

DE QUINCEY AND THE PORTICO LIBRARY

GREVEL LINDOP*

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE,
UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

The Portico Library, a proprietary library established in 1806, is a well-known Manchester institution. Its elegant neoclassical building (constructed to a design by Thomas Harrison) near the city centre, at the corner of Moseley and Charlotte Streets, is something of a landmark; and a blue plaque over the entrance informs the passer-by that Elizabeth Gaskell, Dr Peter Mark Roget (compiler of the famous *Thesaurus*) and Thomas De Quincey, amongst many others, all read there.¹

De Quincey's connection with the Portico is of particular interest as he mentions the library in his autobiographical *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), in a passage which is the best-known literary reference to the library, and indeed the only one to occur in a work of major literary importance. In nearly every respect, however, De Quincey's relationship with the Portico has remained mysterious. We do not know when he visited the library, or on how many occasions; nor do we know what (if anything) he read whilst he was there. Moreover, referring to the library in *Confessions*, he does not even give the Portico's name correctly. There is, however, evidence which enables us to elucidate to some extent the nature of De Quincey's relationship with the Portico Library and even to suggest a likely date for his presence there. The purpose of this article is to examine that evidence, thereby clarifying a small episode in the library's early history and annotating the relevant passage of De Quincey's *Confessions*.

The reference to the library occurs in a footnote to 'Introduction to the pains of opium', a subsection within Part II of *Confessions of an English opium-eater*, which appeared in the *London Magazine* for October 1821.² It would be hard to imagine a stranger context in which to encounter the name of a respectable provincial

* This article is a revised version of a lecture given at the Portico Library in June 1992. I am grateful to the Chairman, Librarian and Proprietors of the Portico Library for permission to examine, and quote from, the archives of the Library.

¹ In the case of Elizabeth Gaskell, this claim is not strictly justified. Women could not become proprietors of the library, and although she made extensive use of the Portico's books, they were borrowed for her by her husband, the Rev. William Gaskell.

² *Confessions of an English opium-eater* appeared in the *London Magazine* IV, September 1821, 293–312 and October 1821, 353–79. The reference to the Portico Library appears in the footnote on page 364.

library, for the passage introduces an account of the bizarre nightmares De Quincey suffered as a result of his addiction, and he is engaged in justifying – not altogether seriously – his continued use of opium, explaining that after 1813 it had become for him not an occasional indulgence but a daily necessity.

Claiming that he has been forced to take opium by illness, he goes on to give a philosophical turn to his confession that the pursuit of pleasure, or at least the evasion of pain, also played a part in his increasing dependence on the drug:

This then, let me repeat, I postulate – that, at the time I began to take opium daily, I could not have done otherwise. Whether, indeed, afterwards I might not have succeeded in breaking off the habit, even when it seemed to me that all efforts would be unavailing, and whether many of the innumerable efforts which I *did* make, might not have been carried much further, and my gradual reconquests of ground lost might not have been followed up much more energetically – these are questions which I must decline. Perhaps I might make out a case of palliation; but, shall I speak ingenuously? I confess it, as a besetting infirmity of mine, that I am too much of an Eudaemonist: I hanker too much after a state of happiness, both for myself and others: I cannot face misery, whether my own or not, with an eye of sufficient firmness: and am little capable of encountering present pain for the sake of any reversionary benefit. On some other matters, I can agree with the gentlemen in the cotton-trade[†] at Manchester in affecting the Stoic philosophy: but not in this. Here I take the liberty of an Eclectic philosopher, and I look out for some courteous and considerate sect that will condescend more to the infirm condition of an opium-eater; that are ‘sweet men,’ as Chaucer says, ‘to give absolution,’ and will show some consideration in the penances they inflict, and the efforts of abstinence they exact, from poor sinners like myself. An inhuman moralist I can no more endure in my nervous state than opium that has not been boiled.³

At the words ‘cotton-trade’, De Quincey appends a footnote:

† A handsome news-room, of which I was very politely made free in passing through Manchester by several gentlemen of that place, is called, I think, *The Porch*: whence I, who am a stranger in Manchester, inferred that the subscribers meant to profess themselves followers of Zeno. But I have been since assured that this is a mistake.

De Quincey’s bilingual pun depends on the tradition that the followers of Zeno were known as ‘Stoics’ because their teacher was accustomed to lecture in the *στοά* or ‘Porch’ at Athens. From this learned joke he returns to the subject of his opium-addiction, and we hear no more of the ‘Porch’ or Portico. The error involving the library’s name, incidentally, remained unchanged when *Confessions* was republished in book form in 1822; but revising and expanding the work in 1856 De Quincey tentatively corrected it, remarking that the library ‘is called either *The Porch* or *The Portico*, which in Greek is the *Stoa*’.⁴

³ Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English opium-eater and other writings*, ed. Grevel Lindop (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 53 and n.

⁴ David Masson (ed.), *Collected writings of Thomas De Quincey* (Edinburgh: A. and C. Black, 1889–90), III, 400n.

Describing himself as 'a stranger in Manchester' who has been 'very politely made free [of the Portico] in passing through Manchester by several gentlemen of that place', De Quincey gives the impression of a very casual contact. Perhaps intentionally, this conceals two things: one is that Manchester was De Quincey's birthplace and home town, where he had spent much of his early life; the other is that the gentlemen of the Portico included several close family friends, people whom De Quincey had known all his life and who had been intimate with his parents.

At this point some biographical summary may be useful.⁵ De Quincey was born in 1785, the son of a textile importer, Thomas Quincey (after whose death the 'De' was added to the family name by his widow). Quincey specialized in the shipping of West India cotton and Irish linen. His son Thomas seems to have been born less than a mile from the subsequent site of the Portico, at his father's house in Cromford Court, off Market Street Lane. (The site is under the present Arndale Shopping Centre, where one of the arcades is still called Cromford Court.) Thomas Quincey senior prospered, and in 1791 built himself a large house outside the city, on the edge of what is now Hulme. The house was called Greenhay, and gave its name to the district, which is still known as Greenheys. It was here that De Quincey spent most of his childhood.

Thomas Quincey died in 1793 of consumption, aged forty. His widow stayed in Manchester for another three years and then moved to Bath, taking her seven children with her and elevating the family name to *De Quincey*. Thomas De Quincey returned to Manchester in 1800, to board at the Manchester Grammar School, from which after two years he ran away to lead a vagabond existence in North Wales and London (a period which he describes in detail in the *Confessions*). After attending Oxford and leaving without a degree he lived for some years at Grasmere as a close associate of Wordsworth and Coleridge; subsequently he drifted into journalism, first (in 1818 and 1819) as editor of the *Westmorland Gazette*, and then as a periodical essayist, making his first contributions to *The London Magazine* with the two parts of *Confessions of an English opium-eater* in September and October 1821.

De Quincey was thus hardly 'a stranger' in Manchester when he made his visit (or visits) to the Portico. Technically, of course, he was such at the library itself: he would have been admitted under the regulation stipulating that

⁵ Biographical information is taken, except where specified, from Grevel Lindop, *The opium-eater: a life of Thomas De Quincey* (London: Dent, 1981).

Any stranger not residing within five miles of Manchester and not having an establishment, either commercial or otherwise in town, may be admitted into the rooms for one calendar month, on having been recommended by two subscribers, in their own handwriting, in a book to be kept for that purpose.⁶

Disappointingly, the *Strangers' book* for the period, as well as the record of books borrowed, vanished long ago. But De Quincey would have had no difficulty in finding people to recommend him, for the early membership of the Portico included several men who were associates of his father and family friends.

Amongst the earliest subscribers to the Portico, who committed themselves to membership and bought shares in 1804 before the building had been erected or a name for the future library chosen, were two leading Manchester physicians, Thomas Percival and Charles White,⁷ who were close friends of Thomas Quincey's and are known to have attended his family at Greenhay during De Quincey's childhood. Percival and White are generally remembered as pioneers of public health reform: Thomas Percival (1740–1804) campaigned for public baths and for legislation to protect factory workers, as well as forming the first committee to press for sanitary reform in Manchester. Charles White (1728–1813), a surgeon, helped to found both the Manchester Royal Infirmary and the Lying-In Hospital, now St Mary's. There is a wealth of information and anecdote about both of them in De Quincey's autobiographical writings.

De Quincey tells us that Percival was

the physician who attended at Greenhay. Dr. P. was a literary man, of elegant tastes and philosophic habits. Some of his papers may be found in the "Manchester Philosophic Transactions"; and these I have heard mentioned with respect, though, for myself, I have no personal knowledge of them. Some presumption meantime arises in their favour, from the fact that he had been a favoured correspondent of the most eminent Frenchmen at that time who cultivated literature jointly with philosophy. Voltaire, Diderot, Maupertius, Condorcet, and D'Alembert, had all treated him with distinction; and I have heard my mother say that, in the days before I or my sister could have known him, he attempted vainly to interest her in these French luminaries, by reading extracts from their frequent letters[.]⁸

Percival also wrote for children, and gave one of his books to Thomas and his sister Elizabeth. It was called *A father's instructions* and De Quincey remembered one of the stories it contained so well that more than forty years later he elaborated and retold it in the course of his *Autobiographic sketches*.⁹

⁶ See *Share transfers I: 1806–1811*, 5, Rule 24.

⁷ Davis, S.W., *The founding of the Portico Library, Manchester, in 1815* (M.A. thesis, University College London, 1969) 16 (copy in the Portico Library).

⁸ *Collected writings*, ed. Masson, I, 130; see also I 35 and, I, 130–3 *passim*.

⁹ *Collected writings*, ed. Masson, I, 130–3. Percival's *A father's instructions* appeared in three parts, published 1775–1800.

As for Charles White, he was called in by Percival to help attend De Quincey's sister Elizabeth in 1792 when she contracted the 'hydrocephalus' (probably, in modern parlance, meningitis) of which she died – an episode of which De Quincey gives a detailed account in *Suspiria de profundis* (1845).¹⁰ When Thomas later returned to Manchester to attend the Grammar School, a particularly lonely period in his life, White befriended him, and amongst other favours showed him round his famous anatomical museum. De Quincey gives a detailed account of White and his museum in his *Autobiographic sketches*.¹¹

Both Percival and White, then, were close friends of De Quincey and his parents, and they helped to found the Portico. Neither became a Proprietor, as shareholding members of the library were (and still are) known, Percival because he died in 1804 just before the library for which he had worked was established; White probably for reasons of age: in 1806 he was seventy-eight years of age. Nonetheless their part in the Portico's founding indicates that the library's membership was likely to be drawn from the social circle of De Quincey's father.

There are other, more direct, indications of close contact between Portico members and De Quincey's father. Examination of the Portico's *Share transfer book*, which records the sale of shares and their purchase by current or new Proprietors, reveals several names which have connections with the Quincey family. One of the founder members was William Sergeant (he had share no. 275).¹² We know nothing about him, but one of the witnesses to Thomas Quincey's will was called William Sergeant.¹³ It seems likely enough that this was the same man. There is a James Entwistle, who took share no. 128 in 1815. In Thomas Quincey's will, there are legacies to John Entwistle and James Entwistle, whose names are given together, clearly implying that they were related: if John Entwistle was a close contemporary of Thomas Quincey's and James his son, this would explain the comparatively late date at which James purchased his share.

Most striking of all is the name of the Reverend Samuel Hall, a founder member and the holder of share no. 122. Samuel Hall, a prominent Manchester clergyman, was a close friend of De Quincey's parents. He was Thomas's tutor from 1793 to 1796; and not only did he teach him Latin on weekdays, but every Sunday Thomas attended St Anne's church, where Hall was curate, knowing that for his homework he must memorize the sermon as Hall preached it and be

¹⁰ *Confessions* . . . , ed. Lindop, 96–9.

¹¹ *Collected writings*, ed. Masson, I, 383–93.

¹² *Share transfers I*, 1806–1811.

¹³ Transcript of Thomas Quincey's will, De Quincey Collection, Manchester Central Reference Library.

able to repeat it to Hall on Monday morning, as nearly as possible in the original words. De Quincey gives a vivid and angry account of these exercises in his *Autobiographic sketches*.¹⁴

De Quincey himself disliked Hall, but so great was Thomas Quincey's confidence in him that in his will he appointed Hall one of the guardians of his children. As a result, after Thomas Quincey's death Samuel Hall became Mrs Quincey's chief adviser and partner in the difficult task of handling the affairs of the Quincey boys, and he seems in practice to have controlled the trust which held the Quincey estate until the children came of age.¹⁵ Hall actually makes an appearance in *Confessions of an English opium-eater* – though not by name. When De Quincey describes his misery at Manchester Grammar School and the circumstances which drove him to run away, he mentions that his other guardians

resigned all their authority into the hands of the fourth, and this fourth with whom I had to negotiate, was a worthy man, in his way, but haughty, obstinate, and intolerant of all opposition to his will. After a certain number of letters and personal interviews, I found I had nothing to hope for, not even a compromise of the matter, from my guardian: unconditional submission was what he demanded: and I prepared myself, therefore, for other measures.¹⁶

The guardian concerned was Samuel Hall, and it is to his obstinacy that De Quincey attributes his own decision to abscond from school.

To summarize, we can say that by personal association De Quincey's links with the Portico were strong ones. The library was conceived and founded by friends and associates of his father; the membership was evidently drawn from his father's social and intellectual circle; and De Quincey's own tutor and guardian was a founder member.

There remains the question of dating De Quincey's contact with the Portico. In principle, he could have visited at any time between January 1806, when the Portico opened, and the summer of 1821 when *Confessions* was written. There is no hard evidence to settle the question. A likely conjecture can, however, be made. It is noteworthy that De Quincey refers to the 'Porch' *not* as a library but as 'a handsome news-room'. Like his friend Coleridge, De Quincey was a great 'Library-cormorant' and rarely fails in his works to comment critically on any book-collection, large or small, which he has visited and used.¹⁷ If the Portico was indeed a library at the time

¹⁴ *Collected writings*, ed. Masson, III, 237–40.

¹⁵ See, for example, A.H. Japp (ed.), *De Quincey memorials* (London: Heinemann, 1891), I, 93, 107, where letters show Mrs Quincey attempting to persuade Hall to release money for Thomas's benefit.

¹⁶ *Confessions of an English opium-eater and other writings*, ed. Lindop, 7–8.

¹⁷ See, for example, his comments on his own library (*Confessions*, ed. Lindop, 60); on his father's (*Collected writings*, ed. Masson, I, 24–5); on Southey's (*Ibid.*, I, 337); on Thomas Poole's (*Ibid.*, I, 141); and on a private library at Oswestry (*Ibid.*, III, 340).

of his visit, we might expect him to mention the fact; but he appears to remember it only as a 'news-room'.

The Portico has indeed always been a news-room, and from the beginning subscription to a wide range of newspapers was part of its *raison d'être* (the Minutes of the Committee record that after establishing its own membership, the Committee's first act was to order twenty-two newspapers and ten other periodicals.¹⁸) There was a brief period, however, when the Portico was only a news-room and nothing more: this was during the first three quarters of 1806, when the book stock, later very substantial, had not yet been built up. A bookseller's 'tender' for the supply of books was being considered by the Committee on 14 April of that year;¹⁹ books were first ordered on 17 April,²⁰ and the 'Library' or book-room was opened – 'for the inspection only of Subscribers' – on September 1, at which time not more than two hundred works had been ordered (it is not clear how many of these had yet arrived from the bookseller).²¹ Access to the library was not an automatic right of proprietors: on October 2 the Treasurer was 'desired to make out . . . a list of such proprietors as have not yet paid their additional subscriptions' for it.²² If De Quincey visited before September 1, he would have found a news-room but not a library.

There is, moreover, reason to suppose that he would have visited Manchester in the summer of 1806, for in August of that year he came of age. The *Confessions* makes it clear that he had eagerly awaited the time when he would come into his share of his father's estate (not least because he had borrowed money against his expectations).²³ In the late summer of 1806 there would have been papers to sign and business arrangements to discuss; these matters would have fallen largely to Samuel Hall and would have been dealt with in Manchester.

We know that on 18 August 1806, three days after his twenty-first birthday, De Quincey was at Coniston in the Lake District;²⁴ but he was still a student at Oxford, and had to travel back there for the new term. It seems altogether likely that on the way either to or from Coniston he would have stopped in Manchester and visited Hall. It may well have been Hall who signed him in as a 'stranger' at the Portico; and there would no doubt have been many 'gentlemen

¹⁸ *Minutes of committee meetings I: 1806–1833*, 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

²² *Ibid.*, 32.

²³ *Confessions*, ed. Lindop, 24n.

²⁴ See his manuscript essay on 'The constituents of happiness', in Japp, *Thomas De Quincey: his life and writings*, 2nd edn (London: James Hogg, 1890), 75; Japp, however, misprints the date at the head of the essay. In the manuscript, now in the Wordsworth Library, Grasmere, this clearly reads '18 August, 1806'.

in the cotton-trade' amongst the Proprietors who would have been happy to meet the son of their late friend Thomas Quincey, and to congratulate him on his coming of age.

A small final indication is the error De Quincey makes in the library's name. 'The Portico' is a distinctive title and not, one would imagine, easy to forget; but if De Quincey were looking back to one (or a few) visits made some fifteen years before the time of writing, the error is natural enough. Our dating must remain conjectural, but the summer of 1806 seems at least a plausible guess.

Interestingly, the Portico itself lost no time in acquiring a copy of *Confessions* when (in late October 1822) it appeared in book form. At the Committee meeting of 5 December 1822 the twenty-five titles 'voted in' for the library included *Confessions of an English opium-eater*. An idea of the context may be given by transcribing a few lines from the entry:

The Life & Adventures of John Nicol A Mariner 5/6.
Confessions of an English Opium Eater.
Wordsworth's "Ecclesiastical Sketches" & Tour on the Continent. in 1820.
Bowe's's Grave of the Last Saxon.²⁵

All have later been marked 'rec^d' in the margin to indicate the arrival of the book. That first-edition copy of the *Confessions*, now a rare item, is still in the Portico. Much-borrowed in the early years, it has recently been conserved, deacidified and rebound. The book was published anonymously, and the entry in the minutes suggests that the Committee was unaware of its authorship.

There is, indeed, no indication that the Proprietors in general took a special interest in De Quincey's literary career either before or after 1822. The records of periodicals taken at the Portico are still largely uncharted territory: there has never been a cumulative listing, newspapers and magazines were not added to the permanent collection, and the Committee Minutes merely record subscriptions taken up or terminated from month to month. A cursory investigation suggests, however, that the Portico never took either Coleridge's 'periodical essay' *The Friend* (for which De Quincey actively sought subscriptions from many of his acquaintance in 1805²⁶) or the *Westmorland Gazette*, which he edited in 1818–19. Naturally the library took *Blackwood's Magazine*, for which he wrote extensively in the 1830s and '40s, but (apart from *Confessions*) it did not acquire any of the works he published in book form until, at the end of his life, it purchased the collected edition of his writings, *Selections grave and gay from writings published and unpublished* (1852–60). De Quincey may have remembered 'The Porch' long after his last visit, but it does not seem to have remembered him.

²⁵ *Minutes of committee meetings*, I, 253

²⁶ Lindop, *The opium-eater: a life of Thomas De Quincey*, 162.