

Theatre and Associational Life in Northern England

ca. 1760 to 1815

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Abstract

This thesis examines how actors engaged with the public, both inside and outside the playhouse, in the North of England during the late Georgian period. The aim is to better understand theatre's role in the region during this time of remarkable change. We know relatively little about the place of northern English theatre in eighteenth-century cultural, political, and intellectual life. The research therefore addresses this historiographical gap, proposing that theatre and its practitioners played a more significant role than previously recognized. The provincial player has long been considered a marginal figure with little influence over regional society; however, what emerges from the research is the actor as a local cultural broker who helped to circulate and generate new ideas in the North. Despite their marginal social status, the stage allowed actors a public voice and they used their capacity for rhetoric, or the art of persuasion, to promote local improvement. Actors took their civic responsibilities seriously and often stepped in to fill gaps in the social fabric by supporting the foundation of schools, libraries and dispensaries. They were also highly sociable, always on the move and their profession and cultural capital allowed them access to a variety of people in a wide range of social settings. This makes them an excellent lens through which to view the contours of eighteenth-century regional society. Unfortunately, due to their nomadic lifestyle, actors left few records behind; however, by adopting an approach that concentrates on sociability and networks of association, it has been possible to turn this methodological challenge to an advantage. To find out more about their presence in the theatrical landscape it has been necessary to seek out previously unexamined archives and in reclaiming this lost figure of the provincial player, the research reveals new insights that contribute to late-Enlightenment study, particularly regarding freemasonry, abolition and print culture.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work, and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as references.

The seventh chapter of this thesis is based on my chapter, “The Provincial Commencement of James Field Stanfield,” published in *Ireland, Enlightenment and the English Stage*, ed. David O’Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

Introduction

This thesis aims to use actors and a select number of theatre companies as a medium through which to examine local social and cultural life in the northern counties of England during the long eighteenth century. This introduction presents the rationale for the study, outlines the geographic and temporal framework and introduces the main themes that the research examines. The thesis intends to contribute to the growing body of work dedicated to eighteenth-century sociability and associational life with a particular focus on theatre and Enlightenment. The study's time frame extends from 1721 when the first recorded theatre company established itself in the North at York to the end of the Napoleonic War in 1815 which marks the end of the Butler company's dominance in the region; however, most attention is given to the period between 1760 and 1800 when the Durham company was at the peak of its local celebrity. For the purposes of the study, I define Northern England with an imaginary southern boundary drawn across the country from the River Humber at Hull to the Wirral Peninsula, with Scotland as the northern border. I occasionally include material from Scottish theatres but only regarding Northern English theatre.

Setting the scene

In 1783 a schoolmaster from the North Riding of Yorkshire called Thomas Pierson published *Roseberry-Toppin: or The Prospect of a Summer's Day: A Descriptive Poem* which surveys the territory explored in this thesis.¹ From his vantage point at the crest of Roseberry-Topping on the edge of the North York Moors, Pierson looks north and identifies Newcastle, Sunderland, Hartlepool and Stockton-on-Tees; to the west he sees Durham and Darlington overshadowed by the

¹ Thomas Pierson, *Roseberry-Toppin: or The Prospect of a Summer's Day: A Descriptive Poem* (Stokesley: N. Taylerson, 1783).

Pennines and distant Westmorland; while to the south lie Whitby and Scarborough. The region that Pierson describes is where the theatre company managed by Thomas Bates and his nephew James Cawdell performed for the last four decades of the eighteenth century. This troupe, known as the Durham company, is the band of players upon which much of this study is based. The aim is to use these little-known and previously unconsidered provincial actors and their associates as a portal into the region's social and intellectual history during what was a period of remarkable change. The primary intention is to show that this company and its rivals were both products and agents of these broader developments.

Writing of British eighteenth-century sociability and urban development, Jeremy Black notes that "Theatres, assembly rooms, subscription libraries and other leisure facilities were opened in many towns" and an approximation of this phrase can be found in many of the studies that have informed this thesis.² However, few historians have considered how those theatres were actually established, by whom, and in what manner the members of the theatrical profession interacted with townsfolk during this period when permanent theatres were being constructed in large numbers in towns across the nation. With the exception of Sybil Rosenfeld, Cecil Price, Alwin Thaler and a handful of local historians writing the histories of specific town theatres or county circuits, Georgian British regional theatre still remains a generally neglected area of study.³ Writing in 1933, Harold Newcomb Hillebrand noted that "no history of the provincial companies of the 18th and 19th centuries has ever been written ... and of the minor circuits we know practically nothing at all" to which Frederick Burwick responded, as recently as 2015, that "the same is true today. There is

² Jeremy Black, *Eighteenth-Century Britain, 1688-1783*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 121.

³ See Sybil Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players and Drama in the Provinces 1660-1765* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939); Cecil Price, *The English Theatre in Wales in the Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1948) and Alwin Thaler, "Strolling Players and Provincial Drama after Shakspeare," *PMLA* 37, no. 2 (1922): 243-280. A more recent overview has been provided by David Worrall, "How Local is Local? The Cultural and Imperial Politics of Georgian Provincial Theatre," in *Radical Cultures and Local Identities*, eds. Cowman Krista and Ian Packer (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 95-110.

still no history of the provincial companies.”⁴ This study therefore attempts to address this gap in historiography, at least with regard to the English northern counties.

The case for northern provincial theatre

A London engagement is generally considered by actors ... as the great prize in the lottery of their professional life. But this appears to us, who are not in the secret, to be rather the prose termination of their adventurous career: it is the provincial commencement that is the poetical and truly enviable part of it.⁵

William Hazlitt wrote his romantic appraisal of a strolling player in 1817, the year after he edited and published the author and playwright, Thomas Holcroft’s memoirs.⁶ Hazlitt included many valuable details of Holcroft’s strolling life in the North, working for the managers Thomas Bates, Joseph Booth and Samuel Stanton in the 1770s; however, most biographies of famous theatrical figures provide little information about their subject’s provincial periods. “It would not be my wish, if I had the means, to trace him through his severe pilgrimage among our country theatres,” declared John Philip Kemble’s biographer, James Boaden, because “The provincial engagements of Mr. Kemble produced to him frequent mortification and little of either profit or fame.”⁷ The dismissal of provincial theatre as a second-rate place for vulgar amateurs is a recurrent trope in the memoirs of Georgian actors once they had acquired their “London engagement.” For much of the ensuing two centuries theatre historians have done relatively little to dispel this notion, tending to regard the provincial theatre as “a site of aesthetic vulgarity ... and financial desperation” as Jane

⁴ Harold Newcomb Hillebrand, *Edmund Kean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1933), 26; Frederick Burwick, *British Drama of the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 2.

⁵ William Hazlitt, “On Actors and Acting,” in *Hazlitt on Theatre*, eds. William Archer and Robert Lowe (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), 141.

⁶ Thomas Holcroft, *Memoirs of the Late Thomas Holcroft, Written by Himself, and Continued to the Time of his Death, from his Diary, Notes and Other Papers*, ed. William Hazlitt, 3 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1816).

⁷ James Boaden, *Memoirs of John Philip Kemble, Esq: Including a History of the Stage from the Time of Garrick to the Present Period*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, 1825), 1:12.

Moody notes in her landmark essay “Dictating to Empire.”⁸ However, it is this thesis’ contention that along with “the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the ‘obsolete’ hand-loom weaver, the ‘utopian’ artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott” that the northern strolling actor also deserves to be rescued from the “condescension of posterity”.⁹ Due to their extremely sociable and highly mobile profession, provincial actors are an excellent lens through which to examine eighteenth-century regional society. In the words of the historian of Welsh provincial theatre, Cecil Price, “The history of their fortunes is in many ways an epitome of the changes in taste and interest in their day.”¹⁰ Actors had the rare ability to move between the period’s rigid social strata and develop associations with a remarkably broad range of people. Due to the access this allowed enquiry into northern theatre and its related networks of association necessarily illuminates the social life of the local communities in which the actors performed. The study therefore follows in the footsteps of Peter Clark who has shown the value of examining the period through association and it is also informed by the more regionally focused work of John Money.¹¹ The examination of northern theatrical associational life extends across a range of contexts including freemasonry, abolition, print culture, pedagogy and antiquarianism.

The regional playhouse provided an important opportunity for sociability and as David Worrall argues was one of the rare places in Georgian life where social structures broke down and people from different classes squeezed together in close proximity for an evening’s entertainment.¹² Price agrees that the theatre provided a “meeting place for all classes from the aristocratic to the

⁸ Jane Moody, “Dictating to Empire: Performance and Theatrical Geography in Eighteenth-Century Britain,” in *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre 1730-1830*, eds. Jane Moody and Daniel O’Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 27.

⁹ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 12.

¹⁰ Price, *English Theatre in Wales*, 5.

¹¹ Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Money’s study of the West Midlands identifies many of the characteristics of the provincial “middling sorts” and stresses the crucial importance of the press, the book trade and clubs although he does not extend his study to the theatre. See John Money, *Experience and Identity: Birmingham and the West Midlands 1760-1800* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977).

¹² David Worrall, *Theatric Revolution: Drama, Censorship and Romantic Period Subcultures 1773-1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 222-24.

criminal, nobleman to footman and servant.”¹³ John Brewer has noted that foreigners were astonished when they visited English theatres and “came to see the English stage as a microcosm of English society, a place which accorded much liberty to the ordinary man.”¹⁴ The thesis draws upon studies of sociability by Gillian Russell and Jon Mee to consider the ways in which theatrical attendance and related conversations helped to shape attitudes and opinion.¹⁵ The actor’s voice in this conversation has not tended to be included. Perhaps this is because, as David Wiles has noted, it “is not an elite voice, but a subaltern voice” which has been suppressed.¹⁶ The declared aim of Wiles’ recent study about the rhetorical acting method, *The Player’s Advice to Hamlet*, is to prioritise the actor because it is “predominantly critics, playwrights and cultural theorists whose thinking has found its way into the archive.”¹⁷ This, he argues, has distorted our understanding of the period. Wiles restricts his study to performance; however, my thesis shows that classical rhetoric underpins many other features of northern actors’ activities including their masonic attendance, as well as their literary output, which encompasses novel writing, histories of the stage and biographical theory. As I show, strolling players, trained in the art of rhetoric, often performed the role of cultural brokers in the provinces, helping to popularise ideas as they moved from town to town and across the North, making them key figures in the diffusion of new enlightened ideals. This approach is guided by Margaret Jacob’s example. While acknowledging the value of the history of ideas and Ernst Cassirer’s commanding work, she notes that the “lofty and static distance” from which he commands the intellectual landscape can be shortened and made more immediate by adopting a “civic” approach through which we “come closer to the intentions of many of its

¹³ Cecil Price, *Theatre in the Age of Garrick* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), 22.

¹⁴ John Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 284.

¹⁵ Gillian Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre in Georgian London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). See also Gillian Russell, and Clara Tuite, eds. *Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain, 1770-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011).

¹⁶ David Wiles, *The Player’s Advice to Hamlet: The Rhetorical Acting Method from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 2.

¹⁷ Wiles, *Player’s Advice*, 2.

participants.”¹⁸ The northern playhouse was a major focal point of local civic life and therefore provides a unique opportunity to witness what northern “participants” experienced.

Historiography: The northern companies and their circuits

Peter Borsay famously described how provincial England experienced an “urban renaissance” in the eighteenth century, noting that a common feature of a town’s civic improvement was the building of a new playhouse, combined with the support for a local theatre company which regularly visited the town, thereby acting as a centrepiece in a culture that thrived on performance and sociability.¹⁹ However, no town was able to sustain a theatre for a long period of time, so permanent regional companies, “the high and mighty of the profession,” usually based themselves in the principal county town and developed a circuit of theatres in nearby towns which they visited for a set period of time on a regular basis throughout the year.²⁰ From his base in Sunderland, Thomas Bates established playhouses in a string of towns along the northeast coast stretching for fifty miles from North Shields in Northumberland to Scarborough in the North Riding of Yorkshire, an area which included theatres in the coastal centres of South Shields, Sunderland, Stockton-on-Tees, Whitby and, further inland, the towns of Darlington and Durham. Visits were timed to coincide with events likely to attract the greatest number of theatregoers, such as an assize meeting, annual fair, militia muster, race week, Christmas, Easter week, and the summer holiday season was an important moment in the annual calendar for spa towns and leisure resorts. In another of his poems, the schoolmaster Pierson celebrates Stockton’s company and its theatre:

In fine improvements Stockton still abounds,
Gay splendour reigns, choice music more resounds;

¹⁸ Margaret C. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 18.

¹⁹ Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance, Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660-1770* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

²⁰ Elbridge Colby, “A Supplement on Strollers,” *PMLA* 39, no. 3 (1924): 645.

The splendid theatre is crouded here,
A band of fam'd performers ev'ry year
Delight the public in the comic vein,
Song, dance, or mourn aloud the tragic strain.²¹

The Durham company timed their stay in Stockton to coincide with the annual hiring fair in July.²²

While the Durham company acts as the lodestone by which to navigate the northern theatrical landscape, there are many other companies and individuals whose activities made this period a golden age for the institution of theatre as permanent playhouses were established for the first time. As I explain in the first chapter, a number of companies based in the Midlands also performed in the North West, but I have chosen to focus on the established companies that exclusively performed in the northern counties. Therefore, most of the supporting material relates to three prominent companies. These were managed by Joseph Austin and Michael Heatton, Samuel Butler, and Tate Wilkinson. For a map of the towns included on each of their company circuits see *figure 1*.

²¹ Thomas Pierson, "A Poem in Praise of Stockton," in *Miscellanies on Various Subjects, containing a Tragedy, founded on a Fact which happened upon Good Friday, in the Year 1753* (Stockton: Printed for the author, 1786), 197.

²² For the fair see John Brewster, *The Parochial History and Antiquities of Stockton upon Tees* (Stockton on Tees: R. Christopher, 1796), 52.

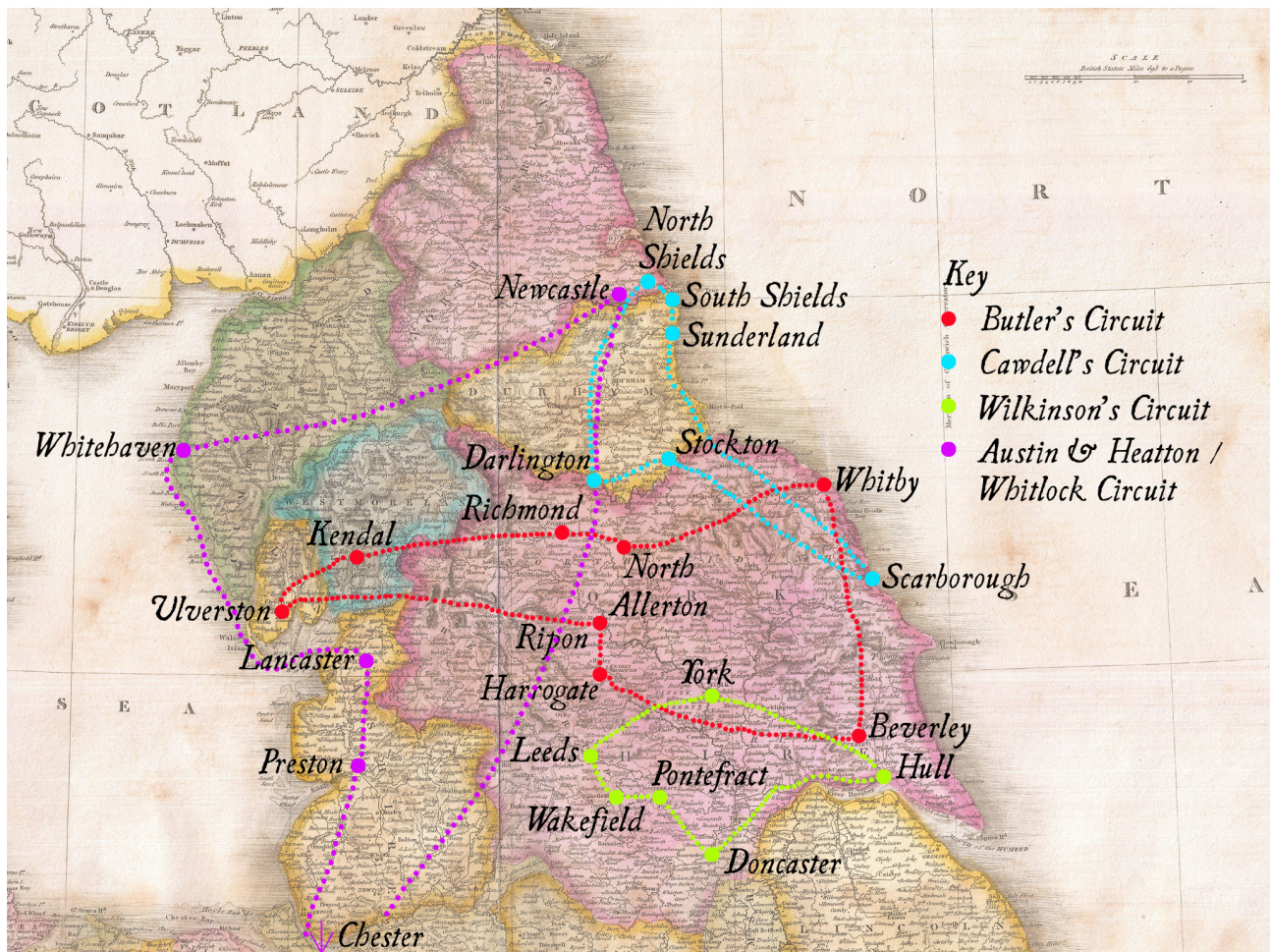


Figure 1. Four established theatre companies in the northern counties ca. 1760 - ca. 1815

While these companies established the most prestigious theatre circuits in the region, there were many other itinerant players or strollers who also provided theatrical entertainment in the counties of Yorkshire, North Lancashire, Cumberland, Westmorland, Durham and Northumberland. However, these performers operated on the fringes or outside of the law for which there are very few official records. The little we know about strolling companies tends to come from accounts written by the actors themselves. Sybil Rosenfeld drew upon fifteen of these “classics of strolling” from which to develop the first chapter of her seminal study, *Strolling Players & Drama in the Provinces 1660-1765*.²³ Although published in 1939, this work is still considered to be the

²³ In Rosenfeld’s *Strolling Players* she lists fifteen “strolling tales” as: George Akerby, *Life of James Spiller* (1729); Thomas Mozeen, *Young Scarron* (1752); Charlotte Charke, *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs Charlotte Chalk* (1755); Oliver Goldsmith, “Adventures of a Strolling Player” in *Essays*, 1765; George Parker, *A View of Society and Manners* (1781); Tate Wilkinson, *Memoirs* (1790) and *The Wandering Patentee* (1795); John Williams [pseud. Anthony Pasquin], *Eccentricities of John Edwin* (1791); William Templeton, *The Strolling*

authoritative study of the methods, organisation, and characteristics of post-restoration English provincial theatre.²⁴ Rosenfeld includes chapters on companies based at Bath, Canterbury, Norwich and York in a conscious effort to represent “the most productive centre for each point of the compass.”²⁵ Her work relies upon Tate Wilkinson’s two autobiographies: *Memoirs of his Own Life*, covering his early career as Samuel Foote’s understudy; and *The Wandering Patentee* that focuses on his life as the manager of the York company.²⁶ His insider view of eighteenth-century provincial theatre life provides numerous observations about the actors and companies featured in this study.

Histories of northern town theatres often start with a chapter on the foundation of a Theatre Royal in the latter part of the eighteenth century.²⁷ Many of these works were written in the first half of the twentieth century and are typically compiled by antiquarians from local newspapers and playbill collections rarely venturing into areas of academic theory.²⁸ The only theatre history of this type with information about the Durham company is Robert King’s *North Shields Theatre* which includes two chapters about Bates and Cawdell’s management.²⁹

Player; or Life and Adventures of William Templeton (1802); Charles Lee Lewes, *Memoirs* (1805); Peter Panglos [pseud.] *Memoirs of Sylvester Daggerwood* (1806); S. W. Ryley, *The Itinerant* (1808), E.C. Everard, *Memoirs of an Unfortunate Son of Thespis* (1818); Pierce Egan, *The Life of an Actor* (1824); John Bernard, *Retrospections of a Stage* (1830) and she also includes material from Holcroft’s *Memoirs* (1816).

²⁴ Robert D. Hume, “Theatre History, 1660-1800: Aims, Materials, Methodology,” in *Players, Playwrights, Playhouses: Investigating Performance 1660-1800*, eds. Michael Cordner and Peter Holland, (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 39, n. 28. Other early influential studies of post-restoration provincial theatre include the articles previously cited by Thaler and Colby plus Herschel Clay Baker, “Travelling Actors in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Studies in English* 21 (1941): 100-120.

²⁵ Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players*, 4.

²⁶ Tate Wilkinson, *Memoirs of His Own Life by Tate Wilkinson, Patentee of the Theatres Royal, York and Hull*, 4 vols. (York: Wilson, Spence, and Mawman, 1790) and Tate Wilkinson, *The Wandering Patentee: A History of the Yorkshire Theatres*, 4 vols. (York: Wilson, Spence, and Mawman, 1795).

²⁷ Examples from Wilkinson’s circuit include Thomas Sheppard, *Evolution of the Drama in Hull and District* (Hull, London, York: A. Brown, 1927); William Senior, *The Old Wakefield Theatre* (Wakefield: Radcliffe Press, 1894); C. M. P. Taylor, *Right Royal: Wakefield Theatre, 1776-1994* (Wakefield: Wakefield Historical Publications, 1995). For more recent studies see Sheffield Theatre History Research Group, *Georgian Theatre in Sheffield* (Sheffield: Pickard Communication, 2003).

²⁸ Two studies which feature in this research are R. J. Broadbent, *Annals of the Liverpool Stage: From the Earliest Period to the Present Time, together with some Account of the Theatres and Music Halls in Bootle and Birkenhead* (Liverpool: E. Howell, 1908) and J. L. Hodgkinson and Rex Pogson, *The Early Manchester Theatre* (London: The Society for Theatre Research, 1960).

²⁹ Robert King, *North Shields Theatres* (Gateshead-on-Tyne: Northumberland Press, 1948). Also see the locally produced pamphlets by Denis Towlard, *James Cawdell: A Georgian Theatrical Life* (Stockton on Tees: Stockton on Tees Borough Council, 2001) and *The Stockton Georgian Theatre* (Stockton on Tees: Stockton on Tees Borough Council, 1991). For Sunderland see George Patterson, *Sunderland’s first Theatre and Music Hall* (Sunderland: Sunderland Antiquarian Society, 2009). Publications about towns related to the

The Yorkshire company under Wilkinson's management from 1766 to 1806 had the best-known circuit in the North with its base in York and theatres in Hull, Leeds, Doncaster, Wakefield, Pontefract and occasionally in Halifax, Sheffield, Beverley, Newcastle and Edinburgh. It is the only northern company in this period for which a number of studies exist.³⁰ The most recent of these is Ian Small's unpublished PhD dissertation on Tate Wilkinson's company which summarises each theatre on the circuit and provides valuable insights into local taste and the demands this placed upon the manager.³¹ My study pays particular attention to the company's early period of development prior to the arrival of Wilkinson and also examines the role that its actors played in restoring freemasonry to York, as these are subject areas that Small did not consider.

Joseph Austin and Michael Heatton's mainly coastal company in the North West included the Chester Theatre Royal adding, under Charles Edward Whitlock's later co-management, Theatres Royal at Whitehaven and Newcastle.³² The actor-manager Stephen Kemble bought the company in 1791 and also purchased the Durham company in 1800. Many studies have concentrated on John Philip Kemble and Sarah Siddons, but their younger brother Stephen is less well documented, despite the fact that he was one of the best-known regional managers of the

management of Austin and Heatton or Whitlock and Stephen Kemble include A. G. Betjemann, *The Grand Theatre, Lancaster: Two Centuries of Entertainment* (Lancaster: University of Lancaster Centre for North-West Regional Studies, 1982) and Harold Oswald, *The Theatres Royal in Newcastle Upon Tyne. Desultory Notes Relating to the Drama and its Home in That Place* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Northumberland Press, 1936).

³⁰ For an extensive compilation of performances and cast lists relating to Tate Wilkinson's Yorkshire Company see Linda Fitzsimmons and Arthur W. McDonald, eds. *The Yorkshire Stage 1766-1803: A Calendar of Plays, together with Cast Lists for Tate Wilkinson's Circuit of Theatres* (Metuchen, N.J., and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1989). This work built on Arthur W. McDonald, "An Analytical Study and Calendar of Performances of the Yorkshire Circuit, 1775-1784," (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1976). For analysis of local theatrical sociability on this circuit see Arthur W. McDonald, "The Social Life of the Performer on the Yorkshire Circuit, 1766-1785," *Theatre Survey* 25, no. 2 (1984): 167-176. Rosenfeld also produced a general history of the York theatre, see Sybil Rosenfeld, *The York Theatre* (London: Society for Theatre Research, York, 1991).

³¹ Ian Small, "Tate Wilkinson's 'Monarchy': The Development and Significance of his Yorkshire Theatre Circuit, 1766-1803," (PhD diss., University of York, 2009). See also Ian Small, "Building a Monarchy: Tate Wilkinson's Yorkshire Theatre Circuit 1766-1803," *South Atlantic Review* 76, no. 1 (2011): 73-95.

³² See Cecil Price, "Joseph Austin and his Associates 1766-89," *Theatre Notebook* 4, no. 4 (1950): 89-94.

period.³³ The one notable exception to this is K.E. Robinson's essay on Kemble's management of the Newcastle Theatre Royal.³⁴

Samuel Butler's transpennine company developed a highly successful chain of theatres in market towns in the North and East Ridings of Yorkshire, North Lancashire and Westmorland. Margaret Eddershaw's *Grand Fashionable Nights: Kendal Theatre 1575-1985* includes material about their performances in the Lake District.³⁵ Rosenfeld's *The Georgian Theatre of Richmond, Yorkshire, and its Circuit* provides a survey of the company. However, like many histories of county circuits from other regions, her chronicle does not engage with broader academic discussion.³⁶ Butler's theatres were in prominent market towns, providing entertainment to town dwellers and rural folk across a swathe of transpennine northern England. Borsay describes the transition that troupes like Butler's made from strolling players to more stable, urban-focused companies and how towns profited from their association with a respectable and reliable group of performers as this improved their civic status and helped to attract visitors to their town.³⁷ Butler opened a permanent theatre in Richmond in 1788, a civic development which conforms to Borsay's thesis, reflecting the growing prosperity and pride which he argues transformed the social life of provincial towns as commercialism generated new forms of leisure.

³³ See Linda Kelly, *The Kemble Era: John Philip Kemble, Sarah Siddons, and the London Stage* (London: Bodley Head, 1980); Herschel Baker, *John Philip Kemble: the Actor in His Theatre* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942); Michael R. Booth, "Sarah Siddons," in *Three Tragic Actresses: Siddons, Rachel, Ristori*, eds. Michael R. Booth, John Stokes and Susan Bassnett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 10-65; Roger Manville, *Sarah Siddons: Portrait of an Actress* (New York: Putnam, 1970); Robyn Asleson, ed. *A Passion for Performance: Sarah Siddons and Her Portraitists* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Museum, 1999).

³⁴ K.E. Robinson, "Stephen Kemble's Management of the Theatre Royal, Newcastle upon Tyne," in *Essays on the Eighteenth-Century English Stage: Proceedings of a Symposium sponsored by the Manchester University Department of Drama*, ed. Kenneth Richards and Peter Thompson (London: Methuen, 1972), 137-148.

³⁵ Margaret Eddershaw, *Grand Fashionable Nights: Kendal Theatre 1575-1985* (Lancaster: University of Lancaster Centre for North-West Regional Studies, 1989).

³⁶ Sybil Rosenfeld, *The Georgian Theatre of Richmond, Yorkshire, and its Circuit: Beverley, Harrogate, Kendal, Northallerton, Ulverston and Whitby* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1984). Other regional studies include T. L. G. Burley, *Playhouses and Players of East Anglia* (Norwich: Jarold and Sons, 1928); Arnold Hare, *The Georgian Theatre in Wessex* (London: Phoenix House, 1958); Anthony Denning and Paul Ranger, *Theatre in the Cotswolds* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1993) and Paul Ranger, *The Georgian Playhouses of Hampshire 1730-1830* (Winchester: Hampshire County Council, 1996).

³⁷ Borsay, *Urban Renaissance*, 120.

The northern companies performed for summer seasons at the leisure towns of Harrogate and Scarborough where people gathered to display their status and engage in the forms of fashionable conspicuous consumption that has provided a rich vein for Georgian historical research.³⁸ However, the centres of leisure that the companies visited for two months of the year constitute only one location on an annual circuit. The rest of the time the actors performed in market towns, manufacturing towns and ports, as categorised by Rosemary Sweet, thus catering to the demands of local townsfolk who sought cultural improvement and enlightenment, as well as providing opportunities for the display and consumption which Borsay particularly emphasises.³⁹

A number of social historians have studied the differences between country, manufacturing and leisure towns.⁴⁰ Sweet's work on the hierarchy of politeness in provincial towns is particularly illuminating for the distinctions that this exposes.⁴¹ She draws attention to the writer of a Scarborough topography contrasting the resort's superior "refined amusements of a polished life" to nearby "closely and irregularly built" Whitby.⁴² In his examination of Leicester, York, Norwich and Derby Paul Elliot argues that the old established county towns acted as centres of cultural and

³⁸ Veblen's classic work on conspicuous consumption provides an argument about the fabrication of a consumer society that continues to influence social historians, see Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Macmillan, 1899). For fashion as a transcultural system of influence and an assessment of historiography regarding consumption see Frank Trentmann, "Beyond Consumerism: New Historical Perspectives on Consumption," *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 3 (2004): 373-401. For leisure towns see Leonard Schwarz, "Residential Leisure Towns in England towards the end of the Eighteenth Century," *Urban History* 27 (2000): 51-61 and Jon Stobart and Leonard Schwarz, "Leisure, Luxury, and Urban Specialisation in the Eighteenth Century," *Urban History* 35 (2008): 216-37. For resorts see John Walton, *The English Seaside Resort: A Social History 1750-1914* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1983).

³⁹ Rosemary Sweet, *The Writing of Urban Histories in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 7. For an important criticism of Borsay's thesis see Angus McInnes's reply in Peter Borsay and Angus McInnes, "Debate, The Emergence of a Leisure Town: Or an Urban Renaissance," *Past & Present* 126 (1990): 189-202.

⁴⁰ Rosemary Sweet, *The English Town, 1680-1840: Government, Society and Culture* (Harlow: Longman, 1999). Christopher Chalklin, *The Rise of the English Town, 1650-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). On manufacturing towns see Hannah Barker, "'Smoke cities': Northern Industrial Towns in late Georgian England," *Urban History* 31, no. 2 (2004): 175-190. For a cultural history of the development of late Georgian industrial towns see Katy Layton-Jones, *Beyond the Metropolis: The Changing Image of Urban Britain, 1780-1880* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2016).

⁴¹ Rosemary Sweet, "Topographies of Politeness," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 12 (2002): 355-374.

⁴² Sweet, "Topographies of Politeness," 367.

intellectual enlightenment allowing them to “ ‘punch above their weight’ in cultural terms” due to the large number of professionals, such as doctors, lawyers and clergymen that they attracted.⁴³ Elliot and Vladimir Jankovic have also noted the remarkable contributions made to enlightenment science by provincial intellectuals.⁴⁴ This research into northern theatre has identified several such figures, including John Christian Curwen from Workington who developed a famous model farm dedicated to agricultural improvement and who was a patron of the Cumbrian stroller Charlotte Lowes who features in this study.⁴⁵ As well as scientists the research has uncovered a number of examples of close association between the actors and provincial literary figures including poets and playwrights, essayists, biographers, antiquarians and writers of town histories.⁴⁶

While the importance of provincial urban culture has been long recognised by social historians, provincial literary life remains something of a lacuna. The “spatial turn” in literary studies has tended to focus on the work of individual writers such as Wordsworth.⁴⁷ David Chandler made the observation in 2010 that the first, and only, “comprehensive and systematic study” of a provincial literary centre in Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is Carl A. Weber’s *Bristol’s Importance for English Romanticism and German-English Relations*, a work that

⁴³ Paul Elliott, “Towards a geography of English scientific culture: provincial identity and literary and philosophical culture in the English county town, 1750–1850,” *Urban History* 32, no. 3 (2005): 392.

⁴⁴ Elliott, “Geography of English Scientific Culture,” 391–412 and Vladimir Jankovic, “The Place of Nature and the Nature of Place: The Chorographic Challenge to the History of British Provincial Science,” *History of Science* 38, no. 1 (2000): 79–113.

⁴⁵ See “Cumberland patronage” in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, “The Region: A Strolling Tale.”

⁴⁶ For an analysis of urban histories written about Newcastle upon Tyne, therefore of particular relevance to this study, see Rosemary Sweet, “The Production of Urban Histories in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Urban History* 23, no. 2 (1996): 171–188. The following year she published her seminal study on urban history, *The Writing of Urban Histories in Eighteenth-Century England*. For general background on Newcastle’s urban improvement see J. Burgess, *Newcastle upon Tyne: The City in Georgian Times* (Carlisle: John Burgess publications, 1990) and P. M. Horsely, *Eighteenth-Century Newcastle* (Newcastle upon Tyne, Oriel Press, 1971); S. Middlebrook, *Newcastle upon Tyne: Its Growth and Achievement* (Newcastle upon Tyne, Newcastle Chronicle and Journal, 1950), 144–60. On worker strike action and social struggle in eighteenth-century Newcastle see J. Ellis, “A dynamic society: Social relations in Newcastle upon Tyne 1660–1760,” in *Transformation of English Provincial Towns*, ed. Peter Clark (London: Hutchison, 1984), 190–227 and J. M. Fewster, “The Keelmen of Tyneside in the eighteenth-century,” *Durham University Journal* 50 (1957/8): 24–123.

⁴⁷ See for example, Michael Wiley, *Romantic Geography: Wordsworth and Anglo-European Spaces* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).

was written in German in 1935.⁴⁸ The reluctance to combine local social history with literary history is reflected by the recently published *The Economy and Culture in North-East England, 1500-1800* which highlights the vibrancy of regional life but does not include a chapter dedicated to literary culture.⁴⁹ This thesis intends to demonstrate that provincial theatre and its practitioners provide an effective medium through which to synthesise local social and cultural history. Networks associated with the Durham company include the playwright and antiquarian William Hutchinson and the grammarian Anne Slack among other historically significant cultural figures.⁵⁰ Relatively little has been published about the eighteenth-century northern stage in England; however, the study draws from a wide range of material about northern culture and the development of regional identity in the eighteenth century.⁵¹ *The Economy and Culture in North-East England, 1500-1800* does contain a chapter about Newcastle print culture which features the Slacks, whose “Printing Shop” was a meeting place for local literati and was frequented by the actors.⁵² Other

⁴⁸ David Chandler, “‘The Athens of England’: Norwich as a Literary Center in the Late Eighteenth Century,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 43, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 172.

⁴⁹ Adrian Green and Barbara Crosbie, eds., *The Economy and Culture in North-East England, 1500-1800* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer 2018).

⁵⁰ Helen Berry, “Landscape, Taste and National Identity: William Hutchinson’s View of Northumberland (1776-8),” in *Northern Landscapes: Representations and Realities of North-East England*, eds. Thomas Faulkner, Helen Berry and Jeremy Gregory (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2010), 247-260. Ann Slack published under her maiden name Fisher, see María E. Rodríguez-Gil, “Ann Fisher: First female grammarian,” *Historical Sociolinguistics and Sociohistorical Linguistics* 1 (2002): 11-38. Also see Barbara Crosbie, “Anne Fisher’s New Grammar: Textbooks and Teaching in Eighteenth-Century Newcastle Upon Tyne,” *Publishing History* 74 (2013): 49-65 and Barbara Crosbie, “New Generations of Pedagogues,” in *Age Relations and Cultural Change in Eighteenth-Century England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2020), 52-88.

⁵¹ For northern identity see Helen M. Jewell, *The North-South Divide: The Origins of Northern Consciousness in England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994) and Neville Kirk, ed., *Northern Identities* (Aldershot & Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2000). For an investigation of northeast identity from the Middle Ages until the present day see Adrian Green and A.J. Pollard, eds., *Regional Identities in North-East England 1300-2000* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007). See also Thomas Faulkner, Helen Berry and Jeremy Gregory eds, *Northern Landscapes: Representations and Realities of North-East England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2010). For the North East as part of a great North Sea region, see J. Roding and L. Heerma van Voss eds., *The North Sea and Culture (1550-1800)* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1996).

⁵² Barbara Crosbie, “Provincial Purveyors of Culture,” in *The Economy and Culture in North-East England, 1500-1800*, 205-229. For the Slacks newspaper operation in Newcastle see the fourth chapter of Victoria E. M. Gardner, *The Business of News in England, 1760-1820* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). For a study of Ann Slack and her daughter Sarah Hodgson see Ria Kathryn Snowdon, “Georgian Women and the Business of Print: Family Gender and the Provincial Press of Northern England, 1700-1850,” (PhD diss, Newcastle University, 2010).

recent publications on music and the built environment provide valuable information about the people and places that the actors frequented.⁵³

Metropolitan dispersion and provincial culture

Following the actors on their circuits makes it possible to gauge the degree to which metropolitan influences were dispersed across the region. John Brewer's influential cultural history *The Pleasures of the Imagination* stresses London's gravitational pull in the provinces, arguing that "aristocrats, prosperous gentry and rich merchants" imbibed London's polite culture and brought it back to their communities "creating smaller versions" of it in the provinces.⁵⁴ However, Brewer notes that from the province's perspective "local culture appears more diverse and much less derivative" which is a position supported by this study.⁵⁵ As will be shown, influences upon local culture came from many different places. Of course, the metropolis regularly supplied new plays that local audiences demanded to see; however, it might be noted that the tendency to over-emphasise the importance of London in the development of provincial theatre has been convincingly challenged even in nearby Kent by Jean Napier Baker's work on the Kentish theatre manager Sarah Baker.⁵⁶ Baker's discovery of an independent provincial circuit just a short distance from London led her to conclude that "a reassessment of the place and significance of the provincial theatre in the broader history of the eighteenth century is long overdue."⁵⁷ Northern provincial companies performed the latest London plays, but this was by no means the only way that actors

⁵³ For music see Stephanie Carter, Kirsten Gibson, and Roz Southey, eds., *Music in North-East England, 1500-1800* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2020). For the built environment see Richard Pears, "William Newton (1730-1798) and the Development of the Architectural Profession in North-East England," (PhD diss., Newcastle University 2013). For a recent intergenerational study of the North East region see Barbarie Crosbie, *Age Relations and Cultural Change in Eighteenth-Century England* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2020).

⁵⁴ Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, 396.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Jean Napier Baker, "Theatre in the Provinces in the Late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries, with special reference to Sarah Baker in Kent" (PhD diss., University of Kent, 2000).

⁵⁷ Baker, "Sarah Baker in Kent," Abstract.

made a local impact. In arguing that country playhouses were not just “a passive recipient” of such plays, Black cites works by local playwrights including James Cawdell’s comic masque *Melpomene’s Overthrow* (1778) and *Battered Bavarians* (1798) which celebrated British victory over the Dutch fleet at Camperdown.⁵⁸ Cawdell’s output is considered in detail in many of the following chapters.

It is possible to catch a glimpse of Samuel Butler’s company at the height of its success in Thomas Meadows’ *Thespian Gleanings*, a “collection of comic recitals, songs, tales ... and comic sketches” performed by the company.⁵⁹ In his introduction to *The Politics of Romantic Theatricality*, David Worrall uses *Thespian Gleanings* to illustrate the principal aim of his thesis:

To show that drama outside of the two royal patent theatres of Covent Garden and Drury Lane developed within what had virtually become a separate public sphere of drama, an essentially popular or plebeian network of intricate intertextuality largely cut off from the heritage of English spoken drama as exemplified by Shakespeare.⁶⁰

However, this appears to be a rather selective interpretation of *Thespian Gleanings* and, by association, the Butler company. The book is a collection of interludes that were indeed highly populist as they catered to local demand, but this material acted as a bridge between the main play which in fact often was by Shakespeare and a farce, which for the last two decades of the century was often the latest production by John O’Keeffe. The year after the book was published, Butler’s company performed four Shakespeare plays, *The Merry Wives*, *Richard III*, *Othello* and *Henry IV* in the Ulverston season alone.⁶¹ That season also saw nine new plays added to the repertoire, four of

⁵⁸ Jeremy Black, *Culture in Eighteenth-Century England: A Subject for Taste* (London: Hambledon, 2005), 204. For a performance of *Battered Bavarians* see York Minster Special Collections, *Hailstone Collection of Playbills*. SC Playbills Box 8 / 107 Scarborough Theatre Playbill, 7 August 1798.

⁵⁹ Thomas Meadows, *Thespian Gleanings, A Collection of Comic Recitals, Songs, Tales, &c. including a Variety of Comic Sketches* (Ulverston: Ashburner, 1805).

⁶⁰ David Worrall, *The Politics of Romantic Theatricality, 1787-1832: The Road to the Stage* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 2.

⁶¹ Barrow in Furness, Cumbria. Barrow Archive and Local Study Centre, Soulby Handbills. Ulverston Theatre Playbills. 1806 – 1807. ZS.565 – ZS.579.

which had appeared in London for the first time the previous year. Whether in playhouses managed by Butler, Bates, Cawdell, Austin and Heaton or Wilkinson, local theatregoers expected to see older Elizabethan and Restoration plays as well as sentimental comedies and the latest fashionable material. Each town does appear to have had preferred material, which might be due to a local theme or a well-loved role by a favourite performer; however, the claim that provincial theatre developed as a “separate public sphere of drama” does not appear to be generally supported by the performance record of the northern companies examined in this study.

In order to place the theatre in its broader historical context it is necessary to go beyond questions of company performance choices. It requires a better understanding of the ways that the actors’ influence extended beyond the playhouse and into the streets, coffee shops, taverns, printing works, masonic lodges and drawing rooms of the local gentry, in order to gauge the manner in which the actors influenced public opinion in this period and the type of impact that their presence had in the communities in which they performed. In this regard Kathleen Wilson’s landmark study *The Sense of the People* is exemplary in the manner in which it considers the influence of political performance and display on public perception in Newcastle upon Tyne.⁶² Wilson’s more recent work considers performance and politics on a global scale, exploring the politics of theatrical performances and its association with colonial rule in a comparative study of five provincial towns, Newcastle, Liverpool, Norwich, Bristol, and Cork with three imperial outposts: Kingston, Jamaica; St. James, St. Helena; and Fort Marlborough at Benkulen, Sumatra, thus raising questions about the playhouse’s role in the building and maintenance of empire.⁶³ In an indication of how provincial theatre historiography has developed since 1939, Joseph Roach has described Wilson’s work as “updating and transforming” Rosenfeld’s seminal study, as she considers these key towns as “provincial nodal points in a network reaching out from the patent theatres” to parts of the British

⁶² Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁶³ Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire, and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

empire in a manner which presented the “acquisition and mastery of English(ness)” as a fundamental mark of progress.⁶⁴ While informed by Wilson’s research, the attention of this thesis remains firmly fixed on the northern English landscape because we still know relatively little about what happened in provincial town theatres during the eighteenth century and what role actors played locally. However, the research does argue that provincial companies played a part in mediating ideas related to British identity regarding empire and perhaps they did even more if Worrall is correct in his statement that: “Georgian drama was the culturally dominant mode for providing representations of national identity, war, discovery, changing relationships with other cultures and the complexities of an ever-growing empire.”⁶⁵ As Britain’s power grew, audiences in Northern England were introduced to exotic characters in distant locations, raising questions about colonialism, gender and race. The social anxieties exposed by British imperial expansion have been examined by Daniel O’Quinn’s studies of metropolitan performance.⁶⁶ O’Quinn’s close readings of play texts and analysis of London performances, supported by the work of Mita Choudhury and Angie Sandhu particularly inform this dissertation’s chapter on Nation, although much of this work does not concern itself with provincial England.⁶⁷ Irish theatre studies have also been influenced by the spatial turn, leading to questions about the subaltern nature of Ireland and its diaspora which has a direct bearing on this study due to the influence that performers from Ireland had on the development of northern theatre.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Joseph Roach, “Fresh Produce,” in *Writing Race Across the Atlantic World: Medieval to Modern*, eds. Philip Beidler and Gary Taylor (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 141.

⁶⁵ David Worrall, *Harlequin Empire: Race, Ethnicity and the Drama of the Popular Enlightenment* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007), 8.

⁶⁶ Daniel O’Quinn, *Entertaining Crisis in the Atlantic Imperium 1770-1790* (Baltimore, MA: The Hopkins University Press, 2011) and *Staging Governance: Theatrical Imperialism in London, 1770-1800* (Baltimore, MA: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

⁶⁷ Mita Choudhury, *Interculturalism and Resistance in London Theater, 1660-1800: Identity, Performance, Empire* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2000) and Angie Sandhu, “Enlightenment, Exclusion and the Publics of the Georgian Theatre,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre 1737-1832*, eds. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 11-30.

⁶⁸ See Helen Burke, “Acting in the Periphery: The Irish Theatre,” in *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre, 1730-1830*, eds. Jane Moody and Daniel O’Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 219-231 and Helen Burke, *Riotous Performances: The Struggle for Hegemony in the Irish Theatre, 1712-1784* (South Bend IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

The case for “Northern Enlightenment”

The term “provincial” can convey the meaning of “parochial or narrow-minded; lacking in education, culture, or sophistication.”⁶⁹ However, Nicholas Phillipson observed, when writing of Enlightenment several decades ago, that provincial culture is “one of its most characteristic manifestations.”⁷⁰ For Phillipson, it was provincial centres such as Edinburgh, Dublin, Naples, and Bordeaux that were at the cutting-edge of intellectual creativity in the eighteenth century. Since making his pronouncement in 1975 there have been considerable advances made in the study of Scottish Enlightenment and provincial Enlightenments more broadly.⁷¹ Following Charles Withers’ *Placing the Enlightenment*, this research advances upon the well-established understanding that ideas are not neutral and universal, but rather are the consequence of grounded social practice which takes place in particular locations among particular people.⁷² Michael Brown and Ian McBride have made significant contributions to the field of Enlightenment Geographies with their attention to Irish Enlightenment which has a bearing on this thesis.⁷³ Jon Mee and Jennifer Wilkes’ recent research on knowledge networks within the “transpennine Enlightenment” has forged the way in making a case for the North of England as a unit of analysis.⁷⁴ Their work builds on Peter Jones’ “Industrial Enlightenment” and Joel Mokyr’s “Enlightened Economy” with particular

⁶⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 8 June 2021, s.v. “provincial, adj. and n.” OED Online. December 2021. Oxford University Press. www.oed.com, accessed 19/02/2022.

⁷⁰ Nicholas Phillipson, “Culture and Society in the Eighteenth-Century Province: The Case of Edinburgh and the Scottish Enlightenment,” in *The University in Society*, ed. Lawrence Stone, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 2:407.

⁷¹ See for example Robertson’s case for a grounded reading of Enlightenment based on the “provincial” kingdoms of Naples and Scotland on the margins of Europe: John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680–1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). For a series of essays on sociability and the question of character formation in the context of Scottish Enlightenment see Thomas Ahnert and Susan Manning eds., *Character, Self and Sociability in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

⁷² Charles W. J. Withers, *Placing the Enlightenment. Thinking Geographically about the Age of Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁷³ Michael Brown, *The Irish Enlightenment* (Cambridge Mass; Harvard University Press, 2016) and Ian McBride, *Eighteenth-Century Ireland: Isle of Slaves* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2009).

⁷⁴ Jon Mee and Jennifer Wilkes, “Transpennine Enlightenment: The Literary and Philosophical Societies and Knowledge Networks in the North, 1781–1830,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38, no. 4 (2015): 599–612.

emphasis given to the importance of polite letters and sociability.⁷⁵ Mee and Wilkes examine how educational institutions, in particular the Dissenting Academies, were closely associated with the development of early literary and philosophical societies.⁷⁶ Northern theatrical figures participated in this network as Sunderland's literary and philosophical society was founded by the actor James Field Stanfield. Another Irish actor John Cunningham was closely associated with the Slacks, Protestant dissenters who are major figures in the educational and radical print tradition of the North East.⁷⁷ The remarkable number of Unitarian dissenters who owned newspapers in the north of England was noted several decades ago; however, the close association between northern print culture and the theatre has never been addressed.⁷⁸

The interpretation of Enlightenment adopted in this study generally conforms to the understanding recently proposed by Clifford Siskin and William Warner.⁷⁹ They attempt to reconfigure Enlightenment and Romantic studies away from the "history of ideas" toward a "history of mediations" which considers "the work done by tools, by what we would now call 'media' of every kind – everything that intervenes, enables, supplements, or is simply in-between."⁸⁰ This pragmatic, more quotidian approach to the period is well suited to a local cultural study. They

⁷⁵ Peter M. Jones, *Industrial Enlightenment: Science, Technology and Culture in Birmingham and the West Midlands, 1769-1820* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008) and Joel Mokyr, *The Enlightened Economy: Britain and the Industrial Revolution, 1700-1850* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2009).

⁷⁶ For the influential Unitarian William Turner see Stephen Harbottle, *The Reverend William Turner - Dissent and Reform in Georgian England* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Northern Universities Press for The Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1997).

⁷⁷ Peter Isaac, "The Earliest Proprietors of the Newcastle Chronicle," in *Newspapers in the Northeast: The "Fourth Estate" at Work in Northumberland & Durham*, ed. Peter Isaac (Wylam: Allenholme Press, 1999), 153-162.

⁷⁸ Maurice Milne, "Periodical Publishing in the Provinces: The Mitchell Family of Newcastle upon Tyne," *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter* 10, no. 4 (1977): 174-182.

⁷⁹ See Clifford Siskin and William Warner, "This Is Enlightenment: An Invitation in the Form of an Argument," in *This Is Enlightenment* eds. Clifford Siskin and William Warner, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 1-33 and Clifford Siskin and William Warner, "If This Is Enlightenment Then What Is Romanticism?" *European Romantic Review* 22, no. 3 (2011): 281-291.

⁸⁰ Siskin and Warner, "If This Is Enlightenment," 282. The classic focus upon Enlightenment philosophers and the history of ideas is found in Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951). For a more recent study with an emphasis on Enlightenment philosophers see Anthony Gottlieb, *The Dream of Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Philosophy* (London: Allen Lane, 2016).

identify four cardinal points, “infrastructure, genres and formats, associational practices, and protocols” and although their focus displays a tendency toward a Habermasian preoccupation with print culture, all four of these points can be applied to performance, spoken word and theatrical experience.⁸¹ Many of these forms of mediation have already been developed and explored by eighteenth-century scholars who have shifted the focus from major Enlightenment thinkers to considerations of place, association and sociability.⁸²

In terms of improvements to infrastructure for the exchange of information, the postal service is of significant importance due to the opportunity that it allowed for readers to receive and exchange a wide range of written and printed material.⁸³ It was a theatre manager, John Palmer, who was responsible for developing the British postal system after developing a fast coach service to convey his actors, costumes and other theatrical materials between his theatres in Bath and Bristol.⁸⁴ This dissertation provides a practical demonstration of how critical the post was in helping to develop an early northern circuit in the late 1750s through the correspondence of the actors Sarah Ward in Liverpool and West Digges in Edinburgh and Newcastle.

Improvements to “traffic” whether in terms of travel or trade and exchange were particularly significant for the itinerant players of the North. An examination of the stroller, Charlotte Deans, reveals information about the banking and transport networks in Westmorland, Cumberland and Durham. This research has also uncovered how northern actors played an important rhetorical role in publicising significant developments in infrastructure that had a significant long term socio-economic impact upon the region, particularly in the construction of the Wearmouth Iron Bridge, then the longest-span iron bridge in the world. Northern actors were also involved in the foundation

⁸¹ Siskin and Warner, “This Is Enlightenment,” 12.

⁸² See Roy Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2000).

⁸³ See John Guillory, “Enlightening Mediation,” in *This Is Enlightenment*, 37-63.

⁸⁴ In 1782 Palmer sold his interests in the theatres to invest in what became the regulation mail coach and was granted the post of Controller-General of the Post Office. See George Dance, “Palmer, John (1742–1818),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online ed., 23 Sep. 2004, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/1011521>, accessed 20 Feb. 2022.

of local schools and dispensaries, while the large number of new theatre buildings constructed in towns across the region exhibits significant local investment into new dedicated spaces for sociability alongside the tavern and coffeehouse.

i. Politeness and sensibility

Roy Porter stresses that politeness as “refinement of the self” was an intrinsic feature of the Enlightenment which could be learned through observation and social engagement.⁸⁵ Fashionable politeness had associations with the English elite and the metropolitan *beau monde* which made its adoption highly attractive to those who sought improved cultural and social status.⁸⁶ As the public demand for performance grew, theatre underwent change driven by commercial interests and audiences became more socially mixed. Actors served as role-models, whose actions and mannerisms could be imitated to form new identities. In the *Making of the Modern Self* Dror Wahrman proposed James Boswell as an eighteenth-century exemplar of self-fashioning with his realisation: “I have discovered that we may be in some degree whatever character we choose.”⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Porter, *Enlightenment*, 22. For politeness see L. E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourses and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) and L. E. Klein, “Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century,” *Historical Journal* 45, (2002): 869-98; Jeremy Black, *Culture in Eighteenth-Century England: A Subject for Taste* (Hambledon and London: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Penelope J. Corfield, “The Rivals: Landed and Other Gentlemen,” in *Land and Society in Britain, 1700-1914: Essays in Honour of F. M. L. Thompson* eds. N. Harte and R. Quinault (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996): 1-33; Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman’s Daughter: Women’s Lives in Georgian England*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).

⁸⁶ For a nuanced reading of eighteenth-century fashion as elite status configuration see Hannah Greig, “Leading the Fashion: The Material Culture of London’s *Beau Monde*,” in *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830*, ed. John Styles (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 293-313. For fashion and the poor see John Styles, “Custom or Consumption? Plebeian Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England,” in *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, eds. Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 103-115.

⁸⁷ Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 169.

Boswell stressed the importance of studying “proper behaviour” for which his role model was the actor West Digges who features in this dissertation’s first chapter.⁸⁸

From Digges in the 1750s to Stanfield in the 1790s, particular attention is given to how politeness and civility was practised and promoted in the North through performance in the playhouse and also more generally in the community: through deportment and sociable association; by the teaching of elocution; and via writing and other forms of expression in which the actors engaged with their public.⁸⁹ Paul Goring’s ground-breaking study of the relationship between the rhetoric of sensibility, oratory and acting, *The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, provides vital insights into the workings of eighteenth-century British culture.⁹⁰ The rhetoric of sensibility frequently emerges in this study of northern theatre and appears in a section dedicated to abolition, which draws from Brycchan Carey’s *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility*.⁹¹ The rhetoric of sensibility also helps to make sense of the outpouring of popular expression related to the prison reformer John Howard, who was a particular subject of interest for the northern actor Stanfield.⁹²

The attention Goring gives to the actor-manager Thomas Sheridan’s School of Elocution is particularly notable due to the fact that many prominent figures of the northern theatre emerged from his enlightened management of Dublin’s Smock Alley Theatre Royal.⁹³ Sheridan believed that with the standardisation of English pronunciation “a general good taste, and exactness of speech, would be diffused thro’ the whole people.”⁹⁴ Many of the actors augmented their incomes by

⁸⁸ James Boswell, *Boswell’s London Journal 1762-1763*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 63.

⁸⁹ On eloquence and oration see Adam Potkay, “Classical Eloquence and Polite Style in the Age of Hume,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 25, no. 1 (1991): 31-56.

⁹⁰ Paul Goring, *The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁹¹ Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment and Slavery, 1760-1807* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

⁹² For the Rhetoric of Sensibility and popular feeling also see William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feelings: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁹³ Goring, *Rhetoric of Sensibility*, 91-113.

⁹⁴ Thomas Sheridan, *British Education: or, The Source of the Disorders of Great Britain* (London: R and J Dodsley, 1756), 246-247.

teaching elocution in provincial towns and developed close relationships with the writers of popular grammar books.

ii. Actors minding their grammar

Actors developed close relationships with regional figures engaged in producing work related to grammar and rhetoric. The actor and pastoral poet John Cunningham had a close personal relationship with Britain's first female grammarian Ann Slack of Newcastle upon Tyne.⁹⁵ Stanfield was a friend of George Wright, a schoolmaster from Sunderland who also published a grammar book in 1794.⁹⁶ Stanfield was also a close friend of James Tate who wrote one of the standard Greek textbooks for the nation's grammar schools. Another significant provincial intellectual preoccupied by language was Joseph Ritson who befriended Cunningham, Thomas Holcroft and the composer William Shield, when they performed for the Durham company in his hometown of Stockton-upon-Tees during the 1770s. The only description of an actor travelling between towns on the Durham circuit was recorded by Thomas Holcroft, who walked with Shield "sometime in the year 1777" from Durham to Stockton and "employed himself on the road in studying Lowth's Grammar."⁹⁷ The relationship between the rhetoric of sensibility, acting, improvement and civic responsibility is the focus of Holcroft's first novel *Alwyn: or the Gentleman Comedian* which is based on his personal experiences as a northern stroller.⁹⁸ Frederick Burwick notes that Holcroft was the first novelist to present a picaresque tale featuring the "challenges and growth of a wandering

⁹⁵ Rodríguez-Gil, "Ann Fisher: First female grammarian," 11-38. See also Barbara Crosbie, "Anne Fisher's New Grammar," 49-65.

⁹⁶ G. Wright, *The Principles of Grammar, or Youth's English Directory*. By G. Wright, Teacher of English and Mathematics (Sunderland: T. Reed, 1794).

⁹⁷ Holcroft, *Memoirs*, 1:252.

⁹⁸ Thomas Holcroft, *Alwyn: or the Gentleman Comedian*, 2 vols. (London: Fielding and Walker, 1780). For the influence of Thomas Sheridan's School of Elocution upon Thomas Holcroft's development as an actor and novelist see Rick Incorvati, "Developmental Stages: Thomas Holcroft's Early Fiction, Elocutionary Rhetoric, and the Function of the Theater in the Progress of Character," in *Re-Viewing Thomas Holcroft, 1745-1809: Essays on His Works and Life*, eds. A. Markley and Professor Miriam L. Wallace (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 17-30.

player” in the form of what came to be called *Bildungsroman*.⁹⁹ The publication of Holcroft’s novel preceded Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795) and Karl Philipp Moritz’s *Anton Reiser: A Psychological Novel* (1785-1790), which are the works often referred to as primary examples of the novel of character formation.¹⁰⁰

iii. Theatre and the public sphere

As well as focusing on the development of character, by making their protagonist a strolling player, Holcroft and Goethe reveal their mutual preoccupation with the public sphere. At the start of his highly influential *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* Jürgen Habermas inserts an “Excursus” drawn from *Wilhelm Meister* which is virtually the only reference he makes to theatre in his study of the rise of bourgeois publicity.¹⁰¹ The absence of theatre in this influential work and the prioritisation of print and coffee shop culture has been challenged by Julie Stone Peters’ *Theatre of the Book, 1480–1880* and Gillian Russell in her work on the late Enlightenment and the early Romantic period.¹⁰² Christopher Balme also prioritises the theatrical public sphere in a broad analysis which includes eighteenth-century theatre.¹⁰³

Many significant works of eighteenth-century social and cultural history tend to refer to theatre in very general terms or to avoid it altogether. In her influential study of national identity *Britons* Linda Colley admits that she has not “discussed in detail what fine art, or theatre, or

⁹⁹ Frederick Burwick, *A History of Romantic Literature* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), 88. The “pícaro” was a type of wanderer who traded in role-playing and went through meaningful change through experiencing purposeful mobility. The most famous example of this type in a novel is *Don Quixote* which Cervantes wrote as a pastiche of the form.

¹⁰⁰ For *Bildungsroman* see Tobias Boes, “Apprenticeship of the Novel: The Bildungsroman and the Invention of History, Ca. 1770–1820,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 45, no. 3 (2008): 269-88.

¹⁰¹ Jürgen. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 1989), 12-14.

¹⁰² Julie Stone Peters, *Theatre of the Book, 1480–1880: Print, Text, and Performance in Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 237–53 and Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre*.

¹⁰³ Christopher Balme, *The Theatrical Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

literature or music can tell us about this subject.”¹⁰⁴ Although he does mention the theatre in general terms, Borsay also provides few direct references to playhouses in his study of English urban renaissance. To a degree, this is understandable because his focus is on the first half of the eighteenth century and it was in the late 1760s that permanent playhouses began to appear in greater numbers, as companies developed long-term associations with specific towns. Borsay’s time frame also means that he provides no engagement with the Romantic period and cannot therefore address the influence of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars which acted as a significant cultural driver reflected in a marked increase in provincial theatre building. However, this subject is explored by Russell’s *Theatres of War*, which is an example of the insights that can result from positioning theatre directly at the heart of Georgian social and cultural study.¹⁰⁵ Russell emphasises that “performance, display and spectatorship were essential components of the social mechanism” in the late-Enlightenment and early Romantic period.¹⁰⁶ Joseph Roach and Felicity Nussbaum have also contributed ground-breaking work on eighteenth-century performance.¹⁰⁷ Roach’s seminal *The Player’s Passion* has influenced this research due to its examination of the relationship between science and acting set against the culture of sensibility.¹⁰⁸ The mediation of celebrity has also become an increasingly important area of research, although this has largely focused on the London stage and therefore this study of provincial celebrity contributes to a gap in historiography.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Linda Colley, *Britons; Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 8.

¹⁰⁵ Gillian Russell, *The Theatres of War: Performance, Politics and Society, 1793-1815* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

¹⁰⁶ Russell, *Theatres of War*, 17.

¹⁰⁷ Joseph R. Roach, *The Player’s Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (London: Associated University Presses, 1985) and *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). Felicity Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

¹⁰⁸ For acting theory see, Frederick Burwick, “Georgian Theories of the Actor,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832*, eds. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 177-191: An earlier influential work is George Taylor, “‘The just Delineation of the Passions’: Theories of Acting in the Age of Garrick,” in *Essays on the Eighteenth-Century English Stage*, ed. Kenneth Richards and Peter Thompson (London: Methuen, 1972), 51-72. See also Earl R. Wasserman, “The Sympathetic Imagination in Eighteenth-Century Theories of Acting,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 46, No. 3 (1947): 264-272.

¹⁰⁹ Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody, ed. *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660–2000* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

Cheryl Wanko's work on theatrical celebrity and biography is particularly relevant because of the contribution made to biography by the actor Stanfield.¹¹⁰

iv. Theatre and Enlightenment

Since David Marshall's influential 1984 essay on the figure of the spectator underlying Adam Smith's moral philosophy, the metaphorical status of theatricality in eighteenth-century culture has become a commonplace.¹¹¹ However, it is only relatively recently that the theatre itself has been recognised as an agent of Enlightenment. Bridget Orr's publication *British Enlightenment Theatre* addresses this question and her introductory chapter provides a concise overview of current relevant scholarship.¹¹² The association between theatre and Enlightenment has also been addressed recently by a collection of essays in *Ireland, Enlightenment and the English Stage* in which its editor David O'Shaughnessy makes the case for Irish theatrical activity in Britain as a significant "cultural phenomenon."¹¹³ O'Shaughnessy includes a chapter on the actor, James Field Stanfield, as a "corrective to the volume's London-centrism" and this thesis provides further provincial examples of the influence of Ireland on the northern English stage with a case study of John Cunningham.¹¹⁴ Other Irish actors who played significant roles in the development of northern English theatre include Mary O'Keeffe, Fielding Wallis, James Augustus Whitley, Alexander Cuthell and Francis

¹¹⁰ Cheryl Wanko, *Roles of Authority: Thespian Biography and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2003). For the commodification of celebrities through porcelain figures see Heather McPherson, "Theatrical Celebrity and the Commodification of the Actor," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832*, eds. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 192-211.

¹¹¹ David Marshall, "Adam Smith and the Theatricality of Moral Sentiments," *Critical Inquiry* 10, no. 4 (1984): 592-613 and David Marshall, *The Figure of Theatre: Shaftesbury, Defoe, Adam Smith, and George Eliot* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

¹¹² Bridget Orr, *British Enlightenment Theatre: Dramatizing Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020): 1-25.

¹¹³ David O'Shaughnessy, "Introduction: Staging an Irish Enlightenment," in *Ireland, Enlightenment and the English Stage*, ed. David O'Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 3.

¹¹⁴ O'Shaughnessy, "Staging an Irish Enlightenment," 4. n. 11. My chapter in O'Shaughnessy's collection has provided the basis for this dissertation's final chapter. See Declan McCormack, "The Provincial Commencement of James Field Stanfield," in O'Shaughnessy, *Ireland, Enlightenment*, 205-225.

Gentleman. Among the many English actors who began their careers in Dublin this study highlights the “Northern Roscius” West Digges and Thomas Holcroft.¹¹⁵

In an effort to place literary culture within the Scottish Enlightenment, Ronnie Young argues that the affective drama heralded by John Home’s Scottish tragedy *Douglas* provided an important laboratory for thinkers including David Hume, Adam Smith and Lord Kames to develop their thought.¹¹⁶ Writing as recently as 2016 Young states that:

By outlining the newfound moral function of dramatic composition, we also begin to move away from the view of literary discourse as disengaged from mainstream Enlightenment activity, to instead see dramatic compositions engaged in the central Scottish Enlightenment project of studying human nature.¹¹⁷

Other scholars including Lisa Freeman and Thomas Ahnert have traced the ways in which the controversy generated by *Douglas* influenced the thought of Robert Ferguson and John Witherspoon.¹¹⁸ It was the northern actors West Digges and Sarah Ward who helped to make the play a success and turn the stage into a laboratory to cultivate and observe the passions. Ward and Digges feature in this research as significant contributors to early northern theatrical circuits. The new form of affective drama typified by *Douglas* generated a variety of new genres by which playwrights, composers, musicians and actors extended their capacity for mediation. This was supported by print culture, whether in newsprint, theatrical illustration, stroller tales, theatre

¹¹⁵ For the history of the Irish stage see Christopher Morash, *A History of the Irish Theatre, 1601-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹¹⁶ Ronnie Young “ ‘Sympathetick Curiosity’: Drama, Moral Thought, and the Science of Human Nature,” in *The Scottish Enlightenment and Literary Culture*, eds. Ronnie Young, Ralph McLean, and Kenneth Simpson (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2016), 115-136.

¹¹⁷ Young “Sympathetick Curiosity,” 128.

¹¹⁸ Lisa A. Freeman, “The Cultural Politics of Antitheatricity: The Case of John Home’s ‘Douglas,’ ” *The Eighteenth Century* 43, no. 3, Theater and Theatricality (2002): 210-235; Lisa A. Freeman, “The Political Economy of Bodies Public: Scotland’s *Douglas* Controversy,” in *Antitheatricality and the Body Public* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 147-188; Thomas Ahnert, “Clergymen as Polite Philosophers. Douglas and the Conflict between Moderates and Orthodox in the Scottish Enlightenment,” *Intellectual History Review* 18, no. 3 (2008): 375-383. See also the earlier article Thorne Compton, “Adam Ferguson and John Witherspoon in ‘Satan’s Seminary’: Douglas, the Critics, and Moral Philosophy,” *Studies in Scottish Literature* 18 (1983): 166-76.

histories, volumes of verse, or in forms of ephemera such as broadsheets or the playbill as Gillian Russell has recently examined.¹¹⁹

The performers themselves are an excellent vehicle through which to explore ideas related to sociability and fashionable politeness which greatly influenced the shaping of Enlightenment thought. Many were active in local associational life with male actors significantly represented in freemasonry. This study includes a dedicated chapter to these “miniature free republics of rational society.”¹²⁰ Masonic lodges were, to use Bridget Orr’s expression, “microcosmic utopias” whose space, with its associated costumes and rituals, shared many characteristics with the theatrical stage.¹²¹ Actors were also attracted to lodges as they offered an “unusually egalitarian space for socially marginal men.”¹²² The actors’ capacity for performance, display and publicity also proved to be highly valuable in promoting masonic values in the region. Freemasons were, in the words of Margaret C. Jacob, “the shock troops of Enlightenment” and actors were at the very forefront of the assault.¹²³

Regarding “protocols,” despite the marginality which arose from the actors’ legal status, the players were actually engaged in policing content to a significant degree within provincial culture, particularly through their public display of language and comportment on stage. The actors thereby enforced and expanded the “rules, codes and habitual practices” that helped to define the parameters of cultural expression in the provinces, often realised through polite sociability.¹²⁴ Brewer argues

¹¹⁹ Gillian Russell, *The Ephemeral Eighteenth Century: Print, Sociability and the Cultures of Collecting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 153-185.

¹²⁰ Porter, *Enlightenment*, 22.

¹²¹ Orr, *British Enlightenment*, 157.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 161.

¹²³ Margaret C. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3. For a concise summary of freemasonry see James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 252-272. For the turn toward loyalism in the late eighteenth century see John Money, “Freemasonry and the Fabric of Loyalism in Hanoverian England,” in *The Transformation of Political Culture: England and Germany in the Late Eighteenth Century*, ed. Eckhart Hellmuth (London: German Historical Institute and Oxford University Press, 1990), 235-271. For secrecy see Jacob’s *Strangers Nowhere in the World: The Rise of Cosmopolitanism in Early Modern Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2006), 95-121.

¹²⁴ Siskin and Warner, *If this Is Enlightenment*, 282.

that “Politeness was created through the convivial patterns of social exchange.”¹²⁵ Robert Jones has also examined how the capacity to form and express opinions about matters of taste and beauty allowed entry into eighteenth-century cultural exchange.¹²⁶ In their role as cultural brokers in the provinces the actors were at the forefront of this exchange. In Cunningham’s pastoral verse, popularised in northern playhouses, the stroller often appears to present himself as a version of Addison’s “Man of Polite Imagination” who takes more pleasure in the “prospect of Field and Meadows than another does in the Possession” which are characteristics further examined in a later chapter.¹²⁷

Strolling ways

Before proceeding further, it will be useful to outline some of the conditions in which the provincial theatre operated. There were two important acts passed during the eighteenth century which determined the course of theatre’s development in the provinces: the *Theatrical Licensing Act* of 1737 and *Theatrical Representation Act* of 1788.

i. “It is the legislature which forms the manners of a nation”¹²⁸

An evening’s entertainment offered by the Bates company at the Durham theatre in July 1763 was advertised as “a concert of music” between the parts of which the tragedy *Theodosius: or the Force of Love* would be performed “gratis”. Companies typically advertised performances in this manner

¹²⁵ Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, 94.

¹²⁶ Robert Jones, *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain; The Analysis of Beauty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹²⁷ Thomas Addison, “Pleasures of Imagination,” *Spectator* 411 (June 21, 1712). For an analysis of Addison’s essay which considers the contradiction between “the politeness of an imagination which is free from particular, property-based desires, and the individuated pleasures which are associated with sensible gratification” see Jones, *Gender and the Formation of Taste*, 43-45.

¹²⁸ Holcroft, *Memoirs*, 1:200.

in order to avoid the restrictions upon spoken drama that had been enforced by the *Theatrical Licensing Act* of 1737.¹²⁹ The term “legitimate” drama, meaning plays performed purely by spoken word, is derived from this law, which made it illegal to perform spoken drama in any place of public performance except the theatres granted a patent by the King. The patent meant they could then be called “Theatre Royal”. In 1737 the only two such theatres in England were London’s Covent Garden and Drury Lane. This is why Tate Wilkinson’s second memoir was entitled “The Wandering Patentee” as he had bought patents for £500 in 1769 which made the playhouses at York and Hull Theatres Royal.¹³⁰ The Act also required all plays to be passed for performance and therefore each new play had to be sent to the Reader of Plays who reported to the Lord Chamberlain.

After the Act’s passing, permission for performance in the provinces usually required a personal appeal to the town’s authorities by the manager of the company which meant that the ability to build and maintain a close relationship with local dignitaries was essential. Tate Wilkinson said a good strolling manager had to well understand “the art of application and solicitation.”¹³¹ In practice, local magistrates tended to resent the removal of their authority by the Act and were often complicit in helping companies to evade prosecution. However, actors were still highly vulnerable to denunciation by anti-theatrical people in the towns where they performed and constantly faced potential arrest, for which punishment could be severe. If a fine was not paid, the penalty was a six-month prison term or the payment of fifty pounds.¹³²

¹²⁹ The Theatrical Licensing Act, 1737, 10 Geo. II, c. 28. For the history of this act see Vincent J. Liesenfeld, *The Licensing Act of 1737* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984) and David Thomas, “The 1737 Licencing Act and Its Impact,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832*, eds. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 91-106. For censorship see Worrall *Theatrical Revolution* (2006) and L. W. Connolly, *The Censorship of English Drama 1737-1824* (Los Angeles. Huntington Library Press, 1976).

¹³⁰ Ian Small, “Building a Monarchy,” 78.

¹³¹ Wilkinson, *Memoirs of His Own Life*, 1:143.

¹³² Jean N. Baker, “Theatre. Law and Society in the Provinces: The Case of Sarah Baker,” *Cultural and Social History* 1, no. 2 (2004): 163.

Playbills ceased to advertise “gratis” entertainment after 1788, when that year’s *Theatrical Representation Act* gave greater powers to local magistrates to licence performances for a period of sixty days with no second licence granted to the same place until eight months after the first had elapsed.¹³³ However, the patent theatres still had a monopoly over performance in their towns and districts, as the Act forbade magistrates to licence any theatre within eight miles of a Theatre Royal.¹³⁴ *The Theatrical Representation Act* appears to have contributed to a significant development in theatre at an institutional level as the next twenty years saw the building of over two hundred new playhouses across the nation which is recorded in James Winston’s *Theatric Tourist*, published in 1805.¹³⁵ The eight new theatres opened by Butler’s company between 1788 and 1805 are an example of this wave of building and an indication of the popularity of theatregoing in market towns across the North at the turn of the century. New theatres were opened in Harrogate (1788), Richmond (1788), Kendal (1789), Ripon (1792), Northallerton (1800), Ulverston (1800), Whitby (1803) and Beverley (1805). It might be noted that none of these playhouses are listed in Winston’s survey which suggests that his figure is likely to be an under-estimation. After 1788 companies also began to use the term “Theatre Royal” for local playhouses. These had not been granted patents, but managers used the term in an informal manner on the understanding that the local authority, as a representative of the King, had legitimised performance of spoken drama in the town’s theatre. From this date it becomes more possible to track the activities of provincial theatre companies as the local assize books record the licences granted to managers to perform for sixty-day periods in towns under their jurisdiction.

¹³³ The Theatrical Representations Act, 1788. 28 Geo. III c. 30. Baker argues that against its original intention, the MP for Hull, William Wilberforce’s anti-theatrical “Temperance” Society helped to bring about this legislation, see Jean N. Baker, “The Proclamation Society, William Mainwaring and the Theatrical Representations Act of 1788,” *Historical Research* 76 (2003): 347-63.

¹³⁴ Ian Small, “Building a Monarchy,” 78.

¹³⁵ James Winston, *The Theatric Tourist, being a genuine collection of correct views, with brief and authentic historical accounts of all the principle provincial theatres in the United Kingdom*, ed. Iain Mackintosh, with an introduction by Marcus Risdell (London: The Society for Theatre Research and The British Library, 2008).

The actors' lack of legal status and vulnerability to arrest is a recurring subject found in their strolling tales. The Elizabethan statute of 1572, still in force in the eighteenth century, stated that all actors outside of the Patent Theatres could be arrested as "Rogues, Vagabonds, sturdy Beggars and Vagrants" if caught attempting to "act, represent, or perform any Interlude, Tragedy, Comedy, Opera, Play, Farce or Other Entertainment of the Stage" making them "liable and subject to all such Penalties and Punishments."¹³⁶ A later Act of 1713, under Queen Anne, reaffirmed this law, declaring that "all Fencers, Bear-wards, common players of interludes" were punishable as "rogues and vagabonds."¹³⁷ Writing in 1809 the actress Ann Catherine Holbrook summarised the itinerant life in legal terms, bitterly complaining:

At a time, like the present, when even cruelty to animals, is thought of sufficient consequence to engage the attention of the Legislature, it may not, perhaps be improper to awaken the public interest on behalf of a set of *Human Beings*, the most oppressed, with the least means of rescuing themselves, of any individuals in the kingdom.¹³⁸

Actors frequently expressed the belief that it was the law that turned public opinion against them. Holcroft declared "It is the legislature which forms the manners of a nation" after starting his theatrical career as a prompter in Dublin and witnessing the prejudice that members of the public felt towards actors.¹³⁹ He also believed that players were at the mercy of townsfolk who exploited their vulnerability. "It is a saying among us, that a player's six-pence does not go as far as a town's-man's groat" he recorded, a groat being four-pence; however, while exploiting the players' vulnerability, Holcroft further notes, with irony, that townsfolk were "exceedingly unhappy" if the

¹³⁶ Vagabonds Act, 1572. 14 Elizabeth 1, c. 5.

¹³⁷ For reducing the Laws relating to Rogues, Vagabonds, Sturdy Beggars, and Vagrants, into one Act, and for more effectual punishing such Rogues, Vagabonds, Sturdy Beggars, and Vagrants, and sending them whither they ought to be. Also known as Public General Acts 1714. 12 & 13 Anne c.23. See James Fitzjames Stephen, *A History of the Criminal Law of England*, vol. 3. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 272-274.

¹³⁸ Ann Catherine Holbrook, *The Dramatist: or, Memoirs of the Stage. With the Life of the Authoress, Prefixed and Interspersed with, a Variety of Anecdotes, Humourous and Pathetic* (Birmingham: Martin and Hunter, 1809), 25-26.

¹³⁹ Holcroft, *Memoirs*, 1:200.

performers failed to return at the appointed time.¹⁴⁰ It should also be stressed that in the case of the established companies, townsfolk also expected professionally produced material. The actors' lack of legal status led to the belief, still occasionally expressed, that provincial companies were amateurs; however, the northern companies considered in this study owed their longevity to the maintenance of high performance standards. The next three sections present the standard practices followed by established provincial theatre companies.

ii. Maintaining theatrical standards

An evening's entertainment lasted about four hours and included a main five-act play: an interlude such as a comical sketch, poem, song or dance; and finally, an afterpiece which was usually a three-act comedy. Halfway through the evening, people were allowed in at half-price. Playbills reflect a hierarchy indicated by ticket prices, with the usual cost of one shilling for the gallery, two shillings for the pit and three shillings for the box. Brewer puts these prices in perspective by pointing out that in 1750 "half-price admission cost the equivalent of two quarts of ale" which was "not beyond the means of an artisan earning between £40 and £60 a year."¹⁴¹ Provincial theatregoers often paid for their tickets on a subscription basis and attended regularly during the season as this was often the only time in the year when locals had the opportunity to be entertained by professional actors. Companies normally performed at least two different plays three times a week over a season which lasted two months. At particularly popular times, such as during race weeks or assizes, there would be a performance every night of the week.

When recording his surprise at the quality of performance on display in the provincial theatre, the playwright James Boaden noted that "memory is there cultivated to an extent of

¹⁴⁰ Holcroft, *Memoirs*, 1:230.

¹⁴¹ Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, 85.

copiousness and accuracy, of which no equal examples can be found.”¹⁴² When performing at Cockermouth in Cumberland in 1775, Holcroft wrote a letter to David Garrick seeking a position, stating that he had “a very quick memory as I can repeat any part under four lengths at six hours notice.”¹⁴³ A length was a standardised measure of forty-two lines according to John Brownsmith’s *The Theatrical Alphabet* which listed the lengths of leading parts.¹⁴⁴ A good memory was of crucial importance for provincial performers in particular because unlike in London, their companies very rarely had runs of repeat performances of the same play. Provincial companies tended to perform a play twice during a season only if it was new and particularly fashionable.

Every week the management had to pay the troupe, employ musicians, stage extras and door keepers, plus buy coals, silk, oil, candles and washing had to be paid for. Scripts and music had to be copied and cast members were paid for writing prologues, epilogues, songs, sketches and plays. Other outgoings included the printing of playbills and tickets, plus the advertising placed in local newspapers. Between seasons the scenery, machinery, properties and costumes also had to be transported from one theatre to another. In most cases the rental of the building also had to be paid by the company. Therefore, a good income from full houses was essential to maintain the financial viability of the circuit.

iii. The company structure

Most strolling companies were based on sharing principles organised under a manager which Holcroft described in his memoir.¹⁴⁵ Each performer was granted one share and might receive

¹⁴² James Boaden, *The Life of Mrs Jordan; Including Private Original Correspondence, and Numerous Anecdotes of Her Contemporaries*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: Edward Bull, 1831), 1:32.

¹⁴³ Holcroft: *Memoirs*, 1:236. Holcroft later tested his prodigious memory by translating and transcribing Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais’ *Follies of a Day: or, the Marriage of Figaro* at the theatre in Paris. He had travelled to the city to get a copy of the smash hit, but this was refused, so he and a friend Bonneville went to see the play every night for a week to ten days and rushed home afterwards to transcribe what they could remember. See Holcroft: *Memoirs*, 2:55-57.

¹⁴⁴ John Brownsmith, *The Theatrical Alphabet* (London: Printed for the author, 1767).

¹⁴⁵ Holcroft, *Memoirs*, 1:228-29.

another share, or half share, for providing a special service such as prompting, fiddling or finding patrons. The company could expect to earn an average of between four and five pounds a night three times a week and so Holcroft's salary amounted to no more than seventeen or eighteen shillings a week.¹⁴⁶ Performers were also typically allowed one benefit performance per season, when, according to Drinkwater Meadows, who had grown up in the Butler company, "a profit was made to the extent, in a town like Prescott, of three, four, or five pounds."¹⁴⁷ The actor S. W. Ryley noted that the sharing system was "nearly general" in the 1770s.¹⁴⁸ This system must have been common in the early nineteenth century as John Waldie, a Newcastle Theatre Royal shareholder, recorded Butler's company performing "most likely on shares" at Harrogate in 1807.¹⁴⁹ In fact, Butler's performers were paid on a salary basis. One of his actors, Walter Donaldson, recorded that Butler "was always ready on the Saturday to meet his performers with their salaries, which were not heavy - 15s. a-week being the average."¹⁵⁰ Wilkinson recorded that the York actors had been operating on "levelling" principles when he arrived in 1765 to act as their "monarch" and he began the practice of paying his actors regular wages, believing that "constant full pay and good quarters" improved the quality of his troupe.¹⁵¹ Wilkinson paid himself the highest salary as manager which was one and a half guineas a week (£1. 11 s. 6d.). At the start of the 1791 Whitby season, Cawdell announced that the Durham company had moved from sharing to regular salary payments which he agreed to pay "Play or not Play, the Year round."¹⁵² Presumably this was a mark of prestige for the company as it was publicised on a playbill.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 241-42.

¹⁴⁷ E. L. Blanchard, *The Life and Reminiscences of E.L. Blanchard*, eds. Clement Scott and Cecil Howard (London: Hutchinson, 1891), 646.

¹⁴⁸ S. W. Ryley, *The Itinerant: or, Memoirs of an Actor* (London: Scott, 1808), 239.

¹⁴⁹ UCLA: Library Special Collections. F. Burwick ed., "The Journal of John Waldie Theatre Commentaries, 1799-1830" (2008): *Journal 15*, April 5 - August 10, 1807. Entry for 9 July 1807 (XV 165). <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3540n1gj>, accessed 20.2.22.

¹⁵⁰ Walter Donaldson, *Recollections of an Actor* (London: J. Maxwell, and Company, 1865), 168.

¹⁵¹ Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 4:45.

¹⁵² Whitby, North Yorkshire, Whitby Museum Archive (WMA) *Theatrical Playbills, 1788-1794*. Whitby Theatre Playbill, 12 October 1791.

iv. The benefit system

During the final three decades of the eighteenth century all four of the northern theatre companies became well established in the towns on their circuits and consistently performed fashionable material in generally well-attended playhouses. Their business models relied on cultivating good relationships with many local bodies, principally the town corporation and magistrates, as well as the masonic lodge and local military units. To help secure their finances the Durham company usually performed on a subscription basis and at the start of a season, playbills advertised tickets for a number of performances which depended on the duration of the planned stay and covered the period up to the benefit performances. Borsay describes subscription for assemblies as an example of “mass tourism” which may have been the case in the spa towns of Scarborough or Harrogate, which entertained visitors during the summer, but subscription was also common practice in other types of town where theatre companies catered to a more fixed local public. Playbills from Whitby and Darlington show that the Durham company offered tickets to subscribers for a block of twelve to fifteen performances that lasted about a month. Notably, under Cawdell’s management the company encouraged children to attend the playhouse by offering a two-for-one deal. This practice is not advertised on other company playbills and suggests the Durham company’s particular commitment to education and moral improvement in the community.

At the end of the subscription performances there followed a number of benefit nights when actors relied upon the generosity of the local community.¹⁵³ Gillian Russell reminds readers that the benefit system, in which a direct appeal was made to patrons for financial support, is a “sign of the theatre’s roots in pre-commercial culture.”¹⁵⁴ According to Drinkwater Meadows, typically “a profit was made [...] of three, four, or five pounds” in provincial stock companies for an actor’s benefit

¹⁵³ For a study of the benefit system see St Vincent Troubridge, *The Benefit System in the British Theatre* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1967).

¹⁵⁴ Russell, *Theatres of War*, 157.

night.¹⁵⁵ The publicity for a benefit evening provides an indication of which actors were associated with certain social groups. In the 1799 season at Darlington, Cawdell was supported by the military, which correlates with the image he projected during the 1790s, patrolling the northeast coastal theatres in martial uniform and helping to recruit local volunteers to the war effort. Stanfield's benefits were typically supported by the local masonic lodge. At Whitby in 1785, the actors Mr and Mrs Ferizer were supported by the local cricket club.¹⁵⁶

The benefit system also allowed actors to return favours to the community. Borsay stresses that provincial theatre managers typically "cultivated a respectable profile by organizing benefit performances for, or making direct contributions to, local charities."¹⁵⁷ The *Hull Packet* reported a charitable performance in 1811 by Beverley's Grammar School for which "the dresses of the performers were furnished by Mr. Butler, the respectable Manager of the Beverley Theatre."¹⁵⁸ Maintaining a reputation for respectability through benefit performances for the poor sustained good relations with the public and was also helpful to counter any criticism from anti-theatrical critics.

While the theatre gradually commercialised and developed as an institution, another sign of the old patronage system continued with the bespeaking of plays by individuals or local social groups. For example, a bespeak called by particular desire of the Ladies of Whitby on 13 July 1785 saw the performance of Holcroft's fashionable new comedy, *Follies of a Day: or, the Marriage of Figaro* which had just enjoyed "a run of near 50 successive Nights the last Season, at Covent Garden Theatre."¹⁵⁹ This practice bestowed the giver with prestige and social recognition. Although the companies were entrepreneurial and competitive, older traditions such as these continued to be followed which suggests that the northern theatre did not entirely conform to what Sweet has

¹⁵⁵ Blanchard, *Reminiscences*, 646.

¹⁵⁶ WMA., *Theatrical Playbills, 1784-87*. Whitby Theatre Playbill, 4 July 1785.

¹⁵⁷ Borsay, *Urban Renaissance*, 119.

¹⁵⁸ *Hull Packet* (Hull, England), Tuesday, December 24, 1811.

¹⁵⁹ WMA., *Theatrical Playbills, 1784-87*. Whitby Theatre Playbill, "*Follies of a Day: or, the Marriage of Figaro*" 13 July 1785.

described as “a new kind of urban society” which was “one in which the old hierarchies of deference and paternalism broke down and were replaced by the forces of the market-place and the relationship of capitalist employer and wage-earning labourer.”¹⁶⁰ As we shall see in numerous examples over the following chapters, older traditions continued to frame social exchange and shape the players and their company’s identity. Although the economic framework based on market forces is undoubtedly an important factor, these older characteristics continued to determine the nature of provincial theatre.

Methodology

Provincial players are an under-utilised resource in part because as a subject area they fall between two areas of scholarship: theatre history and local history. Theatre history has tended to focus upon metropolitan experience to the neglect of regional theatre, while local history has traditionally followed the practices instigated by the highly influential Leicester school. This stresses the value of interdisciplinarity and tends to combine history with social science, relying especially upon quantitative data-analysis drawn from local records, such as parish registers in order to discover demographic insights behind local experience.¹⁶¹ This excludes itinerant performers who rarely appear in such official sources; however, by focusing upon theatre companies as social entities and considering the networks of association generated by their actors, it becomes possible to look for information about the towns where they performed. The fact that theatre companies typically travelled to different places during the year broadens the range of research and the focus on associational life therefore increases the possibility of discovering more information. As actors tended to be highly sociable, their number of contacts in towns can be expected to be above the

¹⁶⁰ Rosemary Sweet, “The Production of Urban Histories,” 172.

¹⁶¹ See Barry Reay, *Microhistories: Demography, Society and Culture in Rural England, 1800-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

average. Once connections are found in local archives, this can then lead to further opportunities for research and gradually extensive networks of association emerge that link individuals in towns across the region to associates at the national and even international level.

The study relies upon newspaper articles, although relatively few were printed in the counties examined during the period. The publications of the actors themselves have proven to be one of the most valuable sources of information.¹⁶² This includes collections of verse, which contain prologues, epilogues and songs written for performance. Several performers and their associates were playwrights and additional material includes novels, theatre history and criticism, strolling tales and memoirs. Private records, including correspondence and diaries, have proved to be a rich resource.¹⁶³ Also the playbill, one of the few public records of provincial theatre performance, is a crucial primary source.¹⁶⁴

i. A “remarkable” playbill

In an article in *The Connoisseur Magazine* about the “dignified” hobby of collecting playbills, W. J. Lawrence draws attention to “a remarkable” bill for a performance of *Hamlet* by Joseph Younger’s company on the evening of 19 March 1777 at the theatre in Manchester.¹⁶⁵ Lawrence points out that

¹⁶² The thesis draws from three collections: James Cawdell, *The Miscellaneous Poems of J. Cawdell, Comedian: Consisting of a Variety of Serious and Comic Prologues, Epilogues, Pastorals, Songs, Descriptions, and Epigrams. Together with Several Sentimental Pieces. To which is annexed an Answer to a late libellous compilation, called the Stockton Jubilee* (Sunderland: Graham, 1785); John Cunningham, *Poems, Chiefly Pastoral* (Newcastle upon Tyne: T. Slack, 1766) and S. G. Kemble, *Odes, Lyrical Ballads, and Poems on Various Occasions* (Edinburgh: Ballantyne, 1809).

¹⁶³ The records of James Tate, the Headmaster of Richmond School, North Yorkshire, include a diary and correspondence. Tate married an actress from the Butler company and so he provides a first-hand record of a northern theatre company. See North Yorkshire County Records Office, Northallerton, North Yorks, (NYCRO), *Letters & Papers of James Tate, (1771-1843), Anecdotes & Recollections*, ZJT (MIC 2629/0811). For a published edited compilation see Leslie P. Wenham, ed., *James Tate, Master of Richmond School, Yorkshire and Canon of St. Paul’s Cathedral, London Schoolmaster and Scholar*, (North Yorkshire County Record Office, 1991).

¹⁶⁴ For an article about the playbill collection held at York Minster see Jane Moody, “Playbills Under House Arrest: A Reply to Richard Schoch, Victorian Theatricalities Forum,” *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 8 (2009), <http://19.bbk.ac.uk>, accessed 3 November 2021.

¹⁶⁵ W. J. Lawrence, “Old Playbill,” *The Connoisseur: An Illustrated Magazine for Collectors* 18 (1907): 221.

at that moment “not a single name” presented was “a name of note” yet before the end of the century four of its actors, Sarah Siddons, John Philip Kemble, Elizabeth Farren and Elizabeth Inchbald, would become the nation’s greatest theatrical celebrities. This constellation of future stars led Lawrence to conclude with some justification: “Possibly no bygone provincial bill has greater value, certainly none possesses a similar variety of appeal.”¹⁶⁶ He cites Charles Lamb, who reminds readers of how “we *once* used to read a playbill – not, as now peradventure, singling out a favourite performer, and casting a negligent eye over the rest; but spelling out every name, down to the very mutes and servants of the scene.”¹⁶⁷ Gillian Russell also highlights Lamb’s “testimony to an affective attachment to the playbill” and describes how its perusal was once “part of the sociable ritual of playgoing” in which the speaking of names became a form of incantation.¹⁶⁸ Russell stresses how these bills formed the basis of alternative reading practices, citing Robert Southey’s experience as a child learning to read through close study of the bills.¹⁶⁹

In another article about the playbill, this time for the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, Lawrence follows Lamb’s example and casts his eye further down the list away from the future metropolitan stars to draw attention to the names of two “humbler people” on the Manchester bill, noting that the actor who presented a poem called “Hobby Horses” during the interlude was James Cawdell “favourably known in the North of England as a comedian and manager” and that the role of the “Player King” in *Hamlet* was performed by James Field Stanfield who “had some literary ability.”¹⁷⁰ It is these secondary characters who never set foot on a London stage in their entire careers that are the principal subjects of this research as they both became local celebrities as stars of the Durham company. Therefore, as far as this thesis is concerned, the value of this “remarkable”

¹⁶⁶ W. J. Lawrence, “Old Playbill,” 221, 222.

¹⁶⁷ Charles Lamb, “On Some of the Old Actors,” in *The Works of Charles Lamb. To which are prefixed, his letters, and a sketch of his life*, ed. Thomas Noon Talfourd, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1838), 2:151.

¹⁶⁸ Gillian Russell, “‘Announcing each day the performances,’: Playbills, Ephemerality, and Romantic Period Media / Theater History,” *Studies in Romanticism* 54, no. 2. An Illegitimate Legacy: Essays in Romantic Theater History in Memory of Jane Moody (Summer 2015): 251-52.

¹⁶⁹ Russell, “Announcing each day,” 252: Also see Russell, *Ephemeral Eighteenth Century*, 157.

¹⁷⁰ W. J. Lawrence, “A Remarkable Playbill,” in *New York Dramatic Mirror* (8 July 1905), 3.

playbill is that it represents an opportunity for orientation away from a preoccupation with metropolitan celebrity towards more marginalised and forgotten figures.¹⁷¹ To these two performers will be added the names of many other long-forgotten northern players and their associates including local teachers, doctors, lawyers, merchants, bankers, politicians, printers, grammarians, antiquarians, poets and divines.

Thesis structure

The thesis is divided into two parts: one is concerned with place, the other with people. The first part consists of four chapters. The first chapter considers the relationship between metropolis and province. This is followed by chapters which examine northern theatre from the perspectives of town, region and nation. The second part then shifts focus to people. Two chapters present case studies about little-known northern actors who made significant contributions to regional culture: the pastoral poet John Cunningham and the abolitionist James Field Stanfield. A third chapter examines the relationship between northern theatre and freemasonry. A concluding chapter then summarises the findings, highlighting how the consideration of theatrical association determines aspects of Northern Enlightenment while identifying areas for further research.

The first chapter “Metropolis and Province: Mapping the Northern Theatrescape” presents a chronological and geographical survey of the development of northern English professional theatre from the mid-eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries. While identifying the principal companies and where specific activities took place, a more theoretical “mapping” simultaneously introduces several of the main themes which the research has uncovered relating to the culture of sensibility. Although the focus of study is on the northern English counties, the stress here is upon archipelagic,

¹⁷¹ W. J. Lawrence’s interest in more marginal theatrical figures is displayed by the encouragement he gave to Clark to write his seminal study of Irish provincial theatre, see William Smith Clark, *The Irish Stage in the County Towns 1720 to 1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), vi.

as opposed to anglocentric history, as the development of Northern English theatre shows significant Irish and Scottish influences.¹⁷² This provides an opportunity to consider Brewer's framing of London's cultural influence in the provinces in his *Pleasures of the Imagination*. He argues that metropolitan imitation and emulation was "amply demonstrated" by the names chosen for provincial venues such as Liverpool's Drury Lane Theatre.¹⁷³ However, Liverpool also had a Smock Alley and Whitehaven's new theatre in Roper Street built in 1769 was a copy of Dublin's Crow-Street Theatre.¹⁷⁴ Local research suggests that it was primarily Dublin's influence that made itself felt in the early stages of northern theatre's development to which the Scottish theatre also later contributed. However, this is always considered in the knowledge that the prioritisation of "nation", whether English, Scottish or Irish, is likely to lead to an oversimplification of local experience. This consideration of the metropolitan therefore helps to contextualise, demonstrate and validate the attention given to provincial experience which later chapters examine from different perspectives.

The second chapter, "Towns on the Durham Company Circuit" concentrates attention on the activities of the company founded by Thomas Bates in about 1760 and considers the diversity of theatrical experience and forms of association in the towns on its circuit. This offers an opportunity to consider Borsay's model of urban renaissance as the circuit provided a mixture of leisure, port, county and market towns. The commercialisation of theatre in this period has led to a tendency to prioritise conspicuous consumption and display; however, local records show that actors took their civic responsibilities seriously. While providing townsfolk and visitors the opportunity for leisurely polite sociability in its playhouses, the company's integration into local life was also rooted in the promotion of improvement. The findings regarding the company's involvement in charity and forms

¹⁷² For a study of the role of ethnic myth in English identity, with particular inquiry into the central myth of the "Free-born Englishman" see Rebecca Langlands, "Britishness or Englishness? The historical problem of national identity in Britain," *Nations and Nationalism* 5, no. 1 (1999): 53-69 and Krishnan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁷³ Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, 396.

¹⁷⁴ Broadbent, *Liverpool Stage*, 19, n. 4. *Newcastle Courant* 18 Nov 1769.

of pedagogy suggest that theories based upon metropolitan experience and applied to the regions are not always supported by local evidence.

The third chapter, “The Region: A Strolling Tale” considers theatre from a chorographic perspective, which is defined by Samuel Johnson in his *Dictionary* as dealing with intermediary areas, being “less in its object than geography, and greater than topography.”¹⁷⁵ It uses the record of a Cumbrian stroller, Charlotte Lowes, as a medium to examine aspects of northern cultural life and identity. This highly mobile local performer is well suited to provide comment due to her first-hand experience of many towns and villages in the northern counties.

The fourth and final chapter in this section, “Performing for the Nation” considers the relationship between the northern stage and a developing sense of national identity. Eighteenth-century theatre historians have fruitfully explored aspects of celebrity to cast light on how performers encouraged a sense of “imagined community” in the developing British nation.¹⁷⁶ However, these studies tend to focus upon the metropolitan stars.¹⁷⁷ Local celebrities, like the manager Cawdell, also played an important role in promoting a new sense of nation, particularly through performances related to war and empire. This also allows for the testing of Russell’s seminal *Theatres of War* in a northern context.

The second section concentrates on people with particular focus on the more personal themes of polite self-fashioning and biography. While the first section considers the northern theatre using the spatial factors of geography, topography and chorography, this section is more concerned with cosmopolitanism. The first chapter of the section, “John Cunningham, a Pastoral Player”, focuses on arguably the best-known pastoral poet of the period.¹⁷⁸ It considers

¹⁷⁵ Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (1755), 1: unpaginated.

¹⁷⁶ For eighteenth-century theatre and celebrity culture see Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody, eds., *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660–2000* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) and Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

¹⁷⁷ A recent example is Leslie Ritchie, *David Garrick and the Mediation of Celebrity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2019).

¹⁷⁸ David Hill Radcliffe “Sawney and Dermot,” in *Anglo-Irish Identities, 1571–1845*, eds. David A. Valone and Jill Marie Bradbury (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2008), 89.

Cunningham's contribution to regional and national culture, particularly through his close relationship with Thomas and Ann Slack, who are key figures in Newcastle's radical print tradition. The next chapter "An Acting Brotherhood: Georgian Freemasons on the Northern Stage" examines the relationship between theatre and freemasonry. One of the major texts of the Enlightenment, Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, defined a *cosmopolite* as "*un homme qui n'a point de demeure fixe*" (a man of no fixed abode) which suits the identity of an eighteenth-century strolling player and indeed an eighteenth-century freemason engaged in the practice of polished self-refinement that the craft encouraged.¹⁷⁹ James Field Stanfield is the subject of the final chapter. After making his debut with Younger at Manchester in 1777, Stanfield is perhaps the only actor to have performed for all the established northern English companies examined in this study. He was a versatile performer; however, it is his multivalent identity as a cultural broker in the provinces which is the main focus of this chapter which examines the contributions he made to abolition, the literature of sensibility and freemasonry. Stanfield has been recognised as the first person to write a full-length study of biography in English.¹⁸⁰ Biography flourished in the eighteenth century and his call to use it as a scientific tool to explore the self in *An Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography* allies him with late Scottish Enlightenment thinkers engaged in the exploration of the new science of man.¹⁸¹

A concluding chapter then summarises the key insights related to geography and biography or people and place that have emerged from the research. This highlights how the theatre was a vector of the Northern Enlightenment which was itself informed and shaped by Enlightenment ideas related to rhetoric drawn from the Scottish and Irish Enlightenments.

¹⁷⁹ Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, 2021); online ed., 2021, <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>, accessed 24 Jan 2022.

¹⁸⁰ Felicity Nussbaum, "Biography and Autobiography," in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 4, The Eighteenth Century, eds. H.B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1997), 303.

¹⁸¹ James Field Stanfield, *An Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography* (Sunderland: Garbutt, 1813).

Chapter One

Metropolis and Province: Mapping the Northern Theatrescape

Introduction

This chapter provides a general survey of the development of theatre as a professional institution in the northern counties of England during the eighteenth century. In one of his final publications, Roy Porter called for “better mappings” and a shift away from the “old emphasis on superstars” in tracing the role played by British thinkers in the “making of modernity.”¹ Perhaps more than any other figure in this period it was the actor whose profession allowed them to traverse “cultures high and low” as they travelled the “loops between London, Edinburgh and Dublin, between the metropolis and the provinces”, helping to realise a form of British Enlightenment which Porter stressed was highly expedient and pragmatic in nature.² The metropolitan-provincial relationship is examined in this chapter through examples drawn from York, Liverpool, Manchester, Edinburgh, and Newcastle, which reveal geography to have been a major influence over the northern theatrical landscape. Ireland’s place in the development of northern English theatre is a major discovery that supports David O’Shaughnessy’s recent, London-focused work.³ This was particularly notable in the 1750s and 1760s when provincial companies were established in many northern towns. Scotland’s influence also grew markedly from mid-century as exemplified by the actor-manager West Digges and his associates. As the century progressed and improvements were made to roads and carriage, London-based celebrities increasingly made their presence felt in the distant North,

¹ Roy Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2000), 11-12.

² Porter, *Enlightenment*, 12.

³ David O’Shaughnessy, ed., *Ireland, Enlightenment and the English Stage 1740-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

particularly in Stephen Kemble's playhouses during the 1790s; however, a long local theatrical tradition preceded any of these influences, which complicates questions of external considerations. Therefore, while identifying who established the playhouses in major towns and when this occurred, the question always remains whether London, Edinburgh or Dublin, truly acted as a significant pole of influence and to what degree prioritising their status is relevant.

York: The first “high and mighty of the profession” in the North

In one of the earliest studies of post-Elizabethan English provincial theatre published in 1922, Alwin Thaler identified three types of company that performed outside London in the eighteenth century.⁴ The “great players from the city” formed companies that visited the regions during the summer when the London theatres were closed. Strolling companies, “unlicenced vagabonds in the eyes of the law” existed on a more informal basis. Thirdly, the permanent regional companies were established in provincial centres with a circuit of theatres in nearby towns where they performed throughout the year.⁵ In a supplementary article, Elbridge Colby, identified Digges, Bates and Wilkinson as managers of these regional companies, which he termed the “high and mighty of the profession.”⁶

Peter Borsay highlighted the establishment of companies centred in provincial towns with the movement of a troupe from Norwich to the towns of Bath and York in the 1720s.⁷ The York company was managed by Thomas Keregan who immediately extended his operation to Newcastle upon Tyne. Town records show that his “company of comedians that plays at York, Nottingham and Leicester Races” were granted a six-week season starting on 5 June 1721 to perform in Newcastle's Moot Hall, which was the former mediaeval great hall of the town's Norman castle

⁴ Alwin Thaler, “Strolling Players and Provincial Drama after Shakspeare,” *PMLA* 37, no. 2 (1922): 243-280.

⁵ Thaler, “Strolling Players,” 246.

⁶ Elbridge Colby, “A Supplement on Strollers,” *PMLA* 39 (1924): 645.

⁷ Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance, Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660-1770* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 120-121.

that also acted as its principal court-house.⁸ The theatrical association between York and Newcastle continued under the management of Joseph Baker who developed a well-organised circuit that included Beverley and Hull in the East Riding of Yorkshire. Therefore, by the late 1760s when the protégé of Samuel Foote, Tate Wilkinson, took over the management of the York Theatre to develop what a contemporary theatre historian called “as respectable a theatrical situation as any out of London” he was building on almost fifty years of provincial theatrical tradition.⁹

John Brewer argues that “provincial theatres employed London players”, the provinces “followed metropolitan fashion” and “the theatre repertory mimicked that of the London houses.”¹⁰ However, this was not always the case in the northern counties. Wilkinson highlights examples of local audience taste that defined performance choice and set dramatic standards in the York company theatres which specifically rejected metropolitan tastes. Plays that were “in vogue in London” that “did not suit the humours of the audience” at York and Hull included *The Follies of a Day* and *The Spanish Barber*.¹¹ Hugh Kelly’s *A Word to the Wise* was damned in London and well received in Wilkinson’s playhouses.¹² “I applaud the judgments of those who decide for themselves” he declared, “and who do not let the name of London deprive them of their senses.”¹³ The well-established local tradition is exemplified by the fact that two highly influential northern theatre-managers, Samuel Butler and Sarah Ward, were both York-born. Wilkinson’s much republished account of the “York Roscius” Bridge Frodsham’s visit to David Garrick at his London

⁸ Cited in Harold Oswald, *The Theatres Royal in Newcastle Upon Tyne. Desultory Notes Relating to the Drama and its Home in That Place*, (Newcastle: Northumberland Press, 1936), 4. For a summary of theatre in the North East of England in the first half of the eighteenth century see Rebecca Frances King, “Aspects of Sociability in the North East of England 1600-1750,” (PhD diss., Durham University, 2001), 188-220.

⁹ Robert Hitchcock, *An Historical View of the Irish Stage; from the Earliest Period down to the close of the Season 1788. Interspersed with Theatrical Anecdotes, and an Occasional Review of the Irish Dramatic Authors and Actors*, 2 vols. (Dublin: R. Marchbank, 1788), 1:293.

¹⁰ John Brewer, “The English Provinces,” in *Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 396.

¹¹ Tate Wilkinson, *The Wandering Patentee: A History of the Yorkshire Theatres*, 4 vols. (York: Wilson, Spence, and Mawman, 1795), 1:236.

¹² Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 1:237-38.

¹³ *Ibid*, 237.

home in about 1758 demonstrates the self-assurance of this leading actor of the York theatre.¹⁴

Garrick assumed the country player was seeking a position at his Drury Lane Theatre, but was astonished to find Frodsham simply considered his visit a polite courtesy call “on a brother genius” while he was on holiday in the capital.¹⁵ Wilkinson notes that Garrick considered Frodsham to be “the strangest mad actor” that he had ever encountered, but adds that this provincial player’s self-assurance was not entirely unjustified.¹⁶

Helen Brooks provides further insight into York’s relationship with London through the “largely unknown story” of Mrs Keregan, who had “clearly been an active, albeit less visible partner” in the management of the York-based company, which became apparent when she took over as manager after her husband Thomas’ death.¹⁷ Brooks presents Mrs Keregan’s case to show that the legal limitations that disallowed women from managing companies in the metropolis were not fully enforced in the provinces.¹⁸ This is illustrated by an attempt made by the Covent Garden comic actor Joseph Arthur to undermine her management. In an address to the “Gentleman and Ladies of the City of York,” published after Keregan’s death in 1741, Arthur presents himself as “a gentlemanly saviour” of the York theatre.¹⁹ He informs the York public that due to the “present indifferent situation” he aimed “to undertake the regulation and improvement” of the town’s theatre by taking over the management for which he had made Mrs Keregan a generous offer. He further reported that “instead of meeting with the civility I imagin’d my proposal deserv’d” she had rudely

¹⁴ Tate Wilkinson, *Memoirs of His Own Life by Tate Wilkinson, Patentee of the Theatres Royal, York and Hull*, 4 vols. (York: Wilson, Spence and Mawman, 1790), 4:37-48. This was republished as “Account of Bridge Frodsham, the Roscius of York,” in *The Phoenix; or, Weekly Miscellany Improved*, 4 vols. (Glasgow: William Bell, 1792) 1:305-10 (Wednesday 14 November 1792) and 1:330-335 (Wednesday 21 November 1792).

¹⁵ Wilkinson, *Memoirs of His Own Life*, 4:43.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Helen E. M. Brooks, “Women and Theatre Management in the Eighteenth Century,” in *The Public’s Open to Us All: Essays on Women and Performance in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Laura Engel (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 77.

¹⁸ For a more recent survey of women managers in Georgian theatre, which features the wife of Samuel Butler, Tryphosa Brockell, see Thomas C. Crochunis, “Women Theatre Managers,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832*, eds. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 568-584.

¹⁹ Brooks, “Women and Theatre Management,” 78. Joseph Arthur’s address was republished in Tate Wilkinson, *The Wandering Patentee*, 2:209-10.

rejected his offer, which had prompted him to make his plans known to “some gentlemen of this city” who had encouraged him to pursue his take-over. Arthur plays on popular tropes, attempting to undermine Mrs Keregan by insinuating that she is a vulgar provincial strolling manageress incapable of achieving the kind of professionalism required of a prestigious theatre, while promoting himself as an experienced metropolitan actor capable of providing a higher class of entertainment based upon superior standards. Despite this, the York public were not swayed by Arthur’s efforts, which suggests the experience Mrs Keregan brought to her management role was recognised and valued. Building and maintaining close relationships with the public, as well as local dignitaries, was a prerequisite of management, in which she must have developed considerable skill over the previous years. Three years after dismissing Arthur she opened a new theatre in the Mint Yard with the town’s full support.²⁰ Brooks’ gendered approach illustrates that provincial theatrical life afforded women a more diverse range of experience than in the metropolis. She makes the further point that prejudicial attitudes towards women and provincial intellectual life still linger in the historiography, leading her to conclude that: “The actress-manager is not absent in the eighteenth century, we have simply been looking in the wrong place to find her.”²¹ This is a position generally supported by this thesis.

Liverpool: The “great players from the city”

Thaler notes that in the first half of the eighteenth century, the “great players from the city” ventured out from London at weekends to perform in towns near the capital, for example at Richmond in Surrey.²² Next they began to organise themselves into companies and went on tour during the three months of the summer when the theatres of Drury Lane and Covent Garden were

²⁰ Sybil Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players and Drama in the Provinces 1660-1765* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), 134.

²¹ Brooks, “Women and Theatre Management,” 89.

²² Thaler, “Strolling Players,” 251-252.

closed. Although financially risky, these expeditions could be lucrative, as in the case of Woodward from Drury Lane who travelled to Dublin in the summer of 1755 and earned £200 for nine performances.²³ In 2022 this equates to £23,000 according to the National Archives' purchasing power calculator and is estimated to be equivalent to 2,000 days of work for an eighteenth-century British skilled tradesman.²⁴ The London actor William Gibson was the first actor-manager to bring "a regular company" to the town of Liverpool, which was then a popular seaside resort that attracted wealthy visitors for the bathing season.²⁵ Gibson, assisted by a fellow actor from London, Isaac Ridout, managed the theatre in Liverpool's Drury Lane during the 1750s and 60s, eventually receiving a patent to establish a Theatre Royal in 1771.²⁶ "From the first" it was the custom at Liverpool to be entertained by London performers, according to Broadbent, the town's first theatre historian; however, in 1778 the managers Joseph Younger and George Mattocks attempted to imitate Tate Wilkinson by forming a company consisting only of provincial performers.²⁷ One of those actors, Sarah Siddons, informed Elizabeth Inchbald, "our managers have determined to employ no more exotics" as she termed metropolitan actors, so Liverpool had to be "content with such homely fare as small folk can furnish to its delicate sense."²⁸ In an indication of the potential volatility of Georgian playhouses, the *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* reported that this initiative led to a riot on the opening night of the 1778 summer season which caused £500 of damage.²⁹ John Philip Kemble recorded "every wall in the town is covered with verse and prose

²³ Alwin Thaler, "Strolling Players," 253.

²⁴ The National Archives, Currency Converter: 1270 – 2017: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/>, accessed 20.2.22.

²⁵ R. J. Broadbent, *Annals of the Liverpool Stage: From the Earliest Period to the Present Time, Together with Some Account of the Theatres and Music Halls in Bootle and Birkenhead* (Liverpool: E. Howell, 1908), 15.

²⁶ For the establishment of the Liverpool Theatre Royal and its consequent history, particularly regarding its role in the city's cultural development and self-conception, see Alexandra Appleton, "In Search of an Identity: The Changing Fortune of Liverpool's Theatre Royal, 1772-1855," (PhD diss., Royal Holloway College, University of London, 2015).

²⁷ Broadbent, *Liverpool Stage*, 71.

²⁸ James Boaden, *Memoirs of Mrs Inchbald: Including Her Familiar Correspondence with the Most Distinguished Persons of Her Time*, 2 vols. (London: R. Bentley, 1833), 2:363.

²⁹ *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, (London, England), 20 June and 24 June 1778. For an analysis of this riot see Appleton, "Liverpool's Theatre Royal," 38-42.

expressive of the contempt they hold us in.”³⁰ Presumably being on the route which actors often travelled between London and Dublin had led to greater audience expectations in the town. However, this was not the norm for theatres in other parts of the North. According to Thaler, “Even more important to the country towns – and more profitable to the actors – were the longer tours often undertaken by star performers from London during the summer months, when the city theatres were as a rule, closed.”³¹ Perhaps this may have been true for the south of England, but for much of the century, apart from the town of Liverpool, there is little evidence to back this claim up for the north of England, where geography played a crucial role in determining how the theatre developed. In terms of metropolitan influence, in the early years of the development of regular theatres, rather than London or Edinburgh, it was Dublin’s influence that made itself felt in northern English towns.

Dublin: Ireland’s influence on northern theatre

The early historian of the Irish stage, Robert Hitchcock, records that by the first half of the eighteenth century, actors habitually crossed the Irish Sea to perform in Liverpool, Manchester and Chester.³² The theatre at Chester was particularly profitable as the town was on the main road to London for travellers who disembarked at the nearby Parkgate Port, a major transit point for Ireland. Liverpool’s newspapers and playbills are limited for the earlier half of the century, but players from Dublin’s Smock Alley are recorded to have visited the town in 1742.³³ They may have performed in the “neat theatre that maintains a set of comedians for four months in the year very well” as observed by a wind-bound Londoner who had travelled to Ireland the previous year.³⁴ The town had a street called Smock Alley at this time, possibly named after a theatre established there.³⁵

³⁰ Boaden, *Memoirs of Mrs Inchbald*, 1:93.

³¹ Thaler, “Strolling Players,” 252.

³² Hitchcock, *Irish Stage*, 2:5.

³³ Broadbent, *Liverpool Stage*, 19.

³⁴ Cited in Broadbent, *Liverpool Stage*, 17.

³⁵ Broadbent, *Liverpool Stage*, 19, n. 4. The town’s Drury Lane was established in about 1749, see Broadbent, *Liverpool Stage*, 20.

In 1789 the Irish association with Liverpool's theatre continued when the Dublin-born actor Francis Aickin obtained a seven-year lease for Liverpool's Theatre Royal in partnership with John Philip Kemble, which was followed by a renewed lease in his own name for seven years in 1796.³⁶ In 1800 Aickin also took over the management of Edinburgh's Theatre Royal in partnership with John Jackson.³⁷

i. The Austin and Heatton Company

Joseph Austin and Michael Heatton's company is perhaps the most obvious example of the influence of Irish theatre in the North as their successful troupe was formed by actors from both Dublin theatres who travelled together across the Irish Sea in 1766 to establish what would become the dominant theatre company in the northernmost counties of England. When Heatton retired in 1779, Charles Edward Whitlock joined Austin in co-management. The scale of the company's dominance at this time was summarised by James Winston's *Theatric Tourist* in a paragraph intended to portray the physical demands of provincial acting life:

An estimate may partly be formed of the laborious life of an itinerant player, when we state that Austin and Whitlock's circuit, consisting of Newcastle, Lancaster, Chester, Whitehaven, and Preston, occasioned the performers a necessity of travelling eleven hundred miles each year, in addition to the constant weariness and fatigue of studying and acting.³⁸

³⁶ Philip H. Highfill Jr, Kalman A. Burnim, Edward A. Longhans, eds., *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800*, 16 vols. (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973-93), 1:46.

³⁷ Highfill et al., *Biographical Dictionary*, 1:47.

³⁸ James Winston, *The Theatric Tourist, being a genuine collection of correct views, with brief and authentic historical accounts of all the principle provincial theatres in the United Kingdom*, ed. Iain Mackintosh, with an introduction by Marcus Risdell (London: The Society for Theatre Research and The British Library, 2008), 44.

Austin and Whitlock's actors also performed in Sheffield, Warrington, and Manchester during the first decade of their partnership.³⁹

The English actor Austin had travelled to Ireland in 1761 to perform at Dublin's Crow Street Theatre, having previously performed occasional parts in Garrick's Drury Lane company. While performing in Ireland between 1761 and 1765 he developed a partnership with the actor Heatton. Their company, advertised as from "the Theatre Royal Dublin" first performed for eleven weeks in Wrexham, the capital of Wales at that time, where they found "crowded houses, polite reception and generous patronage."⁴⁰ The company included Edward Shuter, Robert Mahon, John Vandermere, John Kane and John Boles Watson; their departure therefore marked the loss of a number of capable actors from the Dublin theatres as several of these performers never returned to Ireland.⁴¹

From the winter of 1767 the company regularly performed in Newcastle, taking the town from Wilkinson when the lease for the Theatre in the Bigg Market became available in 1770 after the death of the proprietor Baker, thus ending the York company's forty-nine year association with the town.⁴² Wilkinson left in "great dungeon and *very sulky*" but this prompted him to build a theatre at Leeds and expand his Yorkshire circuit.⁴³ In response, Austin and Heatton obtained a licence for their first Theatre Royal at Chester in 1777 which they visited from July to October and for Race Week. Austin and Heatton projected a public image of polite, refined respectability, often emphasising their connections with the prestigious theatres of London and Dublin. In January 1781,

³⁹ M. H. Dodds, "The Northern Stage," *Archeologia Aeliana*, 3, no. 9 (Newcastle upon Tyne: Andrew Reid, 1914): 60.

⁴⁰ See Cecil Price, *The English Theatre in Wales in the Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1948), 32-34.

⁴¹ John C. Greene, *Theatre in Dublin, 1745-1820: A Calendar of Performances*, 6 vols. (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2011), 2:1155. John Boles Watson, from Silver Fort, Cashel in County Tipperary, would become a successful manager of theatres centred on Cheltenham. For a history of this influential acting family see Anthony Denning and Paul Ranger, *Theatre in the Cotswolds: The Boles Watson Family and the Cirencester Theatre* (London: The Society for Theatre Research, 1993).

⁴² Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 1:73-76.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 75. Wilkinson's company returned to Newcastle for Assize Week in 1781, see Oswald, *Theatres Royal in Newcastle*, 7.

the *Newcastle Courant* announced that Austin had recently been in London socialising with the manager of Covent Garden, Thomas Harris, and the playwright, Hannah Cowley, who had “favoured” him her popular new comedy *The Belle’s Stratagem* which the company would shortly perform.⁴⁴ This played to local interests as the *Cumberland Pacquet* proudly noted that Hannah Cowley was the “wife of Mr Cowley, late of Cockermouth” and the play’s premiere was “received with uncommon applause” at Whitehaven the following March.⁴⁵ *The Belle’s Stratagem* became a company favourite in the town and its protagonist Doricourt one of Whitlock’s most celebrated roles.

Austin prided himself on providing a “nursery” for the London theatres.⁴⁶ The comedian John Edwin joined the company in its strolling days, shortly after the troupe’s arrival from Ireland, when he performed in a barn because “the state of the Company’s treasury was truly lamentable.”⁴⁷ The “Manchester Roscius” George Frederick Cooke performed with the troupe for decades, finally appearing for the first time on the boards of a London winter patent house at the age of forty-four in 1800.⁴⁸ Another star, Joseph Munden, briefly co-managed the company with Whitlock and opened Newcastle’s first Theatre Royal in January 1788, but he quickly abandoned his role due to the “numberless vexations” that management brought.⁴⁹ Wilkinson also prided himself on nurturing talent in his Yorkshire circuit theatres, describing John Philip Kemble as “a choice root from my botanical garden” who Hitchcock lured away from the Hull theatre to Dublin’s Smock Alley

⁴⁴ *Newcastle Courant*, (Newcastle upon Tyne, England), 13 January 1781.

⁴⁵ *Cumberland Pacquet and Ware’s Whitehaven Advertiser* (Whitehaven, England), 4 March 1780. Hannah Cowley’s husband, Thomas, was the son of a Cockermouth bookseller, Mary Cowley.

⁴⁶ For the reclamation of a performer who appeared on this circuit see Susan A. Porter, “John Hodgkinson in England: The Early Life of an American Actor-Singer,” *American Music* 6, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 270-72.

⁴⁷ John Williams, *The Eccentricities of John Edwin, Comedian, collected from his manuscripts and enriched with several hundred anecdotes*, 2 vols. (London, J. Strahan, 1791), 1:187.

⁴⁸ George Frederick Cooke, *Memoirs of the Life of George Frederick Cooke, Esq.*, ed. William Dunlap, 2 vols. (New York: Longworth, 1813), 1:93.

⁴⁹ Thomas Gilliland, *The Dramatic Mirror: Containing the History of the Stage from the Earliest Period to the Present Time; Including a Biographical and Critical Account of All the Dramatic Writers, from 1660; and also of the Most Distinguished Performers from the Days of Shakespeare to 1807: and a History of the Country Theatres in England, Ireland, and Scotland*, 2 vols. (London: C. Chapple, 1808), 2:868-69.

“where he took root, and was transplanted to London.”⁵⁰ Other less prestigious northern companies also cultivated actors for metropolitan fame. The actress Ann Catherine Holbrook believed Stanton’s company in Lancaster and Preston provided more actors for “the London Boards than the whole kingdom could now furnish.”⁵¹ However, the flow was not just one way because northern companies offered summer work when the patent theatres were closed, while also providing employment for metropolitan players who could not find work at the patent houses. At the beginning of Whitehaven’s 1776 winter season the public were assured that the managers had “collected a company of performers from the Theatres Royal of London, Dublin, Edinburgh, York and Bath.”⁵²

ii. Francis Gentleman

After leaving Thomas Sheridan’s Smock Alley Theatre, where they had performed in 1749 and 1750, Charles Macklin and his wife, the actress Ann Grace, formed a company and travelled to Chester where they performed for a summer season.⁵³ The Irish actors and writers, Francis Gentleman and Samuel Derrick, were in Chester at this time and they later travelled to London together where they formed a writing partnership.⁵⁴ The Dublin-born Gentleman is the type of marginal figure with whom this study is concerned because of his contribution to northern literary and intellectual networks which his status as an itinerant player allowed.⁵⁵ Gentleman’s play *The Modish Wife* published in 1775 includes a memoir recording some of his activities and literary

⁵⁰ Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 4:74, 75.

⁵¹ Ann Catherine Holbrook, *The Dramatist; or, Memoirs of the Stage. With the life of the authoress, prefixed and interspersed with, a variety of anecdotes, humorous and pathetic* (Birmingham: Martin and Hunter, 1809), 33.

⁵² *Cumberland Chronicle, or Whitehaven Intelligencer* (Whitehaven, England), 5 Nov 1776.

⁵³ Hitchcock, *Irish Stage*, 1:211.

⁵⁴ Francis Gentleman, “A Summary View of the English, Scots and Irish Stages,” in *The Modish Wife, a Comedy* (London: 1775), 8.

⁵⁵ See Gentleman’s entry in Highfill et al., *Biographical Dictionary*, 6:138-153.

pursuits which he realised as he tramped around the nation performing in country theatres.⁵⁶ This is of particular interest as it describes how he helped to establish Thomas Bates' Durham company in about 1760.

The *Biographical Dictionary* states that Gentleman's *Dramatic Censor* published anonymously in 1770 is "an important title in any history of criticism in the eighteenth century."⁵⁷ It adds that Gentleman's criticism of the 50 plays, 45 contemporary performers and many of the best known playwrights "is always that of an actor who has swayed audiences in his time and of an elocution teacher who has coached pupils in the values of words well spoken."⁵⁸ This combination of actor and teacher of elocution is repeatedly found in the experiences of northern performers during the second half of the century. Many players strove for greater public recognition regarding the respectability of their profession and made conscious efforts to employ the stage as a site of educational example and moral improvement, while often augmenting their incomes by teaching elocution in the towns where they performed.

The professionalisation of acting and the belief in theatre's capacity for social improvement is exemplified by the Irish actor-manager Thomas Sheridan, to whom Gentleman was "indebted for an introduction to the stage" after the manager of Dublin's Smock Alley Theatre had given him "a most gentlemanlike reception" in 1749.⁵⁹ Sheridan helped to dignify the acting profession and gave actors a level of respect and security that was unprecedented. In her influential study, *Thomas Sheridan of Smock-Alley*, Esther K. Sheldon notes that Gentleman's friend, the celebrated actor Mossop, was the son of a clergyman who "had been liberally educated at Sheridan's university Trinity College" and after rejection by Rich and Garrick in London, had been given his opportunity by Sheridan in Dublin. Sheldon stresses: "The fact that such men felt it possible to make an honorable career in the theater was due largely to Sheridan's victory in the Kelly dispute and to the

⁵⁶ Gentleman, "A Summary View," 1-30.

⁵⁷ Highfill et al., *Biographical Dictionary*, 6:148.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Gentleman, "A Summary View," 3.

sobriety and decorum which he had instituted on both sides of the curtain at Smock-Alley.”⁶⁰ Sheldon is referring to Sheridan’s famous challenge made in court for recognition of his gentlemanly status as an actor.⁶¹ It was immediately after another major theatre incident, the Mahomet Riots in 1756, that he developed his plan for a “Hibernian Academy” that would educate Ireland’s youth on the basis of Anglophone oratory instead of the standard Latin and Greek grammar texts. Work about Sheridan has tended to either concentrate on his career as a theatre manager or on his later life as a master of elocution.⁶² However, Conrad Brunström’s biography *An Actor in Earnest* attempts to marry these two careers, leading its author to claim that Sheridan is “one of the most influential characters of the eighteenth century.”⁶³ Certainly Sheridan’s influence did make itself apparent in the region examined in this study where steps taken to professionalise the stage and improve speech continued for the rest of the century. As late as January 1796, the great declaimer Stephen Kemble advertised a “new kind of Entertainment” presented for the “first time” at the Newcastle Theatre Royal called “English Readings. As undertaken by the late Messrs Sheridan and Henderson at Free Mason’s Hall, London upward of sixty nights, with great applause.”⁶⁴ The actor Joseph Cowell wrote of Kemble that “his Macbeth and Hamlet, by the adorers of mind not body, will never be forgotten and his readings of Milton and the Bible were superhuman.”⁶⁵ According to Benzie’s *Dublin Orator* the “Attic Evenings” began at Bath in 1763. They were “celebratory symposia of the spoken word” in which “music, recitation, and lecture were

⁶⁰ Esther K. Sheldon, *Thomas Sheridan of Smock-Alley: Recording his Life as Actor and Theater Manager in both Dublin and London, and Including a Smock-Alley Calendar for the Years of his Management* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), 153-154.

⁶¹ For the relationship between the Kelly riots and trial with the public sphere see Michael Brown, *The Irish Enlightenment* (Cambridge Mass; Harvard University Press, 2016), 243-45.

⁶² For elocution see William Benzie, *The Dublin Orator: Thomas Sheridan’s Influence on Eighteenth-Century Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (Menston, Yorkshire: Scolar Press, 1972).

⁶³ Conrad Brunström, *Thomas Sheridan’s Career and Influence: An Actor in Earnest* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2011), 4.

⁶⁴ Newcastle upon Tyne, Tyne and Wear, Newcastle Central Library (NCL). *Newcastle Theatre Playbills*. Playbill for Wednesday 13 January 1796, “Belle’s Strategem.”

⁶⁵ Joseph Cowell, *Thirty Years Passed among the Players in England and America*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1845), 1:41.

combined to try and pay tribute to the power of the word, in all its corrective plenitude.”⁶⁶ Benzie argues that Sheridan’s main concern was elocution rather than theatre, which is supported by Sheridan’s observation that: “Acting is a poor thing in the present state of the stage. For my own part, I engaged in it merely as a step to something greater, a just notion of eloquence.”⁶⁷ He believed that with the standardisation of English pronunciation “a general good taste, and exactness of speech, would be diffused thro’ the whole people.”⁶⁸

Although Sheridan’s aim was primarily to extend opportunity and participation within British political life for Irish gentlemen whose speech limited their rights and aspirations, the promotion of elocution was embraced in other parts of Britain, particularly where English was spoken with pronounced regional dialects. This has led Brunström to describe Sheridan as “a West Briton who found fame teaching North Britons to speak like South Britons.”⁶⁹ Here he is referring to Sheridan’s travel to Edinburgh to deliver lectures on “English Language and Publick Speaking” in the summer of 1761. The lectures were held at St Paul’s Chapel in Skinner’s Close on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays and the fee, at half a guinea for six evenings of instruction, was a price that ensured only the more prosperous clientele could attend.⁷⁰ In a later visit in 1764 Sheridan also advertised his *Rhetorical Grammar* which had been written so that “the natives of Scotland may be taught, with but little difficulty, according to the method there laid down, to speak the English tongue with such purity, as not easily to be distinguished from the most polite and best educated natives of England.”⁷¹ Brunström claims Sheridan influenced Hugh Blair to develop his

⁶⁶ Brunström, *Actor in Earnest*, 138.

⁶⁷ James Boswell, *Boswell's London Journal, 1762-1763*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 136-137. (Wednesday 12 January 1763).

⁶⁸ Thomas Sheridan, *British Education: or, The Source of the Disorders of Great Britain* (London: R and J Dodsley, 1756), 246-247.

⁶⁹ Conrad Brunström “Thomas Sheridan and the Evil Ends of Writing,” *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua* 3, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 141.

⁷⁰ For analysis of the eighteenth-century British Elocutionary Movement with particular attention given to *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos* see Philippa M. Spoel, “Rereading the Elocutionists: The Rhetoric of Thomas Sheridan's *A Course of Lectures on Elocution* and John Walker's *Elements of Elocution*,” *Rhetorica* 19, no.1 (Winter 2001): 49-91.

⁷¹ *Edinburgh Courant*, (Edinburgh, Scotland), 13 June 1764.

series of lectures on Rhetoric and *Belles Lettres* that have been described as the first University course in English Literature.⁷² However, it should be noted that Blair was working from lecture notes developed by Adam Smith many years earlier.⁷³

Whatever the extent of Sheridan's influence over Blair, what is certain is the crucial role that rhetoric played in the development of mid-century Enlightenment in the North, to which actors like Sheridan and others made significant contributions. Brunström argues that Sheridan was "one of the great opportunists of this intellectual interregnum" when "the traditional mediaeval and Renaissance disciplines were losing their hold and the nineteenth-century academic categories we still inhabit had yet to establish themselves."⁷⁴ Brunström identifies him as "a phonocentrist who believed that the written word had helped destroy something of Edenic (or at least ante-Babelian) purity of expression."⁷⁵ He sought in oratory to establish a form of imagined community in which the "social passions", being constantly exercised through improved speech, would thereby become predominant and "revive that public spirit" which he felt was at that moment "almost annihilated by that vile spirit of selfishness which pervades the whole land."⁷⁶ For Sheridan, this form of destructive selfishness had arisen with the dominance of the written over the spoken word, as he makes explicitly clear when criticising the state of Irish education: "Nothing has contributed more to the propagation of this sordid passion, the bane of every great and good principle, than the ascendancy which the written language has obtained over the spoken."⁷⁷ Sheridan was therefore a combination of ancient and modern and many of his fellow actors, including Francis Gentleman, appear to have belonged to his school of thought.

⁷² Brunström, *Actor in Earnest*, 24.

⁷³ Nicholas Phillipson, *Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life* (London: Penguin, 2011), 119.

⁷⁴ Brunström, *Actor in Earnest*, 24.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 5.

⁷⁶ Thomas Sheridan, *A View of the State of School Education in Ireland: Wherein the Numerous Errors and Defects of the Present System are fully exposed; and the Necessity of adopting a new one, clearly demonstrated. With a Sketch or Plan for that Purpose* (Dublin: Printed for M. Mills, 1787), 66.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*.

Gentleman considered the stage as a school as well as a place of entertainment and the championing of rhetoric's role in moral improvement underlies much of his writing and activities. His position regarding "a turn for politics" and prostituting "principle to profit" is made apparent by a comment regarding his own chosen motto:

... if you are an honest principled writer, ten to one but *laudatur & alget*⁷⁸ is a proper motto for you: how far I have found this verified I won't pretend to say, but heartily wish I had been fated to use an awl and end sooner than the pen, for nothing but a pensioned defender of government, a sycophant to managers, or slave to booksellers, can do anything more than crawl.⁷⁹

He was criticised by contemporaries for his moral didacticism and more recently the *Biographical Dictionary* describes his memoir as "laced with prudential morality, trite maxims, and self-serving protestation."⁸⁰ However, Gentleman's often bitter satire maintains a stoical commitment to virtue and when considered in the context of a challenging strolling life his pronouncements take on a radical hue born of personal struggle.

After starting his career at Smock Alley, Gentleman spent much of the 1750s performing in the provinces and writing plays. In 1759 he travelled to Edinburgh in the hope of joining West Digges' company with a letter of introduction from David Garrick informing the reader that his "Knowledge & Understanding are much Superior to those of our common Stage-Adventurers."⁸¹ Gentleman's successful farce *The Tobacconist* was published in Edinburgh the following year. He also befriended the teenage James Boswell and probably taught him elocution to help eliminate his Scottish accent. As well as introducing Gentleman as a "native of Ireland and a player" in the *Life of Johnson*, Boswell described him as "an instructor in the English language", one of the many players who supplemented their incomes by teaching elocution in the North where local dialects

⁷⁸ The Latin motto "*Probitas laudatur et alget*" is from Juvenal and can be translated as "Honesty is praised and left in the cold."

⁷⁹ Gentleman, "A Summary View," 9.

⁸⁰ Highfill et al., *Biographical Dictionary*, 6:138.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 142.

were considered a hindrance to advancement.⁸² Frederick A. Pottle has suggested that Gentleman and Boswell collaborated on a series of anonymous reviews of performances in the summer of 1759 at the Edinburgh theatre.⁸³ These appeared in a collection of twenty-two reviews of plays published in London as an anonymous 50-page pamphlet dedicated to the actor West Digges called *A View of the Edinburgh Theatre during the Summer Season, 1759*.⁸⁴

Pottle also suggests that Gentleman accompanied Boswell when he transferred his studies from Edinburgh to Glasgow at the order of his father.⁸⁵ Gentleman records in his memoir that he had believed “a professorship of English oratory might be obtained” for him in Glasgow where he assisted “some persons of respectable families in the proper pronunciation of English.”⁸⁶ The Glaswegian printers Robert and Andrew Foulis published his adaptation of Thomas Southerne’s *Oroonoko: or The Royal Slave* in 1760 which contains a verse-dedication to Boswell.⁸⁷ More significantly, in *The Life of Samuel Johnson* Boswell notes that prior to meeting Gentleman, he had held Johnson in “mysterious veneration”, imagining him as a figure in a “state of solemn elevated abstraction” living “in the immense metropolis of London.”⁸⁸ Boswell records that it was Gentleman who “had given me a representation of his figure and manner.”⁸⁹ This exemplifies the argument of this thesis, which is that provincial actors performed the crucial role of cultural brokers

⁸² James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson. L.L.D.*, 2 vols. (London: Dilly, 1791), 1:208.

⁸³ Frederick A. Pottle, *The Literary Career of James Boswell, Esq. Being the Bibliographical Materials for a Life of Boswell* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929),

⁸⁴ [Francis Gentleman, James Boswell], *A View of the Edinburgh Theatre During the Summer Season, 1759. Containing, an Exact List of the Several Pieces represented, and impartial Observations on each Performance. By a Society of Gentlemen* (London: A. Morley, 1760).

⁸⁵ Frederick A. Pottle, *James Boswell, the Earlier Years 1740-1769* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966). See also Peter Martin, *A Life of James Boswell* (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicholson, 1999), 58.

⁸⁶ Gentleman, “A Summary View,” 12.

⁸⁷ Francis Gentleman, *Oroonoko: or the Royal Slave. A Tragedy, altered from Southerne, by Francis Gentleman. As it was Performed at the Theatre in Edinburgh, with Universal Applause* (Glasgow: Robert and Andrew Foulis, 1760). Gentleman’s first role in Sheridan’s theatre had been Aboan in Southerne’s *Oroonoko: or the Royal Slave*. Diana Jaher argues Aboan “voices much of the play’s antislavery rhetoric” and presents the example of an “exceptional, nonaristocratic slave.” See Diana Jaher, “The Paradoxes of Slavery in Thomas Southerne’s *Oroonoko*,” *Comparative Drama*, 42, no. 1 (2008): 51-71. For a close reading of Aphra Benn’s *Oroonoko: or, The Royal Slave* (1688) as an anti-slavery text see Moira Ferguson, “*Oroonoko*: Birth of a Paradigm,” *New Literary History* 23, no. 2, (1992): 339-359.

⁸⁸ Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 1:208.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

in this period. Boswell describes the Irish stroller, Gentleman, as “a man whose talents and worth were depressed by misfortunes” yet he knew Johnson from London and had the opportunity to pass on valuable information to the twenty-two-year-old Boswell, thereby helping to shape his future.⁹⁰ Gentleman also provided Boswell with an introduction to help him on his path, as Boswell notes that “during my first visit to London . . . Mr. Derrick the poet, who was Gentleman's friend and countryman, flattered me with hopes that he would introduce me to Johnson.”⁹¹ Derrick introduced Boswell to the actor-bookseller Thomas Davies who performed the historic introduction of Johnson to his biographer at his bookshop at 8 Russell Street, Covent Garden on 16 May 1763.⁹² The combined role of actor as teacher and cultural influencer is further exemplified in a notable manner by another Edinburgh actor, James Love, who gave Boswell elocution lessons in Edinburgh and was the first person to recommend that he keep a journal.⁹³

After leaving Glasgow, Gentleman travelled to Liverpool where he decided to “occupy the *theatre* as a school of *Oratory*.”⁹⁴ Each evening before the entertainment began he gave a short introductory lecture upon “the general subject and tendency of the play” in order to explain “moral and practical philosophy, both according to the ancients and the moderns” believing this practice should be generally adopted to replace “farcical unmeaning prologues.”⁹⁵ Gentleman then travelled to Scarborough where he helped to establish Thomas Bates’ Durham company.

iii. James Augustus Whitley and the Manchester Theatre

The Manchester theatre was also established by Irish theatrical figures. The first purpose-built theatre in Manchester was constructed in King Street and leased by William Horton to an Irish

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Martin, *Life of James Boswell*, 68.

⁹³ James Boswell, *Boswell's Edinburgh Journals: 1767-1786*, ed. Hugh M. Milne (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 2001), 18.

⁹⁴ Gentleman, “A Summary View,” 18.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

touring company managed by the Dubliner Richard Elrington who opened for the winter season on 3 December 1753.⁹⁶ Elrington failed to win over a group of influential townsfolk who objected to dramatic performances in the town. Another Irishman, the actor-manager James Augustus Whitley, had greater success and managed to acquire a licence for the theatre, thus adding Manchester to his Midlands circuit.⁹⁷ Whitley's association with the town continued for over twenty years. His company also occasionally performed at Sheffield, Doncaster and Scarborough in the 1750s and a regular Yorkshire theatre was established on his circuit at Halifax during this decade. Numerous accounts describe the eccentricities for which Whitley was renowned. He had "a kind of original whimsicality about him that is peculiar to Irishmen" according to the manager of the Taunton, Salisbury and Somerset circuits, Henry Lee, who also believed that "Whitley (with the exception of myself) built more Theatres, than any other manager in the kingdom."⁹⁸ Most of Whitley's theatres were on circuits in the Midlands, Norfolk and Lincolnshire, which are areas beyond the scope of this research and therefore he does not feature greatly in this study. However, in terms of northern theatre, he maintained a hold on Manchester for the 1760s, after managing to resist "His Majesties Servants" from the Dublin theatre who mounted rival performances in 1760 and a combined company from London's Drury Lane and Covent Garden Theatres, including the actors John Lee, Edward Shuter, Sarah Ward and Esther Hamilton, who performed in the summer of 1761, as recorded in verse by the Mancunian poet, Joseph Ashton, in his *Metrical Records*:

In years seventeen-sixty and sixty-and-one,
The town by the players was well played upon;
Old Whiteley possession, had got of the town,
But the two London houses join'd forces and came down,

⁹⁶ John Harland, ed., *Collectanea Relating to Manchester and its Neighbourhood at Various Periods*, vol. 2. (Manchester: Cheltham Society, 1867), 56. For the history of the Manchester theatre from 1750 to 1807 see J. L. Hodgkinson and Rex Pogson, *The Early Manchester Theatre* (London: The Society for Theatre Research, 1960).

⁹⁷ For a compilation of newspaper articles and contemporary theatrical anecdotes about James Augustus Whitley see Lesley Phillips, *The Eccentric Mr Whitley: The Life and Career of James Augustus Whitley a Legendary Theatrical Manager* (Lesley Phillips, self-published, 2017).

⁹⁸ Henry Lee, *Memoirs of a Manager: or, Life's Stage with New Scenery*, 2 vols. (Taunton: W. Bragg, 1830), 2:122-123, 105.

And no place being vacant that was near to the centre,
They determined in Salford to try their adventure;
Erected a building, erected a stage,
To act o'er the passions of man and his age;
And to tempt the Manchestrans, made steps down the ridge,
And over the river threw Blackfriars Bridge.⁹⁹

Comfortable access to the playhouse was a crucial factor in winning theatrical success and this investment in a flight of steps and wooden footbridge exemplifies how performers helped to bring about what Borsay terms “urban renaissance” in the towns where they performed. Later chapters examine how the Durham company in particular directly contributed towards civic improvement in the towns on its circuit.

The London stars returned for the following two summer seasons; however, after 1763 no London company appears to have ever visited the town again. Whitley continued to perform regularly in Manchester until he lost the town to Joseph Younger and George Mattocks, who opened Manchester’s first Theatre Royal on 5 June 1775.¹⁰⁰ Mattocks concentrated on their company’s Portsmouth Theatre, leaving Younger to manage theatres in Liverpool and Manchester. Ashton also commemorated Whitley’s departure in *Metrical Records* and drew attention to three future stars who would appear at the Manchester Theatre Royal two years later:

Poor Whiteley, Manager, ran favour on shore,
And was turned out of town, to return to’t no more ...
And of talent and genius, that stage was not barren,
Which boasted John Kemble, the Siddons and Farren.¹⁰¹

As noted in the introduction of this dissertation, when these actors appeared together in Younger’s company in the Spring of 1777, they were all complete unknowns.

The performance of Siddons in the role of Hamlet at Manchester in 1777 provides an opportunity to illuminate the relationship between metropolis and province. In his *New York*

⁹⁹ Harland, *Collectanea*, 57-58.

¹⁰⁰ *Manchester Mercury* (Manchester, England), 20 May 1775.

¹⁰¹ Harland, *Collectanea*, 59.

Dramatic Mirror article about this performance, Lawrence highlights Siddons' capacity for playing male roles by quoting a letter written to David Garrick by Reverend Henry Bate in which he describes Siddons as "a very good breeches figure."¹⁰² Jane Moody also draws attention to Bate's letter to make a finer point about provincial theatre, observing that Siddons never performed as a man on the London stage during her whole thirty-year career.¹⁰³ However, as Celestine Woo has noted, Siddons appeared as Hamlet at least nine times in the provinces, at theatres in Worcester, Manchester, Bristol, Liverpool, and Dublin.¹⁰⁴ Importantly, Woo explains the distinction between what is usually understood to be a "breeches part" and cross-gendered role playing. A "breeches part" such as Rosalind in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is when a female character dresses as a male as part of the plot during the play and usually returns to wearing feminine clothing by the end. Cross-gendered role playing, such as Siddons' performance as Hamlet, is when an actress plays a man's role throughout the whole performance. Moody argues that while the metropolis did not permit such a transgressive act in the case of Siddons, the provinces provided a space for innovation and therefore resembled "dramatic 'liberties' where theatrical experiments or distinctive forms of cultural commentary could take place."¹⁰⁵ She uses this and other examples in her ground-breaking essay "Dictating to the Empire" to encourage scholars to consider the productive potential of studying the provinces.

Edinburgh: The "barbarous northern clime"

According to Wilkinson, before 1759, "birds of passage from London to Scotland were experiments unknown, for it was judged impossible for a London theatrical sunflower to survive the chillness of

¹⁰² W. J. Lawrence, "A Remarkable Playbill," *The New York Dramatic Mirror* (New York) 8 July 1905.

¹⁰³ Jane Moody, "Dictating to Empire: Performance and Theatrical Geography in Eighteenth-Century Britain," in *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre 1730-1830*, eds. Jane Moody and Daniel O'Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 27.

¹⁰⁴ See Celestine Woo, "Sarah Siddons's Performances as Hamlet: Breaching the Breaches Part," *European Romantic Review* 18, no. 5 (2007): 573-595.

¹⁰⁵ Moody, "Dictating to Empire," 27.

such a barbarous northern clime.”¹⁰⁶ He believed Samuel Foote’s visit to Edinburgh that year was the first example of a famous London performer making what was considered to be an arduous journey to the distant North, although the London performer John Lee had been “the first to raise the status and *morale* of the theatre in Edinburgh” when hired as manager by a group of Scottish aristocrats led by Lord Elbank in 1752.¹⁰⁷ Lee’s arrival had a bearing on theatre in the northern English counties because in order to attract performers he had to offer salaries for the entire year and needed to occupy his actors during the summer months, for which he developed a circuit which included Newcastle and the popular spa-resort of Scarborough.¹⁰⁸ This led to debt and ruin.¹⁰⁹ Edinburgh saw the downfall of many theatre managers during the last half of the century. Wilkinson considered the good fortune of his longevity by way of comparison with the Edinburgh Theatre, listing the managers since 1758 as Mr Lee, Mr Love, Mr Ross, Mr Callender, Mr Dowson, Mr David Beat, Mr Ross, Mr Digges, Mr Corri, Tate Wilkinson, Mr Heaphy, 1781, Tate Wilkinson the races, 1781, Mr Jackson, 1782, Mr S Kemble and Mrs Esten.¹¹⁰ One of the names on Wilkinson’s list, the English actor West Dudley Digges, dubbed “Scotland’s Roscius” by a youthful James Boswell in a verse-epistle to his friend Andrew Erskine, is perhaps the most influential northern performer to have emerged from the Irish theatre in the period of Sheridan’s enlightened reign.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Wilkinson, *Memoirs of His Own Life*, 2:72.

¹⁰⁷ James C. Dibdin, *The Annals of the Edinburgh Stage with an Account of the Rise and Progress of Dramatic Writing in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Richard Cameron, 1888), 72.

¹⁰⁸ John Lee, *A Narrative of a Remarkable Breach of Trust committed by a Nobleman, Five Judges, and Several Advocates of the Court of Session in Scotland* (London: Printed for the author, 1772), 2.

¹⁰⁹ John Lee, *A Narrative*, 11-12.

¹¹⁰ Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 2:85-86. David Ross had been the patentee and first proprietor of a licenced stage in Scotland when the Edinburgh Theatre Royal opened in 1768.

¹¹¹ Andrew Erskine and James Boswell, *Letters between the Honourable Andrew Erskine, and James Boswell, Esq* (London: Printed by Samuel Chandler; for W. Flexney, 1763), 100.

i. West Dudley Digges, “a pretty man”

Digges had been presumptive heir to the title and estate of an earldom, but he lost the inheritance at the age of eighteen and was bought a commission in a Scottish regiment.¹¹² According to Hitchcock he fell into debt, sold his commission and was advised by Theophilus Cibber to follow a theatrical life which for a select few “opened a source of inexhaustible wealth.”¹¹³ Digges was certain his family would prevent him from performing in London, so Cibber advised him to apply to Sheridan in Ireland.¹¹⁴ He made his stage debut on 29 November 1749 as Jaffeir in *Venice Preserv’d* at Dublin’s Smock Alley Theatre.¹¹⁵ The stage manager Benjamin Victor recorded, “I stood by him at his first entrance in Jaffier, and observed that not a single nerve seemed disordered – the audience saluted him with peals of applause.”¹¹⁶ Hitchcock notes, “His family connections, and many singular circumstances which marked his entrance into life, were so well known to the fashionable world, that his first entre on the stage engaged the attention of the politest circles.”¹¹⁷ Digges quickly became a favourite of Irish audiences, remaining with Sheridan for the next five years while spending his summers performing for John Lee’s company in Scotland and the north of England.

Shortly after his debut, Digges came to the attention of Garrick in London who noted in a letter, “I wish I had him at a moderate, or even almost any price.”¹¹⁸ However, Digges would continue to perform in Ireland, Scotland and the north of England for twenty-eight years before setting foot on a London stage, thereby eliminating any notion of metropolitan influence over his career or acting style.¹¹⁹ This was noted by the journalist and playwright Edward Topham who commented that as Digges had been “denied access to the London theatre, he had no opportunity of

¹¹² John Genest, *Some Account of the English Stage from the Restoration in 1660 to 1830*, vol. 10. (Bath: H. E. Carrington, 1832), 408.

¹¹³ Hitchcock, *Irish Stage*, 1:203-04.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 204.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 205.

¹¹⁶ Genest, *English Stage*, 10:367.

¹¹⁷ Hitchcock, *Irish Stage*, 1:201.

¹¹⁸ Highfill et al., *Biographical Dictionary*, 4:410.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*.

forming himself upon what are thought to be the best models ... and as far as I can judge, he copies in no instance from any performer I have seen.”¹²⁰ The *Biographical Dictionary* notes Digges’ “dominating influence in the provinces.”¹²¹ Topham told a friend “Digges’s look and action beggar all description” and that he manifested the “exact character of Cato” which surpassed Garrick’s version.¹²²

The playwright John O’Keeffe recorded that Digges was “an expensive man in his way of living” and his dedication to fashion and conspicuous consumption led to a constant state of debt.¹²³ Nonetheless, Digges’ excesses helped to increase his popularity and win the support of the public, as suggested by the actor Charles Lee Lewes’ description of Digges’ *sprezzatura*:

Bred up in high life from the first entrance on this world’s great stage, his manners were easy and unembarrassed; nor was he ever known apparently to be the least affected, when the greatest seeming difficulties have occurred. ... What felicity! What true philosophy!¹²⁴

Wahrman notes that there was more to a gentleman’s lifestyle of expenditure on luxuries and conspicuous consumption than mere self-indulgence. Leisure and its sociable activities were crucial factors in what he terms “the ideology of civility, or improvement, which could be acquired only by cultivated refinement.”¹²⁵ Pocock also stresses that in this period politeness and taste “were concepts freighted with a heavy ideological load.”¹²⁶ The star-struck Boswell, who befriended

¹²⁰ Edward Topham, *Letters from Edinburgh; written in the years 1774 and 1775 containing some Observations on the Diversions, Customs, Manners, and Laws of the Scotch Nation* (London: J. Dodsley, 1776), 110.

¹²¹ Highfill et al., *Biographical Dictionary*, 4:410.

¹²² Topham, *Letters from Edinburgh*, 124.

¹²³ John O’Keeffe, *Recollections of the Life of John O’Keeffe: Written by Himself*, 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1826), 1:291.

¹²⁴ Charles Lee Lewes, *Memoirs of Charles Lee Lewes, Containing Anecdotes, Historical and Biographical, of the English and Scottish Stages, During a Period of Forty Years*, 4 vols. (London: Richard Phillips, 1805), 3:41. n. 1

¹²⁵ Dror Wahrman, “National Society, Communal Culture: An Argument about the Recent Historiography of Eighteenth-Century Britain,” *Social History* 17, no 1. (1992), 54.

¹²⁶ J. G. A. Pocock, “Cambridge paradigms and Scotch philosophers: a study of the relations between the civic humanist and the civil jurisprudential interpretation of eighteenth-century social thought,” in *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, eds. Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 241.

Digges in Edinburgh in 1757, described the actor as “a pretty man” with “most amiable dispositions.”¹²⁷ This was high praise for Boswell, for whom, like many in mid-century Edinburgh, politeness or “prettiness” was an ideal upon which to fashion one’s life. Richard Sher has stressed how crucial the role of politeness was for Edinburgh’s “moderate” literati with whom Boswell then mixed, many of whom were at the forefront of the Enlightenment project.¹²⁸

In the social practices of the culture of sensibility externalities became increasingly important and appearance, such as the display of fine dress and well-timed manners, perhaps a genteel bow or a compliment at an opportune moment, were recognised as crucial marks of refinement and gentility. Paul Goring has emphasised the role of the eighteenth-century stage in conveying the rules of politeness. As attending the theatre was increasingly accepted as a civilised entertainment for the polite classes, the association between politeness and moral improvement was manifested to spectators in the form of the actor’s body:

The spectacle of the body on the stage, performing according to innovative notions of proper theatrical expression, became, like the image of an orator, a means of emblematising polite society and of showcasing modes of polite self-representation – and as such, a polite body image was itself nourishing and sustaining a perception of the theatre as a polite, moral institution.¹²⁹

As the theatre was undergoing changes driven by ideological and commercial interests and audiences became increasingly mixed, actors therefore served as role-models, whose speech and manner might be imitated and from which new identities might be constructed. Therefore, in this regard, Digges became a significant northern role-model. This is made explicit by Boswell in his *London Journal* when he states his intention to fashion a new modern persona for himself: “I hoped by degrees to attain to some degree of propriety. Mr Addison’s character in sentiment, mixed with a

¹²⁷ James Boswell, *Boswell’s London Journal*, 76.

¹²⁸ Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985), 57.

¹²⁹ Paul Goring, *Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 116.

little of the gaiety of Sir Richard Steele and the manners of Mr Digges, were the ideas I aimed to realize.”¹³⁰ Sociable discourse also became more highly valued. Boswell recorded a friendly comment related to polite sociability that Digges had made: “ ‘Conversation’ says he, ‘is the traffic of the mind: for by exchanging ideas, we enrich one another.’ ”¹³¹ Digges was obviously citing the English philosopher Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury who argued in his epistle-form “*Sensus Communis; an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*” that allowing the free exchange of ideas through conversation would bring about the same benefits for society as a “*Free-Port*” produced for trade.¹³² Shaftesbury believed that taste, manners and polished exchange could provide the moral foundation for British life and he artfully promoted politeness as an expression of virtuous character in his *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, one of the most reprinted works of philosophy in Britain in the eighteenth century after his teacher, John Locke’s *Second Treatise*.¹³³

Digges’ prettiness made him highly suitable for the title role in a local venture that was intended to make a defining statement on the culture of politeness by a remarkable group of leading Scottish intellectuals. In terms of networks of theatrical association, Digges and his partner, the actress Sarah Ward’s involvement in the Edinburgh premiere of John Home’s tragedy *Douglas* encapsulates this thesis’ aim to highlight the central role that actors played within the cultural development of Enlightenment in the North.

¹³⁰ James Boswell, *Boswell's London Journal*, 62.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹³² Anthony Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 3 vols. (London: John Darby, 1711), 1:64.

¹³³ For Shaftesbury’s influence see the introductory section of Douglas J. Den Uyl, “Shaftesbury and the Modern Problem of Virtue,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 15, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 275-316. For politeness see Lawrence, E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourses and Cultural Politics in early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Marshall’s identification of the rhetorical theatrical figure at work in the thought of Shaftesbury and later as Adam Smith’s “spectator” is highly relevant to this study of northern performers. See David Marshall, *The Figure of Theater: Shaftesbury, Defoe, Adam Smith, and George Eliot* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

ii. Digges and Ward in *Douglas*

“In those days there were giants in the North” Walter Scott wrote in an 1827 review of Henry Mackenzie’s *An Account of the Life and Writings of John Home*.¹³⁴ He was referring to David Hume, William Robertson, Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith, the champions of Scottish Enlightenment, three of whom joined Home in the first private rehearsal of *Douglas* in Ward’s lodgings in Edinburgh’s Canongate in 1756.¹³⁵ Thomas Ahnert, Lisa Freeman, Ronnie Young and others have traced this play’s influence upon major figures of Scottish Enlightenment.¹³⁶ Critical attention has focused on the controversy generated by the play which according to Edinburgh’s *Encyclopedia Britannica* amounted to at least twenty-nine pamphlets.¹³⁷ In an early article which considers *Douglas* in an Enlightenment context, Thorne Compton discusses the intellectual debate between Adam Ferguson and John Witherspoon, the minister of Beith, who are the two most

¹³⁴ Cited in Yoon Sun Lee, “Giants in the North: ‘Douglas,’ the Scottish Enlightenment, and Scott’s ‘Redgauntlet,’ ” *Studies in Romanticism* 40, no. 1 (2001), 118.

¹³⁵ This was later reported in the *Edinburgh Weekly Chronicle*, January 21, 1829. Hume’s biographer attested to it as fact. See John Hill Burton, *Life and Correspondences of David Hume: From the Papers Bequeathed by His Nephew to the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and other Original Sources*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1846), 1:420. n. 1. Reverend Alexander Carlyle recorded in his memoirs that he attended two rehearsals with Home, Lord Elibank, Dr Ferguson and David Hume. The date for a rehearsal can be fixed by a report in the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* 4 December 1756 although another known rehearsal occurred on 8 December, as cited in Carlyle’s ecclesiastical court libel. See Alexander Carlyle, *Autobiography of the Rev. Dr. Alexander Carlyle, Minister of Inveresk containing Memorials of the Men and Events of his Time*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1860), 311 & 320. n. 1.

¹³⁶ Freeman presents *Douglas* as a critical point in the struggle for authority and power between the orthodox faction of the Scottish kirk led by religious doctrine and the secularising forces of the Scottish Enlightenment, see Lisa A. Freeman, “The Political Economy of Bodies Public: Scotland’s *Douglas* Controversy,” in *Antitheatricality and the Body Public* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 147-88. Also see her earlier published article, “The Cultural Politics of Antitheatricality: The Case of John Home’s ‘Douglas,’ ” *The Eighteenth Century* 43, no. 3 (2002), 210-235. Ronnie Young makes the case for the theatre’s influence upon the direction of Enlightened thought in mid-century Scotland in his chapter “‘Sympathetick Curiosity’: Drama, Moral Thought, and the Science of Human Nature,” in *The Scottish Enlightenment and Literary Culture*, eds. Ronnie Young, Ralph McLean, Kenneth Simpson (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2016), 115-136. Ahnert has traced how the controversy generated by *Douglas* helped philosophers to develop their ideas, see Thomas Ahnert, “Clergymen as Polite Philosophers. *Douglas* and the Conflict between Moderates and Orthodox in the Scottish Enlightenment,” *Intellectual History Review* 18, no 3 (2008): 375-383.

¹³⁷ *Supplement to the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Editions of the Encyclopaedia Britannica: Or, A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Miscellaneous Literature*, 20 vols. (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Company, 1824), 4:647, n. 1.

prominent philosophers who participated in the pamphlet war.¹³⁸ Compton argues that their opposing positions on the moral and aesthetic value of theatre helped to forge their philosophical systems.¹³⁹ More recently, Ronnie Young has argued that *Douglas* is an example of how “dramatic compositions engaged in the central Scottish Enlightenment project of studying human nature” and explicitly correlates the development of Adam Smith’s thought with Home’s tragedy, observing: “It is notable that soon after the performance of *Douglas*, Smith turned to theater for an ideal illustration of his theory of sympathetic spectatorship” which he realised in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* published in 1759.¹⁴⁰ The performers Ward and Digges played a crucial and yet relatively unacknowledged role in helping to shape this new understanding of the theatre as a site of experiment in which to study the new science of man. Home’s play is unlikely ever to have been performed had it not been for the support provided by these actors after it had been rejected by David Garrick in London who declared it “unfit for representation.”¹⁴¹

Francis Gentleman noted the debt that Home owed to Digges and Ward for realising his drama in *The Dramatic Censor*, stating of Digges’ performance that “the author stood very much indebted to this gentleman for the prosperous existence of the piece” and that Ward “did it as much justice as the poet or audience could wish, and deserves the praise of having exhibited in this tragedy, a very correct and affecting piece of performance.”¹⁴² Sir Walter Scott commented that *Douglas* “produces a stronger effect on the feelings of the audience, when the parts of Douglas and Lady Randolph are well filled, than almost any tragedy since the days of Otway.”¹⁴³ Elizabeth Inchbald agreed that “few classical plays have been more indebted for admirers to the art of

¹³⁸ Thorne Compton, “Adam Ferguson and John Witherspoon in ‘Satan’s Seminary’: *Douglas*, the Critics, and Moral Philosophy,” *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 18 (1983): 166-76.

¹³⁹ See also Thomas P. Miller, “John Witherspoon and Scottish Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy in America,” *Rhetorica* 10, no. 4 (1992): 384.

¹⁴⁰ Ronnie Young, “Sympathetick Curiosity,” 125.

¹⁴¹ Cited in Megan Stoner Morgan, “Speaking with a Double Voice: John Home’s *Douglas* and the Idea of Scotland,” *Scottish Literary Review* 4, no. 1 (2012) 35 and Dibdin, *Edinburgh Stage*, 88.

¹⁴² Francis Gentleman, *The Dramatic Censor; or critical companion*, 2 vols. (London: Printed for J. Bell and York: C. Etherington, 1770), 2:134, 135.

¹⁴³ Walter Scott, “The Works of John Home Esq,” *The Quarterly Review*, 36 (1827): 168.

acting.”¹⁴⁴ It was particularly important for the play’s success that the role of Lady Randolph was performed exceptionally well, as the part demanded a high level of emotional intensity. Reverend Alexander Carlyle, who attended the third performance of *Douglas*, recorded that “Mrs Ward turned out an exceedingly good Lady Randolph.”¹⁴⁵

Felicity Nussbaum has argued that there was a remarkable flourishing of tragedy in the eighteenth century, “thanks largely to the stunningly talented actresses who, engaging in new modes of acting, invested their roles with an emotional intensity to which audiences eagerly responded.”¹⁴⁶ She stresses the relationship between performance and the role of sympathetic imagination, citing Roach’s seminal work *The Player’s Passion*:

The theater audience, fully absorbed in the player's purportedly authentic emotions, also experienced a double consciousness: “The rhetoric of the passions literally incorporated the audience into the performance event” as spectators vacillated between imagining that their own selves were annihilated and taking on the identity of the dramatic character or even of the actor.¹⁴⁷

Nussbaum’s attention remains fixed on the London stage and particularly on Sarah Siddons, although she suggests earlier players such as “Oldfield, Cibber, Pritchard, and Yates may have anticipated the paradigm shift to the ‘natural’ manner that David Garrick would promote and that drew audiences to new tragedy.”¹⁴⁸ Sarah Ward should also be considered as an early precursor, considering she was personally coached by the very people who were developing theories of sympathetic imagination and who would popularise these ideas in major philosophical works

¹⁴⁴ Elizabeth Inchbald, “Remarks to Douglas; a Tragedy, in Five Acts; by Mr Home,” in *The British Theatre; or, a Collection of Plays, which are acted at the Theatres Royal, Drury Lane, Covent Garden and Haymarket. Printed under the authority of the Managers from the Prompt Book. With Biographical and Critical Remarks by Mrs Inchbald*, 25 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1808), 16:4.

¹⁴⁵ Alexander Carlyle, *Autobiography*, 311.

¹⁴⁶ Felicity Nussbaum, “The Unaccountable Pleasure of Eighteenth-Century Tragedy,” *PMLA* 129, no. 4, Special Topic: Tragedy (2014): 689.

¹⁴⁷ Nussbaum, “The Unaccountable Pleasure,” 692. She is quoting Joseph R. Roach, *The Player’s Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (London: Associated University Presses, 1985), 155.

¹⁴⁸ Nussbaum, “The Unaccountable Pleasure,” 692.

shortly after *Douglas* had made its impact.¹⁴⁹ Home's biographer Henry MacKenzie, who had witnessed Ward's *Lady Randolph*, noted that her "feeling, tutored with the most zealous anxiety by the author and his friends, charmed and affected the audience as much, perhaps, as has ever been accomplished by the very superior actresses of after times."¹⁵⁰ The author's "friends" who "tutored" Ward included Hume, Robertson, Ferguson and Lord Kames who attended several workshops in Ward's Canongate Lodgings "to make her fully apprehend the author's meaning."¹⁵¹ Carlyle also attended rehearsals and recorded that he was "truly astonished at the readiness with which Mrs Ward conceived the Lady's character, and how happily she delivered it."¹⁵² This remarkable "provincial" collaborative venture which came about directly because of metropolitan rejection allowed Digges and Ward to set a new standard in performance. Freeman has noted a "turn in *Douglas* to an aesthetics of affect" where generating an emotional response in the spectator, regardless of other circumstances, became the drama's principal concern.¹⁵³ With this development in the culture of sensibility the stage was transformed into a kind of laboratory in which an experimental encouragement of emotional extremes shared by actor and audience might be consciously experienced and observed in the greater pursuit of cultivating the passions. This would continue to have a significant influence over the northern theatre for the rest of the century.

Having considered aspects related to the rhetoric of sensibility, with regard to politeness and the affective turn in drama, the next section turns to the more quotidian subject of constructing a northern theatre circuit in order to cast further light on the actors' role in navigating the relationship between metropolis and province.

¹⁴⁹ On the proximity of the play's performance to the production of major philosophical work see Young, "Sympathetick Curiosity," 123-28.

¹⁵⁰ Henry Mackenzie *An Account of the Life and Writings of John Home, esq*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: A. Constable, 1822), 1:38.

¹⁵¹ Henry Brougham, *The Life and Times of Henry Lord Brougham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 541-542 which quotes from a letter written by Alexander Carlyle to Caroline Marchioness of Queensberry. This quotation also appears in James Miller, *The Lamp of Lothian, or, The History of Haddington* (Edinburgh: James Allan, 1844), 414. n. 1.

¹⁵² Alexander Carlyle, *Autobiography*, 311.

¹⁵³ Freeman, *Antitheatricality and the Body Public*, 177.

iii. Sarah Ward's Correspondence with West Digges

A year after *Douglas* made its impact on the culture of sensibility, Sarah Ward left a record of her three-month summer season at the Drury Lane theatre in Liverpool through her correspondence with Digges in Edinburgh.¹⁵⁴ The collection of twenty-six letters, written between 1 June and 31 August 1758, provides an insider's perspective on the practicalities of theatre management and the manner in which one of the earliest northern theatrical circuits was developed. The letters exemplify the speedy relay of information passing between London, Dublin, Edinburgh Liverpool, Belfast, Bath and Bristol. The correspondence also serves to show that whether due to ties of kinship, financial dependence, aspiration or dedication to their craft, the primary form of association for most actors was professional and between other members of the theatrical community. Players were forced to spend a great deal of time together and they got to know each other very well, therefore what they had to say about each other can be a valuable resource in a subject area that has left relatively few traces behind.

Debt had forced Digges to relinquish the management of the Canongate Theatre to the Edinburgh shopkeeper, James Callender and his partner, David Beatt of Newcastle, with whom he spent the summer of 1758 negotiating terms while preparing a company for the approaching year. He relied on Ward's advice about how to run the company, as might be expected, considering that at the age of only eighteen, in 1747, she had led a troupe responsible for raising subscriptions for the foundation of Edinburgh's first permanent theatre building, the Canongate Music Hall.¹⁵⁵ Ward succinctly describes to Digges how to develop a "good company" in the North, basing her plan on a circuit of three towns and she explained the course of action required to bring this about:

¹⁵⁴ Thomas Stevenson, ed., *Letters which Passed Between Mr. West Digges, Comedian, and Mrs. Sarah Ward 1752-1759* (Edinburgh: Thomas Stevenson, 1833).

¹⁵⁵ John Jackson, *The History of the Scottish Stage: From its First Establishment to the Present Time* (Edinburgh, Printed for Peter Hill, and G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1793), 23-24. For a closer contemporary view see Hugh Arnot, *The History of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: W. Creech, 1779), 368.

Newcastle must at all events be got: Mr Beatt is the properest person to transact that business; he should set out immediately and secure the Hall ... As to leve [*sic*] from the Magistrates, you need not fear; for if they grant liberty to one company, they will do to another; but the complement must be made to the Mayor. He must set men to work, and make an agreement to have it ready to open on the 12th of September. I would play there till the 12th of December, which is three months; then return to Edinburgh, and perform there till the 12th of April; by this time you may have a house ready at Glasgow, play there till the end of May: this makes out the nine month employment, deducting only eight or ten days for travelling. This scheme if persued [*sic*], will make our theatre equal to any.¹⁵⁶

In Elizabethan times, well established companies had carried with them royal orders requesting the authorities to “affourd them your Townehalls” in which to perform.¹⁵⁷ However, as Ward makes clear, by the middle of the eighteenth century, managers were expected to politely present themselves to the mayor in order to “win the town.”

While providing specific advice about how to develop a northern circuit, Ward also acted as a node in a theatrical communication network, relaying timely information to Digges about potential actors who were performing in different theatres across the nation. Her letters show how well connected and extensive actor networks were in this period and particularly the speed by which information was relayed through them. In one letter, she mentions a piece of recent theatrical intelligence about “the unhappy accident which has befall’n the Bath company” and describes “there cloaths [*sic*], scenes, &c. &c. being consumed by one of the wheels of the wagon takeing [*sic*] fire, in there way to the Isle of Whight [*sic*], which has reduced the poor people to great distress.”¹⁵⁸ Always with an eye to business, she adds, “I doubt not but you may get both men and women on reasonable terms.” The speed of exchange is suggested by a letter written back to Digges nineteen days later in which it is clear she had already received his answer and enquired further, as she is able to update him: “The Bath company is now at Reding [*sic*]” and she advised, “I should think that both Miss Ibbot and Mrs Daly are proper persons to sound.”¹⁵⁹ This clearly shows that

¹⁵⁶ Stevenson, *Digges, Comedian, and Mrs. Sarah Ward*, 93-94.

¹⁵⁷ Thaler, “Strolling Players,” 246-247.

¹⁵⁸ Stevenson, *Digges, Comedian, and Mrs. Sarah Ward*, 84.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 98-99.

performers were sought out and recruited through an actor's network much facilitated by a fast and reliable postal service.

While exemplifying how important speed and reliability of communication were for theatrical personnel, Ward's correspondence also shows that the actors' communication network functioned satisfactorily between England and Ireland. This was particularly valuable as her letters also show that the northern circuit established by Digges relied upon actors with strong Irish theatrical connections, as she advised him at the outset:

I fear, my dear, you will not be able to get any performers in England that is worth having; and those that are, will not go to Scotland for so short an engagement as five months: I think if you could get Hopkins again... nor do I think Mrs Croft would be a bad addition ... I doubt not but Mr Ryder would [*sic*] be glad to return ... They are all some ware [*sic*] in the country of Ierland [*sic*].¹⁶⁰

Later letters show Ward seeking out and locating these actors as they moved between the theatres in Belfast and Newry.¹⁶¹ These examples, drawn from two individuals at the heart of establishing a major northern circuit, show that rather than London, the Irish theatre was critical to the supply of talented actors to the principal northern theatres of Edinburgh and Newcastle in this period. Furthermore, in order to attract actors, Ward insisted that they should be offered an engagement for at least nine months.¹⁶² This condition, related to geography, was a crucial factor in the development of the theatre in the North in the 1750s and 60s, as without such security, talented actors were unlikely to make the commitment to perform on a northern circuit.

Digges established an Edinburgh-Newcastle circuit and his company also performed in Northumberland theatres including at Berwick and Alnwick and in the county of Durham at Sunderland, as he mentions in a letter to his friend John Cunningham:

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 89-90.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 101, 121.

¹⁶² Ibid, 93.

The Edinburgh Company is going to Sunderland ... Baker is not gone yet, we are a dismal family ... Nelly holding, Charles a hiding, grumbling, Tom a coughing, the dear Black Bird a molten. Bless your stars at being happily rid of such horrid company.¹⁶³

This undated letter is probably from 1762 after Cunningham had left the Edinburgh company and travelled to London where he briefly attempted a literary career in the capital before returning north to join the Durham company. “Baker” who Digges refers to, is the actor and writer, David Lionel Erskine Baker, who performed with Ward at the Liverpool theatre in 1758 when he and his wife, Elizabeth (née Clendon), expressed an interest in travelling further north to Edinburgh if they could be sure of a nine-month engagement. While working on Digges’ circuit he produced one of the first theatrical adaptations of James Macpherson’s “Poems of Ossian” called *The Muse of Ossian*.¹⁶⁴ However, Baker is best known for publishing *The Companion to the Play House*, a highly utilitarian pocket handbook to the theatre “in the form of a DICTIONARY.”¹⁶⁵ This stroller, playwright and theatre historian provides another example of the provincial actor as cultural broker, traversing metropolitan and provincial culture and taking part in Roy Porter’s “making of modernity.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Westminster, London. City of Westminster Archives Centre. Theatre Collection. A.M. Broadley’s *Annals of the Haymarket* vol. 1, page 343. “Letter from W. Digges to Cunny”.

¹⁶⁴ David Erskine Baker, *The Muse of Ossian* (Edinburgh, Printed for the author, 1763). See Corinna Laughlin, “The Lawless Language of Macpherson’s ‘Ossian,’ ” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 40, no. 3 (2000): 518-522 and Dafydd Moore, “The Reception of the *Poems of Ossian* in England and Scotland,” in *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, ed. Howard Gaskill (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), 35-36.

¹⁶⁵ David Erskine Baker, *The Companion to the Play House: or, An Historical Account of all the Dramatic Writers (and their Works) that appeared in Great Britain and Ireland, from the Commencement of our Theatrical Exhibitions down to the Present Year 1764. Composed in the Form of a DICTIONARY* (London, 1764). The first volume contained “a Critical and Historical account of every Tragedy, Comedy, Farce &c. in the English Language” with comment on the actors who performed the principal characters. The second volume was dedicated to an account of the “Lives and Productions of every Dramatic Writer for the English or Irish Theatres” and anecdotes about the most celebrated actors. An updated and corrected two volume edition of this work edited by Isaac Reed appeared in 1782 which was renamed *Biographia Dramatica: or a Companion to the Play House* and this was further enlarged to a three volume publication edited by Stephen Jones and published in 1812.

¹⁶⁶ For the publishing history of Baker’s *Companion to the Play House* see Richard Schoch, “The Biography of *Biographia Dramatica*,” in *Writing the History of the British Stage, 1660-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 165-191. For Baker as an early biographer of Johnson see David Erskine Baker, “Mr Samuel Johnson, M.A.,” in *The Early Biographies of Samuel Johnson*, eds. O.M. Brack, Jr and Robert E. Kelley (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1974), 5.

This concludes the survey of the foundation of the theatre companies that are the main focus of attention of this thesis. The final section of the chapter moves forward in time to the end of the period covered by the study in order to examine Stephen Kemble's management in Newcastle upon Tyne.¹⁶⁷ Kemble did not establish any circuits, but bought the circuit originally established by Austin and Heatton to which he added the Edinburgh and Glasgow theatres and ten years later in 1800 he also bought Cawdell's Durham company.¹⁶⁸ This is when London's influence began to make itself felt upon the northern English theatre more significantly with an increase in celebrity performance that changed the nature of drama in the region permanently.

Newcastle: Stephen Kemble's metropolitan cultural capital

Stephen Kemble was an ambitious metropolitan actor who arrived in the North East of England using his London credentials and association with celebrity to advance his managerial position. This was a new departure for the region. The Austin and Whitlock company had seen a fusion of celebrity and family connection after the actress, Elizabeth Kemble, married Charles Whitlock at Lancaster's Priory Church on 21 June 1785 and her brother Stephen attended as a witness.¹⁶⁹ Elizabeth Whitlock became the company's lead actress. Kemble and his talented wife, the actress Elizabeth Satchell, then began to appear regularly on the circuit. In 1789 Kemble bought the company from his brother-in-law Whitlock for £1000 in one of the many examples of kinship links that were central to the development and successful running of provincial theatre. Kemble's company was very much a family business. Bland, Benson, DeCamp, Mason, Satchell and Siddons

¹⁶⁷ J. Milling, "Kemble, Stephen George (1758–1822), actor and theatre manager," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online ed., 23 Sep. 2004, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/15326>, accessed 15 Feb. 2022.

¹⁶⁸ Kemble's managerial career is summarised in K.E. Robinson, "Stephen Kemble's Management of the Theatre Royal, Newcastle upon Tyne," in *Essays on The Eighteenth-Century English Stage*, eds. Kenneth Richards and Peter Thomson (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1972), 137-148.

¹⁶⁹ A. G. Betjemann, *The Grand Theatre Lancaster: Two Centuries of Entertainment*, (Lancaster: University of Lancaster, 1982), 7.

are names that regularly appear on the company playbills, and all are families related to the Kembles by marriage. In an indication of how he intended to proceed, when he began his career as a provincial manager Kemble had immediately hired his famous sister Sarah Siddons to perform in the Liverpool Theatre Royal which he rented for November and December 1789.¹⁷⁰

Stephen Kemble was less successful on the London stage than his siblings, having made a poor debut in 1783 as *Othello* at Covent Garden. Critics frequently commented that his weight prevented him from successfully performing in romantic and tragic leading roles, but as John Taylor notes in the *London Magazine* he was successful in parts that exemplified “an honest indignation against vice” such as the Governor, Sir Christopher Curry, in *Inkle and Yarico*.¹⁷¹ Kemble’s first appearance at the Newcastle Theatre Royal on 31 January 1791 was in one of his most successful sentimental roles as Freeport in *The English Merchant* when he was billed as “From the Theatres Royal Covent Garden, and the Hay Market.”¹⁷² In his first season as manager he took every opportunity to remind the Newcastle public that he had previously performed in London’s Haymarket and Covent Garden Theatres. Mrs Kemble was similarly advertised as from these theatres. Other performers from patent theatres advertised as appearing for the first time in Newcastle during his first season of management included Mr Barrett, Mr Chambers and Mr Abbott from the Haymarket; Mrs Walcot from the Theatre Royal Edinburgh; and Mr Paulet from the Theatre Royal Dublin. Also Mr and Mrs Davis from the Royal Circus, London performed in Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s *Robinson Crusoe, or, Harlequin Friday* which Kemble advertised as a spectacle that had been in preparation over a four-month period which promised to be “the most Magnificent, and consequently the most Expensive, ever presented in a Provincial theatre.”¹⁷³ This premiered in Easter week 1791 when it was performed every evening and playbills advertised that

¹⁷⁰ Broadbent, *Liverpool Stage*, 84.

¹⁷¹ ODNB, Milling, “Kemble Stephen George.”

¹⁷² NCL. *Newcastle Theatre Playbills*. Playbill for Monday 31 January 1791, “The English Merchant.”

¹⁷³ NCL. *Newcastle Theatre Playbills*. Playbill for Wednesday 6 April 1791, “School for Arrogance.” For an analysis of Sheridan’s pantomime see John McVeagh, “*Robinson Crusoe*’s Stage Debut: The Sheridan Pantomime of 1781,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 137-152.

“Books, containing the plan of the pantomime, and describing the various scenes and situations, will be sold at the doors of the Theatre.”¹⁷⁴ This suggests how determined Kemble was to use his metropolitan cultural capital as soon as he arrived in Newcastle and the selling of related materials in the theatre also indicates his entrepreneurial nature.

The playbills for Kemble’s first season at Newcastle include several bespeaks called by prominent local figures including the Mayor, Lord Delaval and Miss Blackett.¹⁷⁵ Sarah Blackett was the daughter of John Erasmus Blackett and Sarah Roddam.¹⁷⁶ It is possible that the local Royal Naval Officer Cuthbert Collingwood was present for the performance of *Tamerlane the Great*, desired by Sarah Blackett, as he was in the country in this period and would marry Sarah later that year. Fourteen years later, Vice Admiral Collingwood was second-in-command to Lord Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar.¹⁷⁷ Sarah’s father John Erasmus Blackett, an alderman and four-time mayor of Newcastle, was at the very heart of Newcastle sociability.¹⁷⁸ He bought a new house in Charlotte Square which was Newcastle’s first London-style, neoclassical square, built by the local architect William Newton.¹⁷⁹ Blackett was also the proprietor of the nearby assembly rooms on Pilgrim Street that had opened in 1776, described as “the most elegant and commodious edifice of the kind in the kingdom, except the Houses of Assembly in Bath.”¹⁸⁰ From Kemble’s perspective, Blackett

¹⁷⁴ NCL. *Newcastle Theatre Playbills*. Playbill for Monday 25 April 1791, “Robinson Crusoe; or Harlequin Friday.”

¹⁷⁵ NCL. *Newcastle Theatre Playbills*. Playbill for Wednesday 9 February 1791, “The Way to Keep Him, By Desire of the Right Worshipful, the Mayor.”; Wednesday 2 March 1791, “Othello, By Desire of the Rt Hon. Lord Delaval”; Monday 11 April 1791, “Tamerlane the Great, By Desire of Miss Blackett.”

¹⁷⁶ For the Blackett family in Newcastle see A. W. Purdue, *The Ship That Came Home: The Story of a Northern Dynasty* (London: Third Millennium, 2004): 52-65 and Richard Pears, “William Newton (1730-1798) and the Development of the Architectural Profession in North-East England,” (PhD diss., Newcastle University, 2013), 93-96, 104-05.

¹⁷⁷ C. H. H. Owen, “Collingwood, Cuthbert, Baron Collingwood (1748–1810), naval officer,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online ed., 23 Sep. 2004, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/5930>, accessed 13 Feb. 2022.

¹⁷⁸ Newcastle City Council, Mayors and Sheriffs of Newcastle 1700-1799. <https://www.newcastle.gov.uk/local-government/your-elected-representatives/lord-mayor-newcastle/lord-mayors-mayors-and-sheriffs>, accessed 14 August 2021.

¹⁷⁹ For the architect who built Charlotte Square see Pears, “William Newton.”

¹⁸⁰ Eneas Mackenzie, “Public buildings: The Assembly Rooms,” in *A Descriptive and Historical Account of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne Including the Borough of Gateshead* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Mackenzie and Dent, 1827), 231-232. For an account of the building of the Newcastle assembly rooms which provides information about the social fabric of the town see Helen Berry, “Creating Polite Space: The Organisation

was perhaps the most important of Newcastle patrons because in 1787 he had also been awarded the twenty-one year patent for the Theatre Royal.¹⁸¹ It was built by the local architect David Stephenson financed by eighty subscribers for about £6800 and had a capacity of 1350 people.¹⁸² Several of the stockholders, including the diarist and gentleman of leisure John Waldie, formed a committee which controlled the theatre's business and held Kemble in check. It was only open for the winter season, for Race Week in June, and at Assize times (*figure 2*).



*Figure 2. The Mosley Street Theatre Royal, Newcastle Upon Tyne (1804).*¹⁸³

i. The star system

With Kemble's arrival in Newcastle, there was a significant shift in local attitude towards celebrity as, for the first time, stars from London were regularly introduced to many northeastern theatres.

and Social Function of the Newcastle Assembly Rooms,” in *Creating and Consuming Culture in North-East England, 1660-1830*, eds. Helen Berry and Jeremy Gregor (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 120-139.

¹⁸¹ For the first Newcastle Theatre Royal see Oswald, *Theatres Royal in Newcastle*, 28-38.

¹⁸² Newcastle City Archives, Newcastle Upon Tyne, *Committee Book, Theatre Royal, 1789-1838* Ref. No. 15511, MS 5.

¹⁸³ The Mosley Street Theatre Royal, Newcastle Upon Tyne (1804) in James Winston, *The Theatric Tourist* (1805). The Newcastle Theatre Royal stood on the east-side of the still-existent Drury Lane, at the point where Dean Street, Grey Street and Mosley Street now meet. The external appearance of the theatre is shown in three engravings: Winston's *Theatric Tourist* (1805); on the share certificate (dated 1824); and in Mackenzie's *Descriptive and Historical Account of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne* (1827).

This prompted a change in the nature of drama in the region as audience expectations were raised and a greater demand for celebrity performers developed among the local public. As this section suggests, the star system ultimately led to a drop in performance standards because the continuity that had encouraged performers to collectively improve their work could not be maintained.

John Philip Kemble made his first appearance in Newcastle in the year his brother took over management.¹⁸⁴ Siddons made her debut in Newcastle under her brother's management the following year in August 1792. Stephen's siblings continued to make regular appearances on the circuits that he managed. Siddons' first appearance in Durham was in 1801 as Lady Randolph in *Douglas* when the prices were raised to boxes 5 shillings, pit 3 shillings and gallery 2 shillings.¹⁸⁵ Meadley recorded that the owner of Scarborough's White Horse Inn near the theatre had two playbills framed in the front parlour dated 31 August 1803 which showed that *Henry IV* was performed at the Scarborough theatre starring John Kemble as Falstaff and Mr Charles Kemble as Hotspur.¹⁸⁶ In Sunderland Garbutt noted that Kemble's "own merit and that of Mrs Kemble, were in themselves a considerable accession of strength to the drama" and that Kemble had ensured there were "several actors of eminence successively introduced" to the town.¹⁸⁷ Heavisides suggests there was a newly acquired demand for celebrity at Stockton by listing visiting "eminent actresses" who appeared there, including Miss Foote, Mrs Charles Kemble, Madame Vestris, the accomplished Miss Kelly "one of the finest performers England ever produced" and Mrs Jordan.¹⁸⁸ The male celebrity that Heavisides chooses to mention is Junius Booth, the father of President Lincoln's

¹⁸⁴ NCL. *Newcastle Theatre Playbills*. Playbill for Monday 26 December 1791, "For the Benefit of Mr J. Kemble. King Richard III."

¹⁸⁵ Durham University Special Collections. Durham. Pamphlet Box XL792/L11. "Stephen Kemble Manager of the Durham Theatre."

¹⁸⁶ C. Meadley, *Memorials of Scarborough: A Compilation of Historic Sketches, Anecdotes, Remarkable Occurrences, Reminiscences of Olden Times etc.* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co, and Scarborough: E. T. W. Dennis Library Press, 1890), 282.

¹⁸⁷ George Garbutt, *A Historical and Descriptive View of the Parishes of Monkwearmouth and Bishopwearmouth and the Port and Borough of Sunderland* (Sunderland: Garbutt, 1819), 284, 285.

¹⁸⁸ Henry Heavisides, *The Annals of Stockton-on-Tees; with Biographical Notices* (Stockton: Heavisides and Son, 1865), 65.

assassin Wilkes Booth, who appeared for six nights at Stockton.¹⁸⁹ An indication of the new mania induced by celebrity is made apparent by a letter to the *Newcastle Chronicle* about the Booth and Kean celebrity rivalry which generated riots in Samuel Faulkner and Robert Anderson's South Shields theatre.¹⁹⁰

Jane Moody has drawn attention to the important role that regional theatre played in helping to develop a sense of national identity, noting that "the star system created a sense of shared experience amongst spectators who lived hundreds of miles apart" thus playing an important role in encouraging a sense of "imagined community" which "helped to form a national audience, bound together by the illusion of intimate acquaintance with the nation's most celebrated performers."¹⁹¹ But this came at a price. Aside from manipulating audience expectations which, as we have seen, led to riot in the Liverpool theatre, the star system tended to create dissent among the companies, as actors who were used to playing certain roles were replaced by more famous performers. According to the actress Ann Catherine Holbrook it was the kind of managerial approach adopted by Kemble that had led to a serious fall in theatrical standards by the early nineteenth century.¹⁹² Although laced with disillusion, as she was the daughter of an actor from Norwich's Theatre Royal Holbrook's opinion is valuable and provides a contemporary actor's insight into why provincial companies like those managed by Bates and Butler were successful.¹⁹³ Holbrook believed that "theatrical merit was at the highest pitch ever known in this country" at the end of the eighteenth century and this was largely due to continuity.¹⁹⁴ Managers made it a point to keep good performers and when cast in a part "with very few exceptions" an actor was never dispossessed of a role, which meant that they encouraged to devote time to "studying all the little minutiae of the character" and

¹⁸⁹ Heavisides, *Annals of Stockton*, 65.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Moody, "Dictating to Empire," 32.

¹⁹² Holbrook, *Memoirs of the Stage*, 26.

¹⁹³ Rosenfeld describes the constant changes in membership as a "vicious circle" when the Butler company began to lose its continuity, see Sybil Rosenfeld, *The Georgian Theatre of Richmond, Yorkshire, and its Circuit: Beverley, Harrogate, Kendal, Northallerton, Ulverston and Whitby* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1984), 74.

¹⁹⁴ Holbrook, *Memoirs of the Stage*, 31.

thereby improved performance of the role.¹⁹⁵ Playbills show that these companies maintained a stable cast for long periods of time. As Holbrook notes, “It was not uncommon for a Company, except in case of death, to remain together for years.”¹⁹⁶ In explaining the practical benefits of this continuity, she also provides a summary of the aesthetic of the total dramatic experience from the perspective of an eighteenth-century actor:

By constantly playing with the same people, you become used to each other’s method; you knew where to expect an error, how to conceal it; where to look for a beauty, how to display it: easy in the words, you were at liberty to attend to graceful and appropriate action; each part received additional beauty in a representation thus regulated from the harmonious whole.¹⁹⁷

Speaking as an experienced performer Holbrook thereby emphasises her understanding about the necessity for theatre to establish a form of harmony in order to satisfy the requirement of dramatic illusion.¹⁹⁸ However, this essential characteristic was made virtually impossible by the star system when actors were forced to act with strangers “who neither know your method, nor you theirs.”¹⁹⁹ Moody acknowledges that despite its contribution to a sense of collective experience and nation, the star system was “ultimately detrimental to the provincial theatres.”²⁰⁰ The damaging effect of celebrity was recognised in the North during the period and Stephen Kemble was considered one of its greatest culprits as the final section of this chapter shows.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 32.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 33.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ The classic study of eighteenth-century acting is Joseph R. Roach’s *The Player’s Passion*; however, this has been criticised for presenting a Whiggish model of progress. For a study that aims to position acting theory within the classical rhetorical tradition see David Wiles, *The Player’s Advice to Hamlet: The Rhetorical Acting Method from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). For a little noted, but insightful essay on the recognition of drama as a composite art and the necessity of harmonising all theatrical elements to create dramatic illusion see Charles Morgan, “The Nature of Dramatic Illusion,” in *Reflections on Art: A Source Book of Writings by Artists, Critics, and Philosophers*, ed. Suzanne K. Langer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1958), 91-102.

¹⁹⁹ Holbrook, *Memoirs of the Stage*, 34.

²⁰⁰ Moody, “Dictating to Empire,” 32.

ii. Kemble's downfall

In his essay on Kemble's management of the Newcastle Theatre Royal, K.E. Robinson casts him as a visionary metropolitan manager increasingly constrained by the strictures of provincial life, running theatre operations in ever-decreasing circles from the vast expansion of Edinburgh, Newcastle and Sheffield to a tighter local circuit when he lost the Edinburgh theatre and bought Cawdell's Durham company in 1800.²⁰¹ However, Stuart Moncrieff Threipland writing in the *Scots Chronicle* under the pseudonym "Timothy Plain", believed that theatrical standards at Edinburgh had dropped significantly under Kemble's management. He complained that Kemble was subjecting the public to "the *dross* of all theatres, merely because the Manager now and then treats us with a peep of his sister, the Siddons, and his brother John."²⁰² After three years of highly critical correspondence, his final letter dated 2 August 1800 reported Kemble's last address to the Edinburgh audience in which he had thanked the public for their generous support and was met with hissing and calls to get off the stage.²⁰³

Criticism of Kemble's management followed him to Newcastle and in the first years of the nineteenth century conflict broke out in the town between his supporters and John Mitchell, the proprietor of the *Tyne Mercury* newspaper, whose reviews were highly critical of the company.²⁰⁴ This found expression in pamphlets, songs, poems, theatrical sketches, newspaper articles and legal action, revealing the vibrancy of Newcastle's local culture. The Irish actor Samuel Delaval Mara's *The Mitchelliad: or Tyne Mercury Analyzed* ridiculed Mitchell in mock-heroic satirical attacks in

²⁰¹ Robinson, "Stephen Kemble's Management," 137-142.

²⁰² [Stuart Moncrieff Threipland], *Letters respecting the performances at the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh: originally addressed to the Editor of the Scots Chronicle, under the signature of Timothy Plain, and published in that paper during the years 1797, 1798, 1799 and 1800*. (Edinburgh: G. Gray & Glasgow: W. Bell, 1800): 8-9.

²⁰³ [Threipland], "Stephen Kemble's last address to the Edinburgh audience" in *Letters Respecting the Performances at the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh*, 279-284.

²⁰⁴ For John Mitchell see Maurice Milne, "Periodical Publishing in the Provinces: The Mitchell Family of Newcastle upon Tyne," *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter* 10, no. 4 (1977): 174-182.

imitation of Alexander Pope.²⁰⁵ The last of its four issues attacking the “paragraph monger” of the Tyne Mercury is called “The Dean-Street Dunciad: or, A Peep into Pandemonium” because Mitchell’s business premises was in Dean Street, near to the Mosley Street theatre and Mara accuses him of sending “three hired Tools from the Dean-street Pandaemonium” to disturb performances at the Theatre.²⁰⁶ The *Newcastle Chronicle* joined in by printing a reply to the “malevolent Critic” of the *Tyne Mercury* and defended Stephen Kemble’s management.²⁰⁷ Mara also attacked Mitchell through theatre performances.²⁰⁸ His song “Newcastle Bellman” and a response “The Bards of the Tyne” written by Charles Purvis, a clerk to a Quayside merchant, were published by the Newcastle printer John Bell in *Rhymes of Northern Bards*.²⁰⁹ Newcastle printers continued the pamphlet war long after Kemble and Mara had left the town and it lasted until shortly before Mitchell’s death in 1819 exemplifying the town’s well established literary culture.²¹⁰

Kemble’s provision of London stars to the town’s theatre was not unanimously supported by the theatre’s shareholders who controlled the playhouse’s business. On more than one occasion he was not allowed to increase ticket prices for celebrity performances, including for his brother, John. Kemble’s relationship with the proprietors is revealed in the diary of John Waldie who was a keen theatregoer. Waldie also provided anonymous theatrical reviews for the *Newcastle Courant* which are generally saccharine; however, in his private diary he repeatedly criticises the standard of performance at the Newcastle Theatre Royal. Through a combination of his diary, letters,

²⁰⁵ S. D. Mara, *The Mitchelliad, or, Tyne Mercury analyz'd*, 4 vols. (Newcastle: Printed for the author, sold by Marshall, 1804).

²⁰⁶ S.D. Mara, “The Dean-Street Dunciad”: or, A Peep into Pandemonium,” *The Mitchelliad*, vol. 4.

²⁰⁷ *Newcastle Chronicle* (Newcastle upon Tyne, England), 7 January 1804.

²⁰⁸ Richard Welford, *Men of Mark 'twixt Tyne and Tweed*, 3 vols. (London and Newcastle upon Tyne: Walter Scott, 1895), 3:193.

²⁰⁹ John Bell, ed., *Rhymes of Northern Bards: Being a Curious Collection of Old and New Songs and Poems, Peculiar to the Counties of Newcastle upon Tyne, Northumberland, and Durham* (Newcastle upon Tyne: M. Angus for John Bell, 1812), 65-70.

²¹⁰ Publications include [‘Caustic’], *The Newcastle Critic, or a Poetic Epistle to the Dramatic Draco of the Tyne Mercury, the Self Created Standard of Theatrical Taste* (Newcastle: published for the author by K. Anderson, 1814) and *Number One of Grim Typo, the Tyne Demon; or the Resurrection of the Barber’s Pig. A Satirical Miscellany; illustrated with occasional notes, anecdotes, &c of the Life, Character, & Behaviour of the Demon, both before and since his defeat by Mara, in 1804, to the present period; and dedicated (without permission) to the Editor of the Tyne Mercury* (Newcastle: William Hull in the Great Market, 1818).

newspaper articles and broadsheets it becomes possible to track Waldie's efforts to counter the faction of the lease holder John Blackett and successfully oust Kemble from the theatre when its licence came up for renewal in 1806.

Kemble attempted to use his metropolitan cultural capital to influence the proprietors in January 1804. During the winter, there were performances four nights of the week in Newcastle and two nights at the North Shields theatre which Kemble had bought from Cawdell. This was a source of contention as highlighted by a *Tyne Mercury* article which criticised Kemble for exhausting his actors and paying them poorly.²¹¹ The shareholders decided to meet to discuss this arrangement and five days before, a letter written by "Observer" addressed "To the Proprietors of the Newcastle Theatre" appeared in the *Newcastle Chronicle* to defend Kemble.²¹² "Observer" begins by naming the London performers who had appeared in the town under Kemble's management: "Mrs Siddons, Mr John Kemble, Mr Quick, Mr Charles Kemble, Mr Kelly, Mrs Crouch, Mr Incledon, Mr Munden, Mr Pope, Mrs Pope, Mrs Esten, Miss De Camp, Miss Mellon, Mr Bannister, Mrs Billington" and then "Observer" further puffs the manager by highlighting his "liberality towards the public Charities of this Town" adding that "from good Authority I have heard that he once, from his private Purse, cleared the Newcastle Prison of every Debtor confined in it." Waldie's diary records there was a division between the shareholders at the meeting held on 12 January 1804, but his faction "came off victorious" and the practice was stopped.²¹³ A further meeting recorded by Waldie states that Kemble made a proposal which "did not contain promise of a better company" and so "we rejected it by a unanimous vote, except Mr. Blackett."²¹⁴ The proprietors then decided to advertise for a new theatre manager. Gilliland's *The Dramatic Mirror* states that Kemble "regained the theatre by agreeing to *come down* an extra 100*l.* a year, and not to perform at Shields during the

²¹¹ NCL. Joseph Cowen collection (LO42/L Tr dy 60; L792/N536T), *Tyne Mercury*, 7 July 1805.

²¹² *Newcastle Chronicle*, 7 January 1804.

²¹³ UCLA: Library Special Collections (UCLA LSC). F. Burwick ed., "The Journal of John Waldie Theatre Commentaries, 1799-1830" (2008): *Journal* 9, August 9, 1803 - May 14, 1804. Entry for 12 January 1804 (IX 132 & IX 133). <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9wh0f968>, accessed 20.2.22.

²¹⁴ UCLA LSC. Burwick, "The Journal of John Waldie," *Journal* 9 Entry for 31 January 1804 (IX 153 & IX 154).

season.”²¹⁵ In a diary entry for 7 February 1804 Waldie recorded, “in order to give Kemble a fair trial, & that there might be better plays in the town, we unanimously offered him the Theatre on the terms of his proposal with the addition of his paying all taxes & leases usually paid by Tenants. We granted him a lease for 3 years: he promised to make every exertion in his power.”²¹⁶ A letter written by Kemble to Stanfield a week later states that he had to request support from the Duke of Northumberland with whom he had been careful to develop good relations:

As you have doubtless heard of the struggle I have had about this theatre, and how warmly and kindly the Duke did me the honor to interest himself on my behalf and through his influence the matter is at length settled to my entire satisfaction.²¹⁷

The Duke’s influence was evidently being exerted by the Alderman and former Mayor John Blackett who, the diary entries show, resisted Waldie’s efforts. Nevertheless, Waldie continued to work towards driving Kemble out of the management as an entry two months later records: “Went to a Meeting of the Theatre -- & spoke up for letting it to Kinlock & Mackintosh -- but Bates & I were over-ruled by Tom Hopper, J. Lamb, Alderman Blackett, & Wm Atkinson.”²¹⁸ Two years later Waldie managed to get his way and the Irish actor-manager William Macready took over the management of the Newcastle theatre in 1806, continuing to hold the lease until 1818. This struggle for higher theatrical standards reflects the strong sense of independent and distinct civic pride in Newcastle which was well established and has been identified in other areas of cultural expression including music-making and the built environment.²¹⁹ In Kemble’s case, his reliance on London celebrities to fill his playhouse was considered substandard for the cultural expectations of the townsfolk.

²¹⁵ Thomas Gilliland, *Dramatic Mirror*, 1:239.

²¹⁶ UCLA LSC. Burwick, “The Journal of John Waldie,” *Journal* 9 Entry for 7 February 1804 (IX 164).

²¹⁷ Garrick Club Archive, London. “Original Letters of Dramatic Performers, Collected and Arranged by Charles Britiffe Smith [1850?]” vol. 2, page 94. Letter Stephen Kemble to Stanfield.

²¹⁸ UCLA LSC. Burwick, “The Journal of John Waldie,” *Journal* 9 Entry for 4 April 1804 (IX 212).

²¹⁹ For music see Stephanie Carter, Kirsten Gibson, and Roz Southey, eds. *Music in North-East England, 1500-1800* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2020). For the built environment see Pears, “William Newton.”

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to provide a frame for the rest of the study. While presenting a survey of the establishment of northern theatre as an eighteenth-century professional institution, it identified several influences and underlying themes which are further explored in the following chapters. In mapping out some of the shifts that took place in the northern theatrical landscape during the eighteenth century, it becomes clear that the old regional centres of York and Newcastle were central to the northern theatre's early development. By mid-century, early northern theatre circuits were much more connected to the "provincial" kingdoms of Ireland and Scotland and their "metropolises" of Dublin and Edinburgh than the geographically distant English capital. However, the star system tended to amplify the gravitational pull of London by the end of the century, in part due to improvements made to roads and infrastructure, but also due to the personal influence of Stephen Kemble, who made use of the cultural capital of his own relatively modest metropolitan successes and more importantly exploited his family connections to celebrity. Provincial theatre was very much a family business and the fact that two of Kemble's siblings were major stars eased his way in developing the regional theatres under his management.

A significant amount of attention was focused between 1750 and 1780 as this was the period that theatre companies became established in the North, but Kemble's Newcastle management towards the end of this thesis' time frame highlights the marked change in metropolitan influence that had come about by the turn of the century. This exemplifies a line of development showing how the regular appearance of London's celebrity performers appearing in northern playhouses for the first time helped to change the nature of drama in the region.

The chapter also introduced and demonstrated the role of cultural brokerage that northern actors performed within the culture of sensibility as they spread ideas about improvement and civility across the region. This allowed for the introduction of themes related to politeness, elocution and rhetoric which continue throughout the study. The following three chapters dedicated

to place now concentrate on the forty years between Francis Gentleman's assistance in establishing the Durham company in about 1760 and the Butler company's final performances at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. The dynamic between metropolis and province that has been examined in this chapter continues to emerge as the perspective moves from town to region and nation. The next chapter concentrates on the towns on the Durham company's circuit.

Chapter Two

Towns on the Durham Company Circuit

Introduction

While the previous chapter presented an overview of the relationship between metropolis and province, this chapter aims to convey a greater sense of place by concentrating on the towns on the Durham company's circuit. Tim Cresswell notes in his study of cultural geography *Place, A Short Introduction* that in most definitions of landscape the viewer adopts an objective position looking at the landscape from outside, whereas places tend to be experienced more subjectively and are "very much things to be inside of".¹ It is from this closer, more local perspective that this chapter approaches the northern theatrical landscape. However, despite its considerable success, relatively little has been published about the Durham troupe and few obvious traces of it remain in the towns where its actors performed.² Furthermore, no business ledgers of the company exist, and a life of constant travelling has meant that virtually no official records of its actors have survived. In her seminal study of post-restoration strolling life, Sybil Rosenfeld observes that it is "almost impossible to dig out anything about a company ... whose circuit did not include a town which had a local paper" because "news items concerning the visits of the players and, later, advertisements of their performances, are the chief sources of our information about dramatic activities."³ While two hundred and forty-four provincial newspapers appeared in fifty-five different towns in England

¹ Tim Cresswell, *Place, A Short Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2004), 10.

² See Robert King, *North Shields Theatres* (Gateshead on Tyne: Northumberland Press, 1948), 11-43; Denis Towlard, *Stockton's Georgian Theatre: A Monograph* (Stockton on Tees: Stockton Borough Council, 1991); Denis Towlard, *James Cawdell: A Georgian Theatrical Life* (Stockton on Tees: Stockton Borough Council, 2001).

³ Sybil Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players & Drama in the Provinces 1660-1765*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), 3.

during the eighteenth century, relatively few of these were in the North.⁴ As no newspaper was regularly printed in any town on the Durham company circuit when under the management of Bates or Cawdell this means that even establishing where and when their actors performed can prove to be a challenge.⁵ However, due to the close friendship between Bates and the proprietor of the *Newcastle Chronicle* Thomas Slack, there are occasional articles about the company which demonstrate the social role that the performers played, for example in commemorating prominent local figures as in the case of a song by Cawdell which he sang for the “very numerous and genteel company” celebrating the future MP for Durham, William Henry Lambton’s twenty-first birthday at Lambton Hall in 1785.⁶ While newspaper articles about the company are rare, there were printers in all of the towns where the troupe performed who published histories and verse by local writers about the various locations on the circuit. Many of these writers were close associates of the actors and several also printed plays that were performed locally. These town printers also published work by the actors themselves which includes material that was performed in their theatres. They also printed the playbills that announced the daily performance at the town’s theatre which is one of the most valuable sources of information about the company. Of-course, the records of local associates of the actors are also crucial. By using a combination of these sources, it is therefore possible to

⁴ Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 32. For the provincial press and Newcastle upon Tyne see Helen Berry, “Promoting Taste in the Provincial Press: National and Local Culture in Eighteenth-Century Newcastle upon Tyne,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 25, no. 1 (2002): 1-17.

⁵ *The Darlington Pamphlet or County of Durham Intelligencer* was published in 1772-73 and after this brief period the town was not served by a local newspaper until 1847 with the publication of *The Darlington and Stockton Times*. Relevant to other circuits in the North West, the *Cumberland Pacquet, or Ware’s Whitehaven Advertiser* was launched in 1774, after which occasional news about the Austin and Heatton or Whitlock company becomes available, although news about this company was also published in the Newcastle newspapers as their actors regularly performed in the town. Carlisle’s first newspaper was published in 1798. *The Lancaster Gazetteer and General Advertiser, for Lancashire, Westmorland, &c.* published in Lancaster was founded and owned by the printer William Minshull on 20 June 1801 and renamed *The Lancaster Gazette* in 1803. It published occasional news about Samuel Butler’s company which performed nearby at Kendal and Ulverston from at least the 1780s until 1815. Occasional news related to the Butler company’s appearances at Beverley or Whitby appeared in the newspaper published in the *Hull Packet* or in the *York Herald, and General Advertiser*.

⁶ *Newcastle Chronicle* (Newcastle upon Tyne, England), Saturday 17 November 1785.

develop an understanding of the relationship between the theatre company and the towns that they visited.

Although performance may at first appear to be a transient experience leaving little behind, a close examination of this relatively obscure provincial eighteenth-century theatre company shows that it is possible to identify places where traces of performance have been left on the landscape, whether in the naming of a location, the establishment of a social institution, or in the creation of permanent infrastructure which has survived the passage of time. These traces often reflect an engagement with improvement and reveal how the actors used their capacity for rhetoric, or the art of public persuasion, to help encourage change in the communities in which they performed. It is an aim of this chapter to identify some of these traces, to explore their origins and place them on the map.

The foundation of the Durham Company

Relatively little is known about Thomas Bates, the founder of the Durham Company. The *Biographical Dictionary* suggests that he may have been related to a family of performers led by Robert Bates who performed at Covent Garden from 1768 until 1786.⁷ The Sunderland printer and town historian George Garbutt recorded that Bates “never aspired to make a figure as a performer; his most lucky character was that of a clown in a pantomime” and as a manager, he acted as “a friend, and almost a father to his performers.”⁸ Playbills show that Bates maintained a stable cast for a long period of time, a continuity which played an important part in the company’s remarkable success as highlighted in the previous chapter. Cawdell continued this practice when he took over the management, employing the Scottish actor George Graham and the Irish actress Mary O’Keeffe

⁷ Philip H. Highfill Jr, Kalman A. Burnim, Edward A. Longhans, eds. *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800*, 16 vols. (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973-93), 1:385.

⁸ George Garbutt, *A Historical and Descriptive View of the Parishes of Monkwearmouth and Bishopwearmouth and the Port and Borough of Sunderland* (Sunderland: Garbutt, 1819), 280, 282.

as his principal tragic performers from 1786 until 1800.⁹ Stanfield also consistently performed principal roles in comedy and tragedy after joining the company in 1789 and Cawdell himself was a popular comic actor and a local celebrity in his own right who performed in the company from 1769 until 1799. Of his rival, Tate Wilkinson noted:

In his Deaf Lover, the Mayor in Mr Foote's "Nabob," and many comedy parts of peculiar dry eccentric cast, he has few competitors on any stage: Besides his general utility he is a great favourite with the ladies. A play at Scarborough would be a *bore* without Mr Cawdell.¹⁰

Continuity also helped companies to build a repertoire which catered to local demand. This approach formed a foundation that enabled the Durham company to survive in a recognisable form into the Victorian period.¹¹

The earliest theatrical record for Thomas Bates is a masonic record from 1759 when he is listed as the "Master of a Company of Comedians" admitted to Lodge No. 207 which met at the Kings Arms in Sunderland and was later named the *Phoenix Lodge*.¹² In its early years the company performed in fit-up assembly rooms, transformed barns and temporary structures, such as tents and booths. In Sunderland, Bates began performing plays in the Assembly Rooms opposite Holy Trinity Church, then in 1768 he leased and fitted up the Methodist Society Rooms as the town's first theatre. This existed until 1884 under various names and is marked as the *Theatre Royal* in Playhouse Lane on Raine's *Eye Plan of Sunderland* printed in 1790.¹³ The first recorded

⁹ A playbill from the 1786 Whitby season includes Graham and O'Keeffe in the cast. Whitby, North Yorkshire, Whitby Museum Archive (WMA). *Theatrical Playbills, 1784-1787*. Whitby Theatre Playbill, 15 March 1786.

¹⁰ Tate Wilkinson, *The Wandering Patentee: A History of the Yorkshire Theatres*, 4 vols. (York: Printed for the author by Wilson, Spence, and Mawman, 1795), 1:305.

¹¹ The list of the Durham company managers until 1828 includes: Thomas Bates (c1759–1787); James Cawdell (1787–1800); Stephen Kemble (1800–1805); Samuel Faulkner and Charles Anderson (1805–1813); Henry Kemble (1813–1815); Samuel Faulkner and Charles Anderson (1815–1820); Charles Anderson (1820–1822); Thomas Sheffield (1822–1824); Edward Hillington and John Bland (1824–1825); John Bland (1825–1827); John Bland and Edward Crook (1827–1828).

¹² The Museum of Freemasonry Library and Archive (MFLA), London. The Phoenix Lodge. SN383 110.

¹³ George Patterson, *Sunderland's First Theatre and Music Hall* (Sunderland: Sunderland Antiquarian Society, 2009), 4.

performance in Darlington for which two playbills survive was in June 1768.¹⁴ According to Longstaffe's *History of Darlington* the actors performed "in a tent erected in a field on the edge of town – probably in the Green Tree Fields behind Skinnergate."¹⁵ The earliest record of the company in Durham town appears in an advertisement in the *Newcastle Journal* in the form of a playbill for a performance of Nathaniel Lee's *Theodosius: or the Force of Love* at the theatre in Drury Lane on 18 July 1763.¹⁶ To ensure as large an audience as possible, the company visited Durham in July during race week and the playbill states that performances began each night "as soon as the race is over." Relatively few records of Durham town's theatre history have survived therefore it has been necessary to seek out new sources of information. Visits of the company to the town are indicated by Durham's *Marquis of Granby Lodge's* masonic minute books.¹⁷ These records show that between 1773 and 1802 actor-masons visited Durham's masonic lodge between March and June with the exception of only one year, 1795.¹⁸ Stephen Kemble made his first appearance at the *Marquis of Granby Lodge* in 1800 when he became a subscribing member.¹⁹ This is the year he bought the Durham company and thereafter attendance by actors becomes sporadic as Kemble did not prioritise performances in the town. The actors make regular appearances again after William Faulkner and Charles Anderson sub-leased Kemble's Durham company theatres in 1806. The first time that Stanfield's name appears in the minute books is in an entry for 17 March 1789 at a Master's Lodge which was held in a room at the house of George Nicholson in Old Elvet which he

¹⁴ Darlington Library, Centre for Local Studies, Darlington. (DLCLS). *Darlington Theatre Playbills of 1768*, Playbill Friday 10 June 1768, "The Conscious Lovers by Desire of Reverend Mr Nicholson" and Playbill Wednesday 22 June 1768, "The Suspicious Husband."

¹⁵ William Hylton Dyer Longstaffe, *The History and Antiquities of the Parish of Darlington, in the Bishoprick* (Darlington: Darlington and Stockton Times, 1854), 300. For a more recent study of Darlington see Gillian Cookson, *The Townscape of Darlington* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2003).

¹⁶ Durham University Special Collections. Durham (DUSC). Pamphlet Box XL792/L11 "Georgian Theatres of Durham."

¹⁷ Durham Provincial Masonic Museum (DPMM), "Sunderland. *Marquis of Granby Lodge*, No.124, Minutes Book (Transcribed Copy). 1738-1790": "*Marquis of Granby Lodge*, No.124, Minutes Book (Transcribed Copy). 1791-1815".

¹⁸ DPMM. "*Marquis of Granby Lodge*, No.124, Minutes Book (Transcribed Copy). 1791-1815," 20-22.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 44.

rented to the masons.²⁰ There were eleven Durham masons present including the bookseller Pennington who sold tickets for the theatre from his shop in the marketplace.

Writing in his 1775 memoir, Francis Gentleman felt obliged to explain to metropolitan readers why he wanted to draw attention to the Durham company's founder: "It may seem odd that I make particular mention of persons little, if at all known here but I shall always be glad of acknowledging worth when and wherever I find it."²¹ Bates may have been relatively unknown to Gentleman's metropolitan readers during his lifetime, as he still remains today, but his company, nevertheless, had a long-term impact on the region. Gentleman joined the "infant society" in about 1760 and helped to establish the company by spending twelve months performing on the circuit. He records that the company was "set on foot by two persons" but with whom Bates initially co-managed is unknown.²² Gentleman "wished extremely well" for the company, noting it was "very regular, cordial, and respectable in private, though there was not much stage merit to boast of."²³ The Durham company would later act as a "nursery" for a number of the nation's most celebrated performers. George Garbutt, published a list of the Durham company performers who went on to national fame which included Dodd, Palmer, Wilson, Calvert, Hartley, Jones, Davis Cooper, Wightman, Cunningham, Mrs Wallace, Mr and Mrs Day, Mr and Mrs Brymyard, Mr and Mrs Blanchard, Mr and Mrs Freckleton, and Mr and Mrs Emery.²⁴ Also Bates' nephew, James Cawdell from Baldock in Hertfordshire, joined the Durham company in 1769 and became a significant local celebrity.²⁵ Garbutt records that as a manager and actor Cawdell brought with him "great pretensions and great expectations" in which audiences were not disappointed as he was "in an extensive variety of dramatic characters, an excellent performer."²⁶

²⁰ DPMM. "Marquis of Granby Lodge, No.124, Minutes Book (Transcribed Copy). 1738-1790," 134.

²¹ Francis Gentleman, "A Summary View of the Stage," in *The Modish Wife, a Comedy* (London, 1775), 20.

²² Gentleman, "Summary View of the Stage," 20.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Garbutt, *Sunderland*, 281.

²⁵ C. D. Watkinson, "Cawdell, James (bap. 1749, d. 1800), actor and theatre manager," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online ed., 23 Sep. 2004, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4954>, accessed 15 Feb. 2022.

²⁶ Garbutt, *Sunderland*, 283.

Bates was described in the *Archaeologica Aeliana* as the first manager to form a company in the North to rival Austin and Heatton's company.²⁷ He did not directly compete in any of their towns, which were mostly in the North West, but instead, he concentrated his efforts in the northeastern towns where no company had yet to establish a circuit. Apart from Darlington and Durham, all the other towns on the circuit, North and South Shields, Sunderland, Stockton-on-Tees, Whitby and Scarborough were coastal towns and records show that each was markedly different. This distinction came about, in part, due to the nature of the rivers on which the towns had been founded and the trade and industry that had developed around them. On the Tyne at North Shields, the theatre attracted working men, particularly keelmen and mariners, engaged in providing labour for the coal industry, which by 1800 supplied 77% of the nation's energy requirements, the largest share of which was drawn from northern pits.²⁸ Ten miles further south, the conurbation of Bishopwearmouth, Monkwearmouth and Sunderland on the River Wear, was a relatively new manufacturing centre that was expanding at a fast pace. As well as being a coal supplier, other industries including shipbuilding, glass making and potteries had enabled the area to emerge as an economic rival to its well-established ancient neighbour, Newcastle. A Westmorland traveller, George Thompson, who visited Sunderland in 1796 conveys a sense of the energetic activity and development of the town in this period:

I would gladly say how much the bustle, the active sinew of industry, and the fever of business among the shipping, and the noise of tongues, the vigorous repetition of axes and hammers, and a number of instruments uplifted, in all directions, for the purpose of improving this much favour'd spot, arrested my attention.²⁹

²⁷ M. H. Dodds, "The Northern Stage," *Archeologia Aeliana*, 3, no. 9 (Newcastle upon Tyne: Andrew Reid, 1914): 59.

²⁸ Charles-François Mathis, "King Coal Rules: Accepting or Refusing Coal Dependency in Victorian Britain," *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* [Online], 23, no. 3 (2018): <http://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/2498>, accessed 19 April 2019.

²⁹ G. Thompson, *A Sentimental Tour collected from a variety of occurrences from Newbiggin, near Penrith, Cumberland, to London, by way of Cambridge; and from London to Newbiggin, by way of Oxford* (Penrith: Soulby, 1798), 278.

Sunderland's potential as a commercial outward port is summarised by *The Universal British Directory* published in the 1790s which notes that access to open water meant that ships from Sunderland had often left port, travelled to their destinations to deposit their cargo and returned home, before favourable winds had allowed ships on Newcastle's River Tyne to pass the bar that blocked their departure to the sea.³⁰ However, Sunderland was a town "without government in the formal sense of the word" and lacked the traditional civic institutions such as the guilds and other bodies of civil society upon which identity and a sense of tradition and community typically developed.³¹ The actors therefore stepped into this void and as this chapter shows, they performed ceremonial activities and helped to create traditions and establish new institutions.

i. A nautical circuit

As most of the towns were coastal, the Durham company travelled between them by ship, which was often a more convenient route than the underdeveloped road network. Even at inland Darlington a 1799 playbill advised the public that: "On account of the ship not being ready at Stockton, to take in the goods, the company will perform one night more; and positively for the last time this season."³² The company was travelling to Scarborough for the summer season for which the transportation of machinery, costumes, scenery and troupe was evidently more accessible by sea than by land. The turnaround between towns appears to have been well coordinated and run on a tight schedule. Playbills from 1785 show the company performed the new smash hit *Follies of a Day* on the closing evening of the Whitby season on 13 July which was repeated at the opening of

³⁰ P. Barfoot and J. Wilkes, *Universal British Directory*, 5 vols. (London: 1795-8?), 4:510-511.

³¹ Gwenda Morgan and Peter Rushton, "Parish, River, Region and Nation – Networks of Power in Eighteenth Century Wearside," in *Economy and Culture in North-East England, 1500-1800*, eds. Adrian Green and Barbara Crosbie (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2020), 249.

³² British Library (BL). *A collection of playbills from miscellaneous theatres: Chideock - Deptford 1790-1853 Collection Item*, ([British Isles]: s.n.), 1790-1853). No. 174. Darlington Theatre Playbill, No. 44.

"Monday 22 July 1799, Jane Shore; or, the Unfortunate Favourite."

http://access.bl.uk/item/viewer/ark:/81055/vdc_100022589114.0x000002#c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=43&xywh=-2393%2C493%2C8009%2C5908, accessed 20.2.22.

the Scarborough summer season only three days later on Saturday 16 July.³³ In both cases, the public was reminded that Thomas Holcroft, the translator of Beaumarchais' fashionable comedy, was "late of this company", showing that Cawdell was keen to exploit metropolitan cultural capital to appeal to the northern public.

Despite the speed of improvement in this period things did not always run smoothly. A playbill from the previous season at Scarborough advertised "Mr Bates and the residue of the company who are unfortunately detained by a contrary wind, beg leave to offer the following entertainment."³⁴ The reality lying behind the region's still unstable and unintegrated connecting infrastructure is further exposed by Cawdell in a humorous prologue, "The Royal Cargo: or the Company's Voyage from Scarborough" which he wrote to placate the North Shields public after the company's arrival had been postponed for a fortnight "in consequence of the Company having been wind bound."³⁵ Cawdell parodies the actors of his company in the royal roles that they performed on the circuit, "*Kings* wrapt in blankets – *Queens* ty'd up in sacks ... exposed i'the open sea, / Tossing and tumbling, sick as sick can be" while he works in local topical references as "CLEOPATRA views the angry waves, And ... prays once more to view the smoke of Shields."³⁶ Cawdell presents the theatre as a metaphor for the political nation which is a common trope found in prologues and epilogues in the period. He further plays on the idea of the playhouse as a public, democratising space, the epitome of a mixed constitution, in which consensus on ideas and the boundaries of accepted performance and appearance are arrived at through the audience's

³³ WMA., *Whitby Playbills, 1784-1787*, Whitby Playbill, Wednesday 13 July 1785 and York Minster Special Collections (YMLSC), *Hailstone Collection of Playbills*. SC Playbills Box 18/115 Scarborough Theatre Playbill, Saturday 16 July 1785 "A comedy (never played here) called *Follies of the Day: or the Marriage of Figaro*." Printed by T. Pickering.

³⁴ YMLSC., *Hailstone Collection of Playbills*. SC Playbills Box 18/112 Scarborough Theatre Playbill, Wednesday 27 October 1784.

³⁵ James Cawdell, "The Royal Cargo: or the Company's Voyage from Scarborough" in *The Miscellaneous Poems of J. Cawdell, Comedian: Consisting of a Variety of Serious and Comic Prologues, Epilogues, Pastorals, Songs, Descriptions, and Epigrams. Together with Several Sentimental Pieces. To which is annexed an Answer to a late libellous compilation, called the Stockton Jubilee* (Sunderland: Graham, 1785), 69-73.

³⁶ Cawdell, *Miscellaneous Poems*, 71.

approbation or disapproval. Paula Backscheider has noted that the theatre “was a place that allowed cross-gender, cross-class conversation, difficult to hold anywhere else, and many took advantage of that freedom.”³⁷ New Georgian plays were loudly critiqued by their audiences, who typically “liked exercising their privilege of welcoming or damning a new play, and in their decision gave us the clearest indication of general taste that we can find.”³⁸ An unpopular play could unleash a riot in which the theatre was wrecked. James Tate recorded in his diary that a riot occurred at Samuel Butler’s Richmond theatre only three weeks after it had opened which was “occasioned by Robert son of Rev. W. Thistlethwaite of Kirkby Fleetham, who had enlisted into the Foot Guards.”³⁹ Cawdell jokingly concedes that if his company’s performances did not meet expectations then the North Shields public were “welcome to dethrone us ev’ry night.”⁴⁰ Betsy Bolton stresses that the analogy between politics and the stage was ubiquitous in the last twenty years of the eighteenth-century when it embodied “national fears and national fantasies.”⁴¹ The fourth chapter of the thesis examines this in greater detail through Cawdell’s output regarding war and invasion.

Adopting a deferential tone was standard practice for actors who presented themselves at all times as the servants of the public and the greater the display of deference in the culture of politeness, the higher one rose in the receiver’s estimation. Garbutt observes when writing of Cawdell’s period of management: “the performers took a very evident character of respectability, and the reputation and success of the theatre were proportionably commensurate.”⁴² A delay occurred at Scarborough at the end of the 1793 summer season and Cawdell politely informed the public: “The vessel engaged to convey the scenes & c. to North Shields not being ready yet ... Mr

³⁷ Paula Backscheider, “Shadowing Theatrical Change,” in *Players, Playwrights, Playhouses: Investigating performance, 1660-1800*, eds. Michael Cordner and Peter Holland (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 78.

³⁸ Cecil Price, *Theatre in the Age of Garrick* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), 196.

³⁹ North Yorkshire County Records Office (NYCRO), *Tate Papers* ZJT (MIC 2629/0811).

⁴⁰ Cawdell, *Miscellaneous Poems*, 73.

⁴¹ Betsy Bolton, *Women, Nationalism and the Romantic Stage: Theatre and Politics in Britain 1780-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 16.

⁴² Garbutt, *Sunderland*, 284.

Cawdell hoped the public will not be offended at his exceeding his promised time.”⁴³ He did not want to overstay his sixty day welcome at one of the country’s most fashionable resorts.

Management was a difficult balancing act for which good relations with the town authorities had to be maintained. The theatrical circuit also relied on conforming to the local social calendar for its success. A notice advertising the approaching season at Durham in 1797 suggests the manner in which Cawdell worked to accommodate the social life of the local public by providing good notice of his arrival:

Having been formerly told by many of his friends that if he could give them a week or ten days notice of the time he purposed opening the theatre, they would endeavour as much as possible to regulate their own domestic engagements and card parties, &c so as to prevent their interfering with the play nights.⁴⁴

The good relations that he had cultivated over many years allowed him to communicate with the public in this familiar manner. However, this relationship should not suggest that the company was in any sense amateur. The professional nature of the company’s staging was commented upon by Kalman A. Burnim in a study in which he sought to establish the nature of eighteenth-century stage techniques.⁴⁵ Burnim drew attention to the engraving of James Cawdell performing at the Sunderland theatre which appeared as the frontispiece of his *Miscellaneous Poems* in order to explain the English groove-sliding wing-and-shutter system that was the standard professional practice for staging during this period (*figure 3*).

⁴³ Scarborough Local History Department, Scarborough Library (SLHD). Scarborough Theatre Playbill, 14 October 1793.

⁴⁴ DUSC. NSR Planfile C 18/20 Durham City Theatre ACF 286. *Theatre, Durham, Mr Cawdell*. By exchange from the John Johnson Collection in the Bodleian Library.

⁴⁵ Kalman A. Burnim, *David Garrick, Director* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1961), 88.



Figure 3. Frontispiece of James Cawdell's *Miscellaneous Poems*.

Burnim notes: "The engraving is unique: in no other theatrical print of the period are both wings and top borders together so unmistakably and clearly discernible."⁴⁶ There were grooves situated on either side of the stage into which the shutters could slide. These acted like a curtain by drawing or closing to reveal or hide new scenes or actors. Sometimes the actors remained in the forestage while the setting on wings and shutters changed, and then stepped back into the upstage area and into the new scene which suggests that the Durham company was capable of achieving significantly fluid scene changes in order to maintain dramatic illusion.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Burnim, *David Garrick*, 88.

⁴⁷ For Georgian scenography see Sybil Rosenfeld, *Georgian Scene Painters and Scene Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

It should be stressed that this was a professional stock company providing the highest quality material that it was possible to experience in the Durham region at this time. The final decades of the century saw significant economic expansion and urban improvement in a number of towns along the northeast coast where shipbuilding and trading activities brought prosperity and where a theatre company's success was a sign of achievement and civic pride. Actors in turn were drawn to towns that were developing their commercial capacity as a company's success depended upon the paying public regularly buying tickets in large numbers. The theatre may have maintained the lingering signs of patronage from an earlier period in the continuance of benefit performances, bespeak evenings and in the imploring polite language adopted by the actors, but examination of the Durham company also shows that theatre as an institution was transforming into a more commercially driven phenomenon. The following section draws upon other examples of Cawdell's output to show the company's influence within local communities and the tension at work between the old and the new.

Cawdell's *Miscellaneous Poems*

Cawdell's *Miscellaneous Poems*, a volume of songs, prologues and epilogues published in 1785, provides many personal observations of the quotidian life of his company, comments on specific actors, performances and stagecraft, while also providing insights into the central role that actors played within provincial social life.⁴⁸ A playbill for Cawdell's benefit from the 1784 summer season at Scarborough, announced that he was taking "this method of acquainting those Ladies and Gentlemen, who chuse to encourage his intended Publication, that he would esteem it a Favour, if they would send their Names ... as soon as convenient, as the Work is ready for the Press."⁴⁹ This

⁴⁸ Cawdell, *Miscellaneous Poems*. For a study of metropolitan theatre material belonging to this more marginal but highly revealing subject area see Daniel J. Ennis and Judith Bailey Slagle, eds., *Prologues, Epilogues, Curtain-Raisers, and Afterpieces. The Rest of the Eighteenth-Century London Stage* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007).

⁴⁹ YMLSC. *Hailstone Collection of Playbills*. SC Playbills Box 18/81 Scarborough Theatre Playbill,

illustrates the opportunities available to actors for publicising their work. As it was his benefit performance, this allowed Cawdell to make a direct appeal to the public for subscribers to his volume of verse and the playbill was an excellent vehicle to make public announcements in multiple locations. Many other actors had similar authorial ambitions and took advantage of the potential that they had for success due to their access to a ready-made readership through the theatre. As a later chapter about Stanfield shows, he also took advantage of this access to promote his abolition writing. The actors were further assisted by their typically close relationships with printers. Cawdell's volume was published by James Graham whose printing business on Sunderland's High Street also printed the company's playbills. The subscription list includes a list of sixty-three "Theatrical Gentleman and Ladies" including the manager of the three other companies considered in this study, Wilkinson, Butler and Austin and Whitlock. This support was reciprocated as Cawdell and Stanfield were subscribers to Wilkinson's *Memoirs of his Own Life*.⁵⁰

i. Sunderland's "Cropt Fox"

Cawdell was particularly famous for his topical songs as Garbutt noted:

As a social companion he was universally received; and from a very happy readiness of converting the popular topics of the day into the form of songs, which he sung both on the stage and in convivial meetings, was on all occasions a favorite with the public.⁵¹

A local highly convivial example from Sunderland is his hunting song called "The Cropt-Ear'd Fox" in which each verse ends with Thomas Arne's famous line "And a hunting we will go, &c."⁵² Cawdell's song was written for performance at the Sunderland theatre on the evening of the

7 October 1784.

⁵⁰ Tate Wilkinson, *Memoirs of His Own Life by Tate Wilkinson, Patentee of the Theatres Royal, York and Hull*, 4 vols. (York: Wilson, Spence, and Mawman, 1790).

⁵¹ Garbutt, *Sunderland*, 283-284.

⁵² Cawdell, *Miscellaneous Poems*, 103-105.

“Gentlemen of the Hunt’s bespeak.” The Sunderland hunt exemplifies the popularity of clubs in late eighteenth-century local life and subscription hunts were typically run on an associational basis.⁵³ Cawdell explains in a footnote that the fox “afforded three or four most excellent days diversion, and a song, upon the occasion, being asked for, the author produced the above immediately.” Cawdell plays on local rivalry by suggesting the fox was born near Sedgefield, but as the local huntsmen weren’t quick enough to be of interest, it relocated to Hazleton-dean, to the west of Castle Eden, in order to engage with the Sunderland hunt. It provides a literal example of collective engagement with the local landscape in which an embodiment of native intelligence, in the form of the wily fox, is celebrated and commemorated. After finally catching it, Cawdell records that the huntsman clipped the fox’s ears before releasing it so that the hunt might recognise it in future and Gale, a Sunderland innkeeper, had a picture of this made into his sign:

To Gale’s, my boys, with speed resort;
His portrait’s there display’d:
And since the substance gave such sport,
Do homage to the shade.

Gale’s “Cropt Fox” on High Street East which has undergone numerous name changes remains the oldest licensed premises in Sunderland.⁵⁴

The poem shows how new local identity was forged through the renaming of the inn, via a public marker that continued to maintain the memory of a local experience long into the future. The playhouse itself must also have played a part in cementing this event into local identity by celebrating the new naming of a local social centre. A surviving playbill advertises a performance

⁵³ Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660-1770* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 178-180; Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 123-124. For the history of foxhunting in England see R. Carr, *English Fox Hunting: A History* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976) and David C. Itzkowitz, *Peculiar Privilege: A Social History of English Foxhunting 1753-1885* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1977).

⁵⁴ This public house was renamed the Butchers Arms in 2013 and closed in April 2018. At the time of writing, it remains closed. The building is on the Sunderland Heritage Trail.

on 2 March 1786 called by “the Gentlemen of the Sunderland Hunt” with hunting songs between the acts and at the end of the play when presumably Cawdell performed the piece.⁵⁵ In this way local tradition was established and must have continued through further theatrical performances bespoken by the Sunderland Hunt. It was well suited to be sung in other social gatherings also as it was a drinking song which is revealed by the final line when the repeated chorus of “And a hunting we will go. &c.” is changed to “And a drinking we will go. &c.”⁵⁶ This poem, although at first sight rather ephemeral and not of any significant literary merit, provides a vivid example of a local actor and the theatre’s role as an active agent in local identity formation.

ii. Darlington’s “Good Miss Allan”

Cawdell’s collection of verse also provides several illustrations of the role that prominent local women played as advocates for the poor in towns on the Durham company’s circuit. Cawdell dedicated two poems in his collection to the “Lady near Darlington, remarkable for her benevolence,” Ann Allan of Blackwell Grange.⁵⁷ In the first, he flatters Miss Allan by associating her with the mythical Graces, describing how they call the Virtues to a banquet in Heaven but find that Charity is missing and Truth tells all gathered not to halt their feast, “For at Grainge (says she) CHARITY’s found a retreat, / And Miss A-n solicits her stay.”⁵⁸ Cawdell also dedicated “Jephthah’s Vow” the second poem in his volume to Ann Allan, adding that it was “humbly inscribed with the most profound respect, for her many amiable qualities.”⁵⁹ Writing in the Victorian era, the local historian Thomas Richmond noted that her “charities were most extensive” and that she was “well remembered as “The Good Miss Allan” for her benevolence.”⁶⁰ Her relative,

⁵⁵ Patterson, *Sunderland’s First Theatre*, 5-6.

⁵⁶ Cawdell, *Miscellaneous Poems*, 105.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 24.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 8-19.

⁶⁰ Thomas Richmond, *The Local Records of Stockton and the Neighbourhood* (Stockton: William Robinson, 1868), 84.

the MP for Durham, George Allan, owned a wax model of a popular print of her, noting, “Her memory is so much and deservedly revered at Darlington, that the Portrait hangs over the chimney-piece of every respectable parlour in the place.”⁶¹ See *figure 4*.



Figure 4. Portrait of Ann Allan of Blackwell Grange near Darlington after J Hay. Print made by Joseph Collyer.⁶²

Aside from these poems celebrating a local celebrity which were performed in theatres, Cawdell also wrote *Conscience Personified, an Allegorical Sketch*, a long poem published by the freemason Pennington in Durham.⁶³ This work of sensibility celebrating “the feeling man” also includes a reference to Ann Allan who is compared to the famous prison reformer John Howard:

⁶¹ John Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century*, vol. 8. (London: Printed for the author, 1814), 352. n. 1.

⁶² British Museum. “Ann Allan,” in Freeman O'Donoghue and Henry M. Hake, *Catalogue of Engraved British Portraits preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum 1908-25*, 6 vols. (London: 1908-25). Registration Number 1865,0114.153.

⁶³ DLCLS, James Cawdell, *Conscience Personified, an Allegorical Sketch: and The Pet Lamb, an Elegy*. By James Cawdell, Comedian (Durham: L. Pennington, Undated).

Where HOWARD [The Philanthropist] travell'd,
and where ALLAN [Miss Allan of Grange] dwelt;
Where beings great as these command our praise
And each th'extent of human worth displays,
There CONSCIENCE shines, - in all her bright array.⁶⁴

Cawdell's work is undated, but it must have been written after Ann's death on 16 October 1785 to which Cawdell refers. Richmond noted that at her funeral a dole was given to between nine and ten thousand people of either 1.s or 6d.⁶⁵ The average daily wage of a labourer in 1785 was about a shilling. The "County Papers" published shortly after her death compared her to another well-known philanthropist stating, "Pope's Man of Ross built a Church and an Alms-house: Mrs Allan's charities were more extensive; many of the public and open; more, secret and silent; nor were they confined to Sect of Party, or to her own neighbourhood."⁶⁶ The culture of sensibility was reaching new heights in this period which is exemplified by the remarkable public reaction to the work of the prison reformer John Howard who was celebrated in Elizabeth Inchbald's 1787 play, *Such Things Are*.⁶⁷ Aside from dramatic composition and the performance of material that belonged to the theatre of virtue, there were many other ways in which performance in the playhouse promoted moral improvement. The Durham company encouraged charitable donations for the poor and destitute, supported a commitment to enlightened perfection through freemasonry and celebrated civic infrastructure that provided considerable economic improvement for local communities.

Ann Allan left Blackwell Grange to her elderly cousin James Allan, who, according to M. E. Ringwood, built a private theatre in the house "to keep alive the memory of the drama."⁶⁸ There are

⁶⁴ Cawdell, *Conscience Personified*, 9.

⁶⁵ Richmond, *Local Records of Stockton*, 84.

⁶⁶ Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, 352. n. 1. The man of Ross was John Kyrle (1637-1724), an English philanthropist who inherited his family estate at Ross-on-Wye in Herefordshire and lived a frugal life, choosing to invest in the improvement of the local community. He was eulogised by Alexander Pope in the third of his *Moral Essays* "Of the Use of Riches" (1734) with the line "Who taught that heav'n directed Spire to rise? / The Man of Ross, each lisping babe replies."

⁶⁷ For the actor Stanfield's contribution to the commemoration of John Howard see this thesis' final chapter.

⁶⁸ M. E. Ringwood, "Knew their Shakespeare in the North East," *Northern Echo* (Darlington, England), Friday, 18 April 1958.

no records of the Durham company actors performing there, but the family continued their association with the performers. Ann Allan had subscribed for four copies of Cawdell's volume and her cousin James and his son George, known as "the Antiquary", also appear as subscribers, along with thirty other people whose names appear in the Darlington section.⁶⁹ The Antiquary's son, also called George Allan, was MP for Durham from 1813 to 1818 and his name appears on the list of subscribers for Stanfield's *Essay on Biography* published in 1813.⁷⁰

iii. John Thornhill

Another topographical work by Cawdell related to Sunderland is an acrostic poem spelling the word "Thornhill" which celebrates the "beauteous mansion" inside whose "fair walls" its "lib'ral host" John Thornhill helped to cultivate "social virtues."⁷¹ Thornhill was a Sunderland coal fitter and timber importer who had built his new residence west of the town, one of several grand houses built in the period on Sunderland's outskirts or in nearby villages.⁷² By 1800 Sunderland had become the biggest urban centre in County Durham and one of England's largest provincial towns.⁷³ Sunderland and its two suburbs, Bishopwearmouth and Monkwearmouth, were calculated to contain about thirty thousand inhabitants in 1796.⁷⁴ Morgan and Rushton emphasise the lack of governance over this conurbation of three parishes gathered at the mouth of the River Wear, noting

⁶⁹ Cawdell, *Miscellaneous Poems*, 174-176.

⁷⁰ James Field Stanfield, *Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography* (Sunderland: Garbutt, 1813).

⁷¹ Cawdell, *Miscellaneous Poems*, 115. For the mansion see R. D. Pears, "William Newton (1730-1798) and the Development of the Architectural Profession in North-East England," (PhD diss., Newcastle University, 2013), 280-81. It was demolished in the 1930s, but Pears includes an image of the house taken from a watercolour by Francis Gablon, *Sunderland from Bainbridge Holme* painted in 1784.

⁷² For a contemporary view of Thornhill see Garbutt, *Sunderland*, 60-65. For a more recent analysis of the development of Sunderland's civic identity which discusses Thornhill's position in the town's growth see Gwenda Morgan and Peter Rushton, "Parish, River, Region and Nation – Networks of Power in Eighteenth Century Wearside," in *Economy and Culture in North-East England, 1500-1800*, eds. Adrian Green & Barbara Crosbie (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2018), 230-249.

⁷³ For a list of the leading inhabitants and tradespeople of Sunderland and Bishopwearmouth see Barfoot and Wilkes, *Universal British Directory*, 4:510-17.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 511.

that each community had their own parish administration and with no formal civic association, in effect they were communities set apart from each other and would remain so until becoming a fully incorporated borough in 1836.⁷⁵ It was figures like Thornhill that filled this institutional gap. As the owner of a large quay, he had played an important role in the local growth because much of the newfound prosperity was due to waterborne trade. Without formal government, civic institutions or elaborate civic rituals, the theatre in Sunderland's Playhouse Lane also played a role in acting as a social focal point for townsfolk from each of the three areas and the actors provided new forms of performance that gave expression to local experience. Cawdell's celebration of Thornhill's activities exemplifies this process. The oldest theatre playbill in the Sunderland Antiquarian Society's collection, dated 4 December 1778, advertises Cawdell starring in Sheridan's recently premiered *School for Scandal* at the "New Theatre" and a footnote announces that "The Great Boat will be waiting every Play Night for the better Accomodation of the Ladies and Gentlemen on the North Side."⁷⁶ This was aimed at the citizens of Monkwearmouth or "Northsiders" on the opposite side of the River Wear. Cuthbert Sharpe records in his *Bishoprick Garland* that a Sunderland playbill from 1 April 1791 was still advertising the "Great Boat".⁷⁷ Presumably the opening of the Wearmouth Iron Bridge in 1796 brought an end to the need for this more dangerous form of transportation across the river and a later chapter presents the Durham actors' contribution to that remarkable civic development.

⁷⁵ Morgan and Rushton, "Parish, River, Region and Nation," 247-49.

⁷⁶ Patterson, *Sunderland's First Theatre*, 7.

⁷⁷ Cuthbert Sharp, *The Salamanca Corpus: The Bishoprick Garland or a Collection of Legends, Songs, Ballads, &c. belonging to the County of Durham* (Sunderland: Marwood, 1834), 72. n. 1.

Sunderland's subscription library

The actor James Field Stanfield was responsible for establishing Sunderland's first subscription library in 1795, an institution which would become the town's Literary and Philosophical Society.⁷⁸ Its members came from all three parishes and included Bishopwearmouth's Rector, William Paley. Stanfield wrote to his friend, Reverend James Tate, during this period, "I have been the means of establishing a Library in this place which promises fair. We have also a debate once a month tolerably attended and carried on, at least by some, above mediocrity."⁷⁹ The initial meeting of local gentlemen interested in literary and scientific matters was held at Stanfield's house.⁸⁰ The actor was elected to the position of secretary for the first year, but he was forced to give up the post to travel on Cawdell's circuit, although his contribution was acknowledged by the members who made him a lifetime honorary member in 1796, which liberated him from the payment of dues.⁸¹ The founders of the library provide a snapshot of Sunderland's literary society in the mid 1790s.⁸² They include representatives from the town's respectable professions including: Tipping Brown who was a medical doctor and the surgeon William Eden who were both prominent freemasons; two Reverends, John Farrer and George Stephenson; the abolitionist and school master, Michael Longridge; the Quaker chemist Bernard Ogden; prominent merchants and tradesmen including Thomas Burn, Ship-builder, Thomas Richardson, Coal fitter and Richard Markham, a Mercer and Draper.⁸³ Work on a permanent building in Bishopwearmouth's High Street began on 6 May 1801

⁷⁸ For the growth of eighteenth-century lending libraries see David Allan, *A Nation of Readers: The Lending Library in Georgian England* (London: British Library, 2008).

⁷⁹ Leslie Peter Wenham, ed., *James Tate, Master of Richmond School, Yorkshire and Canon of St. Paul's Cathedral, London Schoolmaster and Scholar* (Northallerton: North Yorkshire County Records Office Publications, 1991), 66.

⁸⁰ Eneas Mackenzie and Marvin Ross, *An Historical, Topographical, and Descriptive View of the County Palatine of Durham*, vol. 1. (Newcastle: Mackenzie and Dent, 1834) 305-307.

⁸¹ See J. James Kitts, "The Sunderland Subscription Library," in *Antiquities of Sunderland and its vicinity*, ed. R. Hyslop, vol. 9. (Sunderland: Sunderland Antiquarian Society, 1908) and handwritten entries *Sunderland Subscription Library Minute Book* in the Sunderland Antiquarian Society archive.

⁸² Kitts, "Sunderland Subscription Library," 2-14.

⁸³ See Barfoot and Wilkes, *Universal British Directory*, 4:510-17.

and by 1834 there were 260 members who paid £1. per annum.⁸⁴ For poorer townsfolk, Michael Longridge founded the Sunderland Reading Society on 21 January 1803 which became known as the *Wesleyan Library* due to its predominantly Methodist membership.⁸⁵ Stanfield's role as the founder of what later became the town's Literary and Philosophical Society was commemorated in 1900 by a marble plaque which describes him as "a lover of liberty, and an accomplished scholar" alongside his Sunderland-born son, Clarkson Stanfield, who was a famous scenographer and artist (figure 5). This is mounted in the entrance to the Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens.

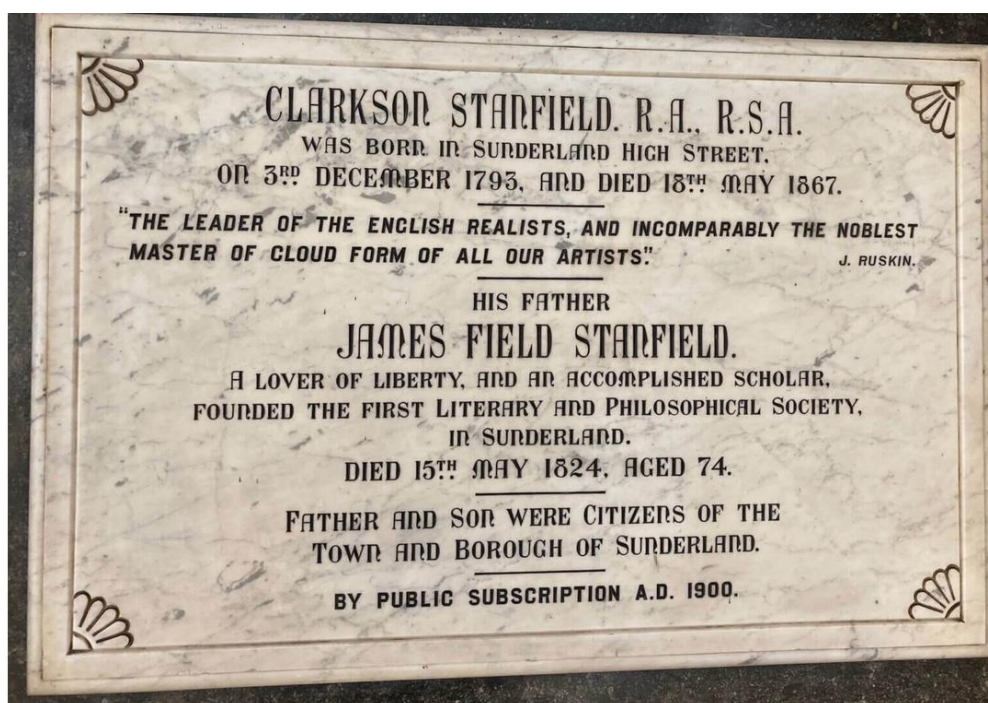


Figure 5. Public Plaque in Sunderland's Museum and Winter Gardens entrance.
Author's own photograph.

Several early members of Sunderland's subscription library were closely associated with the literary and philosophical society at Newcastle, including Dr George Wilkinson who delivered a series of lectures on comparative anatomy there in 1798.⁸⁶ This institution is therefore related to the associational movement of "transpennine Enlightenment" which Jon Mee and Jennifer Wilkes have

⁸⁴ Mackenzie and Ross, *Descriptive View of the County Palatine*, 305-306.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 307. See also Kitts, "Sunderland Subscription Library," 13.

⁸⁶ Kitts, "Sunderland Subscription Library," 30-32.

tracked from northwestern institutions in Manchester and Liverpool to Newcastle. They identify this as particularly driven by Unitarians associated with Dissenting Academies and Literary and Philosophical Societies.⁸⁷ The Durham theatre company's place in this development of enlightened association can be found in the close relationship between actors and Newcastle printers including Thomas and Ann Slack and the Hodgsons who were Unitarians. Also, Stanfield's friend George William Meadley, who acted as the secretary to Sunderland's subscription library for many years, became a Unitarian.⁸⁸ Literary societies and book clubs were established in several other towns in which the Durham company performed.⁸⁹ One book club with a restricted membership of twelve was established at Stockton in 1776.⁹⁰ The town historian Reverend John Brewster was a member, and his name appears on Stanfield's subscription list for *The Essay on Biography*. Subscribers to Stanfield's work also include the Scarboro' Book Society, the Sedgfield Book Club as well as the Library of Sidney College, Cambridge, which his friend Tate had attended.

The player and the printer

Print culture is the other major social and intellectual network system that permeated provincial society, which like theatre, acted as a major generative force in the formation of local identity. As Julie Stone Peters points out in her innovative and interdisciplinary exploration of the relationship between print and the stage, “‘to publish’ ... could mean to show something to the public by any one of a number of means” at the start of the eighteenth century.⁹¹ The close relationship between

⁸⁷ Jon Mee and Jennifer Wilkes, “Transpennine Enlightenment: The Literary and Philosophical Societies and Knowledge Networks in the North, 1781-1830,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38, no. 4 (2015) 599-612. Mee and Wilkes also identify a second wave of “Transpennine Enlightenment” when societies were set up in Leeds (1819), Sheffield (1822), Whitby (1823) and Halifax (1830).

⁸⁸ Kitts, “Sunderland Subscription Library,” 9-12.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 46. Kitts mentions a dedicated building constructed at North Shields in 1807, plus he lists subscription libraries established at Bellingham (1809), Rothbury (1815), Morpeth (1817) and Barnard Castle (1824) as well as Darlington.

⁹⁰ Richmond, *Local Records of Stockton*, 79.

⁹¹ Julie Stone Peters, *The Theatre of the Book 1480-1808: Print, Text and Performance in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 238.

appearing on stage or in print is made evident by the fact that many provincial theatre companies travelled with their own printing press in order to produce the playbills to publicise their performances. According to the Scarborough local historian C. Meadley the Durham company helped to establish printing in Scarborough by selling their printing press to a painter called Joseph Todd.⁹²

This printing-office, the oldest at one time in Scarborough, and lately conducted by Mr HM Todd, Bar Street, had its origin under the following circumstances: - About the year 1790, Mr Bates's company of comedians brought with them an assortment of printing type and a press, called a bellows-press, with which they used to print their own bills for the theatre.

Meadley adds that "all the playbills, from the earliest date, were printed by Mr Todd, and his descendants, down to the year 1862" at which point the family business relocated to Leeds.⁹³

i. Town printers and literati

Actors and theatre company managers were particularly careful to maintain good relations with local printers and booksellers upon whom they relied for the printing of playbills, tickets, occasional pamphlets and other publications including collections of verse and strolling tales. When performing at Stockton in the early nineteenth century, Stephen Kemble "took much delight in lounging in the shop of Messrs Christopher & Jennet, then booksellers in the town, where he used daily to spend a portion of his time in reading on a stool placed for him."⁹⁴ Christopher had been printing the Stockton theatre's playbills since at least 1781 as one of his bills from 25 May of that

⁹² C. Meadley, *Memorials of Scarborough: A Compilation of Historic Sketches, Anecdotes, Remarkable Occurrences, Reminiscences of Olden Times etc.* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co, and Scarborough: E. T. W. Dennis Library Press, 1890), 72.

⁹³ Meadley, *Memorials of Scarborough*, 280.

⁹⁴ Henry Heavisides, *The Annals of Stockton-on-Tees; with Biographical Notices* (Stockton: Heavisides and Son, 1865), 64.

year advertises a benefit for the actresses Mrs Collins and Miss Bailey in *The Gamester*.⁹⁵ The longevity of the association between printer and player is borne out by the names of Christopher & Jennet appearing on the subscription list of Stanfield's *Essay on Biography* published over thirty years later in 1813 when they took six copies. Christopher also published the antiquarian and radical Joseph Ritson's early collection of northern provincial ballads, *The Bishopric Garland: or, Durham Minstrel: a Choice Collection of Excellent Songs* in 1784.⁹⁶ Ritson was from Stockton and his early biographer notes the friendships that he forged with members of the Durham company including the composer William Shield, the playwright and novelist Thomas Holcroft and the pastoral poet John Cunningham.⁹⁷ Many of the performers' associates, like Ritson, are the type of local figure engaged in what Roy Porter has identified as "gentlemanly enlightenment" which he argued "offered a leg up from rusticity, associated with barbarity and riot, towards metropolitan – indeed, cosmopolitan – urbanity."⁹⁸ In his essay "On Actors and Acting" William Hazlitt enthused: "A good company of comedians, a theatre royal judiciously managed, is your true Heralds' College – the only Antiquarian Society that is worth a rush."⁹⁹ The members of the Durham company associated with several of the northern antiquarians who researched and wrote the earliest local town and county histories about the places where they performed.

Rosemary Sweet has analysed provincial print culture using Newcastle's history of town typographies to illustrate changing social conditions.¹⁰⁰ She notes that town histories began to be written by a more varied selection of writers in the late eighteenth century and, reflecting the interests of their writers, these local publications started to provide more information about the kind

⁹⁵ WMA., *Theatrical Playbills, 1779-1783*. Stockton Playbill, 25 May 1781.

⁹⁶ Anon. [Joseph Ritson], *The Bishopric Garland: or, Durham Minstrel: a Choice Collection of Excellent Songs* (Stockton: R. Christopher, 1784).

⁹⁷ Henry Alfred Burd, *Joseph Ritson: A Critical Biography* (Illinois: University of Illinois, 1916), 25-27.

⁹⁸ Roy Porter, "Science, Provincial Culture and Public Opinion in Enlightenment England," *The British Journal of Eighteenth Century Studies*, 3 (1980): 27.

⁹⁹ William Hazlitt, "On Actors and Acting," in *Hazlitt on Theatre*, eds. William Archer and Robert Lowe (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), 136.

¹⁰⁰ Rosemary Sweet, "The Production of Urban Histories in Eighteenth-Century England," *Urban History* 23, no. 2 (1996), 174.

of people who made up the townsfolk. In the region covered by this research: a schoolmaster, Lionel Charlton wrote about Whitby; a clergyman, Reverend Brewster wrote a history of Stockton on Tees; a printer, George Garbutt, wrote Sunderland's history; and a lawyer, William Hutchinson, wrote the histories of Durham, Westmoreland and Cumberland as well as producing typographical works on Northumberland and the Lake District.¹⁰¹ As these local enlightened literary professionals took greater interest in their communities and wrote town and regional histories, a more populist interest encouraged them to include information about the local theatre companies. One actor directly contributed to a publication, in the case of the printer and bookseller Garbutt's history of Sunderland, which acknowledged Stanfield in the preface for providing "many particulars relative to the Theatre and Masonic Lodges."¹⁰² Stanfield also contributed to the book's section on freemasonry. Garbutt's work perhaps best exemplifies the shift toward an interest in "popular" culture in town histories by the fact that it includes fourteen pages dedicated to local theatre history. Sweet highlights the number of pages dedicated to the coal industry in a revised late eighteenth-century town history of Newcastle, noting that this was a commercial consideration, arguing that readers were more likely to be interested in such an important commodity which was central to the nation's well-being.¹⁰³ Following the same logic, Garbutt's choice to extend his theatre section therefore suggests not only how important the company established by Bates had been to Sunderland but also how influential its performers had been on the national stage.

Sweet also notes the influence of conjectural history, such as that written by David Hume and William Robertson, on the "middling-sort" writers who sought to tell the story of the

¹⁰¹ Lionel Charlton, *The History of Whitby and of Whitby Abbey* (Whitby: A. Ward, 1779). John Brewster, *The Parochial History and Antiquities of Stockton Upon Tees* (Stockton: R. Christopher, 1796). Garbutt, *Sunderland*. William Hutchinson, *An Excursion to the Lakes in Westmoreland and Cumberland, August 1773* (London: J. Wilkie and W. Goldsmith, 1774); *An Excursion to the Lakes in Westmoreland and Cumberland, with a Tour through part of the Northern Counties in 1773 and 1774* (London: J. Wilkie and William Charnley, 1776); *A View of Northumberland, with an Excursion to the Abbey of Mailross in Scotland*, 2 vols. (Newcastle, 1776-80); *The History of the County of Cumberland, and some Places Adjacent, from the Earliest Accounts to the Present Time*, 2 vols. (Carlisle: F. Jolie, 1794); *The History and Antiquities of the County Palatine, of Durham*, 3 vols. (London: S. Hodgson and Robinsons, 1785-1794).

¹⁰² Garbutt, *Sunderland*. v.

¹⁰³ Rosemary Sweet, "The Production of Urban Histories," 180-82.

development of their town through its people and social fabric. This is presented as a narrative of development from the Restoration in Brewster's *Parochial History and Antiquities of Stockton upon Tees* published in 1796 in which he identifies enclosure as an important foundation for the prosperity of his town.¹⁰⁴ He stresses that "improvements" had come about through the "cultivated manners" of its leading townfolk.¹⁰⁵ "Opulence and industry have given a spur to all their attainments," he observed.¹⁰⁶ As a public sign of improvement he includes the arrival of a permanent theatre in the town noting its location in Custom-house street, "in the yard belonging to the Green Dragon inn" noting that it had been opened "about 26 years ago" by Bates and that for the previous years Butler's company had also performed there "in the race week."¹⁰⁷ Cawdell and Butler are listed as subscribers to Brewster's work. The theatre was an important sign of improvement to Brewster as an essential ingredient in the "elegant pleasures of a polished life."¹⁰⁸

Cawdell and his uncle Thomas Bates also appear as subscribers to Lionel Charlton's *History of Whitby* (1779).¹⁰⁹ The port of Whitby lies on the River Eske which rises on the moors above the town. A local resident described the townfolk as if "besieged – the sea and the desert draw their lines of circumvallation around us – with more than twenty miles of rock and barren heath on the one side, and the ocean on the other."¹¹⁰ Being cut off from their neighbours meant that the townfolk were forced to be highly self-sufficient and this generated Whitby's own distinctive culture, which companies managed by Bates, Cawdell, and after 1793, Butler, greatly contributed to. The "want of a regular Theatre is attended with serious inconvenience to our very respectability" argued a Whitby citizen writing under the name of "Dramaticus" in a published appeal to the local

¹⁰⁴ Brewster, *Antiquities of Stockton*, 49-50. For more recent analysis of Stockton's economic life see Tony Barrow, *The Port of Stockton 1702-1802*. Paper in North Eastern History, 14 (Middlesbrough: Teesside University, 2005).

¹⁰⁵ Brewster, *Antiquities of Stockton*, 103.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 86. Brewster refers to "James" Butler but must have meant the actor-manager, Samuel Butler.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 103.

¹⁰⁹ Charlton, *History of Whitby*, v, vi.

¹¹⁰ Anon [Dramaticus], *A letter to Lord Viscount Normanby, on the inconvenience occasioned by the want of a theatre at Whitby. With some remarks on the conduct of the editor of the Whitby Repository on his refusing its insertion in that publication* (Whitby: R. Kirby 1826), 5.

lord of the manor, Viscount Normanby, after the town's theatre had burnt down in 1823.¹¹¹

"Dramaticus" made clear that the rebuilding of a permanent institution was required in order to attract a respectable company of performers to the town and thus avoid the "nuisance" of being left exposed to strollers, those "despicable and desperate adventurers" who he described as the "refuse of the village barns – men as devoid of talent as of principle – whose appearance is a disgrace to our town, and a libel on the name which they bear."¹¹² The Bates company had been the first "respectable" company to establish itself in the town, for whom Whitby's first theatre was built on the west side of Cliff Lane in about 1763.

Charlton describes a systematic process of improvement that follows Borsay's notion of urban renaissance with the development of commerce through open trading places, improvement to docks, the widening of roads to ease transportation and access roads across the moors.¹¹³ He describes how the townsfolk's "eyes now began to be opened" to the promotion of subscriptions for public works which led to legislation resulting in the town's "commodious and neat" new streets.¹¹⁴ Whitby's townsfolk had been living in "sorry huts and cottages" before but now lived in "new houses, with brick walls and sash'd-windows, much more spacious, commodious, and neat."¹¹⁵ The building of a dedicated playhouse was a mark of these improvements and it continued to be used by the Durham company until 1784 when a larger theatre was erected by subscription in Scate Lane.¹¹⁶ This is the building that was destroyed in 1823 when a company managed by Scott lost all their property in a fire which commenced at one in the morning and consumed everything inside the building.¹¹⁷ A local artist George Chambers I witnessed the event and his painting hangs in the town's museum (*figure 6*).

¹¹¹ Dramaticus, *Letter to Lord Viscount Normanby*, 7.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Charlton, *History of Whitby*, 338-343.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 341.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 337.

¹¹⁶ George Young, *A History of Whitby and Streoneshalh Abbey with a statistical survey of the vicinity to the distance of twenty-five miles*, 2 vols. (Whitby, Clark, 1817), 2:636.

¹¹⁷ *The Morning Post* (London, England), Monday, 31 July 1823.



Figure 6. George Chambers I, “Fire at the Theatre, Skate Lane” (1823).¹¹⁸

Charlton had a student called Francis Gibson whose play *Streanshall Abbey: or, the Danish Invasion* was performed in the Whitby theatre by the Butler company in the 1799-1800 season.¹¹⁹ The actors also make an appearance in Gibson’s verse which was published posthumously in a collection called *Poetical Remains* by his friend William Watkins.¹²⁰ Gibson’s “To a Country Theatrical Manager,” is addressed to James Cawdell who is named in the piece.¹²¹ His *Poetical Remains* also contain three addresses spoken at the Whitby theatre.¹²² Watkins wrote an account of Gibson’s life which is imbued with the language of sensibility, typified by the elective affinity which he suggests helped to establish their life-long friendship. “There is often a secret and unprompted sympathy” he wrote, “which, like the attraction of cohesion in certain substances,

¹¹⁸ WMA., Exhibited Painting. George Chambers I, *Fire at the Theatre, Skate Lane* (1823).

¹¹⁹ Francis Gibson, *Streanshall Abbey: or, the Danish Invasion*, 2nd ed. (Whitby: T. Webster, 1800).

¹²⁰ W. Watkins, ed., *The Poetical Remains, with other Detached Pieces of the late F. Gibson Esq. F.A.S. Collector of the Customs at Whitby* (Whitby: R. Rodgers, 1807).

¹²¹ Francis Gibson, “To a Country Theatrical Manager,” in Watkins, *Poetical Remains*, 100-01.

¹²² Watkins, *Poetical Remains*, 71-72; 86-88; 73-75.

attaches analogous minds to each other.”¹²³ Watkins was also a playwright and in 1802 he published his tragedy *The Fall of Carthage* which was also performed by the Butler company in Whitby and dedicated to Mrs Butler.¹²⁴

Local writers who produced drama for performances in northern theatres include schoolmasters, lawyers, surgeons and customs officers. The Stokesley schoolmaster Thomas Pierson wrote a play “the Treacherous Son-in-Law” about a notorious local murder, advertised as “a Tragedy, founded on a Fact which happened upon Good Friday, in the Year 1753” which was performed in the local playhouse.¹²⁵ According to the diarist, Nicholas Brown, a surgeon and apothecary from Alnwick called Thomas Collingwood wrote a play called *The Dead Alive Again* about the matrimonial differences between a couple in the town, the public performance of which launched a local pamphlet war.¹²⁶ These productions, often of local topical interest, helped to reinforce the sense of local identity among the members of the audience and the players, several of whom, like the York-born actor Samuel Butler, or the Wigton-born stroller Charlotte Deans, never strayed much further than their counties of birth for the duration of their entire theatrical careers.

Not only do these indications of association allow the actors’ place to be clearly fixed within a broader literary culture in many towns across the region, but this also serves to illustrate their role in helping to develop distinctively provincial identities and forms of association. The names of local historians and prominent antiquarians also appear on the subscription lists of books published by the actors. Cawdell’s *Miscellaneous Poems* includes the names of the antiquarians Joseph Ritson and George Allan as subscribers. Allan’s personal printing press helped to make his home, the

¹²³ Quoted in John Watkins ed., *The Remains of James Myers, of Whitby: with an Account of his Life* (London: Longman and Co, Whitby: R. Horne 1830), xiv.

¹²⁴ William Watkins, *The Fall of Carthage* (Whitby: Webster, 1802). Watkins also published a literary magazine called *Whitby Spy*, a series of essays on miscellaneous subjects after the manner of *The Spectator*.

¹²⁵ Thomas Pierson, *Miscellanies on Various Subjects, containing a Tragedy, founded on a Fact which happened upon Good Friday, in the Year 1753* (Stockton: Printed for the author, 1786), 9-140.

¹²⁶ Nicholas Brown, “The Diary of Nicholas Brown (1767-1796),” in *Six North Country Diaries* ed. John Crawford Hodgson (Durham: Surtees Society, 1910), 270. n. 8.

Grange in Darlington, a hub of enlightened sensibility.¹²⁷ John Nichols' *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century* features a cluster of gentlemen associated with Allan who were linked together by freemasonry, a shared interest in antiquarianism and the theatre. Allan's friend and amanuensis, William Hutchinson, a lawyer from Barnard Castle, was another subscriber to Cawdell's volume. In a study of his *View of Northumberland*, Helen Berry argues that Hutchinson brought a new contribution to the County History which was "the introduction of the idea of the 'man of taste' as the standard-bearer for the good British subject."¹²⁸ As well as writing the first "acceptable" history of the county of Durham, Hutchinson also wrote a number of plays and novels.¹²⁹ Nichols' *Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century* republished letters that show the lengths gone to by Allan's network to get Hutchinson's plays performed in London.¹³⁰ His third effort, an abolition play called *The Princess of Zanzibar*, was printed in 1790 after being rejected by Harris at Covent Garden and according to the *Literary Anecdotes* it was performed "with some success in the country theatres."¹³¹ This is examined in a later chapter of this thesis in relation to freemasonry.

¹²⁷ The first history of Darlington, Longstaffe's *History and Antiquities of the Parish of Darlington in the Bishoprick* was written in the Victorian era using the antiquarian George Allan's collection as Longstaffe's dedication to Robert Henry Allan states.

¹²⁸ Helen Berry, "Landscape, Taste and National Identity: William Hutchinson's *View of Northumberland* (1776-8)," in *Northern Landscapes: Representations and Realities of North-East England*, eds. Thomas Faulkner, Helen Berry and Jeremy Gregory (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2010), 247.

¹²⁹ John Beckett, *Writing Local History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 38. For a summary of Hutchinson's playwriting see John Bowyer Nichols, *Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century. Consisting of Authentic Memoirs and Original Letters of Eminent Persons; an intended as a Sequel to The Literary Anecdotes*, 2 vols. (London: Nichols and Bentley at Cicero's Head, 1817), 1:426-27.

¹³⁰ Nichols, *Illustrations*, 1:426-40.

¹³¹ Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, 352. n. 1.

ii. Publicising polite Scarborough

James Cawdell's name appears on the subscription list of the antiquarian Thomas Hinderwell's *History and Antiquities of Scarborough* (1798).¹³² He also features in the Scarborough bookseller James Schofield's *An Historical and Descriptive Guide to Scarbrough and its Environs* (1787) a publication targeting fashionable visitors to the resort. According to Schofield, Cawdell's "abilities in his profession, and irreproachable conduct through life" had earned him "a very general esteem" from the community.¹³³ The manager of the Yorkshire circuit, Tate Wilkinson, complimented Cawdell for his "real understanding (and genius that ought to have been transplanted) particularly at *Scarborough*."¹³⁴ Part of Cawdell's genius lay in his canny ability for public relations. Cawdell's "Rondeau on the Scarborough Mineral Waters" was set to music by the company's musical director William Shield.¹³⁵ It is a celebration of the town's famous spa which had made the town a summer attraction and like a modern marketing jingle served as a promotion for the resort.

Scarborough in the North Riding of Yorkshire was the southernmost coastal venue on the Durham company's circuit. Originally a fishing town, the discovery of a spa in the seventeenth century led to its development into a fashionable centre of leisure where leading society figures spent the summer season and expected to be entertained by a respectable company. Francis Gentleman describes the town as "(a place like *Bath*) made up in the summer of fantastical people of quality, and ravenous tradesmen, who prey on them."¹³⁶ A letter sent from Scarborough and printed in the London *Public Advertiser* during the summer season of 1787 conveys a sense of the resort's fashionable status.¹³⁷ It notes that even so late in the season "some of the highest, and most

¹³² Thomas Hinderwell, *The History and Antiquities of Scarborough and the Vicinity: with Views and Plans* (York: Blanchard, 1798).

¹³³ James Schofield, *An Historical and Descriptive Guide to Scarbrough and its Environs* (York, W. Blanchard, 1787), 173.

¹³⁴ Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 4:138.

¹³⁵ Cawdell, *Miscellaneous Poems*, 92.

¹³⁶ Gentleman, "A Summary View," 20.

¹³⁷ *Public Advertiser*, (London), Saturday, 29 September 1787.

estimable, in the first class of ancient British nobility” were arriving in the town which was “full of fashionable personages, and those of distinguished rank, as any publick place whatever, so remote from the metropolis.” Having puffed the town, the letter writer then goes on to puff its theatre manager: “Theatrical entertainments have been, this season, filled in all their parts particularly well. Much merit has been justly attributed to Mr Cawdell, the manager, both for so judicious a selection of a good company, and for filling many, and various parts himself.”¹³⁸ Whether Cawdell was behind this letter or not, the fact that Scarborough’s theatrical culture had become a matter of discussion in the London press does indicate the resort’s important status as a provincial centre of leisure. Several pieces publicising the Durham company at Scarborough appeared in the national press, a task made possible by the town’s fashionable status, but which also suggest Cawdell’s skilful self-promotion.

The performers’ experiences during the summer season at Scarborough firmly support Borsay’s central thesis linking leisure and conspicuous consumption, which might be expected considering that he relies upon leisure towns to build his argument. However, of the seven towns on the circuit established by Bates, only Scarborough can be described as a leisure town. The audiences in other playhouses included labourers such as keelmen and sailors and artisans as well as the aristocracy, gentry and the emerging middle-class whose preoccupation with conspicuous consumption has been an important focus of attention for cultural historians like Borsay, Brewer and Wahrman. The Durham Company provides numerous examples of a dynamic of exchange at work in the provinces, in which a range of values and influences are simultaneously relayed. This reading is supported by Amélie Addison’s recent analysis of the subscribers to the Durham company’s band leader William Shield’s first published work *A Collection of Favourite Songs* which appeared in about 1775 shortly after he had moved to London.¹³⁹ Shield is best known for his

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Amélie Addison, “William Shield’s *A Collection of Favourite Songs* (c. 1775),” in *Music in North-East England, 1500-1800*, eds. Stephanie Carter, Kirsten Gibson, and Roz Southey (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Inc, 2020), 241-260.

long career at London's Covent Garden Theatre and as George III's composer, but Addison aims to counter what she terms the "Geordie Dick Whittington" mythology which has arisen around him.¹⁴⁰ Rather than presenting a rags to riches metropolitan salvation, she shows how Shield's talent did not develop in isolation but was "nurtured and shaped by pre-existing and evolving networks of people who participated in music and theatre as performers and consumers."¹⁴¹ Addison identifies four theatre managers and eighteen actors on the list of subscribers, several of whom were members of the Durham company, plus a number of local associates who supported Shield as he developed his ability as a musician and composer. She argues that this list shows the majority did not represent an economic elite of the leisured class, but "rather those whose capacity to engage with culture derived from their own enterprise and industry in a variety of fields."¹⁴² Her analysis supports this dissertation's general argument about the independence, vibrancy and variety of provincial culture in this period, in contrast to an understanding that tends to stress the importance of metropolitan influence, elite leisure and conspicuous consumption.

The etching in the frontispiece to Cawdell's *Miscellaneous Poems* appears to be the only surviving image of the actor. While as previously noted, to Burnim's trained eye this provides significant practical information about the Durham company's performance practices, there is also a story that lies behind the image that casts significant light on the Durham company's social role in the coastal communities in which they performed. When describing the intertwining of people, culture, tide, storm and flood, Michael Kempe wrote that "water is the decisive key to understanding the social life of communities on the North Sea coasts."¹⁴³ The towns in which the Durham company performed sat on the rim of a basin into which many of Europe's major rivers emptied. Greg Bankoff stresses that people in this region are closely linked by "trade, raid and

¹⁴⁰ For this mythology she cites Peter Smith, *From Tyneside Village to Westminster Abbey: The Life, Times and Music of William Shield (1748-1829)* (Gateshead: Gateshead Schools' Music Service, 2005).

¹⁴¹ Amélie Addison, "William Shield," 260.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ M. Kempe, "'Mind the next flood!' Memories of Natural Disasters in Northern Germany from the Sixteenth Century to the Present," *Medieval History Journal* 10, no. 1 & 2 (2007): 331.

geography” and also by a “shared history of risk and by similar cultural responses to disasters.”¹⁴⁴

The following section considers the manner in which the Durham company responded to a disaster that has been described as the major climatic event of the millennium and which impacted the northeast coast extremely severely. It serves as a specific example of how the theatre company stepped into the civic void caused by the limitations of local parish governance and illustrates the role that the company performed in promoting social action prior to the civic institutions that would later be established across the region.

Charity on the northeast coast

The COMPANY hope the LADIES and GENTLEMEN won't be offended at their soliciting their Patronage, during their being detained by the Contrary Winds.¹⁴⁵

This note which appears at the top of a playbill for the final performance of the 1783-4 winter season at Whitby is an indication of the deference typically displayed by actors who were acknowledging themselves as the humble servants of the public. However, this short sentence is something of an incongruity because it is the only example in seventeen volumes of playbills that cover a period from 1779 to 1817 at Whitby of a theatre company declaring that they were forced to continue their season beyond the allocated time period of sixty days because of the severity of the weather. The Durham company had been visiting the town regularly over the previous years for which records exist, but that winter the performers belonged to Strickland's “Comedians from the Theatres Royal”.¹⁴⁶ Some of Strickland's performers and the company's scenery, costumes and

¹⁴⁴ Greg Bankoff, “The ‘English Lowlands’ and the North Sea Basin System: A History of Shared Risk,” *Environment and History* 19, no. 1 (2013): 37.

¹⁴⁵ WMA., *Theatrical Playbills 1784 -1787*. Playbill Whitby Theatre, 15 March 1784.

¹⁴⁶ The Whitby Museum's playbill collection shows that Bates and Cawdell performed at Whitby in October-December 1779; May 1781; January-March 1782; October-December 1782. After Strickland's 1783-1784 winter season, Bates and Cawdell continued with regular visits to Whitby between May-July 1785; March-May 1786; January-April 1787. Cumberland then managed for one winter season between November 1788 and January 1789; Cawdell returned for three recorded seasons, October-November 1789; October-

machinery had arrived by ship to commence their first night of subscription in November 1783.¹⁴⁷ These performers were supported by a local group of strollers.¹⁴⁸ As well as delaying their departure, the weather had evidently disrupted performances during the season, as in February one of the actors, Mr Laverock, had seen his benefit fail “on account of the inclemency of the weather.”¹⁴⁹ In fact, the severity of that winter was such that appeals were made all across the region for contributions to help those suffering from its effects. Writing in the context of regional print distribution, Barbara Crosbie has drawn attention to this “period of particularly inclement weather” pointing out that on 7 February the *Newcastle Chronicle* included “paragraphs about subscriptions for the needy in Newcastle, Sunderland, North Shields and Stockton; and by 21 February the number of reports from towns raising such charitable subscriptions covered almost an entire column.”¹⁵⁰ Crosbie uses this abnormal instance adventitiously to gauge the range of the *Newcastle Chronicle*’s owner Thomas Slack’s northern print network to better understand its reach and relationship with the local population. Strickland’s company also contributed to this relief effort as they performed a benefit for the “Poor of Whitby” on the 13th of February.¹⁵¹ This “inclement weather” also provides an opportunity to consider the Durham company’s relationship with the towns in which the actors performed.

We know exactly where James Cawdell was at this time because the engraving in the frontispiece of his *Miscellaneous Poems* is of him performing at a benefit for distressed families at Sunderland theatre on 9 February 1784.¹⁵² He is standing alone on stage reciting an eulogium which

November 1790; October-November 1791. The collection then continues with Butler company performances commencing in December 1793.

¹⁴⁷ WMA., *Theatrical Playbills 1779 – 1783*. Whitby Theatre, 21 November 1783.

¹⁴⁸ The strollers were Messrs Hood, Booth, Warwick and Mr and Mrs Laverock who appeared at the theatre in nearby Staithes the following month. See WMA., *Theatrical Playbills 1784 – 1787*. Staithes Theatre, 10 April 1784.

¹⁴⁹ See WMA., *Theatrical Playbills 1784 – 1787*. Whitby Theatre Playbill, 10 February 1784 and 2 February 1784.

¹⁵⁰ Barbara Crosbie, “Provincial Purveyors of Culture,” in *The Economy and Culture in North-East England, 1500-1800*, eds. Adrian Green and Barbara Crosbie (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2018), 219-220.

¹⁵¹ WMA., *Theatrical Playbills 1784 – 1787*, Whitby Theatre Playbill, 13 February 1784.

¹⁵² Cawdell, *Miscellaneous Poems*, frontispiece.

was published as the first poem in his volume.¹⁵³ A footnote notes that “the receipts of the house amounted to the sum of sixty-two pounds, twelve shillings, and sixpence” and that it was “addressed to the Benevolent in general, and to the Gentlemen, who collected and distributed for the relief of distressed families in particular.”¹⁵⁴ The following week, *The Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser* published in London carried the news from Sunderland, reporting that “The present intense frost has put a total stop to almost every employment in the sea-faring line, and the greatest poverty prevails among the lower orders of the inhabitants there.”¹⁵⁵ It also noted that a charity play “free of all expence” by Bates and Cawdell had raised “upwards of sixty pounds” declaring it “an example worthy of imitation by every place of public entertainment in the kingdom” and adding that the people of Sunderland had subscribed in total almost five hundred pounds. Bates and Cawdell’s one benefit evening had evidently made a significant contribution to the total and is an indication of the potential contribution that theatre could make to such civic action.

In his performance at Sunderland, Cawdell spoke to the audience in the character and costume of a delegate from the town’s poor. This exemplifies the ambiguous space in which actors existed and from where they were at liberty to make direct appeals to the public and thereby attempt to generate social change. The shifting of responsibility and identity that his performance allows is an example of what the anthropologist Victor Turner called the “betwixt and between” that he argues exists in highly performative social conditions such as ritualistic events or theatre.¹⁵⁶ Building on Arnold van Gennep’s original theory of “liminality”, Turner stresses the proximity of the notion to the actor’s trade, pointing out that the word “entertainment” itself “means the liminal in English, for it means literally, from the Latin, ‘to hold between,’ to be neither this nor that, but

¹⁵³ Ibid, 5-7.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 5. n.

¹⁵⁵ *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser* (London, England), Wednesday, 18 February 1784.

¹⁵⁶ Victor W. Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passages*,” ed. J. Helms, *The Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society for 1964* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1964), 4-20. For the application of this analysis to theatre see Victor W. Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1986), 7, 75, 101.

the problem in the middle.”¹⁵⁷ While his listeners were of course aware that it was an actor speaking through the character of a delegate of the poor, the liminal nature of performance allows Cawdell, in the character of a representative of the poor, to step apart from his actor’s persona and overcome the shame of publicly begging for assistance. Actors and particularly managers were caught in a precarious position of having to maintain good relations with the town authorities who provided them with their licences to perform; however, their liminal status also permitted them to play an essential role within philanthropy, as such opportunities allowed them to directly address the public and encourage townsfolk to act charitably.

Cawdell starts by praising and thanking those present for their generosity. “With tears of joy! Almost of speech bereav’d, / I come with thanks from poverty reliev’d” he declares and then conveys the gratitude of a sample of those poor sufferers that the patrons had saved.¹⁵⁸ These include a “starving wretch” who “blesses those who snatch’d him from the grave”, “a crowd of orphans ... who lisp’d your bounty, and your praises sung” and “the bed-rid widow” who “eager prays for you, her kindest friends.” After flattering the audience, Cawdell’s delegate then reminds them: “Thousands of these poor wretches yet remain” and he urges his patrons to continue with their benevolence as thankful prayers would bring blessings upon them. Below Cawdell’s image in the engraving are two of the lines from the poem:

Such pray’rs ne’er fail – when so devoutly giv’n,
But swiftly fly, on angels’ wings, to heav’n!

Ironically, it was the heavens that was causing the problem. The “inclement weather” which had impacted at such a regional level appears to have been a direct result of a global event that has been described as the single most important climatic event of the last millennium.¹⁵⁹ On 8 June 1783, the

¹⁵⁷ Turner, *Anthropology of Performance*, 41. See also Gregory A. Wilson, *The Problem in the Middle: Liminal Space and the Court Masque* (Clemson University Digital Press, 2007), vi.

¹⁵⁸ Cawdell, *Miscellaneous Poems*, 5.

¹⁵⁹ See Thorvaldur Thordarson and Stephen Self, “Atmospheric and environmental effects of the 1783–1784 Laki eruption: A review and reassessment,” *Journal of Geophysical Research* 108, no. D1 (2003): 15.

Laki fissure in Iceland began an eight-month emission period which spewed an estimated 120 million tons of sulphur dioxide into the northern hemisphere. Known as Móðuharðindin in Icelandic, or “the Mist Hardships” this led to the death of twenty-five percent of Iceland’s population.¹⁶⁰ A thick haze was reported across much of Western Europe in the summer of 1783 and the reduction in solar radiation cooled the average temperature over northern hemisphere land masses by as much as three degrees Celsius.

The period 1783/4 has been recognised as a mortality “crisis year” in the population history of England.¹⁶¹ Town histories on the Durham circuit record a number of extreme weather events during this year. An entry in Richmond’s *Local Records of Stockton* for the 2nd of August notes that there was a severe thunder and lightning storm in the afternoon with a shower of hail “from 8 to 5 inches in circumference” and a farmer had “fitted one of these hailstones to a loaded gun, and fired it through an inch deal.”¹⁶² The following winter while Cawdell was performing in Sunderland, Richmond recorded that at Stockton “the winter very severe” and on January 24th “the Tees was frozen a second time and so continued till Feb. 25” during which time a sheep had been roasted on the river.¹⁶³ Thomas Pierson also mentions “the noted eighty-four” in his “Poem in Praise of Stockton”:

In this cold year the noted eighty-four,
By ten weeks frost distress’d, the suff’ring poor
Were oft sustain’d by charities divine,
Here lives the virtues, here the graces shine.¹⁶⁴

The extreme weather triggered by the Laki event appears to have greatly intensified the Cawdell company’s charitable activity in coastal towns and saw the actors play an important role in civic

¹⁶⁰ Thordarson and Self, “Laki eruption,” 8.

¹⁶¹ C. S. Witham & C. Oppenheimer, “Mortality in England during the 1783–4 Laki Craters eruption,” *Bulletin of Volcanology* 67, no 1 (2004): 15–26.

¹⁶² Richmond, *Local Records of Stockton*, 83.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ Thomas Pierson, “A Poem in Praise of Stockton,” in *Miscellanies on Various Subjects*, 192–93. See also Pierson’s “On the Long and Severe Winter in 1784 and 1785,” in *Miscellanies on Various Subjects*, 242–243.

welfare. The publicity of their actions calling for imitation that was disseminated across the land through national newspapers may have inspired others to take up the challenge. It must have helped to develop a sense of collective purpose shared between performers and their patrons, while greatly helping to establish long-standing bonds with members of the communities which experienced such dreadful and exceptional loss. The role that the actors played was particularly crucial as societies which provided support simply did not yet exist, or were still in development, such as the Marine Society which had only established a branch in Newcastle by this time.¹⁶⁵ It would not be until 1792 that parliament passed an:

Act for Establishing a Permanent Fund for Relief and Support of Skippers and Keelmen Employed in the Coal Trade on the River Wear in the County of Durham, who by sickness or other accidental Misfortunes, or by Old Age, shall not be able to maintain themselves and their Families; and also for the Relief of the Widows and Children of such Skippers and Keelmen.¹⁶⁶

In essence this alleged that the parishes could not cope as “sufficient Provision is not made for their Support.”¹⁶⁷

Local writers from England’s northeast coastal towns record that several of the following winters were also remarkably severe. The following winter 1784/85 proved to be far colder than usual and Richmond notes that at Stockton on 22nd of February 1785 “the Tees was frozen for the third time this winter, and so continued till March 7th.”¹⁶⁸ Also between the 5th and 7th of December 1784 there was “a violent storm of wind, and much damage done on the coast.”¹⁶⁹ This prompted another benefit performance by Cawdell’s company, this time at the North Shields theatre, where “A Serious Address” was delivered “immediately after the dreadful storm ... in

¹⁶⁵ Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England 1715-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 339.

¹⁶⁶ Act for Establishing a Permanent Fund for Relief and Support of Skippers and Keelmen etc ..., 1792, Geo. III, c. 29.

¹⁶⁷ Morgan and Rushton, “Parish, River, Region and Nation,” 236.

¹⁶⁸ Richmond, *Local Records of Stockton*, 83.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

which many ships were totally wrecked, and a great number of lives lost.” As in Cawdell’s performance the previous year at Sunderland, an actor appeared in a role which allowed the performer to address the public directly and make an appeal for charity. In this case, it was “Mrs Marshall, in the character of a *Shipwrecked Seaman’s Widow*, on the evening of a benefit given for those widows and orphans, who were left destitute by the above unfortunate event.”¹⁷⁰ Also in this instance, Mrs Marshall further increased the emotive power by introducing yet more persuasive material. After thanking her “kind Patrons” for their support, she curtsied and said:

One favour more Misfortune bids me ask,
Tho’ Nature melts beneath the painful task –
Not for myself is this entreaty made,
An helpless orphan tribe – implores your aid.

In Cawdell’s volume at this moment there is a stage direction indicating that she “*Brings on three children*” after which she continues:

Look on these babes – then grant my weeping pray’r,
And take, oh! Take them to your gen’rous care –
A father lost! – expos’d to *want* and *grief*!
Their infant sorrows claim your kind relief. –

The third winter after the Laki eruption also saw severe storms and loss of life along the northeast coast. Richmond’s entry for December 1785 records: “A most violent storm ravaged the coasts of Durham and Northumberland, at the beginning of this month. Between Hartlepool and Seaton, not less than 33 vessels lay upon the beach.”¹⁷¹ Severe winters continued for several years, and as extreme weather events continued to devastate shipping along the coast, charitable performances dedicated to widows and orphans of mariners were repeated in theatres on the Durham circuit. Five years later in 1789 the *Whitehall Evening Post* announced another charitable event in its “Country

¹⁷⁰ Cawdell, *Miscellaneous Poems*, 73-75.

¹⁷¹ Richmond, *Local Records of Stockton*, 84.

News” column which appeared under the headline “*Newcastle, Nov. 28.*” and probably referred to the North Shields theatre:

Saturday last Mr. Cawdell paid 25*l.* 9*s.* into the hands of the trustee, for the widows and orphans of those unfortunate seamen who suffered in the late storm. The above sum was the profits of a benefit play given by the company for that charitable purpose.¹⁷²

A sense of the severity of the weather at this time and the extent of relief required by “the widows of seamen drowned in the late storms” is suggested by the large sum of money raised by the overall subscription which amounted to “upwards of 1200*l.*” which the writer added was “a noble instance of the benevolence of the inhabitants of this neighbourhood, and the noblemen and gentlemen connected with it!”

Although the Laki fissure evidently acted as a major impetus for action leading to an outpouring of generosity in the communities in which the actors performed, the Durham company did have a long tradition of charitable performance in towns on their circuit prior to this event. The first recorded performance by the Durham company at the new theatre in North Shields took place on 27 September 1765 when the tragedy *The Distress'd Mother* was presented “for the benefit of poor widows and orphans of seamen &c.”¹⁷³ A note on the playbill informed the patrons that “The profits of this play will be distributed at the discretion of several gentlemen of Shields.” John Cunningham provided an eulogium on charity for the benefit which was spoken by Mrs Brimyard. Cunningham’s *Poems, Chiefly Pastoral*, published by Thomas Slack in 1766, also contains “An Introduction” which was spoken at Sunderland theatre for the benefit of the town’s widows and orphans.¹⁷⁴ The verse is undated, but it contains the lines: “Behold the wretched Matron – madly weep, / And hear her cry – ‘My joys are in the deep!’ ” which suggests that he wrote the address following other losses at sea. A footnote to Cunningham’s “Eulogium on Charity” states that it had

¹⁷² *Whitehall Evening Post* (London, England), 28 November – 1 December 1789.

¹⁷³ North Shields playbill cited in King, *North Shields Theatre*, 13.

¹⁷⁴ John Cunningham, *Poems, Chiefly Pastoral*, 2nd ed. (Newcastle upon Tyne: T. Slack 1771), 213-214.

been spoken as a prologue at a 1765 charitable benefit in Alnwick, Northumberland which suggests that the Durham company may have also occasionally performed at Alnwick or that Cunningham had written the prologue for another company.¹⁷⁵ He had a close relationship with the managers of the Edinburgh theatre, West Digges and James Love, with whom he had performed in the 1750s and early 1760s and he continued to provide prologues and epilogues for Digges for several years. This poem contains the lines: “Her sister’s charms are more than doubly bright / From the kind cause that call’d her here to night” with a footnote explaining that this referred to the Countess of Northumberland “who honoured the Charity with her presence” and Cunningham is evidently identifying the patroness with the mythical graces, as Cawdell later did in his verse dedicated to Ann Allen of Darlington.¹⁷⁶

Conclusion

Ironically, while many people frowned upon the travelling actors and anti-theatrical evangelicals raged against the corruption of theatre, the Durham company provides evidence that it was actually the activities of these actors that helped to provide for families suffering from great loss. As well as celebrating patrons of charity and supporting civic institutions, such as poor schools and dispensaries, the Durham company under Bates and Cawdell regularly stepped in and acted where civic associations did not yet exist, by providing support for widows and orphans of sailors lost at sea. As the company had so many theatres in towns along the coast this type of charitable performances became such a regular feature that it could be considered an unfortunate but defining characteristic of the company.

With its base in the fast-developing town of Sunderland, the Durham company’s circuit grew as the regional economy expanded. The company’s experiences show that theatre as an

¹⁷⁵ John Cunningham, *Poems, Chiefly Pastoral* (Newcastle upon Tyne: T. Slack, 1766), 163-164.

¹⁷⁶ Cooke, ed., *The Poetical Works of John Cunningham* (London, 1797), 56-57.

institution was transforming into a more commercially driven phenomenon formed by the taste of the general public. At the same time, its roots in an older system of patronage also allowed the performers to play a significant social role in the community. This helps to move the theoretical perspective from notions of politeness, leisure and consumption to a consideration of the performers' commitment to moral improvement and civic service. This in turn raises questions about the assumption of metropolitan influence over provincial theatre and particularly the prioritisation of polite culture as an indication of London's pervasive influence as a cultural driver. Brewer's claim that theatrical development was driven by entrepreneurs who were "agnostic when it came to the question of culture as a means of moral improvement" may have been true of the metropolis, which his work tends to prioritise, but it is not supported by northern local records.¹⁷⁷ Bates and Cawdell's Durham company consistently shows the opposite to be true over a period of forty years, which reveals the risk of relying upon metropolitan sources to develop general theories about national cultural experience. Furthermore, while a commitment to improvement was a characteristic of Bates and Cawdell's management, this did not negatively influence their commercial success. Writing in the context of Scottish theatre, Trish Reid notes that "patterns of response and resistance are easier to discern in the smaller scale" for which she cites the sociologist David McCrone's aphorism "the turn of the tide" is more easily monitored by "observing small boats than large ships."¹⁷⁸ This is a fitting metaphor for the Bates company as it performed along its chain of northeastern coastal towns, although it should not imply that the company was merely acting as a weather-vane, passively signalling the shifting times. The company undoubtedly acted as a mirror to society, but as this chapter has attempted to establish, the individuals who performed in it were also active agents in their communities, at times stepping in to perform a valuable social service while helping to forge and hammer local identity into shape.

¹⁷⁷ John Brewer, "'The most polite age and the most vicious' Attitudes towards culture as a commodity, 1660-1800," in *The Consumption of Culture 1660-1800: Image, Object, Text*, eds. Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 346.

¹⁷⁸ Trish Reid, *Theatre and Scotland* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2.

Chapter Three

The Region: A Strolling Tale

Introduction

The last chapter used the Durham company as a medium through which to consider how the establishment of a permanent theatre company in northern English towns conformed to an understanding of eighteenth-century “urban renaissance”. This chapter expands to a more regional perspective, a spatial viewpoint which in the eighteenth century would have been described as *chorographic*. Johnson’s *Dictionary* defined “chorography” as: “The art or practice of describing particular regions, or laying down the limits and boundaries of particular provinces.”¹ To determine these boundaries, the chapter is informed by Charles Pythian-Adams’ understanding of the cultural province, which he bases upon the great centrally focused river-drainage basins and rivers which share an identifiable stretch of coastline at their point of outlet, arguing that: “Drainage basins predispose their inhabitants to look inwards, to look along a broad natural axis, and to face towards, and then to share reactions to, prevailing in-coming influences which tend to emanate from the same general (often foreign) direction.”² The collective threat to life and livelihoods that originated from the Laki event in Iceland highlighted in the last chapter illustrates a northern cultural province in action while also demonstrating that national and certainly metropolitan interests tend not to be major preoccupations with regard to this understanding of a region. In the North, Pythian-Adams identifies four cultural provinces, each with a different predominant prospect of view, whether east across the German Ocean to the Low Countries, the Baltic and Scandinavia; south to the English

¹ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (London, 1755), 1: unpaginated.

² Charles Pythian-Adams, “Introduction: An Agenda for Local History,” in *Societies, Cultures and Kinship, 1580-1850: Cultural Provinces and English Local History*, ed. Charles Pythian-Adams (London and Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1993), 13.

Midlands; west to Ireland; or north to Scotland. The chapter pays attention to the last two examples because its main area of focus is the North West. Attention is also concentrated on the highly mobile strollers, the third form of provincial company identified by Thaler as the “unlicenced vagabonds in the eyes of the law” as opposed to their “more opulent brethren from the city.”³

There are few official records of strolling companies which often formed temporarily to take advantage of a brief visit to a town or village, or to perform at one of over three thousand annual fairs held in England which William Owen listed in his 1756 survey.⁴ The strolling tales that Sybil Rosenfeld relied upon to develop her classic study of provincial theatre included accounts by the northern players, Wilkinson, Lewes, Ryley and Holcroft, but she was not aware of Charlotte Lowes, an actress from Wigton in Cumberland, who left behind the most comprehensive record of northern strolling in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁵ This includes performing for cash-rich miners in the Pennines, visiting coastal Redcar when it was still a fishing village, finding generous enlightened patrons at Workington, and sailing to the Isle of Man for a season. Her account is probably the only exclusively northern strolling memoir of the period as the furthest southern point she ever visited was Milnthorpe in Westmorland.⁶ Paying attention to her experiences brings about the kind of shift in perspective that can only be brought about by a local focus and provides insight into regional culture in the period; a culture which she was helping to forge.

³ Alwin Thaler, “Strolling Players and Provincial Drama after Shakspeare,” *PMLA* 37, no. 2 (1922): 246.

⁴ William Owen, *An Authentic Account Published by the King’s Authority, of All the Fairs in England and Wales, as They Have Been Settled to be Held Since the Alteration of the Stile. Noting Likewise the Commodities Which Each of the Said Fairs is Remarkable for Furnishing* (London: printed for W. Owen and R. Goadby, 1756).

⁵ Francis Marshall, ed., *The Memoirs of the Life of Mrs Charlotte Deans, from her earliest infancy, comprising the periods when she was Miss Charlotte Lowes, Mrs Johnston, and Mrs Deans; being a Journal of a Seventy Year Pilgrimage with Anecdotes of Many with Whom it has been Her Good and Bad Fortune to Associate* (Kendal: Titus Wilson & Son Ltd, 1984). I have chosen to call Charlotte by her maiden name, “Lowes” during this chapter to avoid confusion as she was married twice and performed under the names of her husbands, “Johnston” and “Deans”.

⁶ Frances Marshall, *The Memoirs*, i.

Charlotte Lowes' "Seventy Years Pilgrimage"

In comparison to the northern stock company actors considered in the last chapter, Charlotte Lowes presents a more modest itinerant performer who considered the brief period that she performed with the Durham company and was given instruction by the actress Sarah Sparks as a high point in her career. It was, she noted: "from that time I may date my success as a comedian."⁷ Although a benefit performance at Whitehaven may have been her only appearance in a Theatre Royal, nevertheless this poor stroller performed a significant cultural service for a highly diverse range of audiences throughout her career, despite the fact that no playbill with her name on appears to have survived.⁸

Lowes was born in Wigton, near Carlisle, in Cumberland in 1768. As the daughter of an Irish mother and an English attorney father, she believed she was well-suited to the stage, writing that "the quick wit of Ireland and the effrontery of a lawyer might well amalgamate ingredients to form an actor."⁹ Ireland also features in Lowes' strolling tale as she started her theatrical life by eloping with an Irish actor called William Morrel Johnston from County Tyrone, after seeing him perform in a barn in her home town with Naylor's company. She married him at nearby Gretna Green as she was a minor and they later confirmed their vows on 7 August 1787 at St Mary's Church, Carlisle.¹⁰ Her father, Henry Lowes, was enraged and approached the Carlisle magistrates who forced "Mr Naylor's company to terminate their season abruptly and flee from that area of jurisdiction."¹¹ Lowes and Johnston had twelve children together.¹² He died in Carlisle in 1801 when she was thirty-five and she soon remarried another actor, the twenty-two year old Scotsman, Thomas Deans, with whom she had a further five children. Lowes was still touring on foot in her sixties. She published her memoir in 1837 and died in Carlisle at the age of ninety in 1859.

⁷ Ibid. 29.

⁸ Ibid, 83.

⁹ Ibid, 6.

¹⁰ Ibid, vii.

¹¹ Ibid, vii-viii.

¹² Ibid, 37.

Lowes' first ever appearance on stage was in 1789 with Naylor's company at Redcar, then a coastal fishing village in the North Riding of Yorkshire, where she had joined Johnston after giving birth to their first child. Naylor's strolling company was made up of five men and four women with no fixed theatres or circuit.¹³ The company then travelled fifteen miles inland to Yarm, where Lowes describes the "fitting up" of a theatre and she provides her first glimpse of local regional strolling life, recording that many "genteel families" had abandoned the town due to the "immense flood" which "had banished from the place the wealthy" and she describes the town's "large handsome houses" which were now "deserted by all but fishermen."¹⁴ Yarm is situated on the south-side of the River Tees and had been a major inland port, as its fifteenth-century stone bridge was the first crossing-place over the river from the coast. However, following the 1771 destructive flood known as "The Great Inundation", a new bridge had been constructed nearer to the sea at Stockton on the north side of the Tees in county Durham which affected Yarm's prosperity.¹⁵ Yarm's bridge survived but continued to be a flood hazard, as its five arches collected detritus and blocked water flow.¹⁶ Lowes' early experience of a visit to a semi-abandoned town prone to flooding is suggestive of the marginal spaces in which she spent considerable periods of her career as a stroller. She typically travelled through the more unintegrated parts of England where the mechanisms of diffusion, in terms of traffic in trade, transport and communication were the weakest. Consideration of her memoir therefore allows for insight into the conditions of these places, as observed by an articulate local woman who had the rare opportunity as a performer to move across social boundaries to be welcomed into the homes of miners as well the drawing rooms

¹³ Ibid, 20-21.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See R. W. Rennison, "The Great Inundation of 1771 and the Rebuilding of the North-East's Bridges," *Archaeologia Aeliana* 5, no. 29 (2001): 269-291. For a microhistorical study of this event in the Tyne Valley see Helen Berry, "The Great Tyne Flood of 1771: Community Responses to an Environmental Crisis in the Early Anthropocene," in *Rivers of the Anthropocene*, eds. Jason M. Kelly, Philip V. Scarpino, Helen Berry, James Syvitski, Michel Meybeck (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2018), 119-134.

¹⁶ Thomas Richmond, *The Local Records of Stockton and the Neighbourhood* (Stockton and London: W. Robinson, 1868), 103.

of the gentry. After three attempts, Naylor's actors could not attract an audience at Yarm and Lowes moved on across the North Pennines into Westmorland.

According to Peter Burke's influential study of popular culture, a "commercial revolution" transformed the nation in the eighteenth century and with the rise of commercial capitalism came the "commercialisation of leisure."¹⁷ J. H. Plumb argues that by the 1760s any self-respecting English town had an established theatre and a dedicated company forming a central element of the "leisure industry".¹⁸ More recently, John Brewer's work on English culture has further developed the argument for the commercialisation of culture.¹⁹ However, in the northern counties examined in this research, even by the end of the century the commercial theatre had not developed to the extent suggested by these arguments. In about 1792 the manager Stordy set up a wooden booth in Carlisle "which stood where the butcher market now is" because a rival had "engaged the Coffee Room" where performances often took place.²⁰ As well as this evidence that there was no permanent theatre in this prominent northern town, all one has to do is follow Lowes' itinerary with her second husband, Thomas Deans and their family, to identify the many market towns in Cumberland, Westmorland, Northern Lancashire, the North Riding of Yorkshire, Durham and Northumberland for which general statements about the prevalence of established theatres can be challenged. In fact, Lowes specifically avoided towns with a permanent theatre. As the editor of her memoirs, Frances Marshall, states: "The pattern of her many itineraries show that, apart from one visit to Whitehaven, her routes carefully by-passed any town which boasted a theatre as a permanent structure."²¹ Some of the northwestern towns where she performed include Ambleside, Appleby, Brampton, Cockermouth, Egremont, Maryport, Penrith and Wigton.²² In Northern Lancashire, she visited

¹⁷ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York; Harper, 1978), 244, 248.

¹⁸ J. H. Plumb, "The Public Literature and the Arts in the Eighteenth Century," in *The Triumph of Culture*, eds. P. S. Fritz and D. Williams (Toronto: A. M. Haekkert, 1972), 44. Also see J. H. Plumb, *The Commercialisation of Leisure in Eighteenth-Century England* (Reading: University of Reading, 1973).

¹⁹ See particularly John Brewer, "Province and Nation," in *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 395-398.

²⁰ Frances Marshall, *The Memoirs*, 29

²¹ *Ibid*, xxxviii. The visit to Whitehaven occurs on page 83.

²² *Ibid*, 69-71.

Bouth and Broughton, but never Ulverston where the Butler company performed. When venturing into the dales of the North Riding she performed at Hawes, Reeth and Catterick, but avoided the potentially lucrative nearby market towns of Richmond and Northallerton where Butler also had established theatres.²³ The actor Thomas Mozeen stated that a company would find success in a place where “there were three or four parish churches and above forty gentlemen’s coaches kept.”²⁴ However, Lowes evidently had different criteria for success, as she recorded with some pride that she performed to full houses at the assembly room in the village of Hawkshead, near Esthwaite Water in the Lake District, where there were “often three or four carriages in attendance at the door.”²⁵ Lowes’ social status and expectations support an important observation that Mike Huggins makes about the region, that “The commercialization of leisure” which has been a “dominant theme in national historiography” played “less of a role in Cumberland.”²⁶ This argument might be extended to other regions in the North, as illustrated in the previous chapter’s focus on the Durham company. Huggins based his observations on the writing of the Cumbrian dialect poet Robert Anderson, who was a close friend of Lowes and her lodger for a period when she lived in Carlisle.

Borderers: Actors and dialect poets

Like many actors in this study, Lowes and her husband Johnston had close associations with local printers and poets. In an attempt to retire from the stage in the mid-1790s Johnston found employment at Francis Jolie’s printing business in Carlisle, where he worked as an engraver and Lowes recorded that she worked as his printer’s devil.²⁷ William Hutchinson’s *History of*

²³ Ibid, 104-05.

²⁴ Thomas Mozeen, *Young Scarron* (London, 1752), 20-21 cited in Cecil Price, *The English Theatre in Wales in the Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1948), 2.

²⁵ Francis Marshall, *The Memoirs*, 69.

²⁶ Mike Huggins, “Popular Culture and Sporting Life in the Rural Margins of Late Eighteenth-Century England: The World of Robert Anderson, ‘The Cumberland Bard,’ ” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45, no. 2 (2012): 202.

²⁷ Frances Marshall, *The Memoirs*, 36.

Cumberland contains an engraving which is signed W. Johnston.²⁸ During this period Lowes also developed a close friendship with Robert Anderson, known as “the Bard of Cumberland” who was her lodger at Lowthian’s Lane in Carlisle. Lowes describes him as “a friend when the hour of distress again overtook me” referring to the support the poet had given her after Johnston’s sudden unexpected death in Carlisle which left her in fear of destitution.²⁹ To help her situation, fellow actors organised a benefit in the town and Anderson wrote a long prologue in standard English which appealed directly to the local freemasons for assistance as her husband had been a mason.³⁰

A calico-printer by trade, Anderson has long been considered a major standard bearer in Cumberland’s contribution to borderland bardic verse, celebrating the region through fierce local labouring-class pride expressed in his native tongue.³¹ In his study that aims to set Anderson in his regional and literary context, Mike Huggins notes that in north Cumberland, Anderson “does not stress actual gentry participation, but neither does it appear to have been expected; popular recreations seem to have coped well with or without it.”³² Much the same might be said for Lowes’ theatrical experience as she records it. Of-course she hoped to find influential members of the gentry to patronise her companies, but much of the time she performed for the lower sorts. While her fellow Cumbrian, Anderson, wrote poems that were turned into song, Lowes helped to popularise that material by entertaining locals in villages and small towns who were the very people those songs were about. Huggins stresses the distinctiveness of different northern Cumbrian villages, noting that: “Community identity was also powerful within Cumberland’s leisure culture. In Anderson’s work, each village has its own identity.”³³ With her constant movement between villages and small towns, Lowes must have been aware of these fine distinctions. As a player, she

²⁸ William Hutchinson, *The History of the County of Cumberland, and some Places Adjacent, from the Earliest Accounts to the Present Time*, 2 vols. (Carlisle: F. Jolie, 1794), 2:585.

²⁹ Frances Marshall, *The Memoirs*, 37.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 39-40.

³¹ See Tom Burke, “Robert Anderson (1770–1833),” in *Eighteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poets, 1700–1800*, ed. J. Goodridge, 3 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003), 3:305–28 and Huggins, “The World of Robert Anderson,” 189–205.

³² Huggins, “The World of Robert Anderson,” 202.

³³ *Ibid*, 201.

was immersed in her community, like the Cumberland bard who “wrote about village life not from archival research but from the inside, and from below rather than above.”³⁴ Anderson was from Carlisle, a city considered from a metropolitan point of view, to be at the very margins of England; however, from a northern perspective, Carlisle was a major cultural centre for the region with a vibrant social life where wealthy families would retire to spend the winter. Anderson’s first publication, *Poems on Various Subjects*, published in 1798, was dedicated to Carlisle’s MP John Christian Curwen and this progressive Whig politician together with his wife Isabella were Lowes’ first great patrons.³⁵

Cumberland patronage

After abandoning her first manager Naylor at Yarm, Lowes and Johnston joined Stordy’s twelve-strong company of “tolerable good actors” at Workington, eight miles north of Whitehaven, where she met the Curwens of Workington Hall. Both John Christian and his wife Isabella hailed from old Cumberland families and were proud and protective of their region. Lowes believed the reason they had shown her “great kindness” was because she was “a native of the County.”³⁶ As Isabella Curwen’s favourite, she became “the idol of the public at that period” but with irony she added, “all my faults were overlooked and my little merit magnified.”³⁷ This was the first occasion that Lowes performed in her home county, and it provided her with an experience of Cumberland improvement. Curwen was a significant promoter of enlightenment thought in the North West and was noted as an agricultural reformer.³⁸ He developed the experimental Schoose Farm and founded

³⁴ Ibid, 193.

³⁵ For Isabella Curwen and the “Northern Renaissance” figures associated with her husband John Christian Curwen see Christopher Maycock, *A Passionate Poet: Susanna Blamire, 1747-94: A Biography* (Penzance: Hypatia Publications, 2003), 78.

³⁶ Frances Marshall, *The Memoirs*, 24.

³⁷ Ibid, 24, 26.

³⁸ For a study of agricultural improvement in this period see Tom Williamson, *The Transformation of Rural England: Farming and the Landscape 1700-1870* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002) and

the Workington Agricultural Society which had a major impact on local agriculture in the next century.³⁹ Curwen's commitment to local expression extended to a dramatic appearance in parliament, "dressed like a Cumberland labourer and carrying a loaf and cheese under his arm" when promoting the interests of his constituents.⁴⁰ Lowes refers to the Cambridge-educated Curwen's "institutions to ameliorate the hardships of the poor" in her memoir, although when visiting the Cumbrian west coast she believed, as poor itinerant actors, they themselves might have been considered as candidates for Curwen's initiatives.⁴¹

The Curwen's patronage shows how relatively humble strollers had the opportunity to meet and associate with local figures who were embedded in political and cultural networks that extended across the region and beyond. The players also appear to have taken full advantage of their patron's family connections as after their successful Workington season, Stordy's company sailed to the Isle of Man for a five-month tour. It is likely that John and Isabella supplied the players with recommendations for this venture as the Christian family was descended from one of the oldest families on the island and its members were hereditary Deemsters and Members of the House of Keys, the elected part of the Manx Parliament, the Tynwald, the world's oldest continuous legislature.⁴² This encounter between the actors and their wealthy and powerful local patrons appears to support Pythian-Adams' notion of a North West cultural province with a direction of interest directed westward across the sea towards Ireland and the Isle of Man.

Susanna Wade Martins, *Farmers, Landlords and Landscapes: Rural Britain, 1720 to 1870* (Macclesfield: Windgather Press, 2004).

³⁹ John Christian Curwen published his thoughts on agriculture, poverty and improvement in J. C. Curwen, *Hints on Agricultural Subjects: And on the Best Means of Improving the Condition of the Labouring Classes*, 2nd ed. (London: J. Johnson, 1809) and *Observations on the State of Ireland: Principally Directed to its Agriculture and Rural Population; in a Series of Letters, Written on a Tour through that Country*, 2 vols. (London: Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1818).

⁴⁰ J. V. Beckett, "Curwen, John Christian (1756–1828), agriculturist and politician," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online ed., 23 Sep. 2004, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/37334>, accessed 19 May. 2020. For political performance and publicity see Gillian Russell, "Burke's Dagger: Theatricality, Politics and Print Culture in the 1790s," *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 20 (1997): 1-16.

⁴¹ Frances Marshall, *The Memoirs*, 89.

⁴² Christian's original family surname was McCrystyn. Fletcher Christian of the mutiny on HMS Bounty, who was born at Eaglesfield near Cockermouth in Cumberland, was John Christian's first cousin.

The direction of influence towards Ireland is also indicated by the established theatre company that dominated the region. Austin and Heatton's company, which had formed in Dublin in 1766, developed a circuit that mirrored the Durham company's east coast interests, being made up of playhouses in several prominent coastal towns between which the company travelled by ship. Their most prestigious playhouse was Chester's Theatre Royal on the River Dee, but the company also performed in the prosperous port towns of Lancaster and Whitehaven in West Cumberland. Only three years after their arrival from Ireland in February 1769 the *Newcastle Courant* reported that a "new and elegant theatre" was being built for the company in Whitehaven "by subscription of eight of the principal gentlemen of that place."⁴³ Reinforcing the Irish connection, the theatre on Roper Street was "built upon the model of that in Crow-street, Dublin" and it opened on Wednesday 8 November "to a very numerous and genteel audience."⁴⁴ The emulation and imitation of an Irish model for the theatre is indicative of the local influences at work in this area.

Rather like Whitby, on the east coast, Whitehaven was geographically isolated from much of the rest of the country, as it was pinned in by the mountains of the Lake District. Despite its status as a major port, due to the landscape and poor road system it was Stockton that supplied many of the markets of Westmorland and Cumberland in this period. Nevertheless, the town was extremely prosperous, in part because since the mid-seventeenth century it had been a major Atlantic port, acting as a conduit for tobacco from the American colonies for European and domestic markets.⁴⁵ When Daniel Defoe visited Whitehaven in the 1720s he remarked on the impact of the coal trade on the town, writing: "it is now the most eminent port in England for shipping off of coals, except Newcastle and Sunderland and even beyond the last."⁴⁶ At its peak in

⁴³ *Newcastle Courant*, (Newcastle, England), 25 Feb 1769.

⁴⁴ *Newcastle Courant*, (Newcastle, England), 18 Nov 1769. Whitehaven's Roper Street Theatre continued in use until 1920, see Frances Marshall, *The Memoirs*, ix.

⁴⁵ For an overview of the economic status of the town in the period, particularly with regard to coal mining and colonial trade, see J. E. Williams, "Whitehaven in the Eighteenth Century," *The Economic History Review* 8, no. 3 (1956): 393-404.

⁴⁶ Daniel Defoe, *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain Divided into Circuits or Journies*, 7th ed. 4 vols. (London: J. and F. Rivington; R. Baldwin; Hawes, Clarke and Collins; J. Buckland; W. and J. Richardson, [and 15 others in London], 1769), 3:312.

the mid-eighteenth century, the port was the second busiest by tonnage after London in large part due to its export of Cumberland coal to Ireland.⁴⁷ Whitehaven was also exemplary for northern polished living as it is the earliest planned new town in post-medieval Britain with fashionable regular streets laid out in a right-angled grid system initiated by Sir John Lowther in the 1680s.⁴⁸ However, after the 1707 Acts of Union abolished excise duties between England and Scotland, Glasgow began to compete over tobacco and came to dominate the trade by the end of the eighteenth century. The port's influence diminished and the ensuing loss of prosperity reduced efforts to modernise the town.⁴⁹

Whitehaven had a long history of theatrical entertainment, being one of the first northern towns to construct a purpose-built theatre when Mr Hayton built the Assembly Rooms and a theatre next door in 1736.⁵⁰ A glimpse of the youthful Isabella Curwen and the wealth concentrated in the area appears in an article in *The Cumberland Pacquet and Ware's Whitehaven Advertiser* which reported a performance by Austin and Whitlock's company at the town's Roper Street theatre in December 1780:

The boxes were crowded in the most genteel manner ever seen here; and it was remarked that there were six unmarried ladies present (one of whom was Miss Curwen) whose fortunes together exceed those of any other of the same number in the North of England.⁵¹

At that moment, the fifteen-year-old Isabella was a Ward in Chancery and heiress to £34,000, which is the equivalent to about £2 million today.⁵² Her father Henry Curwen had died two years previously, leaving her the estate and extensive mining interests. She was under the guardianship of

⁴⁷ Williams, "Whitehaven in the Eighteenth Century," 398.

⁴⁸ For analysis of Whitehaven's town planning with particular regard to its social fabric see Sylvia Collier with Sarah Pearson, *Whitehaven 1660-1800: A New Town of the Late Seventeenth Century: A Study of its Buildings and Urban Development* (London: HMSO, 1991).

⁴⁹ Williams, "Whitehaven in the Eighteenth Century," 400-02.

⁵⁰ Frances Marshall, *The Memoirs*, viii.

⁵¹ *The Cumberland Pacquet and Ware's Whitehaven Advertiser* (Whitehaven, England), 12 December 1780.

⁵² Maycock, *Susanna Blamire*, 72.

her cousin and future husband John Christian and was attracting the attention of Lord Maitland, later the 8th Earl of Lauderdale, Sir Michael Fleming Bt, and Lord Craunstoun.⁵³ According to Christopher Maycock, the Cumbrian dialect poet Susanna Blamire had Miss Curwen's various suitors in mind when she wrote her poem "I've Gotten a Rock, I've Gotten a Reel" which included the lines:

Now lassies, I hae found it out,
What men make a' this phrase about;
For when they praise your blinking ee,
'Tis certain that your gowd they see.⁵⁴

Maycock's assumption seems reasonable as Blamire acted as a companion for her first cousin Isabella during this period. Two years later after an application to Lord Chancellor Thurlow for permission to marry had been refused, the much sought-after heiress eloped with John Christian and they married at the Gaelic chapel in Edinburgh on 9 October 1782.⁵⁵

Susanna Blamire's poems have been described as "the first of their kind in Cumbrian dialect."⁵⁶ Charlotte Lowes must have been familiar with Blamire, later known as the "Muse of Cumberland" because of her friend "The Bard of Cumberland" Robert Anderson's interest in dialect verse.⁵⁷ Several of Blamire's poems were turned into songs during her lifetime which the actress is likely to have performed.⁵⁸ Lowes mentions local contemporary songs on two occasions in her memoir and both examples are highly localised. The time she first "chaunted" the weaver

⁵³ Ibid, 73.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 74.

⁵⁶ E. R. Denwood and M. Denwood, "Susanna Blamire 1747-94," *The Journal of the Lakeland Dialect Society* 9 (1947). See also Joseph Wright, ed., *The English Dialect Dictionary* (London: Oxford University Press, 1898-1905) which uses many of her words as examples of Cumberland dialect.

⁵⁷ For analysis of folk song in Cumbria which pays particular attention to Susanna Blamire and Robert Anderson see Susan Margaret Allan, "Folk Song in Cumbria: A Distinctive Regional Repertoire?" (PhD diss, University of Lancaster, 2016).

⁵⁸ Paula R. Feldman, "Susanna Blamire (1747-1794)," in *British Women Poets of the Romantic Era: An Anthology*, ed. Paula R. Feldman (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 106.

poet Robert Tannahill's "Jessy the flower o' Dunblane" was at the town of Dunblane.⁵⁹ She also recalls when "a new song" called "Mary the beauty of Buttermere" was performed by Miss Longstaff.⁶⁰ An inn-keeper's daughter from Buttermere, Cumberland called Mary Robinson had been tricked by John Hatfield into a bigamous marriage. Hatfield was later arrested for forgery and hanged at Carlisle in 1803.⁶¹ The song proved to be "attractive to a degree unprecedented" because it had occurred "in the immediate neighbourhood" and had filled "every paper in the kingdom."⁶²

In terms of Pythian-Adams' notion of cultural provinces, Blamire's direction of interest pointed north to Scotland and the Solway Firth. She was born a borderer to an English father and Scottish mother whose family name comes from the lost village of Le Blamyre in the Debatable Lands. She was as comfortable writing in Cumberland or in Lowland-Scots dialect and her capacity to travel with ease across the border linguistically is suggestive of the region's shared traditions and tendencies. Lowes spent much of her career performing in this borderland area, acting in temporary fit-up theatres and singing her friend Anderson's songs in villages and towns all across the northern border area between England and Scotland. In her record she counters popular misconceptions about areas where she performed by remarking on the civility of the occupants of the more marginalised places including the Debatable Lands. When performing in the Newcastleton area for a month, she notes her own surprise that "here we found that the inhabitants of Bewcastle were quite the reverse of what they had been represented to us: so far from being rude, they were civil to a degree and hospitable in the extreme."⁶³

⁵⁹ Frances Marshall, *The Memoirs*, 53.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 49.

⁶¹ For consideration of this as a media event and its local impact on Wordsworth and others in the region see Donald H. Reiman, "The Beauty of Buttermere as Fact and Romantic Symbol," *Criticism* 26, no. 2 (Spring 1984): 139-170.

⁶² Frances Marshall, *The Memoirs*, 49.

⁶³ Frances Marshall, *The Memoirs*, 96.

Borderlands

Upon the publication of her memoir in 1838, the *Carlisle Journal* noted that Lowes was “an actress, known in every village and hamlet of this County, and who for nearly half a century has contributed a large share to the innocent amusement of our rustic population.”⁶⁴ She supplied a list of many of the villages in which she performed on a northwest circuit with Deans and her family over an eighteen month period in 1803 which included Abbey Holme, Allonby, Askham, Bootle, Bouth, Bowness, Broughton by Coniston, Caldbeck, Cartmel, Dalston, Deane, Eaglesfield, Flookburgh, Greystoke, Hackthorpe, Harrington, Hawkshead, Heskett, Ireby, Milnthorp, Morland, Newton, Orton, Plumbland, Ravenglass, Sebergham, Shap and Warcop.⁶⁵ The fact that strolling companies managed to survive by performing in what might appear today to be such unlikely places is because the population was more thickly spread across the regions in this period, as Angus McInnes pointed out in an exchange with Peter Borsay regarding his urban renaissance thesis which McInnes argued failed to take into account the prevalence of country towns.⁶⁶ People also went to considerable trouble to attend performances in the locations that Lowes visited. One December in the mountains of Ettrick Forest, despite rain, hail and thunder, Lowes recalls that inhabitants who were scattered over a wide district travelled “over mountains and through floods to see scenes from *The Castle Spectre*, and the wonderful phantasmagoria, which tended to increase the terror occasioned by the flashes of lightening and the loud peals of thunder, the effect of which upon some was indeed awful.”⁶⁷ Deans had acquired his “optical apparatus” which was then “new and wonderfully attractive” from London which suggests that communication infrastructure and networks of traffic were well-established between the metropolis and Kincardine where the company had been

⁶⁴ *Carlisle Journal* (Carlisle, England), 21 April 1838.

⁶⁵ Frances Marshall, *The Memoirs*, 69-71.

⁶⁶ Angus McInnes, “The Emergence of a Leisure Town: Or an Urban Renaissance?: Reply,” *Past and Present*, 126 (1990), 200.

⁶⁷ Frances Marshall, *The Memoirs*, 73.

performing when he ordered his magic lantern.⁶⁸ While exemplifying the quick diffusion of the new technology that had recently been popularised in London by the Parisian showman, Paul de Philipstal and his partner Madame Tussaud, these gothic ghost shows also suggest that the fashion for more spectacular entertainment had extended deep into rural communities by the beginning of the new century.⁶⁹ The phantasmagoria proved to be popular and at Carnwath the company “gave an entertainment with their optical exhibition, that terrifically astonished.”⁷⁰ Also at Lanark they added “to their entertainments their magical illusions which gave great satisfaction.”⁷¹ This may appear to support David Worrall’s argument in *The Politics of Romantic Theatricality* that in this period provincial theatre developed a “separate public sphere of drama” which was essentially “popular or plebeian” and “cut off from the heritage of English spoken drama.”⁷² However, it should be noted that Lowes and her various companies also performed “old sterling plays” by Rowe, Farquhar, Centlivre,⁷³ Thomas Southerne,⁷⁴ and Moliere’s *The Mock Doctor*⁷⁵ plus many popular local favourites including Colman’s *Battle of Hexham*⁷⁶ and John Home’s *Douglas*.⁷⁷ As Marshall notes: “The North was ... not the cultural desert which is sometimes implied by southern actors and writers.”⁷⁸ Lowes provided local communities with performances of old classics and fashionable modern material, thereby bringing “the old plays and the new away from the cramped quarters of London’s theatrical monopoly into the furthest corner of the provinces.”⁷⁹ Other plays

⁶⁸ Ibid, 63. For eighteenth-century ghost shows and optical illusions see Terry Castle, “Phantasmagoria: Spectral Technology and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie,” *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 1 (Autumn, 1988): 26-61.

⁶⁹ Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978), 217-20.

⁷⁰ Frances Marshall, *The Memoirs*, 64.

⁷¹ Ibid, 66.

⁷² David Worrall, *The Politics of Romantic Theatricality, 1787-1832: The Road to the Stage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 2.

⁷³ Frances Marshall, *The Memoirs*, 45.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 30.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 93.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 29, 31.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 50, 60, 69, 72.

⁷⁸ Ibid, viii.

⁷⁹ Thaler, *Strolling Players*, 243-44.

performed include Shakespeare's *Richard the Third*,⁸⁰ *Romeo and Juliet*⁸¹ and Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Henry the Eighth*,⁸² Joseph Addison's *Cato, a Tragedy* (1712),⁸³ Theobald's *Orestes* (1731),⁸⁴ George Lillo's domestic tragedy *The London Merchant* (1731),⁸⁵ Charles Coffey's ballad opera *The Devil to Pay: or the Wife Metamorphos'd* (1731)⁸⁶ and Garrick's farce *The Lying Valet* (1741).⁸⁷ More modern material included George Colman the Younger's *The Iron Chest* (1796),⁸⁸ Thomas Morton's *Speed the Plough* (1798),⁸⁹ Elizabeth Inchbald's *Lovers Vows* (1798),⁹⁰ Augustus von Kotzebue's comedy *The Stranger* translated by Benjamin Thompson (1798),⁹¹ John Tobin's comedy, *The Honey Moon* (1805),⁹² and William Barnes Rhodes's burlesque tragic opera, *Bombastes Furioso* (1810)⁹³ as well as fashionable gothic romances including Matthew Lewis' *Castle Spectre* (1797)⁹⁴ and Friedrich Schiller's *The Robbers*, translated by Alexander Fraser (1792).⁹⁵ This relatively humble strolling player's repertoire suggests the important role that she and her family played in the process of diffusion. While Lowes' experiences in villages and the mountains of Ettrick Forest show that she catered to popular and local demand, the cross-section of material that she performed would not look out of place at a Theatre Royal.

The Scottish stroller Deans and the Cumbrian Lowes acted as mediators between the distinct but sometimes overlapping regional cultures in Cumberland and the Scottish Borders. The new plays from the metropolis and older spoken drama were combined with self-produced material that catered to local demand and tradition. Deans dramatised Walter Scott's "Lady of the Lake" with

⁸⁰ Frances Marshall, *The Memoirs*, 83.

⁸¹ Ibid, 79.

⁸² Ibid, 83.

⁸³ Ibid, 70.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 70.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 71, 77.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 70.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 78.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 83.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 50.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 69.

⁹¹ Ibid, 69, 83.

⁹² Ibid, 72.

⁹³ Ibid, 79-80.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 58, 73, 80.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 58, 77.

considerable success.⁹⁶ Their most successful adaptation of a local literary work began at Innerleithen in the Scottish Borders when Deans dramatised “the striking scenes” of James Hogg’s first short novel *The Brownie of Bodsbeck* which is a supernatural tale of transformation and magical shapeshifting. This brought “two or three good nights” and “many good nights afterwards,” as Lowes explains: “the scenes being laid in the immediate neighbourhood, and the manners of the peasantry of that mountain district being described in such a masterly style by the Ettrick Shepherd, that it only required to dress and speak the words to give great effect.”⁹⁷ The success of the dramatisation enabled their company to tour for about a year. She notes that “every where it was popular to a degree” and lists the locations where it was performed including Ancrum, Annan, Bedrule, Borland, Brothwick Brae, Cannobie, Crillion, Denholm, Eckford, Eskdale Moor, Ettrick Forest, Galashiels, Hawick, Hobkirk, Jedburgh, Langholm, Lawder, Lockerbie, Melrose, Minto, Newcastleton, Newstead, St Boswell’s Green, Stowe, Teviot Head, Waterbeck, Westkirk and Yarrow, with return-visits to several of these places.⁹⁸ When the company performed at Moffat in Dumfriesshire she recalled that “on our first night’s performance the anxiety to see the Brownie of Bodsbeck was indeed astonishing” due to the local nature of the piece, as “Bodsbeck is within five miles of Moffat.”⁹⁹ While the local nature of the material acted as an attraction, she believed that the main reason that “Mr Hogg’s Brownie, wrought wonders for us” was because “the tales of the Ettrick Shepherd had been so universally read.”¹⁰⁰ Lowes’ observation serves not only to suggest high literacy levels but also the depth of local interest in the expression of regional culture. Bold and Gilbert note that the estimations for total population in 1790 stand at 1230 for Yarrow and 470 for Ettrick, which suggests the piece must have served a purpose beyond leisurely entertainment in

⁹⁶ Ibid, 95.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 98. For the local oral tradition and analysis of the shepherd poet James Hogg’s *Brownie of Bodsbeck* see Valentina Bold and Suzanne Gilbert, “Hogg, Ettrick, and Oral Tradition,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to James Hogg*, eds. Ian Duncan and Douglas S. Mack (Edinburgh; Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 10-20.

⁹⁸ Frances Marshall, *The Memoirs*, 98.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 99.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 98.

order for it to have sustained a tour which lasted such a long time with repeat visits to these locations.¹⁰¹ Hogg himself might have appreciated the remediation carried out by the players as a theatrical adaptation provided the opportunity for locals to experience his tale of local tradition and folklore in a communal setting. Theatre was social, communal and oral, three important elements to the shepherd poet. Bold and Gilbert stress that Hogg “sought to protect the traditional culture which he believed was under assault in the contemporary drive to modernity.”¹⁰² Hogg came to regret the assistance that he had provided Walter Scott to collect ballads for his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-3). These local songs had been passed down for centuries through traditional oral storytelling sessions at social gatherings which had served to hold the community together. Hogg believed Scott’s printing of them had taken away their power, as: “their arcanum was laid open, and a deadening blow was inflicted on our rural literature and principal enjoyment by the very means adopted for their preservation.”¹⁰³ The fact that Lowes was such a close associate of another significant regional border poet, Robert Anderson, suggests that she and her husband Deans were aware of their role as mediators of this rich local tradition. Alexander Craig Gibson acknowledged Anderson to have been unequalled as a “portrayer of rustic manners - as a relayer of homely incident - as a hander down of ancient customs and of ways of life fast wearing or worn out.”¹⁰⁴ Certainly in the case of Anderson, due to their close relationship, Lowes must have been trusted regarding the dissemination of his material.

The knowledge about the year of successful local performances of Hogg’s first work in prose has only been made possible by Lowes’ brief mention of it in her memoir. Provincial companies adapted a great deal of material for local tastes, but few records of this work survive. Actors like Thomas Meadows in Butler’s company or Stanfield and Cunningham in the Durham

¹⁰¹ Bold and Gilbert, “Hogg, Ettrick,” 11.

¹⁰² Ibid, 14.

¹⁰³ James Hogg, “On the Changes in the Habits, Amusements, and Condition of the Scottish Peasantry,” *Quarterly Journal of Agriculture* 3 (1831-32): 256–263.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Anderson, *Cumberland Ballads, with Autobiography, Notes and Glossary* (Carlisle: G & T Coward, 1893), 19.

company were employed in part to carry out this task. Stanfield's entry in the *Biographia Dramatica* states that he wrote a play called *The Fishermen* when performing for Tate Wilkinson but this was not printed.¹⁰⁵ When working for Booth in the North West, Thomas Holcroft received an extra half-share of the profits per performance for extra work including writing new pieces that were never published.¹⁰⁶ Thomas Meadows' *Thespian Gleanings*, advertised as a "collection of comic recitals, songs, tales ... and comic sketches" performed by the Butler company contains a two-act farce written by Meadows called *Who's to Blame: or, No Fool like an Old One*.¹⁰⁷ This is a rare example of a complete play written by a northern theatre company member which has survived because it was printed. Meadows' book must have been a successful financial venture as its Ulverston publisher, George Ashburner, followed it two years later with another compilation of songs and sketches "selected for their merit or whimsicality" which were "not included in the Thespian Gleanings."¹⁰⁸ This suggests not only that there was a demand among the buying public for this type of theatrical entertainment, as Worrell has noted, but also that there was the locally produced material available to select from.¹⁰⁹ Samuel Butler's brother-in-law, George Jefferson, was also a playwright. Jefferson's published work includes *Variety*, performed on 6 March 1816, and a farce called *The Lady's Dream* which was written for the Richmond theatre.¹¹⁰ The stage directions in *The Lady's Dream* regarding the use of the proscenium door provided the theatre historian Richard Southern with an insight into the period's shifting perceptions regarding the

¹⁰⁵ David Erskine Baker, Isaac Reed and Stephen Jones eds, *Biographia Dramatica: or, a Companion to the Playhouse*, 3 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, T. Payne, G and W. Nicol, Nichols and Son, Scatcherd and Letterman, J. Barker, W. Miller, R.H. Evans, J. Harding, J. Faulder, and Gale and Curtis, 1812), 1:682.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Holcroft, *Memoirs of the Late Thomas Holcroft, Written by Himself, and Continued to the Time of his Death, from his Diary, Notes and Other Papers*, ed. William Hazlitt, 3 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1816), 1:88.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Meadows, *Thespian Gleanings, A Collection of Comic Recitals, Songs, Tales, &c. including a Variety of Comic Sketches*, ed. Thomas Meadows (Ulverston: Ashburner, 1805): 49-84.

¹⁰⁸ George Ashburner, *Ashburner's New Vocal and Poetic Repository; A Collection of Favourite Songs and Poetic Fugitive Pieces* (Ulverston: Ashburner, 1812).

¹⁰⁹ Worrall, *The Politics of Romantic Theatricality*, 2.

¹¹⁰ George Jefferson, *Theatrical Eccentricities* (Huddersfield: Langdale, 1823).

illusion of verisimilitude.¹¹¹ When performing at Ulverston, the American actor Henry Finn, who performed with the Butler company from 1807 to 1810, advertised for subscribers to publish a play called *Splendid Misery* (figure 7).¹¹²

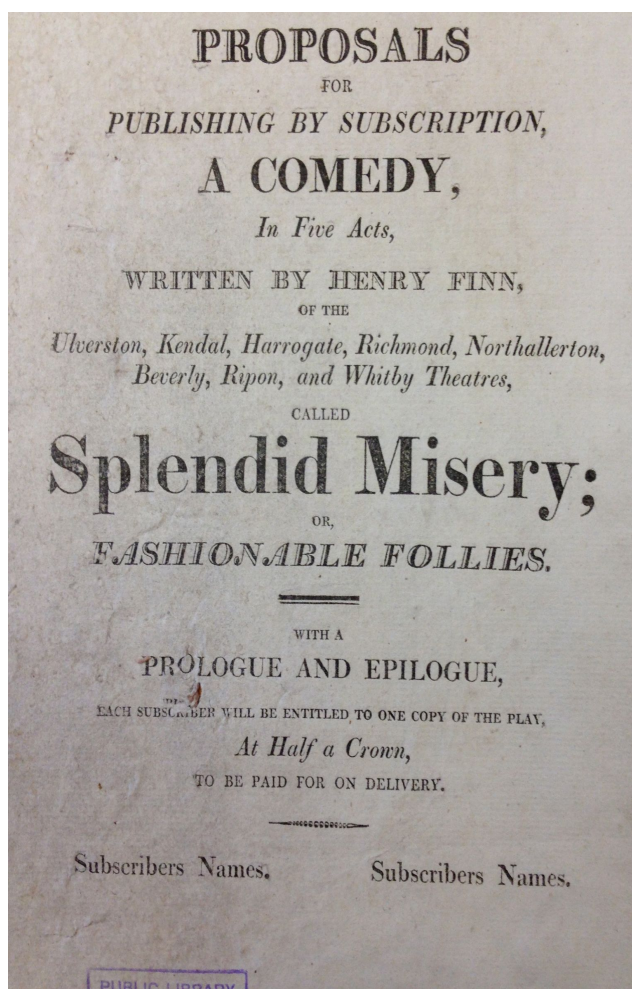


Figure 7. Advertisement for subscribers to Henry Finn's "*Splendid Misery*" (1809).

It seems that Finn was not successful as no record of this play has survived. Henry Finn was "the *tragedy hero* of Butler's Company" from about 1807 until he returned to America in 1810 where he became a popular performer.¹¹³ Finn published three poems in the *Lancaster Gazette* in early 1809.

¹¹¹ Richard Southern, *The Seven Ages of Theatre* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), 246-248.

¹¹² Barrow in Furness, Cumbria. Barrow Archive and Local Study Centre, (BALSC), Soulby Handbills. Ulverston Theatre Miscellaneous, "Splendid Misery" by Henry Finn (actor). ZS.628.

¹¹³ Francis Courtney Wemyss, *Theatrical Biography: or, The Life of an Actor and Manager; interspersed with Sketches, Anecdotes, and Opinions of the Professional Merits of the Most Celebrated Actors and Actresses of our Day* (Glasgow: Griffin, 1848), 224.

One called *The Suppliant* describes a poor woman standing “on a bleak barren heath” with a dying baby in her arms as she appeals for relief while “a keen Northern blast whistled o’er the thatch’d roof” of her isolated moorland cottage.¹¹⁴ The poem is an example of the development in sensibility which saw greater value placed in sentimental eloquence, providing “a retreat from the artificiality of ‘the world’ and its conventions.”¹¹⁵ Brewer notes that sentimentalism lay behind the “cult of rude, wild and authentic nature which put the margins of the nation [...] at the centre of its taste” and focused on a “simpler life, often exemplified in the rustic peasant.”¹¹⁶ The landscape of the Pennines across which the Butler actors walked from Richmond to Ulverston by the Irish Sea evidently provided fashionable sentimental inspiration in much the same manner as the Scottish Highlands and Welsh Hills. These poems were also recited from the stage as indicated by an 1809 handbill printed in Ulverston for Finn’s poem *The Eve of St. Mark* which announces it had been performed at the “Theatres Royal” of Harrogate, Ripon and Ulverston (*figure 8*).¹¹⁷ This bill also exemplifies the post-1788 convention that theatres which had been provided with a 60-day licence by a local magistrate typically advertised themselves as a “Theatre Royal” despite not having received a patent.

¹¹⁴ *The Lancaster Gazette and General Advertiser, for Lancashire, Westmorland, &c.* (Lancaster, England), Saturday, 28 January 1809.

¹¹⁵ Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, 104.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* For consideration of picturesque tourism see Stephen Copley and Peter Garside, *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape and Aesthetics since 1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). For the relationship between town and country in a study of Bristol and surrounding area see Carl, B. Estabrooke, *Urbane and Rustic England: Cultural Ties and Social Spheres in the Provinces 1660–1780* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

¹¹⁷ BALSC, Soulby Handbills. Ulverston Theatre Miscellaneous, “The Eve of St Mark” by Henry Finn (actor). ZS.627.

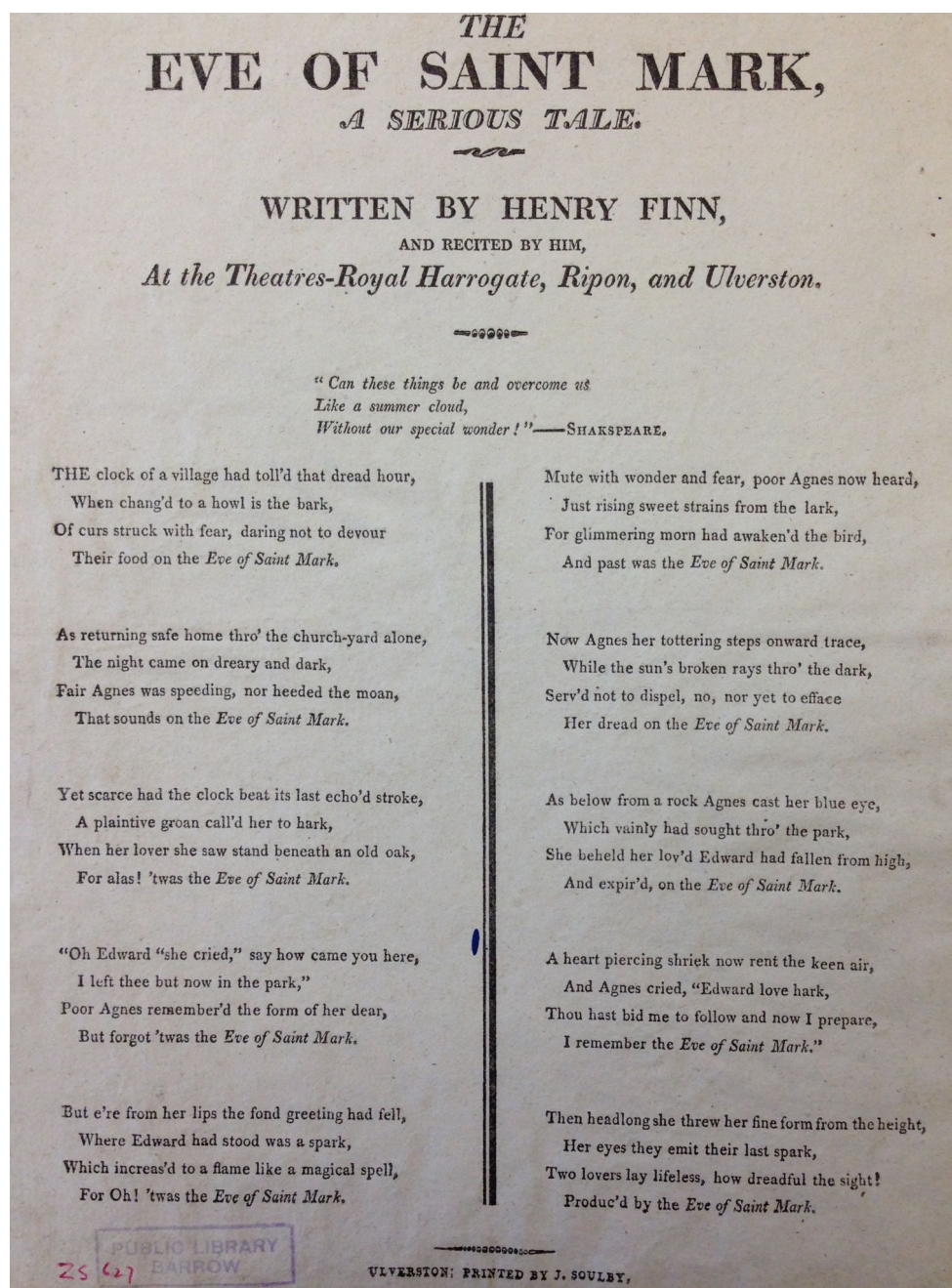


Figure 8. "The Eve of Saint Mark" a poem by actor Henry Finn (1809).

Westmorland traffic

After leaving his friend James Boswell in Glasgow in about 1760, the actor Francis Gentleman recorded that he joined a group of strollers at Carlisle and encountered "the only scene of real theatrical wretchedness, both as to performances and finances" that he ever experienced in his

career.¹¹⁸ This corner of the country was where Lowes spent much of her strolling career. Three quarters of Westmorland was still uncultivated in 1793.¹¹⁹ Heaths and commons often extended for a dozen miles or more with hardly a habitation and only rough or narrow tracks crossed them, so that travellers feared the sudden onset of bad weather or darkness falling. As Porter notes, such regions provided the “craggs, precipices and torrents, windswept ridges, unploughed uplands” that were “the very acme of taste” to writers such as Edmund Burke “precisely because they had not been ruled and refined by the human hand.”¹²⁰ The actors who journeyed through this landscape reveal that journeys could be dangerous and physically demanding. Edward Cape Everard described the reality of travelling in winter from Shrewsbury into this area on his way to take up a position with a Scottish company:

I had to take a chaise for myself and wife till we got to Carlisle; till when, the greatest day’s journey we had made was 27 miles. From Kendal to Shap, and in many other places, on account of a wonderfully deep fall of snow, the roads were impassable, we were compelled to go many miles out of our way, were at Carlisle almost a week before we could get out of it. At length, after a tedious disagreeable, dangerous, and expensive journey, the diligence brought us safe into Glasgow.¹²¹

Travelling by the private post-chaise was the most expensive means of transportation and the costs incurred by Everard amounted to almost twenty-eight pounds. He found himself locked into debt, unable to afford to return to England and was forced to join Ward’s company which was performing further north at Perth.¹²² Everard could expect to be paid his “charges” which was the theatrical term for a travel allowance usually rated at a guinea the hundred miles according to the

¹¹⁸ Francis Gentleman, “A Summary View of the Stage,” in *The Modish Wife, a Comedy* (London, 1775), 13.

¹¹⁹ W. G. Hoskyns, *The Making of the English Landscape* (London: Penguin, 1970), 141.

¹²⁰ Roy Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2000), 314. For the development of a taste for landscape see the first three chapters of Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape, Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain 1760-1800* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1990).

¹²¹ Edward Cape Everard, *Memoirs of an Unfortunate Son of Thespis; being a sketch of the life of Edward Cape Everard, Comedian* (Edinburgh: James Ballantyne and Co, 1818), 125-126.

¹²² Everard, *Son of Thespis*, 130.

“stage itinerant” George Parker.¹²³ However, Sybil Rosenfeld notes “only in the more prosperous companies could coaches be afforded.”¹²⁴ Many provincial players like Lowes travelled by foot.

Everard provides a classic description of a strolling company as he travelled north:

I heard by chance that there was a company of players somewhere about that quarter; this was confirmed the next day; I saw an open wagon, with a woman and two or three children at the top, some old boxes, with what appeared to be scenes and a green curtain; and to confirm and crown the whole, a drum at the head; a picture of a poor strolling company. Presently I saw the manager trudging on.¹²⁵

Some companies like the ones in which Lowes performed did not even own a horse and cart to transport their scenery and costumes; and she made most of her journeys on foot. When performing in Chamberlain’s company, she describes a journey from Stirling to Falkirk “on a very tempestuous day” when she and Deans:

... had to walk ten miles with the children, up to the knees in melting snow, and at every hundred yards Mr Deans had to bear us across swollen brooks; we must have perished at one place, but for the kindness of a traveller from Galashiels, the water taking his horse to the shoulders as he carried us across. It was dark long before our place of destination; we had only one guide which was the volcanic-like blazing of the Carron Iron Works.¹²⁶

Lowes’ memoir is punctuated by passing references to events and places such as the flooding at Yarm, or the Carron Iron Works, the Falkirk foundry that produced the “carronade”, the short-range, short-barrelled naval cannon that would shortly prove to be so effective when mounted on HMS Victory at the Battle of Trafalgar. Specific references, often mentioned in passing, allow her itineraries to be dated. One short line towards the end of her account recalls a tour when her

¹²³ G. Parker, *A View of Society and Manners in High and Low Life; being the Adventures in England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, France, &c. of Mr G. Parker in which is comprised a History of the Stage Itinerant*, 2 vols. (London: Printed for the author, 1781), 1:31.

¹²⁴ Sybil Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players & Drama in the Provinces 1660-1765* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), 20.

¹²⁵ Everard, *Son of Thespis*, 97-98.

¹²⁶ Frances Marshall, *The Memoirs*, 75-76.

company avoided visiting Kendal “for fear of the cholera” which is a reference to the great epidemic of 1832.¹²⁷ Lowes was also affected by the collapse of a prominent northern bank, recording that upon arriving at Staindrop in Durham, her company’s “hopes were blighted by the stopping of Hollingsworth and Mowbray’s bank, which in that part of the country spread a general gloom, and reduced many from wealth to abject poverty.”¹²⁸ This allows the entry to be dated accurately to July 1815 when there was a run on provincial banks and Messrs Mowbray, Hollingsworth and Co., known as the “Durham bank” with branches in Darlington and Thirsk, collapsed.¹²⁹ This was a company with which Lowes must have been familiar as their banking network stretched across the Pennines into Westmorland.

i. Regional credit

John Brewer noted that for much of the eighteenth century, Britain was a collection of regional economies which were linked through the circuit of credit, an interregional network linked to the “capital market and mercantile metropolis of London.”¹³⁰ To illustrate the manner in which regional credit networks extended to national circuits of credit, Brewer drew upon the shopkeeper Abraham Dent of Kirkby Stephen in Westmorland who was: “Inextricably enmeshed in this network of credit, acting, as it were, as the spider at the centre of a complex web.”¹³¹ Brewer lists the variety of goods arriving in this moorland town “perched on the edge of England” as coming from Newcastle, Gateshead, Lancaster, Manchester, Leeds, Wakefield, Halifax, Norwich, Coventry and London.¹³²

¹²⁷ Ibid, 104.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 84.

¹²⁹ Maberley Philips, *A History of Banks, Bankers and Banking, Northumberland and Durham, and North Yorkshire, illustrating the commercial development of the North of England, from 1755 to 1894* (London: Effingham, Wilson & Co, 1894), 77.

¹³⁰ John Brewer, “Commercialization and Politics,” in *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*, eds. Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 207. For northern banking in this period see Maberley Philips, *History of Banks*.

¹³¹ Brewer, “Commercialization and Politics,” 208.

¹³² Ibid, 207.

Of-course, seeing Kirkby Stephen as perched on the edge of the nation entirely depends on your vantage point. If you were the stroller, Charlotte Lowes, you would be more likely to have seen it as a thriving town to visit en-route from Kendal or Keswick in the Lakes to Bishop Auckland and Barnard Castle in Durham. It also lacked a dedicated theatre and was therefore a good potential place to stop and perform. By the 1770s there were turnpike roads linking the town to Kendal and Sedbergh to the south and Brough and Appleby to the north.¹³³ Willan's earlier study of Dent, from which Brewer drew, reveals him to be a valuable source of information concerning wagon trade and road usage in networks expanding from Kendal, the largest town in Westmorland, which acted as a hub for road connections north to Carlisle, south to Lancaster and across the Pennines to West Yorkshire and west to the Furness Peninsula.¹³⁴ Also, if one considers the fact that Stockton-on-Tees acted as a major incoming port for northern European goods which supplied many market towns across the North including Kendal, then Kirkby Stephen must also have experienced a significant amount of traffic and goods passing through it directly from the eastern coast. John Brewster stressed in his history of Stockton written in the mid 1790s that imported materials had been "greatly multiplied" because of the improvements made to the road system such that:

... there are now established wagons in almost every direction from Stockton; and in particular an easy communication is made with Kendal and other parts of Westmoreland by which means they may be supplied with goods from London in a much more expeditious manner than from Lancaster, Whitehaven, or any of their own sea-ports.¹³⁵

Brewer notes that Dent paid for much of his merchandise by bills of exchange and he also used banknotes on the Bank of England and northern country banks. Dent was the agent of the

¹³³ Thomas Stuart Willan, *An Eighteenth-century Shopkeeper, Abraham Dent of Kirkby Stephen* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970), 2.

¹³⁴ Willan, *Abraham Dent*, 31.

¹³⁵ John Brewster, *Parochial History and Antiquities of Stockton-Upon-Tees* (Stockton: R. Christopher, 1796), 69.

Darlington bankers Richardson and Mowbray between October 1780 to April 1783 when he handled at least four hundred of their banknotes.¹³⁶

The name “Richardson and Co” appears on the subscription list of Cawdell’s *Miscellaneous Poems* published in 1785.¹³⁷ This refers to the bankers John Mowbray, Richard Richardson and his sons, one of several Quaker businesses based in Darlington that played an important role in monetising the regional economy.¹³⁸ Known as the English Philadelphia, due to its strong Quaker presence, Darlington might seem an unlikely place for a theatre company to find success, but perhaps Cawdell’s public commitment to charity helped to alleviate concerns.¹³⁹ The fact that the subscription appears under a company name suggests that Cawdell used their banking services. As a business that drew considerable sums of money from the public, theatre companies were vulnerable to robbery so banknotes and lines of credit must have provided the Durham company’s treasurer, Charles Anderson, with greater security as he paid his employees, rented playhouses for the season, hired local carpenters, paid local musicians to augment the band, bought costumes and candles for performances and paid for the transportation of the machinery, scenery, costumes and actors by carriage and ship. The Darlington Quaker James Backhouse, whose banking business was founded in 1774, has the “longest record of any north-country bank” and he later subscribed to Stanfield’s *Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography*.¹⁴⁰ After the banking collapse in 1815 which Lowes refers to, the Backhouse bank took over the premises of Hollingsworth and Mowbray’s bank on High Row in Darlington.¹⁴¹ The Backhouse bank later went into partnership with Barclays in

¹³⁶ Willan, *Abraham Dent*, 123-126.

¹³⁷ James Cawdell, *The Miscellaneous Poems of J. Cawdell, Comedian: Consisting of a Variety of Serious and Comic Prologues, Epilogues, Pastorals, Songs, Descriptions, and Epigrams. Together with Several Sentimental Pieces. To which is annexed an Answer to a late libellous compilation, called the Stockton Jubilee* (Sunderland: Graham, 1785).

¹³⁸ For Richardson and Co., see Philips, *History of Banks*, 353-360.

¹³⁹ See A. E. Wallis, “Darlington, the English Philadelphia,” in “*Friendly*” *Sketches: Essays illustrative of Quakerism*, ed. J.W. Steel (Darlington: Harrison Penney, 1876), 92-96.

¹⁴⁰ Philips, *History of Banks*, 29. James Field Stanfield, *Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography* (Sunderland: Garbutt, 1813).

¹⁴¹ Philips, *History of Banks*, 134.

1896 and their building in Darlington remains the site of Barclays Bank today, therefore providing a surviving trace of the association between eighteenth-century banking and theatre in the region.¹⁴²

ii. Regional print circuits

Brewer writes about Dent as if he is living on the edge of the known world, but Roy McKean Wiles' study of the availability of reading matter in eighteenth-century England led him to state that "the provinces in 1771 did not lag behind the capital city itself" and in terms of access to printed information there was actually very little difference to metropolitan living.¹⁴³ Although written fifty years ago, Wiles' study is valuable as he provides a northern example, asking how difficult it might have been in 1771 for a reader of the *Newcastle Journal* to get a copy of a book or magazine advertised in it. He notes that a potential purchaser could ask the local bookseller to order it from the publisher in London or Edinburgh, but an easier way, whether they lived in the town where the newspaper was published or somewhere in the region served by the paper's news-carriers, would be to order any book which they saw advertised in the paper simply by handing a note to the newsman when he came on his weekly round and the book would be delivered to the door a week or two later along with the newspaper.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, this would have cost no more than purchasing the book over the counter of a London, Edinburgh or Newcastle bookshop, as printers typically had established country routes on which their newsmen travelled and newspapers frequently advertised that books could be had "free of carriage."¹⁴⁵ More recent work on reading culture by William St Clair documents the boom in provincial print, bookselling and circulating libraries from 1774.¹⁴⁶ St

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ R. M. Wiles, "Provincial Culture in Early Georgian England," in *The Triumph of Culture: 18th Century Perspectives*, eds. Paul Fritz and David Williams (Toronto: A.M. Hakkert, 1972) 61.

¹⁴⁴ Wiles, "Provincial Culture," 58.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 59. For a provincial study of print culture and reading in the Midlands see John Money, "Masons, Books, and Bucks," in *Experience and Identity: Birmingham and the West Midlands 1760-1800* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), 121-155.

¹⁴⁶ William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004). A pioneering work on English readership is Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A*

Clair's work shows that readership began to rise rapidly in the late eighteenth century across "all strata of society, whether categorised by income, by occupation, by educational attainment, by geographical location, by age, or by gender."¹⁴⁷ Writing in 2004, he concedes that lacking the "spade work of basic empirical research" the history of reading was at "the stage of astronomy before telescopes, economics before statistics" but nonetheless, it was indisputable that in one single century Great Britain had become a "reading nation."¹⁴⁸ While Wiles and St Clair have countered notions of the cultural remoteness of provincial life by analysing print culture, Susan E. Whyman's study *The Pen and the People* draws on collections of letters held in local record offices to make the case for popular literacy in the regions in which Charlotte Lowes performed.¹⁴⁹

Whyman's examination of correspondence suggests that literacy levels were higher than previously thought and that a broad range of the population often made use of the rhetoric of sensibility in their writing. Her case studies include a bridle-maker, John Fawdington of Asenby in the North Riding of Yorkshire, who travelled between the towns of Cockermouth, Kendal, Whitehaven, Newcastle and Yarm, therefore across the very same landscape at exactly the same time as Lowes. In a storm somewhere in the Dales in 1796 he wrote to his sweetheart, "I imagined the Rocks would have been cleft asunder. I cannot give you any idea of its grandeur & sublimity."¹⁵⁰ While noting that it is likely that he was imitating passages previously read in books, Whyman makes the point that a peddler who sold saddles for a living was writing in the language of sensibility, a form of expression that is normally considered by historians to have been the preserve of the period's elite writers. Many other examples from Whyman's immersion in the local archives

Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800-1900 (Chicago IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1957). On libraries and reading see also, David Allan, *A Nation of Readers: The Lending Library in Georgian England* (London: British Library 2008) and David Allan, *Commonplace Books and Reading in Georgian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For the book trade and networking see James Raven, *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade, 1450-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

¹⁴⁷ William St. Clair, *Reading Nation*, 11.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 10, 9, 13.

¹⁴⁹ Susan E. Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁵⁰ Whyman, *Pen and the People*, 95.

show that the culture of sensibility had been absorbed deeply into provincial culture and she convincingly makes the case for literacy in areas of the North that were previously considered secluded backwaters. This is supported by Lowes' memoir in which she mentions geographically remote places where pride is taken in literacy and a desire for improvement. In the Southern Uplands of Scotland, she records that the miners of the Lead Hills and Wenlock Head "boast of being a literary people, above any in their rank of life, and that because they have an extensive library."¹⁵¹ Also further south, when performing with Deans for the miners of Alston in the North Pennines in the middle of a "very severe storm of snow" they stayed for two months and "received such marks of friendship as made us forget the intensity of the storm" adding with sentiment, "if the weather was cold the hearts of the inhabitants were warm."¹⁵² On this occasion, the strollers produced a local piece called *The Miner's Daughter*, "the name and idea" for which was "borrowed from a religious tract by Miss Forster of Garrigill" the daughter of a local mining engineer Westgarth Forster. This, Lowes records, "pleased wonderfully and procured us two or three very good houses."¹⁵³

Whyman's focus remains firmly fixed on reading and writing and she does not consider the influence of theatre or the impact of strollers like Charlotte Lowes upon her provincial subjects. It could be argued that John Fawdington's choice of language may also have been inspired by words that he had heard spoken in local theatres, as strollers publicised the language of sensibility through plays, like many of the ones previously listed in Lowes' repertoire. Indeed, it was figures like this actress who played a fundamental role in helping to diffuse the rhetoric of sensibility into communities through their performances in fit-up theatres across the region. Strollers acted as role models in speech and diction so that while being entertained at the playhouse, locals also received lessons in language usage, pronunciation and comportment. In addition, as each of the chapters in this thesis demonstrate, while performing their role as cultural brokers and helping to diffuse

¹⁵¹ Frances Marshall, *The Memoirs*, 99.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 96.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 96-97.

sensibility in the region, northern actors also developed local literacy in a very pragmatic sense by providing English lessons in the communities where they performed. Two actors in Strickland's company that performed at Whitby in the severe winter of 1783-4 following the Laki eruption provided schooling for children during their visit as advertised on a playbill for their benefit:

Mr and Mrs KENRICK take this Opportunity to express their grateful Acknowledgments of the Favour conferred on them by the LADIES and GENTLEMEN, who have honor'd them with the Care of their Children; and beg Leave to inform them, they still continue to instruct Youth of both Sexes, at their School in Church-Street; and hope an unremitting Assiduity to forward the Improvement of the Children committed to their Care, will merit the Confidence of the PUBLIC.¹⁵⁴

These examples of traffic, association and pedagogy are forms of mediation that Clifford Siskin and William Warner have stressed in their reconfiguration of Enlightenment and Romantic studies.¹⁵⁵

Strolling competition

Charlotte Lowes' memoir also sheds light on the competition that was taking place among northern minor companies at the start of the Napoleonic Wars, when describing a tour from Keswick in Cumberland, through the eastern border counties and into Northumberland.¹⁵⁶ There appears to have been at least four other strolling companies at work in the area at this time. She and her husband Deans briefly performed with a company managed by King which was moving from Alston northward and which they left at Jedburgh. They then followed a route through the eastern border counties passing through St Boswell's, Selkirk, Galashiels, Melrose, Greenlaw, Coldstream,

¹⁵⁴ Whitby, North Yorkshire, Whitby Museum Archive. *Theatrical Playbills, 1784-1787*. Whitby Theatre Playbill, 29 January 1784.

¹⁵⁵ Clifford Siskin and William Warner, "This Is Enlightenment: An Invitation in the Form of an Argument," in *This Is Enlightenment*, eds. Clifford Siskin and William Warner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 1-33 and Clifford Siskin and William Warner, "If This Is Enlightenment Then What Is Romanticism?" *European Romantic Review* 22, no. 3 (2011): 281-291.

¹⁵⁶ Francis Marshall, *The Memoirs*, 69-74.

Yetholm and Dunse, where they joined Chamberlain's company and spent three weeks in Berwick. There was another strolling company also performing nearby in August 1803, led by two comedians, Smith and Wilson, whose letter to Lord Delaval begging to perform in the long room at William Laidlaw's inn at the village of Ford is a textbook example of the deference exhibited by strollers when appealing to the local authority for permission to perform.¹⁵⁷ After presenting their "most profound respects" they begged his Lordship to "pardon their presumption" as they did "humbly beg leave to solicit" his Lordship's "Sanction and Patronage" which, if they were so "fortunate as to obtain" would leave them with the "strictest sense of Gratitude." Presumably Delaval granted them his permission as he was a supporter of the theatre and surviving playbills show that he patronised Stephen Kemble's Newcastle theatre and Cawdell's Durham company performances at North and South Shields in the 1790s.¹⁵⁸

A letter dated Thursday 16 February 1804 from Stephen Kemble in Newcastle to Stanfield at Alnwick also shows that Stanfield and Graham's company were working in the area and struggling to win the patronage of the Earl of Northumberland.¹⁵⁹ Their company was more successful at Kelso where the diarist John Waldie recorded seeing the company perform *The Rivals* on 3 September 1804 when they attracted the patronage of the Duchess of Roxburgh.¹⁶⁰ Kelso performances took place in the Long Room of Johnstone's Inn which Waldie thought made "a decent theatre."¹⁶¹ Burke argues that "large-scale enterprises were driving out small ones" in an "early industrial revolution in entertainment" during the eighteenth century.¹⁶² However, this does

¹⁵⁷ Woodhorn, Ashington, Northumberland Archives. Delaval Family of Seaton Delaval and Ford, Northumberland. 2/DE/19/4. Letter from travelling comedians regarding performance of comic opera and farce in Ford Village, 23 August 1803.

¹⁵⁸ Newcastle upon Tyne, Tyne and Wear, Newcastle Central Library. *Newcastle Theatre Playbills*. Playbill for Wednesday 2 March 1791, "Othello, By Desire of the Rt Hon. Lord Delaval."

¹⁵⁹ Garrick Club Archive, London. "Original Letters of Dramatic Performers, Collected and Arranged by Charles Britiffe Smith [1850?]" vol. 2, page 94. Letter Stephen Kemble to Stanfield.

¹⁶⁰ UCLA: Library Special Collections (UCLA LSC). F. Burwick ed., "The Journal of John Waldie Theatre Commentaries, 1799-1830" (2008): *Journal 10*, 14 May 1804 – 12 March 1805. Entry for 3 September 1804 (X 171). <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9nd4792d>, accessed 20.2.22.

¹⁶¹ Burwick, "The Journal of John Waldie." *Journal 9*, Entry for 9 August 1804 (IX 80). <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9wh0f968>, accessed 20.2.22.

¹⁶² Peter Burke, *Popular Culture*, 249.

not always seem to have been the case for the northern theatre. Lowes, King, Fraser, Chamberlain and Stanfield and Graham's companies show that even in the early nineteenth century, players were still performing in temporary fitted-up barns, inns and in booths at fairs and races in northern towns.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to develop an understanding of the North from a regional perspective, primarily through the experiences of a female stroller who spent the whole of her acting life performing in the northern counties of England and the Scottish Borders. Identifying the geographical locations where Charlotte Lowes performed allowed for consideration of several local events that impacted life in the region. Lowes' memoir notes the local patrons who supported the companies in which she performed, and the Curwens' patronage was examined to better understand regional preoccupations and the ways in which networks of association developed. Although theatrical performance is by its nature more ephemeral than print culture, this stroller's record also provides rare insight into less-explored regional popular culture and thereby helps to encourage an understanding of the social and pedagogical impact that theatre had on local communities. The record of Lowes' strolling career makes evident the demand for entertainment driven by large numbers of people in hamlets, villages and small towns across the region who did not belong to the middling-sorts, gentry and aristocracy to whom historical attention often tends to be directed. Also, continuing the underlying theme of Irish influence upon eighteenth-century northern theatre, Lowes married an Irish actor at Gretna Green which led to her life on the stage. Now, having considered aspects of the northern theatre from the perspectives of metropolis, town and region, the final chapter in this section focuses on the role that northern performers played in the forging of a sense of nation.

Chapter Four

Performing for the Nation

Introduction

Attention to eighteenth-century metropolitan theatre tends to bring with it a focus upon national identity thereby leading to the neglect of inquiry into the regions and any consideration of how regional centres interacted. However, the previous chapter provided an alternative view, showing how a highly mobile stroller acted as a local cultural broker, bringing new material to the public in more remote corners of the North, thereby helping to integrate locations and reinforce a sense of place and regional identity.

This chapter now considers the idea of nation from the regional perspective and particularly considers the role played by Northern theatre in the forging of national identity during the final decades of the eighteenth-century. Its focus is on the vulnerable northeast coast where sensitivities were heightened by the fear of invasion and attack by sea. Elaborate reconstructions of well-known victories provided a vicarious experience for local theatregoers and appeals to patriotic values through drama, song and speech generated the sense of communal identity that Benedict Anderson famously defined as “*imagined* because the numbers of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”¹ The importance of theatre in the process of nation-building cannot be underestimated when one considers that such immersive experiences were multiplied in hundreds of theatres of all sizes across the nation in which thousands of Britons shared these communal, heightened, patriotic experiences and participated in a celebration of pride, often ending an

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

evening's performance with the collective ritual of singing a patriotic song such as "Rule Britannia" or the hymn to the British Navy "Hearts of Oak". This was an act that was repeated, night after night, week after week, year after year for more than two decades of war with France at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries.² Anderson specifically stressed the importance of the late eighteenth century in the process of the development of the cultural artefact known as "nation-ness" and pointed out that "the twin 'founding fathers' of academic scholarship on nationalism, Hans Kohn and Carleton Hayes argued persuasively for this dating."³ In a rare reference to theatre in *Britons* Linda Colley noted that the first version of what would become the British national anthem was sung in a London theatre in 1745 immediately following the defeat of the crown forces at Prestonpans.⁴ This chapter has been informed by Gillian Russell's *Theatres of War* and aims to test and augment this seminal cultural study with local examples drawn from the northern theatre that have never been considered before.⁵ As well as relying upon material drawn from the Durham company, a set of playbills from a previously unknown company of strollers who appeared for a season in the town of Pickering is also examined in an attempt to establish how the smaller towns not on the circuits of the "high and mighty of the profession" were entertained in the last decade of the eighteenth century when Napoleon's English Army threatened invasion and fears of insurrection led to the suspension of Habeas Corpus.⁶

² For martial representation on the London stage see Terence M. Freeman, *Dramatic Representations of British Soldiers and Sailors on the London Stage, 1660-1800: Britons Strike Home* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1995).

³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 4. n. 7.

⁴ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1701-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 44.

⁵ Gillian Russell, *The Theatres of War: Performance, Politics and Society, 1793-1815* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

⁶ Elbridge Colby, "A Supplement on Strollers," *PMLA* 39 (1924): 645.

“Roseberry-Toppin: or The Prospect of a Summer’s Day”

From his viewpoint in the poem “Roseberry-Toppin: or The Prospect of a Summer’s Day” that opened this study, the North Riding schoolmaster, poet and playwright, Thomas Pierson, indexes the towns, villages, mansions and grand estates that he sees below him and provides the reader with the names of prominent local figures who reside there.⁷ With its synthetic Aristotelian indexing of place, combined with classical heroes, Gods and British martial figures, Pierson’s panoptic local vision serves as a reminder that geography was an important epistemological organising principle of the eighteenth century. This had become so evident by the time of writing a history of Sunderland thirty years later that George Garbutt stated matter-of-factly in his introduction: “The utility of Topographical History is now so generally acknowledged, that a preface seems only necessary in conformity with established custom; the annals of a town being essentially connected with those of the nation of which it forms a part.”⁸ When Pierson composed his poem and contemplated his region, central to his thoughts were peace and trade, and he completed his geographical survey by considering his own birthplace, the town of Stokesley, near Stockton, on the Cleveland plain below. For the first time in the poem, when contemplating his “native *spot*, my home, Asylum sure!” Pierson adopts a moral tone and condemns the growing “luxury and pride” and “sensual riot, *merriment* obscene” which he now witnesses in his “Self-divided Town.”⁹ Having focused on his place of birth, he then makes a direct association between home and nation, stating: “Like Stokesley’s *wealth*, Great Albion’s fame declines, / Her Potence lessens, and her Glory fades.” The rest of the poem conveys his sense of the nation which is entirely expressed in terms of empire and battle.

⁷ Thomas Pierson, *Roseberry-Toppin: or The Prospect of a Summer’s Day: A Descriptive Poem* (Stokesley, 1783).

⁸ George Garbutt, *A Historical and Descriptive View of the Parishes of Monkwearmouth and Bishopwearmouth and the Port and Borough of Sunderland* (Sunderland: Garbutt, 1819), iii.

⁹ Pierson, *Roseberry-Toppin*, v.558-562.

Pierson is writing in the wake of the loss of the American colonies and at first all appears disastrous as he laments, “Her Provinces are lost” and “*Ships are shatter’d, murder’d are her Men*” but he then turns to the nation’s victory at the recent Great Siege of Gibraltar and finds cause to celebrate British courage. This local schoolmaster reveals his own grammar school education as he aligns the Roman empire with an emerging British one, celebrating “prudent Elliot, glorious, *hardy*, brave! / Like Caesar vigilant, like Scipio cool” and he lists the other national heroes, “*gallant* Rodney, *valiant* Hood.” This fusion of contemporary military action in distant lands with classical heroic figures is a rhetoric that was being repeated in local theatres, helping to reinforce the belief in a form of “ethnic chosenness” that Rebecca Langlands has argued was a driving force behind the development of the British nation.¹⁰ This was an emerging identity that took for granted the idea that Britons had an exceptional right to commerce and command, an article of faith that was reinforced nightly in heightened performances at local playhouses all across the region.

Pierson may have seen the Durham company perform *The Siege of Gibraltar* at the Stockton theatre in 1782, the year before his poem was published. A Whitby theatre playbill dated 15 February 1782 announced *The Siege of Gibraltar* as a “musical entertainment (never acted here)” which promised to be a spectacular event including “Several elegant pieces of scenery and machinery, particularly an inside view of the fort and garrison” and “a beautiful prospect of the Great Rock, the Bay, the Town, the Batteries, and Streights of Gibraltar.”¹¹ The enactment aimed to provide a vicarious experience for local theatregoers and the company’s composer William Shield provided original music to help transport them to the scene. It promised to end with “a grand representation of the Spanish men of war and transports brought in by Admiral Rodney’s Fleet. With drums beating, colours flying, &c.”¹²

¹⁰ See Rebecca Langlands, “Britishness or Englishness? The historical problem of national identity in Britain,” *Nations and Nationalism* 5, no. 1 (1999): 53-69.

¹¹ Whitby, North Yorkshire, Whitby Museum Archive (WMA). *Theatrical Playbills, 1779-1783*. Whitby Playbill 15 February 1782.

¹² *Ibid.*

Studies of the northern press based in Newcastle have shown how divisive the American war had been.¹³ Newcastle citizens were asked to sign a petition against war in October 1775 with the opposition led by Thomas Slack's *Newcastle Chronicle*.¹⁴ However, despite his efforts, the *Chronicle*'s editorials failed to encourage the Corporation to vote against the war and the town voted in support of the government's action. No other towns published newspapers in the North East in this period; however, local town histories record that the American war also generated division in Stockton, whose Corporation supported the war. An indication of how local opposition was dealt with came in October 1776 when "effigies of four of the inhabitants of Stockton, who were disaffected to the measures of the administration respecting the American war, were carried through the streets, and burnt in the market place."¹⁵ Lucrative government contracts saw prominent figures in the town greatly profit from the supply of transport ships, such that by the end of the American conflict Stockton had three shipyards in constant employment.¹⁶

In December 1781 an anonymous satire called *The Stockton Jubilee: or Shakespeare in all his Glory: a Choice Pageant for Christmas Holidays* was published.¹⁷ It ridiculed Stockton society and was sarcastically dedicated to the town's Mayor. James Cawdell immediately came to the town's defence with "An answer to a late libellous publication, called the Stockton Jubilee" which he presumably declaimed from the town's stage.¹⁸ It is perhaps not surprising that Cawdell intervened, considering his vested interest in the long-term success of the company which relied upon the town authorities for survival. The attack on the town was written by Joseph Ritson after he

¹³ See James E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism: Non-conformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 341, 364-365, 379.

¹⁴ Bradley, *English Radicalism*, 341.

¹⁵ Thomas Richmond, *The Local Records of Stockton and the Neighbourhood*, (Stockton: William Robinson, 1868), 79.

¹⁶ Richmond, *Local Records of Stockton*, 82.

¹⁷ Anon. [Joseph Ritson], *The Stockton Jubilee: or Shakespeare in all his Glory: A Choice Pageant for Christmas Holidays* (Newcastle, 1781).

¹⁸ James Cawdell, *The Miscellaneous Poems of J. Cawdell, Comedian: Consisting of a Variety of Serious and Comic Prologues, Epilogues, Pastorals, Songs, Descriptions, and Epigrams. Together with Several Sentimental Pieces. To which is annexed an Answer to a late libellous compilation, called the Stockton Jubilee* (Sunderland: Graham, 1785), 153-156.

had moved to London. Enjoying the scandal that his poem caused, he sought out news about the local reaction to it a month after its publication, writing to his friend Wadeson: “I find that a most impudent and malicious rascal has been libelling the all-accomplished inhabitants of Stockton, in a twelfpenny pamphlet.”¹⁹ Ritson continued to maintain his anonymity and ironically his name appeared in the subscription list of Cawdell’s *Miscellaneous Poems* published four years later in which the manager’s “Answer” also appears. The spat between the anonymous Ritson and the publicity-conscious Cawdell, appears to provide support for Kathleen Wilson’s argument that although playhouses may have provided a space for a mixed cross-section of the public, they nevertheless also acted as “bulwarks of the national character and fomenters of those manly, civilised and patriotic manners necessary to English success abroad and stability at home.”²⁰ As later examples show, Cawdell would continue to provide support and promote the interests of the towns where his company performed for the rest of the century.

The Durham Company in the Newcastle Theatre

The Durham company continued to celebrate victory against the Spanish with *The Siege of Gibraltar* and in June 1787 sailed to Newcastle for the race week with their machinery, where they performed it at the Theatre in the Bigg Market. The playbill was printed by their Newcastle associate Samuel Hodgson who had married Sarah, the daughter of Thomas and Ann Slack. The couple were now running the printing business and responsible for the *Newcastle Chronicle*.²¹ Hodgson used capital letters to emphasise the spectacular scenes about to be displayed in the playbill’s announcement of “a most beautiful and transparent Scene representing at one View, the

¹⁹ Joseph Ritson, *The Letters of Joseph Ritson, Esq. Edited Chiefly from Originals in the Possession of his Nephew*, 2 vols. (London: William and Pickering 1833), 1:37.

²⁰ Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2003), 37.

²¹ Newcastle upon Tyne, Tyne and Wear, Newcastle Central Library (NCL). *Newcastle Theatre Playbills*. Theatre Playbill 18 June 1787.

burning of the SPANISH GUN-BOATS, at the SIEGE of GIBRALTAR by the gallant and victorious GENERAL ELLIOT” and this was performed on the company’s first night of performance. This spectacular audio-visual experience provided the conclusion to an “Entire New Pantomime” called *Old England’s Glory* which also promised the Newcastle public “a great variety of Machinery, Tricks, and Deceptions, never before exhibited in public View.”²² It was an ambitious venture, presented “upon a large Scale, and the full Size of the Stage” in which “Gun-Boats are represented as on Fire” and “A Spanish First-rate is seen firing upon an English Boat.” In line with the company’s image of respectable improvement, the public’s sensibility was also respectfully addressed with the inclusion of Sir Roger Curtis, who was “differently and humanely employed in saving the drowning Spaniards from Destruction.” To end this patriotic celebration of martial dominance combined with humane compassion, the public were informed that “Four transparent Portraits, as large as Life” were to be exhibited of “Gen Elliot, Sir Roger Curtis, Admiral Rodney, and Gen. Boyd.” Bates and Cawdell must have invested a considerable amount of money in their visit to Newcastle and evidently thought their celebration of this significant military victory would be popular and profitable. A handwritten note at the bottom of the playbill recorded that £25 was taken for the first evening. *Old England’s Glory* was repeated the following evening when the takings improved to £35, and it was presented for what was advertised as the final time on Friday 22nd at a performance called “by desire of the Stewards of the Races” when the earnings increased to £40. However, it proved so popular that it was also repeated “By Particular Desire” the following Monday. This dramatisation of a major national event is just one example of the many spectacular martial entertainments in which the company invested its energy and finances. The newly produced scenery and stage machinery, when combined with the actors’ performances, sound effects and music must have provided a heightened multi-sensory experience of sound, vision, smell and even taste for the audience to enjoy. It also served as a powerful vicarious experience for the

²² For scenography and the stage experience see Shearer West, “Manufacturing Spectacle,” in *the Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832*, eds. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 287-302.

local public, many of whom would have been deeply affected by war through their own personal experiences. It was a form of entertainment that would become increasingly popular as more members of the public were touched by war over the following decades. Russell has noted that whether volunteering for civil defence, the Army or Navy, putting on uniform became a formative experience for a large proportion of the male population of Britain, one tenth of whom saw some military service during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.²³

Whitby spectacles

The Durham company's re-enactments of important historical victories also included local heroics which served to alleviate the real fear of attack felt by local townsfolk, especially in remote Whitby. At a benefit for the managers on 8 December 1779 the company presented "an exact representation of The Sea Fight off Scarbro" between the American Continental navy officer John Paul Jones in his ship the *Bonhomme* and Captain Pearson of His Majesty's Navy in the *Serapis*. The Battle of Flamborough Head had taken place a little more than two months earlier on 23 September and the company promised to show "the raking fore and aft" of the *Serapis* by the Continental Navy's frigate, the *Alliance*. The piece concluded "with a just resemblance of Paul Jones Ship on Fire." Furthermore, the company promised that "in this piece of Capital Machinery will be introduced a new elegant sea scene painted by Mr Twaits discovering the Victory and Prince George under full sail."²⁴ This was repeated the following week "for the last time" and "with considerable additions" which probably was a reaction to local news, as it included "the escape of five of his [Paul Jones] crew in an open boat to Fyley." There had evidently been complaints about the special effects during the previous performance as a note assured the public that this time "little or no

²³ Russell, *Theatres of War*, 1-2.

²⁴ WMA., *Theatrical Playbills, 1779-1783*. Whitby Theatre Playbill, 8 December 1779.

inconvenience will arise from the smoak [sic].”²⁵ The production of such special effects was summarised in a verse by Stephen Kemble:

Time was I could controul the raging flood,
And stem the fury of the waves – of wood!
Or if I saw the flash fine ladies frightening,
The rosin stop – whence blazed the forked lightning;
Arrest the thunder clap – for oft improper
My stupid scoundrels shook the sheet of copper;
The pelting shower allay with ease,
With – “Zounds, man! pray put down that box of pease.”²⁶

Lightning was provided by throwing powdered rosin at a burning torch.

Cawdell also performed a prologue “spoken by desire of the Whitby Volunteers” that he had written immediately after John Paul Jones appeared off Whitby and threatened to burn the town.²⁷ He starts this piece by presenting a picture of nervous townsfolk living in fear as “Invasion’s now become th’alarming theme, / And all of rapine, blood, and slaughter dream” after which he calls on the town to defend itself, “Then rouse, ye youths, ye sons of Britain arm! / Your safety calls – and danger gives th’alarm” and he ends with a further rallying cry to his local public, “Proceed – associate – to yourselves be true, / And let old English valour blaze in you.”²⁸ Playbills from other northern theatres, such as those managed by Samuel Butler, show similar examples of actors behaving as recruiting sergeants for local volunteer organisations and this must have helped to cement relations between the theatrical companies and their local public. Cawdell particularly styled himself as a martial figure. The publicity for a benefit evening often provides an indication of which social groups associated with an actor, as this provided an opportunity for friends and allies to give them much needed financial help. In his final 1799 season at Darlington, Cawdell was

²⁵ WMA., *Theatrical Playbills, 1779-1783*. Whitby Theatre Playbill, 15 December 1779.

²⁶ S. G. Kemble, *Odes, Lyrical Ballads, and Poems on Various Occasions* (Edinburgh: J. Ballantyne, 1809), 282. For eighteenth-century theatrical special effects see Martin White, ed., *The Roman Actor: A Tragedy: By Philip Massinger* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 192. n. 209.

²⁷ Cawdell, *Miscellaneous Poems*, 55-58.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 58.

supported by the military.²⁹ As well as the frequent military-themed performances advertised by surviving company playbills, particularly from Whitby, Scarborough and Darlington, there are several national newspaper articles which report the patriotic efforts made by Cawdell in the theatres on the circuit.

The same year as John Paul Jones' attack on Whitby, a report appeared in the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* published in London, informing the public about Cawdell's generosity in supporting the American war effort at the theatre during the summer season in the fashionable resort town of Scarborough. It stated that the town's gentlemen had "lately formed themselves into a volunteer company, for the mutual defence of their property" for which a subscription had been opened to clothe and fit them out and that "the manager of the theatre there gave them a free night for the same purpose, which was well received, and brought a brilliant and crowded house."³⁰ The article continued that in the performance of Robert Dodsley's *The Toy Shop* Cawdell in the role of the Master had provided an interesting innovation by adding military content to the farce. It reported he had:

... introduced a new scene and character; the latter, a young volunteer officer, who goes to purchase arms and accoutrements for the design above mentioned: the master's various remarks on the sword when drawn improperly, or used with discretion, were received with repeated bursts of applause, and afforded universal satisfaction: he obtained the general thanks of the audience, and a very handsome present for his trouble.

After the newspaper praised Cawdell for the encouragement he was giving to the respectable British middling-sorts to go out shopping for weapons and uniforms, the article concluded by stating: "We could be happy to see the above example universally followed, as these times of public danger

²⁹ British Library (BL) *A collection of playbills from miscellaneous theatres: Chideock - Deptford 1790-1853 Collection Item*, ([British Isles]: s.n.), 1790-1853). No. 174. Darlington playbill, Cawdell benefit 3 July 1799 By Desire of Major Dive and the rest of the officers of the West Middlesex Regiment. http://access.bl.uk/item/viewer/ark:/81055/vdc_100022589114.0x000002#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=173&xywh=-2334%2C843%2C7890%2C5671, accessed 16.2.21.

³⁰ *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (London), Thursday, 30 September 1779.

require the most strenuous efforts of every Englishman to save his bleeding country from total ruin.” As noted in a previous chapter, Cawdell appears to have been capable of placing favourable news about his company in the national press and it seems most likely that he had encouraged this publicity. However, whether he was behind the story or not, news of his initiative had successfully reached a national readership and must have had an impact on public opinion beyond the region.

A short season in Pickering

Whitby provides a unique opportunity to observe the vicissitudes of a northern town’s theatre, because a local postmaster Richard Rodgers donated his fourteen-volume collection of playbills to the town’s Literary and Philosophical Society, which covers performances from 1779 until 1819.³¹ This includes the period of performances by the Durham company from 1779 to 1791 and then the Butler company’s residence from the winter season of 1793 until 1819. In this collection there are also several playbills for performances by strolling players in nearby towns, such as Staithes and Pickering, which provide rare insights into what theatrical life was like for the many theatregoers in this period who did not have access to a Theatre Royal or a regular stock company, and who depended upon strollers like Charlotte Lowes to perform in the long rooms of inns or temporary structures in one of the hundreds of small towns that made up the nation. The company which performed in the theatre at Pickering in the North Riding of Yorkshire for a season between Monday 16 January and Monday 20 February 1797 is an example of a strolling company, like that managed by Stanfield and Graham, which operated in small towns in the North.³² The thirteen surviving playbills show that there were twelve adult actors in the company, seven of whom were men and five women, plus several of the actors’ children also made appearances. They performed

³¹ Gillian Russell, “‘Announcing each day the performances’: Playbills, Ephemerality, and Romantic Period Media / Theater History,” *Studies in Romanticism* 54, no. 2, *An Illegitimate Legacy: Essays in Romantic Theater History in Memory of Jane Moody* (Summer 2015): 258.

³² WMA., *Pickering & Plough Whitby Playbills 1797*.

on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, which was the normal practice for companies not performing during special occasions such as a race week or a local fair when they might be expected to perform every night of the week. As tickets were only available at the standard price for the pit at two shillings and gallery at one shilling and no tickets for boxes were advertised, this suggests that they were performing in a fit-up room somewhere in the town. The opening playbill promised that a great variety of new pieces would be presented to the “Ladies and Gentlemen of Pickering and its Vicinity” and the bills do present a selection of diverse material.³³ The most popular type of performance was the musical farce with eight performed over the season. This included William Shield’s popular northern-set opera *Rosina: or, Love in a Cottage* and the slavery-themed comic-opera *Inkle and Yarico*, plus several farces by John O’Keeffe. The company also performed four comedies, two other farces and two pantomimes, one of which, *The Death of Captain Cook*, catered to local tastes as Cook came from the nearby village of Marton. The actors also presented historical tragedy with *Alexander the Great: or, The Rival Queens* and a historical three-act play of more local interest *The Battle of Hexham* by George Colman and they closed the season featuring even more local material with Hannah More’s tragedy *Percy, Earl of Northumberland*. The company also performed the popular sentimental tragedy, Edward Moore’s *The Gamester: or, A False Friend* the instructive moral of which was neatly summarised in Garrick’s prologue written for its opening performance:

Ye slaves of passion, and ye dupes of chance,
Wake all your pow’rs from this destructive trance!
Shake all the shackles from this tyrant vice:
Hear other calls than those of cards and dice.³⁴

The play had premiered in 1753 at London’s Drury Lane and was a new type of tragedy which marked a significant development in eighteenth-century drama. In keeping with other works of

³³ WMA., *Pickering & Plough Whitby Playbills 1797*, Pickering Theatre, Monday, 16 January 1797.

³⁴ Cited in Donna T. Andrew, *Aristocratic Vice: The Attack on Duelling, Suicide, Adultery, and Gambling in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 179.

sentimentality, the play shifted attention to a different social class than the aristocracy upon which tragedy had traditionally been based. The protagonist Beverley and the other characters, such as the villain Stukeley who leads him astray, all belong to the “middling” ranks as opposed to the social elite. The company also performed the more recent, fashionable adaptation of Ann Radcliffe’s Gothic novel *Fontainville Forest: or, The Haunted Abbey* by James Boaden. The quantity and range of the material suggests that the local audience had high expectations for their entertainment and that the performers were confident regarding their ability.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the company’s repertoire is the political content with which they chose to launch the season. On the company’s first night they presented *Cato: or, Liberty Triumphant*.³⁵ Joseph Addison’s sentimental tragedy has been described as “arguably the most important political play of the century.”³⁶ This was followed on the second evening of performance with *Louis XVI: or, The Death of the King of France* which was advertised as “an entire new, pathetic, and most interesting historical tragedy, on the recent state of France.”³⁷ Then, having presented the execution of the French King to the Pickering public, the following performance featured the execution of his Queen, with E. J. Eyre’s *The Maid of Normandy: or, The Death of the Queen of France*.³⁸ The British Government had banned both of these plays in licensed theatres as they dealt with the recent political events in France; however, the local magistrate Thomas Hayes Esq. of Aislaby Hall appears to have seen no reason to enforce such a ban.³⁹ Hayes may have attended these performances, as he bespoke George Colman’s *Inkle and Yarico* and Richard Cumberland’s comedy *The Wheel of Fortune* at the beginning of the following week.⁴⁰ The banning of political material from the Theatres Royal is an indication of the potential power that

³⁵ WMA., *Pickering & Plough Whitby Playbills 1797*, Pickering Theatre, 16 January 1797.

³⁶ David O’Shaughnessy, “Civility, Patriotism and Performance: *Cato* and the Irish History Play,” in *Ireland, Enlightenment and the English Stage, 1740-1820*, ed. David O’Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 169.

³⁷ WMA., *Pickering & Plough Whitby Playbills 1797*, Pickering Theatre, 18 January 1797.

³⁸ WMA., *Pickering & Plough Whitby Playbills 1797*, Pickering Theatre, 20 January 1797.

³⁹ For Thomas Hayes see Thomas Langdale, *A Topographical Dictionary of Yorkshire* (Northallerton: J. Langdale, 1809), 2, 84.

⁴⁰ WMA., *Pickering & Plough Whitby Playbills 1797*, Pickering Theatre, 23 January 1797.

drama possessed in this period.⁴¹ Restrictions applying to material that might be considered incendiary had been in place since 1793 and so regional theatres like Pickering were some of the only places where such material could be performed. The more sensational and lurid aspects of the drama were also emphasised in the publicity and performance, as the playbill for *Louis XVI* announced that there would be a scene of the “King conducted to the Place of Execution with a View of the Scaffold, Guillotine, Execution, &c.” Should there be any doubt about the players’ political intentions, a long paragraph further informed the public that the tragedy presented the “melancholy events” that happened in January 1793 in France when its “devoted Monarch ... fell a savage sacrifice to the sanguinary decrees of a horde of democratic Regicides.” It also noted that the play had been written with “the greatest accuracy” so that the “tyrannical principles” of Robespierre and Marat were “most beautifully contrasted by the Duty and Loyalty” of Kersaint, a Naval Commander, and Cleri, the King’s faithful Valet. Finally, four lines of verse made absolutely clear the company’s intention with a rousing national call to arms to resist the forces of insurrection:

Ye British Sons, by France Example take,
Nor quit the Substance for the Shadow’s sake:
Avoid the Snares of disaffected Elves
Protect your King, your Country and yourselves.

Evidently these strollers were capable of presenting powerful political material to their Pickering patrons, many of whom must have been anxious about possible French invasion on the East coast during this time of war with France. The play was popular among the locals as it was repeated the following week with a note stating: “By Desire as many people were disappointed on Monday last of seeing the under-mentioned play” which suggests it had sold out.⁴²

⁴¹ For a discussion of the rejection of this play and the counterintuitive stance of conservatives regarding anti-revolutionary drama see Jeffrey N. Cox, “Ideology and Genre,” in *British Romantic Drama: Historical and Critical Essays*, eds. Terence Allan Hoagwood, Daniel P. Watkins (Madison N.J: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998), 104-110.

⁴² WMA., *Pickering & Plough Whitby Playbills 1797*, Pickering Theatre, 30 January 1797.

The third evening's political fair, *The Maid of Normandy*, was first performed in Dublin in 1794, and had also been denied a licence by the English censor due to its reference to God and events in France.⁴³ Again the company's playbill provided a long paragraph explaining "The noble motives which prompted Charlotte Corday (the Maid of Normandy), to destroy that detestable wretch, Marat, hoping thereby to rescue France from one of the worst of tyrants." According to the Pickering strollers, the "useful lesson" to be learned from this play was, "That restricted Monarchy, while it is a necessary barrier against the madness of the people, at the same time preserves entire the chartered Liberties of the meanest subjects." Again, to allay any confusion or magisterial intervention, four lines of verse provided the assurance that the performance was fully supportive of King and country:

Let all Republicans with envy see
A monarch happy, and his people free:
May peace expand her olive-branching wings,
And freedom smile beneath the reign of Kings.

In terms of who was in the audience, there are only two clues. As previously mentioned, the second week commenced with a performance demanded by the local magistrate, Thomas Hayes, who was a gentleman interested in polite enlightened pursuits, which is suggested by the fact that in this period he employed the Pickering-born artist Francis Nicholson to paint the ceiling of his summer house at Aislaby Hall.⁴⁴ Nicholson has been described as the "father of the British school of painting in watercolours."⁴⁵ The following performance was called by desire of another local gentleman, Leonard Belt Esq., who chose two relatively recent comic pieces, Hannah Cowley's *More Ways*

⁴³ For an analysis of *The Maid of Normandy* see Wendy C. Nielsen, "Edmund Eyre's 'The Maid of Normandy'; or, Charlotte Corday in Anglo-Irish Docudrama," *Comparative Drama* 40, no. 2 (Summer 2006):169-190.

⁴⁴ Simon Fenwick, "Nicholson, Francis (1753–1844), watercolour painter artist and drawing-master," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online ed., 23 Sep. 2004, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20132>, accessed 15 Feb. 2022.

⁴⁵ *The Art Union, Monthly Journal of the Fine Arts, and the Arts Decorative and Ornamental*, vol. 6. (London: Palmer and Clayton, 1844), 87.

than *One: or, A new Way to catch Hearts* (1784) and William Macready's *The Irishman in London: or, The Happy African* (1792).⁴⁶

The actor Fenton appears to have satisfied the company's literary requirements. For his benefit he wrote and delivered a eulogy on the character of "the gallant" Sir Edward Pellew.⁴⁷ The timing of this piece makes it likely to have been prompted by a remarkable naval action which had taken place off the coast of Brittany just the previous month on 13 and 14 January. Pellew, the commander of the frigate, *HMS Indefatigable*, had attacked and with support from another frigate, *HMS Amazon*, outmanoeuvred and defeated the *Droits de l'Homme*, a much larger and more heavily gunned French ship of the line. The action, which lasted fifteen hours and was carried out during a severe storm, was described by the First Lord of the Admiralty Lord Spencer as "an exploit which has not I believe ever before graced our naval annals."⁴⁸ As well as an example of popular expression about the "man thought by his contemporaries to be the greatest sea officer of his time" this is a further indication of the unifying role that strollers played in this period of war as Fenton's eulogy was followed by a rousing recital of *Rule Britannia* by the company.⁴⁹

This record of an obscure company of strollers performing in a small North Riding town to an unknown number of townsfolk and local country dwellers can only act as an indicator of the way that martial victory and the nation's military leaders were celebrated throughout the nation. Nonetheless, it does provide a suggestion of what is likely to have been replicated in theatres in many of the nation's other towns in this period. The company was evidently performing a patriotic role in this part of the country, which was particularly sensitive to fears of invasion and attack. It is also just one surviving example of the thirst for political content which must have been replicated in

⁴⁶ WMA., *Pickering & Plough Whitby Playbills 1797*, Pickering Theatre, 25 January 1797. There is a record of Leonard Belt Esq.'s death aged 63 at Pickering in July 1814 in *The Gentleman's Magazine* 84 (1814), 91.

⁴⁷ Whitby Museum, *Pickering & Plough Whitby Playbills 1797*, Pickering Theatre February 1797. Benefit of Mr & Mrs Tannett & Mrs Fletcher.

⁴⁸ Christopher D. Hall, "Pellew, Edward, first Viscount Exmouth (1757–1833), naval officer," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online ed., 23 Sep. 2004, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21808>, accessed 15 Feb. 2022.

⁴⁹ Stephen Taylor, *Commander. The Life and Exploits of Britain's Greatest Frigate Captain* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013), 14.

similar small-town theatres and villages across the nation by companies of actors about which, like at Pickering, much more remains to be discovered.

This appears to be the only record of the company's activity, but many of the actors were local performers. Five of the cast, Mr and Mrs Tannett, Mr and Mrs Fenton and Mr Hodgson joined Stanfield and Graham's company for a period in 1799 and 1800. These actors, along with Stanfield, Graham and Mrs O'Keeffe, also provided support to the manager Stephen Kemble during a week-long visit to the Newcastle Theatre Royal by George Frederick Cooke in 1801. Cooke described them as "a motley groupe" in his memoirs, adding that "Mr K's company was at Scarborough; so with himself, one lady, and one gentleman, the remainder were a small undisciplined set in the neighbourhood, engaged for the time."⁵⁰ The "lady" and "gentleman" referred to by Cooke must mean Mary O'Keeffe and George Graham who were both advertised on the opening night playbill as "from the Theatre Royal Dublin."⁵¹ A surviving playbill shows that two of the Pickering company, Mr and Mrs Tannett, performed in the Durham company on the second night of subscription at Whitby in 1786, shortly after O'Keeffe and Graham had joined the company when Tannett sang "The Topsails Shiver in the Wind."⁵² Tannett must have had a good voice as he often sang in the interludes and Mrs Tannett danced hornpipes. It is impossible to know whether these actors deserved to be described as a "motley groupe" by Cooke, who was himself a provincial performer from Northumberland who found success as a tragedian in the metropolis after spending decades performing in the provinces. At least through examining these few playbills, what can be understood for certain is the quantity and range of material that these particular strollers were presenting to a local public in this period. This ephemera is an extremely rare surviving example of popular culture, providing valuable insight into the kind of theatrical experience taking place for a great number of the population in similar towns across the nation during this formative period of the

⁵⁰ George Frederick Cooke, *Memoirs of the Life of George Frederick Cooke, Esq.*, ed. William Dunlap, 2 vols. (New York: Longworth, 1813), 1:189.

⁵¹ NCL., *Newcastle Theatre Royal Playbills*, Monday 7 September 1801.

⁵² WMA., *Theatrical Playbills, 1784-1787*. Whitby Theatre Playbill, Wednesday, 15 March 1786.

modern British nation. As we have already seen through the experience of the stroller Charlotte Lowes, the public in these venues expected to be entertained by up-to-date fashionable material as well as old favourites and the strollers also clearly made an effort to provide locally themed material to keep their public entertained.

War and respectability

During the times of increased fear of invasion, 1793-1795 and 1803-1806, theatres were regularly filled with militia members, volunteers, full time professional soldiers and mariners, who witnessed the phantasmagorias and gothic dramas that reflected those fears. These heightened emotions were felt most intensely along the ninety miles of coastline where Cawdell's company performed. Particularly during the 1790s, a combination of war with France and the fear of local insurrection heightened tensions to such a pitch that audience members frequently called for public displays of loyalty to the crown which carried with it the potential for riot. Following Pitt's Gagging Acts, which restricted public gatherings to those sanctioned by local authorities, John Barrell has stated that the theatre "was the only place of public resort, with the arguable exceptions of the law courts and Parliament itself, where confrontations between loyalists and reformers could be staged in public."⁵³ Tate Wilkinson had seen such public activity in his theatres which he commented on with disdain:

Were our sovereign to witness the behaviour of such *gentlemen*, as when sick from a load of wine discharging it in a stage-box – jumping on the stage, because a bet has been laid over a bottle that it should be done, and singing 'God save the King' during the *time* of a *principal scene* of a play, thereby interrupting the performance, and insulting the sober part of the

⁵³ John Barrell, " 'An Entire Change of Performances?' The Politicisation of Theatre and the Theatricalisation of Politics in the mid 1790s," *Lumen* 17 (1998), 12.

audience ... I am fully persuaded that his majesty would not thank such heroes for their *compliment*.⁵⁴

Russell stresses that increasingly the theatre became a “kind of battlefield, as the officer class sought to assert its presence.”⁵⁵ The intimidating call for the public display of loyalty was a means for military officers to assert their power in public and in such instances, the audience was on show too and became the spectacle. There is a report of such a confrontation in one of Cawdell’s theatres which appeared in the *Oracle and Public Advertiser*.⁵⁶ Described as a “curious action for an assault” which had recently been tried at the Durham assizes, this action had arisen from what was reported as “a circumstance that has caused frequent disturbances at public places” and the newspaper provided the details of the event:

The band in the orchestra of the Durham Theatre were playing the air of “God save the King,” and part of the audience stood up with their hats off. Mr Smith did not accompany them in this obeisance to the *notes of a fiddle*. Major Skelly, after repeatedly urging Mr S to take off his hat, at length forcibly pulled it from his head, and threw it upon the stage.

Although audience members were put under intense pressure to make public expressions of allegiance to the King and Country, evidently there were those prepared to go to significant lengths to resist this intimidation, as the report concluded: “Mr S in resentment of this rude and improper behaviour, brought an action against the Major for damages, which were awarded him with costs of suit.”⁵⁷ Apparently in Durham town the authorities were prepared to recognise and act against overt actions of coercion and violence.

⁵⁴ Tate Wilkinson, *The Wandering Patentee: A History of the Yorkshire Theatres*, 4 vols. (York: Wilson, Spence, and Mawman, 1795), 4:211.

⁵⁵ Russell, *Theatres of War*, 94.

⁵⁶ *Oracle and Public Advertiser* (London), Wednesday, 26 August 1795.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*.

Kathleen Wilson has argued that the highly militarised forces of competition and loss related to empire “valorized an aggressive masculinity as a touchstone of Englishness.”⁵⁸ James Cawdell dressed in military costume marching across his circuit’s stages conforms to Wilson’s argument, as he continued to insert new content into old material in order to make patriotic appeals from the stage which were not only for defensive, local recruitment purposes, but also supported imperial acquisition through violent military means. In August 1790, the *Public Advertiser* printed in full the remarkable address that he gave in the character of Captain Meadows in Frederick Pilon’s *The Deaf Lover* on the evening that the Marchioness of Stafford patronised the Scarborough playhouse.⁵⁹ The theatre must have been well attended for such a fashionable evening as the Scottish aristocrat, Susanna Leveson Gower, Marchioness of Stafford had been a woman of the bedchamber to Princess Augusta and was an extremely influential figure renowned for her dedication to social politics and patronage. Her husband Granville Leveson-Gower, the first marquess of Stafford was at that moment the Lord Privy Seal. An idea of the fashionable nature of the Scarborough season is suggested by a *Morning Chronicle* article from three years later under the title “Arrivals at Scarborough., Sept. 13” which printed a hierarchical list of those who had come for the season.⁶⁰ This started with the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Marquis and Marchioness of Stafford, the Earl of Stair, the Dowager Countesses of Granard, Cunyngham and Mexborough, Lord and Lady Grey De Wilton, Lords Dungannon, Belgrave, Northland, Hinchinbroke, the Bishops of Peterborough and Dublin, Lady Crauford, numerous more Lords and Ladies, the Dean of York, General Hale and then the list continued with lesser gentry. It is an indication of how crucial public visibility and the display of prestige was in this period, and the role that the press played in its promotion. The article also noted the popularity of the resort, stating that “the influx of company this season has been so

⁵⁸ Kathleen Wilson, “The Good, the Bad, and the Impotent: Imperialism and the Politics of Identity in Georgian England,” in Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (eds.), *The Consumption of Culture 1600-1800: Image, Object, Text* (London: Routledge, 1995), 238. For a more recent consideration of militaristic and masculinist expression with regard to national identity see Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race*, 36-43.

⁵⁹ *Public Advertiser* (London), Monday, 6 September 1790.

⁶⁰ *Morning Chronicle* (London), Wednesday, 18 September 1793.

great, that lodgings have been unusually scarce” however the town was developing its infrastructure to cope with demand as “from the great increase of new buildings, it might have been thought few would have had much difficulty in obtaining them.” The theatre was directly associated with the town’s advancement in this display of polite sociability and “urban renaissance” as the report concluded with a specific reference to the company, “Donner’s rooms have been crowded; and Cawdell, the Manager of the Theatre, has reaped an abundant harvest.”

“A play at Scarborough would be a bore without Mr Cawdell,” Tate Wilkinson stated of his rival, noting that in dry comedy he had “few competitors on any stage.”⁶¹ *The Deaf Lover* is a popular farce in which the character Meadows, which was played by Cawdell, pretends to be old and deaf in order to enter the house of the young woman that he loves with the aim of preventing her uncle’s plan of marrying her off to another man. This comedy of romance and mistaken identity suited the Durham company star, about whom Wilkinson added, “Besides his general utility he is a great favourite with the ladies.”⁶² However, Cawdell’s remarkable inclusion of a violent call to arms during this bespoke performance which was published in a national newspaper is indicative of the role that the theatre was increasingly playing in not only encouraging patriotism but also in extending imperial interests in far-flung parts of the world.

Cawdell’s address begins by identifying the nation as a sleeping lion that he intends to awaken. He appeals to his listeners to “rise, ye Britons – from your slumbers rise” because the “*Flag’s* insulted” and the time had come to “Protect your honour, and defend your King.” The enemy was Spain and Cawdell frames the insult made to the nation’s pride as “your *Trade’s* abus’d” setting the conflict in clear economic terms. As his imaginary British lion emerges from its den “with fangs expanded and with teeth display’d” Cawdell then launches into an aggressive call to plunder which is notable for its geographic reach:

⁶¹ Wilkinson *Wandering Patentee*, 1:305.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Go sack his cities, and his towns despoil,
And make the *Monarch* on the *Man* recoil:
Carry your arms to MEXICO's proud coast,
The *Native's* bondage and the *Victor's* boast:
Explore the Golden Mines of rich *Peru*,
And reap those spoils which are to valor due.

He justifies this call for Britons to violently seize whatever they dare by identifying the British nation as an enemy of tyranny, calling for Spanish slaves to be freed from bondage so they might be given “*that* which you yourselves enjoy” thus implying that liberty is a state of being, naturally enjoyed by all Britons, and a condition to which all nations should aspire.

This language relating to liberty and slavery was frequently employed by actors in the playhouse. It had often been associated with radicals and reformers, particularly in the era of the Wilkes agitation, but the powerful trope was highly malleable. As Cawdell's call to arms reveals, the ancient national cry for liberty could also be employed in the promotion of commercial and violent militaristic interests. He concludes the piece by calling for the “poor vassals” to be set free in order to wreak havoc on their former captors: “Tell them to hunt their conquerors from their shore, /As CORTEZ' blood-hounds hunted them before.”⁶³ In her study of the theatre's influence in helping to secure the eighteenth-century bourgeois hegemony that led to the contemporary “dominant capitalist order” Angie Sandhu asks who it was that “was to be entrusted with the task of overseeing Britain's domestic and colonial interests and in what manner should this be undertaken?”⁶⁴ Cawdell was evidently considered to be a safe pair of hands. This brazen and bloodthirsty public call to violence and plunder was obviously perfectly acceptable material as it was expressed at a fashionable lady's bespoke evening in a respectable theatre attended by the aristocracy, and it was then published in a national newspaper. Such material acted to reinforce the identification of the British empire with commerce and liberty while simultaneously promoting the

⁶³ *Public Advertiser* (London, England), Monday, 6 September 1790.

⁶⁴ Angie Sandhu, “Enlightenment, Exclusion and the Publics of the Georgian Theatre,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre 1737-1832*, eds. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 13.

idea of British exceptionalism.⁶⁵ However, while the language of commerce used by Cawdell may have been purposefully aimed to appeal to his audience's sensibilities at Scarborough, this would not necessarily have received the same reception at his theatres at North Shields, Sunderland or even nearby Whitby, where playbills frequently advertised the presence of impressment.⁶⁶

North Shields Theatre: Playing to a mixed assembly

The playbill publicising Mr and Mrs Emery's benefit at the North Shields theatre in December 1781 gives an indication that the company's performances appealed to people from all walks of life and not just the wealthier members of the town, as at the top of the bill was printed that on play days: "Captain Bover and Lieut. Oakes of the Press Gang had given their word of honour that no seaman would be interrupted by them from 4 pm until 12 pm."⁶⁷ The assurance to mariners that when attending the theatre they were safe from impressment was repeated on company playbills for other coastal theatres including those at Whitby and Sunderland.⁶⁸ Captain John Bover's press gang was so notorious that a song was named after him which was published in *Northumbrian Minstrelsy*:

Where hes t'been, ma canny hinny,
Where hes t'been, ma winsome man?
Aa've been t'the Nor'ard
Cruisin' back and for'ard,
Aa've been t'the Nor'ard
Cruisin' sair and lang;
But daurna' come ashore
For Bover and his gang.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ For representation of imperial governance and ethnographic spectacle on the London stage see Daniel O'Quinn, "Theatre and Empire," in *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre 1730-1830*, eds. Jane Moody and Daniel O'Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 233-246.

⁶⁶ For literary representations of impressment see Daniel James Ennis, *Enter the Press-Gang: Naval Impressment in Eighteenth-Century British Literature* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002).

⁶⁷ Robert King, *North Shields Theatre* (Gateshead: Northumberland Press, 1948), 18-19.

⁶⁸ See Sunderland theatre playbill for 4 December 1778 reproduced in George Patterson, *Sunderland's First Theatre and Music Hall* (Sunderland: Sunderland Antiquarian Society, 2009), 7.

⁶⁹ Bruce J. Collingwood and John Stokoe, eds., *Northumbrian Minstrelsy. A Collection of the Ballads, Melodies, and Small Pipe Tunes of Northumbria* (Newcastle: Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1882), 125.

A note attached to the song *Captain Bover* reminded the *Northumbrian Minstrelsy* readers that “the press-gang was a fertile theme for local rhymesters” and two other songs about impressment are included in the collection, “Here’s the Tender Coming” and “Liberty for the Sailors.”⁷⁰ Daniel James Ennis has considered the power of such ballads as a subversive form of resistance and asks whether the “*imagined* resistance to the press one sees in representations of the practice provided some with a vocabulary for *actual* resistance.”⁷¹ This not only might have inspired writers to realise resistance but these songs evidently served a social purpose. Ennis’ study considers ballad material in relation to the wide scale mutinies of 1797; however, this song from almost twenty years earlier might be understood to have helped to galvanise solidarity among the working people of the North East. Letters from Captain Bover to the Admiralty reveal that on Tyneside “where common people know one another almost to a man” the strong sense of solidarity was such that he had recommended abandoning their impressment activities altogether.⁷²

In February 1787 the Durham company performed a new pantomime for the first time called *Harlequin Triumphant: or, the Pressgang Outwitted* which suggests a Bakhtinian “carnavalesque” approach to impressment in which the actors celebrated escape from authority with their audience.⁷³ This was evidently popular with the Whitby public as it was repeated on the 20th, 22nd and 24th of February. The playbills also advertised considerable investment in the production with “new music, scenery, machinery and other decorations” suggesting that having gone to such expense, this pantomime is likely to have been repeated along the coast in other theatres.

Another example of these local actors’ subversive treatment of impressment is Stanfield’s popular comic song *Patrick O’Neal: or, The Irishman’s Description of a Man of War* which tells the story of a hapless young Irish lad from Kilkenny who is press-ganged into his majesty’s navy.

⁷⁰ Collingwood and Stokoe, *Northumbrian Minstrelsy*, 126-27.

⁷¹ Ennis, *Enter the Press-Gang*, 171.

⁷² Cited in Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 114.

⁷³ WMA., *Theatrical Playbills, 1784-1787*. Whitby Theatre Playbill, 16 February 1787.

There are two surviving records of Stanfield singing this in coastal theatres. A Whitby theatre playbill records the song was performed on 28 October 1791 during a benefit for Stanfield and his actress wife Mary Hoad, where it is described as “a new comic song by Mr Stanfield.”⁷⁴ The playbill lists the “humourous Adventures and Circumstances” of the song as:

Patrick’s journey from Kilkenny to Dublin: His uproar with the pressgang;
Cramm’d aboard a tender; Voyage from Dublin to Portsmouth; Tumbling
from the side of a ship; Inside of a man of war; The Boatswain; Adventure
with a hammock; Engagement with a French ship; Patrick’s disaster with a
gun; Prize and peace; Banyan day and Saturday night all the week round.

Patrick O’Neal continued to be a popular song for performance in the Durham company theatres as seven years later a Scarborough theatre playbill advertised that Stanfield sang the song “by particular desire” on 25 August 1798.⁷⁵ In a further sign that the song retained its comic appeal, he also sang it twelve years later in December 1810 at the South Shields theatre.⁷⁶ Ironically, his own son Clarkson, who was born in Sunderland in 1793, was himself impressed in 1812 when working as a merchant mariner and consequently served in his majesty’s navy under a pseudonym “Roderick Bland” until he was discharged in 1816.⁷⁷

The song’s popularity was also spread through broadsheets and ballad singers. A personal glimpse into its social impact appeared in a letter written on 25 June 1795 by Stanfield’s friend George W. Meadley in which he tells the actor that he had just heard the song sung by a balladeer in

⁷⁴ Stanfield’s ODNB entry suggests this song was written to celebrate the Glorious First of June 1794, but the Whitby playbill predates this by three years. Pieter van der Merwe, “Stanfield, James Field (1749-1826), actor and author,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online ed., 23 Sep. 2004, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/26236>, accessed 20 Feb. 2022.

⁷⁵ York Minster Special Collections (YMLSC), *Hailstone Collection of Playbills*. SC Playbills Box 18 / 81 Scarborough Theatre Playbill, 25 August 1798.

⁷⁶ British Library (BL). *A collection of playbills from miscellaneous theatres: Skipton - Stirling 1797-1848 Collection Item*, ([British Isles]: s.n., 1792-1852). No. 173. South Shields Theatre Playbill, 28 December 1810.

http://access.bl.uk/item/viewer/ark:/81055/vdc_100022589106.0x000002#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=172&xywh=-1362%2C-1%2C5115%2C3773, accessed 20.2.22.

⁷⁷ Pieter van der Merwe, *The Spectacular Career of Clarkson Stanfield, 1793-1867: Seaman, Scene-Painter, Royal Academician* (Gateshead: Tyne and Wear County Museums, 1979), 42.

a Manchester street.⁷⁸ The liminal quality of the song's "Jonah and the Whale" like subject matter is reinforced in the letter as it was written as Meadley floated up the Humber on a ship bound for the continent and he comically parodied the song in his own description of his nautical circumstances, while expressing his fear of being taken captive by Napoleon's forces.

Eleven verses of *Patrick O'Neal* appeared under Stanfield's name in *The Freemasons' Magazine* in May 1795, where it is described as "An Irish Song to the tune of *Sheela-na-Guire*" which was a popular Irish melody.⁷⁹ In a further indication of the popularity of the song, broadsheets of *Patrick O'Neal* were being sold in America by the early 1800s when it also appeared in American publications such as *The Weekly Visitant* and the *Baltimore Musical Miscellany*.⁸⁰ This shows the potential for popular material to travel across borders far from its source of origin. The song appeared in at least twenty-two songsters between 1797 and 1820 and is described as of the "Yankee Doodle variety."⁸¹

The statement of reassurance of safety from the press-gang found on the Durham company playbills was not just directed at members of the audience. In his article on strolling, Alwin Thaler reminded readers that the recruitment officer and the press-gang had preyed upon actors since Shakespeare's day and even Edmund Kean, as a youthful stroller "used to good effect his excellent ability as a swimmer, - 'particularly when a press-gang was near.'"⁸² Providing mariners with the reassurance that they would not be seized by the press gang was a necessity for the Durham company as it relied upon sailors and keelmen for its audiences. A *Newcastle Chronicle* article from 1792 shows how political activity by the mariners could have a severe impact on the fortunes of the

⁷⁸ Royal Museums Greenwich (RMG), STN COLLECTION: Uncatalogued: Clarkson Stanfield 1793-1867, painter. STN /101/5 James Field Stanfield Letter 5.

⁷⁹ *Freemasons Magazine, or General and Complete Library*, vol. 4, May 1795: 346-347. For the tune see "SILE NI GHADHRA (Sheela na Guire, c.1740)," in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, ed. Angela Bourke, vol. 4. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), 282.

⁸⁰ See "Patrick O'Neal," *Isaiah Thomas Broadside Ballads Project*, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://www.americanantiquarian.org/thomasballads/items/show/187>.

⁸¹ Gale Huntington and Lani Herrmann, eds. *Sam Henry's Songs of the People* (Athens Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 102-103.

⁸² Alwin Thaler, "Strolling Players and Provincial Drama after Shekspere," *PMLA* 37, no. 2. (June 1922), 259.

company by reducing audience numbers.⁸³ Seamen had been agitating for better wages and the article describes how their stand had affected the theatre negatively due to nonattendance, recording that “the house had been very thin” that season, apart from one benefit night for the “Gentlemen of the Friendly Club” and two evenings demanded by the “Officers of the Race-horse and the Officers of the 57th.”⁸⁴ In February of the following year, when the government adopted more extreme measures in order to increase manpower for the war with Napoleonic France, “the seamen belonging to the port of Newcastle associated to defend themselves against the threatened impress.”⁸⁵ In an attempt to avoid violence, a public subscription was established in Newcastle to encourage volunteers to enter into his majesty's navy, from which “320 able-bodied seamen received one guinea, and 77 ordinary seamen half a guinea each.”⁸⁶ The Newcastle Corporation also made the financial offering of two guineas for every able, and one guinea for every ordinary seaman. However, this did not achieve its goal and the impressment of seamen started at Shields on 15 February 1793.⁸⁷ The next month, on 18 March, about five hundred sailors “armed with swords, pistols, and other weapons” at Shields attempted to seize the Eleanor tender, to rescue the impressed men.⁸⁸ The next day they marched on Newcastle where the North York militia who had just arrived from Richmond beat to arms causing the sailors to disperse. The following month on the evening of 26 April:

... the regiment at Tynemouth barracks was drawn up and formed into a *cordon* round North Shields to prevent any person from escaping. The different press-gangs then began, when sailors, mechanics, labourers, and men of every description, to the amount of two hundred and fifty, were forced on board the armed ships.⁸⁹

⁸³ *Newcastle Chronicle* (Newcastle upon Tyne, England), 12 November 1792.

⁸⁴ King, *North Shields Theatre*, 32.

⁸⁵ Eneas MacKenzie, *A Descriptive and Historical Account of the Town and County of Newcastle upon Tyne: Including the Borough of Gateshead*, vol. 1. (Newcastle upon Tyne; Mackenzie and Dent, 1827), 70.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ John Sykes, *Local Records; or, Historical Register of Remarkable Events, which have occurred in Northumberland and Durham, Newcastle upon Tyne and Berwick upon Tweed*, 2 vols. (Newcastle upon Tyne: T. Fordyce, 1866), 1:366.

⁸⁹ Sykes, *Local Records*, 1:367.

The press gang evidently continued to threaten local mariners as the following year a playbill for the North Shields theatre dated November 1794 stated that “Lieutenant Kelly, Lieutenant King and Lieutenant Bevis pledge their word of honour, that no seamen whatever shall be molested by their people on play nights, from the hour of four in the afternoon to six the following morning, after which time the indulgence ceases.”⁹⁰ Captain Bover had died in Newcastle in 1782 and was buried in Newcastle’s St Nicholas Church where he is commemorated with a marble plaque stating that he had “for several previous years filled with the highest credit the arduous situation of regulating officer of this port.”

Young’s *History of Whitby* also noted that in the tumultuous year of 1793 “the mariners of Whitby rose against the press-gang.”⁹¹ Whitby playbills from the winter season of that year also advised the public that they were safe from impressment with the reassurance that:

Captain Shortland pledges his Word of Honour, that no Seamen whatever shall be molested by his People on Play Nights, form the Hour of Four in the Afternoon to Twelve at Night; after which the Indulgence ceases.⁹²

This was the first year that the management of the theatre had been taken over by Butler and his playbills continued to reassure mariners of their safety during the 1795 and 1796 winter seasons after which playbills cease to include this message.

As well as suffering from the consequences of social unrest, the theatre space itself frequently became a public focal point for expressions of dissent, particularly during these moments of heightened tension, as suggested by a playbill for the North Shields theatre dated 11 November 1796 which contains the reassurance that “proper Peace Officers will attend in the Gallery to keep

⁹⁰ King, *North Shields Theatre*, 33.

⁹¹ George Young, *A History of Whitby and Streoneshalh Abbey with a statistical survey of the vicinity to the distance of twenty-five miles*, 2 vols. (Whitby: Clark, 1817), 2:605 n.

⁹² WMA., *Theatrical Playbills 1788-1794*. Whitby playbill 2 December 1793.

Order and Decorum.”⁹³ A later article in the *Caledonian Mercury* about the theatre at Sunderland gives a sense of the excitable state of its maritime audience members, while also providing details about the playhouse’s physical construction:

On Friday night last, while the half-price visitors were going into the theatre at Sunderland, a young man, a sailor, in attempting to dart over the people in the gallery to get into the front, a practice very common in that theatre, was thrown completely over, and in descending fell upon an iron crook, and actually hung by the ribs till he was taken off by assistance from the boxes.⁹⁴

A similar example of Georgian crowd surfing at Sunderland was recorded in *The Morning Chronicle* three years later when “a young keelman, named Wardell Wayman, was precipitated from the gallery into the pit of the Sunderland theatre, and in his fall was caught by the iron spikes in the front, which tore open his side below the ribs, and severely lacerated his thigh.”⁹⁵ This was evidently a frequent occurrence as the article makes clear:

It is a too common practice in that house, for young idle fellows to throw themselves upon the heads of the people on a full night in hopes of getting a front seat at half price, and it is not unusual for the audience, in ridding themselves of the burden, to push the offenders on till they are thrown over into the pit.

Iron spikes were a common feature of theatre design. Heavisides provides a description of the interior of the playhouse at Stockton when Stanfield and Graham handed over the management to Stephen Kemble in 1802, writing that the space:

... consisted merely of pit and gallery, divided by a wooden partition, on which was a formidable array of iron spikes to deter the “gods” from

⁹³ King, *North Shields Theatre*, 34.

⁹⁴ *Caledonian Mercury* (Edinburgh, Scotland), Monday, 6 May 1816.

⁹⁵ *The Morning Chronicle* (London, England), Tuesday, 16 March 1819.

“pitting”, as it was called, any refractory fellow into the pit; which, by way of a lark, was occasionally put into practice.⁹⁶

It serves as a reminder that Georgian theatres were raucous places filled with a highly volatile public, quick to take offence and capable of riot if displeased. There had probably been a riot at the more genteel and fashionable Scarborough theatre in the summer season of 1798 as a playbill dated 23 August has a note at the bottom: “N.B. Proper peace officers will in future attend to keep order and decorum.”⁹⁷

Whitby at war

Whitby is known for its Greenland whaling fleet, which commenced in 1753 with two ships and grew to fourteen or fifteen by 1778.⁹⁸ Like nearby Stockton, the town had also developed because of work associated with war.⁹⁹ Charlton recorded that from the 1740s the townsfolk “were initiated into the transport service” after which Whitby had begun “to put on an appearance very different from what it had done in any age before.”¹⁰⁰ Writing in 1778, he recorded that the port’s shipping and population had more than doubled over the past forty years.¹⁰¹ Improvement had also come through local investment in infrastructure, including the building of a harbour and a turnpike road across the moors “so that passengers now ventured to pass over these moors without fear or danger, where no stranger before that time durst ever presume to come without a guide.”¹⁰² This enabled country-dwellers to supply the town with a weekly market and eased the travel of Butler’s actors who travelled over the moors to the town after performing at Richmond in September and October.

⁹⁶ Henry Heavisides, *The Annals of Stockton-on-Tees with Biographical Notices* (Stockton: Heavisides and Sons, 1865), 63.

⁹⁷ YMLSC. *Hailstone Collection of Playbills*. SC Playbills Box 18 / 81 Scarborough Theatre Playbill, Scarborough Playbill. 23 August 1798.

⁹⁸ Lionel Charlton, *The History of Whitby and of Whitby Abbey* (Whitby: A. Ward, 1779), 337.

⁹⁹ Charlton, *History of Whitby*, 339-342.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 337.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 342.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 338.

By 1796 the Union coach started a twice-a-week service between Whitby and Sunderland, which was the first post coach to pass through Stockton.¹⁰³ En-route it passed Roseberry Topping, the vantage point from which Pierson had imagined his survey of the nation.

Of all the towns on the coast in which the actors performed, Whitby was the most vulnerable and isolated. In the 1790s, local fears stirred by memories of Viking invasion and the Danelaw found expression in a three act tragedy called *Streanshall Abbey; Or, the Danish Invasion* which was written by the Whitby Collector of Customs, Francis Gibson, and performed three times during the 1799-1800 Whitby season by the Butler Company.¹⁰⁴ The second performance came two weeks after the first which allowed for “alterations” to be made by the company and for Tayleure to paint a new scene of the town of Streanshall and the Abbey in its “perfect state.” An 1817 town history noted that Gibson’s play “met with great applause, to which the patriotic sentiments which it breathes, and which were then highly seasonable, contributed not a little.”¹⁰⁵ In a local review of the performance, the *Hull Packet* declared that the play “for regularity of plot, dignity of sentiment, and an elegant simplicity of diction, may vie with many of our modern productions.”¹⁰⁶ A review of the published play in *The British Critic* declared there was “a great deal of spirited and good writing in this performance, and the characters are generally well and consistently supported.”¹⁰⁷ The reviewer particularly appreciated the character of Sir Piers of Grosmont, a dishonest brother, who is the play’s villain. Grosmont is the enemy within, who offers to tell the Danes “Of Streanshall’s force, and where her weakness lies.”¹⁰⁸ For his services, Grosmont demands the lands he claims were once his and the woman he loves. Thus, Gibson combined the highly contemporary themes of paranoiac fear of internal insurrectionary threat with the dread of a murderous pagan invading force. His

¹⁰³ Richmond, *Local Records of Stockton*, 95.

¹⁰⁴ Francis Gibson, *Streanshall Abbey; or, the Danish Invasion*, 2nd ed. (Whitby, T. Webster, 1800). WMA., *Theatrical Playbills, 1795-1800*. Whitby Playbills, 2 December 1799, 13 December 1799, 17 February 1800.

¹⁰⁵ George Young, *History of Whitby*, 2:871.

¹⁰⁶ *Hull Packet* (Hull, England), Tuesday, 11 March 1800.

¹⁰⁷ *The British Critic: A New Review*, 16 (London: F. and C. Rivington, 1800): 202.

¹⁰⁸ Francis Gibson, *Streanshall Abbey*, 85.

Gothic description of the Danes arriving on the high tide into White Bay is representative of what he perhaps hoped might be considered a North Riding version of John Home's Scottish nationalistic tragedy *Douglas*:

- Their marked time
Is when the full-orb'd regent of the night,
Verging to earth, impels the swelling main
Into our ports to pour its amplest tribute;
Then vengeful vows are offer'd for her aid
To guide their vessels through the trenchless deep;
While sick'ning at their wizzard's rites impure,
She veils her face beneath the sable cloud,
As all-portentous their own turbid North
Shoots sanguine streams, and horror rules the skies.¹⁰⁹

Gibson was a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and since 1792 he had been collecting material for a "Guide to Whitby and the vicinity" which he never completed.¹¹⁰ However, the drama provided him with an opportunity to impart some of his local knowledge and the published play includes a footnote about a Roman foundation stone recently discovered by a Captain of the Dragoons stationed in Yorkshire on military defence duties.¹¹¹ Perhaps this is one of the reasons that a critic in *The Monthly Review* noted: "Many local circumstances are introduced, which must give the piece a stronger interest in the place of its birth, than can be expected to attend it in the sphere of the metropolis."¹¹² Gibson's antiquarian interests aside, his play must have served to encourage pride in the local community and galvanise patriotic resolve on the vulnerable northeast coast during this period.

Linda Colley has noted that the British Navy increased from 16,000 in 1789 to 140,000 by 1812.¹¹³ Many of the men in the Whitby area served at sea. Writing twenty years earlier, Charlton

¹⁰⁹ Francis Gibson, *Streanshall Abbey*, 14.

¹¹⁰ George Young, *History of Whitby*, 2:871.

¹¹¹ Francis Gibson, *Streanshall Abbey*, 67. n. 1.

¹¹² *The Monthly Review for July 1800* (London), 326.

¹¹³ Linda Colley, "The Reach of the State, the Appeal of the Nation: Mass Arming and Political Culture in the Napoleonic Wars," in *An Imperial State at War: Britain from 1689 to 1815*, ed. Lawrence Stone (London: New York: Routledge, 1994), 167.

recorded: “Not less than 4000 sailors belong to the port of Whitby; and when troublesome times oblige the government to carry a number of these men on ships of war, it is surprising to see the crouds of youth flock from the country, for many miles around to supply their places.”¹¹⁴ Gibson also wrote a song for the Whitby Battalion of Volunteers which was performed by the Butler company in the theatre.¹¹⁵ At the height of the invasion crisis of 1803–4, when Napoleon’s Army of England was gathered on the coast of Northern France, the British government was compelled to open up the volunteer civil defence ranks to working men and a total of 400,000 volunteers signed up to defend the country in what has been described as “the greatest popular movement in Georgian Britain.”¹¹⁶ Theatrical support for that moment in the war effort is revealed in a *York Herald* article from 1804: “On Wednesday evening, Mr. Butler gave the clear receipts of his theatre at Harrogate, in aid to the subscription, for clothing and arming the volunteer corps of infantry, at Knaresboro.”¹¹⁷

The company’s performance of Gibson’s play and its success serves to illustrate Gillian Russell’s argument that “war and theatre were mutually sustaining, not only in material terms but also culturally, ideologically and politically.”¹¹⁸ In the 1790s, the nation may have been suffering war, blockades, poor harvests, hunger and political unrest, but as we have seen, the theatre, and particularly provincial theatre, was flourishing. Even Butler’s death in Beverley on 15 June 1812 does not seem to have had an immediately detrimental effect upon the company with a playbill showing a performance in the town one week later.¹¹⁹ Butler’s second wife, the actress Frances Maria Jefferson, became the company’s manager and in April 1815 when Francis Courtney Wemyss joined the troupe at Kendal, he played to a full house in a theatre “capable of holding from

¹¹⁴ Charlton, *History of Whitby*, 361.

¹¹⁵ W. Watkins, ed., *The Poetical Remains, with other Detached Pieces of the late F. Gibson Esq. F.A.S. Collector of the Customs at Whitby* (Whitby: R. Rodgers, 1807), 54-55.

¹¹⁶ J. E. Cookson, “The English Volunteer Movement of the French Wars, 1793-1815. Some Contexts,” *The Historical Journal* 32 (1989): 867.

¹¹⁷ *The York Herald* (York, England), Saturday, 3 September 1803.

¹¹⁸ Russell, *Theatres of War*, 179.

¹¹⁹ Sybil Rosenfeld, *The Georgian Theatre of Richmond, Yorkshire, and its Circuit: Beverley, Harrogate, Kendal, Northallerton, Ulverston and Whitby* (London: Society for Theatre research, York, 1984), 62.

sixty to seventy pounds.”¹²⁰ A sign of Mrs Butler’s confidence came in December of that year when she applied to Richmond’s Corporation for a renewal of the building lease for the town’s theatre, which was not due to expire for another four years. On 6 December 1815 an additional term of eleven years from 1819 was granted under the same terms.¹²¹

Wemyss’ memoirs record a fateful interruption to a performance he witnessed as a member of the audience at the York theatre in 1815 when a “gentleman in the dress circle of boxes” suddenly climbed onto the hand-rail and demanded that the performance should cease as he announced: “Gentlemen, I have the pleasure to inform you, Napoleon Bonaparte has surrendered himself a prisoner of war (dead silence, every one intent upon catching the next word) to Captain Maitland, of his Majesty’s ship Bellerophon.”¹²² Wemyss continued that:

The whole audience rose, there followed cheering, the men waved their hats, the ladies their handkerchiefs. God save the King was called for. The whole company, male and female, appeared upon the stage, sang the national anthem, the audience joining in the chorus. At the conclusion, three cheers were given, Rule Britannia was played by the band, and three-fourths of the audience immediately left the theatre.¹²³

The end of the Napoleonic Wars saw a great many more people abandon the theatre and a sharp decline in theatrical fortunes can be seen after the peace that came in 1815. This therefore appears to reinforce Russell’s argument that theatres which were heavily dependent upon the military for their audiences suffered the most. Sybil Rosenfeld believed it was the loss of Beverely that was “the beginning of a decline which was to end in the breaking up of the Butler circuit.”¹²⁴ The collapse came very quickly. After an 1816 season in Kendal that was extended, the company never returned

¹²⁰ Francis Courtney Wemyss, *Theatrical Biography: or, The Life of an Actor and Manager; interspersed with Sketches, Anecdotes, and Opinions of the Professional Merits of the Most Celebrated Actors and Actresses of our Day* (Glasgow: Griffin, 1848), 35.

¹²¹ North Yorkshire Records Office, Northallerton, N. Yorks. Richmond Administrative Records, Corporation Minute Books, Coucher Book 1812-1832, DC.RMB. II/1/5 (MIC 621).

¹²² Wemyss, *Theatrical Biography*, 37.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Sybil Rosenfeld, *Georgian Theatre of Richmond*, 69.

to the town. The following year, Reverend George Young wrote of the Whitby theatre: “Sometimes the house, which will seat about 500 is well filled: at other times the performers complain of want of encouragement.”¹²⁵ The 1817 Whitby season also proved to be the company’s last. The playbills show constantly changing cast lists and inevitably performances suffered.¹²⁶ Two years later Reverend James Tate wrote to a friend mentioning that the widow Butler was considering selling the Richmond theatre lease to two managers from Sunderland “on fair terms.”¹²⁷ She held onto the theatre, but the company never returned to its previous level of success. In 1821 Clarkson noted “theatrical amusements are very much upon the decline in this town.”¹²⁸ The final record of the Butler company’s association with Richmond appears in the town’s *Lennox Lodge* masonic minute book in an entry for 7 June 1849, which states: “Mrs Butler, Comedian, having made application to the Lodge for Assistance, being in adverse circumstances, the sum of 10s. was unanimously voted out of the funds for her relief.”¹²⁹ It is an indication of the circumstances to which this once highly successful manager had been reduced.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the ways in which the northern stage helped to shape a sense of national identity during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As the local archives reveal, the relationship between town, region and nation was increasingly expressed through performance related to war and empire in town theatres, whether in performance by the established stock companies managed by Cawdell and Butler, or by more obscure strolling outfits. The “dramatic ‘liberties’ where theatrical experiments or distinctive forms of cultural commentary could take

¹²⁵ George Young, *History of Whitby*, 2:636.

¹²⁶ Sybil Rosenfeld, *Georgian Theatre of Richmond*, 74.

¹²⁷ Leslie P. Wenham, ed., *James Tate, Master of Richmond School, Yorkshire and Canon of St. Paul’s Cathedral, London Schoolmaster and Scholar*, (North Yorkshire County Record Office, 1991), 271.

¹²⁸ Christopher Clarkson, *History of Richmond* (Richmond: Bowman, 1821), 207.

¹²⁹ Richmond, North Yorkshire. Lennox Lodge Freemasons Archive. Lennox Lodge minute book, unpaginated. Entry for 7 June 1849.

place” identified by Jane Moody, in the context of Sarah Siddons’ masculine role-playing, can be extended to James Cawdell’s appeal for war and plunder before his elite audience. The northern playhouses also clearly played an important role in patriotic support for war with France as examples from Pickering and Whitby clearly reveal. The end of the Napoleonic Wars also marks the end of the generation with whom this study has been preoccupied. However, the northern stage served as a healthy environment for many of the children who grew up in these companies to learn their craft. Miss Wallis of Bath was the daughter of a Butler player who went on to wider fame.¹³⁰ Stanfield’s son, Clarkson, revolutionised scenography.¹³¹ Drinkwater Meadows performed all over the country and was Secretary to the Covent Garden Theatrical Fund for thirty-four years.¹³² Several performers who have featured in this section also played significant roles in the development of American theatre. After selling his interest to his brother-in-law Stephen Kemble, the manager Charles Whitlock travelled to America with his wife Elizabeth (née Kemble) where they performed for over a decade and she was named “the American Siddons.”¹³³ The Scotsman Wemyss became a successful theatre manager in Philadelphia where he employed the “*tragedy hero* of Butler’s company” Henry Finn.¹³⁴ The great Northumbrian tragedian Frederick Cooke died in New York in 1812.¹³⁵ The next generation also saw the gravitational pull of London shift to a new bigger potential audience across the Atlantic. Butler’s son, Samuel William Butler, performed on a New York stage.¹³⁶ James Cawdell’s son, James Martin Cawdell, also crossed the Atlantic and

¹³⁰ Philip H. Highfill Jr, Kalman A. Burnim, Edward A. Longhans, eds. *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800*, 16 vols. (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973-93), 15:232-240.

¹³¹ P. van der Merwe and R. Took, *The Spectacular Career of Clarkson Stanfield, 1793-1867* (Sunderland: Sunderland, Museum & A.G., 1979).

¹³² Joseph Knight and Nilanjana Banerji, “Meadows, Drinkwater (1793x9–1869), actor,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online ed., 23 Sep. 2004, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18475>, accessed 16 Feb. 2022.

¹³³ Highfill et al., 16:47-49.

¹³⁴ Wemyss, *Theatrical Biography*, 224.

¹³⁵ Don B. Wilmeth, “Cooke, George Frederick (1756?–1812), actor,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online ed., 23 Sep. 2004, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6164>, accessed 15 Feb. 2022.

¹³⁶ Sybil Rosenfeld, *Georgian Theatre of Richmond*, 90.

became an influential literary and political theorist in upper Canada.¹³⁷ This exemplifies how Britain was changing and adapting to the forces which the modern era was engendering, as they, like many in their audiences, set their sights on more distant horizons.

This concludes the first section of the thesis, which mapped the northern theatrical landscape from the perspectives of metropolis, town, region and nation with an increasing focus on the final decades of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. The second section now turns its attention to people, with the aim of shedding light on two obscure Irish strolling players who spent most of their professional careers in the North East of England. These works of reclamation are divided by a chapter which attempts to shine a light on freemasonry which is one of the most obscure organisations in eighteenth-century life yet one of the most enlightened. Again, geographical perspectives continue to play a role as the perspective shifts to the cosmopolitan. According to Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, a *cosmopolite* is someone who belongs anywhere in the world or "*un homme qui n'est étranger nulle part*" (a man who is a stranger nowhere), someone who belongs to "the world city."¹³⁸ This is a common characteristic shared by the itinerant provincial players and a theme that unifies the following three chapters.

¹³⁷ For Cawdell's Canadian literary and publishing history see Laurel Ryan, "James Martin Cawdell and Medieval Politics in Early Canada," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 42, no. 1 (2017): 173-190.

¹³⁸ Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, 2021) online ed., 2021, <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>, accessed 24 Jan 2022.

Chapter Five

John Cunningham, a Pastoral Player

Introduction

Aspects of enlightened sensibility, association and politics are now explored through the personal experience of one of the most celebrated northern strollers of the period, John Cunningham (*figure 9*). Although now forgotten, this Irish actor was the nation's leading pastoral poet at mid-century.¹ In the rare instances that his verse has been commented upon by modern critics, Cunningham's focus upon idealised shepherds and maidens has tended to be dismissed as formulaic and ephemeral.² However, if one bears in mind that his friend, the antiquarian, Joseph Ritson, reminded readers of his *English Songs* that Cunningham was writing for "country theatres" and also that, as an Irish Catholic actor, he was one of the most marginalised of cultural producers in the period, the poet's verse begins to take on a more nuanced and even political hue.³ While exploring what can be discovered about his experiences as a northern stroller, this chapter concentrates on his poetic output and particularly seeks to understand why the Member of Parliament and "friend to revolution" Joseph Cowen installed a stained-glass window dedicated to Cunningham in Newcastle's St. John the Baptist Church after he took over the *Newcastle Chronicle* in 1869 and why Britain's first ever female Professor, Edith J. Morley, who was a socialist, member of the Fabian Society and suffragist, sought to restore Cunningham, "a half forgotten versifier ... in the

¹ David Hill Radcliffe, "Sawney and Dermot," in *Anglo-Irish Identities, 1571- 1845*, eds. David A. Valone and Jill Marie Bradbury (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2008), 89.

² For Cunningham's publishing history see Paul Baines, Julian Ferraro, Pat Rogers eds., *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Eighteenth-Century Writers and Writing 1660-1789* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

³ Joseph Ritson, *A Select Collection of English Songs*, 3 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1783), 1:lxix.

niche he rightfully deserves to occupy in the temple of the English muse” in an essay written in 1942.⁴

When William Hazlitt edited Thomas Holcroft’s memoirs, he felt obliged to apologise for offending the sensibility of his readers by including Holcroft’s early years as a strolling player by stating: “It must abate something of the contempt with which we are too apt to mention the name of a strolling player, when we recollect that Cunningham was one.”⁵ The poet was according to Hazlitt, “a man, to whom we are indebted for some of the most pleasing and elegant pastoral descriptions in the language.”⁶ Ritson believed Cunningham’s verse “possesses a pleasing simplicity which cannot fail to recommend him to a reader of unadulterated taste.”⁷ According to *The Cabinet of Irish Literature* even Doctor Johnson, for whom pastoral was: “Easy, vulgar and therefore disgusting” wrote favourably of Cunningham, stating that “his poems have peculiar sweetness and elegance; his sentiments are generally natural, and his language simple and appropriate to his subject.”⁸ More recently, John Brewer mentions Cunningham only once in *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, his influential study of the formation of culture in the English eighteenth-century public sphere. It is when Brewer considers collecting and the formation of the national canon that he states:

The most popular authors in the anthologies published between 1770 and 1800 are no surprise. They include Pope, Thomson, Shakespeare, Addison, William Cowper and John Milton. Only John Cunningham (1729-73), a now forgotten Irish poet whose tomb was etched with the words HIS WORKS WILL REMAIN A MONUMENT TO THE AGES, strikes a discordant note to the modern ear.⁹

⁴ Edith J. Morley, “John Cunningham 1729-1773,” *Essays by Divers Hands, Being the Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature of the United Kingdom* 19 (1942): 40.

⁵ Thomas Holcroft, *Memoirs of the Late Thomas Holcroft, Written by Himself, and Continued to the Time of his Death, from his Diary, Notes and Other Papers*, ed. William Hazlitt, 3 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1816), 1:258.

⁶ Holcroft, *Memoirs*, 1:258.

⁷ Joseph Ritson, *English Songs*, 1:lxix.

⁸ Cited in Charles A. Read, *The Cabinet of Irish Literature*, vol. 1. (London, Glasgow, Dublin, Belfast & Edinburgh: Blackie & Son, 1876-78), 245.

⁹ John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 386.

Robert Darnton's microhistory *The Great Cat Massacre* is a reminder that discordant notes can generate valuable new insights.¹⁰ Why was the Dublin-born pastoral poet and actor John Cunningham thought to belong in the canon of great national poets at the end of the eighteenth century? This is not a question asked by Brewer, whose interest ends by ironically quoting the epitaph written on the table tomb paid for by the Newcastle printers, Thomas and Ann Slack, who were the first to publish Cunningham's collected verse after the poet rejected the entreaties of London's Tom Davies and Edinburgh's Wotherspoon and Martin. Brewer states that in this period "culture travelled only one way, out from London rather than in from the provinces" but figures like Cunningham are perhaps also discordant because they challenge this understanding.¹¹

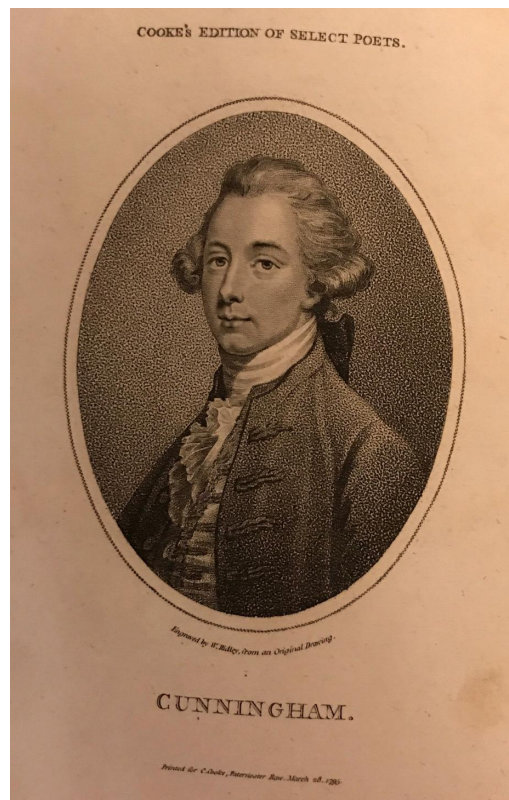


Figure 9. Frontispiece to "Life of Cunningham" in Cooke's Edition of Selected Poets.¹²

¹⁰ Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

¹¹ Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, 396.

¹² British Library (BL). Hodgson Papers Vol X. Additional Ms. 50249. *John Bell's Cunningham's Remains. Poems, Recollections and Original Letters of John Cunningham*, 139.

According to his friend and associate, the grammarian and publisher, Ann Slack, this is the most accurate likeness she had seen of Cunningham.¹³

Biographical materials

Alexander Chalmers noted in his 1810 edition of Cunningham's verse: "The only account we have of Mr. *Cunningham* appeared originally in the *London Magazine* for 1773, from which it has been repeatedly copied without acknowledgment."¹⁴ This three page obituary notice, "Memoirs of John Cunningham" was published in the *London Magazine: or, Gentleman's Monthly Intelligencer* in the month after his death in Newcastle upon Tyne in 1773.¹⁵ It lists Cunningham's birth in Dublin in 1729: a curtailed education at Drogheda; his early success with a two-act farce called *Love in a Mist: or, The Lass of Spirit* which introduced him to Dublin players; his departure for Scotland with a company of strollers; how ill-suited he was for the stage due to his timidity; a short-lived attempt to make a living in London selling his writing to booksellers; his resignation to a strolling life in the North East of England; his general indolence; the generosity of a patron Thomas Slack who provided for him towards the end of his life; the mental derangement at his death when he burnt all his papers. Finally, it summarized that he had led a quiet uneventful life which is reflected by his simple, unassuming but often beautiful verse.¹⁶ A slightly longer biography by Richard Alfred

¹³ M. A. Richardson, ed., "Some Account of the Life of John Cunningham, Pastoral Poet: From Robert White's Manuscripts," in *The Local Historian's Table Book*, 2 vols. (Newcastle upon Tyne: M.A. Richardson, 1843), 2:104.

¹⁴ Alexander Chalmers, "Life of Cunningham," in *Works of the English Poets, from Chaucer to Cowper*, ed. Alexander Chalmers, 21 vols. (London, 1810), 14:425-427.

¹⁵ Anon. "Memoirs of the late Mr John Cunningham," in *London Magazine: or, Gentleman's Monthly Intelligencer* 42 (October 1773): 495-97.

¹⁶ Cunningham destroyed his papers shortly before his death, but the Gateshead antiquarian Thomas Bell collected a scrapbook of memorabilia called "Cunningham's Remains" which includes playbills, newspaper articles, correspondence and the handwritten recollections of Sarah Hodgson, the editor of the *Newcastle Chronicle*, who had known Cunningham as a child. This is in the British Library (BL) Hodgson Papers Vol X. Additional Ms. 50249. *John Bell's Cunningham's Remains. Poems, Recollections and Original Letters of John Cunningham*. Hodgson's account provided the basis for Robert White, "Some Account of the Life of John Cunningham, Pastoral Poet," *The Local Historian's Table Book*, ed. M. A. Richardson, 2 vols. (Newcastle, 1843), 2:99-110. Newly discovered correspondence was published in James Anthony Froude

Davenport was published in an 1822 anthology with Oliver Goldsmith's verse in the 100-volume *The British Poets*.¹⁷ In *By-Ways Round Helicon*, an anthology of lesser known eighteenth-century poets, Iolo Williams mentioned Professor Arber's *The Goldsmith Anthology*, adding that "as far as I am aware, Arber was the *only* anthologist who ever included Cunningham."¹⁸ There has consequently been relatively little interest shown in Cunningham although his verse is included in collections of minor eighteenth-century poets.

The call of the popular

This section considers how the stroller Cunningham reached an elevated position in popular culture and why Edith Morley felt that a revival of interest in him was justified. It also considers how his identity as a stroller influenced his work and its reception. This suggests that underlying his simple polite verse lies a radicalism which contemporaries recognised. Cunningham also serves to illustrate the dissertation's central argument that provincial players acted as important cultural brokers in the North and this section seeks to identify several of Cunningham's contemporaries who came under his influence.

When describing the formative effect of appearing in the public eye, the Irish playwright John O'Keeffe wrote that "the first time that a youthful poet sees himself in print, is assuredly an epoch unparalleled" and he acknowledged that he owed this experience to John Cunningham.¹⁹ His popular song "Winter" had inspired the teenage O'Keeffe to write a poem called "Summer" in

and John Tulloch, eds., "Life of a Strolling Player," *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* vol. 34. (1846): 253-26. The British Library also holds correspondence between Ann Slack and Cunningham in the Hodgson Papers Vol V. Additional Ms. 50244. *Correspondence*.

¹⁷ R. A. Davenport, "The Life of John Cunningham," in *The British Poets: Cunningham and Goldsmith*, vol. 64. (Chiswick: C. Whittingham, 1822), 7-17.

¹⁸ Iolo A. Williams, *By-Ways Round Helicon: A Kind of Anthology* (London: Heinemann, 1922), 33.

¹⁹ John O'Keeffe, *Recollections of the Life of John O'Keeffe: Written by Himself*, 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1826), 1:64.

response, which he sent to a Dublin newspaper.²⁰ The next day a friend showed it to him printed on the page and O’Keeffe described the elation he felt when he was “surveyed from head to foot with admiration” and he recalled that “every youth was proud of my acquaintance.”²¹ The idea of a competitive call and response in verse, illustrated by Cunningham and O’Keeffe, lies at the heart of pastoral poetry and O’Keeffe recorded his effort precisely as an answer to Cunningham’s poem. He said when his song: “ ‘Summer’ appeared, the boys in preference sung that; often asking me ‘Jack, didn’t you write the answer to Winter?’ ‘To be sure I did,’ was my consequential reply.”²² Providing the inspiration to such a potentially life-changing experience is significant and a clear indication of Cunningham’s popularity in O’Keeffe’s Dublin of the 1760s.

The genre for which Cunningham became known is based on Virgil’s pastorals in which shepherds typically compete for the attention of a maiden in an idealised rustic setting. In Britain, pastoral had been revived by Elizabethans and became fashionable in the eighteenth century when popular taste responded to its capacity for parody within a highly restricted formal structure. Poets used the form as a means to communicate with each other about poetry and each other.²³ The fact that O’Keeffe replied to Cunningham in a newspaper further exemplifies pastoral’s populist appeal. As David Hill Radcliffe has noted, “singing contests transpired in ‘the plain’ an undifferentiated imaginary space accessed through metropolitan and provincial newspapers.”²⁴ Cunningham’s poems can therefore be considered from the perspective of an increasingly market-driven associational culture. The printing of his verse in newspapers and the performance of his songs in multiple places, led to a virtual community which engaged in the call and response made possible by newspaper consumption, attendance at pleasure gardens, theatre going, visits to fairs, markets

²⁰ John O’Keeffe, *Recollections*, 1:64. For O’Keeffe’s song “Summer,” see *The Bird: containing a choice collection of the most admired love, hunting and bachanalian songs, that are sung in the most polite circles, with a number of new, spirited and genteel toasts, sentiments and hob-nobs*. (London: A. Richardson, 1781), 24-25.

²¹ John O’Keeffe, *Recollections*, 65.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ See David Hill Radcliffe, “Pastoral,” in *The Oxford Handbook of British Poetry, 1660-1800*, ed. Jack Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 442.

²⁴ Radcliffe, “Pastoral,” 448.

and racetracks and just by simply walking down the street and hearing his verse spoken or sung. The possibility of participation was thus opened up to wide sections of urban and rural middling sorts and literate working people. Therefore, in terms of “popular culture” through individuals like Cunningham, poetry was no longer the property of a small national clique, as this culture had become available to a national society.²⁵ Cunningham’s verse was put to music by the Durham company’s musical director, William Shield, and performed in theatres on its circuit. It was also adapted by Thomas Arne and others for performance at Vauxhall, Ranelagh and Marylebone in London as well as other pleasure gardens. A number of these songs were also published, the most famous of which was *May Eve, or Kate of Aberdeen*, which was set to music by Jonathan Battishill, sung in 1761 and appeared in most collections of Scottish songs.²⁶

Reverend William MacRitchie from Perthshire conveys a palpable and everyday sense of how Cunningham’s verse was experienced in this period in a diary that he kept of his 1795 tour of the nation.²⁷ When walking from Castleton to Sheffield “through the country of the Peak, lying romantic and retired along the banks of the Derwent” he records that he fell:

... in with a shepherd regaling on his simple fare, his flocks feeding around him on the short healthy hill. It was two p.m., and the day was hot and sultry. The sight of this simple swain, in his pastoral solitude, recalled to my mind the following beautiful pastoral of Cunningham, which I amused myself by repeating aloud as I journeyed along the hill:

²⁵ For a consideration of what the term “popular culture” meant in the Georgian period, particularly regarding the oral tradition, see Phil Connell and N. Leask, “What is the people?” in *Romanticism and Popular Culture in Britain and Ireland*, eds. Phil Connell and N. Leask (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3-48. Also N. Leask focuses on the contestation between the polite and the popular in “‘A Degrading Species of Alchemy’: Ballad Poetics, Oral Tradition, and the Meaning of Popular Culture,” in *Romanticism and Popular Culture*. The classic study of popular opinion and extra-parliamentarian politics in eighteenth-century Newcastle is Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England 1715-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²⁶ Frank Kidson, “The Nurseries of English Song. II,” *The Musical Times* 63, no. 955 (1922): 621. Songsters which contain Cunningham’s songs include: *The Bull Finch: Being a Choice Collection of the Newest and Most Favourite English Songs which have been Sung at the Public Theatres and Gardens* (London, R. Baldwin, 1767); *Polyhymnia: or, the Complete Song Book. Being a Genuine Collection of English songs, which have been Set to Music by the Most Celebrated Modern Composers and Sung at Public Places of Entertainment* (London: F. Newberry, 1769) and *The Hearty Fellow: or, Joyous Soul’s Companion. Being a Chaste, Elegant, and Humourous Collection of Songs* (Dublin: J. Magee, ca. 1775).

²⁷ William MacRitchie, *Diary of a Tour Through Great Britain in 1795* (London, 1897).

“O’er moorlands and mountains, rude, barren and bare,
As wilder’d and wearied I roam.” etc.²⁸

A footnote identifies this as the opening lines of Cunningham’s “Content: A Pastoral.”²⁹

MacRitchie had evidently committed the poem to heart. The diary’s editor comments that his record “concerns itself little with celebrities, but rather with everyday people and the everyday usages of the eighteenth century.”³⁰ This personal description of how Cunningham’s verse resonated in this traveller’s direct experience and accompanied him on his journey conveys a sense of how it must have been experienced by others in the period. His verse was not written for the closet, but rather was popular, immediate and to be spoken aloud. It was written for performance and not posterity.

This characteristic of Cunningham’s verse was remarked upon by the antiquarian Joseph Ritson who included one of Cunningham’s songs in his *Select Collection of English Songs*, writing that if his compositions appeared simplistic, it should be understood that “they were necessarily adapted to the intellects of a country theatre.”³¹ Ritson provides another example of Cunningham’s personal influence over a contemporary. He met Cunningham when the actor was performing with the Durham company in his hometown of Stockton.³² However, Cunningham was no ordinary stroller, as by the time they met in about 1770, he was considered to be the “the best-known pastoral writer in Britain.”³³ His celebrity is suggested by the stories that were published about him in popular joke books such as the six-penny *Covent Garden Jester* and the more expensive *Festival of Wit* which cost three shillings and by 1800 had reached its 17th edition.³⁴ Cunningham’s personal influence upon the relatively youthful and inexperienced Ritson should be stressed particularly

²⁸ MacRitchie, *Diary*, 61-62.

²⁹ Ibid, 62.

³⁰ Ibid, x.

³¹ Joseph Ritson, *English Songs*, 1:lxix.

³² Henry Alfred Burd, *Joseph Ritson: A Critical Biography* (Illinois: University of Illinois, 1916), 25-27.

³³ Radcliffe, “Sawney and Dermot,” 89.

³⁴ *The Covent Garden Jester: or, Lady's and Gentleman's Treasure of Wit, Humour, and Amusement; Containing a great variety of Anecdotes, Bon Mots, Witty Sayings and Humorous Jests. By The Earl of Funsborough* (London, Printed by and for J. Roach, 1780), 25. *The Festival of Wit: or The Small Talker. Selected by G-K- summer resident at Windsor*, 6th ed. (London, M. Smith, 1788), 69-70.

considering the antiquarian's later contributions to English ballad scholarship and radical culture.³⁵

Matthew Gelbart identifies him as a scholar "at the forefront" of the shift towards viewing "the people" as representative of "a nation's genius".³⁶

Ritson's biographer Bertrand Bronson believed that Cunningham was probably responsible for helping him to first arrive in print.³⁷ The first published poem known to have been written by Ritson was "Verses Addressed to the Ladies of Stockton" which appeared in 1772 in *The Literary Register: or, Weekly Miscellany* published by Cunningham's friend, Thomas Slack in Newcastle.³⁸ Ritson stated in his letter to the editor that he hoped his verse had "the good fortune to escape a severe critic" and Bronson believed that he was referring to Cunningham.³⁹ Burd notes that "these youthful, amatory verses" marked the start of a thirty-year connection with the press.⁴⁰ The stroller Cunningham therefore provides further support for this dissertation's argument regarding the role that actors played in cultural brokerage in the provinces during this period.

i. A poet of nowhere in particular

In May 1765, Cunningham's friend Henry White encouraged him to travel to London and find a publisher for his first collection, "Why, man, you are allowed by a great number of men of real genius and merit to be the first pastoral poet of the age, and to hide yourself in an obscure corner of

³⁵ For biographies of Ritson see Henry Alfred Burd's *Joseph Ritson: A Critical Biography* and Bertrand H. Bronson, *Joseph Ritson, Scholar-at-Arms*, 2 vols. (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1938). Also see the published collection of Ritson's correspondence: Joseph Ritson, Joseph Frank, and Nicholas Harris Nicolas eds., *The Letters of Joseph Ritson, Esq. Edited Chiefly from Originals in the Possession of his Nephew*, 2 vols. (London: W. Pickering, 1833).

³⁶ Matthew Gelbart, *The Invention of Folk Music and Art Music: Emerging Categories from Ossian to Wagner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 84-87.

³⁷ Bertrand H. Bronson, *Joseph Ritson, Scholar-at-Arms*, 1:29.

³⁸ Isaac Thompson and Thomas Slack, *The Literary Register: or, Weekly Miscellany* 4, no. 36 (1772): 215-16. For the verse and its relationship to Stockton see Bertrand H. Bronson, *Joseph Ritson, Scholar-at-Arms*, 1:23-27.

³⁹ Bertrand H. Bronson, *Joseph Ritson, Scholar-at-Arms*, 1:23.

⁴⁰ Henry Alfred Burd, *Joseph Ritson*, 13.

the world! Oh, fy! Rouse lad, at once, and shine in the face of the world.”⁴¹ Pastoral poetry was a remarkably popular form of verse in mid-eighteenth-century England and this section considers how Cunningham had come to be recognised by his contemporaries as its leading proponent.

It was “Corydon: A Pastoral. To the Memory of William Shenstone, Esq.,” published in the *St. James’s Chronicle or British Evening Post* on 12 March 1763 that had placed him in the forefront of pastoral poets.⁴² In the poem Cunningham claimed Shenstone himself had advised him to avoid speaking about public matters entirely and in the spirit of the tradition he states his intention to carry this out:

I said, - on the banks of the stream,
I’ve pip’d for the shepherds too long!
Oh grant me, ye Muses, a theme,
Where glory may brighten my song!

But Pan bade me stick to my strain,
Nor lessons too lofty rehearse;
Ambition befits not a swain,
And Phillis loves pastoral verse.

Edmund Gosse commented “When Shenstone passed away, on February 11, 1763, the cleverest of his disciples, John Cunningham, brought to the funeral a pastoral elegy, in which he summed up the character of the deceased bard.”⁴³ The critic Aulay Macaulay republished the poem in full in *Essays on Various Subjects of Taste and Criticism*, stating he was “not afraid of tiring the reader’s patience by transcribing the whole of this composition” as it was: “One of the most perfect models of the Pastoral kind, in the English language.”⁴⁴ Numerous books of elocution used Cunningham’s verse

⁴¹ Froude and Tulloch, *Fraser’s Magazine*, 257.

⁴² John Cunningham, “Corydon: A Pastoral. To the Memory of William Shenstone, Esq.,” *St. James’s Chronicle or British Evening Post* (London) 12 March 1763.

⁴³ Edmund Gosse, “A Sentimental Shepherd,” in *Leaves and Fruit* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1927), 141.

⁴⁴ Aulay Macaulay, *Essays on Various Subjects of Taste and Criticism* (London: C. Dilly, 1780), 34-35.

including Thomas Sheridan and John Henderson's *Practical Method of Reading and Reciting English Poetry*.⁴⁵

Cunningham's shepherds and maidens dwell in a rural, idyllic and unidentifiable abstracted space. The poems are reduced to simple rhythmic, hypnotic contemplations upon basic human relations. The plain where the poems take place is a golden idealised space of perfection. In his best-known pastoral "Day" his close natural observations aim to reproduce the sights and scenes of different times of the day. In the morning there is a line which a hundred years later might be described as "Hopkinsesque":

From the low roof'd cottage ridge,
See the chatt'ring Swallow spring;
Darting through the one-arch'd bridge,
Quick she dips her dappled wing.⁴⁶

In describing Cunningham's verse, John Goodridge has remarked upon "Hopkins-like trade off[s] between meaning and sound-effect" which is a skill that would have proven highly effective in theatres.⁴⁷ This moment was reproduced in Isaac Taylor's frontispiece to the first two editions of Cunningham's verse printed by Slack in Newcastle in 1766 and 1771 (*figure 10*).⁴⁸ The Tyneside engraver Thomas Bewick, thought Taylor's engraving was "the best thing that ever was done."⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Thomas Sheridan and John Henderson, *Sheridan's and Henderson's Practical Method of Reading and Reciting English Poetry, elucidated by a Variety of Examples taken from Some of our most Popular Poets* (London: E. Newbury, 1796), 202. See also Mary Weightman, *The Juvenile Speaker: or, Dialogues, and Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose and Verse; for the Instruction of Youth, in the Art of Reading* (London: W. Bent, 1787), 76-77 (Corydon. A Pastoral), 78-79 (Noon. A Pastoral), 79-81 (Evening. A Pastoral), 81-83 (The Thrush and Pie: - A Tale), 83-84 (The Fox and the Cat: - A Fable). Also see *The Young Gentleman and Lady's Poetical Preceptor: Being a Collection of the Most Admired Poetry: selected from the best authors. Calculated to form the Taste to Classic Elegance; And, while it Delights the Fancy, to Improve the Morals, and to Harmonize the Heart* (Coventry: M. Luckman, 1795?), 143-148.

⁴⁶ John Cunningham, *Poems, Chiefly Pastoral* (Newcastle upon Tyne: T. Slack, 1766), 2.

⁴⁷ John Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 46.

⁴⁸ Edith J. Morley, "John Cunningham," 42.

⁴⁹ Jenny Uglow, *Nature's Engraver: A Life of Thomas Bewick* (London, Faber and Faber, 2006), 100.

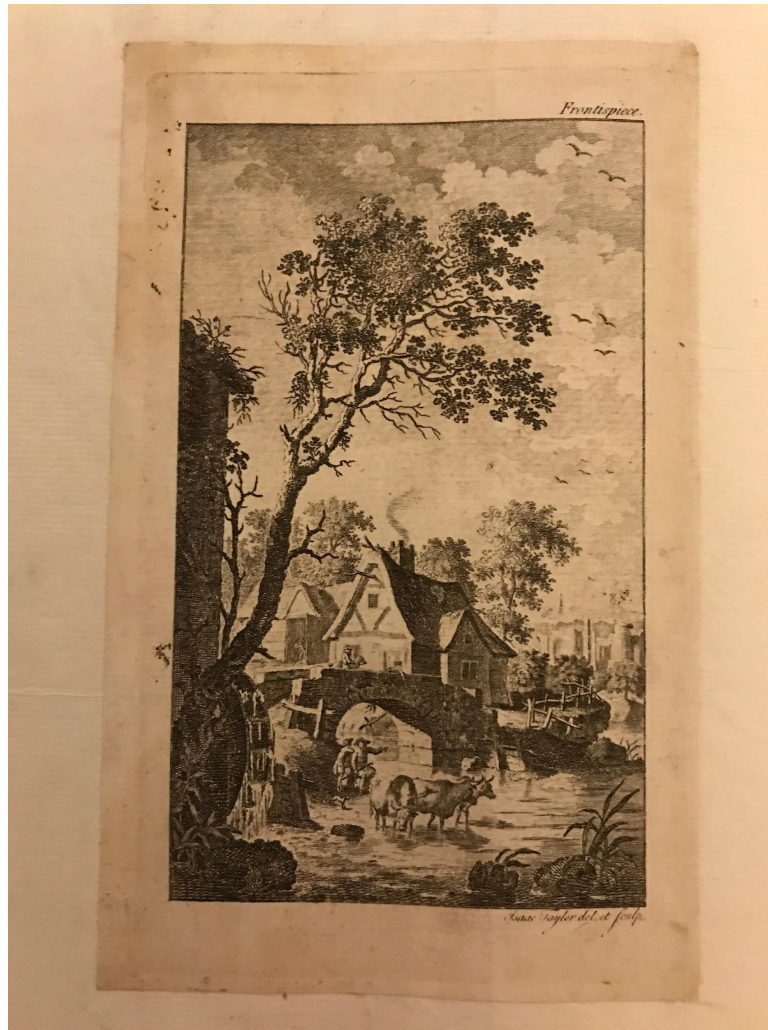


Figure 10. Isaac Taylor frontispiece for John Cunningham's *"Poems, Chiefly Pastoral"*.⁵⁰

Cunningham's immediacy and verbal precision which served his verse well in performance in playhouses had an influence upon another poet of nature, John Clare.⁵¹ In his experimental early verse, Clare copies a line, "Verges in successive rings" from Cunningham's pastoral "Day" to finish a couplet:

And not longer in the stream,
Watching lies the silver bream,
Forcing from repeated springs,

⁵⁰ BL. Ms. 50249. *John Bell's Cunningham's Remains*, 2.

⁵¹ For Cunningham's influence on John Clare see John Goodridge, "John Clare and Eighteenth-Century Poetry: Pomfret, Cunningham, Bloomfield," *The Eighteenth Century* 42, no. 3 *Eighteenth-Century Laboring-Class Poets* (2001): 264-278 and Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*, 45-47; Mark Storey, *The Poetry of John Clare: A Critical Introduction* (London: Macmillan Press, 1974): 37-38; Greg Crossan, "Clare's Debt to the Poets in his Library," *John Clare Society Journal* 10 (1991): 27-41.

“Verges in successive rings”.⁵²

Clare asked his publisher Edward Drury to change this line as it was “not my own” in a letter dated April 1819.⁵³ Goodridge has argued that Cunningham offered Clare “a discipline, a schooling in concision” which helped him “to create structure, pace, and an economy of effect. This is a notable strength of Cunningham's pastorals, and Clare's imitations strive to find the verbal precision on which it is based.”⁵⁴ Whether or not Cunningham’s “outsider” status may have been an attraction to the similarly marginalised working poet John Clare, his influence upon Clare’s development as a poet is acknowledged and in this section that seeks to identify Cunningham’s influence upon his close contemporaries, it therefore seems reasonable to add Clare’s name.

ii. Pastoral radicalism

Keith Thomas criticises pastoral poets for giving an entirely false view of rural social relations.⁵⁵ He points out that their idealized shepherds bore no relation to the harsh reality of life for wage-labourers in the countryside. In his words: “The social inequality of the English countryside meant that arcadia had vanished (if it had ever existed).”⁵⁶ This rather sounds like a historian criticising a poet for not writing prose. Cunningham had become the most popular exponent of this ephemeral form by choosing explicitly not to comment on the harsh realities which he personally experienced daily as a poor stroller. Furthermore, as a highly marginalised figure, an Irish, Catholic, itinerant actor in England, he was in no position to express himself in the kind of manner that Thomas suggests. Rather, Cunningham was obliged to encode his sensitive social messages in the highly

⁵² Mark Storey, *Poetry of John Clare*, 38.

⁵³ John Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*, 204, n. 33.

⁵⁴ John Goodridge, “John Clare and Eighteenth-Century Poetry,” 276, 271.

⁵⁵ See Keith Thomas’s chapter “Town and Country,” in *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (London: Penguin, 1984), 243-254.

⁵⁶ Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, 251.

formulaic language and feeling of sentimental pastoral.⁵⁷ The *London Magazine* “Memoirs” made clear the “disadvantages” under which the “worthy and ingenious” Cunningham had laboured.⁵⁸ Although the writer acknowledged that these were “illiberal and uncandid” prejudices, he noted that being “by birth an Irishman, and by profession a player” it “will be deemed incredible” that he should have been thought “not only as the first of poets, but of men, in the age he lived [author’s note: In the pastoral walk, it ought to be added].” The obituarist does not mention that as well as being Irish and a player, Cunningham was also a Catholic, as Ritson noted in a short account of his life written inside a copy of his collected verse.⁵⁹

Due to its lack of explicit political argument, radical London editors of the 1790s found the use of pastoral verse challenging, although John Barrell notes that they considered the “cultivation of sentiment as an important aspect of the political education they seek to impart.”⁶⁰ Cunningham’s sentimental verse set in an earlier “golden age” conforms to the radicalism identified by Alastair Bonnett in *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia*.⁶¹ Bonnett reminds readers that “radical” in the eighteenth century had a quite different meaning to our post-Marxian understanding of the term and was associated with the conservation and restoration of long-held political rights. In an historicist reading he focuses on two of the most radical English thinkers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the journalist and farmer William Cobbett and “the poorest and most determined militant in English history” Newcastle’s Thomas Spence, both of whom vigorously argued against change.⁶² Cobbett resisted the corruption that he saw developing with the new commercial society around him, arguing that “we want nothing new. We have great constitutional laws and principles, to which we are immovably attached. We want great alteration, but we want

⁵⁷ On the question of why non-elite poets wrote pastoral poetry see John Barrell, “*Rus in Urbe*,” in Connell and Leask, *Romanticism and Popular Culture*, 109-127.

⁵⁸ *London Magazine*, “Memoirs of the late Mr John Cunningham,” 42.

⁵⁹ See Joseph Ritson, *The Letters of Joseph Ritson*, 1:vi-viii. n. 1.

⁶⁰ John Barrell, “*Rus in Urbe*,” 123. See also Bridget Keegan, *British Labouring Class Nature Poetry, 1730-1837* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2008), 173.

⁶¹ Alastair Bonnett, *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York & London: Continuum, 2010).

⁶² Bonnett, *Left in the Past*, 62.

nothing new.”⁶³ Spence stated in his 1797 publication, *The Rights of Infants* that “The Golden Age, so fam’d by Men of Yore / Shall soon be counted fabulous no more.”⁶⁴ Christopher Hill identified Spence’s belief in the restoration of a golden age as “one of the great revolutions of radical thought.”⁶⁵ This correlates with Cunningham’s verse, as the whole point of his pastoral is that his “plain” where all the action takes place must remain neutral. It belongs to a “golden age,” another, ideal time. Therefore viewed in this radical light, rather than revealing Thomas’ sense of desertion, Cunningham might be seen as an enlightened cosmopolitan living as “*un homme qui n’a point de demeure fixe*” (a man of no fixed abode) as defined in one of the major texts of the Enlightenment, Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*.⁶⁶ Or, to use an older English reference for someone who belongs to “the world city”, Richard Hakluyt’s definition from 1598 defines “Cosmopolites” as “a citizen and member of the whole and onely one mysticall citie universal” in what appears to be the first English use of the term.⁶⁷

Cunningham is specifically a poet of nowhere in particular. His poems are absent of any local identifiers or even general signs of national identity, and they are often apostrophic, addressed to absent friends. They are “Anglo-Irish in their deracination” Radcliffe argues “and perhaps even Irish-Catholic in a response to emigration that treats ‘home’ as a tenuous floating-island of the imagination.”⁶⁸ With its “narrow range of diction and theme, hypnotic rhythm, and a lack of georgic specificity” Radcliffe has also compared Cunningham’s pastoral to James Macpherson’s *Ossian*.⁶⁹ Cunningham was certainly familiar with *Ossian* having written the prologue and epilogue for *The*

⁶³ William Cobbett, “To the Blanketeers,” *Cobbett’s Weekly Political Register* (27 March 1819), 830-31.

⁶⁴ Thomas Spence, *The Rights of Infants* (London:1797), 10.

⁶⁵ Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the 17th Century* (London: Pimlico, 2001), 49.

⁶⁶ Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert, *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, 2021), online ed., 2021, <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>, accessed 24 Jan 2022.

⁶⁷ Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, vol. 1. (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 54.

⁶⁸ Radcliffe “Sawney and Dermot,” 89.

⁶⁹ See David Hill Radcliffe “Ancient Poetry and British Pastoral,” in *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations*, eds. Fiona J. Stafford and Howard Gaskill (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 27-28.

Muse of Ossian which was possibly the first-ever adaptation of Macpherson's work for the stage. The three-act tragedy was written by David Erskine Baker and performed by West Digges' Edinburgh company in 1763.⁷⁰ Cunningham's prologue spoken by Digges celebrated Macpherson's "translations" for their timelessness and free verse form:

Can we peruse a Pathos more than attic,
 Mor [sic] with the golden treasure stamp'd dramatic?
 Here are no lines in measur'd pace that trip it;
 No modern scenes, so lifeless, so insipid!⁷¹

In her analysis of adaptations of *Ossian* for the stage, Corinna Laughlin notes Cunningham's repeated use of the word "nervous" in the prologue, pointing out Samuel Johnson's dictionary definition for the word as, "well-strung; strong; vigorous" while also implying "a certain susceptibility to feeling."⁷² By choosing to use the word, Cunningham is consciously employing the rhetoric of sensibility to describe something deeply felt by the senses, which he also identifies with honour and a passionate northern identity, as he makes plain in the concluding lines:

Wrought by a Muse, no sacred fire debarr'd her;
 'Tis *nervous*, *noble* – 'tis true NORTHERN *ardor*!⁷³

He thereby identifies sensibility as an archetypal form of pathos rooted in Ossian's ancient "Highland hills".⁷⁴ Dafydd Moore notes this "interesting" prologue that announces the Highlands as "the real Parnassus" and highlights Cunningham's claim that the compass had shifted and rather "Ossian was *himself* the TRUE APOLLO."⁷⁵ The mention of the North is a rare geographical

⁷⁰ David Erskine Baker, *Muse of Ossian* (Edinburgh: Printed for the author, 1763). For this play see Dafydd Moore, "The Reception of the *Poems of Ossian* in England and Scotland," in *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, ed. Howard Gaskill (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), 35-36.

⁷¹ Cunningham, *Poems, Chiefly Pastoral*, 149.

⁷² Corinna Laughlin, "The Lawless Language of Macpherson's 'Ossian,'" *Restoration and Eighteenth Century Studies in English Literature, 1500-1800* 40, no. 3 (2000): 519.

⁷³ Cunningham, *Poems, Chiefly Pastoral*, 150.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Dafydd Moore, "The Reception of the *Poems of Ossian*," 35.

identifier in Cunningham's poetry which in this case is unsurprising as the material was written to frame the "pick and mix" adaptation by Baker of a fashionable Scottish work.⁷⁶ Thomas F. Bonnell has argued that the "bardic pastoral" which developed later in the century increasingly appealed for authority to national customs and traditions for which ethnographic context was essential.⁷⁷ However, as Radcliffe notes, in Cunningham's mid-century humanitarian pastoral, where the main issue is the rights of man, "ethnographic particularity tends to be superfluous".⁷⁸ Nevertheless, although Cunningham remained resolutely neutral, his influence on the nationalist poetics of later writers' bardic pastoral has been identified by Radcliffe, particularly in his "landscape descriptions, peculiarities of language, manners ... and the reconstitution of 'simplicity' as sincerity or suffering innocence."⁷⁹

Cunningham's contemporaries, who were well trained in decoding messages hidden within sentimental expression, recognised him as a champion of the poor and oppressed. These include the Scottish dialect poet Robert Fergusson, who wrote an "Enconium" to Cunningham when he heard that his fellow poet had died. According to Irving's biography of Fergusson published in 1800 this poem was the last he ever wrote as he died in a madhouse shortly afterwards.⁸⁰ Fergusson's "Enconium" appeared as the introduction to Cunningham's section in the 1822 Goldsmith anthology. Therefore, in the pastoral poetic tradition, the oaten reed had been passed from Shenstone, via Cunningham to Fergusson.

To the cheerful he usher'd his smiles,
To the woeful his sigh and his tear;
A condoler with want and her toils,
When the voice of oppression was near.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Thomas F. Bonnell, *The Most Disreputable Trade: Publishing the Classics of English Poetry 1765-1810* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 251.

⁷⁸ Radcliffe, "Sawney and Dermot," 97.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Robert Fergusson, *The Poetical Works of Robert Fergusson, with the Life of the Author. By David Irving. Embellished with Three Elegant Engravings* (Glasgow: Chapman and Lang, 1800), 52-55.

Let the favour'd of Fortune attend
To the ails of the wretched and poor;
Though Corydon's lays could befriend,
'Tis riches alone that can cure.⁸¹

This acknowledges Cunningham's sympathetic humanitarian engagement, although Ferguson directly addresses how to remedy the suffering of the poor by improving their financial circumstances. A review in Edinburgh's *Weekly Magazine* noted the shift that Ferguson had made in honour of Cunningham:

Mr Fergusson is already well known in the Poetical Department. His pieces wrote in the Scots language are perhaps equal to any of the kind this country has produced; and it is with no small surprize we see him, who has almost dedicated his talents to *humour* alone, shine so conspicuously in the tender elegiac.⁸²

There is no evidence that Cunningham and Fergusson met but they shared a mutual friend in the actor Thomas Lancashire for whom the Scottish poet wrote "On the Death of Mr Thomas Lancashire, comedian, an Epigram."⁸³ Lancashire was a subscriber to Cunningham's first edition of *Poems, Chiefly Pastoral*, taking thirteen copies. Poets of nation such as Fergusson or Burns may seem a far cry from Cunningham whose verse deliberately avoids identifiable markers of locational identity, but in his critical biography, William E. Gillis, Jr argues that "Fergusson often shows himself a disciple of Cunningham even more than of Shenstone, as was also the case with Burns."⁸⁴ This section has sought to better understand why Edith Morley drew public attention to a half-forgotten Irish stroller and has identified Cunningham's pastoral as a form of radical expression.⁸⁵ The next section considers his relationship with Newcastle's radical print tradition.

⁸¹ Robert Fergusson, "Enconium," in *The British Poets: Cunningham & Goldsmith*, 18.

⁸² *The Weekly Magazine* (Edinburgh), 21 October 1773.

⁸³ Robert Fergusson, *The Poetical Works of Robert Fergusson*, 82.

⁸⁴ William E. Gillis, Jr., "Auld Reikie's Laureate: Robert Fergusson, A Critical Biography," PhD diss., Edinburgh University (1955), 158. n. 9.

⁸⁵ Edith J. Morley, "John Cunningham," 40.

The “Print Shop”

This section examines Cunningham’s association with the Newcastle printer, Thomas Slack, who has been identified in the history of Newcastle print culture as the initiator of the town’s radical tradition and seeks to establish why Joseph Cowen commemorated Cunningham almost a century after his death.⁸⁶ The actor’s relationship with Ann Slack is also examined as he supplied poems for her publications *The Lady* and *The Lady’s Memorandum* while travelling on the Durham circuit. Although their company may have been in Thomas Slack’s name by law, the Slacks operated as a business partnership and the correspondence between Ann Slack and Cunningham reveals her formidable managerial capabilities.

i. *The Newcastle Chronicle*

Cunningham helped the Slacks to develop *The Newcastle Chronicle: or, General Weekly Advertiser* which was established in 1764.⁸⁷ An advertisement for the new publication of “News, Commerce, and Entertainment” stated it was particularly aimed towards “The LADIES (whose Approbation it will always be our highest Ambition to merit).”⁸⁸ Cunningham’s poetry was particularly popular among the female readership, making his work an important contribution to the paper’s early success by helping to develop the readership as the Slacks’ daughter Sarah Hodgson acknowledged:

⁸⁶ On Thomas Slack’s radicalism see James E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism: Non-conformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 341, 364-365, 379.

⁸⁷ For an account of the newspaper’s early years see Peter Isaac, “The Earliest Proprietors of the Newcastle Chronicle,” in *Newspapers in the Northeast; the “Fourth Estate” at Work in Northumberland & Durham*, ed. Peter Isaac (Wylam: Allenholme Press, 1999), 153-162.

⁸⁸ T. Slack and Co. *Just published, price two-pence half-penny, to be continued weekly on the Saturday, by T. Slack, (bookseller) and Co. A new periodical paper of News, Commerce, and Entertainment, entitled, The Newcastle Chronicle: or, General Weekly Advertiser.* [Newcastle upon Tyne]: s.n., [1765]. *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* (accessed February 24, 2022).

<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0105532068/ECCO?u=uniyork&sid=bookmark-ECCO&xid=39479ead&pg=1>.

The real cement of friendship between Cuny [as he was known to his friends] & my father was at first mutual advantage. About this time the *Chronicle* commenced & Cuny's poetical pieces were published therein in rotation as he wrote them. It was just at the time when pastoral poetry was the fashion of the day, so that giving his pieces publicity made him be ranked amongst the first rate poets, and was likewise an advantage to the *Chronicle*.⁸⁹

This is significant because it establishes that Cunningham was not a beneficiary of Slack's patronage but rather their relationship was a mutually beneficial business arrangement.

A narrative about Cunningham's dependence upon the Slacks' largesse originated in the *London Magazine's* "Memoirs" and this was later embellished by Robert Cromek in an editorial note published with Cunningham's song "Kate of Aberdeen" in *Select Scottish Songs* (1810).⁹⁰ According to Cromek, Cunningham walked to London in order to present his 1766 volume of verse to David Garrick to whom it was dedicated. Garrick then humiliated Cunningham by giving him a couple of guineas and dismissing him with the line: "Players, sir, as well as poets, are always poor." However, an article "Life of a Strolling Player" in *Fraser's Magazine* which relied on previously unpublished correspondence, shows this pathetic story of the provincial stroller making the long hopeful journey to London and suffering metropolitan rejection at the hands of his theatrical hero to be "pure invention."⁹¹ Cunningham did travel to the capital about five years before the publication of his collection, when he attempted to work for a London bookseller.⁹² However, soon after his arrival, his employer was bankrupted and according to the "Memoirs" as "Cunningham was incapable of prostituting his pen ... he bade adieu to the bustle, the pollution of London" and he never returned.⁹³ Therefore, rather than experiencing metropolitan rejection, Cunningham appears

⁸⁹ James Hodgson, "John Cunningham Pastoral Poet, 1729-1773: Recollections and Some Original Letters," *Archaeologia Aeliana* 3, no. 18 (Newcastle upon Tyne: Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1921): 86.

⁹⁰ Robert Hartley Cromek, ed., *Select Scottish Songs, Ancient and Modern; with Critical Observations and Biographical Notices by Robert Burns*, vol. 1. (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1810), 25-29. This features a note on Cunningham by Burns, editorial note by Cromek, and a picture of Cunningham by Bewick with the song "Kate of Aberdeen."

⁹¹ Froude and Tulloch, *Fraser's Magazine*, 258-259.

⁹² *London Magazine*, "Memoirs of the late Mr John Cunningham," 697-98

⁹³ *Ibid.*

to have rejected the metropolis. The idea of the Slacks as Cunningham's generous patrons was further reinforced by the fact that they paid for a table tomb to be placed over his grave after his death in Newcastle in 1773. However, while it is clear from their correspondence that Cunningham developed a close personal relationship, particularly with Thomas Slack's wife, the grammarian Ann Slack, theirs was always a mutually supportive business arrangement from which the Slacks greatly benefitted.

Shortly after the launch of the *Chronicle* Slack's gratitude and desire to remain on good terms is evident from a letter sent to Cunningham at the George Inn, Sunderland inviting the actor to stay with his family over the coming holidays: "I beg you may make my house your home while you stay that I may have some opportunity to acknowledge all your favours and I do assure you every mark of your esteem for the Chronicle will lay me under new obligations as done to any favourite infant child."⁹⁴ Ann Slack also expressed their debt to Cunningham in a letter written in 1771 in which she assured the actor: "I shall forget everything, sooner than the great Obligations we stand under to Mr Cunningham since the first Commencement of the Chronicle & in Return will ever be his Friend in the best sense of the Word."⁹⁵ Cunningham's theatrical contemporaries also held him in high regard. The "Northern Roscius" West Digges urged him in repeated letters to return to Edinburgh and live with him and his partner, the actress George Ann Bellamy. "D-strolling! ..." he wrote, "I have prepared a snug bed-chamber under my roof for you, and we will live like friends and philosophers together ... there we will sit down and alter plays and amuse ourselves as well as we can."⁹⁶ In another letter Digges told him: "I have fitted up a little reading room and have placed two elbow chairs in it for your use and my own. – I propose to pass many many pleasant days together, and enjoy what some poet or other has called 'the Feast of Reason & the flow of soul.'⁹⁷ Cunningham did not return to Scotland, but this shows how highly Digges

⁹⁴ BL. Ms. 50249. *John Bell's Cunningham's Remains*, 166.

⁹⁵ BL. Hodgson Papers Vol V. Additional Ms. 50244. *Correspondence*. No. 8. Letter from Ann Slack to Cunningham (25 Oct 1771).

⁹⁶ Froude and Tulloch, *Fraser's Magazine*, 255.

⁹⁷ BL. Ms. 50249. *John Bell's Cunningham's Remains*, 155.

valued his writing and sociable company. Several prologues that Cunningham wrote for Digges' company appeared in the first edition of his collected verse, including one for Bellamy's first appearance at Edinburgh, who was "New to this northern scene" in 1762 but was intent "to hit - what criticks call - the *happy right*."⁹⁸

Cunningham's contribution to the success of the Slacks' *Chronicle* is politically significant. The Slacks and their associates, including the members of the Durham company, were important oppositional figures in the town in this period, when, as Rosemary Sweet points out, "a large proportion of the population of Newcastle was becoming increasingly disenchanted with the Corporation and its oligarchic grip on the administration and trade of the town."⁹⁹ The newly launched *Chronicle* acted at this critical moment as the sounding board for the interests in the town and region which were opposed to the interests of entrenched power and more inclined towards political reform. According to Sweet there were about 2,500 freemen in Newcastle at this time; therefore, the newspaper had a large potential readership for its political content.¹⁰⁰ Slack clearly had reservations about the independence of corporations. In 1775, when writing against the American war in the *Chronicle*, he described the Newcastle Corporation as oppressors in several editorial pieces, stating that aldermen, mayors and the corporation "are almost always mere tools of ministers, and clogs to public liberty."¹⁰¹ His radicalism is further exemplified by the publication of an edition of the revolutionary French journalist Jean-Paul Marat's first political work, *The Chains of Slavery*, in the week that Newcastle citizens were asked to sign a petition against the American war in October 1775.¹⁰² This book was described by Jean Massin as "the first modern treatise on

⁹⁸ Cunningham, *Poems, Chiefly Pastoral*, 146. Other material written for Bellamy includes an epilogue as Lady Fanciful, 153-54 and an epilogue for Anthony and Cleopatra, 155-56; material spoken by Digges includes a prologue for the opening of the Edinburgh Theatre in 1763, 147-48; the prologue for "To Rule a Wife," 157-58; and "A Eulogium on Masonry," 159-60.

⁹⁹ Rosemary Sweet, "The Production of Urban Histories in Eighteenth-Century England," *Urban History* 23, no. 2 (August 1996), 183.

¹⁰⁰ Rosemary Sweet, "Production of Urban Histories," 183, n. 51

¹⁰¹ *Newcastle Chronicle* (Newcastle upon Tyne) 10 October 1775. For Slack's activity with other northern radicals over the support for war see Bradley, *English Radicalism*, 364.

¹⁰² Bradley, *English Radicalism*, 341.

insurrection.”¹⁰³ In examining its publishing history Rachel Hammersley has revealed the British origins of Marat’s revolutionary radicalism and the part that Slack and the Newcastle guilds played in its formation.¹⁰⁴ As well as objecting to the American War, Slack’s editorials supported Wilkes and helped to galvanise resistance in the local Town Moor controversy which radicalised Thomas Spence and helped to give birth to his “Plan” for the common ownership of land.¹⁰⁵

The Slacks were Protestant dissenters driven by a commitment to print’s potential for moral education. They were also highly entrepreneurial and clearly wanted to publish Cunningham’s first collection of verse. When he was performing at the Durham Playhouse in July 1764, Thomas Slack sent Cunningham “a set of your friend Shenstone’s work and beg you will accept of as a small acknowledgment of the many favours I have had from you.”¹⁰⁶ The Slacks faced stiff competition from printers in London and Edinburgh, “so favourably was his genius thought of in the book selling market.”¹⁰⁷ These included Dr Johnson’s friend Tom Davies who had a printing business in Russell Street and according to the actor, Phil Lewis, he had been anxious to publish Cunningham’s collection and was disappointed not to do so.¹⁰⁸ A 1764 letter from the Edinburgh printers John Wotherspoon and Gilbert Martin, suggested “We might, perhaps, make a bargain with you” while also requesting contributions for their magazine which was “in a lamentable famine of poetry and

¹⁰³ Cited in Clifford D. Conner, *Jean Paul Marat, Tribune of the French Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 2012), 15.

¹⁰⁴ Rachel Hammersley, “Jean-Paul Marat’s ‘The Chains of Slavery’ in Britain and France, 1774-1833,” *The Historical Journal* 48 (Sept. 2005), 641-660. Hammersley argues the tropes of slavery and liberty employed by Marat were also used by the English seventeenth-century “Commonwealthmen.”

¹⁰⁵ For the Town Moor dispute see Bradley, *English Radicalism*, 255-75. For early studies of Thomas Spence see H. T. Dickenson, ed., *The Political Works of Thomas Spence* (Newcastle: Averro, 1982) and T. R. Knox, “The Trumpet of Jubilee,” *Past and Present* 76 (Aug 1977): 75-98. Spence is currently being reassessed, see the essays in Alastair Bonnett and Keith Armstrong eds., *Thomas Spence: The Poor Man’s Revolutionary* (London: Breviary Stuff Publications, 2014). In terms of linguistics, Joan C. Beal has worked to dispel the idea of Thomas Spence as a “forgotten phonetician” see Joan C. Beal, *English Pronunciation in the Eighteenth Century: Thomas Spence’s “Grand Repository of the English Language”* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and for more recent work see Joan Beal, “A radical plan for the English language: Thomas Spence’s ‘New Alphabet,’ ” *Miranda* [Online], 13 | 2016, Online since 17 November 2016, <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/9244>, accessed 26 May 2020.

¹⁰⁶ BL. Ms. 50249. *John Bell’s Cunningham’s Remains*, 164.

¹⁰⁷ Froude and Tulloch, *Fraser’s Magazine*, 256.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

wit.”¹⁰⁹ Cunningham chose to publish at the Slack’s establishment, which was known as the “Print Shop” and acted as a meeting point for intellectual and literary figures associated with the town and region.¹¹⁰ The volume included poems that had previously appeared in the Slacks’ newspaper and twenty prologues and epilogues written for performances in theatres at Edinburgh, Berwick, Newcastle, North Shields, Sunderland, Whitby, Scarborough, York, Harrogate and Norwich.¹¹¹

ii. Ann Slack, grammarian and entrepreneur

The relationship between Cunningham and the Slacks exemplifies the proximity between print culture and the stage. Their relationship also provides insight into the working practices of the Slacks’ business. Victoria E. M. Gardner’s study of the business of eighteenth-century news includes Thomas Slack and John Ware the proprietor of the *Cumberland Pacquet and Ware’s Whitehaven Advertiser*.¹¹² By approaching the subject as a form of “information brokerage” she reveals networks of influence, cooperation and competition that reached across the region and beyond. Gardner describes the Newcastle business as owned and run by Thomas Slack, but the correspondence between Ann Slack and Cunningham suggests that the business was run more like a partnership and that Ann Slack is an example of the kind of middling-sort urban businesswoman that Christine Wiskin has identified.¹¹³ In her studies of Ann Slack’s work as a teacher, grammarian and publisher, Barbara Crosbie has shown her to have been an important member of the local

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Richard Welford, “Early Newcastle Typography, 1693-1800,” *Archeologica Aeliana* 3, no. 3 (Newcastle: Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1907): 37.

¹¹¹ For the prologues and epilogues see John Cunningham, *Poems, Chiefly Pastoral*, 135-176, 221.

¹¹² Victoria E. M. Gardner, *The Business of News in England, 1760–1820* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 121-129; 135-137, 141.

¹¹³ Christine Wiskin, “Urban Businesswomen in Eighteenth-Century England,” in *Women and Urban Life in Eighteenth-Century England*, eds. Rosemary Sweet and Penelope Lane (London: Routledge, 2003), 87-109. See also Nicola Phillips, *Women in Business 1700 – 1850* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006) and Hannah Barker, *The Business of Women: Female Enterprise and Urban Development in Northern England 1760 – 1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

business community in her own right.¹¹⁴ Previous to her marriage Ann Slack had established and managed an evening school in Newcastle's St. Nicholas's Church Yard for young working women who wanted to develop their literacy skills, for which she advertised in the *Newcastle Journal*.¹¹⁵ She published *A New Grammar and Spelling Book* in 1750 which establishes her as arguably Britain's first female grammarian and the book passed through forty editions.¹¹⁶ Her books, which appeared under her professional name, Ann Fisher, were the fourth most re-printed grammar publications in the eighteenth century.¹¹⁷

Cunningham's verse was also a valuable asset for her publications *The Lady* and *The Lady's Memorandum*. While his second edition of verse was "not dry enough to bind" in 1771 she informed him: "Now we are agoing on with the Ladies Memorandum Book & I hope to be favour'd with a Pastoral, a song or some recommendations Article from Mr Cunningham or we shall loss Ground with it."¹¹⁸ The letters reveal her interpersonal skills and managerial capacity as she cajoles Cunningham to produce verse for the publications. When her husband is away in London handling their partnership with Robinson and Roberts, she writes that "Mr Slack is at London, & has been for some time, on which account I have been too much hurried with business to be so punctual in my correspondence as I cou'd have wished."¹¹⁹ She informs Cunningham about business matters regarding copyright as well as describing technical details of the printing process.¹²⁰ She also

¹¹⁴ Barbara Crosbie, "Anne Fisher's New Grammar: Textbooks and Teaching in Eighteenth-Century Newcastle Upon Tyne," *Publishing History* 74 (2013): 49-65. See also Barbara Crosbie, "Provincial Purveyors of Culture," in *The Economy and Culture in North-East England, 1500-1800*, edited by Adrian Green and Barbara Crosbie (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer 2018), 205-229. For an earlier study see María E. Rodríguez-Gil, "Ann Fisher: First female grammarian," *Historical Sociolinguistics and Sociolinguistics* 1 (2002).

¹¹⁵ Barbara Crosbie, "Anne Fisher's New Grammar," 55-56. See also Ria Kathryn Snowdon, "Georgian Women and the Business of Print: Family Gender and the Provincial Press of Northern England, 1700-1850," (PhD diss., Newcastle University, 2010), 194-95. Snowdon's study examines Ann Slack and her entrepreneurial daughter Sarah Hodgson.

¹¹⁶ Snowdon, "Georgian Women and the Business of Print," 195.

¹¹⁷ For early grammar writers see Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade, "Grammars, grammarians and grammar writing: An introduction," in *Grammars, Grammarians and Grammar-Writing in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Ingrid Tieken Boon van Ostade (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008), 1-14.

¹¹⁸ BL. Ms. 50244. *Correspondence*. Letter from Ann Slack to Cunningham (4 Sept. 1771).

¹¹⁹ BL. Ms. 50244. *Correspondence*. Letter from Ann Slack to Cunningham (17 Sept. 1771).

¹²⁰ BL. Ms. 50244. *Correspondence*. Letter from Ann Slack to Cunningham (14 Nov. 1769).

repeatedly encourages him to write new material for a second collection of verse. In April 1771 she remarked that it was, “Spring the best season of all for Poets” and encouraged him to get writing:

Now Mr Cunningham you talk of stringing up your Muse, but we never hear a single Twang of her: pray sir set to working in good Earnest or yr second Vol will be in the Posthumus way.¹²¹

Bell’s collection contains a pastoral ballad starting with the line: “Tis the birthday of Phillis hark how ye birds sing” at the bottom of which is a note “Tis yours & for no hands but your own.” It is undated and on the back is simply addressed to Ann Slack at the “Printing Office” in Newcastle with no identifying post marks (figure 11).¹²²

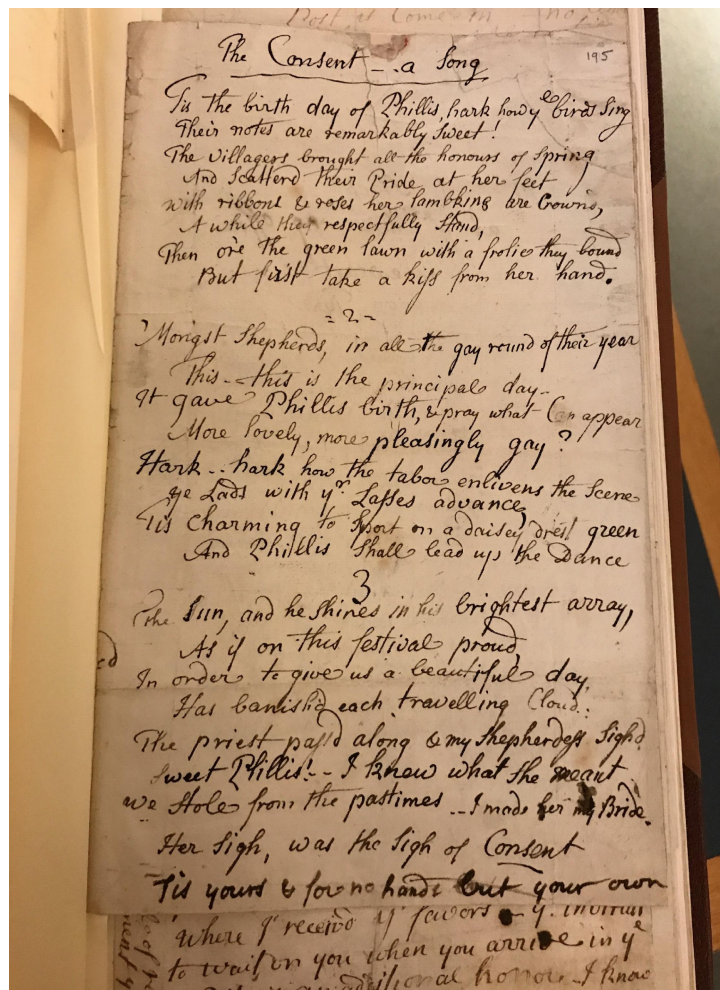


Figure 11. Cunningham’s song “The Consent” written in his hand.

¹²¹ BL. Ms. 50249. John Bell’s Cunningham’s Remains, 188. (fragment)

¹²² BL. Ms. 50249. John Bell’s Cunningham’s Remains, 195.

While it isn't possible to know where on the circuit he wrote the song, it was performed at the Durham theatre on 29 March 1773, as a surviving playbill announces the "Birth-Day of Phillis" written by Cunningham was sung by Mrs Price after the comedy *The Jealous Wife* (figure 12).¹²³

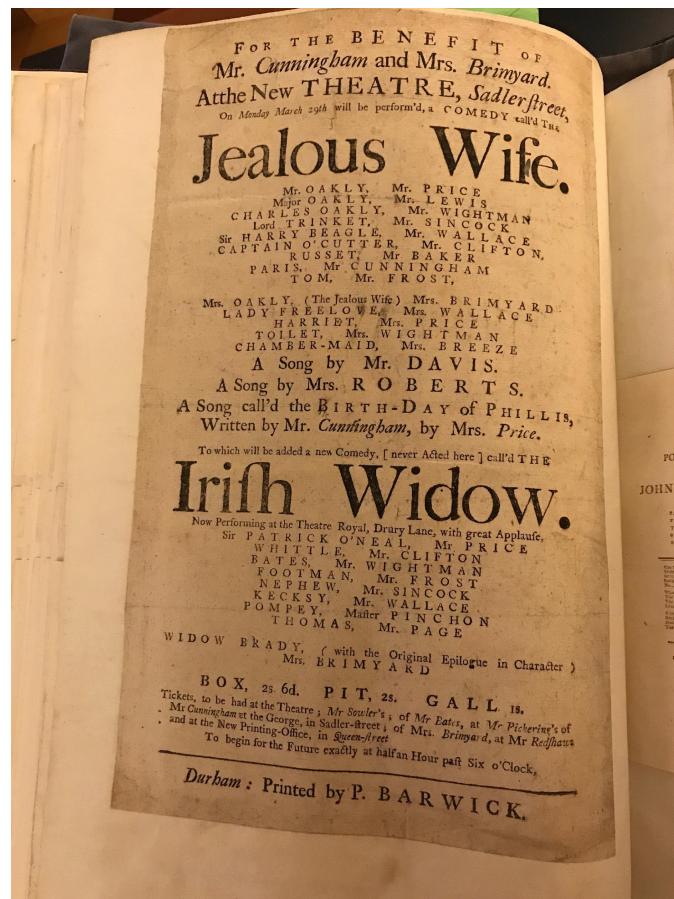


Figure 12. Cunningham's Benefit at the Sadler Street Theatre, Durham (March 29, 1773).

Bell's scrapbook also includes the song "The Winter of Life" written at Scarborough in Cunningham's hand on the back of a letter to Ann Slack dated 13 September 1771, which he wrote after "one of our singing ladies" in the company had requested a ballad and he had set about it, "in hopes (Trifling as it is) your Memorandum might admit it."¹²⁴ Cunningham provides a hint about how such fashionable songs were employed, by noting: "Tis a pity we had not contriv'd to make our publication before the Scarborough Spaw Season. The Earl of Kingston & his lady sent for me

¹²³ BL. Ms. 50249. *John Bell's Cunningham's Remains*, 137.

¹²⁴ BL. Ms. 50249. *John Bell's Cunningham's Remains*, 185.

(They are my country folk) about it, my answer was a Blank.” In this period when patronage was still the norm, such verse was a valuable piece of cultural capital to win favour. Cunningham was also careful to protect his output and to provide Slack with exclusive material for publication, as he informs her that the song “is in no hands but *mine*, our musical composer, & now in yours, so that it shall be intirely yours, if it pleases you that it should be so.” The company’s musical director at this time was William Shield.¹²⁵ Shield’s publication, *A Collection of Favourite Songs*, includes several song lyrics attributed to Cunningham including one in “THE SCOTS TASTE” which was published in *The Lady’s Magazine* in 1774.¹²⁶ According to *The Thespian Dictionary* it was Cunningham who encouraged Shield to join the Durham company, beginning his theatrical career at Scarborough where he “soon evinced his talents for musical composition.”¹²⁷ This therefore serves as another example of cultural brokerage, as Cunningham’s travel in the region which strolling allowed, enabled him to meet Shield in Newcastle and thereby set the young musician on his way to pursuing his career.

Cunningham’s correspondence with Ann Slack illuminates the shift taking place during this period when an economic system based on market forces was replacing older traditions that continued to frame social exchange. His reference to the patronage of the Earl of Kingston shows the manner in which older hierarchies of deference and paternalism still functioned while the new market-driven practices, exemplified by Ann Slack’s publications, were developing.¹²⁸ A signed memorandum survives showing that in 1771, the Slacks paid Cunningham seventy-six pounds for nine hundred and sixty copies of the second edition of his volume of verse.¹²⁹ This included

¹²⁵ For how music contributed to the Georgian theatrical experience see Vanessa L. Rogers, “Orchestra and Theatre Music,” in *the Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832*, eds. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 304-320.

¹²⁶ Amélie Addison, “William Shield’s *A Collection of Favourite Songs* (c. 1775),” in *Music in North-East England, 1500-1800*, eds. Stephanie Carter, Kirsten Gibson, and Roz Southey (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Inc, 2020), 249.

¹²⁷ “Shield W.,” *The Thespian Dictionary; Or, Dramatic Biography of the Eighteenth Century* (London, J. Cundee for T. Hurst 1802), unpaginated.

¹²⁸ See Rosemary Sweet, “Production of Urban Histories,” 172.

¹²⁹ BL. Ms. 50249. *John Bell’s Cunningham’s Remains*, 189.

payment for the copyright over all future editions. It suggests that their relationship was between a capitalist employer and a wage-earning labourer, but their association was complicated by the fact that the Slacks owed Cunningham a debt for their initial success. Ann Slack speaks of another debt she owed Cunningham in a letter dated 24 June 1769:

Your Poetical Tale addressed to Ethrington came safe to hand for which I heartily thank you; but shall never think myself out of your Debt for it. 'Tis prodigiously admired by all ye Association at Home, (i.e. Mr Slack Robinson Bob) as ye prettiest pastoral Tale yt ever was wrote, tho' Occasion had not been so interesting. We cannot expect it will be admitted into ye York Paper from its Length, & ye Publisher's notorious Interest, & shou'd we put it in any of ye Newcastle Papers ye Author must be guess'd at without any Initials. & from our Connection 'Twil be thought to be procured: Bob is therefore heating his Brains to have ye subject by an Essay, preceeding it & then have it in ye London Papers, when I shall be honour'd indeed in Lines which will live forever.¹³⁰

This relates to a fable, "The Thrush and Pye: A Tale" that Cunningham had recently written about a York Bookseller called Etherington whom he had attacked in verse on behalf of Ann Slack. It was published in the second edition of his collected verse.¹³¹ It tells of an "experienc'd Thrush" that taught "many a neighbouring bird to sing." But her audience is stolen by a "chatt'ring" Pye who gets pecked to death. A footnote informs the reader that the Pye was a Yorkshire bookseller, who had pirated an edition of Ann Slack's grammar book the *Pleasing Instructor*. Cunningham concludes:

Friend E—n, the tale apply,
You are - yourself - the chatt'ring Pye:
Repent, and with a conscious blush,
Go make atonement to the Thrush.

¹³⁰ BL. Ms. 50244. *Correspondence*. Letter from Ann Slack to Cunningham (24 Jun. 1769).

¹³¹ John Cunningham, *Poems, Chiefly Pastoral*, 2nd ed. (Newcastle upon Tyne: T. Slack, 1771), 16-18.

The example of mutual favours uncovered here reveals the potential insight to be gained through enquiry into the relationship between print and the stage at the local level.

iii. Pro-Wilkes' agitation

While an earlier section identified Cunningham's radicalism through his pastoral poetry, this section looks for signs of his political identity through prologues written for theatrical performance. Sarah Hodgson describes Cunningham's friend and manager of the "Print Shop" Robert Carr, known as "Bob", as a highly skilled songwriter, noting that "some of the best election songs that ever appeared on the side of Freedom were written by him."¹³² Cunningham also wrote electioneering songs celebrating Robert Shaftoe and his sponsor Henry Vane, second Earl of Darlington.¹³³ As previously noted, attracting the support of elite patrons continued to be extremely important for northern actors. Cunningham managed to win John Manners, the Marquis of Granby's patronage, as Carr mentions to Cunningham in a letter written in January 1770: "I'm glad your patron & great friend, the M-s of Granby, has come over to us. I congratulate you on this great, this unexpected event."¹³⁴ Later that year, Cunningham commemorated Manners with his verse, "On the Death of Lord Granby" who had died in Scarborough where he had gone to support his candidate, George Cockburne, comptroller of the navy in a parliamentary by-election.¹³⁵ The letter written by Carr in Newcastle to Cunningham, who was then performing at the Sunderland theatre, clearly shows that they were involved in the pro-Wilkes agitation. Carr notes:

You may, & I hope you will, have the honour of being directed to once more by that Champ. Of Liberty, that usurper of almost all my thoughts, words & actions, the immortal Mr Wilkes.¹³⁶

¹³² James Hodgson, "John Cunningham Pastoral Poet," 88.

¹³³ Cunningham, *Poems, Chiefly Pastoral*, 126, 128.

¹³⁴ BL. Ms. 50249. *John Bell's Cunningham's Remains*, 178.

¹³⁵ Cunningham, *Poems, Chiefly Pastoral*, 2nd ed., 229.

¹³⁶ BL. Ms. 50249. *John Bell's Cunningham's Remains*, 178.

In his role as an actor in the playhouse Cunningham engaged with the public in the celebration of liberty.¹³⁷ The Corsican cause had been championed by Wilkes in *The North Briton* in which he called for Britain to support their struggle against French control. The volume of Cunningham's verse published in 1797 by Cooke in *The Works of the English Poets* carried an explicitly political quotation on its title page from a prologue written by Cunningham for a benefit for Corsican independence held at the Sunderland theatre in 1769:

All-gracious Freedom! O vouchsafe to smile
Thro' future ages on this fav'rite Isle!
Far may the boughs of Liberty expand,
For ever cultur'd by the brave and free!
For ever blasted be that impious hand
That lops one branch from this illustrious tree!
Britons! 'tis your to make her verdure thrive,
And keep the roots of Liberty alive. *Stanzas, &c.*¹³⁸

The expression "sons of liberty" had been used by *The North Briton* five years earlier in 1764 in an article arguing that by Britain's negligence, the "zealous sons of liberty, the brave *Corsicans*, who prefer death to chains, the grave to slavery, are suffered to fall a sacrifice to tyranny."¹³⁹ This is the language of the Commonwealthmen also employed by Marat in *The Chains of Slavery*.¹⁴⁰

Cunningham's verse celebrating liberty and written for performance in the public space of a theatre positions him in the liminal space between "the represented and the unrepresented" which Jon Mee has examined through the mediation of songs and toasts later penned by members of radical societies for their meetings in the 1790s.¹⁴¹ The Durham company's identification with Wilkes at this very moment had obvious political connotations. The previous year, after his

¹³⁷ For a recent study of radical sociability and the mediation of "liberty" in the 1790s see Jon Mee, *Print, Publicity and Radicalism in the 1790s: The Laurel of Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹³⁸ Cooke ed., "John Cunningham," *The Works of the English Poets* (London: Cooke, 1797), Title page.

¹³⁹ "On the disagreement of Protestant Liberty with Tory Principles," *North Briton*, 125 (December 1764).

¹⁴⁰ Hammersley, "The Chains of Slavery," 646.

¹⁴¹ See Jon Mee, "Introduction: the open theatre of the world?" in *Print, Publicity and Radicalism*, 1-16.

appearance at the Court of the King's Bench on 20 April 1768, Wilkes' temporary release was celebrated by the rioting coal-heavers of Shadwell with cries of "Wilkes and Liberty, and coal-heavers for ever!"¹⁴² Bread prices doubled in 1768, leading to work stoppages, hoarding, and food riots throughout London. "We might as well be hanged as starved!" was a slogan shouted by desperate rioters.¹⁴³ Mass civil disturbance in London by coal-heavers and sailors, culminated on 10 May 1768 with troops firing into a crowd in St George's Fields, killing twelve and injuring many more which made this London's worst eighteenth-century civil disturbance before the Gordon Riots of 1780.¹⁴⁴ The scale of civil unrest at this time was summarised by Benjamin Franklin's observation made in 1770:

I have seen within a Year, Riots in the Country about Corn, Riots about Elections, Riots about Workhouses, Riots of Colliers, Riots of Weavers, Riots of Coal Heavers, Riots of Sawyers, Riots of Sailors, Riots of Wilksites, Riots of Government Chairmen, Riots of Smugglers in which Customs Officers and Excisemen have been murdered ... Here indeed one would think Riots part of the Mode of Government.¹⁴⁵

Cunningham's prologue for the Corsican benefit at the Sunderland theatre in Franklin's riotous year was also printed in full in the Slacks' *Newcastle Chronicle* which noted that it had been spoken by the actor Brimyard.¹⁴⁶ If Pocock's pronouncement that "Republicanism in England was a language, not a programme" is correct, then Cunningham's prologue serves as a reminder that actors played a crucial role in pronouncing and perpetuating that powerful rhetoric.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴² George Rudé, *Hanoverian London, 1714-1808* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1971), 214.

¹⁴³ George Rudé, "The London 'Mob' of the Eighteenth Century," *The Historical Journal* 2, no. 1 (1959): 11.

¹⁴⁴ Geoffrey W. Rice, "Deceit and Distraction: Britain, France, and the Corsican Crisis of 1768," *The International History Review* 28, no. 2 (Jun 2006): 300.

¹⁴⁵ Franklin, Benjamin, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, eds. Leonard Woods Labaree and William B. Willcox, 27 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959-1978), 17:341-2.

¹⁴⁶ BL. Ms. 50249. *John Bell's Cunningham's Remains*, 190. Literary Articles A.

¹⁴⁷ J. G. A. Pocock, ed., "Historical introduction," in *The Political Works of James Harrington* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 15.

Cunningham's willingness to engage in controversial matters emerges in other prologues published in his collection. "A Petition to the Worshipful Freemasons" written for a masonic bespeak, has an actress ask why women were not allowed to join the association.¹⁴⁸ He also makes a statement about the status of his fellow actors in a prologue written at the time of the passing of the *Jewish Naturalisation Act* of 1753 which allowed Jews to become "naturalised" or citizens of the nation by application to Parliament.¹⁴⁹ This had led to a revival of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* which inspired Cunningham to highlight the legal vulnerability of actors who were liable to be punished as "rogues and vagabonds" in a prologue which begins with the lines:

Twixt the sons of the stage, without pensions or places,
And the vagabond Jews, are some similar cases;
Since time out of mind, or they're wrong'd much by slander,
Both lawless, alike, have been sentenc'd to wander.

Cunningham calls for his fellow performers to be included in the Act, or as he puts it, "Then faith 'tis full time we appeal to the nation, / To be join'd in this bill for na-tu-ra-li-za-ti-on." To finish the piece, he plays on the word "naturaliz'd" again, this time using it to mean the performance of a role in front of the public:

This Shylock, the Jew, whom we mean to restore ye,
Was naturliz'd oft by your fathers before ye;
Then take him tonight to your kindest compassion,
For to countenance Jews is the pink of the fashion.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Cunningham, *Poems, Chiefly Pastoral*, 2nd ed., 231-32.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 207-08. The timing of this prologue's performance can be narrowed down to between the Bill's passing on 7 July 1753 and its repeal seven months later. For the theatrical implications of the bill see L. W. Conolly, "The Merchant of Venice and the Jew Bill of 1753," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (Winter, 1974): 125-127.

¹⁵⁰ For the representation of Jewish characters on the eighteenth-century stage see Michael Ragussis, *Theatrical Nation: Jews and Other Outlandish Englishmen in Georgian Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

Behind Cunningham's light-hearted association of actors with one of the most socially excluded of wandering races, lies the awareness that actors and particularly strollers lived apart from society due to their lack of legal status. Also underlying the joke is the wry reminder that acting as a profession was not considered "natural" by many members of the nation, which as has been previously noted was a cause of complaint repeatedly found in strolling tales.

Stephen Kemble invoked Cunningham's name in an address to Parliament in verse which he wrote to make a case for the recognition of an actor's legal status.¹⁵¹ *The Strolling Player* is based on Cunningham's experience as a travelling actor performing "as far as from the winding Tees, / To where fair Tweed flows to the seas."¹⁵² Kemble argues that in this role, Cunningham was performing in a profession "termed vagrant by society."¹⁵³ He casts Cunningham as the very embodiment of a northern actor and while playing upon motifs of northern *genus loci* with references to the Tees and Tweed, he exploits Cunningham's national celebrity as the poet was a popular figure likely to arouse sympathy. Kemble's "tale in rhyme" is addressed to "the members of both houses of Parliament" and presents Cunningham as the exemplar of an improver of society who had provided well intentioned observations through his verse, for which he was simultaneously praised and despised:

And shall He then, who acts so true,
That the dead live to lesson you,
Shall he – who sense and taste displays,
A lawless vagrant live his days!¹⁵⁴

While emphasising drama's "wond'rous mighty mystic charm" and ridiculing anti-theatrical critics as the "mad fanatic" who "damns the stage ... with enthusiastic rage", Kemble uses the memory of

¹⁵¹ S. G. Kemble, "The Strolling Player, a tale in rhyme, most humbly addressed to the Members of both Houses of Parliament," *Odes, Lyrical Ballads and Poems on Various Occasions* (Edinburgh: J. Ballantyne and Co, 1809), 76-96. See also Kemble, "Cunningham, a pastoral," in *Odes*, 278-80.

¹⁵² Kemble, *Odes*, 92.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 91.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 95.

Cunningham to call for the vagrancy law to be lifted for actors and thereby improve the condition of public servants who perform a valuable role in society.¹⁵⁵

According to an article in the *Newcastle Chronicle*, Kemble recited this political address as his final words on the stage of Newcastle's Theatre Royal when his fourteen year reign there finally came to an end on 27 October 1806.¹⁵⁶ He had engaged Samuel Butler's company for six nights during fair week and on the evening of his final benefit the *Chronicle* reported that Butler performed in one of his most celebrated roles, Sir Pertinent Mac Sycophant in *The Man of the World*, after which Kemble recited "a Manuscript Piece, called "A Sketch of the Life of Cunningham, the Poet: or, The Strolling Actor."¹⁵⁷ This local highly self-reflexive and sentimental material delivered by arguably the most famous northern theatrical celebrity in tribute to the North's most famous stroller must have generated a heightened atmosphere in the Newcastle Theatre Royal and helped to solidify Cunningham's association with the town.

Another indication of Cunningham's long-standing local fame is suggested by Cawdell's prelude "An Appeal to the Muses: or, Apollo's Decree" which was spoken at the opening of the new Durham theatre in March 1792 and includes a eulogy to Cunningham:

To these fair climes, and their indulgent tribes,
A late deceased bard his fame ascribes.
Banish'd his own, he sought those happier plains,
Whose genial warmth inspir'd his tuneful strains.
Their grateful plaudits fir'd each rustic theme,
And Cunningham shone in past'ral verse supreme.¹⁵⁸

Although he had died almost twenty years earlier, Cunningham's name evidently still lived on in Durham and had set a standard to which the manager assured the public the company would

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 96, 95.

¹⁵⁶ BL. Ms. 50249. *John Bell's Cunningham's Remains*, 141.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ James Cawdell, *The Miscellaneous Poems of J. Cawdell, Comedian: Consisting of a Variety of Serious and Comic Prologues, Epilogues, Pastorals, Songs, Descriptions, and Epigrams. Together with Several Sentimental Pieces. To which is annexed an Answer to a late libellous compilation, called the Stockton Jubilee* (Sunderland: Graham, 1785), 144-145.

continue to aspire. Cawdell also invoked Cunningham's name at the opening of Sunderland's first permanent theatre in November 1778 when he presented the same eulogy.¹⁵⁹

"The tuneful bard"

This chapter began by noting John Brewer's comment on anthologies and the formation of the national canon in which Cunningham's name struck "a discordant note". One of those collections was Charles Cooke's *Select English Poets* which was launched in the autumn of 1794 as six penny publications advertised as "Cooke's Cheap and elegant Pocket Editions." Cunningham's collection was advertised with the statement: "The pastoral Poetry of Cunningham possesses an elegant simplicity, and indicates a strong and lively fancy; it abounds with images painted from nature, and exhibits all the beauties of rural scenery."¹⁶⁰ In his study of late eighteenth-century publishing, Thomas F. Bonnell remarks that: "Cooke launched his series with poets whose pictures, scenery, and imagery were more amenable to constructions of British nationalism and evocative of a bardic interplay with landscape."¹⁶¹ The series was unified under the epithet of "the most favorite British Bards."¹⁶² Bonnell argues that this leitmotif "served as a vehicle for bringing together an imagined community as wide as Cooke's network of distribution" which extended to far-flung corners of Britain including booksellers in Dublin, Cork, Waterford, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Perth.¹⁶³ Cunningham was characterised as the "tuneful bard", but with the shift of emphasis upon the printed word and bookselling, consensus grew that proper poetry should now be bought and read off the page and no longer sung. This distinction, Bonnell stresses, is a sign of Cooke's

¹⁵⁹ David Erskine Baker, Isaac Reed, Stephen Jones, eds. *Biographia Dramatica: or, a Companion to the Playhouse*, 3 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, T. Payne, G and W. Nicol, Nichols and Son, Scatcherd and Letterman, J. Barker, W. Miller, R.H. Evans, J. Harding, J. Faulder, and Gale and Curtis, 1812) 2:33.

¹⁶⁰ John Cunningham, *The poetical works of John Cunningham. With the life of the author. Cooke's edition. Embellished with superb engravings*, ed. C. Cooke (London: Printed for C. Cooke, 1797), x.

¹⁶¹ Bonnell, *The Most Disreputable Trade*, 248.

¹⁶² Cited in Bonnell, *The Most Disreputable Trade*, 246. n. 35.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 248. n. 43.

emphasis upon verse as a commodity, a production for consumers to purchase and with a greater number of purchases, this would lead to reprinting, thereby establishing the classical standing of the poet.¹⁶⁴ Cunningham's popular verse, which had so often been turned into song, thus began to fall out of fashion. An indication of this came in 1796, just two years after Cooke launched his series, when the ornate lettering of "Esteemed British Bards" on Cunningham's engraved title page was replaced by the words "Poetic Productions".¹⁶⁵ In his study of the negotiation between elite and popular culture over the ballad, Steve Newman has noted that there are profound political implications regarding who has and has not been included in what is a supposed progression toward a more democratic society.¹⁶⁶ Newman points out that this negotiation has been rather one way, arguing that the ballad revival led not to the revival of ballad, but to the revival of elite poetry. The discordant nature of Cunningham's name in the late eighteenth-century canon is indicative of this development. Another anthology, *Bell's New Pantheon*, noted of the bards: "Beneath trees they 'touched the string' of their harps 'each to the chief he loved.'" ¹⁶⁷ Like his friend Joseph Ritson, Cunningham's "chief" was the common man, and his populism was shaped by his identity as an actor, a servant of the public. However, Cunningham's political identity, expressed through his ballads, verse and theatrical prologues, identified with a form of humanitarian cosmopolitanism that was not nation specific. In the nation-building era that followed, his "tuneful" voice was drowned out.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 250.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 251.

¹⁶⁶ Steve Newman, *Ballad Collection, Lyric, and the Canon: The Call of the Popular from the Restoration to the New Criticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). This work considers the appropriation of the ballad form by "elite" culture in terms of its importance for the development of the New Criticism in American education.

¹⁶⁷ John Bell, *Bell's New Pantheon; or Historical Dictionary of the Gods, Demi-Gods, Heroes, and Fabulous Personages of Antiquity*, 2 vols. (London, J. Bell, 1790), 1:124-7.

Conclusion

After his death in 1773 Cunningham's name was invoked by northern actors at significant moments including the opening of new permanent theatres at Sunderland in 1778 and at Durham in 1792. The last words Stephen Kemble ever spoke on the Newcastle Theatre Royal stage was a poem about Cunningham in 1806. Popular joke books continued to feature tales about him into the early nineteenth century. Writing in 1810 Alexander Chalmers observed that Cunningham's "works have lost little of the popularity with which they were originally favoured."¹⁶⁸ In 1816 William Hazlitt assumed his reading public knew very well who Cunningham was and concurred with his opinion that the Irishman had produced "some of the most pleasing and elegant pastoral verse" ever written in English.¹⁶⁹ In 1822 a collection of Cunningham's verse was published in an anthology with Oliver Goldsmith. This appears to have been the final substantial collection of his poetry ever printed. Since then, only one academic, Edith J. Morley, has focused any sustained attention on his verse, which she believed deserved to be returned to its place in the "temple of the English muse."¹⁷⁰ Her effort has not succeeded yet, although David Hill Radcliffe's recent work on pastoral verse does include many insightful comments about the poet upon which this chapter has relied and which may have an influence upon future scholars of English literature.

Setting aside the literary value of Cunningham's verse, from a historical perspective, paying attention to him has provided the opportunity to illustrate how the focus upon actor-associations can lead to new insights into local social life. His *London Magazine* obituary was sympathetic and complimentary, but it established a narrative of Cunningham as ill-suited for the stage which ultimately led to disappointment. However, through archival research supported by close reading of his verse, a more radical, independent and self-assured figure emerges; one that was committed to cosmopolitan ideals. Although he did not perform regularly in Newcastle, the actor had a close

¹⁶⁸ Alexander Chalmers, "Life of Cunningham," 427.

¹⁶⁹ Holcroft, *Memoirs*, 1:258.

¹⁷⁰ Edith J. Morley, "John Cunningham," 40.

relationship with Thomas and Ann Slack, whose “Print Shop” was a focal point in the struggle for improved education and political reform. The narrative has an errant Cunningham deeply indebted to his patrons; however, the Slacks’ correspondence reveals that their relationship with the actor was mutually beneficial and that they were deeply grateful to him for helping them to establish their newspaper. This is the reason that he was commemorated by the social campaigner, John Cowen, with the stained-glass window in St. John the Baptist Church. It is also a reason that Cunningham deserves more general recognition for the highly public and sociable role that he played in the development of Enlightenment in the North.

Chapter Six

An Acting Brotherhood: Freemasons on the Northern Stage

Introduction

This chapter focuses on freemasonry, one of the period's most popular and influential forms of association. Prominent eighteenth-century scholars, including Margaret Jacob, Peter Clark, James Stevens Curl and David Stevenson have produced significant work on the craft, but it remains one of the period's less-examined subject areas.¹ The recent publication of Routledge's five-volume series on freemasonry is likely to generate increased scholarly interest.² Many of the male actors and all the actor-managers of the theatrical circuits examined in this thesis were masons. Lodges frequently bespoke local performances and their records detail processions from the lodge to the theatre in full regalia, often with musical accompaniment. Many company playbills contain cast lists, play titles, promotional statements and the names of masonic patrons. There are also many examples of masonic prologues, poems and songs performed at benefits and masonic events which were written by the northern actor-masons.³ Both theatre company managers and the masonic lodges supported

¹ Margaret C. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); James Stevens Curl, *Freemasonry and the Enlightenment: Architecture, Symbols and Influences* (London: Historical Publications Ltd., 2011); David Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland's Century, 1590-1710*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Paul Elliott and Stephen Daniels, "The 'school of true, useful and universal science'? Freemasonry, Natural Philosophy and Scientific Culture in Eighteenth-Century England," *The British Journal for the History of Science* 39, no. 2 (2006): 207-229. The majority of articles about eighteenth-century English freemasonry have been published in *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, the journal of the English research lodge *Quatuor Coronati* no. 2076. Early collections of masonic texts include anthologies by Douglas Knoop, G.P. Jones and Douglas Hamer, *Early Masonic Catechisms* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1963) and *Early Masonic Pamphlets* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1945). For a recent study of masonic dramatic material see Bridget Orr, "The Masonic Invention of Domestic Tragedy," in *British Enlightenment Theatre: Dramatizing Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 154-187.

² Róbert Péter, ed., *British Freemasonry 1717-1813*, 5 vols. (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

³ See James Cawdell, *The Miscellaneous Poems of J. Cawdell, Comedian: Consisting of a Variety of Serious and Comic Prologues, Epilogues, Pastorals, Songs, Descriptions, and Epigrams. Together with Several Sentimental Pieces. To which is annexed an Answer to a late libellous compilation, called the Stockton Jubilee* (Sunderland: Graham, 1785), 100-102, 119-126, 133-134; S. G. Kemble, *Odes, Lyrical Ballads, and*

charitable activities and information about the foundation and support of dispensaries and schools appeared in local newspapers showing direct collaboration between the two institutions. This chapter aims to shed light on why so many actors were attracted to freemasonry, how this form of association allowed actors to further engage with the communities in which they worked, and what benefits this brought both individually and with regard to the development of local civil society.

Freemasonry has been a rather disregarded area of British historical study. In 1969 John M. Roberts asked why “in the country which gave freemasonry to the world it has attracted hardly any interest from the professional historian?”⁴ He stressed that “the startling growth of the craft was one of the most remarkable facts of English social history in the eighteenth century” and yet “we still have no scholarly investigation of its sociology.”⁵ Thirty years later, in his study of eighteenth-century associational life, Peter Clark echoed Roberts stating that “the social history of Hanoverian Freemasonry” still “cries out for detailed attention.”⁶ This chapter aims to demonstrate how the remarkably rich masonic archive can offer fresh perspectives on broader themes of eighteenth-century scholarship and through an examination of the actor-mason nexus it aims to cast new light on these two understudied areas of northern provincial social life. There may be limited records of provincial actors’ peripatetic lives, but lodges kept minute books and other records, making it possible to know about members who were actors, leading to further potential research in identified locations.

Theatre and freemasonry both experienced a provincial golden age during the late eighteenth century. At first sight these institutions appear to be diametrically opposed, with one generally

Poems on Various Occasions (Edinburgh: J. Ballantyne, 1809), 3-6; John Cunningham, *Poems, Chiefly Pastoral*, 2nd ed. (Newcastle upon Tyne: T. Slack, 1771), 177-178, 231-232; Many of James Field Stanfield’s contributions were published in *Freemasons’ Magazine: Or, General and Complete Library*, see this chapter’s footnote n. 97.

⁴ John M. Roberts, “Freemasonry: Possibilities of a Neglected Topic,” *The English Historical Review* 84 (1969): 323.

⁵ Roberts, “Freemasonry,” 324-325.

⁶ Cited in Elliott and Daniels, “School of true, useful and universal science,” 207. See also John Money, “Masons, Books, and Bucks,” in *Experience and Identity: Birmingham and the West Midlands 1760-1800* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), 136.

understood to be a secret society, while the other appears absolutely dependent upon public “approbation” for survival. Yet they share defining features and their development was mutually beneficial in a number of ways. Aside from common dramatic characteristics such as the adoption of costume, specialised objects, performance, declamation, music and song; both were preoccupied with social and intellectual concerns and laid great emphasis upon civic responsibility. Studying examples of this allows for further exploration of themes related to modernity and the development of civil society, particularly in areas of the country which were undergoing rapid economic development, but in which local government was not firmly established as we have already seen in the case of Sunderland.

While contemporary antitheatrical prejudice may have depicted actors as morally corrupt and little more than vagrants, this chapter reveals that “improvement” was a major preoccupation of actors on the northern theatre circuits. It explores how freemasonry provided actors with a route to respectability and social acceptance, and to some degree an escape from their marginal status. Performance choices in the playhouses make it clear that actors strove for improvement, and this is a trait that was shared by their masonic brethren for whom perfectibility was a declared aspiration.⁷ On a personal level, identity formation is examined by asking whether masonry shared characteristics with staged drama, for example through the self-constructing nature of performance within ritual and public display. Considering how masonry could be studied, Roberts suggested “The whole function of masonry as a social institution – its anthropological aspect, even – is still unexamined and we do not know what role it played in the life of society and individual members.”⁸ This chapter draws on examples of masonic culture on the northern theatre circuits to explore the role it played in actors’ lives and the social life of the region more broadly. In all cases, these examples of cultural expression should be understood to exist not only as a form of comment on

⁷ Andreas Önnarfors, “Perfection by Progressive Excellence: An Initial Analysis of the Freemason’s Magazine 1793–1798,” in *Researching British Freemasonry 1717–2017*, eds. Péter Róbert and Andreas Önnarfors, vol. 3. (Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 2010), 175.

⁸ Roberts, “Freemasonry,” 334.

society, but also as an integral part of that society's evolution, as Geertz stated in relation to "thick description":

Art forms generate and regenerate the very subjectivity they pretend only to display. Quartets, still lifes, and cockfights are not merely reflections of a pre-existing sensibility analogically represented; they are positive agents in the creation and maintenance of such a sensibility.⁹

James Field Stanfield is particularly relevant in this context, both for his theatrical performances and writing and also for the choreography of prominent public events such as the opening of new large-scale civic enterprises that had significant economic regional impact. Recent research has also explored the Irish dimension of London's eighteenth-century world of freemasonry.¹⁰ As with the theatre, provincial freemasonry was also populated by the Irish for which Stanfield also provides an example.

The first section draws on records from Sunderland lodges to provide an understanding of masonic ritual and secrecy while also tracing their connection to acting technique and theatre. The second section provides several examples of the ways in which masonic values were disseminated and celebrated by actors from three northern theatre circuits. Then a final section explores the actor-mason nexus through three specific themes: publicity, abolition and civic action.

Masonry, memory and identity

One of the key affinities between acting and freemasonry lies in the relationship between memory and the conscious manufacturing of new identity. In the case of acting, this is obviously related to the memorising of a new part and masons used similar techniques as actors in their efforts to shape

⁹ Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 451.

¹⁰ Ric Berman, "The London Irish and the Antients Grand Lodge," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 39, no. 1 (2015): 103-130.

themselves into morally perfected individuals. Today, the social dimension of masonry tends to be emphasised, but although this was important, self-improvement lay at the very heart of masonic identity. Key to this process was the art of memory or mnemonics, which was used for its cognitive and transformational potential.

The origin of the art of memory in the Western tradition is traced to 500 B.C. Greece. Following her research on Giordano Bruno and hermeticism, the Renaissance scholar Frances Yates revived interest in the subject.¹¹ She cites Cicero's *De Oratore*, which describes the procedure as follows:

... persons desiring to train this faculty [of memory] must select places and form mental images of the things they wish to remember and store these images in the places, so that the order of the places will preserve the order of the things, and the images of the things will denote the things themselves.¹²

While speaking, an orator would recall the sequence and content of the argument by mentally visiting these places, or *loci* in Latin from which the word "location" is derived. A residue of this process of spatial imagination remains in the modern English expression "in the first place." Yates cites Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* as the clearest description of the process, noting that in order to form a series of places in memory, he instructs that "a building is to be remembered, as spacious and varied as one as possible."¹³ The practitioner was encouraged to imagine vivid scenes populated with figures in a series of rooms in this building. The spatial dimension and architectural visualisations in the *loci* method led Yates to wonder about the symbolic architectural system underlying masonic moral and mystical teaching, leading her to conclude:

I would think that the answer to this problem may be suggested by the history of the art of memory, that the Renaissance occult memory ... may be the real source of a Hermetic and mystical movement

¹¹ Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic tradition* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1964). See also Frances. A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Pimlico, 1992).

¹² Cicero, *De Oratore* II, lxxxvi, 351-4 cited in Yates, *Art of Memory*, 17. Yates uses the Loeb edition of the classics; *De Oratore* translated by E.W. Sutton and H. Rackham and *Ad Herennium* translated by H. Caplan.

¹³ Yates, *Art of Memory*, 18.

which used, not the real architecture of 'operative' masonry, but the imaginary or 'speculative' architecture of the art of memory as the vehicle of its teachings. A careful examination of the symbolism might eventually confirm this hypothesis.¹⁴

David Stevenson's later study of the origins of masonry traced the introduction of the art of memory into freemasonry, concluding that the masonic lodge was in a sense a "memory temple, an imaginary building with places and images fixed in it as aids to memorising the secrets of the Mason Word and the rituals of initiation."¹⁵ John Money has made a similar argument, calling lodges "memory theatres" in which "models were ritually copied and a shared cultural knowledge was created."¹⁶ Unfortunately, as Prinke points out, "there are practically no sources on the ways artificial memory was applied by either operative or speculative freemasons. Standard Masonic reference works do not mention any memory related teachings or techniques, just saying that rituals and teachings need to be memorized."¹⁷ There may not be any practical manuals, but masonic authors do use expressions specifically referring to the art of memory. For example, one of the most famous English eighteenth-century masonic writers, William Preston, used the trope of "imprinting on memory" in his popular work *Illustrations of Masonry*:

The tools and implements of architecture,
symbols the most expressive!
Imprint on the memory wise and serious truths,
and transmit unimpaired, through a succession of ages,
the excellent tenets of this institution.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid, 295.

¹⁵ David Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry*, 96.

¹⁶ John Money, "The Masonic Moment; Or, Ritual, Replica, and Credit: John Wilkes, the Macaroni Parson, and the Making of the Middle-Class mind," *Journal of British Studies* 32, no. 4 (1993): 370.

¹⁷ Rafał T. Prinke, "Memory in the Lodge. A Late 18th Century Freemasonry Mnemonic Aid," in *Culture of Memory in East Central Europe in the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period. Conference Proceedings, Ciqzeń, March 12-14, 2008*, ed. Rafał Wójcik (Poznań: Prace Biblioteki Uniwersyteckiej – nr 30 Biblioteka Uniwersytecka, 2008), 231.

¹⁸ William Preston, *Illustrations of Masonry* (London, 1772), 14.

As the practitioner of the art of memory collected together the memorised material, they engaged in *inventio*.¹⁹ This Latin word led to different words in modern English, such as “inventory” meaning the “storage of many diverse materials in an ordered fashion” and also “invention” meaning to “create something new.”²⁰ A Roman rhetoric text-book from ca. 86-82 B.C., *Ad Herennium*, describes memory as “the treasure-house of inventions.”²¹ It is on this principle that masonry was designed, where, through a creative cognitive process of “imprinting” on the mind through ritual and lecture, the mason could do “the work” and build a new moral self. The information to which the initiate and higher degree masons were exposed through ritual was reinforced by lectures illustrated by paintings on “tracing cloths” or “tracing boards” that were laid on the floor, carpet like, in front of them (*figure 13*).

¹⁹ Jane Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought, Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 11. Carruthers examined the art of memory as it survived in the medieval monastic tradition.

²⁰ Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, 16.

²¹ Cited in Yates, *Art of Memory*, 20.



Figure 13. Initiation into freemasonry with the tracing board as a mnemonic aid.²²

Some of the oldest existing examples of tracing boards in England are from Sunderland's *Phoenix Lodge* and were produced in the period that Stanfield attended (figure 14). The Sunderland freemason William Waples provided an analysis of the *Phoenix Lodge* tracing boards in 1949.²³ The Latin term *tractare* from which the English word "trace" is derived, was used in the medieval scholastic *ars memoriae* to denote "collecting" memory objects in memory places.²⁴

²² Bibliothèque nationale de France. Assemblée de franks-maçons pour la réception des Apprentifs. - Entrée du récipiendaire dans la loge : [estampe]. Département Estampes et photographie, RESERVE QB-201 (109)-FOL.

²³ Museum of Freemasonry Library and Archive, London (MFLA). BE195WAP. William Waples, *An Explanation of the Tracing Boards of Phoenix Lodge No.94*. (1949).

²⁴ Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, 16 cited in Prinke, "Memory in the Lodge," 233.



Figure 14. A Tracing Board from the Sunderland Phoenix Lodge ca. 1815. Author's own photograph.

The mason's self-modelling was built upon Hermetic foundations. Stevenson's research has determined when and how this was introduced to the court of James IV by his Master of Works William Schaw who was "attempting to implant elements of a secret Hermetic cult into the mason craft, with the art of memory intended to lead to spiritual advancement and knowledge of the

divine.”²⁵ However, as Stevenson points out, freemasonry’s reliance on the art of memory has been overlooked for centuries:

William Schaw’s injunction that masons must be tested in the art of memory and the science thereof has been read by generations of masonic historians but the significance of it has never been noticed. Yet that single short phrase provides a key to understanding major aspects of the origins of freemasonry, linking the operative mason craft with the mighty strivings of the Hermetic magus.²⁶

Yates explained that the art of memory was “the vehicle for the formation of the psyche of a Hermetic mystic and Magus.”

The Hermetic principle of the reflection of the universe in the mind as a religious experience is organized through the art of memory into a magico-religious technique for grasping and unifying the world of appearances through arrangements of significant images.²⁷

This synoptic understanding could not be encapsulated in words but rather required a symbolic system to convey it, made up of emblems, the contemplation of which could lead the adept towards enlightenment.²⁸ “In the emblem the symbol took on an almost mystical character. Hieroglyphs and the like were equivalents to the hieroglyphs of the natural world through which God at once revealed and concealed divine truths.”²⁹ This understanding helps to clarify the nature of masonic secrecy. The tendency not to explain symbols in plain language continued because words could not fully express the meaning, as the essence of a symbol’s significance was obscure and complicated. As Stevenson states, “Paradoxically, secrecy and obscurity become an essential part of the great struggle to unlock secrets. Simple and literal language is too shallow, poverty-stricken and vulgar to

²⁵ Stevenson, *Origins of Freemasonry*, 95.

²⁶ Ibid, 96.

²⁷ Yates, *Art of Memory*, 225.

²⁸ For an explanation of the emblem see G. Boaz, ed., *The Hieroglyphics of Horapolla* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1950), 22 and E. H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images. Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (London: Phaidon Press, 1972), 14.

²⁹ Stevenson, *Origins of Freemasonry*, 81.

convey great truths.”³⁰ Rather than considering masonic secrecy as conspiratorial, or as socially exclusive, this understanding therefore helps to clarify its meaning in a British eighteenth-century context. This rather irrational pursuit may seem challenging to our modern understanding, while also problematising an understanding of masonry as a driving force for reason within the Enlightenment. The intellectual historian Margaret C. Jacob is arguably the leading authority on eighteenth-century masonry, yet her research stresses the rational dimension of the fraternity and rarely considers its mystico-religious foundations. However, if, as Roberts suggests, one is to explore the “anthropological aspect” of freemasonry, then this specifically ineffable, but central characteristic, must be borne in mind and its close relationship to secrecy and privacy understood.

At the root of both freemasonry and acting lies the art of rhetoric. In the same way that the art of memory led to a mason’s transformation, memory was an essential tool used by actors when practising their craft. *Ad Herennium* states that it “will be essential – again and again to run over rapidly in the mind all the original places in order to refresh the images.”³¹ Cicero also stresses “the ability to use these [images] will be supplied by practice which engenders habit.”³² This cognitive dimension of *habitus* is stressed by Joseph Roach in his study of the science of eighteenth-century acting, *The Player’s Passion*, in which he emphasises the creative dimension of the art of memory:

The bodily process of creating a theatrical illusion requires at the outset the participation of two interlocking functions: memory and imagination ... Memory retains the image; imagination revives it, vivifies it, and combines it with other images to form the living mosaic of the inner model.³³

Each night, actors performed in a different play, and sometimes two in the case of an afterpiece, as well as a number of interludes. A good memory was therefore highly valuable and when performers applied for a position with a company, they typically listed the number of parts they had

³⁰ Stevenson, *Origins of Freemasonry*, 81.

³¹ *Ad Herennium*, III, xxii cited in Yates, *Art of Memory*, 26.

³² Cicero, *De Oratore*, II, lxxxvii, 358 cited in Yates, *Art of Memory*, 33.

³³ Joseph R. Roach, *The Player’s Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting*, (London: Associated University Presses, 1985), 143.

memorised. At twenty-one, John Philip Kemble claimed to have memorised 126 roles which he listed in a letter when applying for a position with Tate Wilkinson's York company in 1778.³⁴ His biographer James Boaden described Kemble's remarkable memory, which he had exhibited at the Catholic college at Douai where he had spent four years training to be a priest:

His class ... had fallen under severe censure of the masters; and ... an imposition was proposed of two books of Homer, to be gotten by heart. Kemble ... volunteered to accept the task; and by close application, and his uncommon memory, enabled himself to remove the censure, by accurately repeating at least 1500 lines.³⁵

For such a feat Kemble must have been using one of the mnemonic systems which were commonly used as learning devices at English and Irish Roman Catholic colleges on the continent. The actor Charles Macklin also used such a system which was "all to be distinguished into genus, species, and individual characteristics, like dogs, fowl, apples, plums, and the like."³⁶ Stanfield had an almost unnatural ability to memorise lines for performance. According to Tate Wilkinson, he was "a performer of astonishing abilities as to quickness of study. Indeed, I had instances, almost would be termed impossible, were they numerated."³⁷ This suggests that he may also have been using mnemonics, probably learned at the Catholic college in France where he had also studied, according to his friend Reverend James Tate.³⁸ The continental Catholic colleges taught the art of memory as part of the humanist tradition of rhetoric. Moral lessons were also typically taught through dramatic exchange. Didactic drama, especially developed by the Jesuits, in which students performed roles which allegorised logical lines of argument, was a traditional learning method. Indeed, regarding

³⁴ Peter Thomson, "Kemble, John Philip (1757–1823), actor," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online ed., 23 Sep. 2004, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/15322>, accessed 15 Feb. 2022.

³⁵ James Boaden, *Memoirs of John Philip Kemble, Esq: Including a History of the Stage from the Time of Garrick to the Present Period*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, 1825), 1:6.

³⁶ Roach, *Player's Passion*, 71.

³⁷ Tate Wilkinson, *The Wandering Patentee: A History of the Yorkshire Theatres*, 4 vols. (York: Wilson, Spence, and Mawman, 1795), 2:22.

³⁸ Royal Museums Greenwich (RMG), STN COLLECTION: Uncatalogued: Clarkson Stanfield 1793-1867, painter. STN / Unfinished MS Memoir of Clarkson Stanfield by his son Field (1844-1905).

conceptual similarities to masonic ritual, there is at least an important cognitive dimension to both processes.

Roach stresses the machine-like quality of acting in this period, drawing parallels between illustrated acting manuals such as Henry Siddons' adaption of Johann Jakob Engel and manuals of close-order drills prepared for grenadiers.³⁹ Eighteenth-century acting style was particularly influenced by the Italian castrato Grimaldi, who "gestured deliberately and majestically until a strong accent or climax in the score required him to stand motionless for a moment in an exceptionally expressive pose and he held this attitude until he made his point."⁴⁰ This new form of acting became the "signature of eighteenth-century acting style"⁴¹ and "on such 'points' eighteenth- and nineteenth-century actors were applauded with show-stopping ovations."⁴² Physical movement was considered to be an essential ingredient in the art of memory as the rhetor travelled about the memory palace and this lives on in the English expression "in the first place" which is used to initiate an argument. Spatial imaginings and movement from location to another helps to imprint the memory on the mind and an acting style based on movement punctuated by stillness must have also made memory retention easier for the performer. Similarly, masonic ritual required considerable physical activities, which included prescribed movement around the lodge space in which the initiate was guided by specific masons who inhabited certain roles, all of which was observed by the other brethren present. Again, this suggests the physical *habitus*, as described by Roach, in which repetitive actions have a cognitive effect. David Hartley was the first to develop a theory based upon the understanding that what he termed "vibrations" which happened often together have

³⁹ See Henry Siddons, *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action, adapted to the English drama. From a work on the same subject by M. Engel. By Henry Siddons. Embellished with numerous engravings, expressive of the various passions, and representing the modern costume of the London theatres* (London: Richard Phillips, 1807).

⁴⁰ Roach, *Player's Passion*, 68-69.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 69.

⁴² *Ibid*, 111. For a recent study of "points" as powerful transition moments between the passions see James Harriman-Smith, *Criticism, Performance, and the Passions in the Eighteenth Century; The Art of Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

a tendency to recall one another and their associated mental ideas.⁴³ Hartley's *Associationism* is a synthesis of Newton's vibrations with the doctrine of the Association of Ideas derived from John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.⁴⁴ Writing in 1845, George Henry Lewes notes in his *Biographical History of Philosophy* that Hartley had been one of the first to "delight" in "physiological speculations" to explain psychological phenomena.⁴⁵ Stanfield was familiar with his work which he refers to and draws upon in his *Essay on Biography*.⁴⁶ Hartley's *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty and His Expectation* which contains the first use of the expression "psychology" was ordered by the members of the Sunderland subscription library shortly after Stanfield had helped to establish the institution in February 1795.⁴⁷

Masonic ritual as performance

Actors well understood the power of dramatic effect. This was particularly valuable for symbolic ritual, the principal way that the philosophy of freemasonry was conveyed. The dramatic nature of this ritual is described in detail by an exposé of freemasonry, the 1762 publication *Jachin and Boaz; or an Authentic Key to the Door of Free-Masonry*. After the initiate had spent an hour blindfolded in a silent side room, he was led into the main lodge room where all the brethren gathered. The Grand Master then asked him whether he wanted to become a mason according to his own free will. If he received the answer "Yes" the Master then said, "Let him see the Light":

They then take the handkerchief from his eyes, and whilst they are so doing, the brethren form a circle round him with their swords drawn in their hands, the points of which are presented to his breast. The ornaments borne by the officers, the glittering of the swords, and the fantastic appearance of the brethren in white aprons, all together, creates great surprise, especially to a

⁴³ Roach, *Player's Passion*, 106-07.

⁴⁴ See David Hartley, *Observations on Man, his Frame his Duty, and his Expectations* (London: S. Richardson, 1749).

⁴⁵ George Henry Lewes, *A Biographical History of Philosophy*, vol. 3. (London: C. Cox, 1851), 194.

⁴⁶ See Stanfield, *Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography* (Sunderland, Garbutt, 1813), 111-12.

⁴⁷ Sunderland Antiquarian Society, Sunderland. Sunderland Subscription Library Minute Book, Entry for June 16, 1795.

person, who for above an hour has been fatigued with the bandage over his eyes; and his uncertainty concerning what is further to be done for his reception, must, no doubt, throw his mind into great perplexity.⁴⁸

This controlled experience was designed to provide the suitable conditions for the initiate to receive the intended knowledge. The experience must have been familiar to actors, whose craft similarly depended on the creation of heightened conditions through which to transfer information. Masonic literature of the eighteenth century supports an understanding of masonic ritual as a form of dramatised performance. For example, the version of the *Mark Ritual* practised at the *Sea Captains' Lodge* in Sunderland in this period has survived and reads like a play-text in which the initiate played a role (*figure 15*).⁴⁹ The role of "The King", performed by the Master of the Lodge, begins the rite lying on a bench as if asleep, as it involves the interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar's Dream of a Lion. Various actions, such as the opening and closing of doors are clearly marked, as in the form of stage directions. During rituals one of the officers typically acted as a prompter, reminding the participants of their lines, which is understandable, when one considers that for this ritual alone there are five pages of single-spaced transcribed text. In the document, the spoken lines are referred to by act and scene. The space was also clearly demarcated. The Grand Master took his seat in a specific position as did the Stewards. Different rituals required the Grand Master, Wardens, Deacons and other officers to carry out different tasks, some of which involved elaborate movement and activity. All of this suited actors very well, because they necessarily had to be able to memorise lines and movement and be able to reproduce them for effect, in order, at will. Just like any theatrical performance, the more efficiently it was performed, the more effective it would be for the intended recipient. The lodge room was understood symbolically to become King Solomon's Temple for the duration of the ritual. The sense of the space being abstracted into a mythic eternal present was helped by closing off the room with curtains, the burning of candles and the

⁴⁸ A Gentleman Belonging to the Jerusalem Lodge, *Jachin and Boaz; or an Authentic Key to the Door of Free-Masonry* (London: Charles R. and George Webster, 1762), 9.

⁴⁹ MFLA. BE179/1 SUN. The Old Mark Rituals.

employment of portable symbolic objects. The meaning of the various symbols and objects were conveyed to the masons the further they progressed in the organisation.

Mark Mason.

Sojourner. Stands outside and knocks.
I.G. (opens door) Who comes there?
Soj. A sojourner seeking admittance.
I.G. Wait until I report to the King.
 (Closes door and addresses King).
I.G. O King, a sojourner seeks admittance.
King. Admit him. (done.)
Soj. O' King live forever. We have been in search throughout all
 thy dominions, amongst the Magicians, Astrologers, and
 soothsayers, but can find none who can tell thee thy dream
 or give thee the interpretation thereof.
King. Go, search again.
 (Sojourner retires for candidate. When ready knocks outside)
I.G. (Opens the door.) Who comes there?
Soj. A sojourner seeks admittance.
I.G. Wait until I report him to the King.
I.G. (Closes door and says) O King live for ever. We have again
 been in search throughout all thy dominions amongst the
 Magicians, Astrologers and Soothsayers and have found a
 Captive of the Tribe of Judah who can tell thee thy dream
 and the interpretation thereof.
King. What is his name?
Soj. Gblum.
King. The Man that can tell me my dream and give me the interpretation
 thereof shall be clothed in purple and scarlet, be set upon
 my own horse, and proclaimed before me the third person in
 my kingdom.
Soj. O' King live for ever. The dream is not from me but from Him
 that sent me. Thou dreamest thou saw a great Lion stand
 at thy bedside ready to devour thee and thy household.
King. (Arising from a couch upon which he has been reclining) That
 is my dream. Give me the interpretation thereof.
Soj. O' King, the Great Lion thou saw standing at thy bedside was
 the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, ready to devour thee and
 thy household if thou wilt not let the children of Israel
 go down to Jerusalem to recieve the promise of a Mark Mason.
King. Loose him from his bonds: Clothe him in purple and scarlet;
 set him upon my own horse; and proclaim him before me the
 third person in my kingdom.
Soj. O' King that is not my request.
King. What is thy request?
Soj. That thou wouldst pass this man down to Tatnai, Governor on
 this side of the River, and that Tatnai Governor, pass him
 over to Shetharboznai and his companions on the other side
 of the River, and Shethar Boznai to pass him down to
 Jerusalem, there to receive the promise of a Mark Mason.
King. That is already granted. It is my decree that you pass this
 man down to Tatnai, governor on this side the River, and
 that Tatnai, Governor, pass him over to Shethar Boznai and

Figure 15. Transcription of the Sunderland version of "The Old Mark Ritual" ca. 1800.

It is possible that this version of the *Mark Ritual* from Sunderland was enacted by Stanfield and witnessed by his fellow actors from the Durham company as he was the elected Senior and Junior Warden in the *Phoenix Lodge*, roles which included responsibility for the delivery of ritual.⁵⁰

Masonry and social capital

Clearly freemasonry provided more than a forum for social networking or a means by which to improve oneself through good manners and sociable behaviour. “The work” signified personal moral improvement, which was carried out on the self using the techniques previously described, for which actors were particularly well suited due to their professional skill set. However, the social dimension was also a major reason for actors to seek out membership as it provided social status for a group who otherwise risked ostracism. Jacob notes that masonic membership tended to be socially restrictive, the propertied and well-to-do were very well represented, while unskilled labourers and the illiterate were rare.⁵¹ This echoes James Van Horn Melton’s observation that in Britain the social profile of eighteenth-century freemasons “coincided with that of the ‘political nation’, the roughly 20% of adult males who owned sufficient property to vote.”⁵² However, less wealthy individuals did become masons. In December 1800 the *York Herald* announced the burial of a butler, Mr. Joseph Morphet, who was a mason in Richmond, North Yorkshire’s *Lennox Lodge*, stating that “he was a truly respectable member of Society, and his loss is sincerely regretted.”⁵³ This line suggests that as a freemason even a butler could achieve “true respectability.” This must also have been the case for itinerant actors, few of whom had the right to vote and who struggled against the commonly held prejudice that they were little more than vagabonds. As a mere

⁵⁰ See multiple entries regarding Stanfield’s attendance between 1789 and 1811 in the *Phoenix Lodge* minute book, which is held at the Tyne and Wear Archives, Newcastle upon Tyne, (TWA) S.MAS 9/1/1: *Sunderland Phoenix Lodge Minute Book*.

⁵¹ Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment*, 40.

⁵² James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 262.

⁵³ *The York Herald* (York, England), 20 December 1800.

travelling actor, Stanfield brought no social cachet, at least in name or property, to Sunderland's *Phoenix Lodge*; however, his immediate ability to act in the position of Junior Warden on the first evening of his attendance as a visitor on 5 February 1789 reflects not only his ability and prior experience in masonry, but also the social acceptance and respect of his fellow masons.⁵⁴ Stanfield was elected Junior and Senior Warden, both important and prestigious roles with many responsibilities in the delivery of ritual, as well as the running of lodge business. On 12 August 1794, as Senior Warden of *Phoenix Lodge* he accompanied the Grand Master Doctor Tipping Brown and its Chaplain, Reverend Brother Hesket, to attend the provincial Grand Lodge in the regional capital, Durham.⁵⁵ Such responsibility raised his social profile while allowing him to extend his circle of acquaintances further. As a type, actors shared an aptitude for moving across social divides and once accepted into masonry, they were very well-equipped to take advantage of the egalitarianism that masons were expected to exhibit as they met "on the level" in the lodge.

Jacob stresses that lodges tended to attract people from peripatetic professions, arguing that itinerant workers in relatively vulnerable situations, such as merchants, soldiers and sailors, were typically masons. This is borne out by the membership of Sunderland's *Marquis of Carnarvon Lodge* which changed its name to *Sea Captains' Lodge* in 1768, probably due to the fact that between then and 1806, 253 of its 463 members were ships' masters or mariners.⁵⁶ Lodges provided welcome and companionship to people travelling far from home and were a way for such people to gather socially in a safe environment to enjoy the conviviality of like-minded strangers. This is suggested by a letter from Stanfield to James Tate, written from Sunderland in June 1795, in which he tells his friend, "We are full of soldiers and provisions scarce."⁵⁷ The *Phoenix Lodge* minute book for this period shows a sudden influx of military visitors, which began on 11 May with the

⁵⁴ TWA, *Sunderland Phoenix Lodge Minute Book*, 159.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 202.

⁵⁶ See <https://www.palatine97.org/special-minutes>

⁵⁷ Leslie Peter Wenham, ed., *James Tate, Master of Richmond School, Yorkshire and Canon of St. Paul's Cathedral, London Schoolmaster and Scholar* (Northallerton: North Yorkshire County Records Office Publications, 1991), 66.

arrival of two officers from the 84th Regiment and two from the 8th Regiment. An average of six soldiers then continue to attend meetings for the following four months until 11 September.⁵⁸ As well as companionship, the lodge also provided masons with the opportunity to make friends with people who could be beneficial for their business. This is exemplified by the fact that the first time Stephen Kemble's name appears in the Sunderland lodge records is at an extra lodge meeting on the day that James Cawdell was buried in the town's Holy Trinity churchyard.⁵⁹ Kemble was proposed to be a member of the *Phoenix Lodge*, was "admitted accordingly" and attended a Grand Meeting the following month on 6 February 1800.⁶⁰ This coincided with his purchase of the Durham company.

According to J. W. Reddyhoff, Stephen Kemble was made an honorary member of all the lodges in the North.⁶¹ Also, at least in York, all actors who visited the city's lodges were given special status and allowed to attend "pro tempore".⁶² This probably reflects the valuable qualities that they brought to the lodge. Music was an integral part of the theatre in this period and actors were generally required to be able to sing as well as be proficient in declamation. Reddyhoff suggests that actors would have been valuable at the annual festive boards, which were celebratory events when performers might be expected to provide entertainment by reciting poems and singing songs. Cawdell and Bates' names appear in the *Phoenix Lodge* minute books for these events. Cawdell's volume *Miscellaneous Poems* includes an Ode written for the opening of the *Phoenix Lodge*'s new hall in 1785.⁶³ He had already become a freemason by the time he performed with Stanfield at Younger's Manchester Theatre in 1777 as two years previously the *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* published "a song on Masonry with words by Brother Cawdell" which had been

⁵⁸ TWA., *Sunderland Phoenix Lodge Minute Book*, 213.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 283.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 284.

⁶¹ J. W. Reddyhoff, "The York Company of Comedians and the Craft," *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, 101 (1988): 22.

⁶² Reddyhoff, "The York Company," 19.

⁶³ Cawdell, *Miscellaneous Poems*, 133-34.

“sung by Brother Bone at Mr Preston’s Lecture, at the Mitre Tavern on the Strand.”⁶⁴ This probably refers to the Durham town freemason, Thomas Bone, whose name appears in the *Marquis of Granby* minute book as the Secretary in 1791 recording Cawdell’s request for a public procession to lay the foundation stone of the new theatre.⁶⁵ Music also played an important part in normal lodge meetings.⁶⁶ In *Jachin and Boaz* it is stated that songs concluded each part of the rituals and this publication includes twenty pages of odes, anthems and songs.⁶⁷ The *Phoenix Lodge*’s new meeting hall had an organ with six stops built by Donaldson of Newcastle.⁶⁸

Actors were also well suited to masonry as they understood the rules of social etiquette which they typically had to enact in performance. Masons were always expected to act with civility, which for non-observance they risked fines and expulsion. In this period, the playhouse was a place where rules of social behaviour could be learnt by the observation of performance and actors must have been considered valued role-models in the lodge also. Their capacity and experience in public speaking must also have been valued in lodge meetings, particularly as members were expected to engage in public discussion, for which less experienced masons could seek their advice.

Masonry and three northern theatre circuits

The circuits of Samuel Butler, James Cawdell and Tate Wilkinson provide many examples of how itinerant actors helped to spread masonic ideas through bespeak performances, the sponsoring of public infrastructure and written works. However, the establishment of a new lodge by members of the York theatre company is a unique example of the development of masonry in the provinces and

⁶⁴ *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* (London, England), Tuesday, 1 August 1775.

⁶⁵ Durham Provincial Masonic Museum, Sunderland. (DPMM). *Marquis of Granby Lodge, No.124, Minutes Book 1791-1815*, 2.

⁶⁶ For music and Durham freemasonry see Simon Fleming, “Harmony and Brotherly Love: Musicians and Freemasonry in 18th-Century Durham City,” *The Musical Times* 149. no. 1904 (2008): 69-80.

⁶⁷ A Gentleman, *Jachin and Boaz*, 55-75.

⁶⁸ Thomas Todd, *The History of the Phoenix Lodge: No.94: Sunderland* (Sunderland: Todd, 1906), 18-19, 57.

is particularly significant as it directly led to the revival of the craft in the city. The connection between freemasonry and the York theatre company was first made by Reddyhoff, in a study of *The Punch Bowl Lodge* which was established in 1761.⁶⁹ Those present at its first meeting were Frodsham (in the chair), Oram (Senior Warden), Leng (Junior Warden), Granger (Steward), Crisp, Pearce, Fitmaurice and Binns. This is a unique example in masonic history as all of the founding members of this lodge were actors. A visitor, John Smith Caddy, was one of four Hull masons who put forward the formal petition to establish the lodge, which was a requirement.⁷⁰ The York theatre company included Hull on its circuit, which suggests that the actors had been exchanging with Hull masons previously and had requested their assistance in setting up their own lodge. This connection is thus an illustration of how well-positioned itinerant actors were to engage socially with masons from different locations and thus play an important role in helping to spread the craft. Describing the mobility of actors, Reddyhoff states:

Military lodges are accepted as having influenced the spread of Freemasonry, but few regiments even in war, moved as frequently and rapidly as did some actors ... it therefore seems possible, if not probable, that actor-masons contributed something to the spread of Freemasonry outside London.⁷¹

This initiative appears to have led to the dormant *York Grand Lodge* being revived six weeks later on 17 March 1761 and all the actors would move to this lodge three years later.⁷² This suggests that the company did not necessarily want their own lodge but were seeking one to attend when in York for the season.

When Tate Wilkinson joined the York company in 1766 as manager, thirteen out of its seventeen male actors were masons.⁷³ Wilkinson's move to York came about through the work of a

⁶⁹ Reddyhoff, "The York Company," 8-32.

⁷⁰ W. R. Makins, *Some Account of Freemasonry in the City of York* (York, 1918), 11.

⁷¹ Reddyhoff, "The York Company," 9.

⁷² William James Hughan, *History of the Apollo Lodge, York, In Relation to Craft and Royal Arch Masonry* (London: John Kenning, 1889), 12.

⁷³ Reddyhoff, "The York Company," 16.

freemason, John Tasker, who was also a visitor at the first meeting of the *Punch Bowl Lodge*.⁷⁴

Tasker was a silk mercer and linen draper, the Steward of the County Hospital and a keen theatregoer. In a masonic-themed example of Borsay's urban renaissance, Tasker evidently hoped that by attracting an actor of Wilkinson's stature to York, this would help to develop the town.⁷⁵

Wilkinson supported masonry with regular bespoke evenings on the circuit, thus helping to cement relations between his actors, the local freemasons and their town. This approach is shown by a playbill for the expensively-staged pantomime *Harlequin Freemason* by Charles Dibdin and James Messink, which was performed in 1782 featuring a young Stephen Kemble.⁷⁶ It premiered in December 1780 at London's Covent Garden Theatre where it was enthusiastically received with 63 performances during the two seasons 1780-81 and 1781-82.⁷⁷ The *London Chronicle* carries a long description of the plot which begins with a clear indication of freemasonry's defining concept of self-modelling designed upon architectural symbolism, as previously described by Stevenson:

The opening scene is conformable to an Opinion held by all Freemasons, namely, 'that the Original of Architecture is taken from that great building, MAN.' Conformable whereunto three Masons are discovered at work on a Figure, representing a man, composed of the different Orders of Architecture.⁷⁸

A further sign of Wilkinson's support can be seen in the regular masonic-themed benefits which the company presented for their performers. In 1769 the company performed *The Plotting Wives* by a Wakefield mason, Richard Linnecar, at a benefit for the actor Oram. The prologue spoken by Wilkinson made direct reference to freemasonry in an appeal for more serious plays to be produced and is a clear example of theatre and freemasonry sharing an improving spirit:

⁷⁴ Ibid, 15.

⁷⁵ Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance, Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660 – 1770* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 120.

⁷⁶ Harry William Pedicord, "Masonic Theatre Pieces in London 1730–1780," *Theatre Survey* 25, no. 1 (1984): 160-165. Stephen Kemble had been made a mason in York when acting for Wilkinson that year. His more famous brother, John Philip Kemble, was also made a mason while acting in the York company in 1780.

⁷⁷ Pedicord, "Masonic Theatre Pieces," 160.

⁷⁸ *The London Chronicle* (London), 30 December 1780.

Shall York, for learning and for poets fam'd;
A town polite as any Europe boasts,
Be still serv'd up with plays departed ghosts?
Will no bright genius bring us something new?
O Mason we have long look'd up to you!⁷⁹

Linnecar later published a book containing the play and examples of his masonic writing, including a “Song on the Constituting of the Lodge, No. 238, at Wakefield”, “An Hymn on Masonry” and “Strictures on Freemasonry.”⁸⁰ Oram continued to be granted benefits long after he had retired from the company. A playbill for his benefit at York in 1788 features “an epilogue as a freemason’s wife, with an address to the audience by Mrs Mills.”⁸¹ Two years previously there had been a masonic benefit at the Hull theatre for Mills and his wife. Stanfield’s poem “Hail Glorious Masonry” was first performed at this benefit, as he stated in a letter to the editor of *The Freemasons’ Magazine* in which it had been published but mistaken for the work of William Preston.⁸² Shortly afterwards, Mills died of dropsy. Stanfield then commemorated him in a poem which was also published in *The Freemasons’ Magazine*.⁸³ Writing such pieces and placing them in magazines and newspapers is precisely the kind of activity which helped to popularise and develop freemasonry in the provinces; a subject which is considered further in the next section.

The first record that provides a definite association between freemasonry and Butler’s company appears in a 1774 letter from the *Lennox Lodge No. 123*, Richmond, North Yorkshire, to the Grand Secretary in London (*figure 16*).⁸⁴ Registering new freemasons with the lodge in London had been obligatory since shortly after the establishment of modern freemasonry in 1717. The

⁷⁹ Richard Linnecar, *The Miscellaneous Works of Richard Linnecar of Wakefield* (Leeds: T. Wright, 1789), 175.

⁸⁰ Linnecar, *Miscellaneous Works*, 233-235, 239-240, 245-262.

⁸¹ York Minster Special Collections (YMLSC), *Hailstone Collection of Playbills*. SC Playbills 1787-88/40. York Theatre Benefit for Mr Oram, 29 January 1788.

⁸² *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 1, December 1793: 609.

⁸³ *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 4, April 1795: 274.

⁸⁴ MFLA. SN547 Letter from *Lennox Lodge* to the Grand Secretary, 15 April 1774.

names of Fielding Wallis, Samuel Butler, Robert Dalton and William Tayleure appear in the opening paragraph, all of whom were members of the company.

Right Worshipful M^r Secretary

I hereby send You the
Names of Your Brethren to be register'd in the
Grand Lodge Book Viz. Fielding Wallis, Sam^l
Butler, Rob^t Dalton and Will^m Tayleure;
please in Your next to send a line to satisfy
the Gentlemen that the same is done they have
made Masons in Our Lodge and are Mem-
bers of the same and for which the first oppo-
rtunity I shall send You £10 which I suppose
goes to the Fund for building the Grand Hall
&c. at present nothing else is in Our power
but will alway be pleas'd to contribute as
far as We can to the real Enrichment and
Honour of Masonry. I shall if You please
pay the Money to Brother Vaders of Sarlington
who can transmitt it to You. Our Lodge join in
due Respect to You. Sam^l R. W. Sing^r & faithful Bre.
Richmond Apr^l 4th 1774 Will^m Moss

Figure 16. Letter from the Lennox Lodge No. 123.

An important way in which knowledge of masonry spread in the provinces was by actor-masons appearing on stage in full masonic regalia, opening lodges on stage, singing masonic songs, reciting masonic poems, and generally celebrating the supposedly secret mysteries of masonry in full public view. There are examples of such publicity from most towns on this circuit. On 28 August 1788 Harrogate theatre saw a bespeak ordered by a lodge from nearby Knaresborough.⁸⁵ The entertainment included “An Epilogue in the character of a Free Mason’s Wife” which was performed by Mrs Butler, a rare record of performance by Tryphosa Butler, the matriarch behind the company’s long success. The Harrogate playbill states: “A LODGE will be form’d on the Stage, with Masonic Songs, Choruses &c. by Brother Butler, Brother Stanfield, Brother Henry, Brother Martin and Brother Wallis.” Similarly in Whitby during the 1805/6 season, the masons had a bespeak when, “Between the play and the farce a regular Freemason’s Lodge will be performed on stage when the Brethren will appear in their Proper Dresses according to their different orders and Masonic Toasts and songs sung by the Brothers of the Lodge.”⁸⁶ On 12 February 1801 at Whitby, the company had presented a special piece of scenery, “a transparency emblematical of masonry” painted by Thwaite, “seen through the Arches” and supported by Companions Butler, Wright, Martin and Bro Murray.⁸⁷

Maintaining good relations with the local masonic lodge must have been financially rewarding for the companies. An entry in the *Lennox Lodge* minute book dated 6 October 1803 records “Brother Butler licensee of the Theatre Royal” and two associates of his Company “John Martin, Painter” and “John Martin, Stallholder” visited the Lodge and “the members present bespoke a Play entitled *The Brother with the Prize* to be performed on the 26th.”⁸⁸ The next month at Whitby two more performances for the masons were performed. There are relatively few Butler company playbills, yet what has survived suggests that masonic performances happened regularly

⁸⁵ Reddyhoff, “The York Company,” 23.

⁸⁶ Whitby, N. Yorkshire, Whitby Museum Archive, (WMA) *Theatrical Playbills, 1805-1806*. Whitby Theatre Playbill, 5 February 1806.

⁸⁷ WMA., *Theatrical Playbills, 1801-1804*. Whitby Theatre Playbill, 12 February 1801.

⁸⁸ A. Morton, *A History of the Lennox Lodge No. 123* (Richmond, 1947), 16.

in all the towns where lodges existed, which suggests the company relied upon masonic patronage for their success and survival.

James Cawdell played a central role in several charitable masonic-related civic developments and many of these brought improvements to the permanent infrastructure of towns where he had theatres. An example is the building of the Durham infirmary in 1793. Cawdell set events in motion on 22 March 1793 by presenting *The Tragedy of Cato* to a full house which raised fifty guineas for the infirmary. Cawdell's circuit also provides several examples of masonic involvement in the founding of actual theatres themselves including the Durham Theatre on 6 July 1791.⁸⁹ Also the foundation stone for the North Shields Theatre was laid "in the presence of a large concourse of spectators" on 13 June 1797 when "the bells were rung most of the afternoon."⁹⁰ The theatre was later opened with a masonic ceremony on 8 January 1798.⁹¹ A playbill for the opening records the procession was designed to have the greatest effect, with a band, banners and colours, lighted torches and flambeaux.⁹² Stanfield played the lead in Inchbald's comedy *Wives as they were, Maids as they are* and the performance concluded "with a new Masonic Glee by Brother Stanfield, Mr. Darley and Mr. Holliday called *Masons all United*." It is remarkable that the opening of the theatre should also have been a specifically masonic affair and clearly demonstrates the close relationship between the two institutions in this part of the North. Actors also played central roles in the establishment of the first purpose-built freemason halls. Cawdell's *Miscellaneous Poems* contains "An Irregular Ode on the Moral Principles of Masonry" written for the Consecration of the *King George's Lodge* in Sunderland on 4 June 1778 (the Birthday of George III), and his previously

⁸⁹ John Sykes, *Local Records; or, Historical Register of Remarkable Events: Which Have Occurred in Northumberland and Durham, Newcastle upon Tyne and Berwick upon Tweed*, vol 1. (Newcastle: John Sykes, 1833), 357.

⁹⁰ Sykes, *Local Records*, 384.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 386.

⁹² South Shields Public Library. Local Records Section. North Shields Theatre Playbill, 8 January 1798.

mentioned “Ode for the Opening of the Phoenix Lodge.”⁹³ This building still exists and is the oldest purpose-built masonic hall in the world.⁹⁴

Publicity and *The Freemasons’ Magazine*

The familiarity that actors shared with their “public” stood them in good stead to publicise their activities outside the playhouse. An ability for getting material in print is a skill which Stanfield brought with him to Sunderland, and which helped him to bring the lodges their wider fame. On 13 June 1793, Stanfield, then Junior Warden of the *Phoenix Lodge*, was admitted as a member of the *Sea Captain’s Lodge* and an additional note in the minute book states: “Resolved that the Freemason Magazine be ordered for the Benefit of the Lodge.”⁹⁵ This was up to date, as the magazine's first issue had been released that same month.⁹⁶ Stanfield would become a regular contributor. *The Freemasons’ Magazine* was the first English periodical dedicated to Freemasonry. It ran in monthly issues from 1793 to 1798. Stanfield made his first appearance in the magazine in the December 1793 issue, and he would go on to contribute a number of poems, songs and reports.⁹⁷ The editors acknowledge Stanfield’s support in the section dedicated to contributors at the

⁹³ Cawdell, *Miscellaneous Poems*, 120, 133–34.

⁹⁴ MFLA. BE64MED. Colin Meddes, Susan King and Elizabeth Allison, *A Jewel in the Crown or a Thorn in the Side: Freemason’s Hall Queen Street East. A Brief History* (Sunderland: Queen Street Masonic Heritage Trust, 2002).

⁹⁵ Palatine Lodge No 97 Archive Sunderland. (PL). *Sea Captain’s Lodge Minute Book, 1790–1794*, 48. The minute book is digitised. See the section “Miscellaneous Minutes General Lodges, Masters’ Lodges, Royal Arch Lodges, Chapters of Harodim, Extra Lodges,” <https://www.palatine97.org/special-minutes>, accessed 20.2.2021.

⁹⁶ For an introduction to *The Freemasons’ Magazine* see Andreas Önnarfors, “Perfection by Progressive Excellence: An Initial Analysis of the Freemason’s Magazine 1793–1798,” in *Researching British Freemasonry 1717–2017*, vol. 3. eds. Róbert Péter and Andreas Önnarfors (Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 2010), 159–180. For a freemason’s account of the magazine see W. J. Songhurst and L. Vibert, “Some notes on the ‘Freemasons’ Magazine or General and Complete Library,’ A Masonic Periodical at the end of the Eighteenth Century by Bro. George Elkington,” *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* 42, no. 1 (1930): 140–63.

⁹⁷ Stanfield’s contributions to the *Freemasons’ Magazine* include: “Friendship and Love,” (song) *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 1, November 1793: 521; “The Call to Refreshment,” (song) *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 1, December 1793: 609; “The Royal Arch,” (song) *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 2, February 1794: 150; “Verses on seeing the Late Lord Chancellor at Scarborough soon after the King’s Recovery,” (poem) *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 2, June 1794: 464–65; “A Paraphrase on the Laetatus Sim in Bis. Psalm

start of several issues. The July 1794 issue opens with the sentence: “The indefatigable attention and zealous friendship of our Brother Stanfield affords us very great pleasure, and demands our most sincere thanks.”⁹⁸ For a masonic audience, reading about the lives of prominent masons reinforced masonic values and encouraged further civic development. As well as publicity, the desire for transparency could be interpreted as part of an effort to disassociate English masonry from any suspicion that it held Jacobin sympathies during this troubled period of the mid-1790s. Many articles stress loyalty for King and Country, further reinforcing this impression. Andreas Önnersfors has noted that the loyalty of masonry to “King, Lords and Commons” is stressed constantly in the magazine and even equates this to the triad of masonic concepts, Wisdom, Strength and Beauty. However, he also states that “the picture is diversified ... on the one hand the violent extremes of the French revolution ardently are repelled, but on the other hand values inspiring the generation of revolutionaries sometimes openly are embraced.”⁹⁹ Another example of this tension is the number of highly sympathetic articles about Ireland, including one long letter about the White Boys which is scathing in its attack on British neglect.¹⁰⁰

CXXII,” (song) *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 3, July 1794: 69; “An Address written by J.F.S. and Spoken by one of the Pupils at the Exhibition of Mr. Wright’s Academy in Sunderland,” (poem) *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 3, October 1794: 292-93; “Written on the Coast of Africa in the Year 1776,” (poem) *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 4, April 1795: 273; “Elegy on the Death of Brother John Mills, Comedian, of the Theatre Royal, Hull,” (poem) *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 4, April 1795: 274; “To the Memory of William Hills, Secretary and Master of the Sea Captain’s Lodge,” (verse and inscription) *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 4, April 1795: 284; “Patrick O’Neil, An Irish Song; Tune ‘Sheela na Guira,’ ” (song) *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 4, May 1795: 346; “To Dr. Brown, with a Tonquin Bean,” (poem) *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 4, June 1795: 418; “Verses sung to the Leading Passage of Pleyel’s German Hymn on a Public Charitable Occasion; Tune, ‘Rule Britannia,’ ” (song) *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 4, June 1795: 418-19; “Prologue to ‘Werter, A Tragedy’ by Mr. Reynolds, First Spoken at the Theatre Royal, Hull, July 3 1787,” (prologue) *Freemason’s Magazine*, vol. 5, July 1795: 62-63; “The Sunderland Volunteers: Tune Anacreon in Heaven,” (song) *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 4, October 1795: 276; “Monody on the Death of John Howard Esq, Spoken by Mrs O’Keefe in the Character of Arabella (a female captive just set free by Howard of the Drama) in Mrs Inchbald’s play of ‘Such Things Are,’ ” (poem) *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 6, February 1796: 124-25; “Elegy on Mr Winterbotham, Captain of a Vessel in the Sierra Leone Company’s Service,” *The Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 7, September 1796: 205-206.

⁹⁸ *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 3, July 1794: “Acknowledgments to Correspondents.”

⁹⁹ Andreas Önnersfors, “Perfection by Progressive Excellence,” 175.

¹⁰⁰ *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 2, June 1794: 417-21.

Sunderland Subscription Library: A masonic connection

When Senior Warden of the *Phoenix Lodge*, Stanfield frequently visited the *Sea Captains' Lodge* with the Grand Master Dr. Tipping Brown and they built up a strong friendship. In a gesture of fashionable sociability Stanfield published his poem, "To Dr Brown with a Tonquin Bean" dedicated to his friend.¹⁰¹ This includes a footnote stating that the tonquin bean is "An East Indian Seed, that gives a most fragrant odour to snuff." The capacity to comment upon matters of taste allowed one to enter into the terrain of eighteenth-century cultural discourse and this is therefore an example of a local actor exploiting their cultural capital; although in publishing the poem, Stanfield's action as a "cultural broker" extended beyond his local milieu to a wider national readership.¹⁰² Brown and Stanfield's friendship helped to bring about the establishment of Sunderland's first subscription library, as previously mentioned. Another Grand Master of the *Phoenix Lodge*, the Surgeon William Eden, was present at the first meeting of the library's founders which took place in Stanfield's house and Brown was the library's first President. Also, the first name on the visitors' book, signed in by Stanfield, dated Saturday 14 February 1795, is Michael Scarth, the Grand Master of the *Sea Captain's Lodge*.¹⁰³ Scarth would become a subscriber in 1798 (figure 17).

¹⁰¹ *Freemasons' Magazine*, vol. 4, June 1795: 418.

¹⁰² For analysis of the relationship between taste and eighteenth-century cultural capital see Robert Jones, *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain; The Analysis of Beauty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁰³ Sunderland Antiquarian Society, (SAS). *Sunderland Subscription Library Visitors Book*. 1. The second entry, dated Tuesday 3 March 1795, is Mr Collins of North Carolina signed in by Stanfield's friend G. W. Meadley. This may have been the planter, merchant, and banker Josiah Collins I or his son Josiah Collins II, whose family owned one of the most successful rope manufacturing businesses in America. See William S. Powell, "Josiah Collins II," in *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 1 A-C ed. William S. Powell (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 1979), 4.

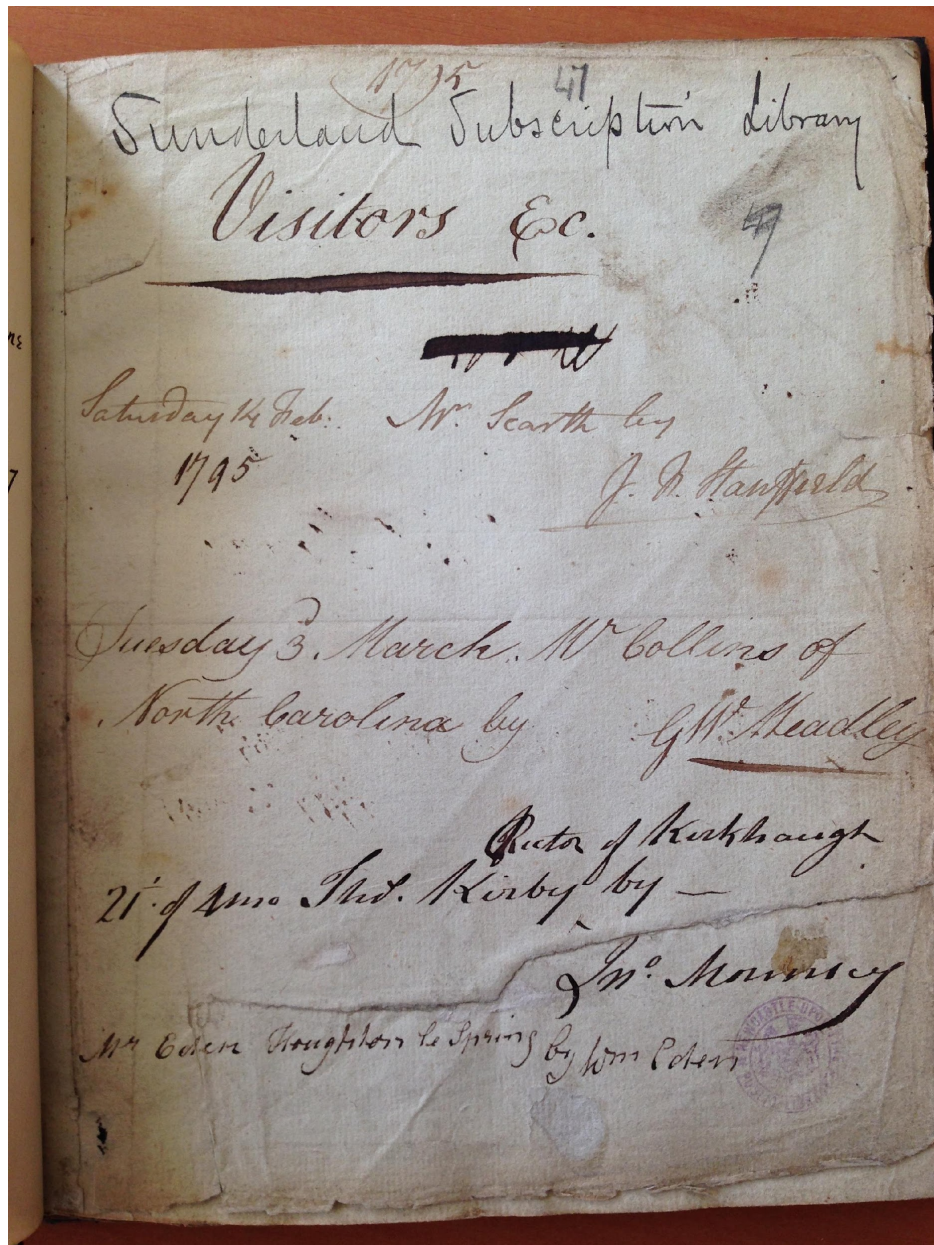


Figure 17. The Sunderland Subscription Library Visitors' Book.

The foundation stone for a permanent library building was laid on 6 May 1801 and the words used: "In the name of Almighty God, the fountain of intelligence, and the source of mind" suggests that the Sunderland masons were behind the ceremony.¹⁰⁴ This institution would later develop into the town's Literary and Philosophical Society with the Durham MP Sir Ralph Milbanke as the President. Milbanke also became Provincial Grand Master for Durham at that time and was a close

¹⁰⁴ Eneas Mackenzie, Marvin Ross, *An Historical, Topographical, and Descriptive View of the County Palatine of Durham*, vol 1. (Newcastle: Mackenzie and Dent 1834), 305-06.

friend of Stanfield. Sunderland's first subscription library thus provides an example of how masonry extended its influence outside the lodge and into the development of intellectual culture in the region.

Masonic politics and abolition

Roberts argued that historians "having satisfied themselves that English masonry was indeed, as its apologists claimed, politically insignificant, have been content to leave the reputable side of the subject to the antiquarians and ignore the rest."¹⁰⁵ He criticises this "positivist" historical preoccupation with politics and power as "short-sighted", pointing out that historians "did not ask themselves what other significance it might have."¹⁰⁶ It is certainly true that Northern lodges were overt in their patriotism and keen to make public pronouncements in support of the King. An indication of their perceived loyalty to the crown came in 1799 when the Prime Minister William Pitt put *The Unlawful Societies Act* to Parliament and Roland Burdon, the MP for Durham and Grand Master of *Sea Captain's Lodge*, was instrumental in having the words "Freemasons Exempted" accepted and written into the Bill.¹⁰⁷ The loyal nationalism that British freemasonry exhibited at the end of the eighteenth century had definite implications for it as a transnational institution, as the masonic "imagined community" became increasingly identified with the nation and the royal family, members of whom have been Grand Masters since 1782.

Although politics was not allowed to be discussed in the lodge, the abolition of the slave trade provides an entry point to explore the actor-mason nexus. In a 2006 article about the masonic writer and antiquarian William Hutchinson, Trevor Stewart concludes that he should be recognised

¹⁰⁵ Roberts, "Freemasonry," 323.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Albert G. Mackey, *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry and its Kindred Sciences*, vol 4: S-Z. (Altenmünster: Jazzybee Verlag, 2016), 144.

as a unique example of a northern mason-abolitionist.¹⁰⁸ Hutchinson, a freemason from Barnard Castle, was also a playwright and wrote an anti-slavery play, *The Princess Zanfara*, which was published in 1789.¹⁰⁹ It was dedicated to the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade and its cover carried the image of a kneeling chained slave with the words “Am I not a Man and a Brother?” Hutchinson’s friend and fellow freemason, Reverend Daniel Watson from Middleton Tyas, had suggested that he write the play and their correspondence shows the efforts taken to secure its performance. In a letter dated 19 Feb 1788, Watson encouraged Hutchinson:

... set your imagination to work on *horror* and *pity*; and, if *love* be necessary, take it in too. Your subject, any of the West India Islands belonging to the English. Your *Personae*, a rascally Captain of a Ship in the African trade, two more rascally and barbarous Planters with their white servants, a Negro Prince and Princess, a faithful Negro of each sex, faithful from connexions in early life in their native country, an insurrection as tragic as you can make it; the Prince, the Hero.¹¹⁰

Watson clearly expressed his feelings regarding abolition at this moment when the anti-slavery movement was gaining momentum: “I was never more in serious earnest ... Such a piece would be well timed, and would do infinitely more towards promoting the great cause of humanity now on the *tapis*, than any thing that has been written on the subject.” Watson also gave Hutchinson sage advice about maintaining his own voice, writing: “Do not read ‘The Royal Slave,’ for fear of having your own imagination warped, and for fear of your insensibly mixing the language with your own.” Hutchinson closely followed his friend’s advice on the plot, but the play was rejected for performance by Covent Garden’s Thomas Harris, who considered it too similar to *Oroonoko* and

¹⁰⁸ Trevor Stewart, “William Hutchinson, FSA (1732-1814): An 18th Century English Freemason and Anti-Slavery Dramatist,” *Lumières* 7 (2006): 145-166.

¹⁰⁹ [William Hutchinson], *The Princess Zanfara; a Dramatic Poem* (London: Wilkie, 1789). Republished in Newcastle in 1789 by Hodgson in Newcastle and again in 1792 with the imprint of London, for B. Law and Son, and F. Jollie, Carlisle.

¹¹⁰ John Bowyer Nichols, *Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century. Consisting of Authentic Memoirs and Original Letters of Eminent Persons; and intended as a Sequel to The Literary Anecdotes*, vol 1. (London: Nichols and Bentley at Cicero’s Head, 1817), 428.

The Revenge.¹¹¹ John Nichols, in the *Literary Anecdotes* states that it was performed “with some success in the County Theatres” although no record of this appears to have survived.¹¹² Perhaps the Austin and Whitlock company staged performances in their theatres as Watson gave the play to the northern manager Charles Whitlock who reacted favourably.¹¹³

Stewart stresses Hutchinson’s uniqueness, stating: “No one else in the entire English Craft – and there were much better dramatists in London who were members – ever bothered to become actively involved in that way.”¹¹⁴ He then speculates whether “any of the really prominent anti-slavery activists were also freemasons” in this area of such “geographical isolation.” Apart from the London-centric bias which peculiarly dismisses County Durham as an area of “geographic isolation” this statement is remarkable because the man who seconded the successful Abolition of the Slave Trade Bill in 1807, the MP for Durham Ralph Milbanke, was a freemason. Also specific to theatre more generally, there are many examples of local actor-masons performing in anti-slavery plays in this period of agitation. Butler’s company had a number of such plays in their repertoire, such as *Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave* which depicted “in the most affecting colours, the inhumanity of the Slave Trade.”¹¹⁵ The company also performed *Obi; or, Three-Finger’s Jack* by John Fawcett, which is one of several plays written during the 1790s following slave revolts in the British and French West Indies.¹¹⁶ The Whitby season saw *Obi* performed twice: on 30 December 1801 and 10 February 1802; and the company continued to perform anti-slavery plays after the 1807 act.¹¹⁷ George Taylor states that “the English theatre played an honourable part in awakening

¹¹¹ For analysis of slave-related drama on the eighteenth-century English stage see Prathibha Kanakamedala, “Staging Atlantic Slavery,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832*, eds. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 673-687.

¹¹² C. M. Fraser, “Hutchinson, William (1732–1814), topographer,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online ed., 23 Sep. 2004, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14291>, accessed 15 Feb. 2022.

¹¹³ Nichols, *Illustrations of the Literary History*, 440.

¹¹⁴ Stewart, “Hutchinson,” 162.

¹¹⁵ Barrow Archive and Local Study Centre, Barrow in Furness, Cumbria, (BALCS). Soulby Handbills, ZS.600. Ulverston Playbill for 27 October 1810 “*Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave*.”

¹¹⁶ George Taylor, *The French Revolution and the London Stage, 1789-1805* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000), 213.

¹¹⁷ WMA., *Theatrical Playbills, 1801-1804*.

consciousness of the inhumanity of the trade” and Butler’s Company evidently played a part in this.¹¹⁸ However, James Field Stanfield was one of the most notable masonic anti-slavery activists in the region and has been described by the historian of slavery Marcus Rediker as “an unrecognised hero of the movement to abolish the slave trade.”¹¹⁹ After arriving in Sunderland in 1789 and joining the *Phoenix Lodge*, one of his first acts was to present a copy of his recently published abolitionist poem *The Guinea Voyage* to his fellow freemasons in a demonstration of local activism.¹²⁰ Stanfield’s abolition activities related to freemasonry are presented in the following section, however his contribution to the abolition struggle more generally is examined in more detail in the next chapter.

Stanfield did know William Hutchinson, as he was well-known to the Sunderland brethren, having given a lecture at the opening of Sunderland’s *St George’s Lodge* hall in 1778.¹²¹ At a *Sea Captain’s Lodge* meeting on 10 April 1794, in the role of secretary, Stanfield noted that William Hutchinson’s *Spirit of Masonry* (1775) had been ordered for the use of the lodge.¹²² A letter written in February 1796 to Stanfield from J. W. Stephenson, the editor of the *Freemasons’ Magazine*, suggests that the actor had been trying to promote Hutchinson’s book by supplying a review:

As the Spirit of Masonry has not been sent I shall beg to know where I can procure a copy in town. By advertising it in the Magazine and other endeavours agreeable to your wishes I could have sold a considerable number and which your review would have assisted.¹²³

The previous year’s September issue contains an editorial note regarding Stanfield’s review which had been postponed “for want of the book to extract from, which we have not been able to

¹¹⁸ Taylor, *French Revolution*, 212-13.

¹¹⁹ See Marcus Rediker, “James Field Stanfield and the Floating Dungeon,” in *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (London: Penguin, 2007), 132-156.

¹²⁰ TWA. *Sunderland Phoenix Lodge Minute Book*, 173 (15 December 1790).

¹²¹ William Hutchinson, “An Oration at the Dedication of Free Mason’s Hall in Sunderland on the 16th July 1778,” in *The Spirit of Masonry in Moral and Elucidatory Lectures*, 2nd ed. (Carlisle: F. Jolie, 1795).

¹²² PL. *Sea Captain’s Lodge Minute Book, 1790-1794*, 88.

¹²³ RMG., STN /101/6 James Field Stanfield Letter 6.

procure.”¹²⁴ The review of Hutchinson’s work eventually appeared in the June and July 1797 issues.¹²⁵

Jeremy Black has noted the 544 subscribers listed in Cawdell’s *Miscellaneous Poems* indicate “the strength of local interest in the stage.”¹²⁶ Many of those names are masons and the list includes “Stockton’s Free Masons Lodge.”¹²⁷ Subscription lists and dedications in their work show how masonic involvement allowed actors to develop relationships with a remarkable range of individuals. In Stanfield’s case, this includes William Frederick, Duke of Gloucester, the nephew and son-in-law of King George III, to whom Stanfield dedicated his *Essay on Biography*. Stanfield met him through masonry at the opening of the Wearmouth Bridge in 1796. Cawdell was evidently interested in learning about the slave trade as his name appears as a subscriber to Peter Marsden’s *Account of the Island of Jamaica; with Reflections on the Treatment, Occupation, and Provisions of the Slaves* which was published at the Hodgson’s “Print Shop” in Newcastle.¹²⁸ Cawdell’s name also appears on the subscription lists of other local abolitionists who he probably met while performing on the circuit, including Durham’s William Eddis whose *Letters from America* provides a first-hand account of the treatment of slaves and indentured servants in Maryland, New York and Virginia during the years prior to the American Revolution.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 5. September 1795: Letters to contributors.

¹²⁵ *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 8. June 1797: 418-20 ; vol. 9. July 1797: 41-43.

¹²⁶ Jeremy Black, *Culture in Eighteenth-Century England: A Subject for Taste* (London: Hambledon and London, 2005), 204.

¹²⁷ Cawdell, *Miscellaneous Poems*, 183.

¹²⁸ Peter Marsden, *An Account of the Island of Jamaica; With Reflections on the Treatment, Occupation, and Provisions of the Slaves. To which is added a Description of the Animal and Vegetable Productions of the Island by a Gentleman lately Resident on a Plantation* (Newcastle: Hodgson, 1788).

¹²⁹ William Eddis, *Letters from America, Historical and Descriptive; Comprising Occurrences from 1769, to 1777, inclusive. By William Eddis, Late Surveyor of the Customs &c. at Annapolis in Maryland* (London: Printed for the author, 1792). These forty-two letters, written between 1769 and 1777, provide a contemporary account of the political and social life of the Chesapeake colonies during their last years of dependency. For his observations on persons in a state of servitude (slaves, indentured servants, free willers and convicts) see William Eddis, “Indentured ‘White Slaves’ in the Colonies,” (1770) For English convicts in the colonies see Gwenda Morgan and Peter Rushton, “Running away and returning home: the fate of English convicts in the American colonies,” *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies* 7, no. 2 (2003): 61-80.

Eddis was an abolitionist and when he returned to Durham from America he helped Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) by providing him with an introduction to the Mayor of Stockton, Rowland Webster, which was published at the start of the sixth and seventh editions of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* in which he states: “Mr. Vassa has published a Narrative which clearly delineates the iniquity of that unnatural and destructive commerce; and I am able to assert, from my own experience, that he has not exaggerated in a single particular.”¹³⁰ Webster and his fellow Stockton abolitionist, Reverend John Brewster, both appear on Stanfield’s subscription list for *The Essay on Biography*. There is no record of Stanfield meeting Equiano, but after his visit to the North East in 1793, the next edition of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* contains quotations from Stanfield’s *Observations on a Guinea Voyage, in a Series of Letters Addressed to the Rev. Thomas Clarkson*. This suggests that if they did not meet, at least Equiano had been made aware of Stanfield’s abolitionist writing.¹³¹

Brewster was the Chaplain of Stockton’s *Lodge of Philanthropy* and wrote *Ardra and Alaba: An African Tale in Verse, with a Preface on The Slave Trade* which was published by Christopher in Stockton in 1788.¹³² An entry in Brewster’s *History of Stockton* states that on 10 February 1792 “a petition was signed by 181 of the principal inhabitants of the town and neighbourhood of Stockton upon Tees, and presented to the House of Commons, by Rowland Burdon, esq. member of parliament for the county of Durham, for the abolition of the Slave trade.”¹³³ The Grand Master of Sunderland’s *Sea Captain’s Lodge*, Rowland Burdon was Mayor of

¹³⁰ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, 6th ed. (London: Printed for the author, 1793), xiii.

¹³¹ See Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, 8th ed. (Norwich: Printed for the author 1794?), 3. James Field Stanfield, *Observations on a Guinea Voyage, in a Series of Letters Addressed to the Rev. Thomas Clarkson* (London: James Phillips, 1788).

¹³² Thomas Richmond, *The Local Records of Stockton and the Neighbourhood*, (Stockton: William Robinson, 1868), 88. John Brewster, *Ardra and Alaba: An African Tale in Verse, with a Preface on The Slave Trade, by M.A., Chaplain to Lord Viscount Falkland* (Stockton: R. Christopher, 1788).

¹³³ John Brewster, *The Parochial History and Antiquities of Stockton Upon Tees* (Stockton: R. Christopher, 1796), 158.

Stockton for 1793 and 1794. Considering his abolitionist writing, it seems likely that Brewster helped to raise those signatures. Sunderland's Rector, John Hampson also printed his *Observations* in 1793, an abolition work without a subscription, whose list of local printers features the names of known associates of the actors including Sunderland's Graham, Durham's Pennington, and Stockton's Christopher.¹³⁴ Stanfield may have provided Hampson with first-hand information for his powerful descriptions of the life of Guinea sailors which is described in graphic detail. Stanfield's name appears on the subscription list of Hampson's *The Poetics of Marcus Hieronymus Vida* which was also published in 1793.¹³⁵

Freemasons were forbidden to discuss politics and religion at lodge meetings. Nevertheless, the editor of the *Freemasons' Magazine* made it clear that the magazine supported the abolition of slavery. In the "Acknowledgement to Correspondents" section of the July 1794 issue, the editor states that he had rejected a pro-slavery poem as the magazine did not support that position: "The Poem *in favour of the Slave-trade* is a complexion unsuitable to a Work which, on all occasions, shall promote, as far as its influence can extend, the cause of *Universal Benevolence*."¹³⁶ This overt stance is noteworthy considering the magazine had been given the approval of the Grand Lodge, as the editor also mentions in the opening address to readers in the same issue.¹³⁷ Stanfield's abolitionist poem "Written on the Coast of Africa, in the year 1776" appears in the April 1795 issue.¹³⁸ His second abolitionist poem published in the magazine was written during the Scarborough season of 1796 and is entitled an "Elegy on Mr. Matthew Winterbotham, Captain of a Vessel in the Sierra Leone Company's Service who was drowned going ashore at Dix-Cove, on the Gold Coast, Africa."¹³⁹ A footnote adds:

¹³⁴ John Hampson, *Observations on the Present War, the Projected Invasion, and a Decree of the National Convention, for the Emancipation of the Slaves in the French Colonies* (Sunderland: Graham, 1793).

¹³⁵ John Hampson, *The Poetics of Marcus Hieronymus Vida, Bishop of Alba; with Translations from the Latin of Dr. Louth, Mr. Gray, and others* (Sunderland: T. Reed, 1793).

¹³⁶ *Freemasons' Magazine*, vol. 3, July 1794: "Acknowledgments to Correspondents."

¹³⁷ Ibid, "To the Readers of the Freemasons' Magazine."

¹³⁸ *Freemasons' Magazine*, vol. 4, April 1795: 273-74.

¹³⁹ *Freemasons' Magazine*, vol. 7, September 1796: 205-206. Stanfield misspelled the name "Winterbottom" in his poem's title.

He, in the beginning of 1794, in company with Mr. Watts, penetrated above 300 miles in the interior parts of Africa, to the regal city of Teembo, in order to establish a fair commerce with the Natives, and with a view to the Abolition of the detestable Slave Trade.¹⁴⁰

Matthew's brother, Thomas Masterman Winterbottom, was physician to the colony of Sierra Leone. He published *An Account of the Native Africans in the Neighbourhood of Sierra Leone* in 1803 which he had delivered in a series of lectures in Manchester in 1795 and to Newcastle's Literary and Philosophical Society of which he was a founder member.¹⁴¹ Perhaps Stanfield attended the lectures or associated with him in Scarborough when touring with the Durham company. Winterbottom had also retired to South Shields where the company performed.

In summary, while the Durham freemason William Hutchinson was evidently a committed abolitionist who sought to use the power of the stage to promote anti-slavery, he was clearly not alone in the region, as this examination of northern actor-mason association reveals. This small selection of local material clearly demonstrates that abolition was supported by many prominent figures in Durham freemasonry including Grand Masters and Provincial Grand Masters.

Civil Society and social improvement

As noted in the previous chapter on towns, Newcastle had a long-established Corporation and tradition of guilds which oversaw and contributed to its urbanisation during the eighteenth century. Its rival, the emerging town of Sunderland-by-the-Sea, had no such history to draw upon and its development as a centre for shipbuilding, glass making and pottery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be accounted for, in part, by the role played by freemasons such as John Thornhill, the

¹⁴⁰ *Freemason's Magazine*, vol. 7, September 1796: 205.

¹⁴¹ Thomas Masterman Winterbottom, *An Account of the Native Africans in the Neighbourhood of Sierra Leone, to which is added an Account of the Present State of Medicine among Them* (London: C. Whittingham, 1803), 29.

first Grand Master of Sunderland's *King George's Lodge* which predated the *Phoenix Lodge*. Thornhill paid the majority of the costs for the construction of Sunderland's St John's Church (1764-69) at which a masonic ceremony marked the foundation stone laying, and many pews were sold to freemasons; in 1802 he was buried beneath its altar.¹⁴² The activities of Thornhill and his fellow masons, including members of the Durham theatre company, supports Jacob's argument that "modern civil society was invented during the Enlightenment in the new enclaves of sociability of which freemasonry was the most avowedly constitutional and aggressively civic."¹⁴³ The Newcastle banker, Grand Master of the *Sea Captain's Lodge*, Mayor of Stockton and MP for Durham, Roland Burdon also provides a remarkable example of how freemasonry stepped in to fill a civic void where local institutions did not exist with the construction of the Wearmouth Bridge, then the longest span iron bridge in the world. According to Garbutt, writing in 1819, this was "by far the greatest curiosity in this part of the country."¹⁴⁴ The construction made a significant impact on the local economy, which was important for Sunderland as the town had experienced a rapid increase in population growth during the eighteenth century such that by the time the bridge was finished, its population combined with Bishopwearmouth and Monkwearmouth almost matched that of Newcastle.¹⁴⁵ For the first time there was fast and convenient linkage between the three parishes. The building of the Wearmouth Bridge exhibits the improving ethos underlying masonry while also demonstrating the ways in which actors used their professional capacities to publicise masonic values to the public. Stanfield played a significant role in the venture by acting as the Master of Ceremonies for the laying of the foundation stone in 1793 and the bridge's opening in 1796, both of which took place in front of extremely large numbers of people. He also publicised the venture in the press and in local theatres.

¹⁴² Todd, *History of the Phoenix Lodge*, 27-30; George Garbutt, *A Historical and Descriptive View of the Parishes of Monkwearmouth and Bishopwearmouth and the Port and Borough of Sunderland* (Sunderland: Garbutt, 1819), 302.

¹⁴³ Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment*, 15.

¹⁴⁴ Garbutt, *Sunderland*, 302.

¹⁴⁵ P. Barfoot and J. Wilkes, *Universal British Directory*, 5 vols. (London: 1795-8?), 4:511.

Twice daily a wave several hundreds of miles long enters through the gap between the North of Scotland and Norway and moves south to generate rising tides twelve hours apart.¹⁴⁶ E. P. Thompson highlighted the Sunderland residents' dependence upon these rhythms of the sea by citing a petition sent to Parliament in 1800 which noted that "many people are obliged to be up at all hours of the night to attend the tides and their affairs upon the river."¹⁴⁷ The primary condition of the bridge's construction was that the flow of the river traffic was not to be interrupted. A major problem was the width of the span, which at 240 feet at its nearest point ruled out stone as this would require several arches thus preventing ships from navigating the river. Therefore, while Burdon worked towards obtaining an act of Parliament for the bridge between 1790 and 1792, he also sought a suitable design.

In 1792 the Act was passed, and the bridge's construction and financing were managed by Burdon and members of the two Sunderland lodges.¹⁴⁸ The engineer Thomas Wilson, who would later become Grand Master of the *Phoenix Lodge*, acted as clerk of works and resident surveyor. Michael Scarth, the Grand Master of the *Sea Captains' Lodge*, controlled the finances during the bridge-building and early years of its operation. Burdon's investment in the venture was £30,000 of the £33,400 total. His approach was based on the understanding that improvement to the regional infrastructure would lead to increased opportunities for local trade and exchange. The economic benefit is suggested by the increase in the number of crossings taking place in 1819 as recorded by Garbutt, who states that before the ferries earned £300 a year, but "the produce of the tolls now received from the bridge and the remaining ferry, amounts to £2800 per annum."¹⁴⁹

A detailed account by Stanfield of the ceremonies related to the laying of the foundation stone of the Wearmouth Bridge on Tuesday 24 September 1793 was published in *The Freemasons'*

¹⁴⁶ Greg Bankoff, "The 'English Lowlands' and the North Sea Basin System: A History of Shared Risk," *Environment and History* 19, no. 1 (2013): 6.

¹⁴⁷ E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present* 38 (1967), 59-60.

¹⁴⁸ Wearmouth Bridge Act, 1792, 32 Geo. III.

¹⁴⁹ Garbutt, *Sunderland*, 302.

Magazine shortly after they had taken place and thereby disseminated on the national stage.¹⁵⁰ The official attendance shows that the bridge's construction was a masonic affair. Stanfield was the Marshal of Ceremonies and events began in the Phoenix Hall with the opening of a Grand Lodge by the Provincial Grand Master and MP for Durham, William Henry Lambton, assisted by about two hundred masons from different lodges. The masons, "all clothed in the badges, jewels, and other insignia of the different orders of Masonry" then processed "through an immense crowd of spectators" to the parish church.¹⁵¹ As well as choreographing the event and recording it for the magazine, Stanfield wrote "A Paraphrase on the *Laetatus sum in bis*. PSALM CXXII" which was sung by the choir in the church and later published in *Freemasons' Magazine*.¹⁵² Four verses later were also published in the first volume of Philadelphia's *Freemasons Magazine and General Miscellany*.¹⁵³ Other publications include New York's *American Masonic Register, and Ladies' and Gentlemen's Magazine* where it appeared under the title of "Masonic Psalm" in September 1820.¹⁵⁴

While celebrating the event as a festive gathering "that call'd the nations round" the obvious masonic references stretch the description of "paraphrase" of the psalm somewhat beyond its limits. Stanfield's interpretation becomes a hymn to enlightenment, as "Sweet science beams upon their toil" while:

O'er SALEM's plains new structures rise;
Her busy sons spread wide,
Heave mighty turrets to the skies,
O'er-arch the fluent tide.¹⁵⁵

After the church service the procession advanced to the "crowded banks of the River Wear" where the surrounding ships were "manned from the mast heads to the water's edge" and the foundation

¹⁵⁰ *Freemasons' Magazine*, vol. 2, June 1794: 406-408.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 407.

¹⁵² *Freemasons' Magazine*, vol. 3, July 1794: 69. See also Garbutt, *Sunderland*, 306-07.

¹⁵³ *Freemasons' Magazine and General Miscellany*, vol. 1. (Philadelphia: Levis and Weaver, 1811), 152.

¹⁵⁴ *The American Masonic Register, and Ladies' and Gentlemen's Magazine*, vol. 1. (New York: Pratt, 1821), 59.

¹⁵⁵ *Freemasons' Magazine*, vol. 3, July 1794: 69. See also Garbutt, *Sunderland*, 306-07.

ceremony took place, ending with “the discharge of cannon, sounds of instruments, and shouts of the applauding spectators.”¹⁵⁶

Several figures known to have associated with the actors are mentioned by name in Stanfield’s account: from Durham’s *Granby Lodge* the masons included Cawdell’s friend, Br. Bone “grand secretary, with his bag” and the printer Br. Pennington “grand treas: with his staff”; Stanfield’s friend, the grammar book writer and masonic lecturer, Br Wright from *Sea Captain’s Lodge* carried the bible; Stockton’s *Lodge* was represented by the local town historian, Reverend Brewster “(master of the senior lodge), carrying the book of constitutions”; and the playwright and Grand Master of Barnard Castle’s *Lodge of Concord*, William Hutchinson, was one of the stewards of the day.¹⁵⁷

Three years later in August 1796, there was another grand ceremony to celebrate the bridge’s opening, performed by William Frederick, Duke of Gloucester at which Garbutt records there were 80,000 spectators.¹⁵⁸ Again in a sign of his standing in the community, Stanfield acted as Master of Ceremonies for the hundreds of freemasons who attended from northern towns and a sermon preached by Brewster as part of the celebration was later printed by Christopher in Stockton.¹⁵⁹ George Thompson, a traveller from Newbiggin in Westmorland, recorded his “Picturesque and Moral thoughts” as he witnessed the event.¹⁶⁰ He describes the “impressive procession form’d of a numerous assemblage of most respectable characters, all free-masons” whose solemnity adds to the grandeur of the occasion, which he presents as an exemplary

¹⁵⁶ *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 2, June 1794: 408.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 407.

¹⁵⁸ Garbutt, *Sunderland*, 317.

¹⁵⁹ William Nesfield and John Brewster, *An oration, delivered at the opening of the iron bridge at Wearmouth, August 9, 1796. By William Nesfield, M. A. Provincial Grand Chaplain, Durham. And a sermon, preached in the chapel at Sunderland, on the same occasion, by John Brewster, M. A. Chaplain of the Lodge of Philanthropy, Stockton, No. 19. To which is added, an appendix, Containing an Account of the Order of the Procession, Ceremonies, Used on that Occasion, &c* (Stockton: R. Christopher 1796).

¹⁶⁰ G. Thompson, *A Sentimental Tour collected from a variety of occurrences from Newbiggin, near Penrith, Cumberland, to London, by way of Cambridge; and from London to Newbiggin, by way of Oxford* (Penrith: Soulby, 1798), 273-279.

exhibition of mass polite sociability.¹⁶¹ “They halt, they beck, they scrape - they bow” he says of the attendant crowds, adding: “The very clown this day becomes polite - he knows not how.”¹⁶² Burdon had been successful in his plan, as Garbutt notes: “The centre of the arch is nearly 100 feet from the surface of the water, at the lowest ebb of the tide, so that vessels of from 200 to 300 tons burthen can pass under it with only striking their top-gallant-masts.”¹⁶³ In this period it must have been a remarkable sight to see such ships pass under a man-made arch. “See! how the Ships glide beneath with their top-masts unbent” Thompson exclaimed, when describing the sense of grandeur and wonder conveyed by “this bridge of bridges” through the astonished double-takes of those present. “See each, he gazes - and gazes again. See, look, - eye the fine - bold proportions. You see them but know them not. Come, look again. - How light, yet how strong!”¹⁶⁴ An unnamed local poet also attempted to convey the giddy impression of this remarkable construction by alluding to fashionable ballooning: “Above the clouds suspended in the sky / LUNARDI’s self was never half so high.”¹⁶⁵ The poet then shifts perspective to that of a mariner perched in his lookout who sees the bridge appear as if a mirage in front of his eyes:

The distant mariner from the main top spies,
The lofty arch, high rising to the skies;
Portentous of his future fate he fears,
The strange phenomenon that now appears.¹⁶⁶

Then the dizzying effect of the bridge is conveyed by a coachman approaching the bridge in a carriage, keeping steadily to the middle of the road:

¹⁶¹ Thompson, *A Sentimental Tour*, 276.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Garbutt, *Sunderland*, 317.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 275, 274-75, 275.

¹⁶⁵ Anon. [Thomas Snowdale], “Verses on Wearmouth Bridge, intitled The Poet’s Dream, a Prophecy. Dedicated to Rowland Burdon, Esq. M.P. By a Spectator,” (Durham: L. Pennington, 1795), 5. This was printed anonymously but on the copy in the Sunderland Library’s Local Studies section is written: “From the author Thomas Snowdale.”

¹⁶⁶ [Thomas Snowdale], “Verses on Wearmouth Bridge”, 4.

‘Till a tall ship’s top-gallant-mast he spies,
He looks, he faints, his sick’ning courage dies;
His trembling arm no more the last sustains,
His giddy head forgets the slack’ning reins.¹⁶⁷

Finally, a local sailor reaches down from the bridge to touch the main sail, as the ship passes underneath, a previously unheard-of action: “Ha! See that sailor bending down to reach, / The flying pendant at his utmost stretch.”¹⁶⁸ This inversion conveys the topsy-turvy impression made by this remarkable bridge during the age of sail.

Stanfield’s detailed report, accompanied by an engraving of the bridge, was published in the October and November issues of the magazine followed by supporting material in the December issue telling readers that it had been unanimously resolved that Burdon be requested to sit for an “eminent artist for his portrait, and also that an elegant painting of the Bridge be procured, both to be hung up in the freemasons’ hall, as a testimony of respect and admiration for such a personage and such work.”¹⁶⁹ See *figure 18*.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 7.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 8.

¹⁶⁹ *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 7, October 1796: 231-41; November 1796: 303-05; December 1796: 374-379.

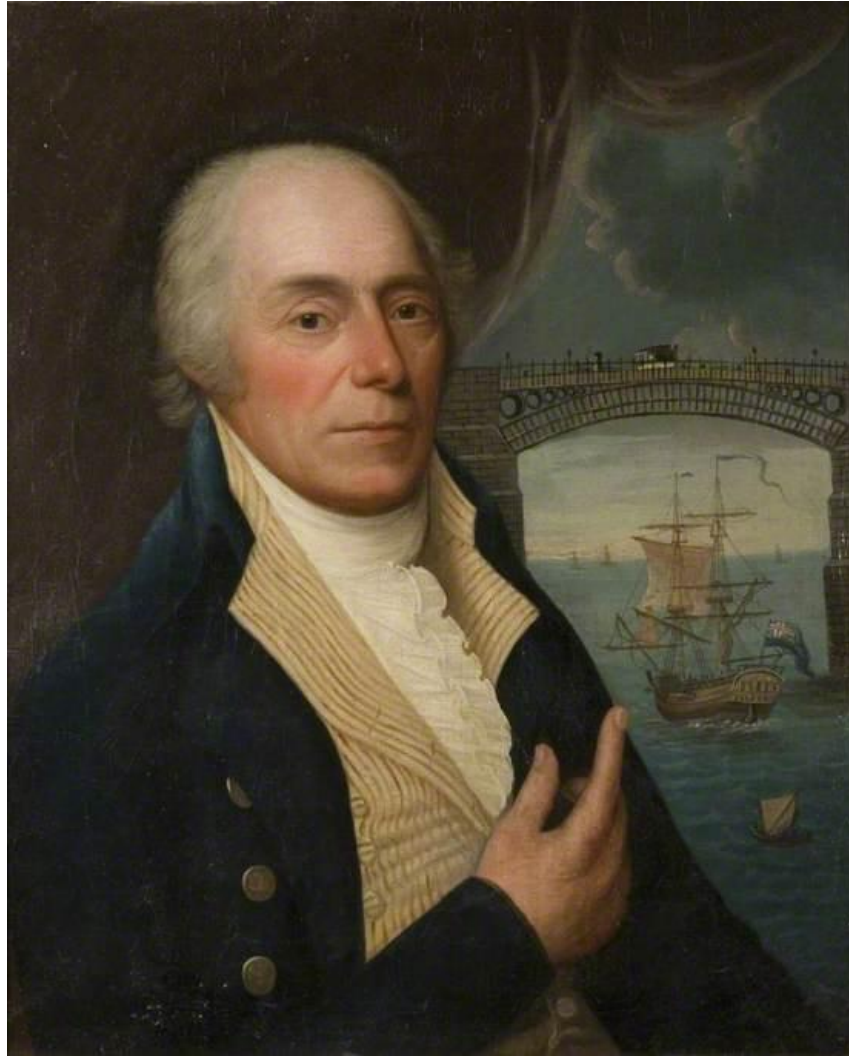


Figure 18. Roland Burdon and the Wearmouth Bridge, ca. 1796.¹⁷⁰

While the bridge was being built Stanfield also wrote a song called “The Royal Arch” set to music with a grand chorus by his fellow freemason Huquier which was published in *The Freemasons’ Magazine* in February 1794.¹⁷¹ The song is a hymn to enlightenment, celebrating the restoration of the three masonic values of Wisdom, Strength and Beauty by “Fair Science”. For freemasons the publication and singing of Stanfield’s “The Royal Arch” during the Wearmouth Bridge’s ambitious construction must have resonated with symbolic significance as in masonic terms it signifies a higher degree of masonry, the fourth degree, which Stanfield’s song references by ending each

¹⁷⁰ Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens, Sunderland. TWCMS: 1999.1237 Roland Burdon and the Wearmouth Bridge, Artist unknown.

¹⁷¹ *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 2, February 1794: 150.

verse with a refrain that refers to “the MYSTIC WORD”. The lost word with mystical power that conveys hope for redemption is the symbolic story that underlies the Royal Arch degree. This song also appeared in other masonic publications.¹⁷²

As well as promoting this initiative in print, Stanfield continued to publicise the Wearmouth Bridge in the Durham company’s theatres. Six months after its opening, elaborate scenography and machinery at the Durham theatre showed “*Ships in full sail, Boats and Keels in natural motion on the River Wear, and passing under the Arch of that Stupendous Fabric*” in an exhibition “on a larger scale than any scene or scenes ever shewn in Durham.”¹⁷³ This suggests that the company had spent considerable sums in realising the dramatic effects for their simulation. The bridge continued to be a significant attraction in the company’s theatres. During the following year’s summer season at Scarborough an interlude “discover’d the different Views of the ... Iron Bridge at Sunderland, as it is now finished and completed.”¹⁷⁴ “Lines spoken on the exhibition of the machinery of Wearmouth Bridge at the Theatres of Durham, Sunderland and Scarborough” was published in *The Freemasons’ Magazine* in February 1798.¹⁷⁵ This performance piece, which must have been supplied by Stanfield, probably marks his final contribution to the magazine.

In the same manner as the ceremonies for the Wearmouth Bridge, by writing and performing this material, Stanfield and the other members of the Durham company were continuing to effect change and transform their environment. This engineering marvel must have acted as an encouragement to members of the audience and helped to generate belief in the potential for modern, scientific approaches to the resolution of social and civic challenges. It demonstrates the potential for rhetoric by other means than language. In the same year that the Wearmouth Bridge was completed, the Scotsman Robert Fulton considered his own profession as a canal builder and eloquently expressed the rhetorical potential of technology: “The mechanic should sit down among

¹⁷² Stephen Jones, ed., *Masonic Miscellanies in Poetry and Prose* (London: Verner & Hood, 1797), 85-86.

¹⁷³ Durham University Special Collections, C18/20 ACF 286, Durham Theatre Advert.

¹⁷⁴ YMLSC. Theatre Playbills: SC Playbills Box 8/109, *Scarborough Playbill*, Thursday 16 August 1798.

¹⁷⁵ *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 9. Feb 1798: 132.

levers, screws, wedges, wheels, & c. like a poet among the letters of the alphabet, considering them as the exhibition of his thoughts; in which a new arrangement transmits a new idea to the world.”¹⁷⁶ This civic improvement, then the largest single-span iron bridge in the world, helped to transform Sunderland into a major industrial centre, as acknowledged today on a blue plaque attached to the bridge that states that its construction “proved to be a catalyst for the growth of Sunderland.” This was one of the first industrial regions of the world, “a vital node in the larger region of north-western Europe, in which the conditions for industrial society more generally took hold” and the creation of this technological marvel, realised through a combination of iron and coal, was a confirmation of the faith placed in the appliance of science to matters of improvement.¹⁷⁷

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to shed light on why so many actors were attracted to freemasonry, how this form of association allowed actors to further engage with the communities in which they performed, and what benefits it brought both individually and with regard to the development of local civil society. Lodges provided acceptance and friendship where actors could find a welcome as they pursued their itinerant profession. Travelling players suffered from social stigma, in part due to the marginal nature of their profession, which masonry helped to reduce, bringing players respectability and greater social acceptance in their communities. They were particularly well-suited to masonry, in part due to the aspect of performance common to the craft, but also due to an actor’s innate ability to move between the different social ranks, which also made them well-positioned to take advantage of masonry’s egalitarian character. Membership also proved financially beneficial to the actors and theatre managers, as the institutions of theatre and freemasonry were mutually supportive

¹⁷⁶ Robert Fulton, *A Treatise on the Improvement of Canal Navigation* (London: I. & J. Taylor at the Architectural Library, 1796), x.

¹⁷⁷ Adrian Green and Barbara Crosbie, “‘Beyond Coal and Class’: Economy and Culture in North-East England 1500-1800” in *Economy and Culture in North-East England, 1500-1800* ed. Adrian Green and Barbara Crosbie (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer 2018), 1.

and bespeaks were regularly requested by lodges in the towns where the actors performed, which further helped to publicise the status of masonry in the community. Both also gained social status from engaging in charitable activities of which there are many examples in the towns where theatres existed. Sunderland's subscription library illustrates just one of the many ways that intellectual networks were developed by masonic relationships between actors and their public. The northern actor-mason nexus also casts light on the struggle for abolition and the remarkable number of northern freemasons who were committed abolitionists. Finally, at a higher level of socio-economic civic commitment, actor-masons and their associates played important roles in the development and promotion of large-scale infrastructure which had permanent, improving effects on the region as exemplified by the Wearmouth Iron Bridge. As highlighted by the statement drawn from Geertz in the introduction to this chapter, such cultural expression did not exist as a form of commentary on society but was rather an integral part of that society's evolution, which is a process in which actor-masons played an important role.

Chapter Seven

James Field Stanfield: Citizen of the World

Introduction

This chapter presents the actor James Field Stanfield as a figure of Northern Enlightenment (*figure 19*). It is fitting that Stanfield should be a conduit into the relatively uncharted territory of Northern English theatre, because he himself was a pioneer who used his acting persona to bring his influence to bear on several key British institutions. While performing on northern circuits, Stanfield made significant contributions in three areas of enlightenment-forged experience: freemasonry, abolition and the literature of improvement. He was the first common sailor to publish an account of the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade and, as the maritime historian Marcus Rediker has observed: “Few people in the eighteenth century were better equipped to capture the drama of the slave trade.”¹ His influence on abolition stems from a harrowing sea voyage in a slave ship across the Atlantic, which he later wrote about while employed as an actor performing in Yorkshire playhouses.² Stanfield said he knew the place where a man lost his moral compass and the exact location on the globe where that was to be found. “Flogging did not commence with us till about the latitude 28 ... It no sooner made its appearance, but it spread like a contagion.”³ If, as Michael Brown suggests, “the imperial aspect of the Irish Enlightenment might be better captured by seeing it as one venue in a broader Atlantic Enlightenment” then the Irishman Stanfield’s *Observations on*

¹ Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (London: Penguin, 2007), 132.

² James Field Stanfield, *Observations on a Guinea Voyage, in a Series of Letters Addressed to the Rev. Thomas Clarkson* (London: J. Phillips, 1788).

³ Stanfield, *Observations*, 11.

a Guinea Voyage might be understood to trace a critical path directly across that geographical imaginary.⁴

Stanfield was described by his friend, Reverend James Tate, as “an actively benevolent Citizen of the World” and the acting profession made him highly itinerant, facilitating his cosmopolitan ambition.⁵ He was in contact with a wide range of people from different social ranks, including Yorkshire reformers, Durham MPs, and the Scottish Professoriate, with whom he associated while acting on theatre circuits in the North. “Thinking geographically”, according to Charles Withers, “illustrates that ideas do not ‘float free’ but are ‘grounded’ in particular sites and social settings, the study of which can help explain the nature, mobility and reach of the ideas themselves.”⁶ Stanfield provides an opportunity to consider the importance of geography and raises fundamental questions about where the periphery and centre were actually located with regard to his contribution to Enlightenment culture. As we have previously seen, he helped to establish the first subscription library in Sunderland, where he was “a great man in freemasonry.”⁷ His contributions to *The Freemasons’ Magazine* are further examined in the final section of the chapter. This seeks to understand what motivated Stanfield to write *An Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography* (hereafter *Essay on Biography*) which was published in Sunderland in 1813.⁸ This work is recognised as the first treatise on biography in English and has attracted academic interest.⁹

⁴ Michael Brown, *The Irish Enlightenment* (Cambridge Mass; Harvard University Press, 2016), 5.

⁵ Leslie Peter Wenham, ed., *James Tate, Master of Richmond School, Yorkshire and Canon of St. Paul’s Cathedral, London Schoolmaster and Scholar* (Northallerton: North Yorkshire County Records Office Publications, 1991), 192.

⁶ Charles W. J. Withers, “Space, Geography and the Global French Enlightenment,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the French Enlightenment*, ed. Daniel Brewer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 216.

⁷ Royal Museums Greenwich (RMG), STN COLLECTION: Uncatalogued, STN/6/3. Tate Letter to Clarkson (4 January 1832).

⁸ James Field Stanfield, *An Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography* (Sunderland: Garbutt, 1813).

⁹ Francis R. Hart, “Boswell and the Romantics: A Chapter in the History of Biographical Theory,” *ELH* 27, no. 1 (1960): 44-65; Richard, D. Altick, *Lives and Letters: A History of Literary Biography in England and America* (London: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 184-85; Joseph W. Reed, *English Biography in the Early Nineteenth Century, 1801-1838* (New Haven: Yale University, 1966), 66-82. Others who have recognised Stanfield’s work as the first systematic attempt to deal with biography as a genre include Shaffer who stresses Stanfield’s didacticism, see Elinor Shaffer, “Shaping Victorian Biography,” in *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, eds. Peter France and William St. Clair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 115-

The chapter is in three parts. The first section summarises Stanfield's known activities and identifies some of his acting associates and reform-minded friends.¹⁰ The second section considers Stanfield's contribution to the abolition movement and the chapter concludes by considering his preoccupation with biography.



Figure 19. James Field Stanfield.¹¹

135. Also see Caitríona Ní Dhúill, *Metabiography: Reflecting on Biography* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 118.

¹⁰ The main source of biographical information about Stanfield comes from an incomplete manuscript written in the late nineteenth century by his grandson Field Stanfield. RMG., STN, Unfinished MS Memoir by Field Stanfield (1844-1905). Pieter van der Merwe drew from this and added further research for a PhD thesis which provides the most complete survey of Stanfield's life yet compiled, P. T. van der Merwe, "The Life and Theatrical Career of Clarkson Stanfield 1793-1867," (PhD diss., University of Bristol 1979), 1-30.

¹¹ Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens, Sunderland. TWCMS: H22101 Portrait of James Field Stanfield. Artist unknown.

A biographical sketch

Stanfield was born in Dublin in 1749 to unknown parents. In his youth, he studied for the priesthood at one of the Catholic colleges in France for which no record appears to have survived. This accounts for his command of Latin, and it is probably where he developed a passion for the philosophy of Francis Bacon which was “remarkable for its profoundness ... and its zeal.”¹² He did not baptise any of his ten children as Catholic, but he remained a religious man and encouraged piety in his children. In a letter to his son, Clarkson, the famous artist and scenographer, Stanfield advised him “Do not on any account neglect your duties to your God.”¹³ After the seminary Stanfield became a common mariner, travelling to many parts of Europe and North America, before a final journey on a slave ship to the West Indies in 1776.¹⁴ He then joined Joseph Younger’s theatre company and performed in Manchester alongside Sarah Siddons, John Philip Kemble, Elizabeth Inchbald and Elizabeth Farren.¹⁵ For the next ten years Stanfield’s activities are difficult to trace. There is no record of him performing in London, but he did spend time there in 1781 and was made a freemason in October at *Lodge Number 215* which met at the One Bell Inn, Fleet Street.¹⁶ At the end of that year he performed at Lichfield with the Cheltenham Company of Comedians, managed by the Irish actor-manager James Boles Watson.¹⁷ Watson had taken over Roger Kemble’s Midlands company earlier in 1781.¹⁸ Stanfield may have remained with this company for several years, as he was a witness at Watson’s wedding in Cheltenham in October

¹² RMG., STN/6/4. Tate Letter to Clarkson, (21 May 1832).

¹³ RMG., STN/2/5. J. F. Stanfield letter to Clarkson Stanfield (Sunderland 15 June 1813). He named his son Clarkson after the abolitionist Reverend Thomas Clarkson. See STN/2/16 Stanfield Family Letters pt. 2: Letter from Tate to Clarkson, “Your name of Clarkson, I have told you ere now, was given by your father from his admiration of that excellent man; Thomas Clarkson, the great Abolitionist. I told the fact in this house to Thomas Clarkson. some years ago, when he called upon me. He was evidently gratified to be reminded of Mr. Stanfield and of his services in that noble cause.”

¹⁴ Stanfield, *Observations*, 21.

¹⁵ W. J. Lawrence, “A Remarkable Playbill,” *New York Dramatic Mirror*, (8 July 1905), 3.

¹⁶ Thomas Olman Todd, *The History of the Phoenix Lodge, No 94* (Sunderland: Todd, 1905), 67.

¹⁷ Merwe, “Clarkson Stanfield,” 6-7.

¹⁸ Cecil Price, *The English Theatre in Wales in the Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1948), 76-81.

1785.¹⁹ The following week, Stanfield married the actress Mary Hoad in the town. He appeared at Bath during the 1782 to 1783 season for which playbills survive.²⁰ He also claimed to have performed at the Bristol Theatre Royal.²¹

i. Stanfield's permanent arrival in the North

In October 1786, Stanfield joined Tate Wilkinson's Yorkshire circuit and for the rest of his career he performed only in the North, acting on circuits belonging to Austin and Whitlock, Butler, Cawdell, Stephen Kemble, Fraser, Faulkner and Anderson, as well as co-managing a company himself for about six years with the actor George Graham.²² He was a versatile performer playing secondary and principal roles in tragedy and comedy. Wilkinson wrote that he "was (and is) a performer of astonishing abilities as to quickness of study... and that aided by marks of strong genius and good understanding."²³ However, Wilkinson went on to mention a feature which probably had a negative impact on Stanfield's career: "But nature has not been partial to him, for I think at a wager, even Tate Wilkinson (whom his friend Stephen Kemble has pronounced the ugliest man he ever saw) might, on ballot, stand a chance for an odd ball as being the handsomer of the two."²⁴ The *Biographia Dramatica* notes that he held a "principal position" with the Durham company at the Scarborough theatre in the 1790s.²⁵ His range is made evident from a week in September 1801 when Stephen Kemble invited George Frederick Cooke to perform a different role every night at Newcastle's Theatre Royal and Stanfield played significant secondary parts in

¹⁹ Merwe, "Clarkson Stanfield," 7.

²⁰ Ibid, 5.

²¹ *The Edinburgh Evening Courant*, 12 March 1814. Advert for composition and elocution class cited in Merwe, "Clarkson Stanfield," 4. n. 5.

²² Tate Wilkinson, *The Wandering Patentee: A History of the Yorkshire Theatres*, 4 vols. (York: Wilson, Spence, and Mawman, 1795), 2:22.

²³ Tate Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 2:22.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ David Erskine Baker, Isaac Reed and Stephen Jones, eds., *Biographia Dramatica: or A Companion to the Playhouse*, 3 vols. (London: Longman et al, 1812), 1:682.

thirteen different pieces during the week.²⁶ Stanfield and Cooke had first worked together on Tate Wilkinson's Yorkshire circuit in the mid-1780s and appear to have shared similar feelings about abolition. There is a record of Cooke drunk on stage at Liverpool Theatre and when the audience hissed him, he walked to the footlights and shouted at them, "Blast ye! Blast ye all! There's not a brick throughout your town that's not cemented with the blood of an African!"²⁷

Wilkinson records that Stanfield had "strong talents for poetry" and this must have made him a valuable member of the companies in which he performed.²⁸ He helped to introduce Goethe to the Hull public by writing the prologue to Frederick Reynolds' tragedy *Werter*.²⁹ He also wrote prologues for the Butler company which he joined in 1787 after briefly appearing in Austin and Whitlock's company at Newcastle's Theatre in the Bigg Market.³⁰

ii. James Tate and George William Meadley: Provincial associates

The seventeen-year-old James Tate was present on the opening night of the Richmond Theatre in September 1788 and recorded in his diary: "The New Theatre opened. A prologue by Stanfield spoken by Butler. Inkle and Yarico and the midnight hour."³¹ Side scenes etc. by Cuit and

²⁶ Newcastle Central Library (NCL). *Newcastle Theatre Playbills*. Theatre Royal Playbills, 1801.

²⁷ Clarke, *The Georgian Era*, (London: Vizetelly, Branston & Co, 1834), 339.

²⁸ Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 2:22.

²⁹ *Freemasons' Magazine: Or, General and Complete Library*, vol. 5, July 1795: 62-63. Thomas Reynolds' adaptation of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is an example of a play that found success in the provinces, at the Bath theatre in November 1785, before being performed in London.

³⁰ NCL., *Newcastle Theatre Playbills*. 21 March 1787, benefit for Mrs Peile by desire of the United Freemasons of Newcastle and Gateshead; 23 March 1787, benefit for Mrs Leister; 9 April 1787, benefit for Mr Duncan; 16 April 1787, benefit for backstage staff.

³¹ For analysis of Colman's popular comic opera see Frank Felsenstein, Jean I. Marsden, Mita Choudhury, Nandini Bhattacharya, "Colman's *Inkle and Yarico*: Four Critical Perspectives," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832*, eds. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 688-705. Also see Daniel J. O'Quinn, "Mercantile Deformities: George Colman's *Inkle and Yarico* and the Racialization of Class Relations," *Theatre Journal* 54 no. 3 (2002): 389-409.

Coatsworth. The Theatre very elegant. Earl Fitzwilliam, Sir Thos. Dundas, etc.”³² This brief note provides a glimpse of the fashionable politeness on display in this provincial theatre that evening.³³ Thomas Dundas was MP for Richmondshire. His father Lawrence Dundas, known as “the Nabob of the North” had used wealth earned as a commissar during the Seven Year War to buy a majority of burgage houses in Richmond and thereby make the town his pocket borough.³⁴ The Dundas family helped to develop the town into a centre of retirement and leisure. The scenery painter, George Cuit the Elder, had spent six years painting in Rome under the Dundas family’s patronage.³⁵ Cuit then retired to Richmond, where he painted landscapes for the local gentry.³⁶ Dundas’ brother-in-law, Earl Fitzwilliam, was one of the greatest landowners in the country and a leading Whig statesman. Tate met Stanfield and his friend the actor Fielding Wallis for the first time during the 1788 season in Richmond, which he mentions in a letter to Stanfield’s son, “Mr F.W. [Fielding Wallis] and Mr. Stanfield had then been for many years acquainted and much attached to each other, both Irishmen, both brought up for different and higher pursuits, both on stage, and both Freemasons.”³⁷ Tate married Wallis’ second daughter, Margaret in 1795, after he had become a Reverend and the Headmaster of Richmond School. He was a prolific letter writer and by marrying into an acting family, his correspondence provides a unique insight into provincial theatrical life in the period.

Shortly after their meeting, Stanfield introduced Tate to a scholarly young man, George William Meadley from Bishopwearmouth, who he had met after joining Cawdell’s Durham company in 1789. Stanfield, Tate and Meadley remained close friends and their letters reveal a mutual interest in reform and abolition. From a young age Tate had been exposed to Anglican

³² North Yorkshire County Records Office, Northallerton, N. Yorks, (NYCRO)., *Letters & Papers of James Tate, (1771-1843)*, Anecdotes & Recollections, ZJT (MIC 2629/0811). Tate diary entry 3 Sept. 1788.

³³ Mark A. Howell, “The Theatre at Richmond, Yorkshire: New Evidence and Conjectures,” *Theatre Notebook* 46, no. 1 (1992) and “The Richmond Theatre and the Quaker Meeting House,” *Richmond and District Civic Society Annual Report* (1986).

³⁴ See G. E. Bannerman, “The ‘Nabob of the North’: Sir Lawrence Dundas as Government Contractor,” *Historical Research* 83, no. 219 (February 2010): 102-23.

³⁵ Jane Hatcher, *The History of Richmond, North Yorkshire* (Pickering: Blackthorn, 2000), 156.

³⁶ Wenham, *James Tate*, 53.

³⁷ RMG., STN/6/4. Tate Letter to Clarkson (21 May 1832).

dissent as at the age of fourteen he had become the amanuensis of the radical Archdeacon Blackburne who was the Rector of Richmond.³⁸ This introduced him to some of the leading Anglican dissenters of the period. Stanfield, Tate and Meadley formed a hub with links to a wide range of literary, ecclesiastical, academic and political figures. Geographically the three were well-positioned as Yorkshire, Durham and Northumberland were home to many prominent Whig families whose influence would increase during the early decades of the 1800s, leading to the Abolition of the Slave Trade, Catholic Emancipation and The Great Reform Act. Tate's school became a trusted place for prominent Whig families to send their children. He taught the second Earl Grey's son, for which he was rewarded with the Canonship of St. Paul's when Grey became Prime Minister in the early 1830s. Letters survive in which Earl Grey asks Tate for his advice regarding Catholic Emancipation.³⁹ Rather like John Cunningham, who assisted the youthful Joseph Ritson's first appearance in print, Stanfield also used his influence to facilitate Tate's entrée into print as mentioned in a letter to Meadley written when Tate was studying at Sidney College, Cambridge:

That paragraph in my letter of July 18th – an intended antidote for all inclination or necessity of Revolution – which I recommended for insertion in the Newcastle Chronicle – got, by Mr. Stanfield's means no doubt, into the Courier and from thence was adopted by Mr. Flower in his second or third paper with a very flattering compliment.⁴⁰

The Unitarian James Flower was the proprietor of “the most vigorous and outspoken liberal periodical of its day” the *Cambridge Intelligencer* which appeared from 1793 until 1803.⁴¹ Tate made his political position clear to Meadley later in the letter:

³⁸ B. W. Young, “Blackburne, Francis (1705–1787), Church of England clergyman and religious controversialist,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online ed., 23 Sep. 2004, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/2513>, accessed 22 Feb 2022.

³⁹ Durham University Special Collections. Durham (DUSC). GRE/B9A/14/43/1 Letter from Tate to Grey 22 May 1819.

⁴⁰ Wenham, *James Tate*, 61. Letter, Tate to Meadley. Sidney College, Cambridge February 13, 1794.

⁴¹ J. E. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace: Anti-war Liberalism in England, 1793-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 97.

Our sentiments, I dare say, are nearly congenial. Mine follow, I own, but without any servility of irrational assent, the general opinions of Fox, the Abdiel of this political Era, amongst hundreds of faithless faithful found, and of Wyvill, who, to use the nervous expression of the Psalmist, holds fast his integrity by God.⁴²

Tate would later become a close associate of the Yorkshire radical Christopher Wyvill of Burton Constable.⁴³

Meadley often expressed his political opinions to Stanfield about war and reform, congratulating him in 1793 on “Your Country shewing an example to mine in a Reform of the Representation” referring to the partial restitution of rights to Catholics in Ireland by the Roman Catholic Relief Act.⁴⁴ He is best known for writing the biography of William Paley who lived in his home town of Bishopwearmouth.⁴⁵ However, most of Meadley’s literary output is political, including a biography of the famous Whig, Algernon Sidney.⁴⁶ Meadley also wrote a memoir of Ann Jebb, the wife of the radical reformer John Jebb and wrote articles for the *Monthly Repository*, a British Unitarian periodical dedicated to rational dissent.⁴⁷ Tate helped Meadley by providing him with introductions to his radical associates including the dissenter John Disney. Meadley was working on biographies of Disney and the Commonwealthman John Hampden when he died at the age of 45.⁴⁸

⁴² Wenham, *James Tate*, 61. Letter, Tate to Meadley. Sidney College, February 13, 1794.

⁴³ See Wenham, *James Tate*, 189.

⁴⁴ RMG., STN /101/2. James Field Stanfield Letter 2.

⁴⁵ Alexander Gordon and Clare L. Taylor, “Meadley, George Wilson (1774–1818), biographer,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online ed., 23 Sep. 2004, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18472>, accessed 15 Feb. 2022.

⁴⁶ George W. Meadley, *Memoirs of Algernon Sidney* (London: Cradock and Joy, 1813). Caroline Robbins has argued that for Americans, Sidney’s *Discourses concerning Government* was a “textbook of Revolution.” See Caroline Robbins, “Algernon Sidney’s Discourses Concerning Government: Textbook of Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (1947): 269-70 and Caroline Robbins, *Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1959).

⁴⁷ G.W. Meadley, *Memoirs of Mrs Jebb* (London: T. Davison 1812). See also *Monthly Repository* 14 (Jan, Mar and Aug 1819).

⁴⁸ Hampden Clubs became popular political debating clubs in the Midlands and the North West in the early nineteenth century. For their foundation in London in 1812 see Naomi C. Miller, “Communications: Major John Cartwright and the founding of the Hampden Club,” *The Historical Journal* 17, no. 3 (1974): 615-619.

iii. Sunderland sociability and improvement

After performing with the Durham company for four years, Stanfield attempted to retire from the stage and between 1793-96 he set up in business as a Wine & Spirit Merchant in Sunderland.⁴⁹ This is the only time that his daily activities come into view for a sustained period, largely due to surviving masonic records. When in Sunderland Meadley encouraged Stanfield's literary ambitions. Shortly after his retirement Meadley asked, "could you no ways adopt a single hour each day to the Scientific Pursuits?"⁵⁰ He also urged Stanfield to write to Tate, telling him: "He is at present staying with Dr. Disney and is intimate with Dr. Towers, Gilbert Wakefield and a long catalogue of Literary Men. He wished much to recover you to the literary world."⁵¹ The following year Stanfield informed Tate that his contributions to local enlightened improvement in Sunderland included helping to establish the town's first subscription library and a debating club in the town as noted in a previous chapter.⁵² Although Stanfield is recognised as the driving force behind its foundation, a letter from Meadley written two years previously suggests that it was he who had provided the actor with the idea. "When I consider how many men of literature and abilities there are in Sunderland I think a Literary Society might be established," he wrote, "consider that subject ... might not the Latin and Greek Classics, French – Philosophy and etc. be greatly improved – would it not be a laudable institution?"⁵³ Stanfield was secretary of the library for its first year before returning to his itinerant acting life with the Durham company after the collapse of his business in 1796.⁵⁴ He remained with Cawdell until his death in 1800. Stanfield then managed his own theatre company in partnership with the Scottish actor, George Graham. After dissolving his partnership following Graham's ill health in 1806 Stanfield joined Fraser's company based at Greenock and Paisley.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ RMG., STN /101/2. James Field Stanfield Letter 2.

⁵⁰ RMG., STN /101/3. James Field Stanfield Letter 3. (22 October 1793).

⁵¹ RMG., STN /101/4. James Field Stanfield Letter 4. (3 July 1794).

⁵² Wenham, *James Tate*, 66. Letter is dated 12 June 1795.

⁵³ RMG., STN /101/3 James Field Stanfield Letter 3.

⁵⁴ Wenham, *James Tate*, 88.

⁵⁵ Wenham, *James Tate*, 250-251. Letter from Stanfield in Paisley to Tate in Richmond, dated 11 July 1806.

Between 1806 and 1809 Stanfield performed in Scotland and the Borders. The *Kelso Times* records that he performed in Stephen Kemble's company in Kelso in 1808.⁵⁶ He also befriended the weaver poet Robert Tannahill when performing with Kemble at Paisley later that year. In November Tannahill informed James Clark of the Argyle Shire Militia Band that he had "presented your compliments" to "old Stanfield" but "We had only one bottle together, as he had to attend Rehearsal."⁵⁷ This serves as another reminder of the proximity between strollers and dialect poets, as previously seen in the case of Charlotte Lowes and the "Cumberland Bard" Robert Anderson.

Between 1809 and 1813 Stanfield returned to perform on the Durham circuit under the management of Samuel Faulkner and Charles Anderson and oversaw the printing of *Essay on Biography* by George Garbutt in Sunderland. After its publication in 1813 he returned to Scotland where he ended his career, acting opposite John Philip Kemble in the newly built Glasgow theatre during the star's 1817 national farewell tour which brought the performers together again after their first appearance together on a Manchester stage forty years previously. Stanfield passed his last days living in London's Lambeth, near his son Clarkson, where he died in 1824.

A forgotten hero of the abolition movement

Adam Hochschild argues that the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade carried out the first modern human rights campaign by drawing attention to the Society's innovative use of the press release, the campaign badge and their attempt to by-pass parliament through mass boycott.⁵⁸ Stanfield's role in this activity is suggested by an undated broadsheet entitled *Slave Trade* which calls for the boycott of slave-produced sugar and bears the initials J.F.S.⁵⁹ This research has

⁵⁶ *Kelso Times* (Kelso), 28 Jan., 8 Feb., 15 Feb. 1808.

⁵⁷ Glasgow University Special Collections, Glasgow. MS Robertson 1: Tannahill, Robert. Bound volume of holograph correspondence, song lyrics and poems relating to Tannahill. 1/17. Letter from Robert Tannahill to James Clark. 24 Nov. 1808.

⁵⁸ Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains* (London: McMillan, 2005), 1-8.

⁵⁹ Durham County Records Office, Durham (DCRO). DUL/60/8/29. Slave Trade printed broadsheet.

discovered that what appears to be the original manuscript written in Stanfield's hand is held in the Lancaster Maritime Museum.⁶⁰ (figure 20)

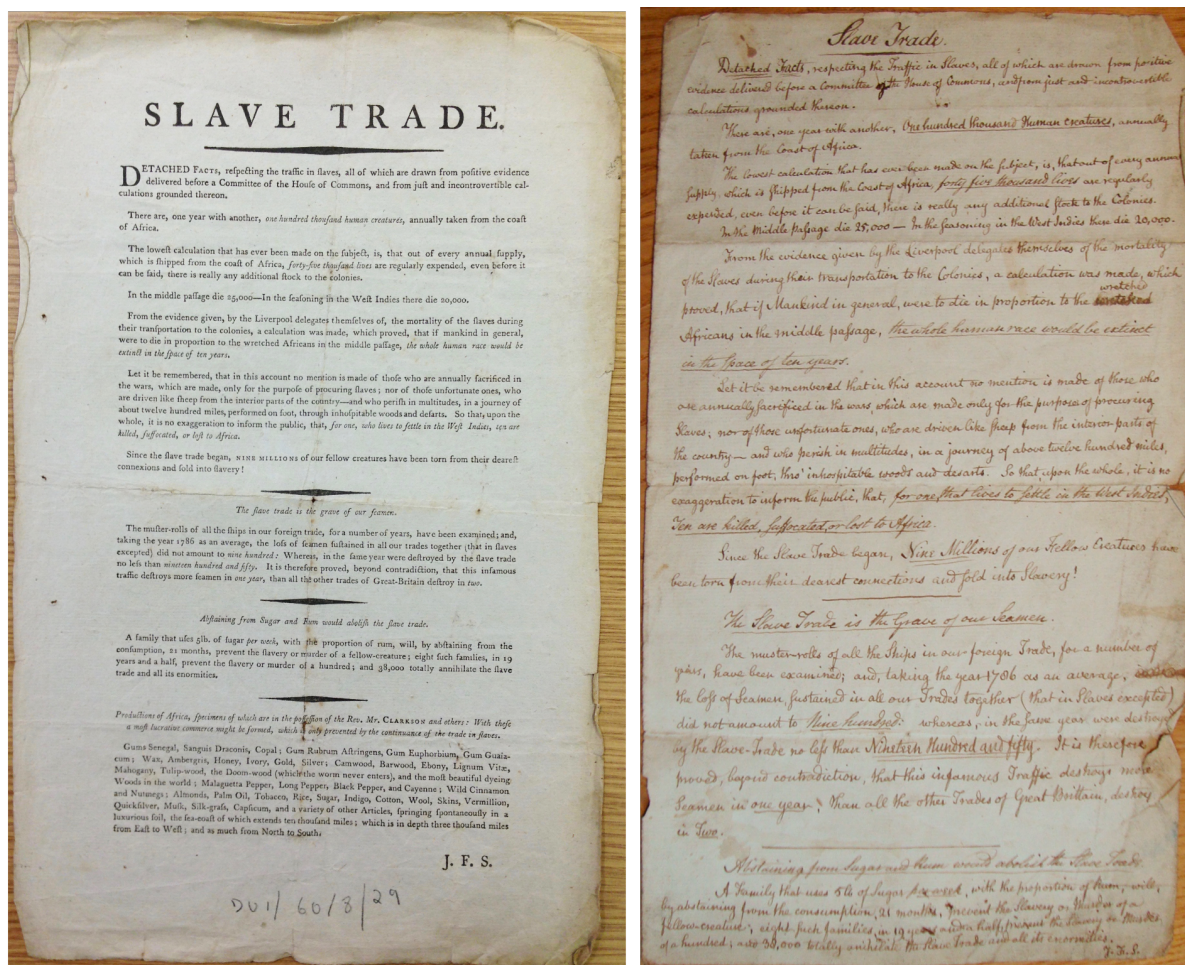


Figure 20. Slave Trade Broadsheet.

Stanfield's activism evidently made a powerful impression on the youthful James Tate who described their first encounter in 1788 in a letter to Meadley:

In a happy hour was I admitted to the acquaintance of my much beloved and ever honoured friend Mr. Stanfield, and the high esteem with which I regard him as a genuine philosopher, a noble spirited man and an actively benevolent Citizen of the World, afforded me sufficient inducement to wish for something more than a nominal acquaintance with one who ranks amongst his friends and of consequence amongst the friends of mankind.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Lancaster Maritime Museum, LANLM.1986.171. Slave Trade handwritten broadsheet for printing.

⁶¹ Wenham, *James Tate*, 191-192.

Tate's reference to Stanfield as a "Citizen of the World" relates to a series of letters that he had published earlier that year. When the Reverend Thomas Clarkson famously went to Bristol and Liverpool in 1787 to seek out first-hand evidence from sailors about the slave trade, it was Stanfield's testimony that the newly formed *Society* chose to print. Three thousand copies of Stanfield's *Observations on a Guinea Voyage, in a Series of Letters Addressed to the Rev. Thomas Clarkson* appeared in their first printed collection the following year. This was a graphic record of Stanfield's experiences in the slave trade, which included his recruitment in Liverpool, his voyage to West Africa, his work inland at a slaving factory, and his voyage on a slave ship from modern-day Benin to the West Indies. Acknowledging that Stanfield was the first common sailor to write about the horrors of slavery, Rediker dedicated a chapter of his book *The Slave Ship* to his account which "was in many ways more detailed, more gruesome, and, in a word, more dramatic, than anything that had yet appeared in print by May 1788."⁶² Stanfield's outspokenness was courageous. According to Emma Christopher, there were an estimated 300,000 to 350,000 common sailors engaged in the slave trade between 1750 and 1807, but accounts of their experiences are extremely rare.⁶³ Wilkinson may have been alluding to this when describing Stanfield as "bred a sailor ... and is what a good English tar should be, a man of bravery."⁶⁴ He clearly intended his published account to be a form of legal testimony as he swore an affidavit to its veracity. Shortly after its publication, the leading abolitionist Reverend James Ramsay referred to it in support of his own arguments to counter the pro-slavery lobby, specifically when stressing the need to reduce the numbers of slaves shipped per voyage.⁶⁵

⁶² Rediker, *Slave Ship*, 154.

⁶³ Emma Christopher, *Slave Ship Sailors and their Captive Cargoes, 1730-1807* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 9.

⁶⁴ Wilkinson, *Wandering Patentee*, 2:22.

⁶⁵ James Ramsay, *Objections to the Abolition of the Slave Trade with Answers* (London: J. Phillips, 1788), 71.

Stanfield identified himself on the *Observations* title page as “a mariner in the African Slave Trade” and in the sixth letter, he states that the suffering of his fellow mariners was an important motivating factor for his writing: “The unabating cruelty, exercised upon seamen in the Slave Trade, first prompted me to give in my mite of information to the cause.”⁶⁶ Due to his concentration on the mariners’ work, harsh punishments and high death rates, Rediker and other maritime scholars have recognised that Stanfield’s record acted as a critique of labour conditions on board slave ships. Stephen D. Behrendt considers him to be an early agitator for workers’ rights who may have influenced MPs to amend the Dolben Act of 1788, which set limits on the number of slaves that British vessels could carry.⁶⁷ However, less attention has been given to the platform which the stage provided Stanfield to promote abolition.

A year after publishing *Observations* he published *The Guinea Voyage*, a verse-form version of his experience.⁶⁸ This was described in a positive review in *Gentleman’s Magazine*, with a nod to his profession, as an “addition to the stage machinery of the abolition of the slave trade.”⁶⁹ Stanfield’s local celebrity as an actor allowed him to gain entrance to gentry houses where he promoted this work. This is apparent from a surviving letter to Sir Charles Hotham, a member of the East Yorkshire gentry, who Stanfield reminds, “You honoured me at S. Dalton, with reading a little work of mine on the Slave Trade.” While seeking his patronage, Stanfield informs Hotham of the purchasers of his new book: “The Gentlemen of the Committee for the Abolition take 200. Friends at Bath and Cheltenham about 100 and about 100 more are named among connections here.”⁷⁰ This shows that Stanfield’s experience as an itinerant actor had helped him to extend his influence in different areas of the nation. At the moment of writing, he was with Cawdell’s

⁶⁶ Stanfield, *Observations*, 30.

⁶⁷ Stephen D. Behrendt, “Crew Mortality in the Atlantic Slave Trade in the Eighteenth-Century,” in *Routes to Slavery: Direction, Ethnicity and Mortality in the Atlantic Slave Trade*, eds. David Eltis, David Richardson (London: Routledge, 2006), 63.

⁶⁸ James Field Stanfield, *The Guinea Voyage, A Poem in Three Books* (London: J. Phillips, 1789).

⁶⁹ *Gentleman’s Magazine*, 59 (1789): 933.

⁷⁰ Hull History Centre, Hull. UDDHO/4/23/54 Letter from Stanfield to Sir Charles Hotham, Darlington, 20 June 1789.

company performing at Darlington. The “connections here” presumably refers to people he had met while working with Wilkinson, Butler and Cawdell, the managers whose circuits covered a substantial area of northeastern England. Evidently, his acting experience earlier in the decade in Cheltenham and Bath had also led to a substantial number of potential readers. It is unclear whether by “friends” Stanfield literally means Quaker contacts. His *Essay on Biography* includes the Darlington banker and Quaker James Backhouse on the subscription list. It is also possible that his relationship with John Boles Watson in Cheltenham brought him into contact with Quakers, as Watson had been born to Quaker parents at Cashel in County Tipperary. Despite the fact that he was an actor, Stanfield certainly enjoyed good standing with the Quakers. Evidence of this appears in a letter written seventeen years later when Meadley had suggested publishing a second edition of the *Guinea Voyage* to coincide with the Slavery Trade Abolition Bill in Parliament and Stanfield, who was then in Edinburgh, “consulted several, and especially among the benevolently – persevering society of Quakers in this part of the country, who all seem to concur in the friendly opinion of Mr. Meadley.”⁷¹

Of the many poets who wrote about the slave trade, “only Stanfield, Thomas Boulton, Thomas Branagan, and Captain John Marjoribanks had actually made a slaving voyage.”⁷² The *Guinea Voyage* deserves to be wider known, not least as the poem allowed his abolitionist passion full vent. In the *Observations*, Stanfield wrote that on the subject of the treatment of slaves, “no pen, no abilities, can give more than a very faint resemblance of the horrid situation.”⁷³ However, in poetic form, he made a more explicit attempt to convey the horrors experienced by slaves, warning readers from the outset that he intended to blast like a “black *Tornado*” through their minds. For this task, he considered polite sentiment to be utterly inadequate, noting that “No spicy zephyrs borne on wings of love, / No gentle pinions, fanning spring-tide air, / Should give one image, or be

⁷¹ Wenham, *James Tate*, 254. Stanfield letter to James Tate, 16 November 1806.

⁷² Rediker, *Slave Ship*, 134, n. 8.

⁷³ Stanfield, *Observations*, 30.

mentioned here.”⁷⁴ A contemporary critic for the *Monthly Review* remarked that Stanfield “dwells on every minute circumstance in this tale of cruelty, and obliges us to witness every pang of complicated misery.”⁷⁵

In offering the British a constructive critique of their imperial ambitions, Stanfield could be said to belong with other Irish writers and early abolitionists, including Oliver Goldsmith and Edmund Burke.⁷⁶ Tate’s description of Stanfield evokes Goldsmith’s *The Citizen of the World*, a series of epistolary observations by an imagined Chinese visitor which offered a moral critique of English manners and life.⁷⁷ However, Stanfield’s description is not presented in a distanced, fictionalised form. Rather, he experienced the nation’s darkest secrets first-hand as a subaltern and then described them in gruesome detail to his superiors. Regarding such imperial critique, Sean Moore has highlighted the liminal status of the Irish, arguing that they were both agent and object, the “colonized, dialectical ‘Others’ helping to define the enlightened subject.”⁷⁸ In this context, Stanfield’s autobiographical description of his experience on board a slave ship could be considered a precise embodiment of Moore’s notion of agent and object. Stanfield himself is the subject of his own critique, and as he reveals, he and his fellow common mariners are not simply the oppressors of the slaves but also victims of the trade.

David Shields states that “the rhetorical horizon of antislavery poetry” is to be found in *The Guinea Voyage*.⁷⁹ This rhetoric is founded upon sympathy and affect which Stanfield employs in a highly theatrical manner, attempting to project readers into the experience, believing that this would lead them to recognise their own implication in the horror and force them to act. Shields notes that

⁷⁴ Stanfield, *Guinea Voyage*, 2.

⁷⁵ As cited in Rediker’s *Slave Ship*, 154.

⁷⁶ See Michael Griffin, *Enlightenment in Ruins: The Geographies of Oliver Goldsmith* (Plymouth, Bucknell University Press, 2013), 4 -10 and Michael Griffin, *Luke Gibbons, Edmund Burke and Ireland: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Colonial Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 147-180.

⁷⁷ Oliver Goldsmith, *The Citizen of the World: or Letters from a Chinese Philosopher residing in London to his Friends in the East* (London, 1792). First published in the *Public Ledger* 1760.

⁷⁸ Sean Moore, “Introduction: Ireland and Enlightenment,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45 (2012): 347.

⁷⁹ David, S. Shields, *Oracles of Empire: Poetry, Politics, and Commerce in British America, 1690-1750* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 84.

his “power is most effectively manifested in those episodes in which he projects the reader into the subjectivity of the African.”⁸⁰

Confin’d with chains, at length the hapless slave,
Plung’d in the darkness of the floating cave,
With horror sees the hatch-way close his sight –
His last hope leaves him with the parting light.⁸¹

It was the immediacy of experience that Stanfield sought to convey and which he believed would bring about a necessary change. As he wrote in his *Observations*, “One *real* view – one MINUTE absolutely spent in the slave rooms on the middle passage, would do more for the cause of humanity, than the pen of a *Robertson*, or the whole collective eloquence of the British senate.”⁸² However, Stanfield did also manage to bring this immediacy directly to members of the British senate.

Through the theatre and his activities within freemasonry, he had come to know several members of Parliament. In 1790 he was Junior Warden at the masonic initiation ceremony of MP for Durham, Roland Burdon, at Sunderland’s *Phoenix Lodge*.⁸³ Two years later Burdon delivered a petition against the slave trade to Parliament, signed by 181 of the “principal inhabitants” of Stockton-upon-Tees.⁸⁴ Also Stanfield’s personal acquaintance with the MP for the city of Durham and Durham Provincial Grand Master, William Henry Lambton, led him to write a biographical piece for the *Freemasons’ Magazine*.⁸⁵ Perhaps most notably, Stanfield dedicated his 1807 re-publication of *The Guinea Voyage and Observations* to Sir Ralph Milbanke, another Durham Provincial Grand Master and also MP for Durham, who seconded the successful Abolition of the

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Stanfield, *Guinea Voyage*, 18.

⁸² Stanfield, *Observations* 30. The Scottish Presbyterian Reverend William Robertson was an abolitionist.

⁸³ Newcastle upon Tyne, Tyne and Wear Archive, (TWA)., Sunderland Phoenix Lodge Minute Book, S.MAS 9/1/1: 169. (11 March 1790).

⁸⁴ John Brewster, *The Parochial History and Antiquities of Stockton-upon-Tees* (Stockton: R. Christopher, 1796), 158.

⁸⁵ *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 6, January 1796: 3-6.

Slave Trade Act.⁸⁶ Both the *Sea Captains* and *Phoenix Lodge* minute books contain records of their joint attendance at lodge meetings and masonic theatre bespeaks. The first record dates from 1791, shortly before Milbanke supported Wilberforce's unsuccessful 1792 bill. The next year, twenty members of the *Sea Captains Lodge* gathered with twelve visitors including Milbanke and the actors Stanfield, Graham and Cawdell, who then processed to the theatre for the performance of the *True Born Tar* and *Appearance is Against Them*.⁸⁷ Milbanke also became President of the Sunderland Subscription Library. Their close friendship is evident in an 1809 letter from Meadley to Stanfield: "Sir Ralph Milbanke had been enquiring your address a few days before I received your favour ... desiring me to say that he will write you in a few days, and therefore begs that if you leave Portobello, you will leave directions to have his letter forwarded to you elsewhere."⁸⁸ That year, at the age of sixty, Stanfield had just found a new situation in Scotland while Meadley was in Sunderland helping him to sell the second edition of *The Guinea Voyage*. Meadley told him that "Thomas Clarkson was here lately, though the 'Friends' kept him all to themselves. I understand however that he promised to exert himself to forward the sale of your book." Meadley revealed that Stanfield also used the theatre for this activism: "I hope ... your new engagement will help the sale of your poem – and the poem contributes to fill the Houses at your Benefits at Glasgow and Aberdeen." As he was then acting in Scotland, Meadley also suggested that Stanfield's friend, Professor Dugald Stewart would be able to assist: "Mr Stewart's interest would be highly useful to you, with the Professors at both places, which I hope you will not fail to procure."⁸⁹ Stewart later appears on Stanfield's subscription list for his *Essay on Biography* taking two copies. His fellow academic John Playfair is also a subscriber.

⁸⁶ James Field Stanfield, *The Guinea Voyage, A Poem in Three Books to which are added Observations on a Voyage to the Coast of Africa in a series of letters to Thomas Clarkson*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: J. Robertson, 1807). Dedication.

⁸⁷ Palatine Lodge No 97 Archive Sunderland. *Sea Captain's Lodge Minute Book, 1790-1794*, 30.

⁸⁸ RMG., STN /101/7, Meadley letter to Stanfield (Portobello, 8 October 1809).

⁸⁹ Ibid.

David Shields argues that in his abolition verse Stanfield “understood how poetry could aid in the transformation of British consciousness.”⁹⁰ The actor’s highly affective approach is characteristic of the rhetoric of sensibility which aimed to encourage sympathy in the reader and thereby cultivate the moral senses.⁹¹ This rhetoric is also employed by Stanfield in *The Life of John Howard* which he published anonymously shortly after the death of the great prison reformer in 1790.⁹² Howard’s death allowed him an opportunity to celebrate a man that he admired and also provided the first opportunity to express his ideas about biography and the tracing of character which would be a subject that preoccupied him over the following years. This is the subject of the concluding section of the chapter.

Stanfield and biography

This section focuses on three examples of biography in which Stanfield was involved. Two are known and the third which relates to freemasonry is identified here for the first time. Stanfield was aware of the novelty of his *Essay on Biography* as before undertaking it in 1795 he asked Tate whether anything like it had been attempted before:

I should be happy in receiving your information and assistance in the attempt. I cannot find that any thing of that kind – to the extent and investigation I propose – has ever appeared. Should your better information give you to know the contrary, I shall sincerely thank you for the communication, with an account of the work.⁹³

⁹⁰ Shields, *Oracles of Empire*, 84.

⁹¹ See William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feelings: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For an influential application of this study to abolition see Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment and Slavery, 1760-1807* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

⁹² Anon. [James Field Stanfield], *The Life of John Howard* (Newcastle upon Tyne: William Thompson, 1790).

⁹³ Wenham, *James Tate*, 66. Letter dated 12 June 1795.

The intention here is not to argue for the value of *The Essay* as a literary work or to gauge whether it made an impact on his contemporaries. The aim is rather to try and understand why he wrote it and what relationship this work has to his identity as an actor and its relationship to Enlightenment thought in general.

i. *The Life of John Howard*

In seeking out further information about the northern theatrical landscape, this research has identified little explored archives related to pastoral poetry, abolition, the strolling tale, freemasonry and local print culture. In addition, Cervantes and Porter have recently noted that there is “an expansive and virtually unexplored archive” about John Howard and his prison reform agenda for which there is an “astonishing number of free-standing odes, sonnets, inscriptions, epistles, epigrams, lines, and monodies” that were published in periodicals.⁹⁴ Stanfield contributed to this remarkable outpouring of sensibility with a monody that was performed by Mrs O’Keeffe in the Durham company theatres and later published in the *Freemasons’ Magazine*, as well as by his biographical sketch *The Life of John Howard* which was published anonymously along with the monody and a collection of Howard’s writing by W. Thompson in Newcastle in 1790.⁹⁵

Thompson intended to print the book as soon as possible after Howard’s death and he states in his introduction that it had been conceived in order to make some of Howard’s works available to the public. Stanfield’s fifty-page *Life of John Howard* was written to introduce this material and the actor describes it as a “sketch”. It was written quickly and does not appear to have been closely

⁹⁴ Gabriel Cervantes, Dahlia Porter, “The Extreme Empiricism: John Howard, Poetry, and the Thermometrics of Reform,” *The Eighteenth Century* 57, no. 1 (2016): 97.

⁹⁵ The much-republished biography of John Howard by John Aikin was first published under the title *A View of the Character and Public Services of the Late John Howard* (London, 1792). For a recent study of John Howard see Tessa West, *The Curious Mr Howard: Legendary Prison Reformer* (Hook: Waterside Press, 2011). For a reading that attempts to understand Howard’s activities from the perspective of psychiatry see Philip Lucas, “John Howard and Asperger’s Syndrome: Psychopathology and Philanthropy,” *History of Psychiatry* 12, no. 45 (2001): 73-101.

edited as Stanfield includes anecdotes and fragments of description that are duplicated in different sections. Long obituary memoirs were published a short while after Howard's death in the *Gentleman's Magazine* and the *Universal Magazine* which appear to have provided the basis upon which Stanfield worked.⁹⁶ He also included material which only appeared in later letters written to the *Gentleman's Magazine* and he drew heavily from a 1790 publication written by a "Gentleman" called *Anecdotes of the Life and Character of John Howard, Esq. F.R.S.*⁹⁷ The *Life of Howard* is unattributed, but its author concludes with the "Monody" which it states was "written by the author of these memoirs" and had been recited on the occasion of Howard's death by one of the characters in Elizabeth Inchbald's play *Such Things Are* whose character Haswell was "professedly written to delineate the character of Mr Howard."⁹⁸ This therefore identifies Stanfield as the author because the Monody was later published in the *Freemasons' Magazine* under his name.⁹⁹ The magazine states that it was spoken by Mrs O'Keeffe in the character of Arabella. A surviving playbill from the Whitby season in November 1790 advertises *Such Things Are* with the note that "At the end of the play, a MONODY, written by Mr Stanfield, on the death of Mr Howard, will be spoken by Mrs O'Keeffe."¹⁰⁰ An undated letter written by Stanfield while travelling by coach to London asks his wife in Stockton to get the Monody from Mrs O'Keeffe and give it to the printer Thompson.¹⁰¹ Presumably this was so that the poem could be inserted into the publication. The letter was probably written between May and July 1790 as this is the period when the Durham company typically visited Stockton for the hiring fair. Stanfield may have been travelling to London to seek out material for the *Life of Howard*. It is also possible that he travelled south in order to testify before

⁹⁶ See the April and May 1790 issues of *Gentleman's Magazine*, and *Universal Magazine*.

⁹⁷ Anon ["A Gentleman"], *Anecdotes of the Life and Character of John Howard, Esq. F.R.S. written by a Gentleman, whose acquaintance with that celebrated philanthropist gave him the most favourable opportunity of learning particulars not generally known* (London 1790).

⁹⁸ Stanfield, *Howard*, 58.

⁹⁹ *Freemasons' Magazine*, vol. 6, February 1796: 124-126.

¹⁰⁰ Whitby, N. Yorkshire, Whitby Museum Archive. *Theatrical Playbills, 1788-1794*. Whitby Playbill, *Such Things Are* 5 November 1790.

¹⁰¹ RMG., STN /101/1 James Field Stanfield Letter 1. (Letter from JF Stanfield in Northamptonshire to his wife Mary Stanfield in Stockton. Undated.)

the House of Commons about the slave trade, as a Sunderland resident, John William Bell claimed that this happened, although no record of it has come to light.¹⁰²

Stanfield declares that Howard's philanthropic purpose had "made *an Era in the history of mankind*."¹⁰³ In his closing summary it is Howard's cosmopolitanism and specifically not his English Protestantism that Stanfield celebrates:

In fine, his was a character, whose catholic mission the jarring nations might receive, as a common medium by which they could transfer and negotiate the general benevolence of the world – and consider him, not as an Englishman, or a Protestant, but, AS THE AGENT DEPUTED TO CARRY ON THE WHOLE BENEFICENCE OF THE PLANET.¹⁰⁴

As well as Howard's philanthropic reforming spirit, Stanfield also considers his mind, which he describes as "illuminated by the principles of science and enriched with the discoveries of modern philosophy."¹⁰⁵ Cervantes and Porter point out that the tabular presentations of data, measurements and quantifications that Howard relied upon were "a hallmark of eighteenth-century natural and social science" with "conceptual roots in Francis Bacon's inductive method with its focus on observation and experiment."¹⁰⁶ Stanfield's own grasp of Bacon's philosophy emerges in his description of Howard's working practice as an iterative process of repetitive checking of empirical observations against fundamental theory until "the science of his observations was fixed upon a basis more than logical – it became self-evident intuition."¹⁰⁷ Stanfield would later directly apply his understanding of the science of observation in his *Essay on Biography* by instructing biographers to fill out synoptic tables in a similar manner with observations about characteristics belonging to the subject in question.

¹⁰² See the Transcript of John William Bell (1783-1864) on the facing title of the Sunderland Library copy of James Field Stanfield, *The Guinea Voyage, A Poem in Three Books* (Edinburgh: J. Robertson, 1807).

¹⁰³ Stanfield, *Howard*, 10.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 58.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 7.

¹⁰⁶ Cervantes and Porter, "The Extreme Empiricism," 99.

¹⁰⁷ Stanfield, *Howard*, 26.

Cervantes and Porter note that Elizabeth Inchbald's play *Such Things Are* was written to celebrate Howard's philanthropy and they highlight the poet Robert Merry's Monody to Howard, "The British Muse" which was spoken by Mrs Pope in the Covent Garden Theatre Royal after the play's performance and then published in the May issue of *The Universal Magazine*.¹⁰⁸ While observing that the outpouring of prison reform verse like Merry's has previously been "commonly written off as a litany of dreadful couplets dripping with inflated, banal sentimentalism" they point out that this form of expression "developed aesthetic strategies for representing the confluence of empirical methods of data collection and a multifaceted, far-reaching Christian charity" and most importantly, they argue, this would later be adopted in other reform causes, particularly for abolition.¹⁰⁹ Perhaps even more than the Covent Garden epilogue by the Della Cruscan poet, Robert Merry, the work of the obscure northern abolitionist James Field Stanfield might act as an illustration of their argument, particularly as he was also such a zealous proponent of Bacon's scientific method. In attempting to account for the remarkable public cultural outpouring surrounding Howard's life and death, Cervantes and Porter conclude that it reveals both "literature's relationship to other fields of knowledge production at an early moment in the consolidation of disciplines" and "the portentous shifts in the cultural authority of scientific, literary, and religious knowledge" which were taking place at this moment of the late-Enlightenment.¹¹⁰ A similar argument might be made for masonic cultural expression which is another late eighteenth-century archive waiting to be fully explored.

¹⁰⁸ *The Universal Magazine* May 1790 (London), 264. For Robert Merry's position as a radical poet see Jon Mee, "'Once a squire and now a man': Robert Merry and the pain of politics," in *Print, Publicity and Radicalism in the 1790s: The Laurel of Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 113-130. Mee traces Merry's service to popular radicalism through a journey from Whig gentleman to radical democrat that illustrates the "complex process of self-fashioning in print." 130.

¹⁰⁹ Cervantes and Porter, "The Extreme Empiricism," 98. For an analysis of how the culture of sensibility impacted upon classical rhetoric with implications regarding the persuasion and conveyance of factual information, see Brycchan Carey, *Rhetoric of Sensibility*, 21-45. See also Brycchan Carey, "To Force a Tear: British Abolitionism and the Eighteenth-Century London Stage," in *Affect and Abolition in the Anglo-Atlantic, 1770-1830*, ed. Stephen Ahern (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 109-128.

¹¹⁰ Cervantes and Porter, "The Extreme Empiricism," 98.

As the previous chapter examined, freemasonry is an institution committed to the improvement of personal character, therefore the tracking of Stanfield's preoccupation with biography and questions of character can be extended into his work to publicise masonic ideals. The next section aims to illustrate how he managed to pragmatically apply his ideas about biography in the service of publicising masonic values.

ii. Masonic biography

This section aims to identify Stanfield's influence behind the inclusion of biography and histories of freemasonry in *The Freemasons' Magazine*, the first periodical dedicated to freemasonry published in England which was launched in January 1793 and continued until December 1798. Andreas Önnersfors notes in his study of the magazine that the "masonic biographies which regularly appeared in its issues served a double purpose."¹¹¹ For masonic readers the lives of prominent freemasons reinforced masonic values by publicising their positive influence on society, while for non-masonic readers, the biographies exemplified the positive role that freemasonry played in public life.

In an article about Durham's Provincial Grand Master, William Henry Lambton, written by someone referred to as "S" the magazine is described as "a Repository, which aims to carry down to future ages the faithful records of Masonic merit and eminence."¹¹² Önnersfors believes "S" to be the proprietor J. W. Stephenson and describes Lambton's biography as reading "almost prophetically when it states that memoirs are devoted to 'living excellence.'" ¹¹³ However, as this section will demonstrate, the writer "S" was almost certainly Stanfield, and it appears that he had

¹¹¹ Andreas Önnersfors, "Perfection by Progressive Excellence: An Initial Analysis of the Freemason's Magazine 1793–1798," in *Researching British Freemasonry 1717–2017*, eds. Róbert Péter and Andreas Önnersfors, vol. 3. (Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 2010), 170. Önnersfors presents a case study of Volume 6 of the magazine which covers 1796 and a section considers biography with particular focus on the Durham freemason and MP William Henry Lambton, 168–171.

¹¹² *Freemasons' Magazine*, vol. 7, July 1796: 3.

¹¹³ Önnersfors, "Perfection," 170.

been influential in developing the magazine into the “repository” of “living excellence” from its early stages. There were different proprietors over the six years of the magazine’s existence, each of whom mentions Stanfield by name in the section acknowledging correspondents at the start of different issues. In the July 1794 issue after stating that he is honoured the magazine had been granted official recognition “conveyed in the most explicit manner in the Sanction extended to it by the Grand Lodge” the editor continues:

To our Correspondents, among whom we may be permitted to distinguish the indefatigable Dr. Watkins and Mr. Stanfield, every sentiment of gratitude is due; their exertions have raised the Freemasons’ Magazine to a degree of credit with the Fraternity, that, at so early a period, was scarcely to have been hoped for.¹¹⁴

The next month, when thanking a contributor in an acknowledgement to correspondents for the August 1794 edition, the editor adds:

We wish he would add to his Favour “An Account of the Present State of Masonry in his County,” as a Contribution towards the Completion of a Plan, set on foot by Brother Stanfield of Sunderland, of a General History of the Present State of Masonry in Great Britain.¹¹⁵

The intention was to publish accounts of English lodges, then include the “Sister-Kingdoms” and eventually extend the review to “the whole Masonic World.”¹¹⁶ The “Present State of Free Masonry” began in the April 1794 issue with the first part of Stanfield’s focus on Durham freemasons.¹¹⁷ The June issue contains part two with attention given to the ceremonies accompanying the laying of the foundation stone of the Wearmouth Bridge at Sunderland.¹¹⁸ The third part in the July issue continues with a history of the Sunderland lodges, describing its

¹¹⁴ *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 3, July 1794: “Acknowledgement to correspondents.”

¹¹⁵ *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 3, August 1794: “Acknowledgement to correspondents.”

¹¹⁶ *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 2, April 1794: 245

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 245-48

¹¹⁸ *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 2, June 1794: 404-08.

“favourable and flourishing” state, laying particular emphasis on the *Sea Captain’s Lodge*.¹¹⁹ After the bridge’s opening two years later, the editor noted in the September 1796 issue:

The copious and elegant account of *Wearmouth Bridge* is received; and will appear next Month, accompanied by an Engraving of the Bridge, &c. Brother S. has our very sincere thanks for his anxiety for the success of our Undertaking.¹²⁰

This material from Sunderland was evidently supplied by Stanfield and again the letter “S” is used. The report took up eleven pages in the next issue.¹²¹

As well as concerning himself with masonic history and providing information about important provincial masonic initiatives, Stanfield also appears to have written some of the anonymous biographies that appear in the magazine. The Worshipful Master of Sunderland’s *Phoenix Lodge*, Dr Tipping Brown, features in the November 1794 issue.¹²² The writer is unidentified, but the language used and references to the composition of biography are similar to Stanfield’s known writing about biography in his *Life of Howard* and his later *Essay on Biography*. While this is likely to have been written by the actor, it is almost certain that he wrote the memoir of Durham’s Provincial Grand Master, William Henry Lambton, which appeared in the January 1796 issue.¹²³ This opens with a portrait of Lambton followed by the memoir written by “S”.¹²⁴ The writer mentions their presence at a Durham Provincial Meeting on 12 August 1794 at which Lambton had made a memorable speech which all present remembered with “sensibility and grateful satisfaction.”¹²⁵ The *Phoenix Lodge* minute book confirms Stanfield’s attendance at this meeting for which he travelled to Durham town with Tipping Brown and Reverend Heskett.¹²⁶

¹¹⁹ *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 3, July 1794: 16-18, 17.

¹²⁰ *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 7, September 1796: 152. “Acknowledgement to correspondents.”

¹²¹ *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 7, October 1796: 231-241.

¹²² *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 4, November 1794: 334-337.

¹²³ *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 6, January 1796: 3-6.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

¹²⁶ TWA., *Phoenix Lodge Minute Book*, 12 August 1794, 203.

While noting that the discussion of politics and religion was prohibited among freemasons, “S” nevertheless makes clear that Lambton belonged to the opposition and was “an advocate for the amelioration of a wise and temperate reform.”¹²⁷ This also conforms to Stanfield’s political radicalism. However, it is the comments that “S” makes about biographical composition that make it most evident that Stanfield wrote this memoir. After providing a brief summary of Lambton’s birthplace, schooling and early travel, the author pauses to reflect upon the practice of biography:

In this place we may be permitted to remark, that were the present an attempt at regular Biography we should here pause – as we should do at each other conspicuous stage of our progression – to mark what had been gained, what had been altered; to view at different periods the changeful but improving features of the mind; to catenate the apparently –disjointed links of effect and cause by the helps of information or analogy; and from the comparison and sum of such prominent positions, to form a precise and comprehensive outline of the general character.¹²⁸

The reflection upon how one structures a biography and to what purpose closely conforms to Stanfield’s other writing on the subject and uses precisely the same language. In his *Life of John Howard* Stanfield describes his work as “tracing the footsteps, and delineating the character” of Howard.¹²⁹ His preoccupation with character and the capacity for biographical writing to investigate its workings is explicitly expressed at the beginning of this work: “It is the delight and pride of *philosophic history*, to trace back the incidents of life to their minute beginnings; the operations of genius to their embryo-commencements; and by a kind of retrograde motion to arrive at causes from effects.”¹³⁰ Stanfield also uses the same language regarding the “catenating” or creating a chain of effects to their causes in the pursuit of the spring of character in his *Essay on Biography* when describing “the pleasure which the mind takes in tracing the links that unite cause and effect, -

¹²⁷ *Freemasons’ Magazine*, vol. 6, January 1796: 4.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Stanfield, *Howard*, 2.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

and from reaching a known and precise object, by a series of lively and concatenated circumstances.”¹³¹

In the May issue, four months after “S” had written the Lambton memoir, the proprietor of the magazine wrote a public note to “S” in the section dedicated to “readers, correspondents, &c” noting: “If S. will oblige us with the whole of his BIOLOGY, we shall be able to judge of its claim to a place in the Freemasons’ Magazine.”¹³² The reference to “Biology” allows for a definite identification of Stanfield as “S” because this is the technical term that he believed he had coined to describe the scientific approach to the writing of biography. Stanfield calls writers who practice a scientific form of biographical writing “biologists” in his *Essay on Biography*.¹³³ The appearance of this word in the *Freemasons’ Magazine* therefore pre-dates the commonly accepted appearance of the term in English which is generally ascribed to the Bristol doctor, Thomas Beddoes, who has been recognised as making the first recorded use of the word “Biology” in its modern sense three years later in 1799.¹³⁴ Of-course, Stanfield is using the word in a sense that was not later popularised, but this is not the point. It isn’t that he was making a mistake in using the term; the point is the word had not yet been invented.

“Biology” and *An Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography*

In *The Order of Things*, the work which presents his argument for *episteme* in scientific revolution, Foucault states that:

¹³¹ Stanfield, *Essay on Biography*, 195.

¹³² *Freemasons’ Magazine* vol. 6, May 1796: 4 “To our readers, correspondents, &c.”

¹³³ Stanfield, *Essay on Biography*, xii, 57. The OED cites Stanfield’s *Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography* as the second example for the use of the term “biology” in the sense of “relating to biographical study and writing.” The first example cited is from 1686 in Dudley Loftus’ *An History of the Twofold Invention of Cross* in which the word “Bialogie” is used to signify a compilation of written lives.

¹³⁴ Thomas Beddoes, *Contribution to physical and medical knowledge, principally from the West of England, collected by Thomas Beddoes, M.D.* (Paternoster-Row, London: printed by Biggs & Cottle, for T. N. Longman and O. Rees. 1799), 4.

Historians want to write histories of biology in the eighteenth century; but they do not realize that biology did not exist then, and that the pattern of knowledge that has been familiar to us for a hundred and fifty years is not valid for a previous period. And that, if biology was unknown, there was a very simple reason for it: that life itself did not exist. All that existed was living beings, which were viewed through a grid of knowledge constituted by *natural history*.¹³⁵

Stanfield's use of the word "Biology" may be disconcerting to our modern minds, but it immediately makes clear that he belongs to the previous age that Foucault describes. According to the literary critic Joseph Reed, Stanfield's theory that he expounds in *The Essay on Biography* is "firmly rooted in his age."¹³⁶ He summarises that "Stanfield simply did not have the scientific know-how or the terms of description to evolve the method he dimly conceived, much less to put it into practice. We perhaps have the know-how in modern psychology and psychoanalytic theory, but the book conceived by Stanfield has yet to be written."¹³⁷ Perhaps Reed is correct, but his critique is ahistorical. He is approaching Stanfield's work from the mindset of a modern thinker, assuming that Stanfield's aim is "modern" but that he simply lacked the correct language, our language that we have today, by which to express himself. This is not the case. Stanfield is explicit and quite precise in his use of language and notions. However, the language he is using and the ideas they express belong to a "grid of knowledge" which in Stanfield's case was rooted in classical rhetoric well informed by Baconian inductive reasoning. While the modern discipline of biology did not yet exist, nor the disciplines of economics or philology which Foucault determined were the three central organising models of human perception and knowledge in *The Order of Things*, the ancient discipline of rhetoric did still exist as an entire system of analysis, composition, expression, persuasion and audience psychology. Stanfield provides an opportunity to examine how a committed disciple of the new empirical science and someone who possessed a "zeal" for Bacon's

¹³⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2005), 139.

¹³⁶ Reed, *English Biography*, 68.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 81.

philosophy determined the criteria of the personal self and reality through the language and cognitive tools of that ancient system.

In her recent study of theatre and British Enlightenment, Bridget Orr observes that “Folding theatrical development into the universalist account of ‘the science of man’ is rare.”¹³⁸ The actor Stanfield provides an opportunity to do this, perhaps most particularly through an examination of his *Essay on Biography*. His work recommends that the biographer deploy Baconian inductive reasoning in the study and writing of lives which, when combined with sympathetic imagination, has the capacity to encourage a biographic spirit, that if nurtured correctly would allow the springs of motivation that lie behind the character of the subject in question to be traced. It is a work illuminated by Stanfield’s rhetorical training and a lifetime’s experience of performing on the stage.¹³⁹

Stanfield was aware of the novelty of his work, noting in his introduction that “no regular compact dissertation on the general subject of biographical composition has yet appeared.”¹⁴⁰ Since its rediscovery in 1960, *The Essay on Biography* has divided scholars. In 1965 Richard Altick thought it “a remarkable book” which “set a theoretical standard for scholarly biography that could hardly be improved upon today.”¹⁴¹ In 2010 Jane Darcy called Stanfield “an intellectual manqué” whose influence has been exaggerated.¹⁴² More recently, in 2020 Caitríona Ní Dhúill stated, “Stanfield’s little-known treatise aims for nothing less than a universally applicable anthropology or ‘knowledge of man’ that could underpin every individual instance of biography.”¹⁴³ This final section outlines the basis for these statements and tracks the development of Stanfield’s writing of the work as he performed on circuits in the North.

¹³⁸ Bridget Orr, *British Enlightenment Theatre: Dramatizing Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 7.

¹³⁹ Bridget Orr, *British Enlightenment Theatre*, 7.

¹⁴⁰ Stanfield, *Essay on Biography*, vi -vii.

¹⁴¹ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 228.

¹⁴² Jane Darcy, “Contesting Literary Biography in the Romantic Period: The Foreshadowing of Psychological Biography,” *Literature Compass* 5, no. 2 (2008): 299.

¹⁴³ Caitríona Ní Dhúill, *Metabiography: Reflecting on Biography* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 118.

iv. Stanfield, the “Biologist”

Stanfield started to consider writing this work in 1795 and eventually published it in Sunderland in 1813, after attending Dr Playfair’s public lectures on the philosopher Francis Bacon’s *Organum Novum* in Glasgow and befriending Professor Dugald Stewart in Edinburgh, with whom he had sought an introduction from Tate, who was a leading classicist collaborating on publications with Edinburgh University’s Professor of Greek Andrew Dalzell.¹⁴⁴ A letter from Tate to Dugald Stewart written in 1807 asked him to consider a new translation of Bacon’s *Organum Novum* “to suit the present exigencies of science.” Tate informed Stewart that his interest in Bacon derived from their “common friend ... Mr Stanfield; who early in life impregnated my mind with an almost romantic attachment to the *Organum Novum* and the *Instauratio Magna*.”¹⁴⁵ A letter from 1795 records Stanfield asking Tate “Have you ever thought more of the translation of the *Novum Organum*? I wish I had weight enough to urge you to what would be a benefaction to mankind.”¹⁴⁶ It exemplifies the degree to which their association was mutually encouraging.

Stanfield had previously discussed with Tate the writing of a study on “the Human Character” which he mentions in the letter.¹⁴⁷ It had been two years since his retirement from the stage and the combination of running the Brandy and Spirits business in Sunderland, his commitments to freemasonry, and family responsibilities appear to have forced him to abandon this plan. “My present avocations are still more hostile than my former profession, to the bringing the intended essay on the Human Character to that comprehensive state my idea of the subject had proposed,” he wrote; instead, he was now considering writing an essay on biography and asked Tate whether such a task had ever been attempted before. Stanfield added that he intended to send Tate “a prospectus” to gauge if in his opinion “the plan be feasible or not.”¹⁴⁸ Tate later told Meadley

¹⁴⁴ Wenham, *James Tate*, 177.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 255.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 67.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

this was “conceived and constructed most admirably well” adding that he hoped to spend the summer with Stanfield writing “a frequent intercourse of letters on the subject of his Essay.”¹⁴⁹ Meadley also encouraged Stanfield, writing that he hoped his friend would now have “leisure to prosecute your Biographical Essay” in a letter sent as Meadley set sail for the continent in June 1795.¹⁵⁰ Tate and Meadley continued to encourage Stanfield to write the work as he performed on the Durham circuit. The next surviving mention of it is in a 1799 letter from Meadley who informs Tate that Stanfield was performing in Darlington and would shortly visit him in nearby Richmond adding: “Pray press him on the score of his Biographical Essay, which may prove to the author not only an honourable but a beneficial work.”¹⁵¹ Seven years later, Stanfield told Tate, “The labour and difficulties of management never allowed me to put the finishing hand to the Essay” but after dissolving his company and joining Fraser’s troupe in Scotland, he told his friend: “I feel freedom of intellect and action that makes my condition, comparatively, grateful.”¹⁵² Now, he felt he had found the time “to discharge what Mr. W. Burdon calls the debt in which I am pledged to the public.”¹⁵³ Stanfield’s actor-persona is clearly wrapped up in the production of his essay which his friend, William Burdon, acknowledged. Stanfield probably met the radical essayist Burdon when performing with his company at Morpeth in Northumberland.¹⁵⁴ Burdon’s name appears on the subscription list for the *Essay*. Stanfield also informed Tate that he was performing in Musselburgh in East Lothian and able to benefit from his proximity to Edinburgh to attend a course of lectures at the University:

I am attending Professor Playfair’s Lectures on Natural Philosophy. You may guess my surprise and satisfaction when I found his introduction a complete commentary on the *Novum Organum* of our illustrious master,

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 88.

¹⁵⁰ RMG., STN /101/5 James Field Stanfield Letter 5.

¹⁵¹ Wenham, *James Tate*, 244.

¹⁵² Ibid, 250,

¹⁵³ Ibid, 251.

¹⁵⁴ William Burdon contributed to Flowers’ radical journal *The Cambridge Intelligencer* and wrote *Materials for Thinking* which after its first publication in 1803 had passed through four reprints by 1819. See William Burdon, *Materials for Thinking*, 5th ed., 2 vols. (London 1820), xv.

Bacon. Your excellent friend Professor Dugald Stewart opens his Course on the 19th.¹⁵⁵

As Fraser's theatre company was about to relocate to Dalkeith and therefore remaining in the Edinburgh area, Stanfield asked Tate for an introduction to friends there, "whose advice and favour might forward the Essay" and through whom he could visit the Advocate's or other public libraries.¹⁵⁶ Stanfield returned to live in Sunderland in about 1809 to perform with the Durham Company where he finished writing the work and it was printed by the Sunderland printer George Garbutt in 1813. His obituarists generally agreed that it was his *Essay on Biography* for which Stanfield would be remembered and a history of Durham County published ten years after his death noted that the " 'Essay on Biography' is the production on which his fame chiefly depends."¹⁵⁷

Francis Hart first drew attention to Stanfield in a 1960 article "Boswell and the Romantics" quoting extensively from the work and stressing Stanfield's preoccupation with sympathy, noting that, "Such a 'negative capability' was of the essence of what Stanfield calls the 'Biographic Spirit.'"¹⁵⁸ It was then brought to critical attention in 1966 by both Richard Altick and Joseph Reed in unrelated works.¹⁵⁹ Reed's pioneering *English Biography in the Early Nineteenth Century* includes a chapter "Higher Criticism: Stanfield and Carlyle" in which he notes that Stanfield "consistently introduces vital questions of biographical art."¹⁶⁰ He also observes that Stanfield's instruction to the biographer is to invest himself with the character of his subject "very much in the manner of the method actor."¹⁶¹ Reed, a professional literary critic, believed that the actor, Stanfield, "comes to biography and to criticism little equipped to speak with authority on either."¹⁶² However, one might argue that it was Stanfield's profession that actually helped him to imagine a

¹⁵⁵ Wenham, *James Tate*, 254.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Eneas Mackenzie, Marvin Ross, *An Historical, Topographical, and Descriptive view of the County Palatine of Durham*, 2 vols. (Newcastle, 1834), 1:305. n. 1.

¹⁵⁸ Hart, "Boswell and the Romantics," 64.

¹⁵⁹ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 184-185; Reed, *English Biography*, 66-82.

¹⁶⁰ Reed, *English Biography*, 68.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 69.

¹⁶² Ibid, 67.

theory that encouraged the biographer to project themselves into their chosen subject in the manner that he prescribed. His theory is of its time, in terms of being an expression of eighteenth-century aesthetics, which itself had developed through an association with theatre. Writing shortly after the second world war, Earl R. Wasserman commented on the practice of “sympathetic imagination” or sensibility present in eighteenth-century acting manuals.¹⁶³ He was building on a previous study by Walter J. Bate which traced the relationship between eighteenth-century aesthetics and the Romantic theory of “negative capability” associated with William Hazlitt and John Keats who had coined this well-known phrase in an 1818 letter to his friend Richard Woodhouse.¹⁶⁴ As Both Hart and Reed note, Stanfield bases his idea of understanding character and the writing of biography on the very same sympathetic principles and iterative practices that he himself used as an actor. His encouragement to the “biologist” clearly conveys this sense of sympathetic imagination:

The assumption of character must be complete. Our own state and peculiar opinions must, for the moment, be abandoned, and the condition of the character, we wish to conceive or represent, wholly engage us; - totus in hoc. Such a force of imagination is to be acquired, that we are to see, not with our own, but with our hero's eyes, and feel only with his faculties; we must contract his habits, adopt his manners, assume his sentiments, invest ourselves with his partialities and humours; be actuated by his motives, guided by his designs, and elated by his attainments.¹⁶⁵

Stanfield calls this the “personating sensibility of our own hearts.”¹⁶⁶ Immediately after this passage he turns for support to the “sentiments” of the “philosophical biographer” Professor Dugald Stewart as expressed in his consideration of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in which Stewart states that “the only way in which we can form this idea [of what passes in the mind of another

¹⁶³ Earl R. Wasserman, “The Sympathetic Imagination in Eighteenth-Century Theories of Acting,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 46, no. 3 (1947): 264-272.

¹⁶⁴ See Walter J. Bate, “The Sympathetic Imagination in Eighteenth-century English Criticism,” *ELH* 12 (1945): 144-164; Walter J. Bate, *Negative Capability: The Intuitive Approach in Keats* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1939) and Walter J. Bate, *From Classic to Romantic* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1946), 131-147.

¹⁶⁵ Stanfield, *Essay on Biography*, 122.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 23.

person] is by supposing ourselves in the same circumstances with him, and conceiving how we should be affected, if we were so situated.”¹⁶⁷ This leads Stanfield to conclude that: “Attention to objects and circumstances, and to the nature and degree of *emotion* they excite in the person under inspection, is a key which opens a passage to the recesses of character.”¹⁶⁸ By considering a subject’s disposition and excitability to stimulus, he argues, it becomes possible to discover the “governing principle of action” which is “the very spirit we are in search of.”¹⁶⁹

Altick and Reed both discuss Stanfield’s work as belonging firmly in the tradition of Hartleian associative psychology.¹⁷⁰ Stanfield had access to Hartley’s *Observations on Man* as it was one of the first books acquired by the Sunderland subscription library.¹⁷¹ However, neither Altick nor Reed note how closely Stanfield’s theorising follows the instructions provided by classical rhetoricians. After stressing the centrality of emotional engagement in the previously mentioned passage, Stanfield concludes the section by citing Cicero’s instructions to a student rhetor in *On Oratory*.¹⁷² The life-writing critic Jane Darcy considers Stanfield old-fashioned for relying upon these classical sources, without acknowledging that he is writing according to the common standards of education in the period and drawing upon these respected sources to position his work. Classical sources punctuate his text, making his identity as an actor steeped in the art of rhetoric frequently recognisable. He describes Plutarch’s writing as:

That *calling to*, (as the painters term it) of his animated pictures, which not only places before our eyes the very transaction in all its interest and bearings, but, absolutely, by a sensitive kind of violence, compels us into the actual situation of the scene, and fills us with every sentiment, purpose and passion, which impel and agitate the bosom of the actor.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁷ *Transactions of the Royal Society, Edinburgh*, vol. 3 cited in Stanfield, *Essay on Biography*, 123.

¹⁶⁸ Stanfield, *Essay on Biography*, 124-25.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 125.

¹⁷⁰ See David Hartley, *Observations on Man, his Frame his Duty, and his Expectations* (London: S. Richardson, 1749).

¹⁷¹ Sunderland Antiquarian Society. *Sunderland Subscription Library Visitors Book*. Entry for June 16, 1795.

¹⁷² Cicero de orat. Lib. I C. 30 cited in Stanfield *Essay on Biography*, 132.

¹⁷³ Stanfield, *Essay on Biography*, 127.

This is highly reminiscent of Quintilian's lessons in oratory "whereby things absent are presented to our imagination with such extreme vividness that they seem actually to be before our very eyes."¹⁷⁴

Stanfield explicitly describes the proximity of his "biographic spirit" to the work of rhetoric when describing its most powerful effect:

... most of all, in those eventful occurrences, where the soul appears though the action, and character is developed at a single stroke; - not exactly the sublime of rhetoricians, but always resembling it, in exciting an emotion in the reader, proportionate to that which animates the sensibility and expression of the author.¹⁷⁵

Reed notes that Stanfield is insistent that "the 'spirit' is not a gift of the Muse, but a philosophic understanding of human nature."¹⁷⁶ The end is arrived at through following a scientific method, like the one practised by John Howard, previously described by Stanfield in *The Life of John Howard*, in which after an inductive iterative process of testing facts against theory, one arrives at a kind of instinctive state, which he calls in the *Life* "self-evident intuition":¹⁷⁷

This biographical spirit is not ... a matter that comes at once upon the mind like a gift of inspiration. It can be only acquired by patient study and habitual reflection, and by the facility and affection generated in the process. The principles, the divisions, and the relative connections of general biography ... must be ever present, and continually brought to bear upon the subjects of observation; until, by a perseverance in the practice, they will insensibly unite with the other mental acquisitions and faculties; and, when forgotten in their terms, like the rules of grammar and logic, will, silently, modify and direct the acuteness of our conceptions and researches.¹⁷⁸

This closely correlates with acting theory, in which the memorisation and repetition of rehearsed speech and action are transmuted into an intuitive, naturalistic performance. Aaron Hill's *Essay on*

¹⁷⁴ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 6.2.29-30 cited in Joseph Roach, *The Player's Passion, Studies in the Science of Acting* (London: Associated University Presses, 1985), 24.

¹⁷⁵ Stanfield, *Essay on Biography*, 108.

¹⁷⁶ Reed, *English Biography*, 70.

¹⁷⁷ Stanfield, *Howard*, 26.

¹⁷⁸ Stanfield, *Essay on Biography*, 111-12.

the Art of Acting observed, “To act out a passion well, the actor never must attempt its imitation, till his fancy has conceived so strong an image, or idea, of it, as to move the same impressive springs within his mind, which form that passion when it is understood and natural.”¹⁷⁹ Roach stated much the same about performance at the end of the twentieth century when noting: “the actor’s spontaneous vitality seems to depend on the extent to which his actions and thoughts have been automatized, made second nature.”¹⁸⁰ Stanfield evidently believed the same process could be harnessed in the pursuit of “biology”.

Reed argues that the latter section of the above passage from Stanfield’s *Essay* shows “almost unmistakably, the influence of David Hartley” whose theories, he notes, also feature in Stanfield’s descriptions of the ages of man.¹⁸¹ In this regard, Stanfield believed it should be possible to establish a scientific method to be able to gauge individuals at different stages of their lives in order to compare one person’s achievements against another. Caitríona Ní Dhúill notes that Stanfield aimed to supply this “missing theoretical foundation” in the knowledge of the nature of man which would provide a “universally applicable anthropology” that could be drawn upon by every biographer.¹⁸² In a related example of systematisation by an actor, in 1807 Henry Siddons published a translation of Johann Jakob Engel’s *Ideen zu Einer Mimik* which proposed a “science” of expressive gesture modelled on the Linnaean system of botanical classification for the study of natural history.¹⁸³ Showing the Kemble entrepreneurial tendency he illustrated the work using images of his family members, Sarah Siddons and John Philip Kemble.

In preoccupying himself with questions of “character formation” Stanfield puts himself in the company of another former member of the Durham company who had produced fictional work

¹⁷⁹ Aaron Hill, *An Essay on the Art of Acting* (London: J. Dixwell, 1779), 9.

¹⁸⁰ Roach, *The Player’s Passion*, 16.

¹⁸¹ Reed, *English Biography*, 70.

¹⁸² Ní Dhúill, *Metabiography*, 118.

¹⁸³ Henry Siddons, *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action, adapted to the English drama. From a work on the same subject by M. Engel. By Henry Siddons. Embellished with numerous engravings, expressive of the various passions, and representing the modern costume of the London theatres* (London: Richard Phillips, 1807).

as *Bildungsroman*. Thomas Holcroft's *Alwyn, or the Gentleman Comedian* which is based on his experiences as a stroller features a protagonist who is a travelling player in the North. This actor-character undergoes personal development as the author intentionally links theatrical experience with character formation.¹⁸⁴ In the case of Holcroft, one might say that it was only a matter of time before an actor thought of basing a story on their own experience to write a fictional life. It appears that Stanfield extended this notion further and based his idea of understanding character and writing the history of a lived life on principles that he himself used as an actor.

Altick describes Stanfield as “the pioneer systematic theorist of the biographical art” noting that above all he stressed “the importance of scientific rigor in the handling of data.”¹⁸⁵ More recently Elizabeth Manning has also drawn attention to Stanfield's efforts to encourage a systematic philosophical approach to the analysis of character.¹⁸⁶ Jane Darcy notes that the book “is evidence of an ongoing discourse about biography's potential to explore the science of mind.”¹⁸⁷ However, she doubts the work's influence, arguing that its impact was minimal if judged by the fact that it was not republished. It is true that Stanfield's *Essay* was not reprinted until 1986 when it appeared as part of a thirty-nine-volume facsimile set, “The Victorian Muse: Selected Criticism and Parody of the Period.”¹⁸⁸ Darcy also states that “despite Stanfield's Edinburgh connections ... the only lengthy treatment it received was in the evangelical *Eclectic Review*.”¹⁸⁹ This fourteen-page review

¹⁸⁴ For a study of Thomas Holcroft's *Manthorn the Enthusiast* (1779) and *Alwyn: or the Gentleman Comedian* (1780) see Rick Incorvati, “Developmental Stages: Thomas Holcroft's Early Fiction, Elocutionary Rhetoric, and the Function of the Theater in the Progress of Character,” in *Re-Viewing Thomas Holcroft, 1745–1809: Essays on His Works and Life*, eds. A. Markley, Professor Miriam L. Wallace (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 17–30.

¹⁸⁵ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 80, 229.

¹⁸⁶ Susan Manning, “Historical Characters: Biography, the Science of Man, and Romantic Fiction,” in *Character, Self, and Sociability in the Scottish Enlightenment*, eds. Thomas Ahnert and Susan Manning (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 233.

¹⁸⁷ Darcy, *Melancholy and Literary Biography*, 209.

¹⁸⁸ James Field Stanfield, *An Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography* (New York: Garland, 1986). Its editor Ira Bruce Nadel believed there were a “limited number of theoretical essays on biography” due to “the inability of readers to perceive biography as a fully defined aesthetic subject” however he points out that Stanfield's *Essay* was an early exception to this rule. See Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1984), 152.

¹⁸⁹ Darcy, *Melancholy and Literary Biography*, 209.

was not positive and described the composition as “ineffective, in a very strange degree.”¹⁹⁰

However, it is incorrect to state that this was the only review. Lengthy reviews of Stanfield’s book appeared in two other major periodicals, the *Critical Review* and the *Monthly Review*.¹⁹¹ Where the *Eclectic Review* failed to follow Stanfield’s logic, the *Monthly Review* was generally favourable, stating that the work “abounds with delicate and original observations on the use which may be made of the documents of biography.”¹⁹² Curiously, more recently in *A Companion to Literary Biography* published in 2019, Darcy has gone on to state that “The book was not reviewed” at all, which is simply factually incorrect.¹⁹³ There is insufficient space here to consider the merits of the *Essay* or its impact in the history of life writing; however, it might be noted that apart from Stanfield, the only other nineteenth-century writer before Edmund Gosse (1849-1928) to produce a substantial study about biography was Thomas Carlyle.¹⁹⁴

Stanfield argued that biography had two purposes. Firstly, he stated it must “offer examples to practical observation and improvement” for which “moral illustration” was required.¹⁹⁵ The stated second purpose of biography gives us a sense of his innovation. “Biography” he argued, served “to obtain a deeper insight into the principles of the human mind.”¹⁹⁶ In order to pursue this, he drew from Francis Bacon, “the great master, by whose institutes this treatise has attempted to apply the science of induction to moral and intellectual operations.”¹⁹⁷ As a methodology in imitation of Bacon, Stanfield drew up synoptical tables which contained examples of character observation.¹⁹⁸ He recommended that the subject to be studied for the biography should be

¹⁹⁰ J. E. Ryland, ed., *Critical Essays Contributed to The Eclectic Review by John Foster*, vol. 2. (London, 1856), 193-205: 202.

¹⁹¹ *The Critical Review: or, Annals of Literature* 4, no. 6 (December 1813): 592-598; *The Monthly Review: or Literary Journal*, 74 (May to August 1814): 356-366.

¹⁹² *Monthly Review*, 363.

¹⁹³ Jane Darcy, “The Emergence of Literary Biography,” in *A Companion to Literary Biography*, ed. Richard Bradford (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2019), 22.

¹⁹⁴ Altick, *Lives and Letters*, 185.

¹⁹⁵ Stanfield, *Essay on Biography*, 145.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, xv.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

compared to similar tables previously drawn up by the “biologist”.¹⁹⁹ The *Critical Review* found this notion too difficult to accept, stating that “our worthy author talks as if it were about as easy to resolve that curious compound, ‘the whole character’ into its elementary ingredients, and then to shake them together again, as if it is to decompose any chemical substance, and afterwards restore it to its pristine form, by a synthetic operation.”²⁰⁰ This criticism summarises the challenge that Stanfield faced when attempting to apply scientific method to questions of self at this moment in time. Darcy has noted “the struggle, in this pre-Freudian period, to articulate the need for psychological insight.”²⁰¹ This struggle was also made apparent in *The Eclectic Review*, when the reviewer described Stanfield’s “ludicrous” suggestion that the biographer “go back to the very birth of his hero, and to any recorded or reported circumstances which, even before that event, might have made impressions on his incipient existence tending to determine his future character.”²⁰² To some post-Freudian minds, this may not seem ludicrous at all. The *Monthly Review* also questioned the relevance of Stanfield’s advice to observe a subject’s childhood closely, but it did acknowledge that “perhaps men are too inattentive to the early indications and permanent impressions of bent to which this age is liable.”²⁰³ In this instance Stanfield directly drew from a classical source:

Quintilian tells us he even wrote a song to be used by nurses: well judging that the formation of character begins with the very commencement of perception; and that the force or gentleness, the harshness or suavity, continuance, succession, and novelty, of these sensible impressions, dispose the tender organs into suitable modifications of habitual thought and action.²⁰⁴

In its summary, the *Critical Review* concluded that “there are many good remarks in this essay; but as a whole, it is prolix and tedious. In this respect it bears a close resemblance to some of the

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 88.

²⁰⁰ *Critical Review*, 598.

²⁰¹ Darcy, “Contesting Literary Biography,” 293.

²⁰² Ryland, *Eclectic Review*, 200.

²⁰³ *Monthly Review*, 364.

²⁰⁴ Stanfield *Essay on Biography*, 206.

productions of the German literati.”²⁰⁵ Perhaps it was its resemblance to the German literati that generated a more positive response in the *Monthly Review*. This was written by William Taylor of Norwich who, according to Edith Morley, “did as much as any individual to promote the knowledge and study of German literature in England” in this period.²⁰⁶ Taylor was a remarkably well-informed individual who wrote more than an estimated two thousand reviews for different publications during his career, almost all of which are anonymous.²⁰⁷ He had an arrangement that he would only review work that he was interested in or felt up to. It is perhaps not a surprise that Taylor may have been interested in reviewing Stanfield’s work as he was the first person to use the term “auto-biography” in English.²⁰⁸

Darcy has called for attempts to “trace the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment notions of “ ‘philosophical biography’ written on inductive principles.”²⁰⁹ Stanfield must be considered in any such tracing as he specifically attempted to apply Bacon’s reasoning to the study of past lives. Whether his work ultimately influenced his contemporaries or not, it is significant that he was the first person who explicitly attempted to apply inductive reasoning in questions of philosophical biography and research into the circumstances that lay behind this attempt has the potential to provide systematic insights into the epistemic shifts then taking place and the manner in which modern culture has restructured its sense of personal self.

²⁰⁵ *Critical Review*, 598.

²⁰⁶ Edith J. Morley, ed., *The Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson with the Wordsworth Circle*, vol. 1. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), 497. n. 1.

²⁰⁷ David Chandler, ed., “Introduction,” in *William Taylor of Norwich: A Study of the Influence of Modern German Literature in England* by Georg Herzfeld, trans. Astrid Wind (Romantic Circles, 2007), 5. Online ed., [William Taylor of Norwich: A Study of the Influence of Modern German Literature in England \(1897\)](#), accessed 20.2.22

²⁰⁸ James M. Good, “William Taylor, Robert Southey, and the Word ‘Autobiography,’ ” *The Wordsworth Circle* 12, no. 2 (1981): 125.

²⁰⁹ Jane Darcy, “Contesting Literary Biography,” 294.

Conclusion

Stanfield may have been a relatively poor Irish travelling player, scraping a living in the North of England, but his social status did not make him a marginal figure in terms of the contribution that he made to late Enlightenment and early Romantic culture. As the introduction to this chapter noted, ideas emerge from grounded social practice and that practice takes place in particular locations among particular people.²¹⁰ Stanfield's preoccupation with ideas related to character and biography illustrates this understanding. His thought developed through correspondence with a little-known headmaster from Richmond, North Yorkshire who he met when performing there. It was further stimulated by encounters in northern masonic lodges, debating societies and book clubs as well as through conversations with Morpeth's William Burdon, Edinburgh's Dugald Stewart and by attending John Playfair's lectures. This wealth of experience and geographical diversity was facilitated by a long itinerant career performing on the stages of northern towns. Stanfield embodies Shaftesbury's ideal of the "virtuoso" in the manner he strove to influence his community and bring about improvement. He had a cosmopolitan outlook which drew him towards reformist networks, and he maintained good relations with people in dissenting communities. His network of associates shows that he engaged with influential and powerful individuals at the forefront of local and national socio-political development and that he played an important role in several of the most important contemporary civic expressions of Enlightenment culture. As a Catholic, although probably lapsed, he is a rather rare figure in British Enlightenment and there is a mercurial element to his identity perhaps exacerbated by the mystery associated with freemasonry. He associated with several major figures of the late Scottish Enlightenment but unlike many of its proponents was not a Presbyterian. His abolition writing remains cosmopolitan and does not indulge in the tropes of salvation or conversion that underlie many of his fellow abolitionists' verse. He was attracted to the rigour of Francis Bacon's philosophy but his masonic hymns to reason and science are highly

²¹⁰ Withers, "Space," 216.

gothic in style and his comic songs are filled with Gaelic improbability and exaggeration. One of his closest friends was a Unitarian, another was the Rector of St Paul's. These apparently contradictory characteristics should be understood as features of contending currents of thought then vying for consensus in this period. Stanfield was living in the age of Enlightenment and is a product of his time, immersed in different locales, helping to shape local and even global mentalities. Certainly, rather than performing as an obscure extra on the national stage, this forgotten Irish provincial actor appears to have actually played a rather significant supporting role.

A concluding chapter will now summarise the dissertation by noting its principal findings, highlighting the features of the close relationship between rhetoric and acting that underlie much of the study and present areas for potential future research.

Conclusion

Introduction

This thesis began by citing Frederick Burwick's 2015 statement that no history of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century English provincial theatre has been written and that we know practically nothing at all about the minor theatre circuits.¹ Its aim has been to address this gap in historiography, at least with regard to the North. It advanced on the understanding that research into local provincial theatre history has the potential to synthesise cultural history with social history. Its central understanding is that the actor played an important role as cultural broker in the provinces, a figure that dispersed new ideas from elsewhere, while also discovering local intelligence, which they mediated throughout the region and beyond. Importantly, provincial performers are understood to have been active agents, not simply conveying information, but helping to forge new identities through the powerful medium of drama and its associated media.

Due to their itinerant lives, actors left relatively few traces behind and therefore the subject was approached from the perspective of association for which there is exemplary work to draw from, such as studies by Peter Clark and John Money.² As a general type, actors were highly sociable which increases the possibility of discovering source material through which to advance the study and therefore sociability has also proved to be a central driver for which work by Gillian Russell and Jon Mee in particular has provided guidance.³

One of the primary aims has been to demonstrate why provincial actors were particularly well-placed to act as cultural brokers and agents of ideas in the northern counties of England during

¹ Frederick Burwick, *British Drama of the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 2.

² Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); John Money, *Experience and Identity: Birmingham and the West Midlands 1760-1800* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977).

³ Gillian Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre in Georgian London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011).

the late Georgian period. This chapter will now highlight several of the key insights related to people and places that have emerged from the research.

New geographies of theatre

Using the Durham company as the lodestone for navigation, the research has sought to reframe our understanding of the geography of theatrical influence and connections. By displacing London as the central hub in the network of influence, this has allowed for the highlighting of little-studied connections that developed between Ireland and Scotland to the Northern English theatrical landscape. In order to understand this circumstance, it was necessary to move back in time to the period when the first northern circuits were established.

The first studies of provincial theatre tended to emphasise the influence of metropolitan stars as the first actors to develop professional regional theatre when they ventured out from London in the summer.⁴ However, local research shows that in the more distant North, largely for reasons of geography, the influence of Irish theatre was initially of greater significance, particularly as theatre professionalised in the 1750s and 1760s. This is exemplified by the Austin and Heatton company made up of Dublin actors who travelled from Ireland to Wales in 1766 and came to dominate northern theatre from the 1760s until Stephen Kemble bought the company in 1791. John Brewer points to the metropolitan “imitation and emulation” exemplified by towns which often renamed the streets in which their theatres were built “Drury Lane”.⁵ However, Whitehaven’s new theatre in Roper Street, constructed for the Austin and Heatton company, was designed on the model of Dublin’s Crow Street Theatre and there was a Smock Alley in Liverpool.⁶ Many of the northern

⁴ Alwin Thaler, “Strolling Players and Provincial Drama after Shakspeare,” *PMLA* 37, no. 2 (1922): 251-252.

⁵ John Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 396.

⁶ *Newcastle Courant* 18 Nov 1769. R. J. Broadbent, *Annals of the Liverpool Stage: From the Earliest Period to the Present Time, together with some Account of the Theatres and Music Halls in Bootle and Birkenhead* (Liverpool: E. Howell, 1908), 19, n. 4.

theatres were either established or supported by actors who had emerged from the Irish theatres.

Thomas Bates' nascent Durham company was assisted by the Irish actor Francis Gentleman in about 1760.⁷ A short time later, John Cunningham joined the company and in the 1790s James Field Stanfield was one of its stars together with the actress Mary O'Keeffe who had performed in Dublin and London's Theatre Royals during her career.⁸ Scotland also increasingly exerted significant cultural influence by supplying actors for northern theatres. Elizabeth Sparks and George Graham, who were both children of Scottish actors, performed with James Cawdell's Durham company when it was at the peak of its success.

The traffic of theatrical influences between Ireland, Scotland and the North of England was exemplified in the thesis by Sarah Ward and West Digges' production of *Douglas* in Edinburgh in 1756 which was spearheaded by leading figures of the Scottish Enlightenment. John Home's hugely successful play emerged at a point when the Scottish *literati* were working through the implications of their own post-1707 "provinciality" and the possibilities of creating a rich and vibrant civil society that did not revolve around a political centre were being realised. This exemplifies the importance of "provincial" theatre as a cultural and intellectual phenomenon and its history is very much bound up with metropolitan rejection as Garrick had refused to perform the play in London. There have been several efforts made to locate *Douglas* within the Enlightenment project; however, no-one has considered the actors' role in this major cultural event.⁹ This is significant as without the

⁷ Francis Gentleman, "A Summary View of the English, Scots and Irish Stages," in *The Modish Wife, a Comedy* (London: 1775), 20.

⁸ Philip H. Highfill Jr, Kalman A. Burnim, Edward A. Longhans, eds., *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800*, 16 vols. (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973-93), 11:97-99.

⁹ Lisa A. Freeman, "The Political Economy of Bodies Public: Scotland's *Douglas* Controversy," in *Antitheatricality and the Body Public* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 147-88. Ronnie Young, "'Sympathetick Curiosity': Drama, Moral Thought, and the Science of Human Nature," in *The Scottish Enlightenment and Literary Culture*, eds. Ronnie Young, Ralph McLean, Kenneth Simpson (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2016), 115-136. Thomas Ahnert, "Clergymen as Polite Philosophers. *Douglas* and the Conflict between Moderates and Orthodox in the Scottish Enlightenment," *Intellectual History Review* 18, no 3 (2008): 375-383.

contribution of West Digges and Sarah Ward drama may not have been so successfully recruited to the study of human nature at this critical moment in the Enlightenment project.

Recent academic attention is helping to position the theatre within Enlightenment studies and this thesis has worked toward highlighting the potential of considering the role that actors played within this.¹⁰ The rhetorical power of the actors is exemplified by Digges and Ward in *Douglas*, which generated an “affective turn” in the culture of sensibility. The study went on to show that the theatre was a vector of the Northern Enlightenment which was itself informed and shaped by Enlightenment ideas related to rhetoric drawn from the Scottish and Irish Enlightenments. An attention to metropolitan influence and exchange highlighted the importance of new rhetoric and particularly Thomas Sheridan’s School of Elocution. Speech and deportment were central to the rhetoric of the body, but this is rarely considered in a provincial theatrical context; although it was particularly in the provinces that its impact was being felt in this period.

Outside the playhouse many northern actors augmented their incomes by teaching elocution and a causal link to Dublin and Edinburgh can be traced in many of these performers’ professional lives. The pedagogic role of the stage was further examined through John Cunningham’s association with Britain’s first female grammarian, Ann Slack from Newcastle, and through the work of James Field Stanfield who befriended one of the nation’s greatest Greek scholars, James Tate, while he was performing on a northern circuit.

The Durham company served as a medium by which to consider how the establishment of a permanent theatre company in northeastern towns conformed to an understanding of eighteenth-century “urban renaissance”. While acknowledging the commercialisation of leisure as an important factor, evidence of the northern performers’ commitment to improvement and their contributions to civic development nuance the standard understanding of the provincial playhouse as a site of conspicuous consumption and display. This repositioning of the actors’ role within local

¹⁰ See particularly Bridget Orr, *British Enlightenment Theatre: Dramatizing Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

communities also shows that their cultural brokerage extended beyond information exchange to the performance of actions that led to significant economic and social benefits for the public. Rather than being the morally destitute figures described by their antitheatrical opponents, the Durham players clearly provided valuable services and filled important social roles where civic infrastructure remained weak. This commitment is clearly illustrated in the company's philanthropic response to the hardships resulting from the eruption of the Laki volcanic fissure.

Aside from the encouragement of charity for the poor and destitute, there were many other ways in which the theatrical experience promoted forms of improvement, including the commitment to enlightened perfection through freemasonry and the celebration of civic infrastructure that provided considerable economic improvement for local communities. The construction of the Wearmouth Iron Bridge illustrates the remarkable dependence upon water of the residents of the urban centres of Bishopwearmouth, Monkwearmouth and Sunderland. This, in itself, was a work of rhetoric, albeit not one that found expression in spoken or written words alone. Local actors played significant roles in the promotion of this creation, helping to generate a belief in technology and thereby contributed to regional identity.

The Durham company also made a contribution to the sense of nation through performance in its theatres. By being in direct contact with large numbers of the public across the North East of England for over a quarter of a century, this troupe played a significant role in developing a new sense of identity, as exemplified by James Cawdell's displays of martial pride, particularly in relation to the nation's expanding empire. However, the picture that the Northern stage paints is more nuanced. The provincial companies were a vector for national, communal feeling, but one which was adapted to local concerns. The playbills from theatres on the northeast coast advertised that sailors could be assured they would be safe from the press gang on the evenings of performance. Material from the performances in the theatres shows that the companies identified with local working people and performed material that ridiculed the threat of the press gang. The performance of plays about the threat of invasion and set locally must have helped to galvanise

resistance during a critical period of the 1790s when war with France preoccupied the minds of everyone on the northeast coast.

Freemasonry and the stage

A key finding of the thesis relates to the close relationship between northern freemasonry and the stage. Considerable attention has been given to freemasonry as many male actors were freemasons. Actors celebrated prominent masons such as Sunderland's John Thornhill, whose mansion was a local site of enlightened sociability frequented by the players, and this appears in James Cawdell's verse.¹¹ Members of the Durham company were closely involved in promoting several of the most significant moments in County Durham's early masonic history. These include providing the songs for the opening of Sunderland's Phoenix Lodge Hall which is the one of the oldest masonic buildings in England. In the 1790s James Field Stanfield was the Master of Ceremonies at the foundation and opening of the Wearmouth Bridge. He also ensured that these masonic-backed events were promoted in a national periodical dedicated to freemasonry. Surviving ephemera shows that the company continued to celebrate this remarkable achievement in theatres for years afterwards. Through such examples the thesis demonstrates that examination of this form of association has the potential to make significant contributions to local social history.

The North East of England is not an area typically associated with the cause of abolition; however, the research into associates of the actors shows that many were deeply involved and several published works dedicated to abolition. Furthermore, many of these individuals were freemasons which helps to make the case for further work to be carried out about the influence of freemasonry in provincial social life.

¹¹ James Cawdell, *The Miscellaneous Poems of J. Cawdell, Comedian: Consisting of a Variety of Serious and Comic Prologues, Epilogues, Pastorals, Songs, Descriptions, and Epigrams. Together with Several Sentimental Pieces. To which is annexed an Answer to a late libellous compilation, called the Stockton Jubilee* (Sunderland: Graham, 1785), 115.

Theatre history as the history of ideas

Eighteenth-century actors provide a remarkable opportunity for historicist enquiry into “sympathetic imagination” and questions related to identity and character formation due to the quantity and range of self-reflexive material that they themselves produced.¹² The actors’ preoccupation with the nature of the self is made apparent by Sybil Rosenfeld’s *Strolling Players* which drew upon fifteen autobiographical “classics of strolling” from which to develop its introductory chapter.¹³ Unlike many other professions, actors are forced to reflect upon themselves and their actions, asking questions of the human experience in order to successfully carry out their daily work, as Joseph Roach examined in *The Player’s Passion*.¹⁴ “The central issue of psychology and physiology, by whatever names they are known, are not remote abstractions to the performer” wrote Roach “but literally matters of flesh and blood.”¹⁵ Ideas related to identity-formation and the culture of sensibility surfaced in James Boswell’s self-fashioning using the actor West Digges as his model. This also started the study’s biographical theme as the actor Francis Gentleman informed a youthful James Boswell about Samuel Johnson and another actor James Love encouraged him to keep a diary.

Actors were local role models. They represented figures to aspire to, whether in Edinburgh’s Theatre Royal or in a fit-up theatre in Workington, where Charlotte Lowes launched her career as a Cumbrian player patronised by the enlightened Curwens. As local townsfolk visited the theatre to see the latest play or an old classic, they observed the performers’ manner of speech and could use the experience as a lesson for their own behaviour. Many actors also worked as teachers of elocution and were influenced by Thomas Sheridan’s elocution movement. Rick Incorvati has

¹² See Earl R. Wasserman, “The Sympathetic Imagination in Eighteenth-Century Theories of Acting,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 46, no. 3 (1947): 264-272.

¹³ Sybil Rosenfeld, *Strolling Players and Drama in the Provinces 1660-1765* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939).

¹⁴ Joseph Roach, *The Player’s Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (London: Associated University Presses, 1985).

¹⁵ Roach, *The Player’s Passion*, 16.

discerned the influence of Sheridan underlying Thomas Holcroft's first novel, *Alwyn, the Gentleman Comedian*, which is based on his experiences as a northern stroller, a work that has been recognised as the first *bildungsroman* based on personal theatrical experience.¹⁶

The association between rhetoric and acting continued with Stephen Kemble who introduced a "new kind of Entertainment" presented for the "first time" at the Newcastle Theatre Royal in 1796 modelled upon Thomas Sheridan and John Henderson's "Attic Evenings."¹⁷ Kemble's Newcastle career ended with the declamation of a long poem about the Irish stroller John Cunningham, who he cast as a hero of improvement. Cunningham is another lost figure that this study has sought to revive interest in. Examining his relationship with the Slacks in Newcastle provides an example of how adopting an approach that presents performers at the centre of local research, it becomes possible to gain new insights into local experience.

The study's attention to rhetoric, acting and biography culminated in Stanfield's *Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography* which was first noted in the twentieth century by Francis Hart in a 1960 article that emphasised Stanfield's interest in "negative capability."¹⁸ Six years later, Joseph Reed noted that Stanfield instructed the biographer to invest himself with the character of his subject "very much in the manner of the method actor."¹⁹

Stanfield is remarkable for the rich variety of contributions that he made to local contemporary intellectual and cultural life. He was an abolitionist, whose *Letters to the Reverend Clarkson* about his personal experiences working in the slave industry in Liverpool, the Guinea Coast of Africa and the West Indies were published by the *Society for the Abolition of the Slave*

¹⁶ Frederick Burwick, *A History of Romantic Literature* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), 88. For a study of Thomas Holcroft's *Alwyn: or the Gentleman Comedian* (1780) see Rick Incurvati, "Developmental Stages: Thomas Holcroft's Early Fiction, Elocutionary Rhetoric, and the Function of the Theater in the Progress of Character," in *Re-Viewing Thomas Holcroft, 1745–1809: Essays on His Works and Life*, eds. A. Markley, Professor Miriam L. Wallace (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 17-30.

¹⁷ Newcastle upon Tyne, Tyne and Wear, Newcastle Central Library (NCL). *Newcastle Theatre Playbills*. Playbill for Wednesday 13 January 1796, "Belle's Strategem."

¹⁸ Francis R. Hart, "Boswell and the Romantics: A Chapter in the History of Biographical Theory," *ELH* 27, no. 1 (1960): 64.

¹⁹ Joseph Reed, *English Biography in the Early Nineteenth Century, 1801-1838* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966), 69.

Trade in its first collection in 1788.²⁰ Stanfield also wrote an early biography of John Howard immediately after his death in 1790 which predated John Aikin's well-known work by two years.²¹ The impact of Howard on the "culture of sensibility" and the remarkable outpouring of public expression upon his death is only now beginning to be appraised for which Stanfield's work should be considered.²² Stanfield's masonic writing extended to influencing the editorial policy of Britain's first magazine dedicated to Freemasonry, which is a fact discovered during the course of this research. He was also the founder of Sunderland's first subscription library which later developed into the town's literary and philosophical society. This research therefore provides a supporting theatrical dimension to Jon Mee's work on "Transpennine Enlightenment" which focuses on the transference of knowledge from the North West to the North East.²³

Suggestions for future research

The research behind this thesis has largely been a work of rediscovery. A natural outcome of the consideration of forgotten public figures is the realisation that this leads to the identification of an assortment of unexplored archives. These include actual physical storage sites, such as the Library and Archive of Freemasonry in London and individual lodges in the region, plus the archives of local antiquarian institutions such as the Sunderland Antiquarian Society, Newcastle's Literary and Philosophical Society and the records of Whitby's former Literary and Philosophical Society which are now held in the town's Museum and contain a remarkable collection of playbills related to the Whitby theatre. To this list should be added the museum and research centre at Richmond's

²⁰ James Field Stanfield, *Observations on a Guinea Voyage, in a Series of Letters Addressed to the Rev. Thomas Clarkson* (London: J. Phillips, 1788).

²¹ Anon. [James Field Stanfield], *The Life of John Howard* (Newcastle upon Tyne: William Thompson, 1790); John Aikin, *A View of the Character and Public Services of the Late John Howard* (London, 1792).

²² Gabriel Cervantes, Dahlia Porter, "The Extreme Empiricism: John Howard, Poetry, and the Thermometrics of Reform," *The Eighteenth Century* 57, no. 1 (2016): 98.

²³ See Jon Mee and Jennifer Wilkes, 'Transpennine Enlightenment: The Literary and Philosophical Societies and Knowledge Networks in the North, 1781-1830,' *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38, no. 4 (2015) 599-612.

Georgian Theatre. As well as actual physical storage sites, there are other collections, of a more virtual nature, some of which remain to be catalogued and even identified.

The *Biographical Dictionary* is an invaluable resource; however, its entries are limited to performers who appeared on a London stage. Many of the actors who feature in this study are not included in the repository. This thesis puts forward a case for the development of a database dedicated to Georgian provincial performers with the rationale that their sociability and networks of association have the potential to illuminate areas of long eighteenth-century social history that have not been previously reached. Historians from other disciplines should find this valuable.

The thesis has also demonstrated the potential that masonic archives contain, and this remains an under-utilised resource. While seeking out new archives to examine, a number of other lacunae were discovered which the research addresses. Although there is a significant amount of provincial social history led by scholars including Peter Borsay, Rosemary Sweet and Penelope Corfield, little has been done in terms of the systematic study of provincial literary history. The thesis demonstrates that provincial theatre history has the potential to contribute to this area because actors naturally gravitated to provincial *literati* and typically cultivated close associations with antiquarians and local historians, many of whom also wrote material for the stage. As the chapter on John Cunningham showed, the other great intellectual driver in provincial life is print culture. Actors typically associated with printers and although northern print culture is an area that has been examined, its association to the playhouse still leaves much to be uncovered. This study focused on Newcastle upon Tyne, but other potential areas might include Whitehaven and Sunderland. For example, the records of Sunderland's Subscription Library provide a snapshot of late eighteenth-century provincial literary and intellectual interests, and this still awaits analysis.

Conclusion

This study began with a 1777 “remarkable” playbill from Manchester announcing the future stars of the London stage performing in *Hamlet*.²⁴ It asked whether investigating the names of the “humbler people” listed might present an opportunity for orientation away from a preoccupation with metropolitan celebrity towards more marginalised and forgotten figures.²⁵ The writer of the article, W. J. Lawrence, noted that the name of the actor performing in the role of the “Player King” was James Field Stanfield who “had some literary ability.”²⁶ With all due respect to Lawrence, who is a major figure in Irish theatre history, hopefully this study has proven this to be the case.

²⁴ W. J. Lawrence, “A Remarkable Playbill,” in *New York Dramatic Mirror* (8 July 1905), 3.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

Conventions

Original spelling and punctuation in all primary sources have been reproduced throughout and my own insertions have been made in square brackets. Unless otherwise stated, all emphasis — italics and capital letters — was found in the original texts.

The Freemasons' Magazine, or General and Complete Library changed its name to *The Freemasons' Magazine and Cabinet of Universal Literature* in April 1796. It then changed to *The Scientific Magazine and Freemasons Repository* in January 1797 under which title it continued until its final issue in December 1798. For ease of reference, I refer to all publications as “*The Freemasons' Magazine*” which is the standard practice.

Abbreviations

ODNB: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (Oxford University Press), online edition

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Marble plaque dedicated to James Field Stanfield and his son Clarkson Stanfield. Author's photograph.

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- Sunderland Phoenix Lodge Masonic Hall. A tracing board ca. 1815. Author's own photograph.

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