. 135.

<sup>37</sup> Porter, *Enlightenment* pp. 142-4.

<sup>38</sup> Porter, *Enlightenment*, p. 143; Brewer, *Pleasures*, pp. 505-7.

as 'Mr. Martin hereby proposes a second Subscription to his Course of Philosophical Lectures'.<sup>39</sup> The lectures were to be held at Mr Taylor's in Cherry Orchard, probably a tavern or coffee house, and were open to both men and women. The lecturer, Benjamin Martin (1705-1782) was a self-taught man who wrote books with the explicit intention of enabling people to read reasonably priced philosophical works.<sup>40</sup> Subscribers could obtain a syllabus from the booksellers Aris or Warren, or from Mr Taylor. A syllabus from a decade later shows that Martin's course ranged from Newtonian philosophy to the prosaic nature of glue and cement.<sup>41</sup> This syllabus prices the lectures at a shilling a time. Three years later, also at Cherry Orchard, but this time at Mr Packwood's Great Room, another series was advertised. This time the series was given over the course of a week with lectures at eleven in the morning and five in the afternoon.<sup>42</sup> Subjects included compound engines, vision and light, water, and diving bells. Here the emphasis was explicitly on practical demonstration. There would be working engines, dissection of eyes – both natural and artificial – and 'Miscellaneous Experiments in several Branches'. The importance of equipment in attracting an audience is clear: in 1765 the advertisement for another course of lectures was eager to convince the Birmingham public of the quality of its experimental equipment, which was not only 'extensive' but 'elegantly finished'.<sup>43</sup> In the course of the twenty lectures subscribers, even 'those who have not applied any Time or Study this Way' would be shown 'all the Experiments necessary for the Explanation of Natural Philosophy in general, or the Properties of Matter, and the Laws by which it acts'. Subjects covered were astronomy,

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<sup>39</sup> *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, August 1747.

<sup>40</sup> John R. Millburn, 'Martin, Benjamin (*bap.* 1705, *d.* 1782)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18175>, 3 March 2006].

<sup>41</sup> Stephen Johnson, 'Benjamin Martin, from beginning to end', *Bulletin of Scientific the Instrument Society* 86, (2005), pp. 12-13.

<sup>42</sup> *Aris's*, 23 April 1750.

<sup>43</sup> *Aris's*, 29 April 1765, cited Langford, J A, *A Century of Birmingham Life* (Birmingham, 1868).

geography, hydrostatics and pneumatics. The appeal of these general courses of lectures on natural philosophy was wide: both sexes were admitted, and a later course was repeated at the request of 'many respectable Families'.<sup>44</sup> Lectures on natural philosophy were events at which the whole family could be entertained and informed.

The content of these series of courses was extremely general and wide ranging. However, there were also courses on more specific aspects of natural philosophy. In 1776 a course of four 'Experiments upon Different Kinds of Air' was advertised.<sup>45</sup> Subscribers paid ten shillings and sixpence for the course, and it was clearly popular as this was the third running of the same course. The same lecturer promised to conduct a future series on chemistry, which he considered would be of 'great Importance' to Birmingham and the surrounding area, probably an allusion to the centrality of chemistry to so many of Birmingham's industrial processes. Not all single subject lectures were so high minded, a series of three lectures on astronomy in 1781 were clearly intended to entertain rather than inform the serious student.<sup>46</sup> They were held in the New Theatre and promised 'Day and Night . . . Eclipses of both Sun and Moon . . . a Transit of Venus' culminating with

A Grand Display of the whole solar System, viz., the Sun, Mercury, Venus, the Earth and Moon, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and their Satellites, and all in motion without any visible Machinery; Together with the Parabolic Decent and Ascent of a Comet.<sup>47</sup>

The audience for these lectures, whilst discovering the Ptolomaic and Copernican systems of the universe, must also have expected to be amazed by 'motion without

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<sup>44</sup> *Aris's*, 13 August 1781, *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Aris's*, 4 November 1776, *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Aris's*, 5 November 1781, *ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Aris's*, 5 November 1781, *ibid.*



visible machinery' and a 'Grand Display'. The spirit of Inquiry was closely associated with the desire to be entertained and astonished.

It was not only natural philosophy that was presented by lecture. In 1775 Mr Walker advertised that he would lecture on 'English Pronunciation and the Beauties of Shakspear [sic]' in six lectures costing half a guinea (single lectures could be attended for two shillings).<sup>48</sup> Walker, who was also marketing his book *Rhyming Dictionary and General Idea of a Pronouncing Dictionary*, promised with his lecture course to not only inform, but to elevate, his hearers. In the lectures on pronouncing he would demonstrate the Principals of Language and also give his subscribers Rules for Pronouncing and 'Methods for speaking and reading in Public with Justness, Energy, and Ease'.<sup>49</sup> He would then give illustrations on English Composition from authors, not only showing the good writing but the bad, so that the subscriber might 'form a Taste for what is excellent in every species of Composition'.<sup>50</sup>

Although the series of lectures on 'Experiments upon Different Kinds of Air' was advertised to 'Persons of every Rank and Profession', these were events clearly aimed at the better sort of the town. A series of lectures might cost a guinea, with even a single lecture costing a shilling or two. This would have placed them out of the reach of many and kept the social atmosphere at the lectures safely exclusive. However, there was a market for the cross-over of entertainment and information amongst those who could not afford a shilling a lecture. In 1742 the Wheat Sheaf in the Bull Ring was bringing in apparatus that would appeal to 'the Curious'. In March that year 'a Curious and

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<sup>48</sup> *Aris's*, 23 October 1775, *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Aris's*, 6 November 1775, *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Aris's*, 6 November 1775, *ibid.*

Unparallel'd Musical Clock' could be seen, and in August an 'ingenious and unparallel'd OPTICAL INSTRUMENT' that seems to have been something akin to a magic lantern.<sup>51</sup> A viewing of the Optical Instrument was unpriced, but the Musical Clock could be seen for as little as sixpence. These machines were clearly designed to entertain, yet they were sold to the public with the added benefits of improvement: the Optical Instrument was advertised as being a specimen of the work of Isaac Newton and the Musical Clock gave satisfaction to the 'most eminent Masters'.

The different nature of audience and lecturer demonstrates the complex relationship between the acquisition of knowledge and status in eighteenth-century Birmingham. Although the cost of attending lectures was sufficiently high that the patrons would be of a respectable sort, the meritocratic nature of learning was illuminated on some of these occasions by the lecturer himself. Robert Martin, who gave some of the earliest lectures in Birmingham, was a man of humble origins.<sup>52</sup> His parents had farmed in Surrey, and it was only through an advantageous marriage that Martin was able to begin the process of transforming his learning into a product to be submitted, by print and personal dissemination, to a public audience. Joseph Wright's paintings of *A Philosopher giving that Lecture on the Orrery* and *An Experiment with a Bird in an Air Pump* show lecturer and audience in intimate proximity (see Appendix 1 for reproductions of these paintings).<sup>53</sup> In each case an intimate family group is arranged around the equipment, ranging in ages from childhood to old age, displaying various levels of interest and attention. Lecturer and audience are each part of a circle of observation and display, there is no spacial distinction between them. Yet, the men

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<sup>51</sup> *Aris's*, 8 March and 2 August 1742.

<sup>52</sup> Millburn, 'Martin, Benjamin'.

<sup>53</sup> Joseph Wright 'of Derby', 'A Philosopher giving that Lecture on the Orrery in which a lamp is put in place of the sun', oil on canvas, exhibited 1766, Derby Museum and Art Gallery; Joseph Wright 'of Derby', 'An Experiment on a Bird in an Air Pump', oil on canvas, 1768, NG725, National Gallery.

displaying knowledge and providing entertainment in each of the paintings are markedly different. The *Philosopher* with the orrery is respectable, with a grave countenance; clothes that are neat, luxurious and dignified; well groomed hair. The philosopher displaying the *Air Pump*, in contrast, is rather wild in appearance – his hair and garments flowing; his expression one of a man observed in his work of providing amazement; his hand raised in the manner of a conjurer. But despite their differences, in both paintings the lecturers occupy a similar space, intimately placed within the respectable family group. Their authority – manifested in their skills, their scholarship and their value as transmitters of knowledge and learning – permitted them to occupy close, equal space with those to whom they conveyed their ideas.

Of course, few of the public lectures heard in Birmingham would have been in such intimate surroundings as those portrayed in Wright's paintings. Certainly for lectures like those on astronomy given at the theatre, and very probably for those given in the 'Great Room' or 'Long Room' of a tavern, the authority of the lecturer would have placed him, not in intimate respectability, but in grand isolation. He was separated from the, as yet, uninformed mass of his audience by the distance in their states of learning and the physical placement of himself and his dramatic equipment in a separate sphere of the room. Their individuality was subsumed into the massed ranks of the crowd waiting to be both enlightened and enthralled; his was displayed before them to be both admired and consumed. In these circumstances the respectability and social acceptability of the lecturer mattered less than in the situations described by Wright. The audience was less exclusive and the physical proximity of lecturer and listener reduced. This was the kind of situation in which Benjamin Martin, farmer-turned-philosopher, was likely to found. His knowledge gave him the authority to conduct a

successful lecture tour of the Midlands, but his failure to move sufficiently beyond his humble origins hindered him in his approaches to the Royal Society – the ultimate mark of respectability amongst natural philosophers.<sup>54</sup> For the most humble of the scientific demonstrations seen at Birmingham, the 'curious', 'ingenious', 'unparallel'd' instruments that were to be seen at the Wheat Sheaf, the physical presence of the lecturer was removed entirely. The price for seeing the instruments was low and the wording of the advertisements was populist – the crowd the instruments attracted would not have been of sufficient calibre to allow the person of the lecturer to be present. Although learning could raise a lecturer in society, there were clear strata within the world of lecturers and their audiences. From the rarefied lecture on the orrery by the *Philosopher*, to the more sensationalist flirtation with death of the *Air Pump*, to the lecture of the learned farmer to the middling sort of the Midlands towns, right down to the ingenious instruments with philosopher absent, amongst the Inquiring Sort there was subtle stratification of both learning and class.

### **Discussion and Debate**

Printed works and personal dissemination brought ideas and innovations to the attention and understanding of the Inquiring Sort of Birmingham. However, it was networks of conviviality that brought this information to life and embedded it as part of the milieu of a wide variety of inhabitants of the town. These networks were driven by clubs and groups that offered opportunities for discussion and debate across a wide sector of Birmingham life. I will look at two such networks, firstly the clubs and committees that met at John Freeth's Coffee House, the heart of the radical Inquiring Sort in Birmingham

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<sup>54</sup> Millburn, 'Martin, Benjamin'.

and seat of a variety of groups, secondly, the short-lived debating societies that sprang up in late eighteenth century in Birmingham. Through newspaper advertisements and other publications the debating societies allow a glimpse of a lower strata of the Inquiring Sort, one which I argue was a legitimate participator in the enlightened public sphere.

John Freeth (1731-1808) was son of the landlord of the Leicester Arms.<sup>55</sup> He was apprenticed to a brass founder and worked as a teacher of geography before inheriting the Leicester Arms from his parents in 1768, when it was known as Freeth's Coffee House. Peter Clark and R A Houston have described how drinking houses played a key role in cultural activities after the Glorious Revolution, and Freeth's establishment is an excellent example of this trend.<sup>56</sup> They also discuss the significant part played by coffee houses in these activities, however the evidence from Birmingham suggests that in fact drinking houses and coffee houses may have often been one and the same in provincial towns.<sup>57</sup> In addition to his role as landlord, Freeth was also a prolific balladeer, both singer and writer. He published his ballads in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, sold them as single ballads, published many collections and used them to advertise events held at his Coffee House. He even suggested in one of his Invitation Ballads that he made a better living from balladeering than from innkeeping.<sup>58</sup> From the early 1770s until the mid-1780s he used the sobriquet John Free, a name that encapsulated his ultra-Whiggish, Dissenting, liberal beliefs.<sup>59</sup> The groups that met at

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<sup>55</sup> John Horden, *John Freeth (1731-1801). Political Ballad-writer and Innkeeper* (Oxford, 1993), p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> Peter Clark and R A Houston, 'Culture and Leisure 1700-1840', in Peter Clark (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain. Volume II, 1540-1840* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 578.

<sup>57</sup> Clark and Houston, 'Culture and Leisure 1700-1840', p. 579.

<sup>58</sup> John Freeth, 'Invitation Cards, 1770-1801', L23.3 523407, 27 November 1782. I use 'Invitation Ballads' to refer to Ballads in this collection, but also with appropriate distinction to those for that appear elsewhere, for example in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*.

<sup>59</sup> Horden, *John Freeth*, p. 13; and Freeth, 'Invitation Cards', 15 June 1775 and 13 June 1786.

Freeth's Coffee House were many and various. Principle ones included the vestry of the Unitarian Old and New Meetings, the aggressively political Jacobin Club and the Birmingham Book Club. In an article for *History Workshop Journal*, Brian Cowan found that coffee houses were almost exclusively masculine worlds - women might be proprietors or workers, or they might enter as hawkers – but in general, especially in politically-charged coffee houses, women did not have the unfettered access men enjoyed.<sup>60</sup> This is borne out by the evidence offered by Freeth's Coffee Shop. John Horden, Freeth's biographer, writes that tradition had it that Mrs Freeth and the Freeth daughters ran the coffee shop, but apart from them women seem to be utterly absent from this particular aspect of the world of the Inquiring Sort.<sup>61</sup>

The records of the Book Club are frustratingly elusive. It was probably formed some time around the middle of the eighteenth century. The first mention of the club is as a subscriber to the third edition of Wellins Calcott's *Thoughts Moral and Divine* in 1758.<sup>62</sup> They are titled as 'The Reading Society at Mr Freeth's Coffee House, Bell Street, Birmingham'. This was during the time of Charles Freeth's tenure as landlord of the Leicester Arms, and suggests that its incarnation as a place of news, books and discussion pre-dated John Freeth's time there. Peter Clark found that most eighteenth-century book clubs outside of the capital were founded in the last decades of the century, making the Birmingham Book Club an early provincial example.<sup>63</sup> The club was run for a membership limited to twenty-four and met fortnightly. They had an annual dinner each January at which the previous year's books were auctioned off,

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<sup>60</sup> Brian Cowan, 'What was Masculine about the Public Sphere? Gender and the Coffeehouse Milieu in Post Restoration England', *History Workshop Journal*, 51 (Spring, 2001), pp. 143-150.

<sup>61</sup> Horden *John Freeth*, p. 18.

<sup>62</sup> Wellins Calcott, *Thoughts Moral and Divine; Collected and intended for the better instruction and conduct of life* (London, 1758).

<sup>63</sup> Clark, *British Clubs and Societies*, p. 109.

which was common practice amongst provincial book clubs.<sup>64</sup> Freeth hosted many dinners throughout the year – bi-annual Society Feasts, a Shrove-tide dinner – as well as the Book Club dinner, which has led to some confusion over the Invitation Ballads.<sup>65</sup> In 'Taverns, Coffee Houses and Clubs', John Money has assumed that the Invitation Cards held at the Birmingham Central Library are invitations to Book Club dinners.<sup>66</sup>

However, a closer reading of the Ballads shows that this cannot be the case - there is not a single mention of books or reading throughout the thirty years of Invitation Ballads and the feasts are not held in the right months. However, there are some Book Club Invitation Ballads published in *Aris's*. The first is for 21 January 1795, there are others for 1799-1803. Unlike the invitations for the Society Feasts, which were often extremely political in their content, Freeth restricts himself to commenting on the war and the hard times in his Book Club Ballads. He often used interplay of ideas about food for the body and mind, and also wrote about friendship, drinking and smoking. It seems likely that these Annual Dinners were the meeting point of the Book Club with the wider public. It is unlikely that the Book Club would bother to advertise their Dinner and Book Sale if they were only expecting to entertain their own number. Since by 1790 Freeth could entertain up to forty people, these dinners and auctions may well have allowed non-members to buy the books and to enjoy the hospitality of Freeth and the Book Club.<sup>67</sup>

The workings of the Book Club, although a little obscure, illustrate the way that networks of conviviality and interest operated amongst the Inquiring Sort in eighteenth-

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<sup>64</sup> Horden, *John Freeth*, pp. 26-7; Langford, *Century of Birmingham Life*, p. 58; Clark, *British Clubs and Societies*, p. 110.

<sup>65</sup> Freeth, 'Invitation Cards'.

<sup>66</sup> John Money, 'Taverns, Coffee Houses and Clubs: Local Politics and Popular Articulation in the Birmingham Area, in the Age of the American Revolution.', *The Historical Journal*, 14, 1 (1971), pp. 25-6.

<sup>67</sup> Freeth, 'Invitation Cards', 24 November 1790.

century Birmingham. The twenty four members of the Club met and discussed radical books of the day – John Alfred Langford who had clearly seen late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century records of the club mentions Tom Paine, William Cobbett and Henry Hunt – at the foremost religiously and politically radical coffee house in Birmingham. However much this was a closed, membership-limited club, its annual interaction with the reading public was both financial and convivial. The books were sold (presumably to fund the next year's readings) but the surroundings in which the sale took place were ones of friendly, public, interaction. As Freeth put it in his 1802 Invitation

If mellow our Hearts are all made

The BOOKS much better may sell.<sup>68</sup>

Those who wanted to buy the books could also enter the world of discussion, debate and conviviality that the Book Club represented: the public was invited into the usually private space of the Book Club. In contrast the Freemasons, as will be seen later, protected the secret, closed inner space of the Lodge from 'prying eye[s]'. On those occasions when the Lodge interacted with public, the Masons went out into public spaces – theatres, churches or the streets themselves.<sup>69</sup>

The clutch of debating societies that sprang up in the 1770s offers a contrasting insight into the world of the Inquiring Sort. As Mary Thale found in her study of the London debating societies of the 1790s, these groups were ephemeral and paper-shy, mainly now to be found in newspaper advertisements.<sup>70</sup> Perhaps for this reason they are not a great deal studied by modern historians. Mary Thale and Donna Andrew have published work on the London debating societies, but apart from John Money's 1971

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<sup>68</sup> Freeth, John, 'Invitation Ballad', January 1802, *Aris's*, cited Langford, *Century of Birmingham Life*, p. 60.

<sup>69</sup> 'The Treasurer's Song', *The Free Masons [sic] Repository* (Birmingham), p. 7 .

<sup>70</sup> Mary Thale, 'London Debating Societies in the 1790s', *The Historical Journal*, 32, 1 (1989), p. 59.



article and a brief mention in Peter Clark's *British Clubs and Societies*, there is little to be found on the provincial debating societies.<sup>71</sup> Debating societies had become popular in London during the 1750s, but were slower to move to provincial towns.<sup>72</sup> Two debating societies began life in the 1770s in Birmingham – the Free Debating Society, sometimes called the Robin Hood Free Debating Society, and the Amicable Debating Society. The Free Debating held fairly diverse meetings, but the Amicable Society seems to have been set up to provide an explicitly more genteel Society than the company at the Free allowed. The announcement of the foundation of the Amicable on 25 April 1774 declared that 'the indiscriminate Admission of Persons into such Society, must cause the best Rules for its Government to be ineffectual'.<sup>73</sup> It seemed to be setting itself up in respectable opposition to the Free, and promised that to become a member, names must be submitted sealed to the President whereupon they would be balloted, members must then sign up to the Rules of the Society. If the Amicable Society was straining for visible respectability, the Free Debating was striving against illiberality.

The Free Debating Society was founded, probably in a fairly informal way, some time previously to 1771, when Freeth wrote a ballad on the subject of the Society.<sup>74</sup> In 1774 John Jones published *Remarks on the English Language with Rules for Speech and Action to which is added, An Account of the Proceedings of the Birmingham, Walsal, and Wolverhampton Free Debating Societies, instituted by J. Jones, President.*<sup>75</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Thale, 'London Debating Societies'; Donna T Andrew, 'Popular Culture and Public Debate: London 1780', *The Historical Journal*, 36, 2 (1996), pp. 405-423; Money, 'Taverns, Coffee Houses and Clubs'; Clark, *British Clubs and Societies*, pp. 120-1.

<sup>72</sup> Mary Thale, 'The Case of the British Inquisition: Money and Women in Mid-Eighteenth-Century London Debating Societies', *Albion*, 31, 1 (1999), p. 31.

<sup>73</sup> *Aris's*, 25 April 1774, cited Langford, *Century of Birmingham Life*.

<sup>74</sup> Freeth, John, 'The Red Lion Society', in *The Political Songster, 1771, Addressed to the Sons of Freedom and Lovers of Humour* (1771), cited Money, 'Taverns, Coffee Houses and Clubs', p. 37.

<sup>75</sup> J Jones, *Remarks on the English Language with Rules for Speech and Action to which is added, An Account of the Proceedings of the Birmingham, Walsal, and Wolverhampton Free Debating Societies, instituted by J. Jones, President – Together with his Address, as delivered at the opening of each the said Societies* (Birmingham, 1774).

Jones seems to have formalised the workings of the Free Debating Society, introducing rules and giving his advice to the prospective speakers. On 2 May 1774 they resolved that 'Ladies who choose to hear the Debates shall be admitted'. On 3 June there was a 'Lady's Question', in response to one of the previous week, asking 'Is it not incumbent on a gentleman to pursue the same maxims to keep possession, as he did to win, the heart of his lover?' There was then a resolution that 'Such Ladies who chuse, are allowed to speak to the Questions'.<sup>76</sup> Mary Thale found in the early decades of debating societies in London that women were not admitted to conventional 'artisan' societies. Her accounts of early inclusions of women are of very short lived societies attempting to attract a more refined, and wealthier, debater.<sup>77</sup> She considers that in London women were not admitted to artisan societies until the early 1780s.<sup>78</sup> Preceding this by five years, the Birmingham Free Debating Society admitted women - not as the early mixed societies in London had done by refining the entire organisation - but by inviting them to participate in a traditionally masculine sphere. That the invitation for women to attend was taken up is clear from a contemporary account which reprimanded some debaters for not procuring clean clothes when they would be in the company of women, as 'Cleanliness is a compliment due to the Sex every where'.<sup>79</sup>

This account, given in *Aris's* in June of 1774 suggests that the debates were not only attended, but spoken to, by socially diverse groups.<sup>80</sup> The writer records his 'Pain' at the oration of a 'poor Mechanic, or an Apprentice Boy' followed by his 'Pleasure' when a 'judicious Person' speaks. The clothes of the attenders were dirty and rough and

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<sup>76</sup> Jones, *Remarks on the English Language*, pp. 44, 49-50; *Aris's*, 2 May and 6 June 1774, cited Langford, *Century of Birmingham Life*, pp. 242-3.

<sup>77</sup> Thale, 'The British Inquisition', pp. 31 and 45-6.

<sup>78</sup> Thale, 'The British Inquisition', p. 46.

<sup>79</sup> *Aris's*, 20 June 1774, cited Langford, *Century of Birmingham Life*, p. 244.

<sup>80</sup> *Aris's*, 20 June 1774, cited Langford, *Century of Birmingham Life*, p. 244.

many were uneducated. There is other evidence of diverse sorts of people attending: Freeth's ballad 'The Red Lion Society' (the Free Debating Society met at the Red Lion Inn), spoke of the attendees being 'tradesmen' of different occupations and Jones's account of the debates give the names and occupations of those who were awarded medals for oratory, and they were mainly professional men – surgeons or lawyers.<sup>81</sup> In spite of the shudder of the author of the letter over the class of speaker, he does say that order was maintained well, due to the effectiveness of the President. Jones's Rules for the society stress order and good behaviour: there was to be silence when the president took the chair, speakers were not to be interrupted, swearing and drunkenness were punished by fines and there was to be no 'personal reflection, or any thing respecting a man's private character'.<sup>82</sup>

The topics addressed were diverse. Freeth sang of the wide range of subjects discussed, 'Open and free in conversation'

No matter what, in Church or State,

Or anything that might relate

To foreign or domestic news:

How times, or trade, or commerce goes,

And whilst Elections are depending,

Where's like to be a great contending<sup>83</sup>

Jones account of the society, together with adverts placed in *Aris's* give a good indication of the kind of subjects discussed, and of the resolutions passed. Whilst there were many questions in the same character as that which prompted the first 'Lady's

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<sup>81</sup> Freeth, 'The Red Lion Society' cited Money, 'Taverns, Coffee Houses and Clubs', p. 37; Jones, *Remarks on the English Language*.

<sup>82</sup> Jones, *Remarks on the English Language*, pp. 22-4.

<sup>83</sup> Freeth, 'The Red Lion Society', cited Money, 'Taverns, Coffee Houses and Clubs', p. 37.

Question' ('Ought not a woman, when married, take the same methods to keep possession, as she did before to win, the heart of her lover?'), there were also questions on scientific problems ('Why does a celestial body appear larger at rising and setting, than when in its meridian?'), on local matters ('Are the inhabitants in general of *Birmingham*, likely to reap any lasting advantages from their canal navigation?'), and on national political questions ('Whether will the pursuit of mild or rigorous measures, by government, respecting the *Americans*, be most to the interest of *Great-Britain*?').<sup>84</sup>

The resolutions of the Society on these questions give an interesting insight into some opinions of this sector of Birmingham society. On matters of national politics the Society was firmly on the side of liberty – resolving in support of Wilkes, the American colonists and that the House of Commons could not override the law of the land.<sup>85</sup>

However, in local matters they were generally conservative. They resolved that a Charter for the town of Birmingham would be detrimental to its trade, that debtors should be imprisoned and that it was to the advantage of Birmingham society that very young children were sent out to work.<sup>86</sup> Another trend that emerges strongly from the resolutions is the importance that the voters put on trust and friendship: liars and dishonest servants were worse than thieves and a breach of friendship was worse than either adultery or public robbery.<sup>87</sup> These men and women, participating at the heart of Birmingham's convivial society, put the bonds of friendship ahead of marriage vows.

Although religion was extremely important to the voters (divinity was voted as most generally useful, ahead of the law or physic, and the wisest man was one knowledgable

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<sup>84</sup> Jones, *Remarks on the English Language*, pp. 33, 49, 53; Thale, 'The British Inquisition', p. 41, considers that 'domestic' questions were a defining feature of a society admitting women.

<sup>85</sup> Jones, *Remarks on the English Language*, pp. 33, 39, 48.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 30, 36, 42.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 42, 44, 46.

about God and religion), morality was more esteemed than Christianity.<sup>88</sup> When Joseph Priestly wrote in 1785, having been in Birmingham for five years, that reading and thinking would inevitably lead to Unitarianism rather than atheism, he perhaps had people like this in mind.<sup>89</sup>

Artisan debating societies were a crucial aspect of the world of the public sphere in the eighteenth century: they offer one of the few means of insight into the world of those who were inquisitive, informed and interested, but were not necessarily literate. Margaret Jacob in 'The Mental Landscape of the Public Sphere' explicitly excludes the illiterate from her public world of 'enlightened discourse' condemning them to 'stand on the sidelines', unable to tap into the necessary opinions, excluded from places of meeting and discussion, and so from the 'new mental republic'.<sup>90</sup> Jacob's exclusion is surely an unnecessary and limiting one. At debating societies those who could listen could learn, and those with an opinion, however humble or unread, could share it with their compatriots. They may have been the starting point on the journey to literacy for many whose interest was piqued by a particular subject discussed in a pub or coffee house debate.

### **Religious Inquiry**

One of the prominent features of the Inquiring Sort in Birmingham was the interest shown in matters of religion. The eighteenth century has traditionally been seen by historians as a century-long lull in religious fervour, coming between the religious

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<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 30, 42, 38.

<sup>89</sup> Joseph Priestley, 'Reflections on the Present Sate of Free Inquiry in this Country', in *The Importance and Extent of Free Inquiry in Matters of Religion: A Sermon . . .* (Birmingham, 1785), p. 47.

<sup>90</sup> Jacob, 'The Mental Landscape of the Public Sphere', p. 100.

conflict of the seventeenth and the enthusiasm of the nineteenth.<sup>91</sup> Yet, as is beginning to be explored by historians such as Roy Porter, there was great interest and concern in matters of religion during the eighteenth century, and this was particularly true of Birmingham. As was outlined in the previous chapter, Birmingham's non-Chartered status, together with the economic opportunities offered, meant that it was a magnet for Dissenters of many denominations. There were Quaker and Baptist congregations active in Birmingham from the beginning of the eighteenth century, and by mid-century there was a strong enough Unitarian leaning within the Presbyterian Meeting to cause a schism. The 1740s also saw a strong Methodist movement in Birmingham, with an influx of Calvinist Methodism in the later decades of the century.<sup>92</sup>

There is evidence that there was active interest in religious matters from the early decades of the eighteenth century. From the records of book publications in Birmingham during the eighteenth century, it seems that printers and publishers were confident of finding a market for religious titles. For the entire period of the eighteenth century, just over half of the books published were of a religious nature.<sup>93</sup> They cover a range of types of religious work, including sermons, catechisms, books for children and books of personal devotion. For the majority of the decades of the eighteenth century more secular titles than religious ones were published in Birmingham, the exception after 1750 is the 1780s, when Joseph Priestley's presence in the town led to a flurry of religious publications as clerics hurried to reply in the public world of print to the

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<sup>91</sup> Porter, *Enlightenment*, ch. 5, pp. 96-129.

<sup>92</sup> Hutton, *History of Birmingham*; 'Religious History: Protestant Nonconformity', in W B Stephens (ed.), *A History of the County of Warwick: Volume 7: The City of Birmingham* (1964), pp. 411-34. URL: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.asp?compid=22980>. Date accessed: 13 March 2006.

<sup>93</sup> These data are taken from the British Library (BL) Catalogue and from Eighteenth-Century Collections Online (ECCO), being an analysis of books published in Birmingham during the years 1700-1799. The data from ECCO were extracted using a script written by Matthew Roberts, Department of Psychology, University of Edinburgh.

dangerous tenets of Unitarianism.

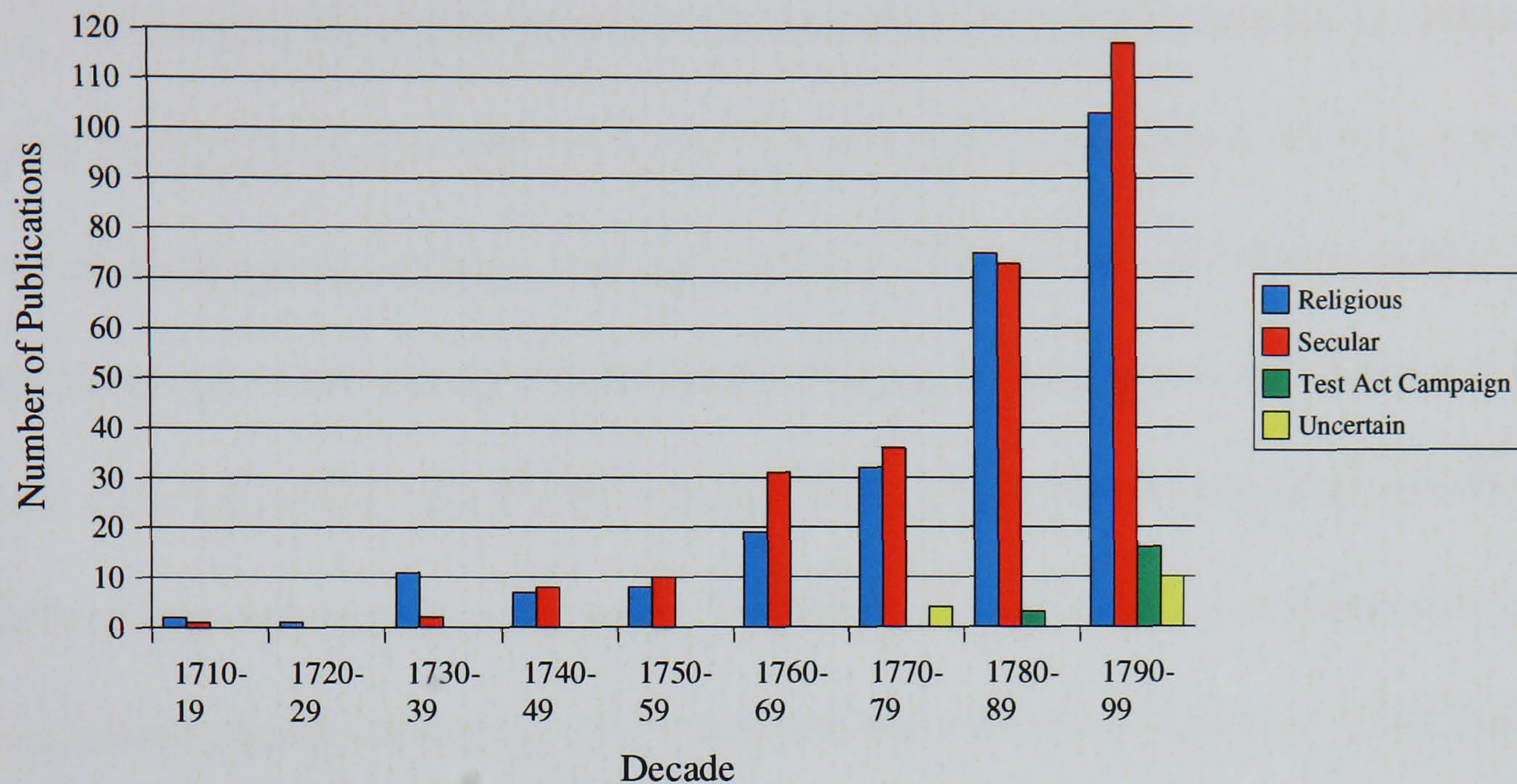


Figure 1. Books recorded on the BL Catalogue or ECCO as published in Birmingham between 1700 and 1799

There is evidence that, from the early decades of the century, the ministers of Birmingham did not fit the stereotype of apathetic eighteenth-century men of the cloth, and were active in their own religious development. In addition to the evidence of large numbers of publications by local clerics, the Dissenting ministers had regular bi-annual lectures, possibly from as early as the 1660s. The aim of the Dudley and Olbury Lectures was the ‘maintaining and extending [of] the principles of Dissent’.<sup>94</sup> The list of ministers who lectured included Stephen Addington (1729-1796) of Market Harborough, who was an Independent minister as well as a school teacher and author of several text books, and the Presbyterian Robert Gentleman (1725-1795) of Kidderminster, who went on to be tutor at the Carmarthen Academy.<sup>95</sup> The openness of

<sup>94</sup> Birmingham City Archive, Notebook on the Dudley Lectures, UC2/157 .

<sup>95</sup> Alexander Gordon, ‘Addington, Stephen (1729–1796)’, rev. M. J. Mercer, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/152>, accessed 13 March 2006]; Alan Ruston, ‘Gentleman, Robert (1745–1795)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

the ministers to diverse ideas is indicated by the fact that although they had conservative Dissenters, such as Gentleman and Addington to lecture, Joseph Priestley lectured to them in 1780, the first year in which he was minister at New Meeting, Birmingham.

It was not only ministers who were interested in religious matters in eighteenth-century Birmingham. Curiosity in the matter of religion was present through a wide sector of Birmingham society. During the mid-1770s, a period of little religious ferment in Birmingham, at the utterly secular Free Debating Society, where the questions for debate were suggested from the floor the previous week, ten percent of the questions addressed touched on religious matters.<sup>96</sup> Curiosity went further than discussion, people would attend church services in denominations that were not their own. Both Julius Hardy and Catherine Hutton went to hear Joseph Priestley preach at New Meeting, although Hardy was a Methodist and Hutton at that point a Calvinist.

With the arrival of Joseph Priestley in 1780, the town acquired a minister who was not only an exceptional theologian and philosopher, but was actively interested in promoting religious inquiry amongst his congregations and the population at large. In publications throughout his life he urged Christians to use their reason in matters of religion.<sup>97</sup> In a sermon on *The Importance and Extent of Free Inquiry in Religion*, preached to the Old and New Meetings in 1785 on the text 'He that hath ears to hear let him hear.' (Matthew, xiii. 9.), he said

It [the text] was a call to make use of their reason, in a case in which it was of the greatest consequence to apply it, and in which they were likewise capable

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(Oxford, 2004), [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/10526>, accessed 13 March 2006].

<sup>96</sup> Analysis of questions debated between 18 March and 21 June 1774, Jones, *Remarks on the English Language*.

<sup>97</sup> For example: Joseph Priestley, *An appeal to the serious and candid professors of Christianity* . . . (London, 1771), pp. 4-5; Priestley, *The Importance and Extent of Free Inquiry in Matters of Religion*.



of applying it with the greatest effect, viz. the investigation of religious truth.<sup>98</sup>

For Priestley personal investigation of religious matters was central to the life of a Dissenter, man's reason was as central to his religious being as was his 'capacity for moral virtues'.<sup>99</sup> To be taught Dissent was not enough, there must be 'serious inquiry' into the principles being taught before they could be accepted.<sup>100</sup> Although a polymath, and now best known for his natural philosophy, Priestley considered that theology was the subject most 'pleasing and satisfying to the mind'.<sup>101</sup>

There was extreme hostility to Priestley's views from the Established Churchmen of Birmingham. It was not only the conclusions that he had come to in his own investigations that were deeply troubling, but his assessments of the possibilities of free inquiry. For Priestley if free inquiry led to the destruction of Christianity 'it ought not on that account to be discontinued. For we can only wish for the prevalence of Christianity on the supposition of its being *true*'.<sup>102</sup> That he went on to say that he had absolute confidence that Christianity could only be found to be true was of little comfort to conservative clerics: the rush of sermons, popular pamphlets, cartoons and ballads that were published in opposition to Priestley demonstrates the threat that was felt at his ideas.

Other ministers were eager to neutralise Priestley's claims that those who investigated the Gospel would inevitably come to Unitarianism – Biblical study had to be reclaimed for Trinitarianism. Samuel Pearse, in a sermon published in Birmingham in 1791, was eager to assert that study of the gospel had increased the faith of the prominent Baptist minister, tutor and theologian, Caleb Evans, in the doctrine of

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<sup>98</sup> Priestley *The Importance and Extent of Free Inquiry*, p. 3.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*, p. 23. Priestley's italics.

atonement.<sup>103</sup> Pearse's ire had been raised by Priestley's suggestion that 'the ablest, wisest, and most pious christians [sic] were of his opinion respecting the person and work of Christ'.<sup>104</sup> Claiming Dr Evans as 'pious, wise, and good', his Trinitarian faith was held up as exposing Priestley's claims as 'bold and unjust'.<sup>105</sup> Those theologians who were just as eager as Priestley to encourage Gospel study, yet rejected his Unitarianism may have found it hard not to feel swamped by the juggernaut of Priestley's publications. Of the religious books or pamphlets published in Birmingham during the eighteenth century, Priestley's output outnumbered the combined publications of the seven next most prolific religious writers by a third.<sup>106</sup> The number of Priestley's publications in Birmingham was sixty-two, the two next most prolific were the Catholic priest and theologian Joseph Berington and the Swedenborgian Joseph Proud, who each published eight works. Even those who supported Priestley's contention that reason must be used to better understand the Christian message were pushed into defensive attitudes by the sheer weight of his output.

For many philosopher-theologians and philosopher-clerics, the duty to investigate religious truths was only one part of God's purpose for the trained mind. The impulse to discover and investigate the natural world was part of God's plan for mankind; it was to the greater glory of God to better understand His creation. The roll call of ordained natural philosophers during the eighteenth century is long and illustrious, including the naturalist Gilbert White and the economist Thomas Malthus.

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<sup>103</sup> Samuel Pearse, *Reflections on the Character and State of departed Christians: In a Sermon, occasioned by the Decease of the Rev. Caleb Evans, D.D. Pastor of the Baptist Congregation Meeting in Broadmead, Bristol; and Senior Tutor to the Academy in that City* (Birmingham, 1791), p. 17; Roger Hayden, 'Evans, Caleb (1737–1791)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/40192>, accessed 17 March 2006].

<sup>104</sup> Pearse, *Reflections on the Character and State of departed Christians*, p. 17.

<sup>105</sup> Pearse, *Reflections on the Character and State of departed Christians*, p. 17.

<sup>106</sup> Publications recorded either at the British Library or on Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

Lorraine Daston in her essay 'Attention and the Values of Nature in the Enlightenment' has shown how naturalists studying the minutiae of God's creation – the insects – were called to both glorify their subjects and justify their studies as part of the observation of His Works.<sup>107</sup> For men such as Priestley, who were theologians and natural philosophers, the study of the Gospel and the study of Creation were aspects of the same calling. Unitarianism may seem to dominate in this account of religious inquiry, though this in part must be explained by the prolific published output of some of its adherents; more fundamentally than this, the denomination had inquiry at its heart. The Unitarians were speaking against, not only many centuries of Trinitarian dominance, but a background of state persecution. Even in the late eighteenth century, when there were large and fashionable Unitarian congregations in many of the major cities and towns, the core of Unitarian belief – that Christ was not divine – was so inimical to traditional British Christianity that to profess it was to declare against a strongly predominant culture. Those ministers who became Unitarians at this time had set aside centuries of accepted scholarship to look again at the Gospels with new eyes. These theologians studied the Gospels and the Epistles in the manner of naturalists studying the microcosm of insect life to see the basis of God's creation. Just as attention and minute study of the intestines of caterpillars or the ovaries of bees marked out the true, professional naturalist, so those who wished to be ministers for the true Christian religion had to over-throw the corruptions of Christianity and make minute study of the building blocks of Christian faith.<sup>108</sup>

The duty to God in the business of inquiry went further than inquiring oneself.

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<sup>107</sup> Lorraine Daston, 'Attention and the Values of Nature in the Enlightenment', in Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal, *The Moral Authority of Nature* (Chicago, 2004).

<sup>108</sup> Daston, 'Attention and the Values of Nature in the Enlightenment', pp. 109-119.

The children of many congregations were given instruction. There is some confusion in records and accounts of eighteenth-century Sunday Schools between the instruction given to the children of the congregation – generally described as classes or lectures, and that given to the children of the poor of the town – Sunday Schools (these will be examined in Chapter 5). Joseph Priestley laid great importance on the teaching of the youth of the congregation. In Birmingham his work built on the experiences he had in Leeds, where he regretted teaching only the young men.<sup>109</sup> He wrote in 1790 that his pleasure in teaching their Evening Class 'exceeds that which arises from the discharge of every other part of my Duty as a Christian Minister'.<sup>110</sup> The aim of the class was to create a taste for knowledge, and good habits, so that they would continue to build upon the foundations laid by the classes throughout their lives. The central part that knowledge played in the lives of the youth of the congregation is illustrated in a letter written to Priestley after he had been driven from the town in the aftermath of the Church and King riot of 1791. They wrote to Priestley thanking him for his teaching, hoping that he would soon return to them once the anger of the townspeople - fuelled by 'ignorance and bigotry' – had abated, and hoping that 'an increase of knowledge, and . . . genuine christianity' would lead to a change of heart in the rioters.<sup>111</sup> For the youth of the congregation the place of knowledge was not just a utilitarian one – whether it be improving themselves or the ignorant of the town – it was something which brought pleasure. In a later letter they wrote that the pursuits Priestley had encouraged them in

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<sup>109</sup> Leeds Archives, Mill Hill Chapel, 'To the young men who attended the Lecture at Mill Hill Chapel', 71.

<sup>110</sup> Birmingham City Archive, Copy of Dr. Priestley's Answer to the Address of the young Men and Women of the Evening Class at the New Meeting Birmingham, UC2 238/1/17, March 1790.

<sup>111</sup> Birmingham City Archive, JP7, 'An Address from the Young People belonging to the Congregation of the New Meeting to Dr Priestley', in *Address to Dr. Priestley, from his Congregation at Birmingham, and the Young People in it, in consequence of the Riots; with his Answers* (Birmingham, 1792), p. 8.

brought both advantage and 'delight'.<sup>112</sup>

The girls in Priestley's classes for the youth of the New Meeting received the same education as the boys. The letters written to Priestley by the 'younger Part of the Congregation' come from the 'young Men and Women', and there is never any distinction in Priestley's replies between the two.<sup>113</sup> Priestley's writings make clear that, as far as middle-class women were concerned, they ought to have the same education as their brothers. This would enable them to use their leisure time constructively by reading and writing, educate their children, be companionate wives and also, if necessary, maintain themselves.<sup>114</sup> Priestley, basing his ideas about the equal nature of the minds of the sexes on David Hartley's philosophy of associationism, was probably unique amongst the ministers of Birmingham in his attitude to the education of the women of his congregation. Vivien Jones in her introduction to the texts on 'Education' in her anthology *Women in the Eighteenth Century*, cites Catherine Macaulay as an 'isolated voice' in her call for equal education of boys and girls. She was condemned by her contemporaries, such as Hannah More, and was a theorist calling for a changed state of education in a country which was hardening its attitude to gender roles in the wake of the French Revolution.<sup>115</sup> Priestley, however, had the opportunity, personal prestige and power to be able to put ideas of equality of education into practice amongst the congregation of New Meeting. One hundred and forty five young people signed a letter to him pledging to continue his work in the classes of New Meeting in August 1791. It is not certain how many of those young people were women, but there was probably a

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<sup>112</sup> Birmingham City Archive, JP7, 'From the Young People belonging to the Congregation of New Meeting' 22 August 1791, in *Address to Dr. Priestley* p. 13.

<sup>113</sup> Birmingham City Archive, Letter to the younger Part of the congregation at the New Meeting, UC2 238/1/10; Dr. Priestley's Answer to the Address of the young Men and Women.

<sup>114</sup> Ruth Watts, 'Joseph Priestley and Education', *Enlightenment and Dissent*, 2 (1983), pp. 83-100.

<sup>115</sup> Vivien Jones (ed.), *Women in the Eighteenth Century. Constructions of Femininity* (London and New York, 1990), p. 101.

sizeable congregation of young women who were learning that they had equal right, and duty, to use their reason to examine God's creation. Lenonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall in *Family Fortunes* suggest that at the end of the eighteenth century there was a retreat of women to the domestic sphere.<sup>116</sup> Indeed, later records of the Birmingham Unitarians suggest that traditional gender roles were soon reasserted after Priestley's departure. In 1796 the senior youth of the congregation formed themselves into a society to assist with the teaching of the Sunday Schools, its name – the Brotherly Society – gives a clear indication that without Priestley's radical influence the young women of New Meeting encouraged into less prominent, roles.

### **Inquiring Conviviality – Birmingham Freemasonry**

John Money classed Birmingham Freemasonry, together with such groups as the Birmingham Robin Hood Free Debating Society, the Birmingham Musical and Amicable Society or the Ancient and Noble Order of Bucks, as one element amongst the multitude of convivial artisan societies which operated in that town during the eighteenth century.<sup>117</sup> Yet, prominent amongst the Birmingham Freemasons were printers, booksellers and book club owners - men with connections to the leading scientific minds of the day and to extreme Dissent and deism. They seem small, provincial men beside those described by Margaret C Jacob in her analysis of early eighteenth-century speculative freemasonry.<sup>118</sup> Indeed, in comparison to the radical thinkers who linked the early lodges of London, Paris and the Netherlands, they *were*

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<sup>116</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*.

<sup>117</sup> J Money, 'Birmingham and the West Midlands, 1760 - 1793: Politics and Regional Identity in the Later Eighteenth Century', in Peter Borsay (ed.), *The Eighteenth Century Town. A Reader in English Urban History, 1688-1820* (London and New York, 1990), pp. 309 – 310.

<sup>118</sup> Margaret C Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London, 1981); Margaret C Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment. Freemasonry and British Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (New York and Oxford, 1991).

small, provincial men, yet they shared with them many characteristics. There were Whigs leaning to political radicalism, Unitarians leaning to deism, and, in general, men open to new ideas and ways of thinking about the world. Yet these were not all men who earned their living through ideas and their dissemination. Amongst the Birmingham Freemasons and their wider circle of associations were also working artisans and merchants who were interested in the spread of ideas, not only for their own sakes, but to enable the improvement of their industrial processes, and for whom Freemasonry meant meeting with their fellow tradesmen.

### **Characteristics of Birmingham Freemasonry**

Warwickshire's first lodge, the Wool Pack, Warwick, was one of the earliest provincial lodges. It was constituted by the Grand Lodge of London in 1728.<sup>119</sup> This was followed in 1733 by the Swan, in Birmingham (later renamed St Paul's).<sup>120</sup> English Freemasonry, in its speculative form had been growing since the seventeenth century. 'Speculative' or 'Non-operative' Freemasons were members of lodges who did not work in the stone trade and made up the vast majority of eighteenth-century Freemasons. 'Operative' masons were those actually working in a stone-based craft. The first recorded incidence of a non-operative mason joining a Lodge was Elias Ashmole, who was admitted to an operative Lodge at Warrington in 1646.<sup>121</sup> By 1717, when the Grand Lodge was formed in London, Freemasonry amongst non-operative masons had become of wide interest;

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<sup>119</sup> John Lane, *Masonic Records 1717 - 1894: Being Lists of all the Lodges at Home and Abroad* (London, 1895), p. 51. The Wool Pack was constituted in April 1728 and given the number 52. Masonic Lodges were numbered sequentially as they were constituted. This led to problems when lodges were erased as a result of no longer being in operation, which left gaps in the list. To counteract this problem, on seven occasions during the eighteenth century the lodges were renumbered to close the gaps. This means that a long standing Lodge such as The Swan at Birmingham, could have seven different numbers at different times during the eighteenth century.

<sup>120</sup> Lane, *Masonic Records*, p. 65.

<sup>121</sup> Douglas Knoop and G P Jones, *The Genesis of Freemasonry* (Manchester, 1949), p. 132.

by 1728 there were fifty nine lodges across the country listed with the Grand Lodge.<sup>122</sup>

The reason for this growth in interest in Freemasonry remains unclear. Douglas Knoop and G P Jones in *The Genesis of Freemasonry* propounded a number of reasons why individuals might be interested in Freemasonry.<sup>123</sup> They suggested that the very secrecy of Freemasonry or ‘the possibility of moral lessons being drawn from the experiences of the building crafts’ might have been attractive. However, they see more likely motives for interest in Freemasonry being an interest in building, an interest in antiquity or the desire to form convivial societies.

Although there is generally very little known about the early non-operative Lodges, and almost nothing known of the early Lodges in Birmingham, the scant records of the Wool Pack in Warwick suggest that in that case there may have been some interest in the building trade behind the formation of the lodge.<sup>124</sup> The fire which had destroyed much of the town in 1694 meant that, during the late 1690s and the early years of the eighteenth century, the town was full of craftsmen rebuilding the town, including masons. The 1728 list of members of the Wool Pack Lodge shows two operative masons, the Smith brothers who were architect-builders, one of whom was a junior warden of the lodge and later mayor of the town. There is no evidence of a previous operative Lodge in the town, and the Provincial Grand Master, James Prescott had been a student at Middle Temple where he may have encountered speculative Freemasonry and brought it to Warwick. However, the strong evidence of a link to operative masonry suggests a Lodge formed with interests in the actual business of masonry.

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<sup>122</sup> R G Russell, *Freemasonry in Warwickshire 1728-1928* (Birmingham, 1978), p. 17.

<sup>123</sup> Knoop and Jones, *The Genesis of Freemasonry*, pp. 133-142.

<sup>124</sup> Russell, *Freemasonry in Warwickshire*, pp. 21 – 24.



A clutch of Masonic Lodges were formed in Birmingham during the eighteenth century.<sup>125</sup> The most long-lasting was the St Paul's, with a continuous history from 1733 to the present day. The only other lodge to survive from the eighteenth century is the St Alban's, which was formed in 1762. Shorter lived Lodges included the King's Arms (1736 to 1772), the King's Head (1764 to 1765) and the Union (1795 to 1832). There were a number of other lodges of which there is no mention beyond the record of their initial constitution, presumably they simply faded away after an initial rush of enthusiasm, a situation echoed in towns across the country.<sup>126</sup>

What drew the men of Birmingham to Masonic Lodges? Mid-eighteenth century towns were crowded with networks of sociability, and the Lodges made up part of that network. Eating, drinking and singing were vital elements of many formal and semi-formal social groups. Dinners and feasts were an important part of many sociable societies, especially those like the Lodges that met in taverns.<sup>127</sup> Drinking was just as important an element of such groups, and English masonry was known for its dedication to heavy drinking.<sup>128</sup> Masonic drinking songs and rhymes emphasised the conviviality of passing around a drinking vessel, and the image of the vessel passing continuously around a circle of drinkers alluded to the ideal of on-going friendship and pleasure.

But when the glass goes round, goes round

Then mirth and glee abound, abound.<sup>129</sup>

These kinds of images of drink and companionship were not limited to Masonic song.

The previous masonic stanza echoes the motto of the Musical and Amicable Society

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<sup>125</sup> Lane, *Masonic Records*; Russell, *Freemasonry in Warwickshire*.

<sup>126</sup> Clark, *British Clubs and Societies*, p. 319.

<sup>127</sup> For example, the Birmingham Book Club and the Jacobin Club as well as the various Masonic Lodges.

<sup>128</sup> Clark, *British Clubs and Societies*, pp. 325-6.

<sup>129</sup> J Bisset, 'A Mason's Life', (1793), cited Russell, *Freemasonry in Warwickshire*, p. 6.

May the catch and the glass go about and about

And another succeed to the bottle that's out<sup>130</sup>

However, the symbolism of the glass being passed around the group may have had especial importance for the Brethren. Eighteenth-century Freemasonry was suffused with classical ideas and imagery. The formalized sociability of the Lodge has strong echoes of the ancient Greek symposium.<sup>131</sup> The brethren were not individually drinking, but passing as the Greeks had, the symbolically decorated vessel around between them. This circular pattern of drinking conviviality is illustrated in Johannes Eckstein's portrait of the Jacobin Club.<sup>132</sup> The Club was held at the Coffee House of John Freeth, a member of the St Paul's Lodge, and about half of its members were also Freemasons. In Eckstein's portrait the members are shown, drinking in this case from their own glasses and with their own pipes, but seated and standing around a circular table, the standing members having vacated the near half of the table to be in the portrait.

James Davidson writes in *Courtesans and Fishcakes*, his study of ancient Greek feasting and pleasure, that 'Wine, song and conversation went around the room'.<sup>133</sup> In Masonic sociability all of these elements were similarly important. Just as the symposiarch dictated the strength and amount of the wine to be drunk at the symposium, the Master of the Lodge oversaw the brethren in their conviviality. And, as Davidson suggested that 'these passages [about the amount that should be drunk] must not be seen as a mirror on Greek dinner-parties . . . but as a symptom of anxiety about how to drink properly',<sup>134</sup> so there was anxiety in Masonic literature about drunkenness and the

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<sup>130</sup> cited Asa Briggs, 'Social History Since 1815', W B Stephens (ed.), *A History of the county of Warwickshire: Volume 7: The City of Birmingham* (1964), p. 217.

<sup>131</sup> James N Davidson, *Courtesans and Fishcakes* (London, 1997), pp. 36-52.

<sup>132</sup> Johannes Eckstein, 'John Freeth and his Circle', oil on canvas, 1792, 1909P6, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. See Appendix 1.

<sup>133</sup> Davidson, *Courtesans and Fishcakes*, p. 44.

<sup>134</sup> Davidson, *Courtesans and Fishcakes*, p. 47.

potential of group drinking to get out of control. The Rev. Dr James Anderson (1679-1739), in his *Constitutions of the free-masons* of 1723, a document that became a standard reference point for Masonic practices during the eighteenth century, wrote of the convivial time after the Lodge that the brethren must conduct themselves ‘avoiding all excess, or forcing any Brother to eat or drink beyond his Inclination . . . or that may forbid an easy and free conversation.’<sup>135</sup>

Although the Birmingham Lodges enjoyed a similar convivial drinking culture to other sociable societies, the Brothers were often reminded that heavy drinking was not a necessary part of Masonic life and that it could reflect badly upon Masonry. Masonic clergy in particular often used public addresses to urge moderation on the Brethren. As early as 1726 the Junior Grand Warden of the Grand Lodge of All England condemned ‘the pernicious custom of drinking too deep which we of our nation too much indulge’ and lamented ‘I wish I could not say, that I have frequently observed it in our own Most Amicable Brotherhood’.<sup>136</sup> Bisset’s ‘A Mason’s Life’ has a chorus proclaiming the moderation of Masonic conviviality, before the last line puts that moderation into perspective

We laugh a little, we drink a little

We work a little, we play a little

We sing a little, are merry a little

And swig the flowing can.<sup>137</sup>

Song was important to Masonic conviviality, not only as an enjoyable group activity, but as a reminder of the ideas and principles behind Freemasonry. There were songs,

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<sup>135</sup> ‘Of Behaviour, viz’ in James Anderson, *The constitutions of the free-masons; containing the history, charges, regulations, &c. of that fraternity*, reprinted in Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, p. 283.

<sup>136</sup> Francis Drake in 1726, cited Knoop and Jones, *The Genesis of Freemasonry*, p. 6.

<sup>137</sup> ‘A Mason’s Life’, cited Russell, *Freemasonry in Warwickshire*, p. 6.

such as ‘A Mason’s Life’, which were clearly designed to be part of convivial activity. There were also songs more appropriate to an occasion when non-masons would be present. At a benefit performance at the Playhouse in 1743, *Aris’s Birmingham Gazette* informed its readers that, in addition to the play and a ‘spoken Prologue and Epilogue made in Honour of the Society’ [of Free and Accepted Masons], ‘Brotherly songs’ would be sung.<sup>138</sup> *The Free Masons [sic] Repository* even has a song which evangelises for Freemasonry

Thus a Mason I’ve drawn and expos’d to your view,  
 And the truth must acknowledge the figure is true;  
 Then members become, let’s be brothers and friends,  
 There’s a SECRET remaining, will make you amends.<sup>139</sup>

Other songs reminded Brothers of the key symbols of Speculative Masonry: the square, compass, plumb-line, rule, gavel, trowel and trassel-board.<sup>140</sup>

Some of the songs emphasised an important, and defining, element of Masonic conviviality, that the Brothers were individuals meeting on the level as Freemasons, whatever their status in wider society. Margaret Jacob sees this as being at the heart of the appeal of Freemasonry, that men ‘met as individuals, separate from family, church, confraternity, or other traditional corporate bodies that primarily reflected their status and rank in the larger society.’<sup>141</sup> In spite of this ideal, Peter Clark, in his analysis of the membership lists of some Modern lodges, found that membership embraced only ‘respectable groups’, with a tendency to elitism in the south of the country.<sup>142</sup> However,

<sup>138</sup> *Aris’s Birmingham Gazette*, 31 January 1743, cited Russell, *Freemasonry in Warwickshire* p. 30.

<sup>139</sup> ‘All shall yield to Masonry’, in *The Free Masons [sic] Repository*, pp. 9 – 10.

<sup>140</sup> ‘That *Plumb* we poize to clear each Clog, // . . . // Within due compass bring’, in ‘Whilst *Science* yields a thousand lights’, *The Free Masons [sic] Repository*, pp. 7 – 8.

<sup>141</sup> Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment*, p. 30.

<sup>142</sup> Clark, *British Clubs and Societies*, p. 323.

in Birmingham Freemasonry, a sense of respectable equality may not have been such an important element in attracting people to the Brotherhood. In the eighteenth century the social structure of Birmingham was much flatter than that of many towns in England. The town had no dominant aristocracy, and whilst there were a few employers of large numbers of men, the nature of most Birmingham industry meant that industrial organisation was on a small scale, with a multitude of small masters and artisans. The dominant divisions in the town were not social, but religious and political. The real possibilities of strife within the Birmingham Lodges were seen as coming from those sources, in contrast to the London lodges where men of very different social backgrounds may have met as equals only in Lodges. In the song 'Let Drunkards boast the Pow'r of Wine', Masonic social equality is portrayed with a sense of romance rather than reality - 'Princes and Kings our Brothers are'.<sup>143</sup> In several songs the real necessity of maintaining social order in the lodges comes about from party and religious differences.<sup>144</sup>

Social and economic networking attracted men to masonry across the country.<sup>145</sup> The opportunity to socialise with people who could be professionally useful may have attracted people to Freemasonry in Birmingham. Gaining membership of St Paul's Lodge at the end of the eighteenth century would have certainly gained the friendship of an important section of the print trade in Birmingham. Members there included John Freeth, poet, balladeer and coffee shop owner; James Sketchley, printer, publisher and auctioneer; James Rollason, who took over Samuel Aris's printing works in the 1770s; and Myles Swinney, magazine publisher and printer who was trained by John

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<sup>143</sup> 'Let Drunkards boast the Pow'r of Wine', in *The Free Masons [sic] Repository*, p. 23 – 24.

<sup>144</sup> For example 'In Lodge no party feuds are seen', in 'A Mason's Life', Russell, *Freemasonry in Warwickshire*.

<sup>145</sup> Clark, *British Clubs and Societies*, p. 328.

Baskerville.<sup>146</sup> At the closely related St Alban's Lodge was James Bisset, manufacturer, publisher and verse writer.<sup>147</sup> In a song about manufacturing fashions, John Freeth in his ballad to a new metal compound, 'TUTANIA', may have been alluding to a Masonic meeting when he wrote

Disregarding wind or weather  
If dispos'd to social mirth,  
SONS of TRADE, when met together,  
Are the happiest souls on earth.

The toast of that evening was 'FRIENDSHIP, FREEDOM, TRADE, and TUTIN'.<sup>148</sup>

### **The Place of Knowledge and Ideas in Speculative Freemasonry**

According to contemporary Masonic literature, knowledge and learning were central to Freemasonry. Knowledge of the Masonic secret was at the heart of the mythology of Speculative Freemasonry, possibly contributing to its growth during the half-century before the establishment of the Grand Lodge. Knoop and Jones found seventeenth and early eighteenth-century men becoming Freemasons, convinced that they would find within it the relics of the "mysteries of the antients" or the wisdom of the Druids.<sup>149</sup> The possibility of knowing the 'secret' at the heart of Freemasonry was held up as an inducement to interest men in Masonry, making knowledge central to the idea of what it was to be a mason. Although Peter Clark found that there was complaint amongst

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<sup>146</sup> *St Paul's Lodge Warwickshire, No. 43 . . . A History from its formation in 1733* (Birmingham); 'St Paul's Lodge No. 43 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1733 - 1983'; B H Joseph, *Early Records of St Paul's Lodge of Free and Accepted Mason's, No. 43. Extracts from the Minute Book, 1764 - 1863, (?1903/4)*.

<sup>147</sup> T M Carter, 'St John's Lodge No 583 (492 in 1792) Henley-in-Arden, 1791 - 1811', *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, 39 (1928), p. 30.

<sup>148</sup> 'An Additional Song', in John Free[th], *Modern Songs on Various Subjects: Adapted to Common Tunes* (Birmingham, 1782). The Masonic reference is in the fourth verse to a buckle 'SQUARE made'.

<sup>149</sup> Knoop and Jones, *Genesis of Freemasonry*, p. 134.

asons of lack of interest in the theory of masonry, however, 'the underlying themes of masonic literature were improvement and enlightenment . . . a utopian world detached from political, religious, or ascribed social status.'<sup>150</sup>

The importance of knowledge and learning in general is evident in official documents from the beginnings of organised Speculative Freemasonry. The Rev. Dr James Anderson's *Book of Constitutions*, the first official history and instruction book of Speculative Masonry, included in its 'Short Charge to new admitted Brethren', 'He is to be a Lover of the Arts and Sciences, and to take all Opportunities of improving himself therein.'<sup>151</sup> This message was of sufficient import to be impressed upon a new provincial Lodge in 1738. The warrant from the Grand Lodge permitting the establishment of a Lodge in Tewksbury stressed that the Freemason 'should exercise himself in all those humane virtues, which consists in the Dominion of his Reason over his sensitive passions and appetites.'<sup>152</sup> In Birmingham at the end of the eighteenth century, *The Free Masons [sic] Repository* claimed that Freemasonry's pre-eminence came from its comprehension of 'every branch of useful knowledge and learning'.<sup>153</sup> The knowledge that was central to the practice of Freemasonry was closely connected with Enlightenment philosophy, particularly with ideas of reason and rationality, and the Masonic Lodges in Birmingham, particularly the St. Paul's Lodge, ensured that those ideas were prevalent in eighteenth-century Birmingham.

*The Free Masons [sic] Repository*, published and probably edited by a St Paul's Lodge Mason, James Sketchley, classed the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences (Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Music, Numbers, Geometry and the Heavenly System) as being at the

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<sup>150</sup> Clark, *British Clubs and Societies*, pp. 335-6.

<sup>151</sup> 'Short Charge to new admitted Brethren', from Anderson, *Book of Constitutions*, cited Knoop and Jones, *Genesis of Freemasonry*, pp. 236-7.

<sup>152</sup> 1738 Warrant, cited Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment*, p. 47.

<sup>153</sup> *The Free Masons [sic] Repository*, p. 1.

core of Masonic philosophy.<sup>154</sup> This classical system of education was just one example of the importance of revived classical thought in eighteenth-century Freemasonry. Reason and rationality, which were facing a sustained attack from the Established clergy in Birmingham at the end of the eighteenth century, were integral to ideas of Masonic life, as portrayed in *The Free Masons [sic] Repository*. ‘Rational’ was one of the twenty one elements of the ‘Free-Masons Memento’, attributes which would be taught by adherence to Masonry.<sup>155</sup> Others included ‘Order’, ‘Oeconomy’, ‘Natural’ and ‘Attention’. It was not only in official or semi-official Masonic literature that Birmingham Masons were exposed to Enlightenment philosophy of rationality. The writings of the Earl of Shaftesbury on civilised man, popular with Freemasons throughout the eighteenth century, were current in Birmingham.<sup>156</sup> His *Characteristicks* was published by John Baskerville in 1773. Baskerville was a skilled printer, creator of the Baskerville type and developer of high quality ink and paper. He was a notorious and controversial figure in Birmingham society, as a result of both his deist religious beliefs and his unconventional personal life. Baskerville may well have brought much Enlightenment thought to the milieu of the Birmingham Freemasons. Although there is no evidence that he was a Mason himself, he had connections to both Birmingham, and Continental and American Freemasonry. The Birmingham print trade was suffused with Freemasonry, but specifically Baskerville’s friend and one-time apprentice, Myles Swinney, was a member of the St Paul’s Lodge. He was also connected by his long-term partner, and later wife, Sarah Eaves, to the Ruston family. Edward Ruston was master of St Paul’s Lodge in 1764.<sup>157</sup> Baskerville was friends with Benjamin Franklin,

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<sup>154</sup> ‘On the Seven LIBERAL ARTS and SCIENCES’, in *The Free Masons [sic] Repository*, p. 2.

<sup>155</sup> ‘It instilleth Principles indisputably Rational’, *The Free Masons [sic] Repository*, p. 3.

<sup>156</sup> Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment*, p. 154.

<sup>157</sup> *St Paul’s Lodge, Warwickshire, No. 43*, p. 17; F E Pardoe, *John Baskerville of Birmingham. Letter-Founder and Printer* (London, 1975); William Bennett, *John Baskerville, the Birmingham Printer*.



who was involved in Parisian and American Freemasonry, and with Voltaire, whose works he considered publishing. Indeed, Myles Swinney did publish Voltaire's *Thoughts on Religion* in his *Warwickshire Journal* in 1771.

Rationality in matters of religion was a central tenet of Freemasonry, and also of Unitarianism, which was of growing importance in Birmingham during the last decades of the eighteenth century. Anderson's 1723 *Constitutions*, the basis for much official Masonic writing, compels Masons not to have any specific faith other than 'that Religion in which all men agree', but to use their reason as the basis for their morality: 'if he rightly understands the Art, he will never be a stupid Atheist, nor an irreligious Libertine'.<sup>158</sup> Although *The Free Masons* [sic] *Repository* contains much explicitly Christian language, the Birmingham Masons and their close associates were varied in their faith: Thomas Thompson, the Provincial Grand Master for Warwickshire, was a Jew.<sup>159</sup> However, many of the Freemasons in Birmingham who can be identified were Unitarians, or associated with radical societies with close links to Birmingham Unitarianism, such as the Jacobin Club at Freeth's coffee house. Unitarianism in the late eighteenth century was aggressively rational, especially under the intellectual leadership of Joseph Priestley, who was resident in Birmingham from 1780 and published his defence of rational Christianity and appeal to the French philosophers, *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, in 1787.<sup>160</sup>

Although the Lodges in Birmingham should have been places where men

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*His Press, Relations and Friends* (2 Vols, Birmingham, 1937), 1.

<sup>158</sup> 'Concerning God and Religion' in Anderson, *Constitutions*, reprinted in Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, pp. 279-287.

<sup>159</sup> 'The *strength*, is that which depends on the living GOD; who resisteth the mighty, and scattereth the proud in the imaginations of their hearts. . .', *The Free Masons* [sic] *Repository*, p. 4; Russell, *Freemasonry in Warwickshire*, pp. 55-6.

<sup>160</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever* (reprinted in one volume, New York and London, 1974).

divided by religion could meet without antagonism, it is possible that there was religious dispute within the Masonic community there. In 1764, the year when the minutes of the St Paul's Lodge begin, there were prominently placed Unitarians within the Lodge: John Freeth was the Lodge's Junior Warden.<sup>161</sup> However, that year the Rev. Thomas Davenport in his sermon preached in Birmingham, *Love to God and Man Inseparable*, wrote

And whereas it is certain, that MASONRY in itself admits of no Distinctions in particular Sects or Parties; yet in a Lodge of *Christians*, no profane Deistical Person, - no one that does not cordially embrace the faith of Christ, ought ever to be received - I need not give my Reasons; - you are able to apply them.<sup>162</sup>

In delivering and publishing this sermon Davenport was directly contradicting the laws of Freemasonry, as laid out in Anderson's constitutions. He offers no explanation in his sermon for his hostility, and it is not clear to which, if any, of the Birmingham Lodges he belonged.

There are two possible causes for Davenport's attack on deism in Masonry. Firstly, 1764 was a year of some activity for the Birmingham Masons: St Paul's Lodge applied for a warrant under the Ancients constitution, although unusually it retained a number as a Modern Lodge also, and the King's Head Lodge was constituted. Given that the title refers explicitly to Davenport's congregation as 'A respectable Ancient and Honourable Society. . .', it is possible that he was making a shot in the dispute between the two branches of

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<sup>161</sup> Russell, *Freemasonry in Warwickshire*, p. 36.

<sup>162</sup> Rev. Thomas Davenport, *Love to God and Man Inseparable. A Sermon Preached before A respectable Ancient and Honourable Society of Free and Accepted Masons, On the 27<sup>th</sup> Day of December, 1764; (Being the feast of St John the Evangelist). At St John's Chapel Birmingham: And publish'd at the Request of the Brotherhood* (Birmingham, 1765), pp. 15-16.

Masonry, with one of the Lodges in Birmingham having become notorious for Unitarianism.

The other possibility is that he was making an attack on John Baskerville. Baskerville's avowed deism was the closest in kind to the radical early eighteenth-century Freemasons. Whilst he did not publicly proselytize his deism, he made no secret of it and by 1764 it would have probably been well known. He attended a funeral in 1766 at St Philip's Church wearing a gold-laced coat, making a public show of his disdain for 'superstitious custom'.<sup>163</sup> The religious works he chose for his printing press were widely varied in nature, from his famous Cambridge Folio Bible, through Milton, to Shaftesbury and Robert Barclay. In 1764 it is likely that he would have been preparing his copy of Barclay's controversial Quaker text *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*. Baskerville's will made explicit his beliefs, and also the hostility that they provoked.<sup>164</sup> Its terms were conditional upon his being buried in a conical building on his estate, as he had 'contempt for all superstition, the farce of a consecrated ground, the Irish barbarism of sure and certain hopes etc.' There is no evidence that Baskerville was a Freemason, however it is likely that he would have found aspects of it attractive, in particular its attitude to religious practice. In addition, his statement of his belief in morality as the duty owed by man to God, rather than 'certain absurd doctrines and mysteries', is remarkably similar to the Anderson *Constitution's* decree to Masons to 'obey the moral Law'.<sup>165</sup> It is possible that Baskerville wished to join a Birmingham lodge, where several of

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<sup>163</sup> Hill, *Bookmakers of Old Birmingham*, cited Pardoe, *John Baskerville*, p. 20.

<sup>164</sup> Birmingham City Archive, John Baskerville, Will [Facsimile], MS1630/3.

<sup>165</sup> Baskerville, Will; Anderson, *Constitutions* in Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, p. 279.

his friends were Masons, and that Davenport was trying to frustrate his attempt, or that Davenport was firing a warning shot in case Baskerville might think of joining the Masons.

The structure of Freemasonry itself was conducive to the spread of ideas. Unlike the majority of similar groups in Birmingham, the Masonic Lodges were part of a national structure. Ideas could be passed between men, not simply through the impersonal and individualistic method of the reading of published works (for example, the Birmingham Book Club), but by the pronouncements of the Grand Lodges and by masons travelling between lodges in Britain and Europe. A visiting mason did not need to be personally known in a town to gain admittance and friendship from the local lodge. In the eighteenth century networks of like-minded men were formed by series of introductions and recommendations.<sup>166</sup> For Freemasons, their membership of a Lodge was sufficient to introduce them to men with a wide variety of ideas and beliefs. There were frequent visits of Birmingham masons between the various Birmingham Lodges.<sup>167</sup> The leaders of Birmingham Freemasonry also had influence in the lodges of the surrounding small towns. James Bissett was involved in the consecration of new lodges at Stratford-on-Avon, Alcester and Henley.<sup>168</sup> However, it was not simply on formal occasions that Birmingham masons visited their brethren in surrounding towns. In 1792 Henley-in-Arden noted ‘A vote of thanks was proposed unanimously to Bros. Toy, Sketchley and Bisset [all Birmingham masons] for their good intention and the honour they have done in paying us a visit this night’.<sup>169</sup> The ideas which were fermenting in

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<sup>166</sup> See for example the introduction of Richard Lowell Edgeworth to the circle of the Lunar Society in Uglow, *The Lunar Men* (London, 2002), pp. 124 – 7.

<sup>167</sup> Joseph, *Early Records of St Paul’s Lodge*.

<sup>168</sup> James Bissett, cited Russell, *Freemasonry in Warwickshire*, p. 61.

<sup>169</sup> St. John’s Lodge, Henley-in-Arden, Minutes, 23 May 1792, cited Russell, *Freemasonry in Warwickshire*, p. 58.

the town of Birmingham during the early 1790s - of rational religion, political representation for Dissenters, or new chemical processes in industry - could pass easily between brethren through the network of lodges.

Convivial interaction with members of other lodges was not limited to local brethren. Any mason could claim assistance at any lodge; in 1770 the St Paul's Lodge granted a guinea to help Bro. Jno Van Lynden on his journey to London. Even masons belonging to St. John's Lodge, a Lodge of convenience for brethren not belonging to a Lodge of their own or having been made Masons in 'An irregular or clandestine manner', were helped.<sup>170</sup> Thus the free passage and association of Freemasons of many nationalities and opinions meant that ideas could also pass freely and quickly between brethren.

The secrecy that was at the heart of Masonic life may have also meant that clandestine or radical ideas could be safely expressed in Lodge meetings. 'The FREE-MASON'S Memento' told masons that '[Masonry] instructeth US how to keep . . . Silence, // To maintain . . . Secrecy, // and preserve . . . Security.'<sup>171</sup> Although party disputes and personal quarrels were barred from Masonic meetings, there was nothing to stop the discussion of new or controversial ideas. There was certainly interest amongst the Birmingham masons in radical enlightenment ideas. John Freeth and Myles Swinney, whose involvement with the ideas of Baskerville and Priestley could bring them hostility in some sectors of Birmingham society, may have been more comfortable discussing these things at lodge meetings, as 'No prying Eye can view us here'.<sup>172</sup> The Lodge, part of an international network and with its members bound to '*Silence . . .*

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<sup>170</sup> *St Paul's Lodge, No. 43*, p. 25.

<sup>171</sup> *The Freemasons Repository*, p. 3.

<sup>172</sup> 'The Treasurer's Song', *The Free Masons [sic] Repository*, p. 7.

*Secrecy . . . Security*’ made Freemasonry unique amongst the Birmingham convivial societies. Ideas could be brought in from London or the continent, discussed openly and then taken outside Birmingham as its masons travelled to the lodges in smaller neighbouring towns, all without risking the kind of public dispute and condemnation which eventually drove Priestley from Birmingham.

In a brief and spurious history of Freemasonry, the author of *New Lights on Jacobitism* outlines what he considers to be the attractions of the society.<sup>173</sup> Although his history is of the mythological type, his account of its allure to the French nobility, ‘the liberty of conversing without restraint’, is important. In its discussion of secrecy it alluded to a matter mentioned in many Masonic songs of the time, one which many people at the end of the eighteenth century considered to be a threat to society. Although the author of this tract is keen to stress his respect for British Freemasonry, the book is an attempt to show the links between European Freemasonry and Jacobitism. The association of continental Freemasonry with the French Revolution, as well as groups such as the Illuminati, may have made British Freemasons cautious about their associations with radical thinkers after 1789.<sup>174</sup> The secrecy which made Freemasonry so alluring could in those paranoid times be turned against the Brethren, making them vulnerable to accusations of having something to hide. This may have been especially true in Birmingham when men associated with radical ideas and causes were members of local Lodges.

### **The Importance of Learning and Improvement in Speculative Freemasonry**

<sup>173</sup> *New Lights on Jacobitism, Abstracted from Professor Robinson’s History of Freemasonry. With an Appendix, containing An Account of Voltaire’s behaviour on his Death-bed, and a Letter from J H Stone (who was tried for Sedition) to his friend Dr. Priestley, Disclosing the Principals of Jacobinism. By the Author of Jacobinism Displayed* (Birmingham, 1798), pp. 5-6.

<sup>174</sup> For the Illuminati scandal see J M Roberts, *The Mythology of the Secret Societies* (London, 1972).

Learning and improvement were at the heart of Speculative Masonry from its origins in the seventeenth century; the desire to learn about architecture, for the purpose of building or because of an antiquarian interest, may have been the appeal which drew early non-operatives to masonry. In the decades after the Glorious Revolution many of the English gentry and aristocracy became enthusiastic builders. The relative peace after decades of uncertainty during the Civil War and the turmoil of James II's reign, the interest in the architectural styles of the French and later of Palladianism, and the impact of the Grand Tour, meant that English landowners were concerning themselves with the building and improvement of their houses. The gentleman amateur architect consulted, not only books such as Colen Campbell's *Vitruvius Britannicus* (1715), but also operative masons and craftsmen, such as the Smiths at Warwick.<sup>175</sup> The presence of two operative masons in a speculative Lodge in Warwick after the town rebuilding is a clear example of this kind of interaction. At the end of his life Francis Smith was a wealthy man, having risen far beyond his origins as a skilled craftsman. His biographer, Andor Gomme, stresses that Smith's success as an architect and master-builder was in large part due to his honesty and reliability.<sup>176</sup> However, Gomme is slightly perplexed by the extent of Smith's close association with the Warwickshire gentry and aristocracy. He cites an instance where Lord Digby, visiting Warwick for a meeting 'got a lodging at Mr. Alderman Smith's'.<sup>177</sup> It is possible that it was Smith's membership of the brotherhood which lay behind his unusually close relations with the best of Warwickshire society. As well as connections through the national structure of Freemasonry, his association at Lodges with the leaders of the town of Warwick would

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<sup>175</sup> Andor Gomme, *Smith of Warwick. Francis Smith, Architect and Master-Builder* (Stamford, 2000) and Geoffrey Tyack, *Warwickshire Country Houses* (Chichester, 1994).

<sup>176</sup> Gomme *Smith of Warwick*, pp. 41-2.

<sup>177</sup> 1733 letter from Lord Digby in the Magdalen College Archives, cited Gomme, *Smith of Warwick*, p. 39.

have ensured him a respectability far beyond that of most master-craftsmen. Others involved in the eighteenth-century spate of house building may have been drawn to Freemasonry hoping to learn about the craft of architecture or make connections to craftsmen.

The craft knowledge associated with masonry - architecture and geometry in particular - were mythologised in speculative Freemasonry. 'No man ought to attain to any Dignity in MASONRY', wrote W Smith in his 1735 *Pocket Companion for Free-Masons*, 'who has not, at least, a competent Knowledge in Geometry and Architecture.'<sup>178</sup> This knowledge, explicitly neoclassical in its content, was to be passed on through the auspices of the hierarchy of Freemasons.<sup>179</sup> An apprentice should have no physical defect rendering him 'unable of learning the Art'.<sup>180</sup> The hierarchy of the Freemasons contained conditions for those who would serve as Grand Master. However, although men wishing to be Grand Masters could be 'nobly born, or a Gentleman of the best fashion', they could also obtain the rank if they were 'some eminent Scholar, or some curious Architect, or other Artist'.<sup>181</sup> Learning and knowledge could carry the same weight as noble birth or social eminence in Freemasonry, making it unusually meritocratic.

The Lodge meetings were supposed to be the means of passing on knowledge about the Masonic craft. Meetings seemed to be of two parts: the 'Lodge while constituted' and the time 'after the Lodge is over and the Brethren not gone'.<sup>182</sup> Whilst

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<sup>178</sup> W Smith, *Pocket Companion for Free-Masons* (1735), cited Knoop and Jones, *The Genesis of Freemasonry*, p. 138.

<sup>179</sup> Anderson's *Constitutions* denounced the Gothic in favour of Vitruvius and Palladio. See Knoop and Jones, *The Genesis of Freemasonry*, p. 137.

<sup>180</sup> Anderson, *Constitutions*, 'To be Read at the Making of New Brethren', IV 'Of Master's, Wardens, Fellows, and Apprentices', Reprinted in Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, p. 281.

<sup>181</sup> *ibid.*, p. 281.

<sup>182</sup> Anderson, *Constitutions*, 'To be Read at the making of New Brethren', VI 'Of Behaviour', Reprinted *ibid.*, p. 281.



brethren might enjoy themselves with ‘innocent Mirth’ after the Lodge, the Lodge itself was a time for ‘what is serious and solemn’.<sup>183</sup> There is evidence that there were lectures on architecture, geometry and natural philosophy given at Lodges in London and around the country.<sup>184</sup> At the St. Paul’s Lodge in Birmingham the minutes record at each meeting ‘A Lecture from the Chair on the first Step in Masonry.’<sup>185</sup> Although this Lecture may have been no more than a recitation from a standard Masonic text, the idea of learning being at the heart of Masonic life was alive in the practice of masonry in Birmingham. In the evangelical song ‘All shall yield to Masonry’, one of the aspects of ‘What’s meant by a Mason’ is that

The temple of Knowledge he nobly doth raise,  
Supported by Wisdom, and Learning its base’<sup>186</sup>

Although the records of the Birmingham Freemasons do not reveal what was learnt in Lodges during the eighteenth century, an early nineteenth-century minute records that ‘Lectures were delivered this evening on the following subjects’.<sup>187</sup> The brethren heard first about the senses, then about grammar, rhetoric, music and logic, the place of the first four of the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences amongst the subjects showing that the influence of Enlightenment neo-classicism was still strong amongst the Masons.

Freemasonry in Birmingham went far beyond being a simple convivial gathering of men. Its international structure and early eighteenth-century origins in radical thought, meant that the Birmingham masons were part of an international network of men, many of whom were interested in the most modern, radical and controversial

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<sup>183</sup> *ibid.*, p. 281.

<sup>184</sup> Francis Drake in a speech in 1726, cited Knoop and Jones, *The Genesis of Freemasonry*, p. 137; Clark, *British Clubs and Societies*, p. 336.

<sup>185</sup> *St Paul’s Lodge, Warwickshire, No. 43*, p. 27.

<sup>186</sup> ‘All shall yield to Masonry’, in *The Free Masons [sic] Repository*, pp. 9 – 10.

<sup>187</sup> *St Paul’s Lodge, Warwickshire, No. 43*, p. 46.

ideas. Many of the Birmingham Masons brought to the Lodge their connections with radical Birmingham men who were part of the late eighteenth-century flowering of political and religious non-conformity. Within the security of the Lodge these ideas could be discussed, and the integral place of knowledge and learning within the structure of Freemasonry meant that would have attracted to its ranks men with an interest in learning about and from the latest ideas. Knowledge and learning were part of the mythology of eighteenth-century Freemasonry, but in Birmingham they were also an important part of the everyday business of Masonic life.

## **Conclusion**

Birmingham in the eighteenth century was a place of opportunities for discovery. A wide variety of its inhabitants were concerned with thinking, discussing, experimenting and learning. The tradesmen and apprentices who debated at the Free Debating Society, the youths tutored by Joseph Priestley at the Evening Classes of the New Meeting and those attending a lecture series on 'Experiments upon Different Kinds of Air', were all infused with a spirit of inquiry that crossed social and religious divides. The radical, Enlightenment variety of Freemasonry that flourished in eighteenth-century Birmingham was outward-looking in a way echoed the international trade connections of the town. Just as the metal trades of the town linked it with America and France, the brethren of the Lodges provided intellectual links with Franklin and Voltaire. The spaces in which the Inquiring Sort moved – the Long Room, the Theatre, the Meeting or the Lodge – were part of the internal world of inquiry and exploration. In the next chapter the place of those spaces in the town will be explored. In later chapters the hostility displayed by conservative commentators towards the Inquiring Sort, and the

implications this had for social unrest in the town will be examined in more detail.

## Print Outlets: Spaces, Books and Texts

This chapter is concerned with both the consumption of print and the physical space of Birmingham. Since the mid-1990s there has been a revival of interest in urban history, with the work of historians such as Peter Borsay and John Money being of special importance to studies of the Midlands area.<sup>1</sup> Work on print culture and the consumption of culture interacts with urban history in interesting ways, and this is particularly true for eighteenth-century Birmingham, where the physical locality of places of print and cultural consumption can be analysed to tell us more about the Inquiring Sort and the uses they made of print and the ideas contained within texts.<sup>2</sup> Recent work on the consumption of culture, particularly the work of John Brewer, has concentrated on consumption of culture for entertainment. I will argue that Birmingham provides an example for a different kind of relationship with cultural consumption based on seriousness. Using information about the location of eighteenth-century Birmingham's print outlets, print industry and places of print culture, I will analyse the way that businesses and institutions concerned with print culture and the consumption of that culture moved to occupy spaces at the heart of the newly fashionable north part of Birmingham during the second half of the eighteenth century. I will then examine the place of books, both the ways that the Inquiring Sort of Birmingham acquired them, and the importance of their consumption as cultural objects. Finally I will look at the place

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Gunn, 'Knowledge, power and the city since 1700', *Social History*, 27, 1 (2002), pp. 59-63; Peter Borsay, (ed.), *The Eighteenth-Century Town. A Reader in English Urban History, 1688-1820* (London and New York, 1990); Philip Waller, (ed.), *The English Urban Landscape* (Oxford, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Key works on print culture include Roger Chartier, *The Culture of Print. Power and the Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe* (trans. by Lydia G. Cochrane, Oxford, 1989); Roger Darnton and Daniel Roche (eds), *Revolution in Print: The Press in France 1775 - 1800* (Berkeley, 1989); and on the consumption of culture Ann Bermingham and John Brewer, (eds.), *The Consumption of Culture: Image, Object, Text* (London and New York, 1995); John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London, 1991).

of the texts themselves in eighteenth-century Birmingham, presenting an analysis of data concerned with books published in Birmingham. I will also discuss the important part played by the texts as entities to be consumed in the quest for learning and ideas by the Inquiring Sort.

## Spaces

The first surveyed plan dedicated exclusively to Birmingham was produced in 1731 by William Westley, a surveyor resident in Birmingham. Sixty years later, in the much-expanded third edition of his *History of Birmingham*, William Hutton included a new plan of the town.<sup>3</sup> The changes that took place in the townscape of Birmingham in the years between 1731 and 1795 are vividly seen in its representation on the two plans, not only in the differences shown on the plans, but in the different way the cartographers saw their town. In this section I will explore these changes, with particular reference to places of print culture, and thereby explore ways in which the town of Birmingham changed during the eighteenth century. The first glance at William Westley's 1731 *Plan of Birmingham* shows a pleasant town of commerce, religion and leisure.<sup>4</sup> At the two edges of the town are its churches: the ancient parish church of St Martin's on the left, amongst the market squares and streets, and to the right the new church of St Philips, set between the cherry orchards and the open fields. At the bottom of the town are two Dissenting Meeting Houses. Beyond the edges of the town are market gardens, moated houses and the river Rea.

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<sup>3</sup> William Hutton, *An History of Birmingham* (3rd edn, Birmingham, 1795).

<sup>4</sup> William Westley, *The Plan of Birmingham Survey'd in the Year 1731* (Birmingham, 1789).

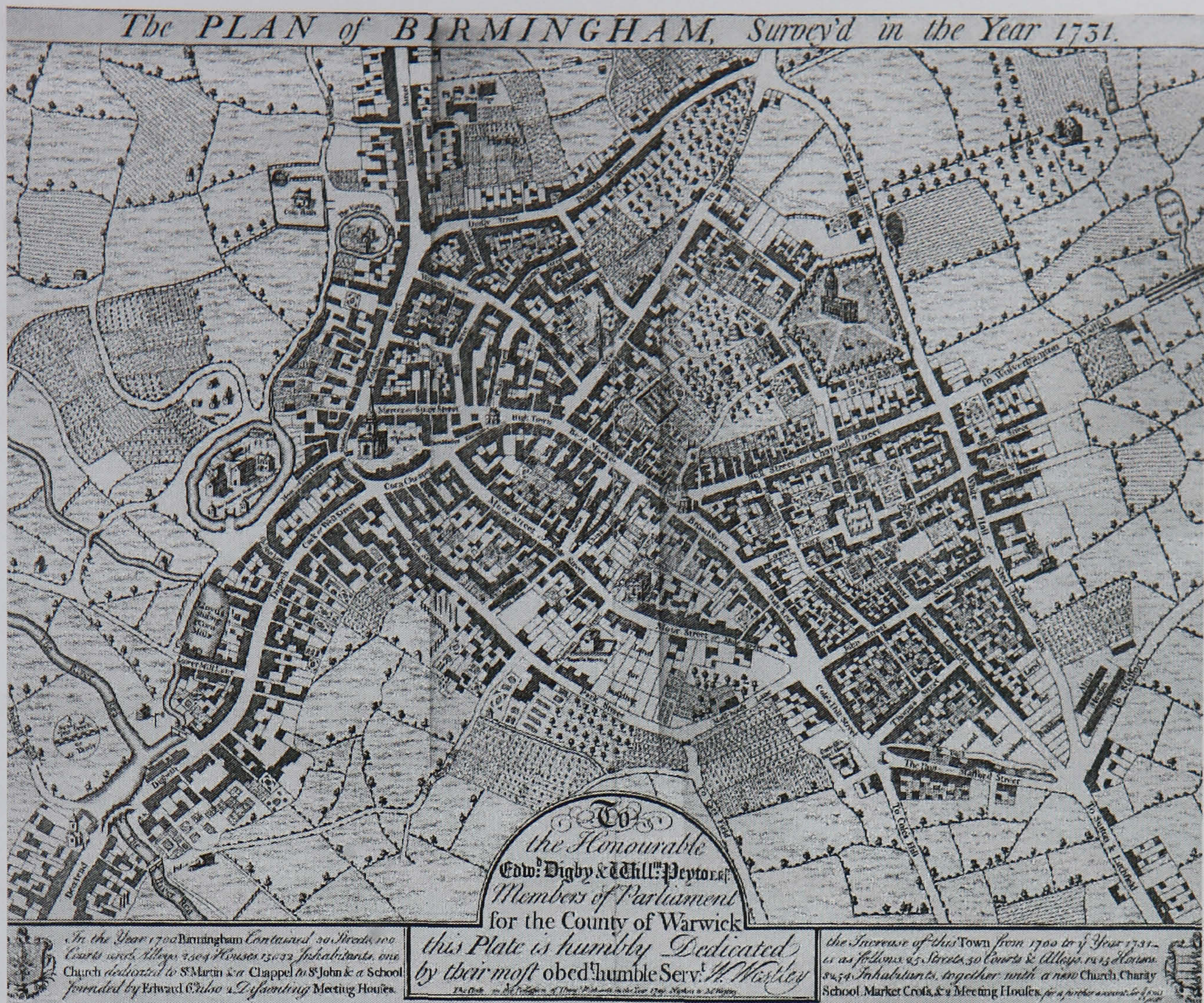


Illustration 1 William Westley, *The Plan of Birmingham Survey'd in the Year 1731* (Birmingham, 1789)

Westley gives some indication of the size of the town in 1700 in the panel below the map, and also states the dramatic growth seen in the intervening thirty years – an increase of around fifty percent. Entirely absent from Westley's vision of Birmingham, however, is the main reason for that increase – the metal-working industry that dominated the town. Although cartography was very much part of the scientific revolution of the Enlightenment, and Westley's plan is accurately surveyed, his is not a complete picture of the state of Birmingham at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Peter Borsay has found that many eighteenth-century maps and plans omitted features that did not fit into the cartographer's chosen view of the area.<sup>5</sup> The plan of Birmingham is dedicated to the

<sup>5</sup> Peter Borsay, 'Early Modern Urban Landscapes, 1540-1800', in Waller, *The English Urban Landscape* p. 121.

Members of Parliament for the County of Warwick, and Westley's representation of Birmingham has transformed a nascent industrial city into a county town, complete with wide streets and an elegant Square. Westley aided his visual transformation of Birmingham with an altered orientation. North in the Westley plan is in the direction of the bottom left-hand corner. By orientating his plan to the south-west he achieves a balanced town, with the two churches - St Martin's in the old metal-working heart of the town and St Philip's amongst the new, up-coming fashionable areas – presiding over the two halves of the town. Although recent historiography on cartography has suggested that powerful social groups had influence on the detailed contents of maps, work by Mary Sponberg Pedley suggests that economic considerations should be taken seriously when looking at map production.<sup>6</sup> It is possible that Westley felt that his map, a printed work to be consumed, would not be economically viable if it showed Birmingham in its grimy, working reality.

The plan included in the third edition of William Hutton's *An History of Birmingham*. . . sixty years later shows an entirely different aspect to the town.<sup>7</sup> Hutton's map is resolutely industrial; the appearance of canals had transformed the townscape, introducing the images and language of industry into the fabric of the place. The combination of the conventional northerly orientation of the plan, and urban growth to the north of the town, has made St Philip's the heart of Birmingham. St Martin's, which had been Birmingham's principle church since the twelfth century, now appears squashed in amongst the Bull Ring and the coaching inns of the main road out to the south-east of the country. By contrast St Philip's sits amongst its own clutch of trees and

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Sponberg Pedley, *The Commerce of Cartography. Making and Marketing Maps in Eighteenth-Century France and England* (Chicago and London, 2005), pp. 10-11.

<sup>7</sup> Hutton, *An History of Birmingham*.

open space, surrounded by the four roads that were becoming the centre of fashionable life in eighteenth-century Birmingham.



*Illustration 2 'Plan of Birmingham Survey'd in the Year 1795' from William Hutton *An History of Birmingham. The Third Edition* (Birmingham, 1795), between pages 76 and 77*

To its north-west was the fashionable thoroughfare consisting of Ann Street, Colmore Row and Bull Lane. A rural lane on Westley's plan, by the second half of the eighteenth century this street had become home to such fashionable places as the circulating library, and was a favoured location for specialist tutors. To the north-east was Bull Street, an entry point to the Square, one of the most popular residential areas in Birmingham. To the south-east lay High Street, renamed from Beast Market since Westley's plan, which, together with New Street, was one of the fashionable shopping areas. Finally to the south-west was New Street itself, home to the theatre and the Blue Coat School as well as shops and businesses.



The rapid expansion of the population of Birmingham during the eighteenth century coincided with a period of architectural change and self-confidence in the building of British towns.<sup>8</sup> During the seventeenth century most architectural grandeur had been seen in ecclesiastical and defensive buildings, but, from the eighteenth century, trends in the style of townscapes tended towards classicism, giving the town a more ordered and integrated appearance. Within existing towns change was slow and piecemeal, but there were occasions when newer styles, and a new interest in the idea of town planning, created areas of more uniformly modern appearance. The destruction of a major part of a town by fire was often the catalyst for this new style of town building, as it was in nearby Warwick in 1694 or in London in 1666.<sup>9</sup>

In Birmingham, however, it was the expansion of the town's population and its growing wealth that enabled the creation of a modern-looking, fashionable district in the north of the town. The two adjoining blocks of the town which made up the fashionable area were those surrounding the new church of St Philip's and the residential area known as the Square. The land on which the Square was constructed had been bought by a wealthy Quaker, John Pemberton in 1700.<sup>10</sup> Pemberton had already been involved with building in the area, but with his purchase of the entire section of land and his decision to release plots with lease controls, he was able to influence the quality and appearance of the buildings. The Square in Birmingham was one of the earliest provincial examples of the style, and, together with the block of roads around it, quickly became the chosen area of residence for the wealthier inhabitants of Birmingham.<sup>11</sup> A London visitor to

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance. Culture and Society in the Provincial Town 1660-1770* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 41-6.

<sup>9</sup> Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance*, p. 42.

<sup>10</sup> 'The Growth of the City', W B Stephens (ed.), *A History of the County of Warwick: Volume 7: The City of Birmingham* (1964), pp. 4-25. URL: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.asp?compid=22959>. Date accessed: 11 May 2006.; Borsay, *English Urban Renaissance*, pp. 85-101.

<sup>11</sup> Borsay, 'Early Modern Urban Landscapes', p. 109.

Birmingham in 1755 described the north of the town as being 'like *St James's* . . . well built, and well inhabited'.<sup>12</sup> The building of *St Philip's Church* on adjoining land intensified the trend for money and influence to move from the area surrounding the old church of *St Martin's* to the new sector of the town.



*Illustration 3* Westley's Plan of Birmingham cropped to show the fashionable areas of *St Philip's* and the Square. The plan has been rotated to orient it more closely to north

<sup>12</sup> Resta Patching, *Four Topographical Letters, written in JULY 1755, Upon a Journey . . .* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1757), p. 55.

The position of new churches built during the eighteenth century shows clearly the move of both weight of population and the middling sort away from St Martin's. There had been little building of new churches in the centuries after the Reformation, but, with the pressures of urbanisation from the end of the seventeenth century, a programme of church building emerged in the early decades of the next century.<sup>13</sup>



*Illustration 4* Pre-1700 places of worship. Established Churches shown in blue, Nonconformist Meeting Houses in orange



*Illustration 5* Established Churches built during the eighteenth century. There was a further church built at Ashted, to the east of the map in line with the two northerly shown here

In the years before 1700 the places of worship in Birmingham, both the old Established churches and the new Nonconformist Meeting Houses, were positioned in the south of the town (*Illustration 4*). The spate of building of new Established Churches in Birmingham began with St Philip's in 1711. It was designed by the gentleman-architect Thomas Archer, who had previously worked on several aristocratic seats. Although not as intricate as Archer's later churches in London, the elegant, Wren-influenced style was in stark contrast to the worn, Reformation-ravaged St Martin's.<sup>14</sup> Continued population pressures on Birmingham during the century saw further building of places of worship,

<sup>13</sup> Borsay, 'Early Modern Urban Landscapes', p. 117.

<sup>14</sup> Borsay, 'Early Modern Urban Landscapes', p. 117; Conrad Gill, *History of Birmingham*, (2 Vols, London, 1952), 1, p. 75; Andor Gomme, 'Archer, Thomas (1668/9–1743)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/628>, 19 May 2006].

including a clutch of new Established churches. The sites of these new places of worship during the eighteenth century clearly show the expansion of the population of the north of the town (*Illustration 5*).<sup>15</sup> Although the ancient chapel of St John at Deritend, on the southern outskirts of the town, was rebuilt during the eighteenth century, no new Established churches were built south of St Philip's. The energy, money and influence needed to create new churches came exclusively from the north of the town.

During the eighteenth century more land was released for building on the outskirts of Birmingham, leading to a trend for craftsmen to live on the periphery, where many workshops were also located.<sup>16</sup> This reflected the general trend in eighteenth-century towns for the better-off to live in the centre and the poor on the outskirts.<sup>17</sup> Peter Borsay found that this trend was being challenged in London, as well as in few provincial towns and cities.<sup>18</sup> However in Birmingham, although several prominent individuals, such as John Baskerville and Matthew Boulton, had large houses on the outskirts, it was not until the building of the Edgbaston Estate in the nineteenth century that the move of the influential residents to the suburbs really began.<sup>19</sup>

The area of St Philip's and the Square was not simply a fashionable residential quarter. In 1751 William Hutton was persuaded to take a shop on the High Street for his

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<sup>15</sup> The location data on all the following maps are taken from a range of sources: Hutton *An History of Birmingham* (1795); W B Stephens (ed.), *Victoria County History of Birmingham. Volume 7; Birmingham; Bailey's Western and Midland Directory* (Birmingham, 1783); *The Birmingham, Wolverhampton . . . Directory* (Birmingham, 1780); James Bisset, *Poetic Survey round Birmingham and Magnificent Directory* (Birmingham, 1800); G Hunter, *Multum in Parvo. The Distant Traders Guide* (Birmingham, 1788); *The New Birmingham Directory* (Birmingham, 1774); *Showell's Dictionary of Birmingham* (facsimile edition of the 1885 1st edition, Birmingham, 1969). Complete versions of these cropped maps can be found in Appendix 2.

<sup>16</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'The Growth of the City', *A History of the County of Warwick: Volume 7: The city of Birmingham* (1964), pp. 4-25. URL: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.asp?compid=22959>. Date accessed: 22 June 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Borsay, 'Early Modern Urban Landscapes', p. 105.

<sup>18</sup> Borsay, 'Early Modern Urban Landscapes', p. 105.

<sup>19</sup> Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes. Men and women of the English middle class, 1780-1850* (London, 1987), p. 43.

bookselling business at the frightening rent of eight pounds per annum.<sup>20</sup> It was a shrewd move on the part of Hutton, or his friends who encouraged him. From the middle of the eighteenth century businesses and services concerned with the creation and maintenance of a comfortable public and private life, including those purveying print culture, were beginning to position themselves in the area. Once again using the 1795 plan of Birmingham, it is possible to track the movement of these fashionable businesses and services in their move to the area of St Philip's and the Square. Taverns and coffee houses concerned with print culture were based in the heart of the old village of Birmingham, the borders of which are essentially those shown on the Westley plan (*Illustration 6*).



*Illustration 6* Taverns and Coffeehouses concerned with the world of print. Traditional taverns shown in blue, those restyled as coffeehouses are brown



*Illustration 7* Assembly Rooms. The assembly rooms, marked in pink, are placed firmly in the fashionable quarter

It might be expected that the Birmingham coffee houses, whose proprietors used the name 'coffee house' to place themselves within the milieu of print and modern conviviality, would be located in the northern sector of the town. However,

<sup>20</sup> William Hutton, *The Life of William Hutton, F.A.S.S. including a particular Account of the Riots at Birmingham in 1791 to which is subjoined, the History of his Family, written by Himself, and published by his Daughter, Catherine Hutton* (London 1816), p. 86.

Birmingham's coffee houses were simply taverns, recast for a new type of customer. Freeth's Coffee House was often referred to as the Leicester Arms, even during its new incarnation. Their origins as places of popular entertainment and refreshment placed them within the south sector Birmingham. In contrast Assembly Rooms were fashionable creations of the eighteenth century. They were intended to be socially exclusive venues, unconnected with the old sociability of taverns, and providing safely segregated polite entertainment.<sup>21</sup> As *Illustration 7* shows, the Assembly Rooms were positioned in the new centre of the town, clearly marking the status of the new residential and business area.

Another marker of the location of prosperous families, especially those concerned with learning and ideas, was the position of educational institutions. Denise Fowler in her thesis, 'Social Distinction and the Written Word: Two Provincial Case Studies, Warwick and Draguignan, 1780-1820', found that the acquisition of cultural capital was becoming 'as important as the acquisition of capital'.<sup>22</sup> For Fowler printing and literacy were key parts of town culture, with the ability to read and write enabling participation in the governance of the town, as well as cultural activities. She found that the teaching of grammar to middle-class children was used as a means of creating distinction between those who worked with their brains and those who worked with their hands.<sup>23</sup> However, in a town such as Birmingham, where literacy and numeracy were generally useful for small masters and economic elevation was possible, it might be expected that schoolmasters and mistresses would be widely spread throughout the town. Indeed, a sample plotting of school teachers in the 1770s shows a dispersed pattern (*Illustration 6*).

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<sup>21</sup> Borsay, 'Early Modern Urban Landscapes', p. 119.

<sup>22</sup> Denise Fowler, 'Social Distinction and the Written Word: Two Provincial Case Studies, Warwick and Draguignan, 1780-1820', (PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1998), synopsis.

<sup>23</sup> Fowler, 'Social Distinction and the Written Word', pp. 6.1-8, (page references follow Fowler's own pagination system).

However when the sample is restricted to those teachers offering specialist skills that might be expected to particularly appeal to the more wealthy or aspirant families, the location of the teachers is much more restricted to the area of St Philip's and the Square.



Illustration 8 Location of Schoolteachers in the 1770s



Illustration 9 Specialist School Teachers in the 1770s

The position of such markers of fashionable society as assembly rooms and specialist teachers has shown that there was a geographically localised market for fashionable consumption in Birmingham. The same techniques show that print was part of that culture of fashionable consumption, a crucial element in the creation of a cultured life in the eighteenth century. In the early decades of the eighteenth century businesses concerned with print tended to congregate around the church of St Martin's. The earliest books printed in Birmingham come from printers located near the church – Matthew Unwin and Thomas Warren.<sup>24</sup> Indeed in their front matter the printers are explicit that they are geographically connected with St Martin's. Matthew Unwin announces that *A Loyal Oration* is 'Printed and Sold by Matthew Unwin near St Martin's Church, 1717' and Thomas Warren, in the end papers of *A practical discourse of reconciliation between*

<sup>24</sup> James Parkinson, *A Loyal Oration . . .* (Birmingham, 1717); *Multum in parvo, or, the Jubilee of Jubilees . . .* (London, 1732).

*God and man. . .* (which he sold rather than printed), advertises himself as 'T. Warren, Bookseller in Spiceall-street near St Martin's Church, Birmingham'.<sup>25</sup> The early dominance of St Martin's on the printers is also reflected in the fact that in the decades before 1750 twice as many religious as secular books were published in Birmingham, although throughout the eighteenth century the picture is much more balanced.<sup>26</sup> During the eighteenth century printing, publishing and bookselling were closely interconnected, with many establishments covering all three roles. This overlapping of function meant that it was not simply the public face of the book trade, the booksellers, who moved to locate themselves in the fashionable shopping streets, but the working printer and bookbinder.

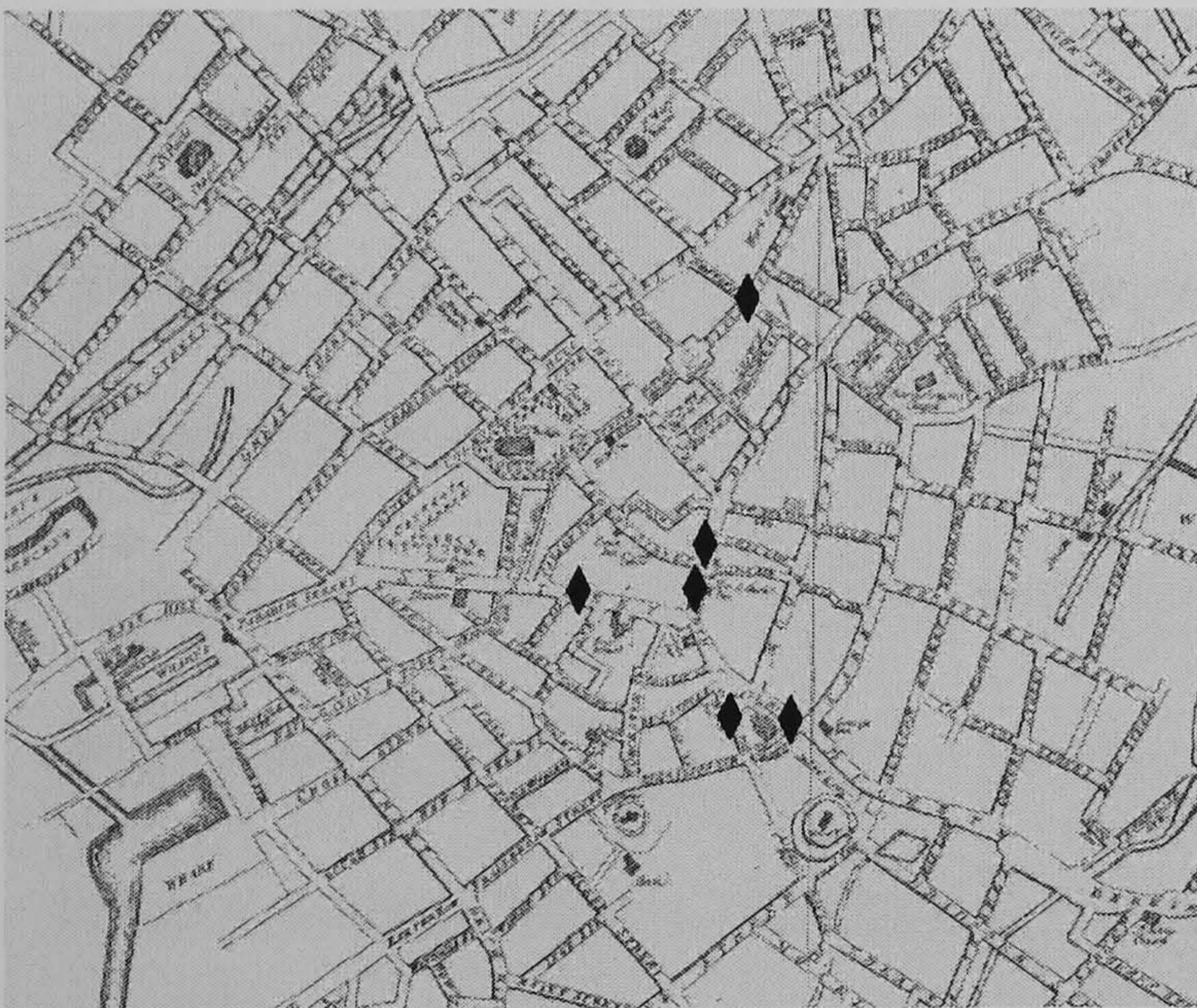


Illustration 11 Printers. Location of printers before 1750

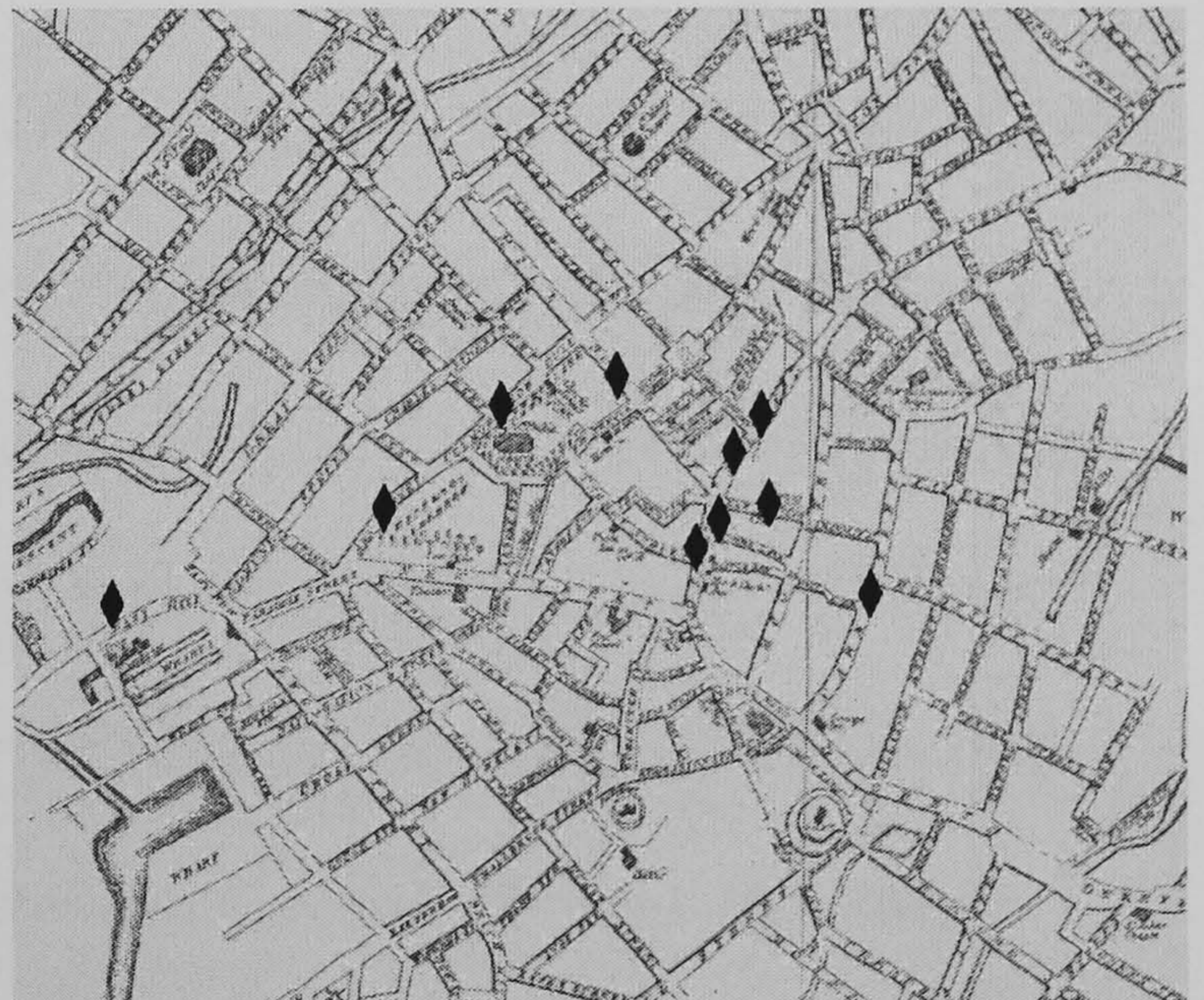


Illustration 10 Printers. Location of printers after 1750

Those connected with the book trade who were concerned with the provision of books to the public, booksellers and libraries, were firmly established in those fashionable streets during the second half of the eighteenth century (*Illustrations 12 and 13*).

<sup>25</sup> Parkinson *A Loyal Oration*; John Reynolds, *A Practical Discourse of Reconciliation between God and Man . . .* (London, 1729). Original italics.

<sup>26</sup> These data are taken from the British Library (BL) Catalogue and from Eighteenth-Century Collections Online (ECCO), being an analysis of books published in Birmingham during the years 1700-1799. The data from ECCO were extracted using a script written by Matthew Roberts, Department of Psychology, University of Edinburgh. See Chapter 2, 'Curiosity and Identity', for a breakdown of the religious and secular publications for the century.





Illustration 12 Libraries and Booksellers. Pre1750 libraries (squares) and booksellers (diamonds). The blue marker is St Philip's Theological Library



Illustration 13 Libraries and Booksellers. Post 1750 libraries (squares) and booksellers (diamonds)

The overall picture of the geographical location of places of print culture in Birmingham during the eighteenth century is one of movement from old sources of power and patronage, in the shape of St Martin's Church, to new sources, the Inquiring Sort who congregated in the fashionable streets of north Birmingham during the eighteenth century (*Illustration 14*). The development of an area of assembly rooms, specialist tutors, circulating libraries and bookshops shows the way in which during the second half of the eighteenth century a class of people were resident in Birmingham who placed value on these services, a contrasting picture to that which historians have recently painted of the town, including Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's *Family Fortunes* and Jenny Uglow's *Lunar Men*.<sup>27</sup> The movement of a wealthy population to this area was well under way in the first half of the eighteenth century, but the businesses were slower to follow. As Hutton's nervousness at moving to a high-rent, fashionable shop shows, investment of this type could be a risky undertaking. By mid-century, however, it must have been clear that the old trading areas around St Martin's, where foodstuffs and livestock were sold, were becoming peripheral to the new world of shopkeeping and

<sup>27</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, pp. 36-43; Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men. The Friends who made the Future, 1730 - 1810* (London, 2002), pp. 18-21.

services for the middling sort. This was particularly true for the provision of printed matter, which was closely connected to culture, learning and 'brain' pursuits, in contrast to either agricultural or industrial goods which were increasingly confined to the periphery of the town.



*Illustration 14* Print Places. Post-1750 businesses and services connected with the world of print, showing the dramatic clustering in the streets around St Philip's and the Square

- |                  |                       |                     |
|------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| ● Assembly Rooms | ◆ Booksellers         | ◆ Blue Coat School  |
| ● Coffee Houses  | ◆ Printers            | ◆ Grammar School    |
| ● Taverns        | ■ Commercial Library  | ◆ Dissenting School |
|                  | ■ Theological Library | ◆ School Teachers   |

Hutton's experience shows that books and print were part of the fashionable world of consumption which was becoming the economic and social basis for the northern area of the centre of Birmingham. Peter Clark in *British Clubs and Societies*, contends that

learned societies were an essential part of the improved areas of provincial towns, a 'cultural *quartier* . . . distinguished by paved streets and rebuilt civic buildings, joined with assembly rooms, coffee-houses and other drinking premises . . .'.<sup>28</sup> This examination of Birmingham's fashionable area has shown that this was certainly so in this case, but that the societies were only one aspect of this 'smart new social world', others being fashionable places of worship, opportunities for cultural consumption and aspirant educational facilities.<sup>29</sup> The milieu of the Inquiring Sort was one of fashionable consumption, but the defining feature was its serious nature rather than the exclusively frivolous world of consumption of culture described by John Brewer and discussed in the next section.<sup>30</sup>

## **Books**

Robert Darnton in *Revolution in Print: the Press in France 1775-1800* called for a new way of looking at the printed word: 'Historians generally treat the printed word as a record of what happened instead of as an ingredient in the happening'.<sup>31</sup> For eighteenth-century Birmingham, the printed word was not only part of the happening (the impact of pamphlets and sermons on the outbreak of rioting in the 1790s will be discussed in a later chapter), but, as was seen in the section above, part of the re-formation of the town during the century. One of the key factors that made the printed word so important in Birmingham, was the fact that the Inquiring Sort there were active consumers of the printed word, and were active in the wider milieu in which it existed: coffee houses,

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<sup>28</sup> Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies, 1580-1800. The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford, 2000), p. 169.

<sup>29</sup> Clark, *British Clubs and Societies*, p. 85.

<sup>30</sup> John Brewer, "'The most polite age and the most vicious'" Attitudes towards culture as a commodity, 1660-1800', in Birmingham and Brewer, *The Consumption of Culture*, p. 348.

<sup>31</sup> Darnton and Roche, *Revolution in Print*, p. xiii.

libraries, book clubs and lectures. Recent work on this milieu, what Roger Chartier called ‘the new set of acts arising out of the production of writing . . .’, has focused on ideas about consumption, and particularly about the consumption of culture as a commodity.<sup>32</sup> Ann Bermingham, in her introduction to *The Consumption of Culture: Image, Object, Text*, set out the idea that modernism’s conception of culture as a pure artistic project had led to a denial amongst historians of the early relationship between ‘consumption and . . . social and cultural forms’.<sup>33</sup> The case of eighteenth-century Birmingham shows that consumption was a key part of the way the Inquiring Sort interacted with a cultural form, in this case with text. John Brewer, in his chapter on ‘Culture as commodity: 1660-1800’ in the same volume, outlined several features of eighteenth-century commercialised culture.<sup>34</sup> Firstly, that there was a large variety of entertainment available, without obvious discrimination between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. Secondly, money was the only necessary key to gaining access to cultural entertainment. Thirdly, there was ‘an emphasis on social display . . . [of] wealth, status, social and sexual charms’. Finally, commercialized culture was ‘a culture steeped in hedonism and sexual intrigue’.<sup>35</sup> Whilst the first two of Brewer’s aspects of commercialised culture were seen in eighteenth-century Birmingham, the third and fourth, concerning social display and hedonism were not so much present. Culture was certainly commercialised, and there was mixing of ‘high’ and ‘low’, for example as seen in the presence of lawyers and labourers at the Free Debating Society, but there was a seriousness to Birmingham’s culture that is not captured in Brewer’s discussion. There

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<sup>32</sup> Chartier, *The Culture of Print*, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Ann Bermingham, ‘Introduction’, in Bermingham and Brewer, *The Consumption of Culture*, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Brewer, “The most polite age and the most vicious”, in Bermingham and Brewer, *The Consumption of Culture*, p. 348.

<sup>35</sup> Brewer, “The most polite age and the most vicious”, in Bermingham and Brewer, *The Consumption of Culture*, p. 348.

has been little attention paid to the idea of seriousness during the eighteenth century; it is a trait that has become almost exclusively associated with the Victorians. Ian Bradley in *The Call to Seriousness* characterised the Victorian Evangelical seriousness as arising from a reaction to the eighteenth-century way of life, including intellectual and rational attitudes to religion.<sup>36</sup> As Bradley made clear, the Evangelical seriousness 'appealed wholeheartedly and unashamedly to the emotions. There was indeed a strong measure of anti-intellectualism about it'.<sup>37</sup> This conception of seriousness as moral and emotional has perhaps distracted from the fact that there was a great sense of seriousness that was both intellectual and rational during the eighteenth century. This was in no way antithetical to the idea of pleasure. As Lorraine Daston has shown, there was both seriousness of purpose and pleasure in the process, in the work of eighteenth-century naturalists.<sup>38</sup> Religious works of the time abound with ideas about the importance of seriousness, particularly seriousness of attention. In 1712 Thomas Clayton, Rector of St Michael's Norwich, published *Seriousness of attention at the time of divine worship*.<sup>39</sup> In 1781 ministers reporting back to the Countess of Huntingdon often remarked on the seriousness of the crowds to whom they preached, including on one occasion to many thousands at Wolverhampton, who behaved with unparalleled 'seriousness and attention'.<sup>40</sup> The Inquiring Sort of Birmingham brought this sense of seriousness to their consumption of culture. The example of eighteenth-century Birmingham shows that it was not only 'high' culture that was commercialised, but 'serious' culture. It was seen in

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<sup>36</sup> Ian Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness. The Evangelical Impact on the Victorians* (London, 1976), pp. 18-20.

<sup>37</sup> Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>38</sup> Lorraine Daston, 'Attention and the Values of Nature in the Enlightenment', in Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal, *The Moral Authority of Nature* (Chicago, 2004), pp. 109-19.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Clayton, *Seriousness of Attention at the Time of Divine Worship* (London, 1712).

<sup>40</sup> *Extracts of the Journals of several Ministers of the Gospel; being an Account of their Labours in several Parts of England, during the Summer 1781. In a Series of Letters to the Countess of Huntingdon* (London, 1782), p. 111.

the last chapter that the Inquiring Sort were closely involved with cultural activities associated with ideas and learning, from series of scientific lectures to debates in taverns. In this section we will see that, in these activities and in the text objects they purchased and consumed, they were also consumers of culture. I will examine the consumption of printed matter, and more generally the consumption of print culture, showing that, in eighteenth-century Birmingham 'high' culture, 'serious culture', and popular production and consumption were intimately connected.

The mid to late eighteenth century has been seen by historians as the decades when the 'consumer revolution' began, with the development of large retail outlets in London.<sup>41</sup> The origins of this revolution were in earlier centuries, when the first primarily retail businesses were established – drapers, mercers, haberdashers, grocers – a change from the previous practice of shops attached to workshops.<sup>42</sup> This move towards retail outlets can be seen in the Birmingham book trade, with the emergence of booksellers who were not also printers or bookbinders and then, at the end of the century, the move to sell books along side other 'luxury' goods. Booksellers were well established in Birmingham from the early years of the eighteenth century.<sup>43</sup> William Hutton, arriving in Birmingham in 1750 found that there were three booksellers in the town: Thomas Aris, Thomas Warren, and Rollasons.<sup>44</sup> In spite of this, Hutton was confident that he could make a profit and opened his business – indeed the bookselling aspect of his wide-ranging business interests was always the most successful.<sup>45</sup> Aris, Warren, Rollason, and indeed Hutton himself, were all craftsmen who were also retailers,

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<sup>41</sup> Neil Mckendrick, John Brewer and J H Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society* (London, 1982), p.21.

<sup>42</sup> Kathryn A Morrison, *English Shops and Shopping. An Architectural History* (New Haven and London, 2003), p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Hill, *Bookmakers of Old Birmingham. Authors, Printers and their Booksellers* (Birmingham, 1907).

<sup>44</sup> Hutton, *Life of William Hutton*, p. 77.

<sup>45</sup> Hutton, *Life of William Hutton*, p. 77.

or businessmen who dealt both in the printing and bookselling trades.

Helen Berry has argued that the experience of shopping should be classed as part of the 'polite' experience of eighteenth-century England, just as attending concerts or assembly rooms might be, with its attendant rituals, and norms of interaction and display.<sup>46</sup> She shows how this was the case for a large range of luxury goods, but it also became increasingly so for books and other tools of text as they began to be stocked in the newly emergent type of fashionable shop – the emporium or warehouse. In *English Shops and Shopping* Kathryn Morrison presents evidence of large retail establishments existing in London from 1750, and in provincial towns such as Bath and York just before 1800.<sup>47</sup> In Birmingham, as well as in such fashionable towns, there were also signs of this stage of the consumer revolution. Allin's 'Cheap Clothes and York Shoe Warehouse, THE FLAG' on New Street was an emporium selling an extraordinary range of products, including cultural items.<sup>48</sup> Although he described himself as 'Taylor, Hatter, Haberdasher, Hosier, Linen and Woollen Draper, Grocer', his business was far more extensive than simply apparel. His stock included educational items for children (puzzles, maps and charts, spelling books, primers), books, a wide range of paper, quills, pens and other writing accoutrements, sheet music and musical instruments.<sup>49</sup> A sixteen-page verse advertising his warehouse shows the way in which Allin's potential customers were not simply possible purchasers, seeking information about his clothes, books, or pens, but consumers to be wooed with the experiences they might have using his products.

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<sup>46</sup> Helen Berry, 'Polite Consumption: Shopping in Eighteenth-Century England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 12 (2002), pp. 375-94.

<sup>47</sup> Morrison, *English Shops and Shopping*, p. 31.

<sup>48</sup> Allin Taylor, *Allin Taylor, Hatter, Haberdasher, Hosier, Linen and Woollen Draper . . .* (Birmingham, ?1800).

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 8-12.

His verse advertisement begins with his items of clothing and accessories, such as fans and gloves. These goods were part of the 'every Necessary of Life' which Allin would accommodate.<sup>50</sup> He was aiming his poem, and his goods, at a variety of people. At the end of a long list of fineries for women, he lists his stockings and shoes

. . . black or white, quite fine,  
Or some more coarse if you incline.  
Seal skin and morocco shoes,  
Coarse or fine, just as you choose.<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, when addressing his potential male customers he speaks to 'The prince, the porter, and the peasant' equally, as long as they all have 'the cash so pleasant'.<sup>52</sup> Allin did not simply speak to the educated, cultured, middling sort in his poem: the porter and the peasant are not only provided for, but are addressed in verse. He saw them as potential customers, but also as potential readers; wearers of coarse stockings and shoes could also be consumers of poetry.

Although the title page of his poem concentrates on the clothing and linen sold, only half of the poem's pages are devoted to them. Cultural goods make up another large segment of the poem. Here Allin provides poetic descriptions of item after item, the effect is studious and sensuous in turn. He first promises goods that will '. . . improve the mind. . .', give '. . . infant lectures', provide '. . . teaching . . . and learning'.<sup>53</sup> Then, moving to the raw materials of textural consumption – paper, ink, vellum, board, quills, wafers, wax – the language evokes the pleasure these goods will bring to the senses. Paper 'soft and pleasant to the touch', 'A beauteous shew of quills and pens', 'Ink, like

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<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, title page.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.* p. 5.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8.



jet, 'twill shine so bright . . . Ink of glowing ruby red' or 'Penknives fitted to your hand'.<sup>54</sup> These items were not simply tools for creating and passing on the written word, they were things of pleasure in themselves, things to be consumed, just as wine or fine food might be.

It was not simply in the purchase of a book that text became an object for cultural consumption. Their very nature meant that books could be consumed, then consumed again. Booksellers, religious institutions and groups of individuals realised the potential of this fact from the early decades of the eighteenth century, when large numbers of libraries were established.

The earliest library in Birmingham was connected with St Philip's Church. It was founded in 1733 by William Higgs, the first Rector of St Philip's, who left to it his collection of books.<sup>55</sup> However, access to it was restricted to Church of England clergy of the town and neighbourhood, and students recommended by the rectors of St Philip's, St Martin's or the Rector of Sheldon. Although its connections with St Philip's and the Established Church were close it was not exclusively a theological library, having a general aim of promoting 'useful literature'.<sup>56</sup>

The practice of booksellers lending out books to customers began in the 1660s, but it was not until the 1720s that Circulating Libraries, with dedicated stocks of books intended for lending rather than for sale, began to appear. They were first seen in the provinces 'at watering places where fashionable idlers sought fresh supplies of light reading'.<sup>57</sup> By 1729 there was such a service run in Birmingham by Thomas Warren who

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<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Parish, *History of the Birmingham Library. An Eighteenth-Century Proprietary Library as described in the Annals of the Birmingham Library, 1779-1799 with a Chapter on the later History of the Library to 1955* (London, 1966), p. 9.

<sup>56</sup> Parish, *History of the Birmingham Library*, p. 9.

<sup>57</sup> Alan Dugald McKillop, 'English Circulating Libraries, 1725-50', *The Library*, 4, 14 (1933-4), p. 478.

had 'Books . . . Hir'd out to Read, or Exchang'd'.<sup>58</sup> It was from the middle of the century that the booksellers of Birmingham realised the commercial potential of the circulating library. William Hutton opened a commercial circulating library in around 1752. He clearly found it a sociable and pleasant trade, a 'smiling trade', and found that 'As I hired out books, the fair sex did not neglect the shop'.<sup>59</sup> The next few decades saw a clutch of circulating libraries opening: Joseph Crompton in 1754, John Lowe in 1776, M and S Olds in 1787 and Thomas Chapman in 1788. Myles Swinney opened a commercial subscription library in 1772. Circulating libraries were often the subject of criticism by those who saw them as purveyors of cheap, light, and dangerously amusing novels.<sup>60</sup> The suggestion above by Alan McKillop, writing about Circulating Libraries in 1933, that their customers were 'fashionable idlers' shows just how pervasive that idea was. Frank Donoghue in his essay 'Colonizing Readers' found a tendency for reviewers to not only criticise readers of the products of Circulating Libraries, but to criticise the booksellers and the book trade for allowing such things to be produced and placed in the public arena. The language used was gendered and sexualised, with prostitution used as a metaphor for the book trade.<sup>61</sup>

The most prominent library in Birmingham was the Birmingham Library. It was a proprietary (membership) library, founded in 1779 by a small number of Birmingham men, mainly Dissenters, but with the aim that its membership would be open to men of a variety of opinions.<sup>62</sup> In an advertisement in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, two years after

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<sup>58</sup> Reynolds, *A Practical Discourse*, p. 439.

<sup>59</sup> Hutton, *Life of William Hutton*, p. 87. Hutton's library is often cited as the first in Birmingham, but Warren's clearly pre-dates this.

<sup>60</sup> Frank Donoghue, 'Colonizing readers. Review criticism and the formation of a reading public', in Birmingham and Brewer, *The Consumption of Culture*, p. 69.

<sup>61</sup> Donoghue, 'Colonizing readers'.

<sup>62</sup> John Edwards, *Letters to the British Nation, and to the Inhabitants of every other Country* . . . (Birmingham, 1792), p. 12; Jo Hunt, *A History of the Birmingham Library 1779-1979: A Bicentenary Reappraisal* (Birmingham, 1979), p. 3; Parish, *History of the Birmingham Library*, p. 10.

it was formed and at a period of expansion, it was made explicit that the structure of the library had been chosen in order that domination by one interest group might be avoided.<sup>63</sup> From 1783 members of the Anglican clergy began to join the library, and were elected to the committee, which itself was elected annually by the membership. Books were to be chosen by the committee from those nominated by the members. Membership was a guinea, plus six shillings per annum, a sum that was made deliberately low to enable it to be widely accessed.<sup>64</sup> As commercial Circulating Libraries at that time cost about sixteen shillings a year, the Birmingham Library should have certainly been more accessible, although the initial payment of a guinea would have been prohibitive for many.<sup>65</sup> It was initially housed in the rooms of John Lee Jnr, a Unitarian merchant and button maker, on Snow Hill. Within three years it moved to one of the yards off the High Street (1782), then to Upper Priory in 1790, and finally to its own rooms on Corbett's Alley (later Union Street) in 1792 – all locations in the heart of fashionable Birmingham. The character of the library was resolutely serious: its stated aim was to 'increase till it contains all the most valuable publications in the English language'.<sup>66</sup> In 1784 a separate section of the library was formed with the aim of making a collection of scientific volumes, especially foreign language ones.<sup>67</sup> The books in section were to be available to all to consult, but only to be borrowed by the subscribers to the separate section. Yet in spite of its serious aims, the supporters of the library were unable to suppress the fact that the library was enjoyable, as well as edifying. The

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<sup>63</sup> *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* 11 June 1781, cited Parish, *History of the Birmingham Library*, p. 13; The split in the library at the end of the 1780s, caused by disputes over admissibility of certain disputatious books, will be dealt with in a later chapter. For the purposes of examining the consumption of culture in Birmingham I intend to look at the library in the first years of its inception.

<sup>64</sup> Hutton, *History of Birmingham*, p. 165.

<sup>65</sup> Hilda M Hamlyn, 'Eighteenth-century Circulating Libraries in England', *The Library*, 5, 1 (1947), pp. 209-11.

<sup>66</sup> *Aris's* 11 June 1781; Parish, *History of the Birmingham Library*, p. 15.

<sup>67</sup> *Aris's* 31 May 1784, *ibid.*

committee itself must have felt that pleasure was part of the concern of the library, for it contained novels as well as factual volumes.<sup>68</sup> John Edwards, a Birmingham Unitarian minister, praising the value of the library in doing social good and countering ‘idle dissipation, and boundless indulgence of the appetites and passions’, wrote that the benefit came from ‘improving the mind in useful or even in curious knowledge’.<sup>69</sup>

William Hutton compared the lonely world of a man at leisure before there was easy access to printed matter, with one who could borrow from a library: ‘before him expands a capacious garden, rich in culture, where he can gather what flower he pleases’. The world of print gave him information, culture, enlightenment, but also ‘more amusement than he can grasp’.<sup>70</sup>

## **Texts**

Ideas about the consumption of books should not be limited to the purchase of the object. The acquisition of the book itself is not the end of the story. It must be thought that the Inquiring Sort did not, for the most part, purchase a book for its properties as an object, but for its contents. In the main, it is impossible to know why a certain text was acquired, but looking at the texts that were published in Birmingham over the course of the century, an idea can be formed as to the kinds of texts that were available to people who shopped there. Of course, there would have been a wide range of books published elsewhere, principally in London, but Birmingham publications offer useful information. These were texts selected by the Birmingham printers, publishers and booksellers, they were the things that local people were interested in, and things that the booksellers

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<sup>68</sup> Parish, *History of the Birmingham Library*, p. 15.

<sup>69</sup> Edwards, *Letters*, p. 18.

<sup>70</sup> Hutton, *History of Birmingham*, p. 165.

calculated sold well. It is important to note that not all publications by small printers were commercial ones intended to make money through volume of sales, for example there are several texts printed 'for the author', which may often indicate that the writer had borne the financial risk.

The data used for this analysis come from two sources, the British Library Catalogue (BLC) and the Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO). The data from the two collections were merged into a single spreadsheet and duplications removed. In the case of publications covered by both databases, the data from ECCO have been used in preference to the BLC. The analysis is intended to cover only books; I have therefore also taken out publications of less than eight pages, thereby removing handbills, ballads, advertising pamphlets and such occasional items as John Baskerville's typeface examples. In some cases, but not all, publications with more than one volume have more than one entry. I have therefore standardised to use one entry for publications with multiple volumes. Publications for the years 1700 to 1799 have been used.

John Feather outlined the highly complex nature of the eighteenth-century book trade in his article 'The Commerce of Letters: The Study of the Eighteenth-Century Book Trade'.<sup>71</sup> The basic chain of Author, Publisher, Bookseller, Reader had additional participants, possibly including patron, editor, printer, binder, reviewer or librarian.<sup>72</sup> Feather, examining the European-wide book trade, found three distinct functionaries: printer, publisher and bookseller, assisted by other specialist trades such as papermakers or typecutters. However, he found that the printer had become, by the eighteenth century 'at the periphery of the book trade'.<sup>73</sup> As competition became fierce amongst printers, the

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<sup>71</sup> John Feather, 'The Commerce of Letters: The Study of the Eighteenth-Century Book Trade', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 17, 4 (1984), pp. 405-424.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, p. 407.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, p. 407-8.

publishers were able to consolidate power in the areas of book selection, finance and distribution. Printers found themselves making a large part of their business from the 'ephemera' of trade cards and advertisements. However, the picture in Birmingham was rather different. Whilst printing was done for the major publishers of London, and booksellers were part of the national distribution network, the trades of publisher, printer and bookseller were far more closely connected than was the case for the major national presses. The common pattern was for booksellers to also be printers. The very early print trade in Birmingham, in the 1710s, was conducted by Matthew Unwin and Thomas Warren, booksellers and printers.<sup>74</sup> In the 1730s and 1740s the picture widened, with the arrival of Michael Broome, music publisher and seller, and Thomas Aris, who also printed and published *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, the most successful Birmingham newspaper of the eighteenth century.

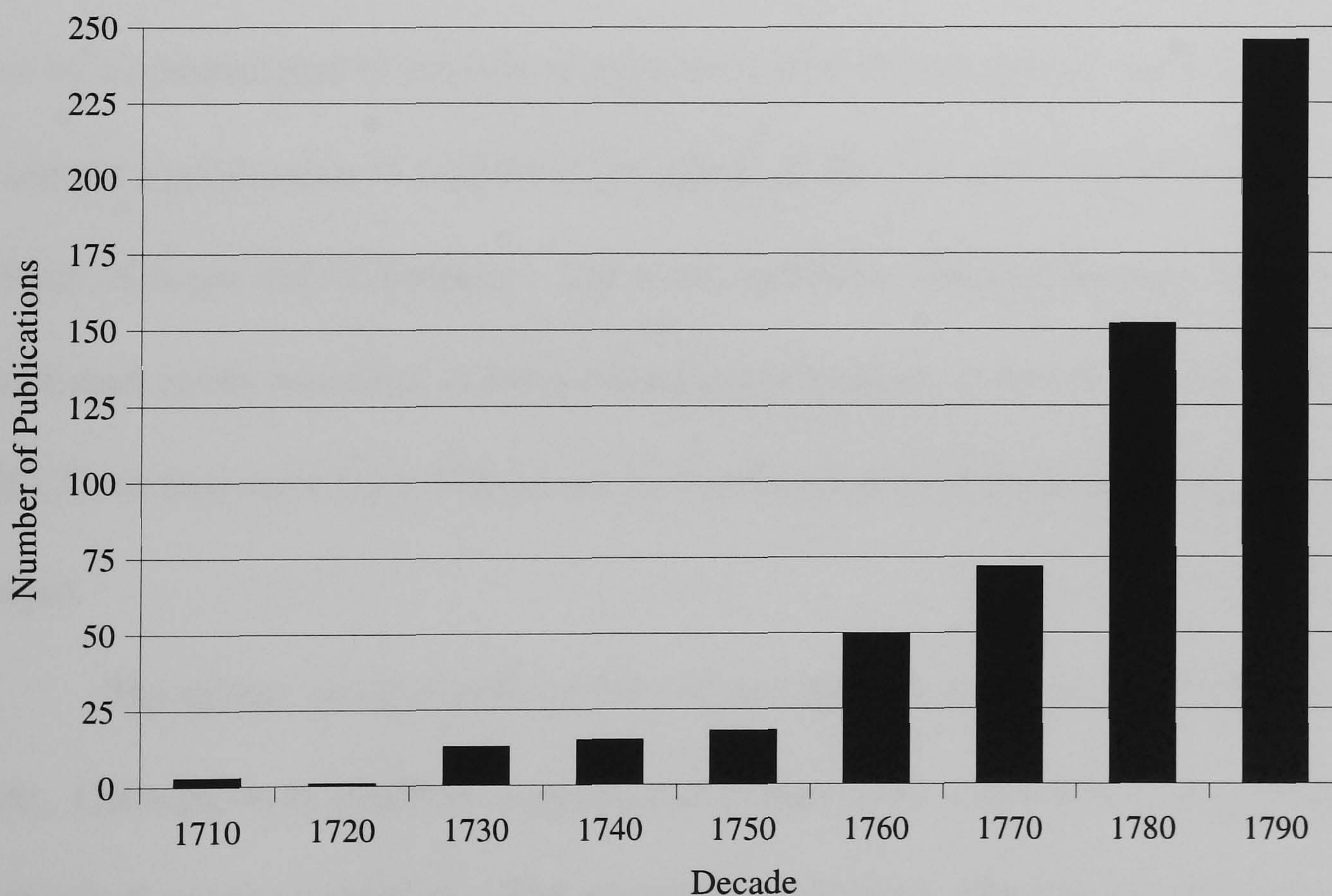


Figure 2. Numbers of books published in Birmingham, 1700-1799

<sup>74</sup> Hill, *Bookmakers of Old Birmingham*, pp. 35-46.

The enormous rise in the level of printing activity in Birmingham during the eighteenth century can easily be seen in the number of books published during the decades of the century. From tiny beginnings in the first half of the century, publication numbers almost doubled each year in the last three decades of the century. The majority of authors who had books published in Birmingham published only one book in the town, nearly two hundred, almost a third of the total number of publications. Fifteen people had five or more books published, and there were five Bibles printed there during the century. By far the most prolific author was Joseph Priestley, who published sixty two books in Birmingham between the years of 1780 and 1799. No other individual had more than ten published. More surprising than the single-volume author, is the large number of single or low-volume printers – over thirty. There are a variety of reasons for this. Some, such as Matthew Unwin, were very early printers, who were innovators in the world of printing in Birmingham. Others are explained by single imprints brought out by a combination of printers or publishers who did not usually work together, for example a publication in support of the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts by E Piercy, E Jones and M Swinney. The music publisher Michael Broome has only three published books recorded, as his usual output is unlikely to feature highly in BLC or ECCO, or may have been filtered out by the decision to analyse only texts of over eight pages.

The printer in eighteenth-century Birmingham was not an impartial midwife to text. Contemporary evidence suggests that printers had a reputation for association with either radicalism or reaction. The reactionary pamphlet, *The Life and Adventures of Job Nott, Buckle-Maker*, portrays a craftsman's wife whose head is turned by radical ideas in

'a book from the Poison Shop'.<sup>75</sup> John Money surmises that this refers to the bookshop of William and James Belcher, who were Unitarians, and indeed John Belcher, a Birmingham bookseller was imprisoned for selling Paine's *Rights of Man* in 1793.<sup>76</sup> There is evidence in the ECCO and BLC data that, by the end of the eighteenth century, there was a level of segregation of authors and printers. The evidence from the analysed data suggest that E Piercy and James Belcher, in particular, were associated with the Anglican writers and the Dissenters respectively. Piercy, printer of the Job Nott pamphlets and the sermons and letters of the Rectors of Birmingham, published nothing by a Dissenting writer. From Belcher's press came a wide range of Dissenting literature: Unitarians, Baptists, Swedenborgians and literature from the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion. However, not all were partisan. Myles Swinney, for example, printed the Catholic Joseph Berington, the loyalist poet John Morfitt, the Evangelical Anglican David Simpson, as well Joseph Priestley. Thomas Pearson was similarly catholic in the output of his press.

The eighteenth century saw a widespread blossoming of regional presses. After the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695, which removed government powers to censor books before publication and ended the monopoly of the Stationers Company, there was great freedom to print.<sup>77</sup> Although there were government restrictions in the shape of the laws of blasphemy, obscenity and seditious libel, these were applied post-publication, and publishers were often willing to risk prosecution. There was also taxation on printed

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<sup>75</sup> Job Nott, *The Life and Adventures of Job Nott, Buckle Maker, of Birmingham; First Cousin to the celebrated Button Burnisher; and Author of . . .* (Birmingham, 1793), p. 8.

<sup>76</sup> John Money, *Experience and Identity. Birmingham and the West Midlands 1760-1800* (Manchester, 1977), p. 264 and p. 272, n. 49; Stuart Andrews, *Unitarian Radicalism. Political Rhetoric, 1770-1814* (Basingstoke, 2003), p. 153.

<sup>77</sup> John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination. English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago, 1997), pp. 131-2.



matter. However, there was no registration of printers until 1799.<sup>78</sup> John Brewer, looking at the provincial printers and publishers, found that they did not compete with the London press, rather that they produced 'insubstantial material of local interest' – sermons, songs, pamphlets, election material and town histories.<sup>79</sup>

Whilst a great deal of the material to emerge from the Birmingham presses during the eighteenth century could certainly come under those categories (although not election material, as Birmingham had no dedicated representation in the House of Commons), the presence of several prominent writers, particularly Lunar Society members, and the press of John Baskerville meant that a significant number of books of national, and even international, importance came from the Birmingham during the eighteenth century. William Withering's works were published in Birmingham, including *Botanical Arrangement of British Plants . . .* in 1787 to 1792 and the *Account of the Foxglove, and some of its medical uses* in 1785. Joseph Priestley's extensive publication rate in Birmingham has already been noted. Once he arrived in the town in 1780 he published much of his work there, although some continued to go through the London presses, particularly new editions of previous works. It is the location of Baskerville's press in Birmingham that provides an extraordinary presence to the book trade of the town. Baskerville, who was baptized in January 1706, settled in Birmingham in his early twenties and worked variously as a writing master and stone cutter before setting up in the Japanning business in 1738, after he inherited his father's estate.<sup>80</sup> In the preface to his edition of Milton's *Poetical Works* he explained that he had pursued his interest in the 'mechanic Art' of letter founding with 'steadiness and pleasure'.<sup>81</sup> It is clear that his

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<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>80</sup> William Bennett, *John Baskerville, The Birmingham Printer. His Press, Relations, and Friends* (Birmingham, 1937), pp. 22-32, 41.

<sup>81</sup> John Baskerville, 'Preface' to John Milton, *Poetical Works*, cited F E Pardoe, *John Baskerville of*

interest in printing and letter founding was in its aesthetic potential, rather than for any monetary gain. He went to extraordinary lengths to develop, not only the letters themselves, but paper and ink to complement his types. His interest was in printing 'books of *Consequence, of intrinsic merit, or established Reputation*' rather than a large volume of works.<sup>82</sup> However, the large number of textural inaccuracies suggest that for Baskerville the aesthetic of the book may have taken more of his attention than the content.<sup>83</sup> The look of the Baskerville texts is extraordinary in comparison to the output of other Birmingham printers. It is not simply the clarity and line of the type that is breathtaking, but the layout of the pages, especially when looked at side-by-side with printing done by his contemporaries.<sup>84</sup> Much of Baskerville's output fulfils his criteria of consequence, merit and reputation: Virgil, Milton, *The Book of Common Prayer*, Addison, Ariosto. However, he also printed classics of more a radical nature: Barclay's *Apology* and Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks*. He also printed some local works, including John Freeth's *Political Songster*. During his lifetime, Baskerville's innovations were more appreciated by continental printers than his British contemporaries; Baskerville was not part of the conventional printing world, not having served an apprenticeship, and his personal eccentricities were used against him.<sup>85</sup> However his reputation is now established as one of the great innovators in the history of British print.

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*Birmingham. Letter founder and Printer* (London, 1975), p. 61.

<sup>82</sup> Baskerville, 'Preface' to John Milton, *Poetical Works*, cited Pardoe, *John Baskerville*, p. 62.

<sup>83</sup> James Mosley, 'Baskerville, John (1706–1775)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/1624>, 13 June 2006].

<sup>84</sup> See Appendix 3 for examples of Baskerville's print.

<sup>85</sup> A spiteful biographical sketch of Baskerville by Mark Noble in his *Biographical History of England* (1806) cannot have helped his nineteenth-century reputation. Noble was born in Birmingham and an enthusiastic participant for the Established Church in a number of disputes with Birmingham Dissenters.

## Conclusion

In her introduction to *The Consumption of Culture*, Ann Bermingham has written about the 'cordon sanitaire drawn between high art and these other forms of art and entertainment [mass-produced commodities]' that began to be felt from the mid-eighteenth century, seen in the growing association of the word 'art' with the word 'culture'.<sup>86</sup> The world of high art, for example the Royal Academy, strove to dissociate the world of art from the world of commerce. Bermingham sees the contemporary dissociation of art from commerce, and hence the tenor of much historical writing on the subject, as stemming from this movement.<sup>87</sup> In the world of print culture and its consumption in Birmingham the strains of commercialism and aestheticism drawing apart the 'high' and 'low' arms of culture can be seen in two examples.

The trade of bookselling was becoming highly commercialised and moving away from being a business associated with production of text, towards one associated with consumption. The early booksellers of the eighteenth century in Birmingham were also printers, or paper warehousemen, or newspaper editors. During the century the specialist bookseller emerged, dealing in books for sale or for hire. By the end of the century Allin's Warehouse was a manifestation of the way that print culture, along with other forms of mass-produced art-objects were becoming part of the world of consumption.

John Baskerville provides an example of the aestheticising of cultural objects during the second half of the eighteenth-century. Not only did he self-consciously set himself up as a practitioner of a 'mechanic Art' and aim to produce beautiful editions of texts with high reputations, he also physically distanced himself from both the commercial print shops and the consumer world of booksellers. Although he had

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<sup>86</sup> Bermingham, 'Introduction', pp. 4-5.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5.

premises in the centre of Birmingham, where he carried on his japanning business and had warehouses, his print shop was attached to his own residence, Easy Hill. The art he produced there was not to be associated with either industrial processes, such as those that made his own fortune, or commercial consumerism and the novel-peddling booksellers.

In the geographical location of Birmingham's places of print culture, in the rise of the library and the bookseller, and in the development of Birmingham printing and publishing, we see that eighteenth-century Birmingham was an excellent example of the connection between 'consumption and . . . social and cultural forms'.<sup>88</sup> But, in contrast to John Brewer's assertion that commercial culture was a world of 'hedonism and sexual intrigue', Birmingham provides a model for a more serious mode of cultural consumption.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*

## Fashioning Goods and Self in the Industrial Town

A large part of the economic life of eighteenth-century Birmingham was based around the manufacture of metal goods, meaning that a significant portion of the Inquiring Sort - from major employers such as Matthew Boulton to small-scale manufacturers or journeymen - were concerned with the same. There was, therefore, an interaction of ideas and learning with Birmingham's manufacturing industry. The most prominent and well-known manifestation of this association is found in the Lunar Society, a group of a dozen industrialists, physicians, natural philosophers and theologians, which emerged during the 1770s.<sup>1</sup> They met monthly at each others' houses, enjoying a convivial dinner followed by discussion and experiments. They then travelled home by the light of the full moon. The core of their discussions, both in person and in their voluminous correspondence, was the subject of what is now called science, but to them was natural philosophy. Areas of interest ranged from plant biology to electro-chemistry, but their interests also covered subjects beyond natural philosophy, extending into theology, social experimentation, current affairs, their own family lives and beyond. The presence in the group of the industrialists Matthew Boulton, James Watt and Josiah Wedgwood, all of whom were concerned with using natural philosophy to improve their businesses, gave practical outlets for many of the applied aspects of the philosophical enquiries of the society. The dynamic interaction between what is now called theoretical and applied science in their experiments and manufacturing, was blurred and indistinct. Joel Mokyr's recent work, *The Gifts of Athena*, suggests that this type of interaction was a key

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<sup>1</sup> Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men. The Friends who made the Future* (London, 2002); Robert E Schofield, *The Lunar Society of Birmingham: a study of his life and work from 1733 to 1773* (Philadelphia, 1996).

ingredient in the development of the Industrial Revolution in Britain.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter I approach the interaction of ideas and learning with the manufacturing industry through the concept of the transformation of the self, suggesting that Mokyr's exclusion of 'the human mind and human society' from his thesis about the origins of the industrial revolution is flawed and limiting.<sup>3</sup> I first give an overview of the development of Birmingham Industry. Secondly, I look at an area of particular concern to commentators at the time and apposite to a study of the acquisition of occupational knowledge for industrial workers, the opportunities for workers to receive appropriate training. I then explore two specific aspects of the manufacturing industry in Birmingham which, in Mokyr's terms of reference, are excluded from the 'knowledge economy', but in which ideas and learning play important roles. I examine the ability of Birmingham manufacturers to market their goods, showing that it was a key aspect of industrial business practice, especially where manufacturers were making items that were part of the growing market for luxury goods. I also analyse the importance of fashion for the success or failure of Birmingham manufacturing firms. The areas of marketing and fashion are key elements in understanding the workings of Birmingham manufacturing, but are often given insufficient attention by those studying the subject.

### **The Origins of Birmingham's Industry**

The geographical position of Birmingham did not suggest a place that might become an important trading town: it was not served by any of the great salt ways, Roman roads, established trade routes or navigable rivers. Its industrial origins were as a mediaeval

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<sup>2</sup> Joel Mokyr, *The Gifts of Athena: Historical Origins of the Knowledge Economy* (Princeton and Oxford 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Mokyr, *The Gifts of Athena*, p. 3.

metalworking and local trading centre, and as a central hub for the surrounding areas. Conrad Gill's official history of early Birmingham, published in 1952, made extensive use of the little documentary evidence that exists for pre-eighteenth-century Birmingham and provides a valuable source for its mediaeval and early modern history.<sup>4</sup> He speculates that although Birmingham was not part of the national network of communications, it became a crucial nexus for the west-midland region.<sup>5</sup> The extremely variable agricultural and industrial conditions of the region meant that a complex network of trade and communication sprang up during the centuries to provide local exchange: salt from Worcestershire, iron from south Staffordshire, corn from the fertile areas and meat and wool from the pasture lands. Much of the traffic had to pass through Birmingham in order to cross the marshy lands around the river Rea, which ran from the north-east to the south-west, bisecting the region. Gill also speculates, from the numbers of fair and market charters and the increasing number of tax payers, that the lords of the manor were interested in trade and prepared to grant freedoms to ensure that it prospered.<sup>6</sup>

Up to the end of the seventeenth century Birmingham had been a steady market town with a history of metal working. In previous centuries it had been known as a town of 'smithes and cutlers'<sup>7</sup> divided between its lower, watery, industrial southern section and the northern part of the village consisting of handsome houses on the high ground.<sup>8</sup> John Leland in 1538 found Birmingham to be 'a good markett towne in the extreame parts of Warwicke-shire' with 'many smiths in the towne that use to make knives and all mannour

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<sup>4</sup> Conrad Gill, *History of Birmingham* (2 Vols, London, 1952).

<sup>5</sup> Gill, *History of Birmingham*, 1, pp. 18-19.

<sup>6</sup> Gill, *History of Birmingham*, 1, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> John Leland, 1538, cited J A Langford, *A Century of Birmingham Life: or a Chronicle of Local Events, From 1741 - 1841* (Birmingham 1868), p. xix.

<sup>8</sup> William Camden, *Britannia* (1588), cited Langford, *A Century of Birmingham Life*, p. xix.

of cutting tooles, and many loriners that make bittes, and a great many naylors. Soe that a great part of the towne is maintained by smithes'.<sup>9</sup> The next hundred years is sparsely documented.<sup>10</sup> Conrad Gill wrote that 'the daily occupations of the people were similar [to that of previous centuries], except that the woollen industry was declining and the manufacture of cutlery was increasing'.<sup>11</sup> These traditional occupations were leather, cloth and metalwork, especially iron.<sup>12</sup> Possible reasons given by Gill for the sudden growth of Birmingham in the late seventeenth century were the ready availability of coal from Staffordshire and Warwickshire, which was in increasing demand in manufacturing; the adaptability of Birmingham's metal workers to gun-making and brass manufacture; connections with London merchants who could find a market for Birmingham goods; increasing demand in the country for the sort of metal small goods produced in the town; and finally that there were flourishing industries in the vicinity, iron in the Black Country and the new glass works in Stourbridge.<sup>13</sup> The key factors in the growth of the seventeenth-century metal-working industries, which were the basis for much of Birmingham's eighteenth-century success, were water and fuel. Although the main sources of coal in the area were in the Black Country to the north and west of Birmingham, the need of the forges for water meant that they, together with smiths and nailers tended to move south to the Tame river, which was still sufficiently close to the coal supply.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, of the 202 forges mentioned in the 1683 hearth tax returns for Birmingham, 115 were in three streets, Digbeth, Edgebaston Street and Deritend. These

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<sup>9</sup> Leland, cited *ibid.*, p. xix.

<sup>10</sup> Gill, *History of Birmingham*, 1, p. 48; 'Economic and Social History: Industry and Trade, 1500-1880', W B Stephens (ed.), *A History of the County of Warwick: Volume 7: The City of Birmingham* (1964), p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Gill, *History of Birmingham*, 1, p. 48.

<sup>12</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'Industry and Trade', p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Gill, *History of Birmingham*, 1, pp. 58 and 60.

<sup>14</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'Industry and Trade', p. 3.



were situated in the southern, lower end of town, close to the river.<sup>15</sup> All of these factors contributed to Birmingham's later economic growth, indeed John Langton considers that Birmingham was already performing the economic functions of its nineteenth-century economy at the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>16</sup>

Birmingham's growth cannot simply be explained by the geographical convenience of the availability of iron ore, fuel and water; other areas had these advantages and did not expand in the way in which Birmingham did.<sup>17</sup> William Hutton – the first historian of Birmingham, moderate dissenter and public figure of the town, who settled there in 1750 – suggested that as Birmingham was not a Chartered town it was 'a town without a shackle'.<sup>18</sup> Its non-chartered status meant that it had neither guilds nor some of the constraints on religious freedom of the Clarendon Code (1661-1665). Although by the eighteenth century guilds were a declining force, in some places they still acted against newcomers or workers wishing to change their trade. Flexibility by Birmingham's workforce was crucial as the leather industry declined and the advantages of brass and copper over iron working became clear. However the presence of guilds did not prevent the rise of new industries in several other towns, for example pin-making in Gloucester or silk and clock manufacture in Coventry.<sup>19</sup> Birmingham, as an unincorporated town, was attractive to ministers forced to leave the Established Church by the Act of Uniformity of 1662. The Act, part of the Clarendon Code, made the *Book of Common Prayer* the basis of all religious services, leading to the ejection of ministers

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<sup>15</sup> Gill, *History of Birmingham*, 1, p. 57.

<sup>16</sup> John Langton, 'Urban growth and economic change: from the late seventeenth century to 1841', in Peter Clark (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain. Volume II, 1540-1840* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 489.

<sup>17</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'Industry and Trade', p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> William Hutton, *The Life of William Hutton, F.A.S.S.* . . . (London 1816), pp. 11, 24-41; William Hutton, *History of Birmingham* (3rd edn., Birmingham, 1795), p. 376.

<sup>19</sup> Gill, *History of Birmingham*, 1, pp. 59-60; Stephens (ed.), 'Industry and Trade', p. 3.

who refused to comply with the statute. The Five Mile Act, three years later, forbade those ejected ministers from coming within five miles of their former parish or any incorporated town. As a thriving town with a reputation for radicalism, outside the confines of the Five Mile Act, Birmingham was an obvious destination for ejected ministers, as well as members of Non-Conformist congregations looking for more congenial surroundings in which to live and worship. Birmingham was certainly home to many Non-Conformists during the late seventeenth century, including several ejected ministers, two Presbyterian congregations and one Meeting of the Society of Friends. However, other towns subject to the Five Mile Act, including Coventry, had large populations of Non-Conformists.<sup>20</sup> What seems to have marked Birmingham out from similar towns of the period was the combination of geography, existing industry, flexibility of workforce and the presence of dynamic individuals. The key factor may have been that during the last decades of the seventeenth century Birmingham had a reputation - partly gained as a result of its production of weaponry for the Parliamentary troops during the civil war and Prince Rupert's retaliatory attack- for both radicalism and industrial opportunity, making it an attractive option for Nonconformists, ejected ministers and those looking for economic opportunities.

### **Printed Knowledge: Gaining Skills through the Written Word**

Although industrial training, in the form of apprenticeship and training within the workplace, falls outside of the scope of this thesis, the desire of workers to learn new skills and ideas, and the opportunities they had to do so, must be considered in a study of ideas and learning in eighteenth-century Birmingham.<sup>21</sup> This section will concentrate on

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<sup>20</sup> Gill, *History of Birmingham*, 1, pp. 59-60.

<sup>21</sup> See 'Introduction', p. 15, for my distinction between apprenticeship and training done of the worker's

the importance of the printed word for the transmission of skills and knowledge. Joel Mokyr writes that, simultaneously with the Industrial Revolution, there was a revolution in information technology. He describes this as a process by which 'a great deal of knowledge that previously was tacit and oral was codified and described in scientific and technical writings and drawing'.<sup>22</sup> However, he considers that even for most of the nineteenth century personal contact was the most important manner of conveying new knowledge, printed texts being 'complements to rather than substitutes for' this type of transmission.<sup>23</sup> It is clear, however, that in late eighteenth-century Birmingham many writers of scientific and technical tracts aimed at industrial manufacturers were explicitly putting the transmission of their own knowledge at a step above methods of personal contact.

The base on which most supplementary training from printed sources was built was industrial apprenticeship. The majority of indentures binding master and apprentice simply stated that the apprentice should be taught the master's 'art and mystery'.<sup>24</sup> Joan Lane, in her study of apprenticeship in England, found a few exceptional trades where it was the explicit responsibility of the master to provide the apprentices with specific training, and occasional indentures that mention the master's obligation to teach the apprentice to read or write.<sup>25</sup> However, the majority of apprentices were taken on with no level of education assumed before they took up the apprenticeship and none specified for their period of indenture. In particular, mathematical skill was hardly ever specified in indentures.<sup>26</sup> Lane found that apprentice education could 'comprise any or all of the skills

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own volition.

<sup>22</sup> Mokyr, *Gifts of Athena*, p. 56.

<sup>23</sup> Mokyr, *Gifts of Athena*, p. 57.

<sup>24</sup> Joan Lane, *Apprenticeship in England, 1600-1914* (London, 1996), p. 65.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 67 and 71, for example, foreign language training for apprentice merchants was part of the master's obligation.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 71.

of reading, writing, counting and craft instruction, as well as religious and social training'.<sup>27</sup> Many apprentices may have found aspects of their training lacking, particularly in formal skills such as drawing or mathematics, and sought out alternative sources of instruction in skills to help them to take up the opportunities Birmingham could offer to skilled craftsmen.

One of the key areas for industrial training in eighteenth-century Birmingham was that of design. Anne Puetz, in a paper for the *Journal of Design History*, found that there were general calls for improvement in design during the mid-eighteenth century. Although the foundation of the Society of Arts in 1754 aimed to meet the need for workers skilled in drawing, there was still felt to be inadequate training for those specifically concerned with designing for fine and applied arts.<sup>28</sup> This was not specifically envisioned for high-prestige trades, such as architecture or painting. In a plan submitted to the Academy of Arts in 1755 the architect Henry Cheere called for an academy to provide such training for 'architecture and all its Ornaments . . . Painting and Sculpture . . . Graving and Chasing . . . to the Subordinate Branches of Design . . . Plate and Cabinet work, Patterns of Silk, Jewelling . . . down to Toys and Trinkets'.<sup>29</sup> There was the additional problem for provincial manufacturers that most of the suitable training was available in the capital. A letter to *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* in 1754, outlined the need for a Birmingham based 'Academy or School . . . for teaching some Young Persons . . . in the Art of Drawing and Designing, and in some parts of Mathematical Learning'.<sup>30</sup> The author of the letter was concerned that the lack of design skill amongst Birmingham metal workers was hampering the growth of the industry of the town. In

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>28</sup> Anne Puetz, 'Design Instruction for Artisans in Eighteenth-Century Britain', *Journal of Design History*, 12, 3 (1999), p. 217.

<sup>29</sup> Henry Cheere (1755), cited Puetz, 'Design Instruction', p. 219.

<sup>30</sup> *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, 19 January 1754.

1757 there was a Drawing School in the town operated by John Devoto, but his emphasis was on works of 'the most eminent Masters'.<sup>31</sup> This Devoto was probably the son of the painter John Devoto and, as he also taught several musical instruments, it seems likely that his school was aimed at improving the offspring of the middling sort of the town, rather than at improving the skills of its craftsmen.<sup>32</sup>

For workers in large manufactories, design training was provided by the employer. The exemplary case in Birmingham was Matthew Boulton's Soho Works. Boulton (1728-1809) inherited his father's steel-toy works in 1759, in which he had been closely involved since leaving school. He was also a key player in the Lunar Society and throughout his life was an eager experimenter and innovator in both the toy and engine sides of his business.<sup>33</sup> His two marriages brought him a fortune sufficient to allow extensive expansion of both the physical space of his manufactory, and also its scope and ambition. His initial partnership with John Fothergill for toy and silver making, and subsequent one with James Watt to manufacture steam engines, facilitated this expansion. Boulton purchased the land at Soho just north of Birmingham in 1761.<sup>34</sup> It provided him with space on which to build the Soho manufactory and Soho House (a grand residence used by various members of Boulton's family and his business partners), the potential for creating a water mill, land for building workers housing and a position advantageously close to Birmingham. The manufacturing output there included both the

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<sup>31</sup> *Aris's*, 29 August 1757, cited Langford, *A Century of Birmingham Life*, pp. 83-4.

<sup>32</sup> Christopher Baugh conjectures that a John Devoto with a drawing school in Norwich was probably the son of the scene painter, since Devoto's advertisement in Birmingham is after 1752 it seems likely that this was indeed also the son. 'Devoto, John (fl. 1708-1752)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/64330>, 2 Dec 2005].

<sup>33</sup> Jennifer Tann, 'Boulton, Matthew (1728-1809)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004); online edn, Oct 2005 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/2983>, 2 Feb 2006]; Eric Delieb and Michael Roberts, *The Great Silver Manufactory. Matthew Boulton and the Birmingham Silversmiths 1760-1790* (London, 1971); Uglow *The Lunar Men*.

<sup>34</sup> Uglow, *The Lunar Men*, pp. 65-9.

silverwear and ormolu elements of Boulton's work, done in partnership with John Fothergill, and later the steam engines produced with James Watt. Boulton was particularly exercised by the problem of obtaining skilled workers for both arms of his business and trained up 'country lads . . . [who] are taught to draw', as well as poaching workers from other metal working centres, although he apparently had scruples about poaching from fellow Birmingham manufacturers.<sup>35</sup> Boulton had the resources to provide high quality training for his workers - he had a drawing and modelling school, training those who designed and decorated his silverware, and his engineers trained others who worked on the installing and working of the engines. Those trained at Soho were sought all over the world.<sup>36</sup> However, it was probably exceptional in the level of training given to its apprentices and workers, most of those in smaller or less dynamic establishments must have had to look for sources of information outside their place of work to expand their knowledge and skill.

There were opportunities, at least during the second-half of the eighteenth century, for adults in Birmingham to learn new skills and be exposed to new ideas that might be of use to them in their work lives. At the basic level they could visit one of the school-masters of the town in the evenings and learn basic skills: in 1747 *Aris's* advertised the opportunity to 'retrieve a neglected Education' with Benjamin Simpson, who kept his school open in the evening to allow adults to learn reading, writing, arithmetic and geography.<sup>37</sup> However, for the more complex and specialised operations,

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<sup>35</sup> Matthew Boulton to James Adam, cited Delieb and Roberts, *The Great Silver Manufactory*, p. 39. On poaching workers, *ibid*, p. 38 – 9; Birmingham City Archive, Matthew Boulton Papers, Letter Book D, 1768 – 1773, no. 136 Letter to John Taylor 23 Jan 1769.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph Hill and William Midgley, *The History of the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists* (Birmingham, 1928), p. 2; Jennifer Tann, *The Selected Papers of Boulton & Watt. Volume I, The Engine Partnership 1775-1825* (London and Cambridge, Mass, 1981), pp. 215-16; Sidney Pollard, *The Genesis of Modern Management* (London, 1968), cited Mokyr *Gifts of Athena*, p. 148.

<sup>37</sup> *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, 27 April 1747.

a more advanced level of knowledge and skill was needed. Birmingham manufacturers were hampered in obtaining this knowledge of applied mathematics by their own lack of basic skills and by the fact that many school-masters were insufficiently versed in appropriate applied mathematics.<sup>38</sup> However, for those with the basic ability to be able to take advantage of them there were many published tracts that promised to improve the skills of the adult learner.

Nationally, instruction books for trade skills were becoming widely available from the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>39</sup> Printed works were available to Birmingham manufacturers from at least the 1770s. Although schoolmasters advertised themselves as being able to help adults gain skills necessary for their businesses, this did not suit all who wished to learn. For those who needed more specialist help, who could not afford lessons, who were too busy, or even too embarrassed, there were publications that advertised themselves to those who needed applied mathematical or scientific skills or information. The other group of people who might have availed themselves of printed matter for training purposes were women. Women tended to be active in many areas of the household economy during the eighteenth century, including in manufacturing occupations.<sup>40</sup> During the early eighteenth century girls from the lowest strata of society were placed by parish authorities in a variety of professions, including those traditionally associated with men. However, during the course of the century their placements tended to become restricted to to more traditionally female-orientated work, and when girls were

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<sup>38</sup> C Bernecker, *The Birmingham Ready Calculator, shewing in Twenty Tables, the sums necessary, from one shilling to fifty pounds, to produce real profits . . .* (Birmingham, 1778), p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Puetz, 'Design Instruction', p. 220 and *passim*.

<sup>40</sup> Katrina Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation in England, 1700-1870* (London, 2000), p. 25; Deborah Valenze, *The First Industrial Woman* (New York and Oxford, 1995), p. 19; Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes. Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London, 1987), pp. 279, 304.

placed by their parents instead of the parish, typical female occupations also dominated.<sup>41</sup> Although increasingly restricted in their access to industrial training through apprenticeship, some women learnt the trade of their husbands or fathers through the 'watch and learn' method common to apprentices at that time.<sup>42</sup> The Birmingham trade directories list several widows carrying on trades not traditionally associated with women's work (such as millinery or mantua making): for example, Widow Ault was compass making, Widow Cupper traded as a cooper and Widow Greatrex worked as a druggist.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore women who did not describe themselves as widows were listed amongst the other traders, including Sarah Chandler, button maker; Sarah Palmer, thumb latch maker; and Ann Green, glazier.<sup>44</sup> Although many of these women were in the relatively light and possibly low skill trades of button making or other toy making, this was not universally the case.<sup>45</sup> Martha Garrison was working as a brazier, Widow Neeld was a carpenter's tool maker, and Sarah Florry was occupied as a factor, working in the public sphere of Birmingham trade life, visiting manufacturers and selling on their goods, possibly to metropolitan or international merchants.<sup>46</sup> The division between skill as accomplishment and skill as a social construct was not yet entrenched in Birmingham industrial life; women who had obtained skills in industrial trades were able to work without comment amongst the men of the town.<sup>47</sup> Printed works may have been a useful way for these women to obtain new skills and keep up with new ideas. Katrina

Honeyman, in *Women, Gender and Industrialisation in England 1700 – 1870*, writes that

<sup>41</sup> Valenze, *First Industrial Woman*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>42</sup> Lane, *Apprenticeship in England*, pp. 75-6.

<sup>43</sup> *The Birmingham, Wolverhampton Walsall, Dudley, Bilston and Willenhall Directory; or, merchant and tradesman's useful companion . . .* (Birmingham, 1780), pp. 2, 13, 20.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 10, 36, 20.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*; G Hunter, *The distant traders guide and residents local directory; The new Birmingham directory, and gentleman and tradesman's compleat memorandum book* (? 1788).

<sup>46</sup> Hunter, *The distant traders guide and residents local directory*, p. 2; *The Birmingham, Wolverhampton . . .* p. 34 and p. 17.

<sup>47</sup> Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation in England*, p. 62.



women's choice of occupation was 'restricted by . . . the gendered distribution of rational and scientific knowledge'.<sup>48</sup> However, the publication of works such as *The Chemical Principles of the Metallic Arts* brought scientific knowledge, explicitly applied to manufacturing techniques, into the public sphere.<sup>49</sup> This gave manufacturers, including women, the opportunity to make use of information about the principles behind their crafts, and to make improvements in their practice accordingly.

One of the most common class of books offering the opportunity to learn skills appropriate for all manner of businesses, was those concerned with numbers. Although described by Bruce G Carruthers and Wendy Nelson Espeland as 'not a subject that quickens the pulse', skills such as double-entry bookkeeping were crucial to the successful running of many manufacturing concerns.<sup>50</sup> There was a need amongst manufacturers for all kinds of published information about numerical calculations, providing help with improving their skills and making calculations necessary for a range of common situations, for example offering discounts, working out interest rates or gauging casks. These manufacturers might be working on a small scale; the *Trader's Ready Assistant* explicitly stated in the first paragraph of the 'Preface' that the tables of calculations went down to one farthing and the *Birmingham Ready Calculator* calculated discounts down to two and a half percent.<sup>51</sup> *The Birmingham Ready Calculator* was aimed at those who wanted to offer a discount to buyers. Its author, C Bernecker, makes it clear in his preface that there were existing methods of calculating discounts and

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<sup>48</sup> Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation in England*, p. 25.

<sup>49</sup> W Richardson, *The Chemical Principles of the Metallic Arts; with an account of the principal diseases incident to the different artificers* . . . (Birmingham, 1790).

<sup>50</sup> Bruce G. Carruthers and Wendy Nelson Espeland, 'Accounting for Rationality: Double-Entry Bookkeeping and the Rhetoric of Economic Rationality', *The American Journal of Sociology*, 97, 1 (1991), p. 31.

<sup>51</sup> *The Trader's Ready Assistant; or, Accomptant's Sure Guide, in buying and selling all sorts of commodities*, (Birmingham, 1792), p. 3; Bernecker, *The Birmingham Ready Calculator*, title page.

profits, but that the methods used were laborious and inaccurate processes, and those using them hampered by ignorance of the basic principles behind the calculations.<sup>52</sup> People were learning these methods from those who used them, and the inferior methods were therefore perpetuated. Manufacturers either made costly mistakes or had to buy in expertise: the fluctuating cost of goods (and presumably raw materials and labour) meant that these calculations could not simply be done once, but that considerations of profit and discount had to be considered on an ongoing basis.

The *Calculators and Assistants* promised, not only better methods for manipulating figures, but ways of enabling manufacturers to transform themselves with efficiency and correct systems. Carruthers and Espeland argue that the spread of double-entry bookkeeping had 'cognitive consequences', that in making a rational and rationalising account of a business, the businessman would see his transactions in a different light.<sup>53</sup> From the earliest texts on double-entry bookkeeping in fifteenth-century Italy, claims had been made about the transformative power of the system, and Carruthers and Espeland suggest that, particularly in eighteenth-century England, there could be a 'transformation of self wrought by double-entry bookkeeping'.<sup>54</sup> Although they are, in the main, discussing large or complex businesses, the idea of transformation through rational accounting and calculation is also applicable to modest Birmingham manufacturers. In wider contexts than bookkeeping, by purchasing a printed guide from an expert, the manufacturer was not only gaining access to a method of making calculations which claimed to be more rational, but was moving away from processes that were 'tedious and laborious' or riddled with 'palpable errors, glaring absurdities' and

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<sup>52</sup> Bernecker, *The Birmingham Ready Calculator*, p. 2.

<sup>53</sup> Carruthers and Espeland, 'Accounting for Rationality', p. 36.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 36-7, 42.

from the perpetuation of such methods by teachers ignorant of more appropriate methods.<sup>55</sup> It was not only with techniques of calculation that these books promised transformation of the manufacturer as well as his business. *The Trader's Ready Assistant*, in addition to calculations and mensuration, provided knowledge about the forms and convention of business matters. It had examples of receipts, promissory notes, inland and foreign bills of exchange and the duties on them all of which could be copied and adapted by a manufacturer entering new areas of business, such as exporting goods or receiving rent.<sup>56</sup> In a town of many small and medium masters, many of whom had risen above the experiences of their parents or apprentice-masters, gaining skills such as making accurate measurements, or obtaining information about discounts and profits or bills of exchange was crucial to the successful operation of their businesses. This allowed them to not only run their businesses in a more efficient manner, but to feel confident in themselves as rational, correctly operating manufacturers.

### **The Marketing of Birmingham Goods**

Crucial to the success of the economy of Birmingham was the use made by its manufacturers, factors and retailers of knowledge about the market for goods created there. Knowledge of marketing is one of the 'gray areas' conceded by Joel Mokyr to be part of the 'knowledge about social facts and phenomena', which he in general does not consider to be part of the useful knowledge that drove the Industrial Revolution, yet still 'might be considered part of this definition [that is, of useful knowledge]'.<sup>57</sup> Yet far from being a 'gray area', an examination of the marketing methods and materials of eighteenth-

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<sup>55</sup> Bernecker, *The Birmingham Ready Calculator*, Preface, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> *The Trader's Ready Assistant*, pp. 9-11.

<sup>57</sup> Mokyr, *Gifts of Athena*, pp. 2-3.

century Birmingham manufacturers shows that this aspect of the 'useful knowledge' of industrial manufacture was critical to their success. Roy Church and Andrew Godley in *The Emergence of Modern Marketing* consider the scope of the term 'marketing' to include 'selling . . . advertising, branding, pricing, promotion, market research, and product planning . . . [marketing] also encompasses increasingly complex distribution systems'.<sup>58</sup> Church and Godley, introducing their collection of essays, write that modern marketing methods were taken up and developed by businesses from the nineteenth century onwards.<sup>59</sup> Yet, as Eric Robinson showed in his 1963 article on Matthew Boulton's marketing of his 'toy' goods, extremely sophisticated marketing techniques – ranging from overseas distribution systems to the cultivation of members of the aristocracy – had been developed by Boulton during the 1770s.<sup>60</sup> I have used the diary of a medium-sized button manufacturer to show how crucial was marketing and awareness of self to the successful selling of goods.

The development of metal goods manufacturing into a diverse, adaptable and successful industry by the second half of the eighteenth century would not have been possible without the ability of the Birmingham manufacturers to take advantage of the growing domestic and international market for fashionable consumer goods.<sup>61</sup> For successful placing of goods in the market place, specialised knowledge was crucial. Many Birmingham manufacturers relied on factors (middlemen or wholesalers) to distribute their goods to the capital, the regions and European and American markets.

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<sup>58</sup> Roy Church and Andrew Godly, 'The Emergence of Modern Marketing: International Dimensions', in Roy Church and Andrew Godly (eds), *Emergence of Modern Marketing* (London and Portland, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> Church and Godly, 'The Emergence of Modern Marketing', p. 1.

<sup>60</sup> E Robinson, 'Eighteenth-Century Commerce and Fashion: Matthew Boulton's Marketing Techniques', *Economic History Review*, 16, 1 (1963), pp. 39-60.

<sup>61</sup> For the eighteenth-century luxury goods market see Maxine Berg (ed.), *Markets and Manufacture in Early Industrial Europe*, (London, 1991); John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London, 1991); Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (eds), *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century* (Basingstoke and New York, 2003).

The numbers of factors were growing: a 1777 directory lists 85, one from 1815 has 175.<sup>62</sup>

Although Maxine Berg, looking at 'Markets, Trade and European Manufacture', considered that in general provincial manufacturers sent their goods to London factors, from whence they were either sold in the capital or sent out to the regions for the provincial markets, there is evidence that Birmingham manufacturers had a more sophisticated relationship with the factors and retailers.<sup>63</sup> The poor communication system between Birmingham and the rest of England meant that the most profitable goods for exporting around the country or abroad were small, relatively high value per weight items, such as buttons and buckles. These could be transported by an individual with a horse or sent in high volume by the post. Without an easy and established trade route with London, factors and manufacturers took Birmingham goods around the country: in 1720 a local ironmonger distributed his nails and other portable iron goods to East Anglia and the East Midlands and in the 1780s Julius Hardy and his brother were making trips to London and around the country selling their buttons.<sup>64</sup>

The experiences of Julius Hardy in selling his goods shows ways in which knowledge and information were crucial for conducting a successful business. Hardy was a medium-sized button manufacturer whose business with his brother, Joseph, was located in the Bull Ring area of Birmingham.<sup>65</sup> Hardy was a Methodist, and his diary is for the most part a record of his religious life. However some of the less ordinary aspects of his business life intrude into his religious narrative. Hardy, who was in his mid-twenties at the time he wrote his diary, made trips to London to market his goods to

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<sup>62</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'Industry and Trade', p. 32.

<sup>63</sup> Maxine Berg, 'Markets, Trade and European Manufacture', in Berg (ed.) *Markets and Manufacturing*, p. 21.

<sup>64</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'Industry and Trade', pp. 11-12; Birmingham City Archive, Julius Hardy, 'Journal', MS218/1 or MS839/53.

<sup>65</sup> Hardy, 'Journal', the diary spans the years 1789 to 1793.

London businesses. It is not clear to whom he was selling his buttons, whether to factors, showrooms or exporters, but he was aware that in order to successfully sell his goods he must do more than simply present them to the relevant person. The diary records his discontent at the difficulties of selling in London, and also his thoughts on why this was so and possible remedies. He found that he was hindered in marketing his buttons by a knowledge-gap; he was not known to those to whom he was selling. Hardy was well aware that knowledge of the person whose goods you are buying brought tangible advantage to the seller. On a trip in March 1789 he wrote that 'I met with good success, considering . . . that I was in great measure a stranger to those who favoured me with orders'.<sup>66</sup> During a trip later the same year Hardy was again making insufficient progress in selling his buttons. This time it was knowledge of his own character that he felt was the key to doing successful business in London. To be 'timid, bashful or backward' would not do, there was an 'absolute necessity of one's being bold and properly forward'. Hardy was explicit that knowledge of his own character had helped him in marketing his buttons: 'I found myself unusually inclined to pursue the dictates of my own reason in this particular [knowledge of the necessary character traits for successful selling]; whereby I believe I procured some orders which probably otherwise I might not have done'.<sup>67</sup>

Hardy's realisation was revelatory: he must use his reason to discern and alter traits in his own character in order to be more successful as a button manufacturer. To prosecute his business successfully he must not only manufacture his buttons; he must be able to sell them. To sell his buttons he must examine his own character and assess its suitability for the role it must perform. Finally, he may have to, if necessary, alter his

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<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*, 2 March 1789.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, 22 October 1789.

character so that that he might present to the world a public persona best suited to the purpose of selling buttons. Just as the manufacturing process could be tweaked to improve production, so the character of the manufacturer could be altered in the interests of the success of the business. The revelation of the centrality of the self in the process of marketing shows that Mokyr's distinction, between knowledge of natural phenomena and of social facts and phenomena, is not only unhelpful, but makes an artificial differentiation between aspects of the development of manufacturing industries which should both be of concern to the historian.<sup>68</sup> Marketing, Mokyr concedes as a 'gray area', possibly deserving of a place in the pantheon of 'useful knowledge'. However, his explicit exclusion of the human mind from the natural phenomena from which useful knowledge may be gained, is to make a distinction that is unhelpful in examining the course of the industrial revolution and the knowledge economy. In addition, its rejection of the study of the self leaves aside an area of business practice that was becoming a more widely considered aspect of running a successful manufacturing concern in the late eighteenth century. From Boulton's eagerness to influence the minds of the buying public by taking time and money to create the optimum public image of his goods, to Hardy's attempts to present an altered self to the merchants of the metropolis, knowledge of the human mind was an important element of the 'useful knowledge' required by industrial manufacturers in eighteenth-century Birmingham.

### **Fashion: a Fickle Mistress**

Although Mokyr concedes that some areas of his category of 'knowledge about social facts and phenomena' may be considered as part of 'useful knowledge' in relation to

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<sup>68</sup> Mokyr, *Gifts of Athena*, p. 3.

economic growth, he ignores an area of knowledge which was fundamental to the success of a large proportion of Birmingham manufacturers, that of fashion. The growth of the Birmingham luxury-goods manufacturing industry was closely bound up with the growing influence of fashion on purchases made by people across the social spectrum. From the early decades of the eighteenth century, international trade stimulated demand of the middle classes for fashionable goods and had particular influence on the cotton industry and the small metal trades.<sup>69</sup> It was not only the appearance of goods from overseas that stimulated an interest in fashion amongst many sections of British society: periodicals of all kinds, from the *Lady's Magazine* to local papers, such as *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, brought information about what was being worn and used by *le beau monde* of London and Paris.<sup>70</sup> Beverly Lemire, in her book *Fashion's Favourite*, charting links between fashion and the cotton trade in Britain, summed up the importance of fashion to British society thus

The exigencies of fashion were now [by the close of the eighteenth century] woven into the fibre of British society, and were institutionalized in periodicals, the structure of industries great and small, and the prevailing patterns of trade. Fashion and consumerism were inextricably linked to the future prosperity of the nation.<sup>71</sup>

The idea of fashion as a distinct influence on the workings of British manufacturing industry in the eighteenth century has recently become subsumed into work on luxury and consumerism during that period. It has shown how pervasive throughout society was the idea of being a fashionable consumer, through the purchase of objects for decorating

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<sup>69</sup> Berg, 'Markets, Trade and European Manufacture', p. 13; Beverly Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite. The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1660-1800* (Oxford, 1991).

<sup>70</sup> E Robinson, 'Matthew Boulton and Josiah Wedgwood. Apostles of Fashion', *Business History*, 28, 3 (1986), p. 100.

<sup>71</sup> Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite*, p. 200.



the person or home. The idea of fashion and fashionable consumption is closely tied with ideas about luxury, yet it differs from the idea of luxury in that, concomitant with the purchasing of goods in order to give the outward impression of luxurious living, is the ever changing nature of the fashionable ideal. Christopher Breward, making the case for the need for a deeper and more complex understanding of the history of the fashion industry, asked the historian of fashion to go beyond considering the role of the designer and take into account the importance of manufacturing and its technologies, together with changes in culture and society.<sup>72</sup> And surely, the converse is also true. For a proper understanding of certain areas of manufacturing industry, an understanding of fashion is crucial.

From the end of the seventeenth century, the coming of the London Season each winter heralded a wave of consumption of luxury items, from Spitalfields silks to Birmingham buckles.<sup>73</sup> The idea of change and novelty in consumer goods was closely bound up with the annual dawning of the new Season. However, awareness of the cycle of fashionable consumption was certainly not limited to London society. In July 1754 *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* published the poem 'A-la mode, 1754' which declared

The Dress in the year fifty-three that was worn,

Is laid in the Grave, and new Fashions are born. . .<sup>74</sup>

The poet recognised that it was not simply the clothes of the fashionable that must change, but that a change in behaviour was also necessary; the whole person must be recast in the new fashion - 'let your Talk, like your Dress, be fantastic and odd'.<sup>75</sup> Here, thirty years before Hardy's realisation that his persona could be changed to achieve

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<sup>72</sup> Christopher Breward, *Fashion* (Oxford, 2003), p. 21.

<sup>73</sup> Robinson 'Matthew Boulton and Josiah Wedgwood', p. 104.

<sup>74</sup> 'A-la mode, 1754', *Aris's*, 27 July 1754, in Langford, *A Century of Birmingham Life*, p. 90.

<sup>75</sup> 'A-la mode, 1754', in Langford, *A Century of Birmingham Life*, p. 90.

business success, was the idea that the totality of one's public image could, and should, be adapted to the latest fashions. It was not enough to change the outer shell – to wear the latest dress, or even wear the latest hair style – the demands of fashion went further than that. Fashion abhors a fake, therefore the follower of fashion must embrace the change to such an extent that their very person was altered. 'Your Talk' – the public articulation of your thoughts and opinions – must change in order to conform to that which was *a la mode*. Michael Mascuch in *Origins of the Individualist Self* writes of the centrality of the idea of self as storyteller, the author who 'creates and acts out his life', in the conception of the individualist self.<sup>76</sup> Here, the idea is taken one step further, the self not only has the power to decisively act out its own life, but can decide to alter that very self.

Of course, as 'A-la mode, 1754' opens with the burial of the old 'Dress' of 1753, there is throughout the poem a strong implication that in 1755 the entire transformation will have to be undertaken again. Although Hardy's transformation comes of a similar belief – that the individual has power over their own person, both external and internal – the relationship between fashion, the individual and manufacturing industries is a more complex one. Hardy recognised a problem, devised a solution and attempted to carry it out. The ever-changing nature of fashion meant that individuals and manufacturers could influence fashion, yet also be at its behest. Whole sectors of industries could thrive or fall on the basis of their understanding of the complex changes in fashionable ideas.

In the textile industry, Anne Puetz found that craftsmen needed the ability to incorporate fashionable design into their goods in order to meet the need for novelty.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Michael Mascuch, *Origins of the Individualist Self. Autobiography and Self-Identity in England, 1591-1791* (Cambridge, 1997).

<sup>77</sup> Puetz, 'Design Instruction', p. 218.

Likewise, important sectors of the manufacturing industry in Birmingham were dependent on the ability of the designers and craftsmen to cope with three mutable aspects of the provision of consumer goods. They had to provide novelty, they had to be on top of the superficial changes demanded by the fashionable world to delineate one season's fashion from the next, and they had to be able to move with the major shifts in taste – such as the influence of Etruscan art in creating a fashion for simple neo-classical lines. Birmingham's toy industry emerged from the ability of its metal workers to manufacture goods according to market demand, and throughout the eighteenth century those workshops produced fashionable items, ranging from small, easily affordable objects to large items of luxury silverwear. Although the lack of a guild system in Birmingham is not a wholly satisfactory argument for Birmingham's industrial success during the eighteenth century, its absence did mean that the Birmingham craftsmen could be as flexible as they were able. In addition, the relatively straightforward nature of much of the work carried out by Birmingham craftsmen meant that they were easily able to transfer both skills and tools to new products; complex machinery finely tailored to one process could easily stand redundant if the product produced fell from popular favour.<sup>78</sup> Changes in demand could be met by changes in production without official difficulty or highly specialised equipment lying idle. However, as the devastating impact wrought by the collapse in the buckle market shows, fashion could be damaging as well as beneficial to Birmingham manufacturers.

Whilst it seems likely that the figure of twenty thousand individuals involved with buckle making mentioned in the 1791 petition to the Prince of Wales was an exaggeration, buckles were an important sector of the toy industry.<sup>79</sup> They were made by

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<sup>78</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'Industry and Trade', p. 20.

<sup>79</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'Industry and Trade', p. 20; *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, December 26 1791, cited

a wide range of manufacturers: the Soho works was involved in buckle making (indeed Matthew Boulton's father's works on which Boulton built his fortune was a buckle manufactory) yet they were also made by single craftsmen who passed their goods to a factor.<sup>80</sup> The buckles varied enormously from cheap steel items costing a few pence, to those made with precious metal and jewels, which could cost in excess of fifty pounds, indeed much of the early work of the assay office was concerned with stamping buckles from Soho.<sup>81</sup> It was a source of local pride that the buckle trade was both modern and capable of fulfilling the demands of fashion. John Freeth (1731-1808), owner of an establishment that was variously tavern or coffee shop, and he a poet and balladeer, a radical in religion and politics, was a strong supporter of Birmingham's manufacturing industry.<sup>82</sup> His 1782 song, *Tutania*, praised the buckle makers who could '... scheme // Plan, project, strike out, and carry // FASHION to the full extreme'.<sup>83</sup> Although Freeth's poem was in praise of the new metal compound tutania, he was clear that change was everything for the buckle makers, whether in shape, pattern or material. The Birmingham buckle makers were expert at moving with the quick annual changes demanded by fashionable society, but were powerless in the face of one of the more fundamental shifts in public taste.

The almost complete collapse of the buckle industry came about as a result of just such a change in fashion. Suddenly shoe-strings (actually ribbons) were in fashion and buckles were not. The *Tatler*, in 1797, dated this *volte face* to 1787.<sup>84</sup> It appears that it

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Langford, *A Century of Birmingham Life*, p. 374.

<sup>80</sup> Delieb and Roberts, *The Great Silver Manufactory*, p. 40; 'The Buckle-Maker and the Modern Beau', in *Blossoms of Genius; A Selection of Pieces in Verse, Ludicrous & Sentimental* (Huddersfield, c. 1800), pp. 64-6.

<sup>81</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'Industry and Trade', p. 20.

<sup>82</sup> John Horden, *John Freeth (1731-1801). Political Ballad-writer and Innkeeper* (Oxford, 1993).

<sup>83</sup> 'Tutania' from John Free[th], *Modern Songs on Various Subjects: Adapted to Common Tunes* (Birmingham, 1782).

<sup>84</sup> *Tatler*, Issue No. 113, Dec 29 1797, p. 506, footnote.

took several years for the buckle makers in Birmingham to realise that this was not a brief drop off in demand, but an utter collapse in interest in buckled shoes. By 1791 the Birmingham buckle makers were taking action. The manner of the buckle makers' appeal demonstrated the central role of fashionable opinion in the collapse of their livelihoods. Their industry was driven by fashion, and they appealed to one of the key figures in the upper echelons of British society – the Prince of Wales; they were introduced to the audience with the Prince by the dramatist and parliamentarian Richard Sheridan; their request was not for relief or favourable taxation, but that the Prince and his Court should wear buckles and not shoe-strings, a request that seems to have been looked on favourable by His Royal Highness.<sup>85</sup> It appeared to be a shrewd move. The dress of the Court had vast influence on the rest of fashionable society, and thence on the manufacturers who catered to it: when the Court went into mourning (a not infrequent event during the eighteenth century), there could be real hardship amongst those manufacturers dependent on the demands of fashionable society.<sup>86</sup> Three years after the appeal it was still felt that there were grounds for hope. Freeth's song *The Arts Reviv'd*, published in 1794, expressed the hope that as the 'PRINCELY BUCKLE' was shining 'Happy days may BRITONS see, // And from hence the Shoe-string be, // Banish'd ever more'.<sup>87</sup> However, by the time James Bisset published his *Poetic Survey Round Birmingham* in 1800, the buckle works were being visited as a curiosity to show visitors to the town the remnants of the industry that had been destroyed by fashion, and the buckle makers' fate had passed into the popular imagination as a noble, but hopeless

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<sup>85</sup> *Aris's*, December 26 1791, cited Langford, *A Century of Birmingham Life*, p. 374.

<sup>86</sup> Robinson, 'Matthew Boulton and Josiah Wedgwood', pp. 107-9, Boulton's button sales were affected by periods of Court mourning.

<sup>87</sup> 'The ARTS REVIV'D' in John Freeth, *Annual Political Songster, with a preface on the times* (Birmingham, 1794), p. 48.

cause.<sup>88</sup> Knowledge about fashion had been claimed for the buckle makers whilst times were good; it was part of their skill and a cornerstone of their trade. Jack Chape, in *The Buckle Maker and the Beau*, 'the buckle's gay fashion had form'd . . . with improvements its wearers had charm'd'.<sup>89</sup> Yet when the trade failed, fashion became a fickle mistress, and those who formed fashion and followed it were ridiculed and derided. Bisset called them 'the more enlightened EPHEMERALS of the animal kingdom', whilst the anonymous author of *The Buckle Maker and the Beau* was more damning. In contrast to Jack Chape's skill, his 'voice rough and stern', his wife and his children, the Beau is 'an unnatural monster', a 'coxcomb', a 'fop' and, in common with the description in *Aris's*, unmanly or even of uncertain sex because of his choice of foot fastening.<sup>90</sup>

Even after the collapse in the buckle market there was still some money to be made from buckles in Birmingham: James Smith registered a patent for a 'pinch-on' buckle from the Soho Manufactory in 1808.<sup>91</sup> But these were silver reeded buckles from the high-end of the buckle trade; the mass-produced, bulk product was no longer in demand. Those who continued to prosper after the buckle collapse were manufacturers who had diverse businesses, or who were able to move into newly fashionable areas. Matthew Boulton's interests were wide ranging enough that he moved on, yet still produced luxury buckles such as James Smith's reeded buckles. Another major manufacturer, Edward Thomason, moved into buttons, jewellery and medals.<sup>92</sup> Unlike

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<sup>88</sup> James Bisset, *A Poetical Survey Round Birmingham and Magnificent Directory* (Birmingham, 1800), p. 31; 'The Buckle-Maker and the Modern Beau', pp. 64-6. 'The Buckle-Maker' was a popular enough tale to feature in two 1800 poetry collections, *Blossoms of Genius* and *The Museum of Wit* (1800).

<sup>89</sup> 'The Buckle-Maker and the Modern Beau', pp. 64-6.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 64-6; *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, December 26 1791, cited Langford, *A Century of Birmingham Life*, p. 374.

<sup>91</sup> Delieb and Roberts, *The Great Silver Manufactory*, p. 128.

<sup>92</sup> Philip Attwood, 'Thomason, Sir Edward (bap. 1769, d. 1849)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/27249>, 25 Nov 2005]. Edward Thomason, like Matthew Boulton, had inherited his father's buckle manufacturing business and used it as a starting point for what was eventually a wide-ranging and successful metal-based manufacturing business.

poor Jack Chape who was forever waiting 'trade and tools both alike at a stand', they used their knowledge of fashion, the way tastes change and diversify, seeking out objects and information to help them to continue producing goods that would please fashionable consumers.

## **Conclusion**

Birmingham, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, was a town on the cusp of enormous change. Its geographical position and industrial economy, the social and religious composition of its inhabitants, and its own legal status, meant that it was in a position to move with, and even anticipate, the vast changes that were to soon alter the face of industrial Britain beyond all recognition. The access to new ideas, and the interest of the people in them, gave Birmingham industrialists – large and small – great advantages in the prosecution of their businesses. Masters and workers alike could receive training, not only from school teachers who recognised the needs of adults to continue learning, but from published sources bringing new ideas and methods through the printed medium to all who could read and afford to buy. The possibilities of new methods of marketing goods, of which Matthew Boulton was a master, meant that some Birmingham manufacturers became engaged in an examination of the mind. They hoped to understand their potential consumers in order to encourage them to buy more, but also to understand themselves and, if necessary, remake themselves in a more appropriate mould. The idea of recasting the self reached its apotheosis in the area of fashion. Birmingham manufacturers were adept at providing for two aspects of the market for fashionable goods: the provision of novelty and the ability to move with annual changes. However, more fundamental shifts in the world of fashion had a diverse impact on

Birmingham manufacturers. Whilst some, like Boulton or Edward Thomason could move on, following or influencing long-term shifts in taste, smaller manufacturers found it hard to adapt and many lost their livelihoods as a result of changes in fashion. Joel Mokyr's decision to exclude 'the human mind and human society' from his thesis on the *Historical Origins of the Knowledge Economy* is a deeply flawed one.<sup>93</sup> Amongst the Birmingham manufacturers, from Boulton's sophisticated marketing techniques to Julius Hardy's self-critical attempts to become a better button salesman, a knowledge of human mind and society were critical to the success of their enterprises.

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<sup>93</sup> Mokyr, *Gifts of Athena*, p. 3.



**'The serious and candid Professors of Christianity': Religious Life  
in Eighteenth-Century Birmingham.<sup>1</sup>**

Joseph Priestley spent five years as pastor at the Mill Hill Chapel in Leeds, between 1767 and 1772, when he went to work for the Earl of Shelburne. During that time he published many works, of natural philosophy – including *The History and Present State of Electricity, with Original Experiments*, on religion – including *An Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity*, and on politics – including *An Essay on the first Principles of Government*, also *An Essay on the Course of liberal Education for civil and active Life*.<sup>2</sup> The publication of Priestley's ideas brought little printed reaction from the inhabitants of Leeds: only one item concerning his writing was published there in the years in which he was at Mill Hill, and that was by a supporter. In 1780 when he went to Birmingham to be pastor at New Meeting, the situation was markedly different. His tenure there was marked by hostile publications, attacks from the pulpits and ended in three days of rioting during the summer of 1791. The basis of many attacks and much of the hostility was that Priestley had brought dangerous ideas into Birmingham society. There were several incidents that led to an increase of hostility over the decade leading up to the riots, and these will be explored in the next chapter, but here it is necessary to examine the religious situation in Birmingham during the eighteenth century with the view to answering several questions. Why was there such a hostile reaction to Priestley in a town with a reputation for religious Dissent and toleration of it? To what extent

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Priestley, *An Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity, on the following Subjects, ... By a Lover of the Gospel* (London, 1771).

<sup>2</sup> Priestley, *Serious and Candid Professors*; Joseph Priestley, *An Essay on the first Principles of Government . . .* (London, 1771); Joseph Priestley, *An Essay on the Course of liberal Education for civil and active Life* (London, 1768).

were there tensions in the town before the arrival of Priestley? And, most importantly, what was the role played by religious ideas in causing this situation? I will first give an account of the Established Church in Birmingham, and then look at a series of popular anti-radical pamphlets. There follows a section on Dissent in the town during the eighteenth century. Finally I look at Joseph Priestley and some reactions to him from the inhabitants of Birmingham.

### **The Established Church in Birmingham**

Whilst Birmingham's industry has been examined by various historians, including Eric Hopkins and Maxine Berg, and others, such as John Money, have written about political activities there, there has been little written on the structure of its religious life.<sup>3</sup> The popular story of eighteenth-century Birmingham as a haven for Dissent goes through periods of popularity, but arguments over its veracity tend to eclipse the story of the Established church in the town. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, whose *Family Fortunes* covers the period of the 1780s and 1790s, have almost nothing to say about the Anglican Church at that time: in their account it seems to be in a state of suspension, waiting for the Evangelical Revival.<sup>4</sup> To understand the extraordinarily vicious nature of the Church and King conflicts at the end of the century, and the key role of ideas in that conflict, it is crucial to gain a better understanding of the position of the Established Church in Birmingham.

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<sup>3</sup> Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham: The first manufacturing town in the world, 1760-1840* (London, 1989); Maxine Berg (ed.), *Markets and Manufacture in Early Industrial Europe* (London, 1991); John Money, 'Taverns, Coffee Houses and Clubs: Local Politics and Popular Articulatory in the Birmingham Area, in the Age of the American Revolution.', *The Historical Journal* 14, 1 (1971), pp. 15-47; and John Money, *Experience and Identity, Birmingham and the West Midlands 1760-1800* (Manchester, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes. Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London, 1987), p. 85.

In the seventeenth century, Birmingham was a place of generally Presbyterian leanings, sympathetic to Calvinism and to relatively non-hierarchical church government. There were two places of worship in Birmingham: St Martin's, the parish church, and the chapel of St John the Baptist at Deritend.<sup>5</sup> The parish of St Martin's dated from the thirteenth century, the incumbent being the Rector of Birmingham. The chapel of St John, Deritend, acquired its own elected chaplain as a result of periodic flooding, which prevented some of the parishioners of Aston from attending their own church during the winter. The heterodox opinion prevalent in Birmingham during the seventeenth century saw several Presbyterians incumbent at St Martin's. There were also Puritan lectureships in Birmingham and nearby King's Norton during the 1630s.<sup>6</sup> The town supported Parliament during the civil war, becoming a target of the Royalist forces as a result of its supply of swords to the Parliamentary troops.<sup>7</sup> The heterodox influence at St Martin's ended in 1660 when the incumbent, Samuel Wills, was deprived of the living. Thereafter the Rectors of Birmingham were resolutely orthodox.<sup>8</sup> However, this was not the end of Presbyterianism within the Established Church in Birmingham: Samuel Wills was able to continue preaching there as the chaplain of St John's, until he was eventually ejected under the Act of Uniformity in 1662.<sup>9</sup> His occupation of the elected chaplaincy demonstrates that there was support for Presbyterianism in Birmingham after the Restoration.

The historiography of the Established Church in the eighteenth century tends to

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<sup>5</sup> 'Religious History: Churches built before 1800', W B Stephens (ed.), *A History of the County of Warwick: Volume 7: The City of Birmingham* (1964), pp. 361-79. URL: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.asp?compid=22975>. Date accessed: 07 July 2006. The on-line *History of the County of Warwick* does not refer to individual pages but to chapter pages, therefore in subsequent references I refer to the page numbers of the relevant chapter.

<sup>6</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'Religious History: Churches built before 1800', pp. 361-79.

<sup>7</sup> Conrad Gill, *History of Birmingham* (2 vols, London, 1952), I, pp.52-3.

<sup>8</sup> Gill, *History of Birmingham*, I, pp. 54-6; 'Churches built before 1800'; William Hutton, *An History of Birmingham* (3rd edn, Birmingham, 1795), pp. 173-5.

<sup>9</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'Religious History: Churches built before 1800', pp. 361-79.

be sharply divided between those broadly critical of the Church at that time – seeing it as being weak and corrupt – and those who characterise it as being an accepted and central part of the establishment. The critics of the Church were dominant for the majority of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the result that the eighteenth-century Church had come to be seen as an institution weakened by impropriations and toleration, and in thrall to the machinations of the Whig state.<sup>10</sup> A new vision the Established Church was offered in J C D Clark's *English Society 1688-1832*, which was first published in 1985.<sup>11</sup> Clark told a revisionist version of the story of English society during the long eighteenth century, with the Church as an integral element of the English state, one which helped to maintain the *ancien regime* in England until the decade of the Reform Act.

Whilst there is much of Clark's thesis that falls away when studying eighteenth-century Birmingham – it was an industrial economy, it had relatively little aristocratic or gentry influence – his theory that the Established Church was a powerful and accepted force in society provides a useful tool with which to examine the Church in Birmingham. The Established Church tends to be quietly absent from histories of the eighteenth century town. The church building programme is mentioned, and the Church and King riot at the end of the century, but the presence of Dissent is so strong that it tends to dominate accounts.<sup>12</sup> However, the Established Church was an important part of the life of the town. The ancient parish of St Martin's had not been affected by impropriation, meaning the living was still a rectory with the right to its own tithe money, although the

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<sup>10</sup> Alan D Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England. Church Chapel and Social Change, 1740-1914* (London and New York, 1976), pp. 4-7; David Hempton, *Religion and Political Culture in Britain and Ireland. From the Glorious Revolution to the Decline of Empire* (Cambridge, 1996), pp.1-3.

<sup>11</sup> J C D Clark, *English Society 1688-1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice During the Ancien Regime* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> For example: A V Simcock, "'Reason's Dim Telescope': A Poetic Tirade against Joseph Priestley, F.R.S.", *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 49, 1 (1995), p. 79.

right of presentation was in lay hands, belonging to the Manor of Birmingham until 1720.<sup>13</sup> Although, in common with many other parts of the country, the parish system was straining to cope with population changes, attempts were made in Birmingham to ameliorate the situation.<sup>14</sup> It was clear from the beginning of the eighteenth century that a single parish was inadequate for the needs of the town. A petition to Parliament in 1708 requested a new parish as ‘. . . the Town aforesaid has but one church, not sufficient for a 5<sup>th</sup> part of the inhabitants’.<sup>15</sup> That year an Act was passed allowing a new parish to be created out of the parish of St Martin’s and enabling a rectory to be endowed.<sup>16</sup> The land was donated by Robert Phillips, and the building was consecrated in 1715, although not completed for another ten years. The rectory was sufficiently endowed to allow a curate to be employed, and this, together with the prestige of the situation of the church and its fine building, attracted a fairly high calibre of rector.

David Hempton listed the common problems faced by those ‘worker bees of the eighteenth-century Church’ who administered the necessary formularies of the Established Church: ‘a life of peripatetic poverty with few incentives, little supervision, an absence of like-minded company and an undisguised element of rural boredom’.<sup>17</sup> In comparison to clerics facing these challenges, the Birmingham clergy were fortunate. St Philip’s and St Martin’s were both rectories, which generally meant higher income for the incumbent compared with most stipendiary livings.<sup>18</sup> For the curates and lecturers there was the possibility of pluralism within the town, George Croft (1747-1809), for

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<sup>13</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'Religious History: Churches built before 1800', pp. 361-79 .

<sup>14</sup> Hempton, *Religion and Political Culture*, pp. 3-10.

<sup>15</sup> 1708 Petition, cited Christopher Feeney, 'St Philip's, an Eighteenth-Century Church and Parish' (Provost and Chapter of Birmingham Cathedral, 1984).

<sup>16</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'Religious History: Churches built before 1800', pp. 361-79.

<sup>17</sup> Hempton, *Religion and Political Culture*, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England*, p. 5.

example, held the lectureship of St Martin's and was chaplain of St Bartholomew's.<sup>19</sup>

There were also opportunities for other employments within Birmingham: Rann Kennedy (1772-1851) was a master at King Edward's School during the period of his curacy at St Paul's, before giving up teaching when he became incumbent there.<sup>20</sup>

Curates also had an incentive in the possibility of making progress in their careers within the group of churches in Birmingham. William Toy Young, for example, was curate to John Parsons at St Martin's before becoming chaplain at St Paul's.<sup>21</sup> The issue of rural boredom is obviously irrelevant in this case: there is evidence that the clergy found plenty of like-minded company in the town, for example in the loyalist dining club, The Bean Club, to which several clergymen belonged.<sup>22</sup>

By the 1780s and early 1790s, the years in which the clergy of the Established Church in Birmingham became engaged in public conflict with the Unitarians, there was a strong coterie of clergy who were openly hostile to radical, rational theology of the type vociferously promoted by Joseph Priestley. The Rector of Birmingham was Charles Curtis, supported by the lecturers John Clutton until 1789 and George Croft after 1791.<sup>23</sup> Clutton was extremely hostile to the Unitarians in Birmingham, and to Priestley in particular: he was actively involved in the Birmingham Library controversy and preached against Priestley in his farewell sermon.<sup>24</sup> George Croft came to Birmingham in 1791 with an established reputation as an opponent of Priestley. In 1788 he had published his

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<sup>19</sup> Peter B Nockles, 'Croft, George (1747-1809)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6715>, accessed 10 July 2006].

<sup>20</sup> T E Page, 'Kennedy, Rann (1772-1851)', rev. Megan A Stephan, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/15390>, accessed 10 July 2006].

<sup>21</sup> William Toy Young, *A Sermon preached in the parish Church of St. Martin, Birmingham, on Sunday November 15, 1778, occasioned by the death of the Rev. John Parsons*. . . (Birmingham, 1778); Stephens (ed.), 'Religious History: Churches built before 1800'.

<sup>22</sup> Money, *Experience and Identity*, pp. 99-102.

<sup>23</sup> John Clutton, *A Farewell Sermon, Preached in the Parish Church of St. Martin, Birmingham, On Sunday, December 13, 1789* (Birmingham, 1790); Nockles, 'Croft, George'.

<sup>24</sup> See the next chapter for the Library controversy.

*Cursory Observations chiefly respecting Dr. Priestley*, a tract designed as a straightforward rebuttal of Priestley's ideas for those who had neither 'leisure or inclination to pursue more elaborate tracts'.<sup>25</sup> Rector of St Philip's from 1787 was Spencer Madan (1758-1836). Madan was well connected in both the aristocracy and the clergy, his father was bishop of Peterborough and his mother Lady Charlotte Cornwallis, and he was a respected scholar.<sup>26</sup> His presence in Birmingham at the height of his career (during which time he was also chaplain in ordinary to the king) is a good indicator of the calibre of candidates attracted to Birmingham, and hence the prestige of the livings there. His campaign against radicalism in religion whilst he was in Birmingham took the form of a dispute, in published sermons and anonymous tracts, with Priestley over the campaign to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts. At the chapel of St Mary from 1790 was Edward Burn (1762-1837), theological writer and celebrated orator.<sup>27</sup> The publication of his *Letters to Dr Priestley on the Infallibility of the apostolic Testimony concerning the Person of Christ* in 1790 brought Priestley into public controversy in his own town for the first time, and Burn later published letters accusing Priestley of inciting mob violence because of his support for the French Revolution.

The clergy of the Established Church in Birmingham, in contrast to many of their contemporaries, were prosperous, well placed and confident, but they faced two serious problems in their parishes – lack of provision for the poor and the strong presence of Dissent. In general in eighteenth-century England, the parochial system was under most strain in urban industrial areas.<sup>28</sup> Queen Anne's Bounty had been explicitly aimed at

<sup>25</sup> George Croft, *Cursory observations chiefly respecting Dr. Priestley* (London, 1788), p. iii.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Hole, 'Madan, Spencer (1758-1836)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), [http://www.oxforddnb.com/new/article/17750, accessed 10 July 2006].

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Gordon, 'Burn, Edward (1762-1837)', rev. Philip Carter, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4040, accessed 10 July 2006].

<sup>28</sup> Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England*, p. 129; Michael Reed, 'The transformation of urban space 1700-1840', in Peter Clark (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain. Volume II*,

rural parishes, and there was no systematic reordering of the parochial system until the Ecclesiastical Commission in 1832.<sup>29</sup> However there was sufficient money, interest and influence in Birmingham to enable some piecemeal changes to be made. After the creation of the new parish of St Philip's, Birmingham was still desperately in need of more seats. Three chapels of ease to St Martin's were created during the century – St Bartholomew's in 1749, St Mary's in 1774 and St Paul's in 1777-9. In addition, St James the Less was founded in 1789 at Ashted, close to the east side of Birmingham. There was money and effort put into providing extra accommodation for the orthodox worshippers of Birmingham. However, these were, for the most part, churches frequented by the better sort of the town.<sup>30</sup> Between 1750 and 1800 the population of Birmingham rose by around fifty thousand, trebling from about 23,000 to about 73,000, and the few thousand seats added to the numbers available in Established Churches could have made no significant difference to the numbers going unministered to.<sup>31</sup> Methodism and other enthusiastic sects found willing congregations amongst the populous of Birmingham. When in September 1781, a travelling minister of the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion arrived to preach, the account he sent back to the Countess was of a town ready to receive their message.

Yesterday afternoon came to *Birmingham*, where I preached this morning, at half past eight o'clock, to an amazing concourse of people in the open air . . . There is truly an astonishing door opened for the faithful preaching of the gospel in this large and very populous town. The people's natural

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*1540-1840* (Cambridge, 2000), p.632.

<sup>29</sup> Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England*, p. 129.

<sup>30</sup> Bernard O'Connor, 'Places of Worship 1680-1860' (Birmingham, Digbeth & Deritend Local History Project, 1988), pp. 11-35.

<sup>31</sup> 'The Growth of the City', W B Stephens (ed.), *A History of the County of Warwick: Volume 7: The City of Birmingham* (1964), pp. 4-25. URL: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.asp?compid=22959&strquery=population>. Date accessed: 18 August 2006.



prejudices are so generally removed, that they appear ready to hear what any minister has to offer them in the name of the Lord . . . To see thousands and thousands of people stand like lambs in the open streets, and in the midst of drizzling rain, and dark clouded skies, is so glorious a sight, that, methinks, I could willingly live and die in so divine a service<sup>32</sup>

Later in the month, the same minister returned to Birmingham and wrote 'The thirst for the glorious gospel in this large town is really amazing . . . I do suppose that if there were *as many more places opened for the gospel, as there are already*, if there were found and acceptable preachers, they would be all filled'.<sup>33</sup> He preached to some of the largest gatherings of people he had ever encountered and found them 'solemn and attentive'.<sup>34</sup> Thus the clerics of the Established Church in Birmingham were facing the problem of thousands of the poor of the town being untouched by the ministrations of the Church whilst, as we shall see later in the chapter, there was a long-established tradition of Dissent in the town that was being re-energised by the growth of Dissenting groups – both rational and enthusiastic – that occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century.

### **Popular Anti-Radicalism: the Nott Pamphlets**

The number of publications by Established Churchmen in Birmingham, especially during the decades of crisis at the end of the century, means that it is possible to form an impression of opinions of the clergy on a variety of subjects. However, it is important not to assume that this can be extended to describe the opinion of either those in

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<sup>32</sup> *Extracts of the Journals of several Ministers of the Gospel; being an Account of their Labours in several parts of England, during the Summer 1781. In a Series of Letters to the Countess of Huntingdon.* (London, 1782), pp. 108-9.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p. 113, my italics.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 117.

congregations or those who were not regular church attenders, but would have considered themselves Anglicans. Donald Spaeth, in his study of the clergy and laity of the Salisbury diocese at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries, found that the clergy regarded themselves, and were regarded as, a separate class from the laity.<sup>35</sup> Even in the area of hostility to Nonconformity, Spaeth found that the parishioners were often opposed to the actions of the clergy in prosecuting their neighbours.<sup>36</sup> Some insight into the opinions of one sector of the Birmingham laity, the manufacturing workers, can be gained from an analysis of the Nott pamphlets which were published in Birmingham between 1790 and the mid-1850s. This series of pamphlets, whose true origins are extremely elusive, purport to be written by various members of a family of authentic Brummagen toy makers. I will also consider the pamphlets by Alexander Armstrong and Abel Sharp, which were written in direct opposition to the Nott pamphlets and also claim to be written by Birmingham working men. The appearance of the pamphlets was initially prompted by the conflict between the Established Church and Dissent in Birmingham, and it is this set of the pamphlets on which I will concentrate, excluding those from later in the 1790s which focus exclusively on the subject of the war with France.<sup>37</sup> I will make extensive use of their contents in

<sup>35</sup> Donald Spaeth, *The Church in an Age of Danger: Parsons and Parishoners 1660-1740* (Cambridge and New York, 2000), p. 256.

<sup>36</sup> Spaeth, *The Church in an Age of Danger*, pp. 255-6.

<sup>37</sup> John Nott's, *Very Familiar Letters, addressed to Dr Priestley, in Answer to his Familiar Letters, to the Inhabitants of Birmingham* (Birmingham 1790); Alexander Armstrong, *Very Familiar Letters addressed to Mr John Nott...*, by Alexander Armstrong, *Whip-maker* (Birmingham, 1790); Alexander Armstrong, *Very Familiar Letters Pt 2, addressed to Mr John Nott...*, by Alexander Armstrong, *Whip-maker, and Abel Sharp, Spur-maker* (Birmingham, 1790); John Not (sic), *A Letter of Advice, to the Rev. J. Edwards, with Remarks on his late Productions, by John Not, Button burnisher* (Birmingham, 1792); John Nott, *An Appeal to the Inhabitants of Birmingham, designed as an Answer to Job Nott, Buckle-maker, by his elder Brother John Nott, Button-maker, and first Cousin to John Nott, Button-burnisher* (Birmingham, 1792); Job Nott, *Job Nott's humble Advice, with a Postscript [Advice to sundry sorts of People]* (Birmingham, ?1792); Job Nott, *The Life and Adventures of Job Nott, Buckle-maker, of Birmingham, first Cousin to the celebrated Button burnisher, and Author of 'Advice to sundry sorts of Folks', as written by Himself* (Birmingham, 1793); Job Nott, *Job Notts humble Advice with a suitable Postscript [Advice to sundry sorts of People]* (5th edn, Birmingham, 1793); Job Nott, *Job Nott's Address to the Inhabitants of Birmingham* (Birmingham, ?1793); Job Nott, *More Advice*

later sections of this chapter on hostility to Joseph Priestley, and in the next chapter on conflict over ideas and learning. At this point I will examine the claims for authorship, look at the various voices within the pamphlets and speculate on the likely intentions of their authors and their likely audiences.

The run of pamphlets with which this thesis is concerned begins in 1790, with the first of the Nott pamphlets, John Nott's *Very Familiar Letters, addressed to Dr Priestley, in Answer to his Familiar Letters, to the Inhabitants of Birmingham*.<sup>38</sup> The pamphlets claim to have been written by a variety Birmingham toy makers: John Nott, a button burnisher; Job Nott, a buckle maker, cousin to John Nott; John Nott, a button maker, cousin to John Nott and elder brother to Job Nott; Alexander Armstrong, a whip maker; and Abel Sharp a spur maker.<sup>39</sup> These trades, particularly those connected with buttons and buckles, were seen as being at the heart of the Birmingham manufacturing life. They were trades in which a man could begin as an apprentice and end up as a master, trades in which the mythical status of Birmingham as a manufacturing town of many small independent masters was rooted. However, there is extensive internal evidence suggesting that this story of authorship cannot be accurate.

The first Nott pamphlet, John Nott's *Very Familiar Letters*, claims to have been written by 'JOHN NOTT, Button Burnisher, Steelhouse-Lane, Birmingham'.<sup>40</sup> They allege to be a series of letters, circulated amongst 'some inferior manufacturers' and

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*from Job Nott the Birmingham Buckle-maker first Cousin to John Nott the celebrated Button burnisher* (Birmingham, 1795); Job Nott, *More Advice from Job Nott The Birmingham Buckle-maker . . .* (3rd edn, Birmingham, 1795); Job Nott, *Further humble Advice from Job Nott* (Birmingham, 1800). Martin Smith in 'Conflict and Society in late eighteenth-century Birmingham' looks at a range of the pamphlets published during the 1790s, including those relating to the wars with France, which I do not examine here.

<sup>38</sup> Nott, *Very Familiar letters*.

<sup>39</sup> I will use the term Nott pamphlets to describe the entire collection of pamphlets associated with the Notts, even if they were written by someone else in opposition to the classic Nott position, as in the Armstrong/Sharp pamphlets.

<sup>40</sup> Nott, *Very Familiar Letters*, title page.

picked up by a substantial factor, who published them as 'they contain the sentiments of that order of people'.<sup>41</sup> It is claimed by the author that he attended the Free School, learned 'latin [sic] and grammar and Cesar's comedies'. He was then apprenticed to the button trade, married (to Betty) and had several children, and at the time of the letters had 'thanks to providence and my labour . . . got a little before-hand with the world; and I be'nt forced to toil and moil as I have done' and so had the leisure to spend his evenings pleasantly.<sup>42</sup> John Nott and his wife were fond of friendly conversation, playing with their children, reading (John) and knitting and sewing (Betty). The tone of the letters is jocular, familiar, slyly insulting and insinuating, and with an undercurrent of threat running through them. The 'Advertisement' explaining the origin of the letters claimed that 'after making them a little more intelligible to a polite public, [the factor who printed them] sends them into the world with all their striking peculiarities', and 'with all their imperfections on their head'.<sup>43</sup> In fact, there is little of the Brummagen dialect of John Not [sic] or the Black Country dialect found by Martin Smith in *A Wurd or two of good counsil to abowt Hafe a Duzzen diffrunt Sorts o Fokes* by Nicholas Noboddy, another claiming cousin-ship with Job Nott.<sup>44</sup> The John Nott of the *Very Familiar Letters* is a characteristic educated small master, whose 'd'ye see' and 'fair play's a jewel' were easily comprehended by a readership outside of Birmingham, and who was perhaps composed by someone without an intimate knowledge of the dialect of the Birmingham streets and small workshops.

The second Nott pamphlet also alleges to have come from the pen of John, but in

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<sup>41</sup> Nott, *Very Familiar Letters*, 'Advertisement'.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>43</sup> Nott, *Very Familiar Letters*, 'Advertisement'.

<sup>44</sup> John Not's *A Letter of Advice to the Rev. J Edwards* is written in a more markedly Brummagen dialect. Martin Smith identified *A Wurd or two . . .* as being written in the Black Country dialect. Smith 'Conflict and Society', p. 120.

this case the slightly different 'JOHN not Button Burnisher'.<sup>45</sup> The voice and internal evidence of this pamphlet suggest a different author to the original John Nott of the *Very Familiar Letters*. The pamphlet is once again a letter, but this time written to Priestley's assistant minister, and eventual successor at New Meeting, John Edwards. Whilst the *Very Familiar Letters* were laid out in the manner of a conventional letter, with an address, a date, a signatory at the end of each and talk of sending a young Nott child to deliver them, the *Letter of Advice* of John Not is simply headed 'Letter', although it is signed at the end. John's wife is now Moll, and his level of education has shifted: he does not 'understand Greke or Latan [sic]'.<sup>46</sup> Unlike the easily comprehensible voice of the *Very Familiar Letters*, John Not is written as an attempt to reproduce a kind of crude Brummagen dialect: the text abounds with examples such as 'meister' for Mr. and 'yore' for you're.<sup>47</sup> The spelling veers between barely comprehensible phonetic reproduction ('I oun its hynghish' or a 'hare balone') and suspicious reversion to correct spellings ('currage' on page 3 becomes 'courage' on page 12).<sup>48</sup> Its tone is openly insulting and hectoring, without the jocular humour of the *Very Familiar Letters*.

The final John Nott pamphlet was written in 1792, in reply to *Job Nott's humble Advice*.<sup>49</sup> This is one of the pamphlets in the Nott style, but written to oppose the reactionary, anti-radical voice of the other Notts. It was attempt to appeal to the same readership whose interest had been captured by the popular, and much reprinted, *Very Familiar Letters* and *Humble Advice*. The claims made by the author for this John Nott are that he was a button maker, elder brother to Job Nott, buckle-maker and first cousin to John Nott button-burnisher. It is a strange pamphlet, cobbled together from several

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<sup>45</sup> John Not, *A Letter of Advice to the Rev. J Edwards*, title page.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 3, 4, 12.

<sup>49</sup> Nott, *Appeal to the Inhabitants of Birmingham*.

disparate elements – it begins with a tirade against Job Nott, followed by a dialogue between the radical John Nott and a character called Simple Truth, there is then an extract of Volney's *Les Ruines*, a John Freeth song 'French Revolution', an address to the Birmingham Society for Constitutional Information, a list of toasts, and another song 'Burke's Address to the Swinish Multitude'. Unlike the other John Nott pamphlets there is no attempt to achieve an authentic voice, only the occasional appeal to 'brother chips' reminds us that this is supposed to be a button-maker addressing his fellow 'inferior manufacturers'.<sup>50</sup> Whether because of the inauthentic note struck by the author, or because the message was unpopular, it seems that *An Appeal to the Inhabitants of Birmingham* was not as successful as the anti-radical Notts. Unlike John Nott's *Very Familiar Letters*, which went through at least three editions, or Job Nott's multitudinous *Humble Advices*, *An Appeal* seems to have had only one edition. There had been a previous attempt at a radical answer to Nott. Immediately in the wake of the 1790 John Nott pamphlet, two productions by Alexander Armstrong, whip-maker, appeared.<sup>51</sup> Unlike the radical John Nott, these attempt authenticity of voice and content, but they lack the humour and narrative appeal of the original John Nott, a fact alluded to in a contemporary poem offering comment on the disputes in the town.<sup>52</sup>

The final character from the Nott pamphlets was the most successful and enduring – Job Nott, buckle-maker. The series of pamphlets from the pen of Job began in 1792 with his *Humble Advice with a Postscript [Advice to sundry Sorts of People]*, this went through various manifestations during the 1790s, including *Humble Advice with a Suitable Postscript [Advice to sundry Sorts of People]* (1793), *Address to the Inhabitants*

<sup>50</sup> Nott, *Appeal to the Inhabitants of Birmingham*, p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> Armstrong, *Very Familiar Letters* and *Very Familiar Letters by Alexander Armstrong, Whip-maker, and Abel Sharp, Spur-maker*.

<sup>52</sup> *The Controversiad* (1790).

of Birmingham [*Advice to sundry Sorts of People*] (1793), it then morphed into *More Advice from Job Nott* in 1795, which had changed content but had a similar format.<sup>53</sup>

The character of Job Nott is given most flesh of all of the Nott incarnations, through the publication of his *Life and Adventures* in 1793.<sup>54</sup> The claim made by the author is that Job was an exemplary Birmingham apprentice, a little educated – but not too much – who went on to make a happy marriage and a successful business of his own. The radical John Nott in his *Appeal to the Inhabitants of Birmingham* had made his own claims as to Job Nott's real identity

I know brother Job will not be very well pleased at my taking upon me to answer him, for we never agree about politics, because he always thought himself a bigger scholar, and indeed so he is; for I have worked many hard day's labour to support him whilst he was revelling with his women and wine, a getting his learning at the virtuous school of divinity at Oxford.<sup>55</sup>

He later speaks of Job putting on and taking off his religion along with his 'holy robes', so the accusation is certainly that the author was a clergyman, there is a similar claim in the Alexander Armstrong pamphlet.<sup>56</sup> As most of the Established Clergy who were active in the disputes with the Dissenters were educated at Oxford, this could point in a number of directions.<sup>57</sup> The Job texts certainly contain an abundance of scriptural quotations, but this was, of course, an age infused with scripture. Job Nott's own claims about his education are that he went to the first Birmingham Sunday School where he

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<sup>53</sup> Many of the Job Nott Pamphlets are subtitled *Advice to sundry sorts of people*. If this is the case it is indicated in square brackets.

<sup>54</sup> Nott, *Life and Adventures*.

<sup>55</sup> Nott, *Appeal to the Inhabitants of Birmingham*, p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> Nott, *Appeal to the Inhabitants of Birmingham*, p. 8; Armstrong, *Very Familiar Letters*, p. 3.

<sup>57</sup> Of the main protagonists, only Spencer Madan was a Cambridge graduate.

learnt his letters, then as an apprentice he went to school in the evening to learn to write, he was taught shorthand (but *not* French) by his Master's clerk and also learnt accounts.<sup>58</sup>

The tone of the majority of the Job publications is similar to that of John Nott's *Very Familiar Letters*: straightforward, generally well spelt and grammatical, with no attempt at Brummagen dialect, but with plenty of 'em' and 'ere' and rambling sentences keeping the voice pointing towards authenticity. However, occasionally the voice of Job slips and something more refined appears. In *More Advice from Job Nott*, he begins with a typical piece of Job advice to the Blood Coloured Jacobines

That is, them that are *dead ripe*; you see it wont do, the trap wont go off, the train is got damp, and the gunpowder only fizzes; you have tried your schemes, and you see they wont go down, no not even in the *Holy Country* call'd France, where at their last *pious* festival, a Jacobine Figure, wearing a double face, was hang'd up, and then burnt before the door of the Convention, and the ashes gather'd into a chamber-pot by the President<sup>59</sup>

Later in the text, in the advice to Brother Artificers, the tone becomes much more akin to what might be expected in a sermon

It is our duty, our interest, and our happiness, to carry quiet conscience about us *at all times*, but particularly so, *in times of Public Calamity*.  
“When God's judgements are in the earth, the inhabitants thereof should learn righteousness.” Isiah 26 chap. 9 verse . . . For my friends it is conscious innocence and virtue that give a man true courage . . . I would, as I regard the best interests of my countrymen, urge them to an

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<sup>58</sup> Nott, *Life and Adventures*, pp, 1-2, 4.

<sup>59</sup> Nott, *More Advice from Job Nott*, original italics.



immediate and general reformation of life and manners, for I cannot view the great events which are daily taking place, without considering them as national chastisements for the sins of the nations.<sup>60</sup>

There are two explanations for this dual-voiced text. The first is that different sections of the Job Nott pamphlets were written by different hands. The other is that the second passage is the true voice and the first, 'Job voice' is his creation. The way in which the two voices segue into each other suggests that the second explanation is most likely.

There is no conclusive evidence as to who actually wrote the various Nott pamphlets. The introductory notes for the Birmingham Library collection suggest that all of the John Nott pamphlets were written by the Birmingham barrister and poet John Morfitt.<sup>61</sup> Mortiff in his *Observations on the present alarming Crisis: addressed to the Nobility and Clergy*, an anti-war tract published in 1797, admitted – and regretted – that he had written 'a few poetical trifles . . . against the Dissenters'.<sup>62</sup> There is nothing in either the John Nott or John Not pamphlet that suggests poetry, but Morfitt may have also turned his hand to parody. In this case John Nott's *Very Familiar Letters* seems a more likely contender. It seems extremely unlikely that the author of the *Very Familiar Letters* was also the author of John Not's *Letter of Advice*. The tone of the writing, the spelling, the use of dialect and the contextual inaccuracies all suggest that the two letters were not penned by the same hand. There are suggestions, but little evidence, that Job Nott was created by Theodore Price, a nail master from Harborne.<sup>63</sup> The presence of

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<sup>60</sup> Nott, *More Advice from Job Nott*, pp. 3-4 original italics.

<sup>61</sup> Birmingham Library, Nott Collection, introductory note, cited Smith 'Conflict and Society', p. 112.

<sup>62</sup> John Morfitt, *Observations on the present alarming crisis: addressed to the nobility and clergy* (4th edition, Birmingham, 1797,), p. iii; John Morfitt, 'A Poetical Effusion', reprinted in Simcock, "'Reason's dim telescope'", pp. 82-3.

<sup>63</sup> Smith, 'Conflict and Society', p. 112.

sermon-esqe passages, on the other hand, raises the possibility that Job Nott was, as was alleged by the radical John Nott and by Alexander Armstrong, created by a clergyman. In many ways it matters little who actually wrote the pamphlets. Their creation in the 1790s was an attempt by elements of the Establishment in Birmingham to counter the messages emerging from the Dissenters in the town. The fact that they were felt to be needed shows the way in which the Established Church felt threatened by the prominent Dissenters in their midsts. Unitarianism is often portrayed as an elite sect, one which had no natural constituency amongst the small manufacturers of Britain's industrial towns, yet the initial target of these pamphlets was Joseph Priestley and his radical theological ideas, and the intended audience was clearly the mass of 'inferior manufacturers' that made up a large part of Birmingham's working population. The pamphleteers used methods similar to those later used by those who attempted to counter the impact of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* in 1792 and 1793. Olivia Smith in *The Politics of Language 1791-1819* found that various techniques were used to undermine Paine's serious arguments, including 'present[ing] emotional arguments as if they were rational' and removing meaning from radical concepts in order to 'distort and confuse information'.<sup>64</sup> These techniques, together with humour, threat and disparagement, were at the heart of the Nott pamphlets, and they were used throughout the period of tension in the town to counter a variety of threatening ideas.

### **Birmingham Dissent**

The first congregation within Birmingham which existed outside the confines of the Established Church came with the establishment of a Quaker meeting there in the

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<sup>64</sup> Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language 1791-1819* (Oxford, 1984), p. 72.

1650s.<sup>65</sup> The place of Dissent in the town became established in the last decades of the seventeenth century, with the Act of Uniformity in 1662 and the ejection of Presbyterian ministers from the Established Churches of Birmingham and the surrounding areas, followed by the introduction of moderate Toleration for Nonconformists and Dissenters after the Glorious Revolution (1689).<sup>66</sup> It is thought that there were about ten ejected ministers in or around Birmingham in the decades immediately after the Act of Uniformity.<sup>67</sup> After the Act of Toleration two congregations which were to become the core of Old Dissent in Birmingham quickly registered their Meeting Houses: Old Meeting in 1689 and Lower Meeting (later New Meeting) in 1690. They were probably both served by ejected ministers living in the area.<sup>68</sup> The situation in Birmingham was then fairly stable for the next half century, although there was rioting against Dissent in the town in 1715.<sup>69</sup>

The 1740s and 1750s saw the beginnings of the renewal of Dissent in Birmingham, as was the case across the country with the rise of New Dissent, closely associated with Methodism within the Established Church.<sup>70</sup> There had been Baptists active in Birmingham from the beginning of the century. In 1737 the first Baptist Chapel was established there, but it struggled until 1754, when it acquired a more dynamic minister. The Methodist revival that swept Britain in these years had a strong presence in Birmingham, which was open to the influence of evangelism and enthusiasm. Methodism took strong hold there from 1745 (in its Wesleyan form it was, of course, not

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<sup>65</sup> 'Religious History: Protestant Nonconformity', W B Stephens (ed.), *A History of the County of Warwick: Volume 7: The City of Birmingham* (1964), pp. 411-34. URL: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.asp?compid=22980>. Date accessed 18 August 2006.

<sup>66</sup> See chapter 1, fn. 78 for a definition of Dissenter and Nonconformist.

<sup>67</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'Religious History: Protestant Nonconformity'.

<sup>68</sup> Emily Bushrod, *The Birmingham Unitarians (1692-1973)* (Birmingham, 1973), p. 1.

<sup>69</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'Religious History: Protestant Nonconformity'.

<sup>70</sup> Gilbert, *Religion and Society*, p. 33.

an aspect of Dissent, still being officially part of the Established Church during the eighteenth century), yet the ministers for the Countess of Huntingdon found that there was still need for popular preaching in the 1780s.

The later decades of the century saw the the establishment of more Dissenting congregations in the town – both Protestant and Catholic – with the creation of places of worship by several prominent sects. John Wesley opened the first Wesleyan Chapel in Birmingham at Cherry Street in 1782.<sup>71</sup> In 1786 a Catholic church was established in Broad Street, which saw a rise in the numbers of families worshipping there over the next ten years. This, together with the presence of Joseph Berington at Oscott in Handsworth, meant a renewed prominence for Catholicism in Birmingham at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>72</sup> Another important presence in the town during the early 1790s was the Swedenborgian Joseph Proud, who served the Newhall Street Chapel from its creation in 1791, the first chapel dedicated to the Swedenborgian faith.<sup>73</sup> Proud (1745-1826), who went on to create a large and fashionable congregation in London after his Birmingham ministry, was also a friendly controversialist with Priestley.<sup>74</sup> The presence of men such as Proud and Berington in and around Birmingham meant that its reputation for Dissent increased and that, more than ever, Dissent within the town was a strongly visible force.

In the pursuit of the place of ideas and learning in eighteenth-century Birmingham, it is the development of rational religion in Birmingham – especially anti-Trinitarian ideas – on which this section will concentrate. The spread of explicitly

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<sup>71</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'Religious History: Protestant Nonconformity'.

<sup>72</sup> J. P. Chinnici, 'Berington, Joseph (1743–1827)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/2204>, accessed document.write(printCitationDate()); 28 July 2006]. Berington was a noted and prolific writer who maintained friendships with several prominent men of the town, including Matthew Boulton and Joseph Priestley.

<sup>73</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'Religious History: Protestant Nonconformity'.

<sup>74</sup> Peter J. Lineham, 'Proud, Joseph (1745–1826)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/22841>, accessed 28 July 2006].

Unitarian ideas and practices, which emerged in England as a result of the refusal of the London Dissenting Ministers to condemn denial of the Trinity at Salters' Hall in 1719, was fairly slow to reach Birmingham.<sup>75</sup> It was probably Samuel Bourn, minister at New Meeting between 1732 and 1754, who first brought Arian beliefs to Birmingham. Bourn (1689-1754) had become convinced of the unscriptural nature of the Trinity in his readings after the Salters' Hall conference.<sup>76</sup> However he and his fellow minister at New Meeting, Thomas Pickard, were jointly responsible for the Birmingham congregation and one in Coseley in the Black Country, and it was to Coseley that Bourn moved. It was not until William Howell arrived as minister at Old Meeting in 1746 that the two Presbyterian Meetings were considered solidly Unitarian.<sup>77</sup> As a result of this, a new Congregationalist Chapel was founded at Carr's Lane in 1748, a secession of Calvinistic Trinitarianism in retreat from the increasing Unitarianism of both New and Old Meeting.<sup>78</sup> However, there was not a sharp distinction between the two factions of Rational Dissent in Birmingham – William Hutton, although a Unitarian, was a long-time member of the Carr's Lane Chapel.<sup>79</sup> In addition, it should not be thought that the identification of the two Meetings with Unitarianism meant an inevitable move to the more extreme Socinianism that Joseph Priestley was later to bring to New Meeting.<sup>80</sup> Samuel Clark, minister to the Old Meeting between 1756 and 1769 had been trained at

<sup>75</sup> Stuart Andrews, *Unitarian Radicalism. Political Rhetoric, 1770-1814* (Basingstoke, 2003), p. 1; Stephens (ed.), 'Religious History: Protestant Nonconformity'.

<sup>76</sup> Alexander Gordon, 'Bourn, Samuel (1689–1754)', rev. Alan P. F. Sell, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/3000>, accessed 21 July 2006].

<sup>77</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'Religious History: Protestant Nonconformity'.

<sup>78</sup> Stephens (ed.), 'Religious History: Protestant Nonconformity'; Catherine Hutton, *Reminiscences of a gentlewoman of the last century, letters of Catherine Hutton, edited by Catherine Hutton Beale* (Birmingham, 1891), p. 28.

<sup>79</sup> Catherine Hutton, *A Narrative of the Riots in Birmingham, July 1791* (Birmingham, 1875), privately printed, p. 25, found at Birmingham City Archive, Church of the Messiah, Bundle of Sermons and Letters by or against Joseph Priestley. Account of the riots. UC2/186.

<sup>80</sup> Socinians denied the divinity of Christ and the atonement.

by the Trinitarian Philip Doddridge at his Academy in Northampton.<sup>81</sup>

At a national level the social base of Rational Dissent tended to be relatively wealthy and well educated, keen to maintain the exclusivity of its congregations and rejecting the populist enthusiasm of New Dissent. John Seed found that, despite the national decline in numbers of Presbyterian congregations across the country during the eighteenth century, the remaining congregations, from Hull to London, were 'centres of substantial wealth and influence'.<sup>82</sup> This situation certainly seems to have been the case in Birmingham, where the upholders of Rational Dissent – the Unitarian Old and New Meetings and the Carr's Lane Chapel – had a reputation for wealth and high social status. The members of all of these congregations, but especially the New Meeting, were one of the core groups that constituted the Inquiring Sort in Birmingham. Brief biographies of three prominent members of the New Meeting congregation demonstrate the kinds of people who were worshipping there in the second half of the eighteenth century.

William Russell (1740-1818) was one of the wealthiest merchants of the town and one of its largest employers.<sup>83</sup> He came from a family of Birmingham iron merchants, who were prominent in the town throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>84</sup> An active citizen of Birmingham – participator in improvement efforts, Justice of the Peace for Worcestershire, low bailiff for Birmingham, and involved in projects such as the hospital and the library – he was also a national figure in organisations such as the Society for Constitutional Information and the campaign for the repeal of the Test and Corporation

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<sup>81</sup> Hutton, *History of Birmingham*, p. 179; Alexander Gordon, *Heads of English Unitarian History* (2nd edn, Bath, 1970), p. 36; David Bogue and James Bennett, *History of Dissenters, from the Revolution in 1688, to the Year 1808* (4 vols, London, 1808-12), 3, p. 297.

<sup>82</sup> John Seed, 'Gentlemen Dissenters: the Social and Political Meaning of Rational Dissent in the 1770s and 1780s', *The Historical Journal*, 28, 2 (1985), pp. 301-6; Gilbert, *Religion and Society*, p. 40.

<sup>83</sup> R B Rose, 'The Priestley Riots of 1791', *Past and Present*, 18 (1960), p. 70; Jacob M. Price, 'Russell, William (1740-1818)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004), [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/24349>, accessed 28 July 2006].

<sup>84</sup> Price 'Russell, William'; Hutton, *History of Birmingham*, pp. 147 – 53.

Acts. He was recognised as a leading figure of the New Meeting and was friend and patron of Joseph Priestley.<sup>85</sup> Catherine Hutton (1756-1846), novelist, letter-writer and daughter of William Hutton, came to New Meeting soon after the arrival of Joseph Priestley, attracted from the Calvinist Carr's Lane Chapel by his reputation as a preacher.<sup>86</sup> She was educated in the town and moved in its Inquiring circles, both through her membership of New Meeting and her friendship with the novelist Robert Bage. She was in correspondence with friends across the country and was a frequent visitor to London and tourist around Britain.<sup>87</sup> Finally, one of the younger generation who were influenced by Priestley was Thomas Wright Hill. Hill (1763-1851) had been brought up as a Dissenter in Kidderminster, and joined Priestley's congregation when he was apprenticed to a brass-founder in Birmingham.<sup>88</sup> The influence of Priestley and his volunteering as a Sunday School teacher drew him away from brass-founding, and after a failed business venture he opened Hill Top school in Wolverhampton in 1803, which educated several future eminent scholars and became a centre of 'utilitarian and radical educational thought'.<sup>89</sup> Alan Gilbert counsels caution in claiming any numerical rise for Unitarianism during the second half of the eighteenth century, pointing out that Unitarian numbers tended to come from existing Presbyterian congregations turning away from their Trinitarian origins.<sup>90</sup> Again the situation in Birmingham seems to fit the national picture, with Unitarian congregations in the town coming from previously Trinitarian

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<sup>85</sup> Price 'Russell, William'; Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men. The Friends who made the Future* (London, 2002), p. 436.

<sup>86</sup> Rosemary Mitchell, 'Hutton, Catherine (1756–1846)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14299>, accessed 28 July 2006]; Hutton *Reminiscences*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>87</sup> Mitchell, 'Hutton'.

<sup>88</sup> Thompson Cooper, 'Hill, Thomas Wright (1763–1851)', rev. C. A. Creffield, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/13313>, accessed 28 July 2006].

<sup>89</sup> Cooper, 'Hill, Thomas Wright (1763–1851)'.

<sup>90</sup> Gilbert, *Religion and Society*, p. 41.

meetings. However, the arrival of Priestley in 1780 drew many prominent individuals, such as Catherine Hutton, to the congregation from other Dissenting meetings.

The situation of Dissent in Birmingham in the last decades of the eighteenth century was one of social and numerical vigour and renewal. Whilst New Dissent and Methodism were enthusiastically received by many whom the Established Church were unable to reach, Rational Dissent was a prominent force amongst the middling sort in the town. Political power in the unincorporated town had always been shared between Establishment and Dissent and, although attempts had been made to wrest the powerful offices traditionally held by Dissenters from them earlier in the century, the groups had worked together on town improvements and organisation.<sup>91</sup> In the last quarter of the century national issues – the American situation, the campaign for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts – and local Birmingham campaigns began to be the focus of disputes between the Anglican clergy of the town and prominent Dissenters.<sup>92</sup>

Nationally, the failure of the Feather's Tavern petition in 1772 and the subsequent dissent from the Church of vocal clergy, such as Theophilus Lindsey, brought another challenge to the authority of the Established Church.<sup>93</sup> This was the local situation into which Joseph Priestley stepped in 1780: a group of local Anglican clergy who were relatively self-confident and established within the town, yet who were aware that they had the care of far more souls than they could possibly minister to, with Methodism and evangelical Dissent making converts amongst those untouched by words from the grand pulpit of St Philip's. In addition there were three congregations of wealthy and powerful Rational Dissenters, two of which were part of a national movement whose ideas were posing a

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<sup>91</sup> Money, *Experience and Identity*, pp. 8-13; Gill, *History of Birmingham*, 1, pp. 73-5; Smith, 'Conflict and Society', p. 8.

<sup>92</sup> Money, *Experience and Identity*, pp. 185-219, *passim*.

<sup>93</sup> Andrews, *Unitarian Radicalism*, pp. 22-30.



threat to the very core of Anglican belief, and who were all campaigning for relief from the constraints on their participation in local and national government.

### **Joseph Priestley (1733-1804)**

Joseph Priestley and his family arrived in Birmingham in 1780 in retreat, to some extent, from life in the world of high politics, in which he had moved for the previous seven years. In 1773 he had accepted employment as the Earl of Shelburne's librarian and literary companion, exchanging a position as pastor to a sympathetic congregation in Leeds for an improved income and opportunities for the pursuit of natural philosophy.<sup>94</sup> It seemed to be an ideal position for Priestley: he represented the Dissenting interest to the highest echelons of the political world; he had time and space to follow his philosophical enquiries; he supervised the education of Shelburne's children; and his companionship with Shelburne took him to places and people a Leeds minister might have struggled to have access to.<sup>95</sup> However the situation became increasingly unsatisfactory for both parties, especially as the two men seem not to have liked each other particularly. In 1778 Shelburne had become head of the Chathamite Whigs, and Priestley's printed declaration, and enthusiastic defence, of his Unitarianism during the late 1770s became an embarrassment.<sup>96</sup> Priestley's letters to Shelburne display a sense of discomfort at his position. In 1776 he is concerned that '... I am of so little use to your Lordship ...', and throughout the period his letters are stilted and apologetic, in striking contrast to his usual forthrightness.<sup>97</sup> In addition, Priestley had no outlet for his

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<sup>94</sup> Robert E Schofield, 'Priestley, Joseph (1733–1804)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/22788>, accessed 4 Aug 2006].

<sup>95</sup> Schofield, 'Priestley'; Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism in Transylvania, England, and America* (Cambridge, Mass, 1952), p. 300.

<sup>96</sup> Schofield, 'Priestley'.

<sup>97</sup> Bowood House Archive, Shelburne Papers, Dr Priestley to Lord Shelburne, 11 Sept 1776, Miscellaneous Correspondence M-Z; *passim*.

ministerial vocation at Calne. He parted company with Shelburne in 1780. The terms of Priestley's contract with Shelburne included a £150 annual pension, and he was given financial assistance from several people – including Josiah Wedgwood, Samuel Galton, Erasmus Darwin and Matthew Boulton – that enabled him to set up home at Fairhill on the outskirts of Birmingham and continue his work on natural philosophy.<sup>98</sup> By the end of the year the resignation of Mr Hawkes as one of the pastors of New Meeting gave Priestley a chance to resume this vocation.<sup>99</sup> This position, together with the companionship of the Lunar Society members, and a group of able Dissenting ministers and theologians of several persuasions, made the Birmingham scene extremely congenial to Priestley, and the Inquiring Sort welcomed him enthusiastically.

At the time of his arrival in Birmingham Priestley was forty seven, and was an established theorist and practitioner in the fields of theology, pastoral organisation, natural philosophy (principally electricity, optics and chemistry) and education (general education, with specific works on history, grammar and oratory), and had published works on political theory, law and metaphysics. In his early years he had studied at Batley grammar school and then with various Dissenting ministers and tutors, as well as independently.<sup>100</sup> His family were Yorkshire Calvinists and Priestley was intended for the Independent ministry before adolescent illness and theological doubts altered this path. His rejection of Calvinism came about from conversations with a series of visiting ministers, which coincided with a crisis of faith during a serious illness when he was sixteen. He upheld his Arminianism in the face of hostility from his family, and the rejection of his application for membership of his chapel. His family had intended that

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<sup>98</sup> F W Gibbs, *Joseph Priestley. Adventurer in Science and Champion of Truth* (London, 1965), pp. 135-7; Schofield, 'Priestley'.

<sup>99</sup> Hutton, *Reminiscences*, p. 28.

<sup>100</sup> For a good, comprehensive short biography of Priestley see Schofield, 'Priestley'. Subsequent biographical details are taken from Schofield unless otherwise stated.

he should attend a second-rate, Calvinist, Dissenting Academy in London, but he was now theologically unacceptable to the trustees. He therefore entered the Daventry Academy in 1752. This was one of the finest academies in the country, founded by Philip Doddridge and theologically liberal and questing, although Doddridge himself was a Calvinist.<sup>101</sup> It was being run by Caleb Ashworth by the time Priestley attended there, and was one of the academies which began to offer a serious alternative to study in Scotland or Holland for Dissenters unable to enter English universities. By the time he entered his first ministerial position in 1755, his own studies and those undertaken at Daventry had covered classics, modern languages, Hebrew and Arabic, biblical studies, English literature, history, rhetoric, logic, metaphysics, various branches of mathematics, anatomy, natural and experimental philosophy and theology.<sup>102</sup> The method of teaching at Daventry had a strong emphasis on dialectics, giving Priestley a life-long enthusiasm for intellectual dispute and contention. The years spent there saw Priestley become an Arian, believing that pre-incarnate Christ was divine, yet inferior to God. This began the move away from Trinitarianism that eventually led to Socinianism and the rejection of the divinity of Christ.

The next decade of Priestley's life was one of teaching and writing. Following two unsatisfactory ministerial appointments, when he turned to teaching both adults and children in order to supplement his pastoral work, he was appointed to the Warrington Academy as tutor in languages and *belles-lettres*. His publications whilst at Warrington made his reputation as a scholar, and it was during these years that he was awarded his LLD from Edinburgh University and was elected fellow of the Royal Society. It was also during his years at Warrington that he married Mary Wilkinson, sister of the

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<sup>101</sup> *ibid*; John T McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York, 1962), p. 370.

<sup>102</sup> Schofield, 'Priestley'; Bogue and Bennett, *History of the Dissenters*, 3, p. 305.

ironmasters John and William Wilkinson, a strong-minded, independent-thinking, educated young woman who excelled in domestic organisation and retained her own religious views, whatever Priestley believed.<sup>103</sup> In 1767 he accepted an offer to become pastor to the congregation at the Mill Hill Chapel in Leeds. Here Priestley began his work as a theological controversialist, and also instituted many of the systems and institutions of congregational organisation which he later applied to New Meeting.<sup>104</sup>

The prospect of Priestley becoming minister at the New Meeting was an enticing one for both the Inquiring Sort of Birmingham and for Priestley, who had friends and family in the area. To those who met him, even those who did not share his Unitarianism or were actively hostile to him, Priestley was an extremely attractive character: charming, quiet, straightforward, with a strong gift for friendship. Catherine Hutton, in a letter written in the period between Priestley being offered the position and taking it up, wrote

The celebrated Dr. Priestley has taken up his residence among us for the sake of facilitating his philosophical experiments; and Mr. Hawkes, one of the preachers at the New Meeting, having resigned his place, it has been offered to the Doctor, and it is generally believed he will accept it. If he do so you may expect to hear of my becoming a convert to his religion, for I am very weary of Calvinistical monotony and nonsense.<sup>105</sup>

Within a year Hutton and her brother were both formal members of New Meeting. It was not only those who shared his religious views who were captivated by him. Mary Anne Galton, a child in a Quaker household during Priestley's time at Birmingham and later a Methodist and Moravian, described him thus, 'a man of admirable simplicity, gentleness,

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<sup>103</sup> J. R. Harris, 'Wilkinson, John (1728–1808)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004), [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/29428>, accessed 4 Aug 2006]; Gordon, *English Unitarian History* pp. 123-4.

<sup>104</sup> Schofield, 'Priestley'.

<sup>105</sup> Hutton, *Reminiscences* p. 28.

and kindness of heart, united with great acuteness of intellect . . . He, indeed, seemed present with God by recollection, and with man by cheerfulness'.<sup>106</sup> It was not only the sophisticated, educated upper echelons of the Inquiring Sort who were pleased with Priestley. Julius Hardy, a devout Methodist, heard him preach in 1789 and wrote in his diary: 'I was better satisfied than I expected'.<sup>107</sup>

For his congregation and his sympathetic hearers amongst the Inquiring Sort, Priestley's philosophical expertise was an asset to them. The New Meeting congregation arranged his duties so that he had the weekdays to continue with natural philosophy and other research, devoting Sundays to his congregation, although Scholfield considers that he spend the majority of his time on his pastoral duties.<sup>108</sup> Hutton, a member of the Trinitarian, rationalist Carr's Lane Meeting, felt that the congregation had acted 'judiciously' in inviting Priestley to be their pastor as he was 'one of the first philosophers of the age'.<sup>109</sup> His daughter found his sermons to be 'full of sound reasoning and good sense'.<sup>110</sup>

Yet in spite of the enthusiasm with which Priestley was welcomed by the Inquiring Sort of the town, whether or not they were Unitarians, he was viewed with great hostility by the clergy of the Established Church. Priestley was not the first religious controversialist to preach in the town, nor was he the only natural philosopher, but he was unique in the reaction he provoked from the Established clergy. It was Priestley's qualities as a thinker, as a learner and as a teacher which caused him to be

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<sup>106</sup> Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck, *Autobiography of Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck* (3rd edn, London, 1859), pp. 31-2; Elizabeth Lee, 'Schimmelpenninck, Mary Anne (1778–1856)', rev. K. D. Reynolds, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/24809>, accessed 4 Aug 2006].

<sup>107</sup> Birmingham City Archive, Julius Hardy (fl. 1788-93), 'Journal', MS218/1. Transcript available MS 839/53.

<sup>108</sup> Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism* p. 301; Schofield, 'Priestley'.

<sup>109</sup> Hutton, *History*, p. 180.

<sup>110</sup> Hutton, *Reminiscences* p. 28.

considered such as threat by the Established Church in Birmingham. These qualities manifested themselves in many threatening forms – Unitarianism, ideas on the nature of government, theories of education – but it was the clear, sharp, fearless quality of the action of Priestley's mind that caused the Divines of Birmingham to turn on him with such ferocity. The threats posed by Priestley's specific ideas will be dealt with in the next chapter, here I will look at some of the general reactions – both accusations against him and attacks on him.

A common theme in many of the responses to Priestley was the disputatious nature of his publications and the disquiet and disruption caused by his activities. Priestley's education at Daventry had given him a strong grounding in dialectic disputes, and it was the mode of intellectual encounter he favoured.<sup>111</sup> He was also, in his published work, extremely forthright in his setting forward of his views. Although he welcomed criticism and argument, he had a strong sense of the rightness of his own conclusions in the moment, even if he later came to renounce them. Catherine Hutton, a member of his congregation, found this to be a failing which antagonised others. 'Having fully assured himself of the truth in religion', Hutton wrote to a friend after the Birmingham riots, 'he conceived it his duty to go abroad into the world and endeavour to persuade all mortals to embrace it'.<sup>112</sup> He could be brutal and insensitive in his writings. Abbé Boscovich, a Jesuit, wrote to reprimand Priestley for passages in his *Disquisitions relating to Matter and Spirit*, in which he used Boscovich's theories, where he declared the Pope to be the Antichrist. 'Can you believe that it is not a serious injury you have done me . . .?', he asked.<sup>113</sup> But Priestley seemed to believe that once someone had

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<sup>111</sup> For example his *Doctrines of Materialism and Philosophical Necessity*, which brought into the public gaze and celebrated his theological dispute with Price.

<sup>112</sup> Hutton, *A Narrative of the Riots in Birmingham*, UC2/186, p. 24.

<sup>113</sup> Boscovich to Priestley, 17 October 1778, cited Dan Eshet, 'Rereading Priestley: science at the intersection of theology and politics', *History of Science*, 39 (2001), p. 146.

followed his argument they would have to agree with his conclusions. He dismissed the Chaplain of St Mary's, Edward Burn's, arguments as coming from someone who was 'well meaning [but] governed by prejudice', so therefore unable to examine 'the truth of what they generally hear propagated, concerning those whose religious principles they disapprove'.<sup>114</sup> It was not only the forthright conduct of these printed disputes which was criticized – the validity of published discussion was questioned by the Rector of St Philip's, who considered it a 'fruitless employment' and accused Priestley of wasting his time with these writings and of always wanting the last word.<sup>115</sup>

In the wider world of letters and published disputes, a robust attitude to public argument could be accommodated without too much personal antagonism. However within a town, even one as large and sophisticated as Birmingham, the printed disputes could cause animosity, misunderstanding, misrepresentation and public hostility. Priestley himself was aware of the dangers. In his Preface to 'Letters to the Rev. Edward Burn', he wrote of his great reluctance to enter 'public controversy with a person residing in the same place with one's self', and declared that he had only decided to reply to Burn's letters because they were being widely read and giving an unfavourable impression of Unitarianism.<sup>116</sup> The progress of the public arguments were soon being used against Priestley: the Nott pamphlets implied that Priestley had brought a disputatious spirit to the town. The *Very Familiar Letters* urged him to attend the services of the two Rectors in Birmingham, in order that he might drop his views. Nott promised that with Priestley quieted all would be well and 'we shou'dn't repent, as we do now, that you ever came

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<sup>114</sup> Joseph Priestley, 'Letters to the Rev. Edward Burn', in Joseph Priestley, *Familiar letters, addressed to the inhabitants of Birmingham, in refutation of several charges, advanced against the Dissenters and Unitarians*. . . (Birmingham, 1790) p. 204.

<sup>115</sup> Spencer Madan, *A letter to Doctor Priestley, in consequence of his "Familiar letters addressed to the inhabitants of the town of Birmingham, &c." occasioned by . . .* (Birmingham, 1790), pp. 3-4.

<sup>116</sup> Priestley, 'Letters to the Rev. Edward Burn', p. 201.

among us, to throw us into hot water, and kick up such as dust as you have done'.<sup>117</sup> In the rush of publications after the riots of 1791 the printed disputes were commonly cited as a cause of the bad feeling in the town.

In 1778 Priestley published his discussion with Richard Price on the subject of *Doctrines of Materialism and Philosophical Necessity*. In one of his epistles to Price he wrote that his opinions were not yet settled, nor could he see when they might be. Priestley's honest declaration that he might not yet have the final answers to the theological questions he investigated was seen as threatening and disquieting. Spencer Madan in his sermon, *The principal Claims of the Dissenters considered*, pointedly justified the publication of his sermon on the grounds that it laid out 'the settled principles and conviction of my heart'.<sup>118</sup> The publication of Madan's sermon prompted Priestley to reply with his *Familiar Letters addressed to the Inhabitants of Birmingham*.<sup>119</sup> John Nott in the populist reply to Priestley's *Letters*, set out the dangers of encouraging the idea of changing principles. His readers were warned that 'we shall be like a swarm of bees that will never go into a hive; and what is to become of 'em in winter, if they hav'nt been settled enough to mind their work and get honey in summer?'<sup>120</sup> Nott goes on to discuss the importance of settling to a trade in order to bring stability to family life, and the clear implication is that theological investigation, such as that undertaken by Priestley, was extremely dangerous in the population at large, encouraging flightiness and economic irresponsibility.<sup>121</sup> The fact that Priestley not only undertook these investigations himself, but encouraged others to either do the same or,

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<sup>117</sup> Nott, *Very Familiar letters*, p. 26.

<sup>118</sup> Spencer Madan, *The principal Claims of the Dissenters, considered, in a Sermon preached at St. Philip's Church, in Birmingham, on Sunday the 14th of February . . .* (Birmingham, 1790), p. 6.

<sup>119</sup> Priestley, *Familiar Letters*.

<sup>120</sup> Nott, *Very Familiar Letters*, p. 9.

<sup>121</sup> Nott, *Very Familiar Letters*, pp. 9-10; also in Croft, *Cursory Observations*, p. 16.



for those who had 'fortune, but little leisure' to offer financial assistance to others, was deeply threatening.<sup>122</sup> The clergy of the Established Church had no desire to encourage a practice that they feared might result in, not only doctrinal disobedience, but civil unrest. In their published sermons they encouraged the middling sort to see these practices as dangerous and in popular loyalist tracts they tied the practice of theological investigation to economic insecurity.

Many of the attacks on Priestley focused on the specific ideas which he was promulgating, but some attacked him using the words with which he wrote. The most well known example of this is Priestley's ill-judged 'grains of gunpowder' phrase. The notorious passage occurred in a sermon, which was published in 1785, on *The Importance and Extent of Free Inquiry in Matters of Religion*.<sup>123</sup> The sermon had been preached on 5 November, a date on which Protestant Dissenters remembered the Glorious Revolution. However, it cannot have been lost on Priestley that this was also the date of the Gunpowder Plot, and as he sought to encourage Unitarians that, although they were numerically small, they were having a significant impact, he wrote

We are, as it were, laying gunpowder, grain by grain, under the old building of error and superstition, which a single spark may hereafter inflame, so as to produce an instantaneous explosion; in consequence of which that edifice, the erection of which has been the work of ages, may be overturned in a moment, and so effectual as that the same foundation can never be built upon again.<sup>124</sup>

Priestley had been advised against including the passage when the sermon was published,

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<sup>122</sup> Joseph Priestley, *The Importance and Extent of Free Inquiry in Matters of Religion: A Sermon preached before the Congregations of the Old and New Meeting . . .* (Birmingham 1785), p. 26.

<sup>123</sup> Priestley, *Free Inquiry*, p. 40.

<sup>124</sup> Priestley, *Free Inquiry* pp. 40-1.

but he dismissed the idea and seems to have enjoyed the stir caused, indeed he was still using the metaphor in 1790 in his *Letter to the Rev. Edward Burn*.<sup>125</sup> He considered that the severity of the reaction to this passage was as a result of fears of the Established Church that their institution was indeed in imminent danger of collapse. 'To us this affords no unpleasant prospect, and it may tempt us to sport with their fears on other occasions'.<sup>126</sup> The coincidence of dates was certainly not overlooked by Spencer Madan, who compared Priestley's seemingly innocent conduct in public with that of Guy Fawkes in the days before the attempted destruction of Parliament.<sup>127</sup> In the Nott Pamphlets, the transformation of Priestley's words from metaphor to literal threat was absolute: 'You never write but to tell us church people that you're *laying it* [gunpowder] *grain by grain under the churches* and mean to blow 'em up all together very soon'.<sup>128</sup> After the early events of French Revolution the passage was often alluded to in conjunction with a discussion of the destruction of the state institutions in France, and Priestley portrayed as a dangerous traitor.<sup>129</sup> His liking for a dramatic phrase was turned against the whole Dissenting cause during the 1790 campaign for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts when a sheet of extracts, prepared in Birmingham, from Priestley's *Letters to the Rev. Edward Burn* was circulated to Parliament.<sup>130</sup>

The perceived complexities of Priestley's theological arguments meant that much of the populist attack on him was couched in personal terms. The authors of the anti-Jacobin Nott pamphlets portrayed invented behaviour by Priestley that cast him in a unfavourable light. In John Nott's third letter, Priestley was accused of, not only refusing

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<sup>125</sup> Priestley, *Letter to the Rev. Edward Burn*, p. ix.

<sup>126</sup> Priestley, *Familiar Letters* p. viii.

<sup>127</sup> Madan, *A letter to Doctor Priestley*, p. 16.

<sup>128</sup> Nott, *Very Familiar Letters*, p. 13.

<sup>129</sup> Nott, *Very Familiar Letters*, p. 12.

<sup>130</sup> Anon., *The following extracts from a preface to a late publication, entitled, "Letters to the Rev. Edward Burn, of St. Mary's chapel, Birmingham," by Dr. Priestley* (Birmingham, 1790).

to answer Nott's first two missives, but of refusing hospitality to a Nott child who had delivered them.<sup>131</sup> John Not [sic] charges Priestley with being 'a foul fighter'.<sup>132</sup> His physical appearance was often a target for ridicule. John Nott accused him, not only of having 'whipping-post looks', but of having brought this on himself by not laughing and enjoying himself enough.<sup>133</sup> John Morfitt's 'Poetical Effusion' gave Priestley a 'puritanic scowl' and the author of *A New Song* likens Priestley to 'a crow in the gutter'.<sup>134</sup> There was often a comparison drawn between the physical appearance of the Established Church clergy – who were portrayed as fat, sleek and contented – and the Dissenting ministers. John Nott, who was written as a contented, ale loving, well fed mechanic was the idealised Birmingham small master of that town's popular mythology. The clergy were the superior version of this ideal. Using this image of Birmingham joviality, Priestley was presented as an incomer bringing dangerous ideas and a way of life that was puritanical, dour and unwelcome. Priestley's speaking voice did not escape the derisive attentions of the author of John Nott's *Familiar Letters*, and became part of this picture of difference and absurdity. Priestley had had a stutter in his youth, and his preaching voice was quiet and conversational. Nott, however, described it as 'outlandish lingo' and implied that Priestley was not properly English – his accent sounding 'Irish, or Scotch, or American'.<sup>135</sup>

The author of the John Nott pamphlet attempted to deny Priestley the authority of his learning, implying that the relative achievements in lives of Priestley and Nott were the result of parental choice. In his first letter to Priestley, Nott wrote that 'if my father

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<sup>131</sup> Nott, *Very Familiar Letters*, p. 19.

<sup>132</sup> Not, *A Letter of Advice*, p. 11.

<sup>133</sup> Nott, *Very Familiar Letters*, p. 25.

<sup>134</sup> John Morfitt, 'A Poetical Effusion' reprinted in Simcock, 'Reason's Dim Telescope', pp. 82-3; Birmingham City Archive, *A New Song*, MS690/54.

<sup>135</sup> Nott, *Very Familiar Letters*, p. 24.

had'nt [sic] sworn I should be put prentice to the button trade, I might by this time have been a doctor as well as you'.<sup>136</sup> Then, in the third letter, he writes of Priestley's grandfather, 'I have heard say as how he was a taylor, and your father a stay-maker; and you was to have been a weaver'.<sup>137</sup> In Nott's version of Priestley's childhood it was the decision of his father to send him to school that brought him to intellectual eminence. The implication is clear – Nott too could have been in that position if only his father had not known his place and placed his son appropriately. The selection of proverbs on the front of the *Familiar Letters* emphasise the difference between the honest button burnisher and the wealthy minister.

Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city (Proverbs 9, 15)

A poor man is better than a liar (Proverbs 19, 22)

The rich man is wise in his own conceit, but the poor man that hath understanding searcheth him out (Proverbs 28, 11)<sup>138</sup>

Nott's author lays out his stall from the cover of the pamphlet: Nott is the poor, wise man, who will save Birmingham from Priestley, the rich liar.

Priestley's work was both belittled and branded as dangerous. His *Familiar Letters, addressed to the Inhabitants of Birmingham*, to which Nott replied, were 'funny' and 'a droll story'.<sup>139</sup> They were robbed of their serious intent and transformed into a work of the same type as Nott's own letters. In the same paragraph Nott dismisses Priestley's work as 'little odd books', and then writes that if a man was to follow his lead 'he will soon be no better than a Heathen or a Nottentot [sic]'.<sup>140</sup> Later he implies that

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<sup>136</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>137</sup> *ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>138</sup> *ibid.*, Title Page.

<sup>139</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>140</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.

they were not only trivial, but also commercial failures.<sup>141</sup>

John Nott also accused Priestley of madness, suggesting that being challenged by the clergy and denied by Parliament had driven him too 'melancholy mad[ness]'.  
However, once again Nott trivialized Priestley's ministry, campaigns and subsequent tribulations, comparing his troubles to 'being cross'd in love or losing a prize in the lottery'.<sup>142</sup>

In a poem written soon after the riots of 1791, John Morfitt also alluded to madness. In a passage that, unlike most of the populist works, damns Priestley because of his work in natural philosophy, Morfitt suggested that Priestley was 'Away // to Bedlam-Regimen, dark rooms and straw', punished with madness that comes from questioning God by investigating His works.<sup>143</sup> In vituperative passage by the author of the John Nott letters, Priestley was accused of being a spawn of the devil. Nott juxtaposed Spencer Madan's criticism of Priestley from the pulpit with St Paul's condemnation of Elymas – '*O full of all subtlety and all mischief, thou child of the Devil, thou enemy of all righteousness wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord?*' Nott wrote that he wished Madan had used this passage, and that he would have been right to do so, having been provoked as Paul had.<sup>144</sup>

## Conclusion

Between the 1750s and 1770s members of Rational Dissenting meetings tended to have good, constructive working relationships with the Establishment in Birmingham, cooperating on urban improvement and local government.<sup>145</sup> However, although the Established Church seemed to be in a strong position in the town, the relative paucity of

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<sup>141</sup> *ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>142</sup> *ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>143</sup> Morfitt, 'A Poetical Effusion' reprinted in Simcock, 'Reason's Dim Telescope', pp. 82-3.

<sup>144</sup> Nott, *Very Familiar Letters*, p. 12, original italics..

<sup>145</sup> Smith, 'Conflict and Society', p. 8.

its own resources – especially in relation to the thousands of mechanics and labourers of the town – and the growing strength of rational and enthusiastic Dissent, left its clergy in a position of perceived weakness. The arrival of Joseph Priestley in 1780, and his subsequent election as pastor of New Meeting, brought to the public arena of Birmingham ideas which were regarded by the Established Church as dangerous and threatening. The appointment of George Croft, who was openly hostile to Priestley, to the Lectureship at St Martin's demonstrates the lengths to which the clergy of the town were willing to go to counter this threat.

In the next chapter I will examine in detail areas of conflict, in which ideas played a major role, which were central to the build up of tension and hostility in the decade before the riots. John Money attributes the hostility which led to the rioting of 1791, to attempts to gain control of governance of the town.<sup>146</sup> His argument about disputes over local control are persuasive, but much of his analysis dates from conflict over policing of the town from 1789.<sup>147</sup> I argue that underlying these disputes was a conflict over ideas and their place in society, particularly religious ideas and their impact on the minds of the poor.

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<sup>146</sup> Money, *Experience and Identity*, p. 16.

<sup>147</sup> *ibid.*, p. 13.

**'A vulgar error; that opinions are harmless': the Workings of Controversial Ideas  
in late Eighteenth-Century Birmingham<sup>1</sup>**

In the historiography of riot and disturbance, beginning with the pioneering work of George Rudé in 1964, the Church and King riots of the 1790s form an interesting counter-example amongst the accounts of popular political uprisings, economic grievances and class struggles.<sup>2</sup> Rudé's work attempted to rescue the crowd from the stereotypical images of 'the people' or 'the mob', by systematically analysing the origins, events and aftermath of crowd actions. By asking a series of questions of events he hoped to discern the nature, behaviour and individual elements of the crowd.<sup>3</sup> Although Rudé does not wish to claim 'universal validity' for his conclusions, his view of the eighteenth-century crowd is too often expressed in terms of the crowds which came after it; the rioters become part of 'an important stage in the historical process', with Church and King 'giv[ing] way to the trade unionist, labor militant, and organized consumer of the new industrial society'.<sup>4</sup> Rudé finds evidence of Church and King-type riots from the sixteenth century onwards, but they particularly emerged with peasant opposition to the French Revolution. He attributes their existence in English manufacturing cities to the 'peculiar circumstances of the time', with Dissenters achieving wealth, power and intellectual institutions there.<sup>5</sup> Although he mentions in passing intellectual institutions as a factor in the riots, Rudé's analysis is based almost exclusively on economic

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<sup>1</sup> George Croft, *Cursory Observations chiefly respecting Dr. Priestley* (London, 1788), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> George Rudé, *The Crowd in History. A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848* (2nd edn., London, 1981), pp. 135-49; John Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances in England, 1700-1832* (2nd edn., 1992), pp. 173-9; Ian Gilmour, *Riot, Risings and Revolution. Governance and Violence in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1992), pp. 393-6.

<sup>3</sup> Rudé, *The Crowd in History*, pp. 7-11.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 15, 268.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 136, 139-40.

arguments and described the protagonists as 'the "lower orders" . . . *not yet* organised in labor movements'.<sup>6</sup> In his chapter on 'Motives and Beliefs' he acknowledges the complex intertwining of religious motives. However, he is always drawn back to economic ones for the Church and King crowd: the wealth of the victims of the rioters in Birmingham evidence of the poor seeking social justice and attempting 'levelling'.<sup>7</sup>

Published almost synonymously with Rudé's work on the crowd, and of a similar ideological perspective, was E P Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*.<sup>8</sup> Thompson described the Church and King rioters as at once the last gasp of the eighteenth-century mob and as making a class motivated attack; they were workers who had not yet been radicalised by access to Paine.<sup>9</sup> He saw class hatred acting in several ways in the riot. He firmly placed responsibility for the direction of the looting and destruction with the magistrates and clergy - a 'discriminatory outburst' by country gentlemen, using the urban labourers as means of attacking the bourgeoisie.<sup>10</sup> However, he also saw the motivation behind the mob actions as being class hatred for the new wealth of the prominent Dissenters. Thompson's misunderstanding of Birmingham's prominent inhabitants mean that his analysis of the riot is deeply flawed. There is almost no sense in which the loyalists of the town could be described as country gentlemen – the magistrate most widely implicated in the riots was a man so devoted to serving the town of Birmingham that he risked debtors prison to maintain his presence there, and the only aristocrat present at the riots was the Earl of Aylsford, who attempted to end the riot in its early stages.<sup>11</sup> He also believed that there was no Painite literature abroad amongst

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 140, my italics.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 232, 224-5.

<sup>8</sup> E P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (revised edn., London, 1980).

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 79-81.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>11</sup> John Money, *Experience and Identity. Birmingham and the West Midlands 1760-1800* (Manchester, 1977), pp. 12-14; R B Rose, 'The Priestley Riots of 1791', *Past and Present*, 18 (November 1960), p.



those from whom the rioters emerged until 1792, yet in much of the immediate post-riot literature Paine's identity and ideas are assumed to be in common currency.<sup>12</sup> To attempt to analyse the Birmingham riot in purely economic or class terms is to attempt to manipulate those who were affected by it into categories which are inappropriate for the circumstances. To reduce the motivation of those who rioted to being either manipulated or not yet radicalised, is to both deny them a voice and to misunderstand the real fears and hostilities which were at play.

In accounts of eighteenth-century Church and King riots, the riot in Birmingham in 1791 is given prominent place, in the most part based almost exclusively on the excellent analysis of the events of the riot by R B Rose.<sup>13</sup> Brilliant though Rose's forensic work on the riot is, his account of its origins is limited to the issues surrounding the campaign for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts.<sup>14</sup> John Stevenson's account of the Birmingham riot is heavily based on Rose, and his analysis of the reasons for it are almost exclusively limited to hostility towards the campaign for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts and to anti-French feeling.<sup>15</sup> Ian Gilmour, in his study of the relationship between violence, government and people, devotes an interesting, but brief, section to the tensions contributing to the situation in Birmingham from which the riots emerged.<sup>16</sup> Although he is mainly concerned with the reaction of the government to the riot situation, he mentions a range of motivations for the hostility of the crowd: the economic hardships brought on by the collapse of the buckle trade, bitterness over the Test and Corporation Act repeal attempts, fear of the Anglicans that they might entirely

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<sup>12</sup> See the conclusion to this chapter.

<sup>13</sup> Rose, 'The Priestley Riots of 1791', pp. 68-88.

<sup>14</sup> Rose, 'The Priestley Riots of 1791', pp. 71-2.

<sup>15</sup> Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances*, pp. 174-7.

<sup>16</sup> Gilmour, *Riot, Risings and Revolution*, pp. 393-6.

loose control of the town to Dissent, and the presence of Joseph Priestley and his Unitarian theology.

John Money's account of the lead up to the riots of 1791 has, like Stevenson's, an almost exclusive focus on the campaign for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts and on the disputes over various aspects of town governance.<sup>17</sup> Apart from very brief mentions of Joseph Priestley's *The Importance and Extent of Free Enquiry in the Matters of Religion* and the distribution of *A Preservative against Socinianism* to confirmation candidates, there is little attention paid to the bitter dispute which raged over controversial ideas. Money's work on the political aspects of the tensions in Birmingham during those years is extremely valuable, but his scope of enquiry meant that the importance of wider aspects of the disputes and the fundamental underlying theological differences were ignored. In addition, although his chapter on the riot is subtitled 'the West Midlands and the French Revolution', he does not analyse the way in which fear of republicanism and deism being exported from Revolutionary France led to hostility towards those in Birmingham who were associated with it.

For Thompson and Rudé, the motivations of the rioters were to be found in class hatred or misplaced proto-radicalism. For Money and Rose the cause of tension was political power struggles, local or national, and indeed this was an important aspect of the disputes which were related to the campaign to repeal the Test and Corporation Act. However, as I will show, the printed material, both populist and elite, relating to the period of turmoil is concerned more with religion and ideas than with economic differences. In this case a more useful theory of difference is Pierre Bourdieu's concept of distinction.<sup>18</sup> In the disparagement by the authors of the Nott pamphlets for the items

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<sup>17</sup> Money, *Experience and Identity*, pp. 219-21.

<sup>18</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (trans. by Richard Nice,

of cultural capital valued by the Inquiring Sort - wide-ranging education, intelligent reading, free assessment of ideas, the possibility of uncertainty of belief - there can be found an alternative theory of motivation for the actions of the mob.

For the purpose of this thesis I have not made a study of the course of the riots themselves, R B Rose's 1960 account is accurate, exhaustive and hard to better.<sup>19</sup> I will give a brief outline of the events of July 1791, based on Rose's paper, before looking at the way in which ideas were key to the build-up of tensions which culminated in riot. I will then look at two key sets of ideas which were the subject of dispute in the town. Firstly Unitarianism – including case studies of the dispute over the admission of controversial texts to the Birmingham Library and the collapse of the Birmingham Sunday Schools. I will then look at ideas about democracy, participation and freedom which were bound up in the campaign for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. I suggest that the tensions out of which the riots emerged were closely bound up with the attitudes and actions of the Inquiring Sort towards the place of ideas and learning in society, and the fear, hostility and reaction this engendered in the self-consciously loyal members of the Establishment.

## **The Riot**

The immediate cause of the riot was a commemoration dinner for Bastille Day held on the 14 July 1791.<sup>20</sup> In the days before an anonymous 'ultra-revolutionary hand-bill' circulated throughout the town, causing bitter reaction from loyalists and a notice in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* from the promoters of the dinner dissociating themselves

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London, 1984).

<sup>19</sup> Rose, 'The Priestley Riots' .

<sup>20</sup> This account is taken from Rose, 'The Priestley Riots', pp. 72-8.

from it.<sup>21</sup> Pro-Church and King slogans were daubed on walls in the town. Trouble was expected, and at some point Joseph Priestley decided not to attend the dinner. When the diners assembled in the middle of the afternoon, a crowd of 60 or 70 shouted slogans (including calls for 'no Popery', suggesting that the devotion of the mob to the stated theological cause might have been a little confused). By the time the dinner, which had been chaired by the Anglican manufacturer Captain James Keir, finished in the middle of the evening, the crowd was several times as large and pelted the diners with mud and stones before attacking and looting the hotel. The crowd then moved into Bull Street, where one of the leaders dissuaded the rioters from attacking the Quaker Meeting House. The destruction of the domestic, devotional and economic edifices of the Inquiring Sort in Birmingham then ensued. The New Meeting House was the first to be attacked, followed by the Old Meeting House, the former was burnt to the ground, the latter saved from the same fate only because of its proximity to other buildings. The rioters then moved to Fair Hill, where Joseph Priestley's house and laboratory were burnt and his library, papers and apparatus destroyed. The next day the Earl of Aylsford, a staunch loyalist, managed to persuade the rioters back to Birmingham, but the magistrates were unable to disperse them. They then broke open the town prisons. The house of John Ryland was attacked and the contents of his cellar drunk. There was then an attempt to forcibly quell the riot, but the rioters disarmed the specially sworn-in constables, and no further action was taken to contain the situation until the army arrived two days later. In those two days the houses and businesses of at least twenty seven of the Inquiring Sort were attacked, including William Hutton, William Russell, the wealthy 'toy' manufacturer John Taylor, the Unitarian steward of Birmingham Manor Thomas Lee,

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 72.

and several Dissenting pastors. Other Dissenting Meeting Houses were also attacked. Finally, on the 17th July, three days after the Commemoration Dinner, about thirty remaining rioters made their way to Edgebaston Hall, home of Dr William Withering – an Anglican, but as a member of the Lunar Society an established part of the Inquiring Sort. However, Withering had procured hired muscle in the form of grinders from the blade mill and 'famous fighters from Birmingham'.<sup>22</sup> Here the rioters were finally dispersed and one of their leaders seized. At this point the Dragoons arrived from Nottingham and, apart from some skirmishes in local areas, the unrest was quelled.

Rose places the victims of the riots in three categories: attenders at the Bastille Day Dinner, Dissenters and members of the Lunar Society.<sup>23</sup> However, what unites all of those who were attacked is that they were wealthiest or most prominent members of that part of Birmingham society which I have called the Inquiring Sort. They were men who were open to new ideas and ways of thinking – whether in religion, politics or natural philosophy – and they were part of the element of the public sphere which was devoted to free and public inquiry, debate and learning. The loyalist elite of the town – who Rose found were, if not directly complicit in the organisation of events of the riot, were certainly active in directing the crowd towards Dissenting targets, and failed to act swiftly to end the destruction<sup>24</sup> – feared these men because of their high public standing, their influence and the danger posed by the ideas which they put into circulation in the public sphere.

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 75-6.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 79-82.

## Unitarianism

In the search for the way in which ideas contributed to the hostility in Birmingham society during the 1780s and 1790s it is crucial to look at, not so much what the ideas of men such as Joseph Priestley actually were, but how they were perceived by those who encountered them, and how they were used by those who wished to prevent the Dissenters gaining power within the English State. In publications by those who opposed radical ideas there is no clear delineation between ideas which were attributed to the Inquiring Sort, ideas which were held by them, and ones which were deliberately imputed to them, although never part of the thought of most. This was the case in publications relating to many of the subjects of dispute during those decades. Although the catalyst for the riots was a commemoration dinner for the French Revolution, Unitarian theology was frequently mentioned in pamphlets published after the riot, and was also especially prominent in publications which appeared in Birmingham in the decade before it. Unitarianism had been present in Birmingham since the mid-eighteenth century, but it was after the arrival of Joseph Priestley in 1780 that the concept of Unitarian ideas as a threat gained public voice in the town. I do not intend here to analyse the theological arguments which passed between the upholders of the Trinity and those propounding its unscriptural nature, and the related subjects of the atonement and scriptural infallibility.<sup>25</sup> Of concern for this study is the way in which Unitarian ideas were seen as a threat to the Established Church, to society itself, and to the religious life

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<sup>25</sup> The main Anglican defenders of Trinitarianism on a national platform were George Horne and Samuel Horsley. For Priestley's disputes with Horne see Nigel Aston, 'Horne and Heterodoxy: The Defence of Anglican Beliefs in the Late Enlightenment', *The English Historical Review*, 108, 429 (Oct., 1993), pp. 895-919. For Horsley, Robert Hole, 'Horsley, Samuel (1733-1806)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004); online edn, May 2006 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/13820>, accessed 3 Oct 2006]; For an analysis of the development of Priestley's thought on the Trinity see Stuart Andrews, *Unitarian Radicalism. Political Rhetoric, 1770-1814* (Basingstoke and New York, 2003), pp. 13-21; also Robert Hole, *Pulpits, politics and public order in England 1760-1823* (Cambridge, 1989).

of individuals in Britain.

### The Unitarian threat to the Established Church

The primary accusation levelled against the Unitarians in Birmingham, and against Joseph Priestley in particular, was that Unitarianism was a direct threat to the Established Church. It was an accusation which Priestley found it hard to refute, although he often attempted denial. From the time of the delivery and publication of his 1785 sermon, *The Importance and Extent of Free Inquiry in Matters of Religion*, in which he threatened the Church with metaphorical gunpowder, his hostility towards the institution of the Established Church was part of the Birmingham public's understanding of him.<sup>26</sup> The image of an innocent or helpless church threatened by evil was often employed in pamphlets published before the riots. In 1787, in a pamphlet concerned with the Birmingham Library, the Birmingham Unitarians were portrayed as wolves preying on the innocent Anglican catechumens.<sup>27</sup> The 1790 John Nott pamphlet *Very Familiar Letters*, sought to liken the Dissenters of the town to the wolf in the Little Red Riding Hood story. Behind their 'lamblike intentions', 'this loving grand-mama had got a *beard* and *claws* and *long teeth*, and as soon as it had got to bed to her [sic], gobbled up the poor little wench in a trice, bones and all'.<sup>28</sup> The version of the Red Riding Hood story which was current in English at this time was a translation of Charles Perrault's telling of the tale - after an overtly sexualized encounter with the wolf, Little Red Riding Hood is eaten by him.<sup>29</sup> There is no rescue by the woodcutter. The readers of these texts knew

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<sup>26</sup> Joseph Priestley, *The Importance and Extent of Free Inquiry in Matters of Religion: A Sermon preached before the Congregations of the Old and New Meeting . . .* (Birmingham 1785).

<sup>27</sup> Anon., *A Letter to Doctor Joseph Priestley. Occasioned by his late Address to the Subscribers to the Birmingham Library. By Somebody, M.S.* (Birmingham, 1787), p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> John Nott, *Very Familiar Letters Addressed to Dr Priestley* (Birmingham, 1790), p. 24.

<sup>29</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment. The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (Harmondsworth, 1978), pp. 166-8, 318 n. 52.

that to allow the wolf to gain access to the innocent would be to condemn them to depravity and death; the only means of saving them would be to stop the wolf. The same Nott pamphlet later compared Edward Burn and Joseph Priestley to David and Goliath.<sup>30</sup> By transforming leading Dissenters into the familiar villains of popular stories, the mechanics of Birmingham were being asked to see these men – who were often wealthy, large employers, or prominent in the administration of Birmingham – as dangerous to national Church and to the local Anglican clergy and congregations, particularly to children.

In post-riot populist publications aimed at the literate and semi-literate Birmingham mechanics, Priestley's Unitarianism was held up as a direct cause of the disturbance. In pamphlets, songs and letters in the local newspapers, he was accused of bringing tension to the town, stirring the people to hostility or posing a threat which needed checking.<sup>31</sup> The extent to which the threat of Unitarianism had come to be seen as analogous with threats to the Established Church was voiced by several writers, who characterised Priestley as the creator of that threat and its embodiment. *A Lover of Truth*, who advertised his popular stance by alluding to John Nott in his signature, explicitly portrayed Priestley as an incomer, 'a noxious planet', who had interrupted harmony and order and sown 'seeds of dissention'.<sup>32</sup> Priestley was accused of destroying the peace of the town by disseminating his ideas within it, by means of his preaching and publishing. In the many incarnations of Job Nott's *Humble Advice* the Dissenters of Birmingham

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<sup>30</sup> Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, p. 25.

<sup>31</sup> For example: *A Lover of Truth*; John Churchman; Benedict in [*An authentic Account of the Riots in Birmingham, on the 14th, 15th, 16th, and 17th days of July, 1791* (Birmingham)], p. 39, 42, Appendix p. 23. The volume consulted is contained in the bundle: Birmingham City Archive, Church of the Messiah, Bundle of Sermons and Letters by or against Joseph Priestley. Account of the Riots, UC2/186. However, it is without its cover so the edition cannot be confirmed. The page numbers correspond with those of the 1791 edition, however it has an additional Appendix.

<sup>32</sup> *A Lover of Truth*, [*An authentic Account of the Riots*], UC2/186, p. 39.



were partitioned into 'FRENCH EMISSARIES' – Priestley and his friends; 'New fashioned restless DISSENTERS' – those youth of New Meeting who had been taught by Priestley; and 'Old fashioned moderate DISSENTERS' – tainted by Priestley, but whom Nott urges to live peacefully, distancing themselves from him.<sup>33</sup> *A New Song* accuses Priestley and the wealthy Unitarian merchant, William Russell, of directly working against the church

Old Mother Church they hate & now's the time to spite her -

To tear her lawn sleeves make a football of her Mitre<sup>34</sup>

These pieces, all published in the period soon after the riot, had a simple aim – to paint Priestley as an alien influence and to condemn his thought as a cause of the riot and a continuing threat to the Established Church.

The ideological milieu from which these populist voices emerged, developed in the 1780s. Churchmen, nationally and locally, published sermons, tracts and pamphlets which condemned the Unitarianism advocated by Priestley, Richard Price, Theophilus Lindsey and a number of other prominent theologians, as dangerous and unchristian. There was general hostility from some Established Church clerics towards all varieties of Dissent. George Croft, lecturer at St Martin's from 1791, saw it as 'almost demolishing the whole fabric of christianity' and 'hostile to the present as well as the future happiness of mankind' and Spencer Madan, Rector of St Philip's, described Dissent as 'essentially repugnant to the tenets of that national church'.<sup>35</sup> However, although Madan regarded all of Dissent as a threat to the Church, it was Unitarianism which he regarded as especially

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<sup>33</sup> Job Nott, *Job Nott's humble Advice, with a Postscript [Advice to sundry sorts of People]* (Birmingham, ?1792).

<sup>34</sup> *A New Song*, Birmingham Records Office, MS690/54.

<sup>35</sup> Spencer Madan, *The principal Claims of the Dissenters considered, in a Sermon preached at St. Philip's Church . . .* (Birmingham, 1790), p. 7; George Croft, *The Test Laws defended. A Sermon preached at St. Phillip's Church in Birmingham on Sunday, January the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1790 . . .*, (Birmingham, 1790), p. xii.

dangerous. A large part of his sermon of February 1790, on the desire of Dissent for relief from statutory restrictions, was devoted to the specific threat of Unitarianism, which he regarded as as dangerous to the State as Catholicism.<sup>36</sup> The threat which clerics such as Madan were facing was a sustained barrage of criticism, condemnation and demands from several Unitarian writers, but particularly from Priestley's erudite and prominent pen. Priestley was brutally unrepentant in his rejection of the Trinity, the starkness of his message shocking. This example, from *The Importance and Extent of Free Inquiry in Matters of Religion*, shows the kind of language which brought him such a hostile reaction:

Luther and Calvin reformed many abuses, especially in the discipline of the church, and also some gross corruptions in doctrine; but they left other things, of far greater moment, just the way they found them. They disclaimed the worship of saints and angels, but they retained the worship of Jesus Christ, which led the way to it, which had the same origin, and which is an equal infringement of the honour due to the supreme God, who has declared that he will not give his glory to another.<sup>37</sup>

Passages such as this were not only seen as threatening theologically, the accusation of idolatry was extremely offensive.<sup>38</sup>

On a national level Samuel Horsley and George Horne were Priestley's main scholarly opponents, defending the Church from the dangers of heterodoxy. Horsley (1733-1806), came from a clerical family with a Dissenting background.<sup>39</sup> Initially educated for the law at Cambridge before being ordained, he was a natural philosopher

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<sup>36</sup> Madan, *The principal Claims of the Dissenters considered*, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> Priestley, *The Importance and Extent of Free Inquiry in Matters of Religion*, p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> Madan, *Principal Claims*, p. 19.

<sup>39</sup> Hole, 'Horsley, Samuel'.

and member of the Royal Society, before resigning as a result of a dispute with the naturalist Joseph Banks and devoting himself to his clerical career. Horne (1730-1792) was also the son of a clergyman.<sup>40</sup> He was educated at Oxford, where he had a successful academic career, which he combined with a clerical one from 1780. In the light of later biblical scholarship, whose influence spread in the nineteenth century and of which Priestley's historical criticism was an early example, neither man managed to defeat Priestley's arguments. Horne produced only short, populist, anonymous works or sermons in his efforts to answer Priestley.<sup>41</sup> He was working on a major work later in his life, which he hoped would be a definitive answer to the Socinian claims. However, Nigel Aston has found from Horne's commonplace-books that he spent many months fruitlessly searching for an answer, demonstrating the difficulty faced by counter-Enlightenment theologians whose main theological tools were authoritative works, rather than the emerging field of biblical criticism.<sup>42</sup> Horsley, although hailed as the victor in his dispute with Priestley, never satisfactorily rebutted his arguments.<sup>43</sup> His retreat into silence in the face of Priestley's demands for intellectual satisfaction only increased the Rector's public status: Priestley was often afterwards characterised as 'woman-like' for wanting to have the last word, whilst Horsley was rewarded with a bishopric.<sup>44</sup> Horne and Horsley both achieved popular success and preferment as a result of their opposition to Priestley, and their works were cited by Birmingham clerics in their anti-Priestley tracts.<sup>45</sup> In the aftermath of the riots anti-Trinitarian ideas were frequently cited as being offensive to the populace of Birmingham, inciting them to riot. Benedict's letter to the

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<sup>40</sup> Nigel Aston, 'Horne, George (1730–1792)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/13789>, 24 Nov 2006].

<sup>41</sup> Aston, 'Horne and Heterodoxy', pp. 898-915.

<sup>42</sup> Aston, 'Horne and Heterodoxy', p. 914.

<sup>43</sup> Hole, 'Horsley, Samuel'.

<sup>44</sup> *The Controversiad* (1790).

<sup>45</sup> For example, Croft, *Cursory Observations*, p. iii.

*Shrewsbury Chronicle* advocated a rapid prosecution of Priestley, possible under the Blasphemy Act of 1697, and explicitly charged the authorities with having failed to prevent the riots through not having acted before.<sup>46</sup>

Priestley's methods of biblical criticism were attacked and rejected by the clergy of the Church of England, indeed theologians such as Horne refused to engage with them. Underlying these arguments was a fundamental disagreement over the place of reason in religious life. For Priestley, reason had to be at its heart. 'Be not backward or afraid . . .' he wrote in 1782 'to make use of your reason in matters of religion, or where the scriptures are concerned. They both proceed from the same God'.<sup>47</sup> This emphasis on the use of reason led Priestley to question the infallibility of scripture, and to seek to interpret it in the light of its historical moment. For many of the Established Clergy who wrote in opposition to Priestley, the danger of a rational approach to the scripture was the emphasis it placed on personal interpretation over authoritative writings. Individual rights might come to triumph over distinction, with no discrimination between the unlearned and the learned.<sup>48</sup> Edward Burn, in his *Letters to the Rev. Dr. Priestley, on the Infallibility of the Apostolic Testimony, concerning the Person of Christ*, defended scriptural infallibility and attacked the use of reason.<sup>49</sup> He considered that denying infallibility was not only theologically erroneous, but was a dangerous practice. The authority of scripture was crucial, allowing it to be defended against man's reason, which could be 'capricious, erroneous, and opposite'.<sup>50</sup> During the 1780s, the public prominence of Priestley's ideas tended to encourage a polarisation of views, including on the use of

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<sup>46</sup> Benedict, [*An authentic Account of the Riots*], UC2/186, Appendix, p. 23.

<sup>47</sup> Joseph Priestley, *An Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity . . .* (Birmingham, 1782), p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Croft, *Cursory Observations*, p. 15.

<sup>49</sup> Edward Burn, *Letters to the Rev. Dr. Priestley, on the Infallibility of the Apostolic Testimony, concerning the Person of Christ* (Birmingham, 1790).

<sup>50</sup> Burn, *Letters to the Rev. Dr. Priestley*, p. 24.

reason. Three references in the work of George Croft, not at that stage a Birmingham cleric, but soon to be appointed there, demonstrate the way this change could happen. In 1786 Croft delivered the prestigious Bampton Lectures at Oxford. His first, on the text 'Yea, and why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right', considered the vital importance of the use of reason 'upon all religious subjects'.<sup>51</sup> Two years later he finished his *Cursory Observations chiefly respecting Dr. Priestley*, with a call to abandon unnecessary theological investigation, as 'Faith' and the 'practical duties of Religion are more necessary to be attended to'.<sup>52</sup> By the time of his sermon, *The Test Laws Defended*, preached at St Philip's, Birmingham, in 1790, he wished to have effective censorship on the matter of Unitarian ideas about the Trinity.<sup>53</sup> The hardening of Croft's views on theological inquiry and the use of reason demonstrates the way in which Established Church clerics were becoming convinced of the dangers posed by exchange of ideas, wide-ranging biblical criticism, and Unitarian tenets in particular.

After the riots, more populist tracts aimed at the Birmingham public also questioned the legitimacy of biblical criticism. *A Poetical Effusion* asks 'How dar'st thou question the Almighty's word?'<sup>54</sup> The question enunciates a common theme in the popular anti-Priestley literature, that he showed a lack of respect for scripture and was willing to attempt to legitimise the practice of rejecting sections with which he did not agree. The author of the John Nott pamphlet likened Priestley's techniques to a 'pick-pocket [as] has said there ought to be never a *not* in the eighth commandment'.<sup>55</sup> In a

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<sup>51</sup> Luke XII. 57, cited George Croft, *Eight Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford, in the year 1786 . . .* (Oxford, 1786), p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> Croft, *Cursory Observations*, p. 20.

<sup>53</sup> Croft, *Test Laws*, p. xi.

<sup>54</sup> John Morfitt, 'A Poetical Effusion' reprinted in A V Simcock, "'Reason's Dim Telescope': A Poetic Tirade against Joseph Priestley, F.R.S.' in *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* (1995) 49, 1, pp. 82-3.

<sup>55</sup> Nott, *Very Familiar Letters*, p. 26.

published letter supporting the banning of controversial divinity from the Birmingham Library the author accused Priestley of manipulating scripture for his own ends.<sup>56</sup> The sophistication of Priestley's work on scripture made it easily dismissed as sophistry. His opponents could portray, not only his ideas, but his theological techniques as suspect and a threat to the heart of revealed religion.

It was not only Priestley's theological work which was seen as threatening to the Established Church. Several authors suggested that he was using techniques of natural philosophy to theological ends, and that this was an unnatural and arrogant way of conducting such work.<sup>57</sup> The author of *A Letter to Doctor Joseph Priestley* saw this as a two-fold outrage: Priestley attempted to discern God in nature rather than in scripture, and in his examination of scripture refused authority in favour of 'mathematical demonstration' and the use of understanding.<sup>58</sup> Edward Burn, usually less reliant than other clergymen on works of the Church fathers, turned to Jeremiah Seed to condemn the use of 'metaphysics' in theological discussion as 'fruitful of little else but *thorns* and *briars* to entangle and perplex'.<sup>59</sup> There were frequent similar complaints about the blurring of the lines between Priestley's roles as natural philosopher and theologian. For Priestley, all personal resources given by God had to be put to use in his greatest purpose – that of the religious life and scriptural investigation. For others, Priestley was using his skills as a philosopher to obfuscate his dangerous message and to hide the deficiencies in his theological work. Burn saw this as a highly dangerous strategy, which might deceive 'men of discernment and conscience' to into regarding his '*probabilities, general considerations and acute conjectures*' as authority.<sup>60</sup> This went to the heart of one of the

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<sup>56</sup> Anon., *Letter to Doctor Joseph Priestley*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>57</sup> Anon., *Letter to Doctor Joseph Priestley*, p. 31; Morfitt, 'A Poetical Effusion', pp. 82-3.

<sup>58</sup> Anon., *Letter to Doctor Joseph Priestley*, p. 31.

<sup>59</sup> Jeremiah Seed quoted in Burn, *Letters to the Rev. Dr. Priestley*, p. 7.

<sup>60</sup> Burn, *Letters to the Rev. Dr. Priestley*, p. 29.

most serious threats felt by the Church from Unitarianism, that good, able, influential men might be tempted from the Church of England by theological sophistry. The extraordinary popularity of Theophilus Lindsey's Essex Street Unitarian Chapel demonstrated the way in which Unitarianism could achieve converts amongst the educated and sophisticated, potentially depriving the Church of clergy and key laity. In Birmingham, the popularity of Unitarianism amongst the wealthy and influential of the Inquiring Sort meant that the Established clergy were constantly faced with the potential power of the sect. By the mid-1780s the threat had become so acutely felt that the clergy were willing to use a range of methods to counter it. Hostile publications – named or anonymous, sermons from the pulpit, or the manipulation of town bodies all became necessary tools in the fight against the Unitarian threat.

#### The fight for influence in Birmingham society

The writings of the Birmingham clergy made it clear that they viewed Unitarianism as, not only theologically erroneous, but as a danger to the social order. Edward Burn accused Priestley of undermining the moral obligation on which rested the 'security and peace' of society.<sup>61</sup> He contended that the removal of apostolic infallibility threatened the status of the Ten Commandments and hence the conduct of men, and urged Priestley to consider the consequences to society of a method of theological investigation which undermined all authority.

Powerful Birmingham loyalists took direct action during the 1780s to counter this perceived threat to the social order. Two disputes wracked the town as the Church of England clergy and their supporters attempted to protect their parishes from Unitarian

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<sup>61</sup> Burn, *Letters to the Rev. Dr. Priestley*, pp. 25-7.

influence. In a dispute over the admissibility of controversial ideas to the Birmingham Library they attempted to prevent the availability of dangerous theology to a wide range of the Inquiring Sort, whilst at the same time discrediting Priestley and his ideas. In a fight to control the Birmingham Sunday Schools the clergy sought to prevent these ideas being spread to the thousands of mechanics, labourers and unemployed to whom the Church was failing to reach out through pastoral care, but whose children were beginning to be reached by the Sunday Schools.

### The Birmingham Library

In the course of the conflicts which tore through the Birmingham Library during the second half of the 1780s, disputes over controversial ideas were, for the first time, aired in the public sphere. The simmering tension over the perceived dangers of Unitarian theology and other radical ideas, which had been growing since the arrival of Joseph Priestley and was also played out at the same time in the arguments surrounding the Birmingham Sunday Schools, were given explicit voice in the pamphlets which were published during these years of dispute. There were a number of contemporary publications regarding the history of the Library, although the minutes of the Library committee from these years are lost. However, these publications must be used with some caution as they are extremely partisan, and several written after the riots of 1791. In spite of this, a useful picture of the development of the library and the course of the subsequent dispute can be built up. The contemporary pamphlets are also extremely valuable in enabling an analysis of the kinds of fears, assumptions and desires which were the basis for much of the conflict which culminated in the riots.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Joseph Priestley, *An Address to the Subscribers of to the Birmingham Library, on the Subject of Mr. Cooke's Motion . . .* (Birmingham, 1787); Anon., *A Letter to Doctor Joseph Priestley*; Anon., *A Fair*



The origins of the library rest firmly with the Inquiring Sort.<sup>63</sup> It was founded by a group of men, almost all of whom were Dissenters, in 1779. Its leading light was John Lee Jnr, a Unitarian merchant and button maker, in whose rooms the library was originally housed.<sup>64</sup> Its origins were, according to William Hutton, 'exceedingly minute . . . their whole stock might have been hiding in a handkerchief', although this may be poetic licence on Hutton's part, as Joseph Priestley in 1781 said it was 'in its very infancy, but it already contains a valuable collection of books'.<sup>65</sup> The aims of the library seem always to have been liberal, both in terms of its membership and its content.<sup>66</sup> In 1781 Priestley joined the library and, using the experience he had gained at Leeds, set about transforming it into an institution of ambitious scope and scale. There was general consensus from all sides in the dispute that he changed the library beyond all recognition, for the better, and that without his reforming zeal it would have remained a small, select body.<sup>67</sup> The books were bought by a committee, which was elected annually by the subscribers, with the explicit aim that it would 'promote a spirit of liberality and friendship among all classes of men without distinction'. It was hoped that in time the library might 'contain[s] all the most valuable publications in the English language'.<sup>68</sup> In

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*Statement of Facts, containing a short Account of the Institution of the Birmingham Library . . .* (Birmingham, 1789); Edward Burn, *A Reply to the Reverend Dr. Priestley's Appeal to the Public, on the Subject of the late Riots at Birmingham, in vindication of the Clergy . . .* (Birmingham, 1792); John Edwards, *Letters to the British Nation and to the Inhabitants of every other Country* (Birmingham, 1792); Joseph Priestley, *Familiar Letters, addressed to the Inhabitants of Birmingham, in refutation of several Charges . . .* (Birmingham, 1790); Joseph Priestley, *Appeal to the Public on the Subject of the Riots in Birmingham . . .* (2nd edn., Birmingham, 1792).

<sup>63</sup> For the early workings of the Birmingham Library, see chapter 3.

<sup>64</sup> Jo Hunt, *A History of the Birmingham Library 1779-1979: A Bicentenary Reappraisal* (Birmingham, 1979), pp. 2-3.

<sup>65</sup> William Hutton, *An History of Birmingham. The Third Edition* (Birmingham, 1795), p. 165; *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, 11 June, 1781, cited Charles Parish, *History of the Birmingham Library. An Eighteenth-Century Proprietary Library as described in the Annals of the Birmingham Library, 1779-1799 . . .* (London, 1966), p. 13.

<sup>66</sup> John Edwards, *Letters to the British Nation*, p. 12.

<sup>67</sup> Anon., *A Fair Statement of Facts*, p. 4; Edwards, *Letters to the British Nation*, p. 11; Burn, *A Reply to the Reverend Dr. Priestley's Appeal*, p. 13.

<sup>68</sup> *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, 11 June, 1781, cited Parish, *History of the Birmingham Library*, p. 13.

its period of growth after 1781 several members of the Established Clergy joined and began to be elected to the committee.<sup>69</sup>

Rumblings of discontent began in 1785 or 1786. Although 1786 was the year in which the arguments over controversial books began, there was a bizarre incident in 1785, alluded to by Priestley in a pamphlet at the time and later described by his successor pastor, John Edwards. It was alleged that Spencer Madan, Rector of St Martin's, had blotted the word Reverend from before the names of Priestley and one of his fellow Dissenting pastors, Mr Scholefield.<sup>70</sup> The accusation was not denied in any of the loyalist pamphlets, and if true demonstrates a high level of contempt felt by Madan, and possibly his fellow clergy, towards the Dissenting ministers of Birmingham.

The arguments over the admission of controversial texts to the Library erupted in 1786 and continued for several years. The bones of the dispute are thus. It had been the stated wish of Joseph Priestley on his reordering of the Library that books of controversial divinity should not be admitted until Library funds permitted that books on all sides of the dispute could be purchased, and it seems that members of the Established clergy who joined the Library and Committee in the early 1780s agreed to this principle. However, there was no clause in the Library's rules to that effect. In 1786 the issue became one of dispute. The Committee, which had become dominated by members of the Established Church, probably by the illicit use of lists for the election of members, voted to purchase Priestley's *History of the Corruptions of Christianity*.<sup>71</sup> The only Dissenter present, William Russell voted against the purchase. The loyalist accounts of the dispute do not record that the work was voted in by a Committee of Established

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<sup>69</sup> Anon., *Fair Statement of Facts*, p. 5.

<sup>70</sup> Edwards, *Letters to the British Nation*, p. 13.

<sup>71</sup> Priestley, *Address to the Subscribers of to the Birmingham Library*, p. 7; Edwards, *Letters to the British Nation*, p. 13.

Churchmen, but neither do they deny it, the author of *A Fair Statement of Facts* merely remarked that controversial works 'crept into the library'.<sup>72</sup> Spencer Madan and four others resigned from the Library in protest at the admission of the work, then reinstated themselves. It seems at this point that Priestley agreed to the admission of controversial divinity, feeling that there were sufficient funds and that interest in the subject was high. He suggested works that could be purchased which held opposing views to his own.<sup>73</sup>

At this point an attempt was made by a Captain Charles Cooke to prevent the admission of any 'books of *controversial divinity*', by means of a motion presented to the subscriber's meeting in December 1787.<sup>74</sup> Joseph Priestley then published an *Address to the Subscribers of Birmingham Library*, in which he argued for the motion to be rejected in order to retain the independence of the Committee and prevent one class of book from being excluded. Both Captain Cooke's motion and Priestley's *Address* were, in the main, fairly even-tempered documents, although offence was taken on both sides by certain aspects of them. Cooke, for example, described books of religious disputes as 'mere lumber', whilst Priestley accused the clergy of wishing to censor the reading material of Library subscribers.<sup>75</sup> Before the subscriber's meeting another pamphlet was published, anonymously, by a non-subscriber, which accused Priestley of lying in order to cast the clergy in an unfavourable light, and described him variously as '*Proud and Haughty Scorners*', 'insidious ravener' and 'deluded visionary'.<sup>76</sup> The author, described by the writer of *A Fair Statement of Facts* as 'a very well meaning young man', is generally identified as being John Clutton, lecturer of St Martins.<sup>77</sup> Cooke immediately published a letter in

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<sup>72</sup> Anon, *Fair Statement of Facts*, p. 5.

<sup>73</sup> Priestley, *Address to the Subscribers*, pp. 5-7.

<sup>74</sup> 'Mr. Cooke's MOTION' reprinted in Priestley, *Address to the Subscribers*, p. 3, original italics.

<sup>75</sup> 'Mr. Cooke's MOTION', *ibid.*, p. 3; Priestley, *Address to the Subscribers*, p. 8.

<sup>76</sup> Anon., *A Letter to Doctor Joseph Priestley*, pp. 4, 5, 24.

<sup>77</sup> Anon., *A Fair Statement of Facts*, p. 6; Clutton is named on the copy of *A Fair Statement of Facts* housed in Birmingham Library.

*Aris's Birmingham Gazette* stating his aims in restricting books of theology as being to prevent strife, suggesting a separate library for the learned professions along the same lines as the existing scientific one, and praising Priestley for his work on the library. There was further unpleasantness with an exchange of anonymous letters concerning Cooke's character and motives.<sup>78</sup> At the meeting of subscribers the motion calling for books of controversial divinity to be inadmissible was rejected by two thirds of the subscribers. After this Priestley and those who were happy to see controversial texts admitted, felt that they had won the day.<sup>79</sup> However, in the election to the committee a large number of non-Dissenters were admitted, according to John Edwards by the use of lists to influence the voting, and those who were opposed the the admission of controversial texts became the larger party on the committee.<sup>80</sup> The next few years were marred by bickering over voting lists and anonymous motions censuring one side or the other. Eventually, in 1794, the library split over the issue of choosing books. A generally Dissenting group resigned and set up the Birmingham New Library, which flourished in the nineteenth century.<sup>81</sup>

At the heart of the dispute which eventually split the Library, was the issue of control of ideas. The group which centred around Spencer Madan, and styled themselves the Church party, were determined to prevent controversial divinity being admitted to the public sphere of the town. Although the apologists for controlling the admission of certain books often spoke in terms of avoiding 'a spirit of controversy' or 'explod[ing] the idea of party influence', the Church party were willing to see the Library split on the

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<sup>78</sup> Anon., *A Fair Statement of Fact*, pp. 10-15.

<sup>79</sup> Joseph Priestley to Theophilus Lindsey, cited Parish, *Birmingham Library*, p. 22.

<sup>80</sup> Edwards, *Letters*, p. 15; Priestley, *Appeal to the Public*, p. 12.

<sup>81</sup> Hunt, *Birmingham Library*, pp. 5-7; J A Langford, *A Century of Birmingham Life . . .* (2 Vols, Birmingham, 1868), 1, pp. 294-5.

issue - just as they were with the Birmingham Sunday School.<sup>82</sup> The Churchman behind *A Fair Statement of Facts* himself placed the nub of the controversy with the admission of dangerous religious texts and the desire of 'a number of well disposed members, anxious for the peace and quiet of their friends and families, and desirous of keeping from their knowledge the numberless writings that are daily published against the established religion of this country'.<sup>83</sup> For the author of *A Letter to Doctor Priestley*, the issue was pressing: the 'whole neighbourhood' was in danger from 'a fountain of erroneous opinions, spreading infidelity, heresy, and schism'.<sup>84</sup> With the possibility of controversial books being admitted to the Library there was danger of the persuasive sophistry which the Churchmen saw in heterodox texts reaching the ears of those who might be swayed by its arguments. The Library subscription rates had been set deliberately low to enable many to read, so a large number of unsophisticated Birmingham readers could gain access to Unitarian ideas. This was not simply a dispute between a few vocal, publishing antagonists, there is evidence that the townspeople cared about the Library, and about the attempt to restrict the subject matter available. Julius Hardy, Methodist and no natural supporter of the Unitarians, attended a subscribers meeting for the first time in 1790 in order to vote Dissenters onto the committee, including Priestley. He also wrote that he attended in order that he might 'lend my voice and vote in favour of the former (the Dissenters)'.<sup>85</sup> There was a clear attempt by both sides to claim the right to the conscious souls of the Birmingham people. Priestley and his friends amongst the Inquiring Sort were described as 'a warring power' rampaging

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<sup>82</sup> Charles Cooke, cited Anon., *A Fair Statement of Facts*, pp, 6 and 9.

<sup>83</sup> Anon., *A Fair Statement of Facts*, p. 5.

<sup>84</sup> Anon., *Letter to Doctor Priestley*, p. 22.

<sup>85</sup> Birmingham City Archive, Julius Hardy, 'Journal' MS218/1 Transcript at MS 839/53, December 3, 1790. Original parenthesis.

through 'a peaceful country'.<sup>86</sup> However, an anonymous letter attacking Captain Cooke did so on the (incorrect) grounds that he was not a native of the town.<sup>87</sup> Different visions of Birmingham were set against each other - the bastion of loyal Churchmen protecting the townspeople against invading alien ideas clashed with the Inquiring, sophisticated, learned town of men, curious about new ideas and willing to give a hearing to many.

### Sunday Schools: The conflict for the mind of the child

The last decades of the eighteenth century saw the beginnings of the Sunday School movement, which came to fruition during the next hundred years. Whilst historians of the nineteenth century regarded the Sunday-School movement as one of crucial importance for both education and social cohesion, twentieth-century historians have tended to neglect the Sunday Schools.<sup>88</sup> The main historiographical debate has been between those historians, such as Asa Briggs and E P Thompson, who saw the Sunday Schools as 'agencies of middle-class moral and political influence, or even indoctrination' and Thomas W Lacqueur, for whom the Sunday School movement was an integrated part of the working-class community, arising from it and serving its interests.<sup>89</sup> Since Lacqueur published his ideas in *Religion and Respectability* in 1976, many historians have expressed reservations about his ideas. The 1770s had seen several examples of provision of schooling for the children of the poor on the Sabbath, including by the Unitarian, and close friend of Joseph Priestley, Theophilus Lindsay.<sup>90</sup> However, it was

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<sup>86</sup> Anon., *Letter to Doctor Priestley*, p. 44.

<sup>87</sup> Cited Anon., *A Fair Statement of Facts*, p. 12.

<sup>88</sup> K D M Snell, 'The Sunday-School Movement in England and Wales: Child Labour, Denominational Control and Working-Class Culture', *Past and Present*, 164 (1999), pp. 122-4.

<sup>89</sup> Snell, 'The Sunday-School Movement in England and Wales', pp. 132-3 for an analysis of this historiographical debate.

<sup>90</sup> R A Soloway, *Prelates and People. Ecclesiastical Social Thought in England 1783-1852* (London and Toronto, 1969), p. 350.

the work of Robert Raikes, a Gloucester journalist and Evangelical, which brought the idea to national attention. Raikes organised lessons on Sundays for the children of the poor, who were otherwise unoccupied on that day.<sup>91</sup> Raikes's classes were not significantly different from those which had preceded them, but they rose to wider prominence through his promotion of the idea, first in the *Gloucester Journal* and then in the *Gentleman's Magazine*.

The motivation for the provision of basic education for the children of the poor under the auspices of Church or Meeting House was generally underpinned by two related aims. Firstly, by a short-term desire to control the behaviour of children, both on a Sunday when they were not restrained within the confines of their work, and whilst they were in that work environment. Secondly there was a long-term aim of salvation for those children.<sup>92</sup> The aim of salvation was bound up with both the Christian duty to save souls, and the hope that children schooled in Christian morality would become humble, disciplined, accepting adults.

The Sunday School movement in Birmingham began in 1784 with an attempted interdenominational approach, and one which bears no relation to Laqueur's vision of Sunday Schools emerging from the people. The initial organisation originated at an open meeting, advertised in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* and held at the Birmingham Hotel, at which subscriptions were taken.<sup>93</sup> Control of the scheme lay with the subscribers, from whom the management committee was chosen and who were the visitors to the schools. The aim was to provide for those children who were labouring during the week.<sup>94</sup> A

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<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 349, 350-55.

<sup>93</sup> Herbert New Jnr, *CENTENARY of the Church of the Messiah (formerly New Meeting) Sunday Schools. Sketch of the History of the Schools, from their commencement in 1788 to the present time* (Birmingham, 1888), p. 3; Langford *A Century of Birmingham Life*, 1, p. 409.

<sup>94</sup> *Rules and Orders for Sunday Schools*, reprinted Langford *Century of Birmingham Life*, 1, p. 410.

Report of 1787 set out the dual aims of salvation and social control explicitly. The children were to be instilled with ' . . . the best Principles, and not only rendering them most essential Service as Members of Society by the Improvement of their Understandings, but guarding them against the delusions of the world, and qualifying them for the glories of another'.<sup>95</sup> The scale was ambitious from the start - Birmingham was to be divided into twelve sectors, each sector to have one school for boys and one for girls. The initial assessment of need seems, if anything, to have under-estimated the situation: within two years there were almost sixty schools serving about two thousand children.<sup>96</sup> The rules of the schools were firmly Sabbatarian - pupils and teachers were to attend church or chapel morning and afternoon. However there seems to have been some possibility for moving beyond the customary restriction on teaching anything other than reading at Sunday Schools. The rules stated that the children should be taught 'what is suited immediately to the design of the Sabbath-Day', but that also they should be taught that which might 'presev[e] young people from idleness, immorality, and ignorance.'<sup>97</sup> There was clearly scope within the second part of this rule for teaching skills beyond those necessary to read the Bible and gain a basic understanding of the concepts of salvation and damnation, although there is no evidence that this happened.

Although both Dissenters and Churchmen were involved in the creation of the Birmingham Sunday Schools, the Established Church interest seems to have dominated from the start - the scholars were to attend an Established Church service and the Clergy were responsible for catechising the children.<sup>98</sup> The Rector of Birmingham, Charles Curtis, was an active instigator of the scheme and its first chairman. John Clutton was

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<sup>95</sup> October 2, 1787, 'Report', reprinted Langford, *Century of Birmingham Life*, 1, p. 419.

<sup>96</sup> New, *Centenary*, p. 3.

<sup>97</sup> *Rules and Orders for Sunday Schools*, reprinted Langford, *Century of Birmingham Life*, 1, p. 410.

<sup>98</sup> *ibid.*, 1, p. 410.



another initial subscriber.<sup>99</sup> Throughout the Church of England the Sunday School movement was regarded with some suspicion, although it was regularly, if cautiously, endorsed by many of the bishops.<sup>100</sup> Its early proponents, including Raikes and Hannah More, were strongly associated with the growing Evangelical wing of the church, and hence prompted fears of enthusiasm and Methodism. However, these concerns seem to have been generally associated with conservative rural areas, where an alliance of hostile parson and landowner could quash any attempt at introducing Sunday Schools.<sup>101</sup> George Horne, whose work was likely to be known amongst the Birmingham Clergy as a result of his printed disputes with Joseph Priestley, was a supporter of the movement – arguing in 1786 that only religious principles could make the poor obedient of human laws.<sup>102</sup> In Birmingham the support of the Anglican clergy, particularly Charles Curtis, for Sunday Schools meant that they had a good chance of wide support within the Established Churches and Chapels of the town.

Despite initial cooperation, the Birmingham Sunday Schools soon became a focus for the tension in the town. Members of the Established Church clergy and prominent laymen had been at the forefront of the movement to establish the Schools, however James Luckock, who was involved in the New Meeting Sunday Schools during the 1790s, implies that the Dissenters allowed the Established Church dominance in order to secure the successful introduction of the scheme.<sup>103</sup> Soon however, the regulation insisting on attendance at an Anglican church by the pupils soon led to disquiet among the Dissenting subscribers. They twice attempted to enable children of Dissenting

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<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*, 1, pp. 409 and 411.

<sup>100</sup> Soloway, *Prelates and People*, p. 355.

<sup>101</sup> Soloway, *Prelates and People*, pp. 352, 355.

<sup>102</sup> George Horne, *Sunday Schools Recommended in a Sermon . . .* (Oxford, 1786), cited Soloway, *Prelates and People*, p. 354.

<sup>103</sup> James Luckock, *Moral Culture* (1817), extract to be found in Birmingham Records Office, Church of the Messiah, Sunday School Centenary, 1888, UC2/165, p. 4.

parents, or those who had come to the school under the influence of a Dissenting subscriber, to attend a Dissenting service instead of an Anglican one, first in 1786 and then a year later. However, by a narrow margin, both of these attempts were defeated and the ideal of interdenominational Sunday Schools ended, with the Dissenters withdrawing and forming their own schools. In the second attempt to resolve the situation, the Dissenter's motion was rejected on the casting vote of Charles Curtis as Chairman. The action of Curtis, which inevitably led to the split of the Dissenters from the scheme, make it seem likely that there was a decision made to make the Sunday Schools exclusively Anglican establishments.

The atmosphere of tension in the town over the danger of Unitarian and radical ideas, and the recorded concerns of other Anglicans over such ideas being promulgated to the children of the poor, suggest that the motive behind the Curtis's exclusion of the Dissenters was a desire to protect the thousands of children being taught though the Schools from dangerous ideas. Contemporary concerns about the teaching of the children of poor families abounded. There was widespread worry that children who were taught too much would no longer be useful labourers and most Sunday Schools emphasised that reading only was taught.<sup>104</sup> In a pamphlet concerned with the Birmingham Library the view of childish innocence threatened by dangerous theology was starkly laid out.

Does not Reason tell us that it is the good Shepherd's duty, not only to feed his sheep, but with a tender care to lead his lambs, and guard their helpless age from every hostile incursion? to pluck the counterfeit clothing of harmless simplicity from the insidious ravener's back? to shew what arts

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<sup>104</sup> Soloway, *Prelates and People*, p. 352.

the wily plunderer practices, to steal upon their unsuspecting affections?  
and to caution them against his insinuating advances? If this be the  
pastoral charge and mere *Reason's* voice declares it is, will not Reason go  
on and justify the measure that was adopted [publication of the  
*Preservative against Socinianism*], to keep safe from harm the *little flock*,  
while the wolf was seen prowling about for prey<sup>105</sup>

It is not clear how far the Established Clergy supported this invective at the time, but in 1792 Edward Burn endorsed it as a reply of 'just severity'.<sup>106</sup> With the advent of the French Revolution, some in the Church came to see the idea of teaching even reading to the poor as dangerous: 'who shall hinder them from reading bad books, as well as good . . . they will chuse for themselves, or suffer bad people to chuse for them' wrote Bishop Hurd of Worcester in a private letter in 1795.<sup>107</sup> The spectre of mass readings of Tom Paine's *Rights of Man* was clearly of concern to one of Birmingham's prelates.<sup>108</sup> Several bishops, including Samuel Horsley – like Horne known in Birmingham for his strong anti-Priestley stance – advocated a sharp dislocation between Church and Dissenting Sunday Schools, because of the risk of the Dissenters bringing dangerous Revolutionary principles to the poor.<sup>109</sup> In general there seems not to have been a mass outcry against the Sunday Schools in Birmingham after the Revolution, suggesting that the Sunday Schools may have been seen as safe from dangerous influences. The failure in Birmingham of interdenominational schooling was a forerunner of the situation which emerged around the country during the Napoleonic Wars, when fear of the spread of

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<sup>105</sup> Anon., *A Letter to Doctor Joseph Priestley*, p. 6.

<sup>106</sup> Burn, *A Reply to the Reverend Dr. Priestley's Appeal to the Public*, (Birmingham, 1792), p. 14.

<sup>107</sup> R Hurd to Rev. S Smith, 9 February 1795, cited Soloway, *Prelates and People*, p. 362.

<sup>108</sup> The parishes of Birmingham were divided between the diocese of Worcester and Lichfield and Coventry.

<sup>109</sup> Samuel Horsley, *Charge* (1800), cited *ibid.*, p. 363.

revolutionary ideas from Dissenters led to the ending of such schemes, and by the mid-nineteenth century denominational division was the norm.<sup>110</sup>

The Unitarian Sunday Schools which were subsequently established were popular: there were 1700 attending the Unitarian schools by the end of 1788 and it is noticeable that expenditure on teacher's salaries in the old, now exclusively Anglican, Sunday Schools dropped in the year following their establishment, perhaps indicating a fall-off in attendance there.<sup>111</sup> The Unitarian establishments were not as restricting and paternalistic as the Anglican model in Birmingham. The Vestry Meeting Minute recording the desire to begin the establishment of the schools recommended that it should be done 'upon the most liberal Plan'.<sup>112</sup> They were more explicitly secular than the interdenominational one had been, and were non-sectarian and separate from the chapels.<sup>113</sup> That the determination to be interdenominational was carried through, can be seen in the literature used in the schools. Unitarian texts such as Joseph Priestley's *Catechisms* and Anna Letitia Barbauld's *Hymns in Prose for Children* were used, but so was the evangelical Anglican Sarah Trimmer's *Sunday Scholar's Manual*.<sup>114</sup>

The influence of Joseph Priestley on the Unitarian Sunday Schools was strong. His was the first name on the committee charged with setting up the New Meeting Sunday School in 1788 and he gave the first Benefit Sermon the next year.<sup>115</sup> The

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<sup>110</sup> Snell, 'The Sunday-School Movement', pp. 136-7.

<sup>111</sup> New, *CENTENARY of the Church of the Messiah (formerly New Meeting) Sunday Schools*, p. 4; 2 October 1789, 'The Committee of Sunday Schools in account with Robert Coales', reprinted in Langford, *Century of Birmingham Life*, p. 421.

<sup>112</sup> Birmingham City Archive, New Meeting Vestry Minute June 23, 1788, UC2/95 – New Meeting and Church of the Messiah Sunday School Centenary 1888.

<sup>113</sup> Langford, *Century of Birmingham Life*, p. 420.

<sup>114</sup> Selected text books used in Sunday Schools, UC2/165 Church of the Messiah. Sunday School Centenary 1888; Barbara Brandon Schnorrenberg, 'Trimmer, Sarah (1741–1810)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/27740>, accessed 29 Sept 2006].

<sup>115</sup> Birmingham City Archive, Transactions Relating to the New Meeting Sunday Schools, MS 501/1-4, Vestry Minutes January 23, 1788; Birmingham City Archive, Report of the committee of the New Meeting Sunday Schools, Birmingham Records Office, UC2/234, November 2, 1817.

presence of Priestley in Birmingham and the influence of his ideas there may have been part of the concern that led Charles Curtis to expel the Dissenters from the Birmingham Sunday Schools. However, despite concerns about his radical ideas, Priestley had a typically paternalistic attitude to the poor, including to their education. Some historians have seen his writings on the education of the poor as contradictory, however they were in keeping with his theory and practice towards them.<sup>116</sup> For the wealthy or the educated, Priestley advocated the ascendancy of individual rights over the common good.<sup>117</sup> In his *Remarks on Dr Brown's Code of Education*, he argued that the state should have no role in the provision of education, believing it would result in the youth of the nation being indoctrinated with the ideology of the rulers.<sup>118</sup> However, his concern to protect the individual from the state was most directed at those that 'have wealth' or 'have sense'. The poor, he believed, were 'the most safe' from the gaze of even arbitrary government, being too humble to attract attention.<sup>119</sup> It is therefore not inconsistent with his theoretical ideas about the place of the poor in society that he believed that the state could have a role in the provision of basic education. Priestley believed that the poor were a problem for society, and made little distinction between poverty-stricken workers and the more lawless elements of society. In his pamphlet *An Account of a Society for Encouraging the Industrious Poor* (1787) he set out a scheme for enforced saving by industrial employees, to improve 'the present state of the *Poor*, and that of the *Criminals* among us'.<sup>120</sup> For Priestley, the poor were a group whose behaviour could be

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<sup>116</sup> Ruth Watts, 'Joseph Priestley and Education', *Enlightenment and Dissent*, 2 (1983), pp. 89-90.

<sup>117</sup> Joseph Priestley, *An Essay on the First Principles of Government and on the Nature of Political, Civil and Religious Liberty, including Remarks on Dr. Brown's Code of Education . . .* (2nd edn, London, 1771) reprinted in Joseph Priestley, *Political Writings* (Cambridge, 1993), p37; Peter Miller, 'Introduction', in Priestley *Political Writings*, p. xix.

<sup>118</sup> Priestley, *An Essay on the First Principles of Government*, pp. 39, 42, 45.

<sup>119</sup> Priestley, *An Essay on the First Principles of Government*, p. 37.

<sup>120</sup> Joseph Priestley, *An Account of a Society for Encouraging the Industrious Poor* (Birmingham, 1787), p. 3.

manipulated with savings schemes and the closing down of alehouses. However, unlike many of his contemporaries, who were concerned to give moral education without changing the state of the poor, Priestley believed that, as a group, the poor could learn and that, individually, they could legitimately rise in society.<sup>121</sup> In his *Lectures on History and general Policy* he advocated nationwide, state provision of schools to teach reading and writing to all, and in his *Account of a Society for Encouraging the Industrious Poor* he suggests universal literacy as a key tool in encouraging independence, ambition and industry, condemning those who advocated ignorance for the poor for their irresponsible attitude.<sup>122</sup> His attitude to the education of the poor might be most accurately described as paternalistic – whilst he believed the poor needed to be controlled and managed he also believed they could learn, benefit from learning and even rise within society as a result of it.

One of Joseph Priestley's strengths as a pastor was the thought and time he gave to the organisation of his church and congregation. At Birmingham he expanded and improved on many of the structures he had created during his time at Mill Hill in Leeds fifteen years before. In this way the mark of Priestley's thought about education of the poor can be discerned in the nature of Sunday Schooling through New Meeting.<sup>123</sup> The Sunday School Sermons were mainly fund-raising occasions, but they were also an opportunity to show the respectable nature of the Unitarian Sunday School provision, and to place and locate the children within their appropriate sphere of society. The physical appearance of the children was an important sign of the work done. In an account of the

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<sup>121</sup> Priestley, *An Account of a Society for Encouraging the Industrious Poor*, pp. 16-17; Priestley, *An Essay on the First Principles of Government*, p. 37.

<sup>122</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Lectures on History, and general Policy; to which is prefixed, an Essay on a Course of liberal Education for civil and active Life* (Dublin, 1788), p. 232; Priestley, *An Account of a Society for Encouraging the Industrious Poor*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>123</sup> This is distinct from the extensive and wide-ranging education given to the children of the members of New Meeting.

1791 sermon, sent to Priestley soon after his forced move to London, the fact that children were of 'charming appearance . . . the boys . . . remarkably clean in their linen and decent in their clothes' was the first concern of the author.<sup>124</sup> The words of the hymns written to be sung by the children and congregation on these occasions make explicit the separate worlds which the congregation members and Sunday School children occupied. Even the singing was segregated, with separate verses for congregation and children.<sup>125</sup> Throughout the 1790s the words of the hymns echoed the same themes – knowledge will lead to salvation, the children have been lifted from sin and woe by the bounty of their betters, and deliverance from ignorance will be rewarded by good conduct.<sup>126</sup>

In spite of the paternalistic attitude of Joseph Priestley and the Unitarian establishment in Birmingham towards the education of the poor through Sunday Schools, their radical ideas were sufficiently threatening to the Established Church in Birmingham that a concerted campaign seems to have been used to strip ecumenism from the Sunday School project in the town. In common with the disputes over admission of controversial texts to the Birmingham Library which was playing out at the same time, the issue at play in the struggle to ensure that the Sunday Schools was in safe, Church hands, was the control of ideas. Those who styled themselves the Church party believed that radical religious ideas, particularly Unitarian ones, posed a threat to social order in Birmingham. They were willing to risk destroying useful institutions in order to prevent such ideas being widely circulated. In the Library dispute there was danger that they might reach the less wealthy of the Inquiring Sort, who could only access such material through the

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<sup>124</sup> Birmingham City Archive, Church of the Messiah. Sunday School Centenary 1888, UC2/165 p. 7.

<sup>125</sup> 'An Hymn, to be sung by the Children belonging to the New-Meeting Sunday Schools . . .', December 11, 1791, Birmingham City Archive, Church of the Messiah Sunday School Scrap Book 1791 to 1895, UC2/234.

<sup>126</sup> Hymns for 11 December 1791, 2 November 1794, 20 October 1799 and 1802, *ibid.*

reasonable rates of the Library. In ejecting the Dissenters from the Birmingham Sunday Schools, Charles Curtis was willing himself to make the casting vote which would result in splitting the project. The perceived dangers of Unitarian theology were such that effective and harmonious administration of the town could be sacrificed to attempt to prevent its spread.

### Reactions to Unitarianism

It should not be thought that Unitarian ideas were seen as threatening or dangerous only by theologians and clerics. The reaction of ordinary, literate, reading church-goers to the ideas propounded by men such as Joseph Priestley or Richard Price is hard to establish, yet there is some evidence that these ideas were seen by some as a threat to their own religious lives. Mentioned several times in contemporary sources, is the belief that Unitarian theologians were attempting to deprive believers of the comfort to be gained from traditional religion. In a published letter written to Priestley after the riots, 'Clericus' accused him of having 'endeavoured to deprive us of the comfortable doctrines of Atonement and Grace'.<sup>127</sup> Helena Wells (?1761-1824), a loyalist writer and educator, in *Constantia Neville*, a book set partly at the time of the 1791 riots, set out the dangers inherent for the ordinary reader in delving into Unitarian theology.<sup>128</sup> The opinions are those of Constantia, who, during a conversation in a stage coach, establishes herself as being liberal enough to condemn the Birmingham riots and the destruction of Priestley's work. However, she considers his theology to be 'subversive of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity'. When asked if she has read any of his works she replies that

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<sup>127</sup> Clericus, 'To the Rev. Dr. Priestley', [*An authentic Account of the Riots*], UC2/186.

<sup>128</sup> Helena Wells, *Constantia Neville; or The West Indian* (3 Vols, London, 1800), 3, pp. 104-5; Jane McDermid, 'Wells, Helena (1761?-1824)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/45790>, accessed 13 Oct 2006].



she has not as although 'my faith is, I hope, too firmly fixed, to be unsettled by reading of any kind. The perusal of well-written tracts might, however, bewilder my imagination'. For Constantia, the danger in Unitarianism was that, in the denial of the doctrine of atonement and the divinity of Christ, she would be deprived of her 'sheet-anchor' and be unable to take comfort from Christ's atonement for the sins of the world.<sup>129</sup> Here again is the idea that there was something dangerously seductive about Unitarian ideas, that even those of firm faith might become 'unsettled' or 'bewildered', thus losing a crucial element of the role played by religion in their everyday lives – that of providing comfort. Certainly Priestley seems to have been not much interested in religion as a source of comfort. In his writings about faithful lives, it is from one's children and from members of one's religious community that comfort is derived.<sup>130</sup> For Priestley, the guiding spirit in religious life, thought and investigation had to be reason.<sup>131</sup> This was the clash of needs which must have lain behind much opposition to Priestley's Unitarianism. Clericus understood the need of many, like Constantia, to receive comfort from their religious doctrines, even if there was some hint or suspicion that the doctrine might not be scripturally sound. It is, perhaps, in the appeal of the offer of comfort, contrasted with the requirement to use reason, that may be found the basis for the failure of Rational Dissent in the face of the Evangelical revival.

### **Levelling Ideas and Revolutionary Threats**

Although most prominent Dissenters were paternalistic in their views and cautious about

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<sup>129</sup> Wells, *Constantia Neville*, p. 103-5.

<sup>130</sup> Priestley, Joseph, *A serious Address to Masters of Families, with Forms of Family-Prayer* (2nd edn., London, 1770), p. 7; Joseph Priestley, *A free Address to Protestant Dissenters, on the Subject of Church Discipline; with a preliminary Discourse, concerning the Spirit of Christianity* (London, 1770), p. 130.

<sup>131</sup> Priestley, *Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity*, pp. 1-2.

ideas of democracy and equality, writers hostile to the sect frequently charged Dissenters with being levellers or revolutionaries. In the rush of pamphlets and sermons which emerged in Birmingham during the campaign for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, Dissenters, and heterodox Dissenters in particular, were portrayed as participating in a campaign which had as its ultimate aim the overthrow of the British State. In the national arena the arguments from the defenders of the Acts centred on expediency – defending the alliance of Church and State against those who planned to destroy it via the disestablishment of the Anglican Church, if given the opportunity.<sup>132</sup> The discussion of necessary restriction of natural rights tended to be harsher when discussing Unitarians – the danger they posed was seen as much more pressing therefore their demands were more forcefully resisted.<sup>133</sup> The Birmingham publications opposing the campaign were concerned with presenting the campaigners as a grave and immediate danger to English society. Birmingham Unitarians – Priestley and William Russell in particular - were driving forces in the national, interdenominational, campaign for repeal.<sup>134</sup> The presence of such prominent local figures in the national campaign meant that in Birmingham the opponents of repeal tended to focus on the Unitarian threat, and the perceived threats of levelling and revolution which went with it.

In discussion of the ideas behind the campaign of the Dissenters to have the Test and Corporation Acts repealed, it is almost impossible to distinguish between the ideas of their published writers, which caused disquiet to the clergy and loyalists; the threatening ideas which were attributed to the Dissenters or assumed to be held by them; and the ideas which loyalist writers put into the mouths of the Dissenters in order to make clear

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<sup>132</sup> J C D Clark, *English Society 1660-1832. Religion, ideology and politics during the ancien regime* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 2000), p. 414.

<sup>133</sup> Clark, *English Society*, pp. 273-4, 337.

<sup>134</sup> Money, *Experience and Identity*, pp. 220-2.

the serious nature of the threat to readers of loyalist pamphlets. The ideas contained in published works such as Priestley's *Letter to Pitt*, in the wake of the first failure of repeal in 1787, or Richard Price's sermon *On the Love of our Country* delivered in 1789 did cause real alarm amongst loyalists. Priestley himself later admitted that his *Letter* had caused offence.<sup>135</sup> Spectacular and accessible works, such as the *Letter to Pitt*, were probably far more widely read than Priestley's political philosophy or theology, therefore many writers simply assumed that they knew what Priestley actually believed. George Croft, for example, in his *Cursory Observations chiefly respecting Dr. Priestley*, implied that he has read the *Letter to Pitt*, but a few pages later confessed 'I only dipped into the first volume of his Early Opinions', before elaborating on what he believed Priestley wrote there.<sup>136</sup> The fact that Croft – Doctor of Divinity, one-time fellow of University College, Master of Brewood Grammar School and chaplain to the Earl of Elgin – casually admitted that he did not bother to read the works on the basis of which he was about to condemn Priestley, was probably only unique in having made it into print. It is the way in which ideas such as Priestley's were perceived, and the way in which they were used by those who opposed him, which tells us about their contribution to the hostility in Birmingham at the end of the eighteenth century.

In *English Society* J C D Clark's story of the eighteenth-century State is one of Church and State interdependent, interconnected and reliant upon each other for survival.<sup>137</sup> In contemporary publications attacking Dissent, and especially Unitarianism, this vision of Bodies 'sharing the same Fate and Circumstances, Twisted and Interwoven into the very Being and Principles of each Other' was frequently alluded to.<sup>138</sup> The

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<sup>135</sup> Andrews, *Unitarian Radicalism*, p. 79.

<sup>136</sup> Croft, *Cursory Observations*, pp. 1, 4.

<sup>137</sup> Clark, *English Society*, pp. 26-34 and *passim*.

<sup>138</sup> Henry Sacheverell, *The Political Union* (Oxford, 1702), cited *ibid.*, p. 28.

loyalist rallying cry of 'Church and King' is the simplest demonstration of this connection, but accusations against Priestley often claimed that in attacking the Church (which he could hardly deny), he also attacked the monarchical state.<sup>139</sup> In 1788, the year between the first two attempts at repealing the Test and Corporation Acts, George Croft published his *Cursory Observations chiefly respecting Dr. Priestley*.<sup>140</sup> Croft was formally unconnected with Birmingham at this point, but his appointment to the lectureship of St Martin's three years later is perhaps an indication of the value the Birmingham clergy put on his views of Priestley. In the *Cursory Observations*, Croft's reasons that Dissenters should be excluded from 'any part of Civil Government' are straightforward: '[t]hey who would abolish episcopacy and tithes, who are Republicans in the State, as well as enemies of the Church' cannot be trusted.<sup>141</sup> However, it was not only Priestley who was seen as embodying republican dangers, Spencer Madan in 1790 accused all Dissenters of being 'unquestionably republican'.<sup>142</sup> In publications after the riot, loyalty and trust were again the key-notes. In Job Nott's *Life and Adventures*, the claims of the Dissenters were dismissed on the grounds that they were insufficiently loyal to the government to be entrusted with power.<sup>143</sup> Dr. Tatham's 'Letter to the Dissenters', which was published in the collection *An authentic Account of the Riots in Birmingham*, in 1791, so was presumably of local interest in the time after the riots, took the dual threat a stage further and claimed that Priestley worked 'against the Church and King of England, and against another King, greater and more divine than the King of England' and cast the rioters as having been 'Kindled with a spark of . . . loyalty' into

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<sup>139</sup> For example: John Churchman, [*An authentic Account of the Riots*], UC2/186, p. 43.

<sup>140</sup> Croft, *Cursory Observations*.

<sup>141</sup> Croft, *Cursory Observations*, p. 2.

<sup>142</sup> Madan, *The principal Claims of the Dissenters considered*, p. 8.

<sup>143</sup> Job Nott, *The Life and Adventures of Job Nott, Buckle Maker, of Birmingham . . .* (Birmingham, 1793), p. 9.

rebellion against him.<sup>144</sup>

Often, it was the threatening concepts of levelling and democracy which were held up as an example of the dangerous ideas emanating from Birmingham Dissent. Such threatening ideas were frequently regarded as the likely consequence of allowing Dissenters to participate more widely in the State. Imagery of the 'world turned upside-down' was frequently employed – John Morfitt used a pyramid metaphor, the Crown crushed 'Beneath the people's overwhelming *Base*'.<sup>145</sup> The use of the image of a pyramid allowed him to portray the likely result of the Dissenters requests as, not only unnatural, but also inherently unstable. *A New Song* directly accused Priestley and William Russell of personally grasping for power, whilst wanting to 'turn *all* topsy turvey'.<sup>146</sup> Defending the Test Laws, George Croft wrote of the dangers of Priestley's ideas about equality. Like Morfitt and the writer of *A New Song*, Croft considered that, not only would 'jealousy and discontent' be spread as a result of these ideas, but that it was Priestley's intention for this to happen.<sup>147</sup> In pieces written before and after the riots there is a strong sense that loyalist writers feared that Dissenters wished to spread chaos through British society. Discontent with the existing Establishment was translated into a desire for, not reform, but revolution.

Not all loyalist pamphlets attempted to warn of likely dangers or consequences of repeal, those aimed at a less sophisticated readership often retreated to humour and nonsense. The author of John Nott's *Very Familiar Letters* undermined the sense of the national campaign by making a play on the name of the Acts. He used the idea of Birmingham as a proudly non-corporation town, claiming that the consequence of

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<sup>144</sup> Edward Tatham, 'Letter to the Dissenters' in [*An authentic Account of the Riots*], UC2/186, p. 53.

<sup>145</sup> Morfitt, 'A Poetical Effusion' reprinted in Simcock, 'A Poetical Effusion', pp. 82-3.

<sup>146</sup> *A New Song*, MS690/54.

<sup>147</sup> Croft, *Test Laws*, p. xii.

repealing the Test and Corporation Acts would be to make Birmingham a corporation town, and therefore 'no bigger than Sutton'.<sup>148</sup> Nott then introduced the authority of 'Mr Thingembob, the school-master' to explain that the Acts were introduced to prevent 'Presbyterians from growing *testy* and *headstrong*'.<sup>149</sup>

The spectre of regicide was never far away from discussions of the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. George Croft, in his sermon defending the Test Laws, spoke of the charge as 'harsh' but 'well-founded': anyone who was sympathetic to Cromwell or cast doubt on the system of monarchy 'must be stigmatised as an enemy to the English constitution'.<sup>150</sup> John Churchman accused all Presbyterians of approving of the execution of Charles I and accused them, therefore, of being republicans still.<sup>151</sup> Together with the transformation of leading Dissenters into fairy-tale villains, allusions to the regicide were a useful tool for alerting those who could not grasp the complexities of theology or political theory to the dangers posed by the campaign to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts. It allowed language which was dramatic and portentous to be used in what could otherwise be a dry subject. 'Is there no reason to receive with suspicion their declarations of "reverence to the government" and of "loyalty to the king"' asked Spencer Madan, 'when the amount of that reverence has been exactly ascertained by a woeful experience of republican tyranny, and the extent of that loyalty has been exactly delineated with the blood of a king'.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Nott, *Very Familiar Letters*, p. 20.

<sup>149</sup> Nott, *Very Familiar Letters*, p. 21.

<sup>150</sup> Croft, *Test Laws*, p. v.

<sup>151</sup> John Churchman, [*An authentic Account of the Riots*], UC2/186, p. 43.

<sup>152</sup> Madan, *The principal Claims of the Dissenters considered*, pp. 13-14.

## Conclusion

The arrival in Birmingham of Joseph Priestley in 1780 created a situation in which the fundamental differences between the Inquiring Sort and the anti-Enlightenment, loyalist members of Birmingham society became increasingly public and obvious. By the middle of the decade the clergy of the Established Churches were sufficiently concerned that they destabilised local institutions, such as the Sunday School and the Library, in order to attempt to prevent ideas perceived as dangerous becoming widespread in Birmingham society. With the build-up of tension surrounding the campaign to repeal the Test and Corporation acts, and the commencement of the French Revolution, these tensions erupted into a printed battle of ideas. The clergy of Birmingham, anonymous pamphleteers and songwriters portrayed Dissent in general, the leading Dissenters of the town, and Joseph Priestley in particular as dangerous to the nation and Birmingham society. In these circumstances the anniversary dinner to celebrate the French revolution became the flash-point of the Church and King riot. Whether this was explicitly encouraged or implicitly condoned by the clergy and magistrates of the town cannot now be ascertained, however without the publications which flooded the town in the decade previously, it is hard to see how the large number who rioted could have come to see the Inquiring Sort as such a serious threat.

The destruction that was wrought on Priestley, his effective banishment from the town, and eventual emigration to America, did little to quell popular feeling against him. After the publication of Tom Paine's *Rights of Man* in 1791, Paine and Priestley were frequently linked in anti-Priestley polemics. Although Priestley was a published opponent of Paine's theism, their shared admiration for the French Revolution associated them in the public mind and provided a fruitful source of invective against Priestley's

ideas. Linking Unitarianism, atheism, natural philosophy and radical political ideas was a useful device in respectable sermons, loyalist 'True Blue' popular songs and pamphlets, and Evangelical tracts alike. The loyalist *A New Song* cast Priestley as a trenchant supporter of 'The blessings of Equality', and at once equates this with Paine's work in the malicious line 'Tho' the equal rights of Man set his Mansion-house a Blazing'.<sup>153</sup> Edward Burn, in more measured tones, but with equal certainty, sees the difference between Paine and Priestley as 'a principle of *prudence* than of general policy'.<sup>154</sup> Similarly John Churchman challenged Priestley to deny his agreement with Paine, and Job Nott placed them together as 'bothering' the mechanics of Birmingham with things in which they did not believe.<sup>155</sup> The fact that Priestley was a published opponent of Paine seemed to matter little; the two men could be yoked together to great effect. As the 1790s progressed, the emergence of proto-Reform and 'true-blue' loyalist groups polarised Birmingham society in a new, and more clear-cut manner. However, although the spectre of Unitarianism faded with the absence of Priestley and the death of many leading Unitarian theologians in the following decades, the image of the semi-atheist philosopher lived on as a popular hate-figure. In a Cheap Repository tract of 1797, *Mr. Fantom, the New Fashioned Philosopher and his Man William*, Hannah More sought to illustrate the dangers to society of philosophical engagement.<sup>156</sup> In the tract *Mr. Fantom*, with a new-found enthusiasm for philosophy born out of a desire for distinction, brings the evils of atheism to his servant, who is eventually dismissed, descends into crime and is hanged for his deeds. More held up the image of philosopher as popular hate-figure, encountered such populist works as *A New Song* and the Nott pamphlets, and used it to

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<sup>153</sup> *A New Song*.

<sup>154</sup> Burn, *A Reply*, p. 31, original italics.

<sup>155</sup> John Churchman, [*An authentic Account of the Riots*], UC2/186, p. 43; Nott, *Life and Adventures*, p. 5.

<sup>156</sup> [Hannah More], *Mr. Fantom, the New Fashioned Philosopher and his Man William* (London, [1797]).



demonstrate the dangers of atheism to the lower classes. Whilst Priestley, and very probably some of his antagonists such as Horne and Horsley, knew that he had won the theological debate, the enduring image of the dangerous philosopher in tracts such as *Mr. Fantom* shows the extent to which the Established Church managed to gain the upper hand in the popular argument about dangerous ideas in the 1790s.

## Conclusion

In studying the place of ideas and learning in late eighteenth-century Birmingham I have brought together two areas of current historical thinking about the eighteenth century. Firstly, there are the ideas which have emerged in the last twenty years about consumption, particularly the concept of consumption of texts, ideas or culture.<sup>1</sup>

Historians such as John Brewer and Ann Bermingham have made powerful arguments that we should view cultural objects as things which were consumed by those who participated in events, purchased paintings or read books. Together with ideas from historians about the interactions of Enlightenment thinking with the Industrial Revolution, particularly from Margaret Jacob and Joel Mokyr, a picture has emerged of Britain as a country suffused with the ideas of writers ranging from Voltaire to Lavoisier, a nation eager to consume items of luxury – from cheap cloth to cultural experiences, and a middling sort devoted to imagination, art and friendship.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, are the ideas about the place of religion in English society. The publication of J C D Clark's *English Society* has prompted a reassessment of the place of the Established Church and State in England.<sup>3</sup> Whilst Clark's ideas have been challenged, for example by Roy Porter and, recently, by Boyd Hilton, this study has shown that they can be

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1 Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (eds), *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century* (Basingstoke and New York, 2003); Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (eds.), *The Consumption of Culture: Image, Object, Text* (London and New York, 1995); John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London, 1991); John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination. English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1997); Neil Mckendrick, John Brewer and J H Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society* (London, 1982).

2 Joel Mokyr, *The Gifts of Athena: Historical Origins of the Knowledge Economy* (Princeton and Oxford 2002); Margaret C Jacob, *Scientific Culture and the Making of the Industrial West* (New York and Oxford, 1997).

3 J C D Clark, *English Society 1688-1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice During the Ancien Regime* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 2000).

useful within the context of an examination of the world of ideas and learning.<sup>4</sup> In Birmingham the ideological clash between the Established clergy and elements of the Inquiring Sort shows the way in which the Church was powerful, yet felt itself to be seriously threatened. Although eighteenth-century religion is now being studied in imaginative ways, the experience of ordinary people as serious consumers of religious ideas has not so far been properly explored.<sup>5</sup> The world of late eighteenth-century Birmingham shows that it is a subject which deserves attention.

I have developed the concept of the Inquiring Sort as a means of identifying and describing the distinct type of person, who I found to have been part of Birmingham society in the second half of the eighteenth century, yet which seems to be without definition in the current historiographical literature. The Inquiring Sort were marked out by their curiosity and interest in ideas ranging from new experimental techniques of natural philosophy, to rational religion, to the secrets of Freemasonry. Although their interest in ideas and their desire to learn define the unifying concept of the Inquiring Sort, in other ways they were diverse. From wealthy employers such as Lunar Society member Matthew Boulton, to humble apprentices who spoke at the Free Debating Society, they spanned divisions of wealth, power and influence. The category encompasses Anglicans and Unitarians, men and women, the highly educated and semi-literate, the lecturer and the audience member. Their desire to learn on an on-going basis made them consumers, and their belief that what they consumed had an impact upon them made them self-aware. The Habermasian authentic public sphere is

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4 Roy Porter, *Enlightenment, Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London, 2001); Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846* (Oxford, 2006).

5 Spaeth, Donald, *The Church in an Age of Danger: Parsons and Parishioners 1660-1740* (Cambridge and New York, 2000); Hole, Robert, *Pulpits, Politics and Public Order in England 1760-1823* (Cambridge, 1989); Porter, *Enlightenment*.

the milieu in which the Inquiring Sort moved.<sup>6</sup> In the home, in the clubs and in the semi-public spaces of coffee house and long room, they created a world of inquiry and debate which came to be seen as an explicit challenge by elements of the Established Church and State. I have argued that the Habermasian idea of the public sphere is a more useful concept than Davidoff and Hall's public/private sphere distinction.<sup>7</sup> In seeking to describe a retreat of women to the private sphere in the period 1780 to 1850 they have created a picture of a segregated world. The complexities of Birmingham society in the last decades of the eighteenth century mean such a picture is inaccurate.

An important aspect of the concept of the Inquisitive Sort is the idea of individuals with a sense of self. The focus on ideas and learning has shown the way in which people who were part of the Inquiring Sort embraced the idea of the improvement of self. The diary of Julius Hardy reveals that a modest button manufacturer regarded his own self as a mutable entity. The numerous opportunities for learning – lectures, printed guides, teachers – meant that for a relatively small sum a Birmingham manufacturer could improve his business, enhance his understanding and recreate his person in a new mould. The Inquiring Sort were consumers of cultural goods, but not as described by John Brewer in 'Attitudes towards culture as a commodity', part of *The Consumption of Culture*. Brewer's world of cultural consumption is one of 'display' and 'hedonism and sexual intrigue'.<sup>8</sup> For the Inquiring Sort of Birmingham there was a sense of moral seriousness about their cultural consumption. Sermons – both printed and spoken, works relating natural philosophy to

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6 Jürgen Habermas, (trans. Thomas Burger, assisted by Frederick Lawrence), *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, 1989).

7 Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes. Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London, 1987).

8 John Brewer, "'The most polite age and the most vicious'" Attitudes towards culture as a commodity, 1660-1800', in Birmingham and Brewer, *The Consumption of Culture*, p. 348.

industrial processes, and debates on friendship or politics – all were central parts of the Inquiring milieu. Religion was a fundamental part of this world. At the most elevated level, rational Christians set about a minute study of Biblical and early Christian texts in the manner of naturalists making microscopic studies of bees. For the majority of the congregations of churches such as New Meeting there was an expectation that reason would be used, that children of the members would be given a demanding and wide-ranging religious education, and that religion was a proper subject for study and contemplation. Seriousness in religion has been very much applied to the moral seriousness of the Victorian Evangelical Revival, yet in eighteenth-century Birmingham there was an intellectual seriousness about the matter of religion.

Although seriousness was a defining feature of the Inquiring Sort, conviviality and friendship so were also. The many clubs and groups which existed in late eighteenth-century Birmingham were concerned with ideas and learning in a resolutely convivial context. A variety of groups of men (and they were, almost exclusively, men) combined the exploration of ideas with drinking, eating and companionship. The Birmingham Book Club, for example, met in the convivial surroundings of Freeth's Coffee House. The Coffee House straddled the divide between the old world of tavern sociability and the eighteenth-century, Enlightenment milieu of the coffee house. Freeth himself embodied the multiple roles of publican, balladeer, host and book-club leader. In the Book Club, friendship combined with the reading of Paine and Cobbett. Many of the Book Club members were also Freemasons, and this offers another example of the interaction of ideas and friendship. Brotherhood was at the heart of this organisation, as was the concept of the secret, and the hierarchy of knowledge, rules and skills which could take a low-born man to the upper echelons of this highly

stratified society. As well as group conviviality there existed a strong sense of personal friendship. In *The Lunar Men*, Jenny Uglow told the story of a group linked together by close personal friendships.<sup>9</sup> The personal friendships of men such as John Baskerville and Joseph Priestley made Birmingham an important part of the networks of enlightened friendship which linked Paris with Edinburgh and London with Philadelphia. Examining these networks of association and ideas has enabled us to move on from Peter Clark's contention that associations were 'taking new cultural ideas from the great cities to the doorstep of country towns.'<sup>10</sup> We have seen how this town was not simply a passive recipient of 'new cultural ideas', but was the creator of its own, in turn spreading those ideas to the capital and beyond.

The established depictions of Birmingham in the late eighteenth century have been enhanced by this study of the Inquiring Sort. The provinces, and in particular the industrial provinces, are often marginalised by historians of cultural consumption – Birmingham has been too often seen only as domicile for some Lunar Society members.<sup>11</sup> Major historians of the town have tended to focus on industry or politics, in representations of Birmingham it is not until the mid-nineteenth century that any sense of a place of thought or the acquisition of knowledge emerges.<sup>12</sup> In studying both the religious conflict in the town and the place of ideas and learning in the public

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9 Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men. The Friends who made the Future* (London, 2002).

10 Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies, 1580-1800. The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford, 2000), p. 443

11 Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, pp. 498, 513, 599; Uglow, *The Lunar Men*.

12 Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham: The First Manufacturing Town in the World, 1760-1840* (London, 1989); Eric Hopkins, *The Rise of the Manufacturing Town. Birmingham and the Industrial Revolution* (Sutton, 1998); John Money, 'Taverns, Coffee Houses and Clubs: Local Politics and Popular Articulation in the Birmingham Area, in the Age of the American Revolution', *The Historical Journal*, 14, 1 (1971); John Money, *Experience and Identity, Birmingham and the West Midlands 1760-1800* (Manchester, 1977); Asa Briggs, 'Economic and Social History: Social History since 1815', *A History of the County of Warwick: Volume 7: The City of Birmingham* (1964); Roy Hartnell, *Pre-Raphaelite Birmingham* (Studely, 1996); Rachel E Waterhouse, *The Birmingham and Midland Institute* (Birmingham, 1954).

sphere, our knowledge of the town has been deepened and extended. I have shown that the Established Church in the town, far from being a negligible force, was a powerful presence. The use of mapping has shown the way in which the physical, social space of Birmingham changed over the course of the eighteenth century, with the decline of the old heart of the mediaeval village around St Martin's Church and the creation of a smart, dynamic quarter of the town in the north, based on commerce and consumption, printing and learning, pleasure and entertainment, and fashionable places of worship. This technique has helped to show, not only that a new quarter was created, but that at its heart were the locales of print and inquiry which were central to the world of the Inquiring Sort.

The Church and King riot of 1791 shows that, contrary to the assertions made by Roy Porter in *Enlightenment*, rational religion was not accepted by the religious establishment during the eighteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Underlying the conflict, which was rife in Birmingham society during the 1780s and early 1790s, were fundamental disagreements over the role of reason in religion, the possibility of personal interpretation of the Bible, the acceptability of the presence of controversial ideas – such as the non-divinity of Christ – in general society and the danger to Church and State from such ideas. Until the arrival of Joseph Priestley in 1780, the Inquiring Sort were fairly comfortably positioned within Birmingham society. After that time the clergy of the Established Church became fearful of the combination of a wealthy, rational, tolerant elite; a man of great abilities, national connections and dangerous tenets; and a populace eager for religious ministrations. Whilst there were many of Priestley's beliefs which were threatening to the Established Clergy, the means by

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13 Porter, *Enlightenment*, pp. 96-130.

which he achieved those beliefs were also a source of conflict. His explicitly stated belief that the basis of faith could change over the course of a lifetime was found extremely unsettling by a generally deeply conservative organisation. His use of the methods of natural philosophy in theological investigations challenged the reliance on the work of Church Fathers, on which much of eighteenth-century Anglican theology was based. In order to assert their control over the admission of controversial ideas and ways of thinking to the general populace of the town, the clergy and those who supported their cause were willing to take direct action against those they feared. The appointment of the proven anti-Priestley cleric Croft followed the open disputes within two of the town's institutions, the Sunday School and the Library. In each case members of the clergy were willing to engage in overt hostilities with Priestley and those who supported the free admission of texts and ideas in order to restrict them.

The Established clergy, and probably a handful of associates, also engaged in a print dispute which sought to reveal Priestley as a source of dangerous ideas which would damage Birmingham, the Established Church and English society. In doing this they sought to appeal to a wide variety of people, through sermons, ballads and popular pamphlets, using humour, half-truth and aspersion. Although the Establishment attack was not one on the Inquiring Sort, *per se*, in its assault on the free use of reason, the admissibility of all ideas and the appropriateness of discussion of controversial ideas amongst the mass of small manufacturers of the town, it made an attack on the mode of society which needed to exist in order for the Inquiring Sort to thrive.

The Inquiring Sort cannot be seen as proto-Reformers, proto-Utilitarians or as the nascent working class. They were the flip-side of Clark's *ancien regime*. Although they believed the future was theirs, their values of rationality, tolerance and progress



were smothered by patriotism, conservatism and reaction during the 1790s. The groups whose interest was united by a spirit of friendship, freedom and, above all, inquiry, were pushed in divergent directions by events at the turn of the nineteenth century - the French Revolution, the wars with France, the Evangelical Revival. Unitarianism, at the loss of its charismatic leaders, slumped in numerical weight, never achieving the mass conversions Priestley felt were imminent. Those mechanics who drank with Freeth and debated at the Free Debating Society became part of the great working-class movements of the next century. By the time the spirit of reform rose again in England, rational religion had dwindled in the face of Evangelism, clubbable conviviality had been subsumed into the rules and regulations of the nineteenth-century civic society, and the world where an individual could excel in inquiry over many areas was being lost to specialisation and professionalisation.

### **Future Work**

This study has suggested two possible avenues for future research. The first is suggested by the ideas explored in Joel Mokyr's *Gifts of Athena: Historical Origins of the Knowledge Economy*.<sup>14</sup> An analysis of this aspect of Lunar Society work would make an extremely useful micro-study to examine these ideas, particularly on the working interaction of propositional and prescriptive knowledge. Recent works on the Lunar Society and the Industrial Revolution have, of course, presented work on these

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<sup>14</sup> Joel Mokyr, *Gifts of Athena: Historical Origins of the Knowledge Economy* (Princeton and Oxford, 2002).

areas, but the ideas expounded in *Gifts of Athena* make extensive claims which a study of this kind could do much to investigate.<sup>15</sup> There are considerable archive materials available, the Birmingham City Archive alone holding over five hundred books and two thousand letters. The other subject of research suggested by this thesis is the Established Church in Birmingham. Very little work has been done on it, possibly because the eighteenth century parishes were divided between the diocese of Worcester and Lichfield, meaning that the archive material is now spread between those towns and Birmingham itself. The calibre of the main antagonists and the volume of their printed disputes mean that this could be a very interesting arena within which to explore the ideas of Clark, Porter and Boyd on the relationship between the Established Church and rational religion.

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15 Uglow, *The Lunar Men*; Schofield, *The Enlightenment of Joseph Priestley*; Margaret C Jacob, *Scientific Culture and the Making of the Industrial West* (New York and London, 1997).

## Appendix 1

### **Paintings**

Johannes Eckstein, 'John Freeth and his Circle',

oil on canvas, 1792, 1909P6

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery



Joseph Wright 'of Derby', 'A Philosopher giving that Lecture on the

Orrery in which a lamp is put in place of the sun', oil on canvas,

exhibited 1766

Derby Museum and Art Gallery

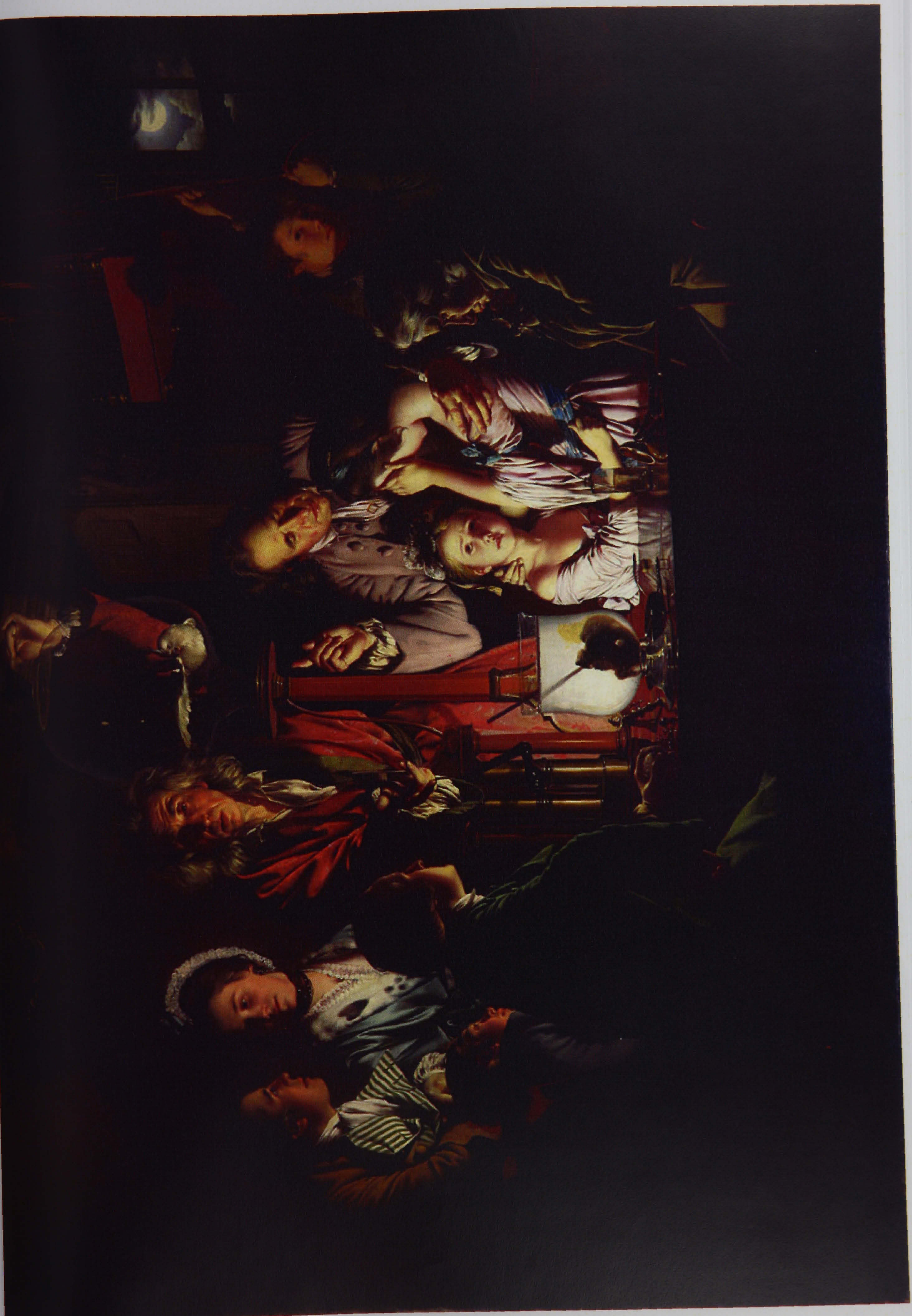


Joseph Wright 'of Derby', 'An Experiment on a Bird

in an Air Pump', oil on canvas, 1768, NG725

National Gallery





## Appendix 2

### **Maps**



Pre-1700 places of worship. Established Churches shown in blue, Nonconformist Meeting Houses in orange



Established Churches built during the eighteenth century



Taverns and Coffeehouses concerned with the world of print. Traditional taverns shown in blue, those restyled as coffeehouses are brown



Assembly Rooms. The assembly rooms, marked in pink, are placed firmly in the fashionable quarter



Location of Schoolteachers in the 1770s



Specialist School Teachers in the 1770s





Printers. Location of printers before 1750



Printers. Location of printers after 1750














Libraries and Booksellers. Pre1750 libraries (squares) and booksellers (diamonds). The blue marker is St Philip's Theological Library



Libraries and Booksellers. Post 1750 libraries (squares) and booksellers (diamonds)



Print Places. Post-1750 businesses and services connected with the world of print, showing the dramatic clustering in the streets around St Philip's and the Square (see over for key)

	Assembly Rooms		Booksellers		Blue Coat School
	Coffee Houses		Printers		Grammar School
	Taverns		Commercial Library		Dissenting School
			Theological Library		School Teachers

Appendix 3

**Baskerville Title Pages**

PUBLII VIRGILII  
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1757 Baskerville Edition of Virgil, Baskerville's first work



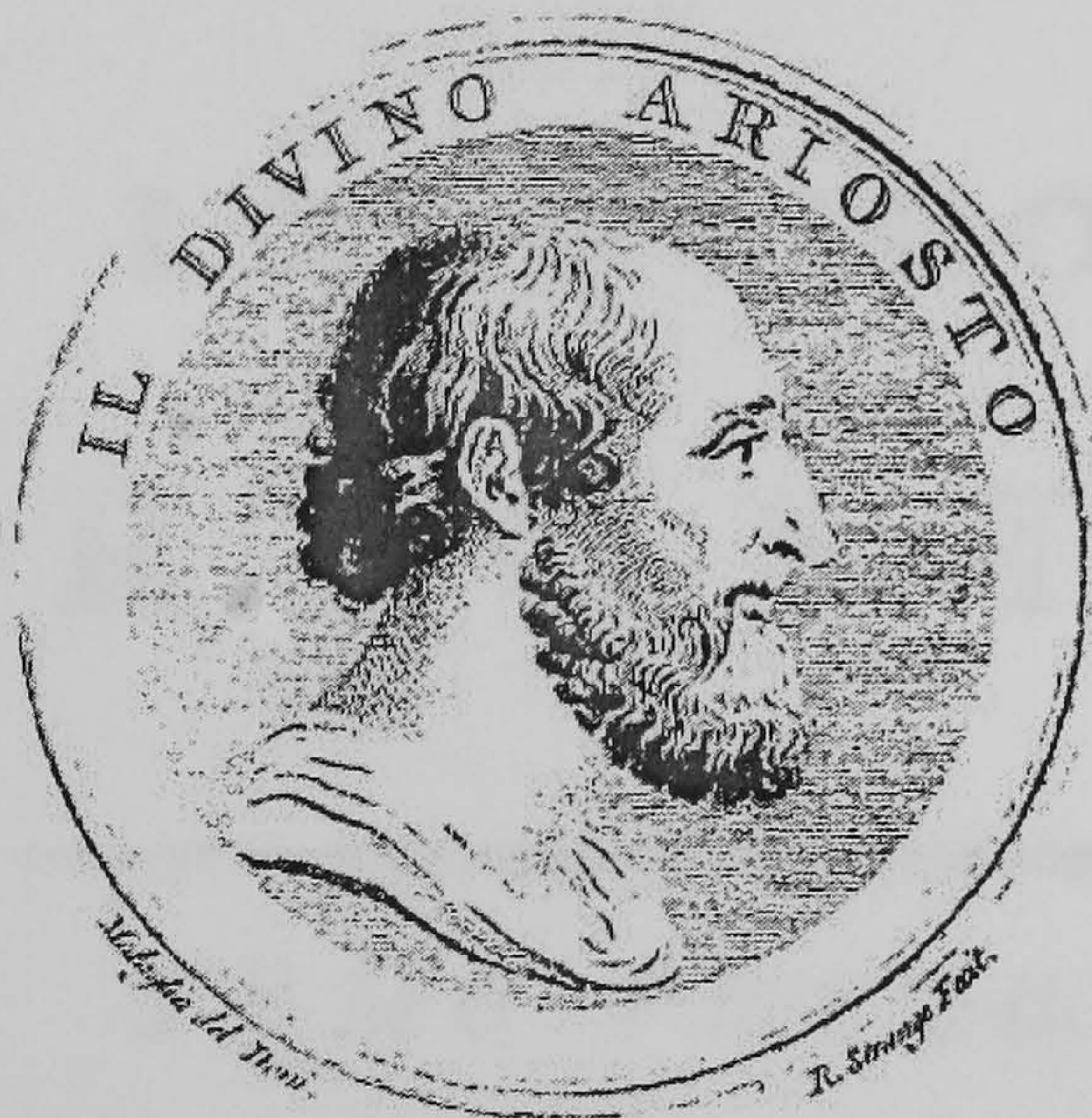
3DR  
ORLANDO FURIOSO,

BY

LUDOVICO ARIOSTO.

IN

ITALIAN and ENGLISH.



*Ille per extentum funem mihi posse videtur  
Ire Poeta, meum qui pectus inaniter angit,  
Irritat, mulcet, falsis terroribus implet,  
Ut Magus, & modò me Thebis, modò ponit Athenis.*

HORAT.

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VOL. I.

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LONDON:

Printed for the EDITOR, in Rupert-Street. M.DCC.LV.

ORLANDO

FURIOSO

DI

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*TOMO PRIMO.*

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*BIRMINGHAM,*

Da' Torchj di G. BASKERVILLE:

Per P. MOLINI Librajo dell' Accademia  
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*M. DCC. LXXIII.*

A N  
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True Christian Divinity,

As the same is Held Forth, and Preached, by the  
People, called in Scorn,

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and *Doctrines*, by many Arguments, deduced from  
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With a full Answer to the strongest Objections  
usually made against them.

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By ROBERT BARCLAY,  
And since Translated into *High Dutch*, *Low Dutch*,  
and *French*, for the Information of Strangers.

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The Fifth Edition in English.

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*Acts 24. 14.—After the way, which they call Heresie, so worship I the God of my  
Fathers; believing all things, which are written in the Law and the Prophets.  
Titus 2. v. 11. For the Grace of God, that bringeth Salvation, hath appeared  
to all Men. Vers. 12. Teaching us, that denying Ungodliness and worldly  
Lusts, we should live Soberly, Righteously, and Godly in this present World.  
Vers. 13. Looking for that blessed Hope, and glorious Appearing of the great  
God, and our Saviour Jesus Christ. Vers. 14. Who gave himself for us,  
that he might redeem us from all Iniquity, and purifie unto himself a pecu-  
liar People, Zealous of good Works.  
1 Thess. 5. 21. Prove all things, hold fast that which is good.*

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