

THE LETTERS OF SYDNEY SMITH

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OF all literary reputations, that of the political pamphleteer and periodical journalist is the most rarely prolonged into posterity. Of social reputations, that of the fashionable conversationalist and wit is peculiarly evanescent. Enduring fame in either is exceptionally rare, but it is Sydney Smith's achievement to be remembered both for his essays and for his talk. The combination of boisterous good humour and vigorous good sense gives his polemical essays and his *Edinburgh Review* articles an enduring value which does not depend on the passing issues which called them forth. His conversational style, with all its well-attested speed in repartee, its puns naturally used, its flights of fancy and its by no means unkindly edge, is less easy to pin down. Table-talk recorded by contemporaries often seems rather flat, probably selected by the narrator because it matched the style which society then expected of the professed wit, and certainly taking too little account of Sydney Smith's general buoyancy of manner and the speedy and continuous flow of his talk, of which the reported *mots* were only a very small part. It is perhaps in his letters that we can best see the lightness of style which endeared him to several generations of fashionable society in the early nineteenth century. With all their verve and impromptu banter, combined with the robust common sense of the best of his published writings, they preserve much of the manner, as well as something of the matter, of the talk of that most companionable of men.¹

¹ This essay is based on work towards a new edition of Sydney Smith's letters, undertaken with the generous support of the Leverhulme Trust and of the Clarendon Press. The edition will contain full acknowledgements, but I must specially mention here my gratitude to D. M. Davin, T. M. Higham and Simon Nowell-Smith for their advice and encouragement. I am also grateful to the many owners and institutions mentioned in the footnotes following for their permission to quote material in their possession.

This was fully recognized by his actual correspondents, many of whom treasured the letters they had received from him. In the summer after his death in 1845, Mrs. Sydney Smith resolved on preparing a memoir and set about collecting anecdotes and letters of her husband. Some of her correspondence has survived in family collections now at New College, Oxford, and it shows her methods. As a sample of an approach to an old friend, here is part of a letter to Lady Davy written in June 1845 :

Our old friend Mr Moore has (not unwillingly I hope) undertaken to write some little account of *one of the best of men*, whose memory ought not to perish from amongst his fellow men. Such a character, and such a tone of feeling as were his, is best illustrated by his letters written in the playfulness and honesty of his heart. I know he occasionally corresponded with you in your occasional absences from this country. Would you have the great kindness if any such letters are preserved by you to allow me to copy them? The originals will of course be carefully restored to you.¹

As we shall see, it was Sarah Austin rather than Thomas Moore who edited the letters which Mrs. Sydney's efforts had accumulated. A few of her requests were declined by those who felt that their "personal minuteness" (Arthur Kinglake of Taunton's phrase) precluded submission for publication. Lord Lyndhurst, for example, who had been persuaded reluctantly to send extracts, wrote that "to tell you the real truth I think friendly communications of this sort ought *not* to be published to the world—and as to the reason which you assign for it, our late friend's memory is too high in public estimation to require the aid of any such testimony".²

Some correspondents had reservations about particular passages in letters submitted. Lady Carlisle, writing from Castle Howard in June 1845, expressed very well the problem which constantly faces contributors to biographies of the recently dead :

I send you a few letters that I have found . . . but there were not many. I am quite certain that I never destroyed any that He wrote to me—I valued them much too highly—but it was you know only an occasional custom at great distances of time. Delightful as they are I doubt whether it would do to publish

¹ New College, Oxford, Archives [hereafter NCA], 4437.

² 19 July 1845 : NCA 4429.

them? There are many little observations, most amusing, but that would be too personal—and however harmless and innocent, I could not like any that would throw the least Ridicule on any of my Friends, such as the Berries, Lady Holland (but I am not sure that those on Her would be anything that she could object to—they are so much what he would have said to Herself), the Dunfermlines, or even lately Lord Lorne—to be made public.

I would however entirely trust all this to you my dear Mrs. Sydney—Lord Carlisle has not any objection to His note being published *excepting* the little reflexions on Wentworth House. . . . I need not add that I must have them back—they are really dear and precious to me.¹

Such personal reservations were sometimes matched by the questions raised about good taste or religious propriety in an age more circumspect than Sydney's. As Lord John Russell wrote to Sydney's daughter Saba, Lady Holland, after the *Letters* were printed, "I think the description of Rogers's dinner table as nothing but 'darkness and gnashing of teeth' tho' very witty and perhaps irresistible in conversation, broaches too much on awful doctrines to be fit for publication".

"Perhaps on other grounds", Lord John had added, "the application to Macaulay of 'book in breeches', and 'flashes of silence' is unfair to a man so amiable, and in reality unpretending as Macaulay."² Fortunately these two of his most celebrated *mots* were not sacrificed, and they appear among the miscellaneous anecdotes in the *Memoir*. Mrs. Sydney's canvassing produced a good crop of stories, most of which have found their way, in a rather charmingly artless arrangement, into the biography. Mrs. Marcet contributed several, including: "Some one on a visit to Combe Florey complaining that the atmosphere was warm, damp and enervating, and hinting that it resembled the air of a washhouse; he said 'you northern barbarians like to breathe the air raw, but we more civilized people of the south prefer it cooked'".³ (This may serve as a reminder of how so much of the original impact of a remark can be lost in the narration.)

A large file of correspondence remains to show Mrs. Sydney's

¹ [13 June 1845]: *ibid.* Lord Carlisle had written to Sydney in 1821 congratulating him on the comfort of Foston Rectory: "I have thought of my friend Fitz[william] who has erased the word Comfort out of the Wentworth Dicty., as neither He, nor anyone about him could ever comprehend its meaning".

² 26 December 1854: NCA 4437.

³ Undated: *ibid.*

energy and the eagerness of her late husband's friends to see that "one of the best of men" was adequately commemorated. Some were particularly generous. Lady Grey actually gave Mrs. Sydney most of the letters to her family, remarking that "I really do feel that the originals of *all* the letters *ought* to belong to *you* and you shall have them whenever you like", and only requesting copies in return.¹

When soliciting correspondence and reminiscences, Mrs. Sydney also sought high opinions on the advisability of publishing some of her husband's uncollected works. In 1843 Sydney had written to William Whewell about the course of lectures which he had delivered at the Royal Institution almost forty years before that "My lectures are gone to the dogs, and are utterly forgotten. . . . Still, in justice to myself, I must say there were some good things in them."² Some three years later Whewell reported favourably on the lectures to Mrs. Sydney: "They show a large acquaintance with the literature of the subject and a great deal of acute thought, besides the brightness of expression and the play of fancy which he always had at his command".³ They were published as *Elementary Sketches of Moral Philosophy* in 1850.

Macaulay felt that he had to decline an invitation to write an appreciative preface to the letters, explaining in 1849 with becoming modesty that "I own that I do not like the thought of giving what looks like a certificate or a testimonial to one who was my elder and better. . . . I am afraid that I might incur the reproach of arrogance by coming forward to pronounce an eulogy on talents acknowledged by the whole world, and on works which have taken a permanent place in the literature of my country".⁴

¹ Undated: NCA 4429. From an editor's point of view, this means that the Grey family is well represented, with the main group now in NCA, supplemented by a few non-strays in the Grey Papers at Durham, and (through inter-marriage) the transcriptions and a few originals in Lord Halifax's family papers at Garrowby. Archival reunifications like this are one of the satisfactions of re-editing.

² Nowell C. Smith (ed.), *The Letters of Sydney Smith* (Oxford, 1953), no. 915 of 8 April 1843. Where an acceptable text is available in this edition, it is cited here merely by NCS and letter-number.

³ 1 June 1846: NCA 4429.

⁴ 10 January 1849: NCA 4437.

Five years later he was thoroughly complimentary when the first, privately-circulated, edition of the *Memoir* was sent by Lady Holland for the confidential scrutiny of a number of her father's close friends: "I have already read most of the volume with great interest and with pleasure, sometimes, I am afraid, the effect of selfish vanity. Your father's opinion of me was far higher than I deserve. In one thing, however, he was unjust to me. He fancied that I did not listen to him; and I was not so tasteless and senseless as to be inattentive when he talked."¹

The second volume of the *Memoir*, containing a selection of letters, came out with the biography in 1855, over the editorial name of Mrs. Sarah Austin, the writer and wife of the legal theorist John Austin. It is clear that much of the selection and transcription was done on Mrs. Sydney Smith's initiative, and certainly on her principles. Mrs. Sydney had consulted Lady Grey in the matter. "I shall not feel comfortable", she wrote, "if I think I may have incautiously inserted one word that you would desire to have omitted", explaining that her other daughter Emily, "the discreet, judicious and sensible copyist of the letters, leaves out much that might be painful, leaves blanks where blame is imputed, or, if too plain to be sheltered, omits the sentence altogether."² These scrupulous reticences were transferred from the transcriptions to the published edition, though even at the time of publication there was some feeling that publication had been a little too discreet. "Mrs. Austin I think", Lord John Russell wrote to Saba, "has been too scrupulous in omitting names, where only praise is intended."³

Some of the innumerable minor changes introduced are interesting for the light they shed on the less obvious Victorian conventions—why, for example, did the judicious Emily Hibbert alter a reference to "piquette" to "cribbage", and why did Mrs. Austin alter it back again? Others are due to simple misunderstandings of the text. Nowell Smith detected and noted one example of editorial delicacy in a phrase which Sydney used in a letter to Francis Jeffrey in 1801: "Now what

¹ 17 November 1854: *ibid.*

² Undated: Halifax (Garrowby) papers.

³ 26 December 1854: NCA 4437.

I object to [in] Scotch philosophers in general is that they reason upon man as they would reason upon *X*—they pursue truth, without caring if it be useful truth.” The pious prudence of the editor had misled her into taking the algebraic symbol for an abbreviation of “Christ”, and printing “they reason upon man as they would upon a divinity”.¹

There are changes which are more readily understandable. In a letter of 1844 to Georgiana Harcourt, partly published by Mrs. Austin and partly by Stuart J. Reid in his *The Life and Times of Sydney Smith* (1884), there is a fine tribute to Dr. Arnold of Rugby.² “I have been reading Arnold’s Life, by Stanley”, Sydney wrote to Archbishop Harcourt’s daughter: “Arnold seems to have been a very pious, honest, learned, and original man”. So far, so good: but the manuscript, which has been rediscovered in the library of the University of California, Los Angeles, shows that Sydney wrote of “a very pious, honest, learned, and original man without five grains of common sense. He divided mankind into two parts, Dr. Arnold, and *other people*—with the former part remained all the sense, philosophy, wisdom and liberality”.

Yet for all her faults—and Mrs. Austin’s editorial modesty even led her to omit the addressee’s name on the many letters which Sydney had written to herself—the editor had some virtues. In 1804, Sydney had protested against Jeffrey’s increasingly sceptical cast of mind: “I exhort you to restrain the violent tendency of your nature for analysis, and to cultivate synthetical propensities. What’s the use of virtue? What’s the use of wealth? What’s the use of honor? What’s a guinea but a damned yellow circle? What’s a chamber-pot but an infernal hollow sphere?” (This last was of course omitted by Mrs. Austin.) And in 1807 he again urged Jeffrey to philosophical modesty, parodying his destructive attitude as “Damn the solar system! bad light—planets too distant—pestered with comets—feeble contrivance;—could make a better with great ease.”³ Now in 1854 Mrs. Austin, finding herself in a quandary, took counsel of William Whewell:

¹ [June 1801]: NCS 58 and n.

² [July 1844]: NCS 995-6.

³ [April-May 1804] and 25 February 1807: NCS 91 and 113.

Now I have a case of conscience for you. Lord Lyttelton has detected in Sydney's 'Letters' 'two oaths', or, to speak more accurately (for there is no juration in the case), two d—ns, pp. 6 and 16. You see, Sydney is mimicking Jeffrey, and most unquestionably Jeffrey did season his discourse with that sort of condiment. I am no admirer of it, but I must say that to strike out those two innocent little 'd—ns' seems to me absurd. Lady Holland, who is anxious to make dear old Sydney as decorous as possible, suggests 'Hang the solar system.' Is that an improvement? It is *not* what Jeffrey would have said—that is certain. If you think it better to make the alteration I will make it, but not for Lord Lyttelton. . . . Surely on these terms we had better let Sydney alone. He was a great and good man, and what he revered he revered sincerely, and acted upon faithfully, but these things formed no part of his code.¹

It would be easy to multiply examples of these editorial changes. Victorian textual shortcomings in general are now very well known, but it is only rarely that they are so well documented. Fortunately, so many of the manuscript letters used by Saba, Lady Holland and Mrs. Austin have survived intact that their successors are spared much of the detailed investigation of editorial peccadilloes which many unconfirmed corrupt texts would have involved. The *Memoir and Letters* received instant acclaim as (to use Whewell's words in a letter to Mrs. Austin) "the picture of such a noble, upright, cheery, vigorous character [that] it cannot but do men good to look at".² It is the principal repository of fact and anecdote about Sydney Smith and soon became accepted as such; and the large accumulation of original letters from which it had been compiled rested in the hands of his descendants, awaiting the day when a more thorough generation would seek them out for republication.

The task was taken up by Nowell Charles Smith, sometime Fellow of New College, Oxford, and later a Winchester house-master and headmaster of Sherborne School, who had been asked to write a short life of Sydney Smith in 1928. A short spell of work on the *Memoir and Letters* showed him its inadequacies, and after some preliminary research he abandoned the proposed biography in favour of a completely new edition of the letters. He was soon able to add to the published texts more than as much again of unpublished material. Some came

¹ 22 March 1854: Janet Ross, *Three Generations of English Women* (1893), 298.

² 20 October 1855: *ibid.* 317.

from the Holland House papers then owned by Lord Ilchester ; Lord St. Aldwyn allowed him access to the Hicks-Beach family papers, which provided much important new information about Sydney's early days in Edinburgh as their private tutor. Most importantly, the then Lord Knutsford (a descendant of Saba's husband Sir Henry Holland and of Emily Hibbert) gave him free run of his family collection, containing well over four hundred letters, which was later presented to New College, Oxford, of which Sydney Smith had himself been a Fellow. Thus Nowell Smith had at hand material aplenty to expand the 1855 *Letters*, and in 1953, twenty-five years after the work had first engaged his enthusiasm and ingenuity, when he was an old man retired from an active career in educational administration, the Clarendon Press published the 1038 numbered texts he had assembled in his edition of *The Letters of Sydney Smith* in two large volumes. This was followed—an admirable example which few other editors of correspondence have chosen to repeat—with an excellent, well-shaped selection in the World's Classics series.

Smith brought to the editing an enviable knowledge and an assured taste, which many years before had led Professor Walter Raleigh to lament his leaving Oxford for Winchester. "High-priests abound : but we want competent engineers", Raleigh had remarked of his Oxford English school, writing of Smith's work on Sir Philip Sidney that he "does his job careful and first-rate".¹ Nowell Smith was a general practitioner in literary scholarship before specialization became normal, and he did his Sydney Smith work rather well ; it is a pity that he was not able to complete the task earlier in life, but his edition leaves us with much to be grateful for. Although much of what I will have to report may seem to indict him as a scholar, there is a great deal to praise in his work. Errors of commission seem insignificant when compared with the Augean stable of, say, the Centenary Edition of *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott* (1932-8) ; and, as for the errors of omission, it must be remembered that he worked at a time when the techniques of a general survey of locations and notions of comprehensive publication were still

¹ W. A. Raleigh to C. H. Firth, 24 July 1905 : Lady Raleigh (ed.), *The Letters of Sir Walter Raleigh* (1926), 280.

being developed. In a notable review of the *Letters* which is a masterpiece of gently constructive dispraise, John Butt pointed out "the extravagance of modern demands upon an editor", and drew attention to numerous omissions which were drawn mainly from printed sources.¹

I had come across a number of *addenda* in the course of my work as an archivist, and the prospect of further discoveries led me to hope that a slim supplementary volume might be produced. With the encouragement of the Clarendon Press and later with a Leverhulme research grant, I was enabled, in my spare time and during a three-month spell of leave from the National Library of Scotland in 1972, to make a systematic search of private and institutional holdings. It soon became clear that my predecessor (so I could now regard him, having taken up the tacit challenge set by Butt's review) had been far from enterprising in his search. I suspect that the richness of the Knutsford deposit in New College Library rather deterred than encouraged further search; with so much conveniently-assembled new material, he could afford to be less energetic in his field-work than a modern editor would dare to be. The search for additional material had therefore to be made almost entirely over new ground. Even the British Museum and the Bodleian had to be examined for the first time, and the main British institutional collections soon provided me with enough new information to encourage further research. The United States also fully repaid investigation, and several British privately-held archives and American bibliophilic collections have generously been made open to me.² Printed sources, beginning with those mentioned in Butt's review, have offered many further letters or clues to the existence of others. Material came in too rapidly at first for the implications of its bulk to be properly appreciated: by the time preliminary transcription and filing was completed,

¹ *Review of English Studies*, n.s., v (1954), 314-7.

² Amongst the British material is a large batch from Castle Howard, which I owe to Mr. George Howard's generosity. Nowell Smith had presumably been deterred by the preface to G. W. E. Russell's "English Men of Letters" *Sydney Smith* (1905) in which he reports that Lord Carlisle had then told him "that everything worth publishing has already been published". Such assurances are dangerous and must always be investigated as far as is politely possible.

I realized with no little apprehension that the new letters, or those offering changes in Nowell Smith's text which could not be accommodated in the margins, nearly doubled the number of letters available. The editorial progression since 1855 was geometrical, not arithmetical. Instead of (roughly) a thousand texts, one must now contemplate (roughly) two thousand. The slim supplementary volume which had been innocently thought of as the result of these investigations was clearly out of the question.

Moreover, the search for new texts had revealed a large crop of minor errors in those already published: varying practices of presentation, inadequate (or at least patchy) annotation, inconsistencies in apparatus, an unsatisfactory index. It would not be fair to the patience of the reader or the achievement of my predecessor to labour these points here (and a day of checking one's own work is a sure remedy against any conceit); nor, in view of the preponderance of manuscript authorities still available, is it necessary to do so. But from quite an early stage in my work it was clear that a merely supplementary volume would not be suitable, and that the *whole* collection would have to be re-edited. With these considerations in mind, the Delegates of the Oxford University Press—not without some preliminary misgivings—accepted my proposal for a new edition, probably in four volumes. Work on this is going ahead steadily, but it will be preceded by a new biography of Sydney Smith, drawing heavily on the new materials, which will probably be published in Spring 1978.

Editorial and biographical work on this scale could not possibly be justified if the quality of the newly discovered documents, both as biographical and as literary material, did not match its quantity. I am fully convinced that the "new" letters, from which the illustrations in the following commentary are largely drawn, justify the effort of preparing and publishing them. There is more than enough to provide new themes, and to emphasize those already known, for the appreciation of Sydney Smith as a literary, political and ecclesiastical figure, and as a private personality of very great interest. And for a hard-pressed editor, Sydney Smith has the major advantage of being a consistently enjoyable subject to work on.

The earliest of the newly-discovered letters (falling in date within the first two or three of those already published) sets the mood and tone for much of what is to follow. "You was so obliging as to say you would put on the Linen Ephod, and minister in the temple for one Sunday," Sydney wrote during his curacy on Salisbury Plain, asking a neighbouring clergyman to change the date and place of a substituted duty, "... therefore tell me fairly, whether this exertion will be too much for you, and how far your vocal, theological, equitating, and all other powers which such an undertaking would call into action are sufficiently strong to carry you thro'. To me it will certainly be an accomodation, and a considerable one, but I shall think such accomodation dearly purchased if it puts you to any great inconvenience".¹ Here one can already see the general lightness of touch, even when dealing with ecclesiastical matters, the beginnings of a characteristic piling up of adjectives, and a pleasantly complimentary request—features all so characteristic of his shorter letters that they make even relatively slight items pleasant both to edit and to read.

Other early letters display an attempt at more sustained humour, showing his developing capacity for cumulative burlesque which was to be so useful to him as a reviewer and controversialist. In 1798, while his style was still developing in the direction which was to give his periodical contributions their permanent appeal, he wrote to his friend J. G. Clarke of Swakeleys about his impressions of Edinburgh :

I like this place extremely and cannot help thinking that for a literary man, by which term I mean a man who is fond of Letters, it is the most eligible situation in the Island. It unites good Libraries, liberally managed, learned men without any other system than that of pursuing truth—very good general society—large healthy virgins, with mild pleasing countenances, and white swelling breasts—shores washed by the sea—the romantic grandeur of antient, and the beautiful regularity of modern buildings—and boundless floods of Oxygene.

Some little defects it has to be sure, but they are all frivolous and ludicrous—one is as you must have observed a total want of all faecal propriety and excremental delicacy. . . . Our situation is a little improved since I saw you, and I now begin to think I shall pass the latter part of my life in pious orgies and decent

¹ Addressee unknown, 10 December 1794: MS. Gordon N. Ray. Minor adjustments of spelling and punctuation have been made in quoting letters; detailed textual evidence will be presented in the new edition.

prayers as I originally intended, rather than in the rubbing down of horses and in the accumulation of petty profits by the sale of Gingerbread and roast apples or other revolutionary employments.¹

Unfortunately there are only five in this group of high-spirited early letters. "How can you my good friend misname the sober communications of a priest, the ravings of a Bacchanal?" he opened a letter to Clarke in the following year, which announced his forthcoming marriage. It continues with a piece of percipient self-mockery :

I shall do very well in the world I dare say—but if I had half as much apparent and exterior, as I have of real and intrinsic prudence, I should do much better. This is very vain—but if you will not admit it to be true, you will I am sure have the politeness to allow I am deficient in both. Happy is the man who possesses the appearances of good qualities rather than their essences—by old women shall he be praised and muffins and hyson shall be his lot.

I attend the hospitals where I learn the elements of a puke and the rudiments of purging—the viscera rustica will pay for this when I am settled in my parish.²

This prediction of skill in unconventional but effective medical work was to come true many years later when he eventually acquired parishes in Yorkshire and Somerset.

The robust and sometimes even coarse banter of these and other early letters from Edinburgh was continued after Sydney returned to London, whence reports of metropolitan life were regularly sent to friends in Edinburgh, and sometimes to Sir James Mackintosh, lately gone to a legal appointment in India—as in the autumn of 1804 :

May I never be a prebend if ever I spend the month of September again in this horrible city—such detestable unpoetical noises, such red hot stinks—I would rather quit London altogether. However all this is nothing to the purpose which is to say I hope you are all well, and that you are happy at Bombay. I strongly recommend you to take bribes—not small ones, but those of the upper class, calculated to promote your return. You will be punished in another world for it—but you will be highly respected in this if you employ your wealth in expensive equipage, and savory repasts.³

Then at the end of the year Sydney wrote again to Mackintosh outlining the course of lectures he was to give at the Royal

¹ 5 December 1798 : MS. British Library, Add. 38650, fols. 93-94. See also G. C. Heseltine, "Five Letters of Sydney Smith", *London Mercury*, xxi (1930), 512-7.

² 27 October 1799 : *ibid.* fols. 99-100.

³ [September 1804] : MS. National Library of Scotland 5319, fols. 193-4.

Institution, adding: "Let prayers be put up for me not only in Christian Churches at Bombay—but in all the temples by all the Brarmins to the Persian Gulf Westward and as far North as Delhi—and let the God Chrishnon be appeased with a foreign virgin. Why not Miss Daubigny?"¹

Sydney's elementary philosophical lectures soon established him as a well-known literary and social personality in London, but his growing private reputation as a wit owed much to his having the entrée at Holland House, in whose Whig salon and amongst whose very stimulating habitués his talents rapidly developed. Many of the additional letters refer to the Holland House circle and emphasize its importance in his life. It is interesting to note that the new edition will be able to promote from a footnote to the main text, and with reference to the original in the Holland House papers, Sydney's letter introducing to Lord and Lady Holland his Edinburgh friend John Allen. As travelling physician, librarian, resident conversationalist and confidential companion to his patrons over many years, Allen was to be a major personality in the household. "You will speedily perceive," Sydney wrote in terms calculated to ensure his friend's rapid acceptance, "that my friend Mr Allen (who has passed his Life in this monastery of Infidels) has not acquired that species of politeness which consists in attitudes and flexibilities, but he is civil, unaffected and good natured. What to compare his french to, I know not—I never heard a sound so dreadful".²

By no means all Sydney's newly-discovered early letters are happy or contented in tone. Biographically speaking, the most important result of the recent reinvestigation has been the discovery and assessment of Sydney's surviving correspondence with his father. Most of this family correspondence, after a few strays had found their way on to the market, was sold at auction (Sotheby, 20 February 1967, lots 191-3), whence Sydney's letters to his father and sister have found their way to the Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California, and those to his nephew Cecil Smith to the library of New College, Oxford.

¹ 1 December 1804: MS. *ibid.* Adv. 36.1.7B., fols. 1-2.

² [June 1802]: MS. B.L., Add. 51645. See also NCS, p. 70 n.

A further group, apparently the parent archive of these Sydney Smith items, containing (with other documents) letters between Sydney's father and his brothers in India, has found a home in the India Office Library. The three groups, when considered together, provide a mass of new biographical detail.

Sydney's father has long been one of the most elusive figures in his son's biography, and the new material at last enables us to fill the gap with some knowledge, disagreeable though it is, of this financially grasping and personally meddlesome old man who was to treat his four sons and his daughter with meanness and irascibility all his life, and to treat Sydney—his poorest and most accessible son—worst of all. The surviving correspondence was necessarily intermittent and only one side has survived, but a few jottings and endorsements remain to give some impression of the father's aggressive and officious manner to his children, which is the most startling aspect of his papers. It is understandable that Sydney in particular must have been an exasperating son, but the correspondence shows that he received ample provocation from his father. Although the letters are superficially concerned with finance, they reveal a sustained personal conflict, exacerbated perhaps by the son's calculated moderation and forgiving good humour. They also show a sharpness which occurs disagreeably in some of Sydney's early responses to real or imagined slights. This trait, which can be seen in a dispute with the Hicks Beaches over the tutorship, or in an unnecessarily prolonged literary argument with Lord Carlisle,¹ is quite different from the wholesome literary passion against injustice and intolerance which informs his published writings, and it may in some way have been inherited from his infinitely provoking father.

The earliest letters are clearly written against a background of long-standing strife, and dissension grew to a point at which Sydney had to plead distressingly to be allowed to visit his parents before leaving for his tutorship in Edinburgh, adding that:

I hope the conversation upon suicide which passed between us had produced no other unpleasant sensation in your mind than the want of respect to you, of

¹ See Alan Bell, *Sydney Smith, Rector of Foston 1806-1829* (York, 1972), 28-29.

which I am sorry to say you have a right to accuse me. You know the world too well to believe that a bookish man like me governs his conduct by the metaphysical nonsense which he petulantly or pedantically advances in company. . . . To these new sentiments of the fair and rational obedience which a Son owes to his Father, I will not insult your understanding by adding any real or apparent servility. You want a respectful manner, and where acquiescence is not possible, a silence upon certain subjects. To be sulky is the pitiful resource of a man who dares not be imperious and overbearing, and who is too ill tempered and indolent to be respectful and polite.¹

Later, in a long letter which is dated merely " 1798 " but was obviously written towards the end of the year, Sydney wrote giving a piece of news which was bound to have caused great agitation, however disarmingly it was phrased :

. . . I have long wished to marry and think that state of life to be almost the only happiness that is worth looking forward to. I know but one woman who unites fortune, understanding and good disposition in a degree that makes an alliance desirable with her, and who at the same time is not in a situation of life that puts her out of my reach. Under this impression I engaged myself to Miss Pybus while I was in town and just at the time I was leaving it. Some letters have passed between us since to settle more fully a subject which we had settled very imperfectly before. We have nothing more to settle and, in consequence, I communicate to you our intentions.

The first sensation that will arise in your mind upon reading this (and it is the first which has suggested itself to me) is, why my intentions were not communicated to you, before they were carried into execution. But you, my dear father, must know how these things are carried on. Nobody sets out with a systematic intention of making himself fond of any woman—but he thinks himself quite free at first, but assiduity is added to assiduity, and kindness heaped upon kindness on both sides, till affection which has gathered by slow and unperceived degrees is at last so great that all option is taken away, and all consultation and advice is a mockery. At the proper time of asking it, nobody means to marry ; at the usual time of asking it, nobody means to follow advice, unless it agrees with his previous determination. I hope therefore you will attribute my conduct in this respect to the ordinary tenor and impulse of men's actions and thoughts, and not to any want of respect and affection. It would be more pleasing and flattering to you and my mother if I had united myself as my brother has done to a family of distinction, but when I look to my pretensions I really think I had done as well as I had any reason to expect ; and when I look to my heart, I am quite content.

I know you think Miss Pybus's person very disagreeable, but this consideration is so entirely confined to opinion, and the evil (if it exists) is so exclusively my own, that I am sure you will not give me unprovoked pain by commenting on the subject.

¹ 25 November 1797 : MS. Henry E. Huntington Library, HM 30415.

Sydney had written with extraordinary deliberation, "taking care not to sacrifice to brevity that respect and regard which I feel for you and owe to you".¹ He ventured to mention the possibility of some paternal financial assistance, but the reaction to this, and the tone of Robert Smith's reception of the news, was summarized in Mrs. Sydney's later report: "Not one penny. If you had remained unmarried your fellowship would have been your provision by giving you a living."²

Robert Smith was deeply offended at not being made a trustee of the marriage settlement, and was also dissatisfied with some of the financial arrangements Sydney had made with the parents of his tutorial pupils. He remained interested in Sydney's career, hoping that in taking a son of Lord Bolton as an extra pupil he might be putting himself in the way of ecclesiastical patronage. Sydney disabused his father in characteristic style:

Every parson and every relation of the said parson imagine that the moment he is connected with a Lord, that he has nothing to do but to study Tythe law, to amuse himself in planning Barns of different Constructions, and to order a Buggy of the very best sacerdotal shape. As for me, I confess my ideas are rather lower and more practical—a few dinners, my salary well payed, the power of applying for a frank, a bow in the public streets, and a good deal of commendation behind my back—these are the limits of my expectations, and the probable limits of my good fortune.³

Even Sydney's mother's death failed to produce any reconciliation with his father. In fact the reverse occurred, as Robert Smith's reaction to a well-meant invitation to Scotland after his bereavement may be judged from Sydney's reply:

I have received an answer to my invitation in which you call me Rascal, Villain, Fool, Scoundrel, Pedant, etc. All these opprobrious Epithets, as well as your animadversions upon my wife, I *do* now as I have often *done* before very sincerely forgive. Any condemnation of my conduct by you founded upon facts—and expressed with moderation, and dignity—I should very seriously regret. But after an experience of fifteen years, this very energetic Language produces no other effect upon me than to make me regret the unhappy state of mind which must have given birth to it.⁴

¹ [1798]: MS. *ibid.* HM 30420.

² Catharine Amelia Smith, "Narrative for my Grandchildren": MS. D. C. L. Holland.

³ 25 October [1801]: NCA 4432.

⁴ 24 November 1801: MS. Huntington, HM 30429.

Sydney's brother Cecil (1772-1814), an Indian administrator, provided plenty of trouble at home by endeavouring to secure a divorce from his wife and by getting into trouble with the Company for some financial maladministration. Both matters set Sydney, as his brother's delegated agent in London, further at odds with his father. At one time their relations deteriorated to such a state that Sydney, who had at various times attempted forgiveness (no doubt to the particular annoyance of a cantankerous recipient), found himself writing in a way which has the true ring of his most effective polemical style: "If I find that this correspondence cannot be carried on with more temper and good manners, I must also beg leave to avoid that as well as our meeting. I have no longer anything to hope for from you, or anything to fear. You have long treated me as an outcast, and a stranger, merely because I am poor, and therefore I must at least request that civility to which every stranger is entitled."¹

There were temporary rapprochements, but Cecil's Indian problems had been added to the marriage settlement and Sydney's professional prospects in the repertory of parental complaint. Difficulties were usually resolved in a way which Sydney had reported to Francis Jeffrey in 1805: "I am at last reconciled to my father. He was very ill, much out of spirits and tired to death with the quarrel the moment he discovered I ceased to care a halfpenny about it. I made him a slight apology—just sufficient to save his pride—and have as in duty bound exposed myself for these next seven or eight years to all that tyranny, trouble and folly with which I have no manner of doubt at the same age I shall harrass my children."²

Regular truces merged into a steady but never cordial peace, for which few letters survive. Sydney's father died in 1827 at the age of 88, providing well but not overgenerously for him in his will. Later, a long correspondence beginning at the time of his father's illness, and ripening into intimacy when they became neighbouring clergymen in Somerset in the 1830s, grew up between Sydney and his nephew Cecil—a son of the Indian Cecil, who had been brought up by his grandfather.

¹ [Late 1804]: MS. *ibid.* HM 30435.

² April 1805: NCS 98.

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This does much to offset the unpleasant impression produced by the earlier letters, just as the very opportune reward of a large inheritance from another brother, Courtenay (1773-1843), who died intestate, provided some compensation very late in Sydney's life for the family's financial neglect of some forty years previously.

It is refreshing to be able to turn from the records of Sydney's conflict with his father to some new documents on his early literary career. The discovery of a very important letter giving new information on the founding of the *Edinburgh Review* was a valuable stimulus to my research, and the place (the Wedgwood Museum, Barlaston, whence it has since been transferred to the University Library at Keele) was a timely reminder that the less obvious places may often be the most rewarding. In January 1802 Sydney Smith wrote to his friend Sir James Mackintosh in London :

Allen, Thomson, Horner, Murray, Jeffrey, Hamilton and myself intend to undertake a review. The two first confine themselves to chemical and medical subjects. Hamilton is strong in oriental languages, and has already reviewed a good deal in the *Asiatic Register*. Jeffrey is an extremely clever little man who will write *de omni scibili*. Brown will assist. I mean if possible to persuade Maltby to give us some classical articles, and we shall have aid from many other literary men more obscure than they deserve to be. . . .

The rocks and shoals to be avoided are religion, politics, excessive severity and irritable Scotchmen. If nothing else, the common sense of every man concerned will of course teach him the necessity of the utmost decency upon the first two points, in the third point I do not think we shall offend over much, and in the last the danger of a broken head will make us wise.

Sydney sought Mackintosh's opinion on the proposed form of the publication and about its prospects in London, hoping also to enlist the support of his friend's Whig dining club, of which he himself was soon to become a prominent member :

I have less scruple in troubling you, because I have observed you are very demotic to poor authors, and that you often make use of your eminence to give others a helping hand. If any of the members of the King of Clubs have a mind to barbecue a poet or two, or strangle a metaphysician, or do any other act of cruelty to the dull men of the earth, we are in hopes they will make our journal the receptacle of their exploits. We shall make it a point of honour neither to mutilate contributions, nor to reveal the names of contributors.

We are rather sanguine as to the success of the scheme—indeed so much so that we talk of hiring a critics' room in the old town at fifty shillings per annum—

tho' to this the most prudent part of the confederates object as a rash anticipation of ideal funds and imaginary prosperity.

Whatever good may result from the scheme, or whatever evil it will at least have the effect of imparting some degree of animation to this metaphysical monastery. . . .¹

That is but part of a letter of great significance in the history of British periodical journalism, which also displays Sydney at his best as a correspondent, indulging some of his favourite themes (such as a perpetual but never boringly unvaried teasing of his Scotch philosopher friends) at just enough epistolary length to give free play to his humorous inventiveness. His letters contain much new or supplementary information about his work for the *Edinburgh Review* throughout his long connection with the journal he had projected. Thus in 1823 he sent a bill for £129.5s.6d. to "Francis Jeffrey Esq. Debtor to the Rev S. Smith Clerk" itemized thus :

To an attack upon a Bishop in No 74—said Bishop being a Bigot and a Tyrant and for making said Bishop ridiculous and so improving him.

To another article in said No showing John Thompson to be a clever [seal] chicken pox, and small pox disease.

To a review in No 75 shewing Grey Bennet's accusations to be just, and Governor Mcquarrie to be a bad Governor of Botany Bay.

"All executed", the invoice ends, "in the best manner—good language, witty and clear of Scotticisms, and very provoking according to order."²

There is, of course, a great deal in the additional letters about Sydney's literary friendships, but they tend on the whole to offer confirmatory detail attractively stated, rather than striking new facts. Here is a single example, a report of the Edgeworth family as seen in Edinburgh in 1803 (Maria was exceedingly small, but not malformed in body) :

The Edgeworths are here, so that you see we are strong in Education people. The family now in Edinburgh consist of a Father, a Mother, and two daughters, the eldest of which daughters writes the treatise on Education jointly with her father. The father is 60, a man of the world and a great rattle—his conversation however is very good and full of information ; the mother is very agreeable and

¹ 13 January 1802. See Alan Bell, "An Unpublished Letter on the *Edinburgh Review*", *Times Lit. Supp.*, 9 April 1970, 388.

² [7 April 1823] : MS. N.L.S. Adv. 2.1.15, fols. 75-76. This confirms the *Wellesley Index* entries 1005, 1000 and 1012 respectively.

unaffected; the younger daughter very handsome and very engaging; the eldest extremely deformed—diminutive almost to invisibility, and with a manner which scarcely does justice to those talents and good qualities which she is said to possess. They are barely passing through so that my means of judging are hardly ample enough to enable me to speak so decidedly.¹

In a lifetime which was to embrace friendships with the generation of Scott and Tom Moore and that of Dickens and Monckton Milnes, and which was also notable for the number of prominent Americans (such as Edward Everett and George Ticknor) whom he knew not just as a lion but as a friend, the new letters add countless details to document Sydney's friendships.

Much has come to light, too, relating to Sydney's long years in rural Yorkshire, where he was rector of Foston-le-Clay from 1806 to 1829, and I have already used some of the papers in a monograph showing what an energetic and devoted rural pastor he became, and also displaying the interest of his correspondence with the Carlisle family at Castle Howard and with Archdeacon Francis Wrangham of Hunmanby, the scholar and bibliophile.² Single letters and small groups help to build up a picture of active parochial work which may come as a surprise to those who know of Sydney Smith mainly as a metropolitan wit, and there is at least one important new group—the privately-owned letters to Richard York of Wighill Park, Tadcaster—which is in the first rank of Sydney's letters, even though it deals mainly with provincial affairs and with county friendships. In one of the earliest letters of the series, Sydney promises that after his son had gone away to school, "one use of my leisure will be to hold a great session in the Moor of Manger and Parler, or general Larder delivery—so look to your corner dishes"; there are frequent gastronomic references throughout the remaining letters, which continue into the 1840s.³ Thus, shortly after he moved to Somerset he reported to Richard York that "Our neighbours here are in the common line, Port and Sherry for dinner, hail, rain and snow for conversation, but

¹ To Mrs. Hicks Beach, 1 April 1803: MS. (transcript) Gordon N. Ray.

² See Alan Bell, *Sydney Smith, Rector of Foston*, 25-32.

³ 9 October 1817: MS. Major Christopher York. I am grateful to Mr. W. J. Connor for telling me of these letters. See also Alan Bell, "'I have dined today': Sydney Smith at Table", *Cornhill Magazine* (Spring 1973), 411-26.

the best people in any place come slowly to light and lye, like Maccaroon Cakes at the bottom of an Italian cream, last and best.”¹ There were reports, too, of common friends in Yorkshire :

The Fairfaces of Gilling have been here (Fairfaces is the plural of Fairfax). What a mad and absurd Match Harriet is about to make. She is going to espouse Mr Frederick Worsley a gentleman who is in possession of a clear income of 100 per annum—the Lady having an income equally clear of the same amount—and upon this they set down to farm, and to procreate. A young Lady who has lived upon Cream and Sugar, been wrapt up in Cotton—who has taken Lessons of Singing from Squallini, and been taught the Italian Language by Conjugatelli—wholly ignorant of those distinctions which Nature has made between Turneps and Carrots, and believing perhaps in the slenderness of her agricultural acquirements that the Ram suckles the young ones, and the Ewe begets them. Alas. Alas.²

The sporting comments which Sydney addressed to his hunting friend may seem unusual from him until one reads in an invitation to Combe Florey that “ We will get some butchers’ dogs, and will turn out a Curate. I will answer for the Scent. But what are we to do for a Brush? ”³

Late in life Sydney wrote to his Wighill friends during his busy social life in London :

I dine out eight or nine times every week. If people will talk across the table it is agreeable but I hate whispering to the Lady next to me. When I have asked her whether she has lately been to the Opera, I am knocked up entirely and don’t know what else to say—and I know she hates me for being a large fat Parson and for not [being] slim and elegant. One of the greatest evils of old age is the advance of the Stomach over the rest of the body. It looks like the accumulation of thousands of Dinners and Luncheons. It looks like a pregnant Woman in a Cloth Waistcoat and as if I were near my time and might reasonably look for twins.⁴

The advancing paunch was all too true in 1840, but the declining conversational powers were fortunately less so. The manner of describing them both is in Sydney’s best vein of amused self-analysis—and characteristic of a man who could urge his friend York to continue the good habit of giving dinners. “ Any falling

¹ 18 December [1829] : MS. Major York.

² 7 February 1834 : MS. *ibid.*

³ 15 December 1835 : MS. *ibid.*

⁴ 9 April [1840] : MS. *ibid.*

off in this particular", he wrote in 1834, "would I am afraid impair our friendship :

Talk not of those who in the Senate shine
Give me the man with whom the Jovial dine
And break the lingering day with Wit and Wine."¹

Another north-country correspondent of Sydney's Yorkshire period was Edward Davies Davenport of Capesthorne. Most of Sydney's letters to him were reprinted by Nowell Smith from Mrs. Austin or from Stuart J. Reid's biography; soon after republication, Nowell Smith learnt of the survival of the originals in the John Rylands (University) Library and annotated his own copy of the edition accordingly. In addition to family and personal gossip, several of the letters discuss an article (later rejected by Jeffrey, who considered it a "ticklish subject") which Davenport proposed to write on Peterloo. Amongst the details which Sydney discussed, some were too coarse to have been printed by Mrs. Austin :

Could you not procure some facts respecting the state of the late incumbent of Rochdale at the massacre of Peterloo? Was Hay aware of the Diarrhea at the moment he determined the meeting to be illegal, and ordered the Cavalry to advance? Was he in correspondence with Apothecary of Rochdale on the one side—and the Secretary of State on the other? Such circumstances as these throw great light on History—and it is your duty to investigate them.²

Another passage omitted from Nowell Smith's No. 382 had also been cut out by his predecessors from considerations of delicacy, but it shows Sydney in typical form, jesting (once again) about Scotch philosophers :

The Itch is severe this year in Edinburgh. The Lord Provost and Town Council were all in Sulphur, and the Professors in the University just sloughing their Scarf Skin. The Scratching Posts in the New College are all of Marble and beautiful, with Tablets below to the God Scabies.³

As a final example from the Davenport correspondence, it may be noted that the first paragraph of a letter of 10 February 1821 was too robustly expressed by Sydney for his widow's and daughters' taste; it was accordingly omitted by Mrs. Austin

¹ 11 April 1834 : MS. *ibid.*

² 29 January 1820 : MS. John Rylands University Library, Bromley Davenport Muniments, Correspondence 5, iv.

³ 13 December 1820 : MS. *ibid.*

and the mutilated letter appears as Nowell Smith No. 389. However, Stuart J. Reid, who had access to the original later in the century, felt that there was much of interest in the omitted passage in which Sydney refuses to rewrite Davenport's article, and printed it (as "to a young gentleman of fortune"); Nowell Smith reprinted it (No. 391) from Reid, but suspected tampering. Reference to the Rylands original shows that the text will have to be revised from a conflation of 389 and 391, with additions to repair Reid's omissions. Sydney wrote that to have corrected an illegible manuscript he would have needed "intervals of white paper for interlineation as broad as gravel walks *leading to Necessaries* in the Garden", and that Davenport's essay was too long, "much too long for any subject *not connected with adultery*".¹ Such excisions are quite understandable in Victorian editors, but the habitual broadness of expression which restorative investigations have revealed is not unimportant in assessing the author's character; the expressions are varied and, taken in context, not disagreeable. They add to the unexpected and fluent humour and the impromptu effects that give his letters their freshness and charm.

Much of Sydney's literary effort in the 1830s was devoted to the defence of cathedral foundations against the possible deprivations which (particularly as a Canon of St. Paul's) he feared would be carried out by the bishops and the newly-formed Ecclesiastical Commission. Sydney's contribution to the published debate, which is to be found in his *Letters to Archdeacon Singleton* and his letters to the newspapers, is backed by a less formal private correspondence in which his perpetual amusement with, as well as his indignation at, the episcopal bench always shows through. Thus, in November 1835 he reported to Lady Carlisle that "The Archbishop of York is coming to Town for the Church Commission, and as his family is not here he is to stay at the AB of Canterbury's. . . . What a pleasing reflection is that of the Archbishops dwelling together, what an accumulation

¹ 10 February 1821: MS. *ibid.* Note also that the unpublished second half of Sydney's letter to J. A. Murray, 24 January 1831, part printed as NCS 572 from NCA 4431, is also in the John Rylands University Library (English MS. 700/87).

of power, what a luxury of sanctity, the Right Revd Pelion on the Right Revd Ossa—Gog and Magog. What an Halo of Holiness must surmount them ”.¹

He had the advantage in his dealings with statesmen of a longstanding intimacy which gives the additional letters on public controversies a refreshing touch of informality. For example, in one of the many “new” letters to Lord John Russell (some of which have been scattered far beyond the Russell papers in the Public Record Office), he writes of the possible confusion between his defence of some existing arrangements in church administration and a general belief in all similar abuses :

I must correct a mistake into which you have fallen my dear John respecting me—I am not a lover of abuses, and have no passion for them. I entirely agree with all this administration have done, and all that I believe they intend to do. I am a sincere friend to the Reform of the English, and to the circumspection of the Irish Protestant Church, and I have said so at public meetings and in print three or four times. What you mistake for a love of abuses is 1st a Love of talking Nonsense and Joking upon all Subjects. 2ndly a much greater apprehension of political changes than you seem to entertain—a conviction that the best understandings often cannot see the consequences of measures, that the game though it must be played is full of great difficulty and danger. You must not forget of me that I began attacking abuses between 30 and 40 years ago when it was safer almost to be a felon than a reformer—and you must not mistake my afternoon nonsense for my serious, and morning opinions.²

And a year later he was able to write to Russell with the same easy familiarity :

You say you are not convinced by my pamphlet. I am afraid that I am a very arrogant person. But I do assure you that, in the fondest moments of self-conceit, the idea of convincing a Russell that he was wrong never came across my mind. Euclid (dear John) would have had a bad chance with you if you had happened to have formed an opinion that the interior angles of a triangle were not equal to two right angles. . . . I will fight you to the last drop of my ink ; dine with you to the last drop of your claret ; and entertain for you, *bibendo et scribendo*, sincere affection and respect.³

With the episcopate, too, he was able to preserve a tone which is far removed from the rancorousness of so much contemporary

¹ 4 November 1835 : MS. Castle Howard.

² 24 November 1835 : MS. University of California, Los Angeles.

³ 10 February 1837 : Spencer Walpole, *The Life of Lord John Russell* (1899), i. 288 n.

ecclesiastical controversy. Without yielding an inch in the voluminous correspondence which backed up his published letters to the Bishop of London, he was able to follow a long piece of ecclesiastical and legal reasoning addressed to Blomfield with the following :

I think you have made other mistakes, but of these hereafter. But why discuss these things so angrily? I have attacked my Whigg friends as stoutly as I have done the Bishops. I dined with Lord John yesterday, and refused for a prior engagement to dine with Lord Melbourne on Saturday ; all this is good natured, as it ought to be. In a month hence, when Cathedrals are totally ruined, and the Church of England put an end to, you and I may surely walk over the ruins with perfect good humor as Wood and Dawkins contemplated the ruins of Palmyra—and when we all meet, the Archbishop, the Bishop of London, and Myself as Emigrants on the banks of the Susquehannah, or the little Wabash, we shall I hope have a good laugh over our European Bickerings.¹

To his polemical but interested anxiety for the safeguarding of cathedral endowments was added a remarkably active concern for the day-to-day administration of St. Paul's Cathedral, which is discussed in several of his later letters. His practical views sometimes differed from those of his colleagues, as when he replied to a request from the Almoner to have the choir increased :

I think the Choir of St. Paul's as good as any in England—we have gone with it for 200 years, why not be content? You talk of competing with other Cathedrals, but Cathedrals are not to consider themselves rival Opera Houses. We shall come by and bye to act Anthems—it is enough if your music is decent, and does not put us to shame. It is a matter of perfect indifference to me whether Westminster bawls louder than St. Paul's—we are there to pray, and the singing is a very subordinate consideration.²

A few years earlier, the Abbey had been in his mind when he wrote to Milman, then canon of Westminster, seeking advice :

pray tell me the sort of person you employ for cleaning the Monuments. Is it the Curate or a Statuary or is it a mere Mason's Labourer? Or does it (as in the case of a Scotchman caught and washed for the first time) require acid?³

Sydney's later letters, in their increasing number and decreasing length, present special editorial problems. The growing

¹ 13 February 1837: *Catalogue of the Collection of Autograph Letters . . . formed by Alfred Morison*, vi (1892), 145-6. See also Maggs Brothers, *Catalogue 911* (1968), no. 151.

² To William Hawes, 21 August 1844: MS. (copy) B.L. Add. 41771, fol. 121.

³ 13 July 1838: MS. Osborn Collection, Yale University Library.

range of his acquaintance in his last years in London, when his financial, ecclesiastical and above all his social position was fully assured, combined with an ageing man's natural disinclination to write at length, make his letters shorter; more than ever, his reputation secured their survival in large numbers. Surely then, it might be argued, probable repetitiousness and diminishing significance might make selective treatment desirable? But no: apart from the technical reason that these shorter, later letters fill out sequences and firmly establish the chronological framework, there is very little in them that one would willingly exclude. It is arguable, too, that many of them preserve the most effective manner of Sydney's conversational style in a way which the more deliberate humour of his considered letters can never do. Thus, he wrote to Lord Hatherton acknowledging two dozen light Burgundy: "Many thanks. It shall have the week of forbearance, and shall then descend into that antient and venerable depository for wine—the stomach of the priest."¹ And to "Sydney Owenson" he wrote only half-accepting an invitation because "I had last week an attack of gout, which is receding from me (as a bailiff from the house of an half-pay captain) dissatisfied and terrified by the powers of colchicum; but I swear by that beautiful name we both bear, that I will come if it is possible."²

Sydney can devise a way of elegantly recommending "in the Lactiferous Line" a Mayfair milkman, "excellent as Auxiliary Waiter at feasts and banquets, and he delivers every morning a certain quantity of that white fluid which passes in London under the name of Cream."³ He can also vary his responses to those persistent callers—out of the usually mechanical reply, the autograph hunters, or to his many social acquaintances seeking privileged tickets to special services at St Paul's. There are also infinitely-varied invitations to the then fashionable breakfast-parties for which he became famous. One of them sent to

¹ 1 July 1836: MS. Staffordshire Record Office, Hatherton papers. The endorsement records the gift.

² 14 November 1842: *Lady Morgan's Memoirs* (2nd ed., 1863), ii. 471.

³ 30 November 1836: MS. then Mildmay-White Trust; see now Henry Bristow of Ringwood, *Cat. 13* (1975), item 164.

Thomas Moore and printed in Nowell Smith's edition (no. 861) offers a taste of the occasion and the personalities, which in its way sums up some of my pleasure as an editor in dealing with such a consistently high-spirited and enjoyable set of scholarly materials, and it offers new readers an invitation to the many delightful aspects of the writer's correspondence: "I have a breakfast of philosophers tomorrow at ten punctually; muffins and metaphysics, crumpets and contradiction. Will you come?"