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Library Notes

Of Publishing, Polkas, and Prudery: A Restored Letter by Thomas Hood

John Spalding Gatton

In March 1980 the Special Collections Department of the M. I. King Library purchased from George S. MacManus Company, Philadelphia, an unsigned, holograph letter by the English poet Thomas Hood (1799-1845). This letter joins the library's extensive holdings of autograph letters by major and near-major nineteenth-century British authors, among them, Sir Max Beerbohm, Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, Sir Richard Burton, Charles Dickens, James Anthony Froude, Richard Le Gallienne, Harriet Martineau, and William Makepeace Thackeray. While focused on the varied problems of publishing a monthly magazine, the Hood letter also provides an intimate, personal perspective on important concerns of the age: the tension between the Established Church and Nonconformist sects; the fascination with utopian and socialistic systems; and contemporary attitudes toward modesty.

A prominent literary figure in his day, Hood was a man of many parts: poet, storyteller, dramatist, novelist, engraver, and editor. Circumstances, he once explained, had forced him to become "a lively Hood for a livelihood." It was as the editor of Hood's Magazine that he wrote to his assistant, Frederick Oldfield Ward, in August 1844. Although Hood reiterates editorial policy and reprimands Ward for publishing articles contrary to the magazine's philosophy, the letter betrays none of the dry formality common to business correspondence. Instead, befitting Hood's creative talents, the lines evidence a lucid style and conversational tone, informed by his gift for sustained metaphor, by balanced argumentation, and by his frank opinions on current social, religious, and cultural affairs. His inveterate humor, which now and again flashes forth, tempers the firm position he adopts toward Ward.

In his twenties initially a writer of lyrical romantic verse in the Keatsian vein, Thomas Hood subsequently established himself as a
comic poet, his works, like his conversation, frequently enlivened
by puns (as in “Faithless Sally Brown” and “Miss Killmansegg and
Her Precious Leg”). He also earned fame as a poet of social
protest, notably with “The Song of the Shirt,” his most popular
poem, condemning the intolerable working conditions of London
seamstresses, and “The Bridge of Sighs,” attacking the social system
that drove a poverty-stricken woman to suicide. Humanitarian
interests likewise animate his engraving, “The Progress of Cant,”
which considers through satire such current movements as the
abolition of slavery, penal reform, and Irish conciliation. For the
theatre Hood provided farce, musical comedy, pantomime, and a
comic burletta.

In addition to the writings which put his name before the public,
Hood achieved recognition as an editor. In this capacity he worked
on the London Magazine (1821-23), The Gem (1828), his own
Comic Annual (1830-39, 1842), and the New Monthly Magazine
(1841-43).

These and numerous other projects issued from a man plagued
from his youth by chronic ill health and in constant pain during the
last seven or eight years of his life. Like Keats, whose poetry he
had once imitated, Hood in his final decade expectorated
considerable quantities of blood, although he suffered from severe
pulmonary edema rather than “consumption” or tuberculosis, as
nineteenth-century accounts claimed. Partial deafness and
circulatory complaints compounded his difficulties. Mary
Balmanno’s pen-portrait of Hood at the home of Charles and Mary
Lamb in 1827 suggests something of his already fragile physical
condition: “In outward appearance Hood conveyed the idea of a
clergyman. His figure slight, and invariably dressed in black; his
face pallid; the complexion delicate, and features regular; his
countenance bespeaking sympathy by its sweet expression of
melancholy and suffering.” Besides the Lambs, Hood counted as
friends and colleagues such literary lights as De Quincey, Dickens,
Robert Browning, Bulwer, and Thackeray.

Armed with experience he had gained on other journals and
driven by the desire for editorial independence, Hood founded his
own periodical, Hood’s Magazine and Comic Miscellany, the first
number of which appeared on 1 January 1844. Assisting Hood as
his unpaid sub-editor was Frederick Oldfield Ward. When Hood
lost his financial backers, he contemplated cancelling the April
issue. But Ward, plumping for publication, managed to secure the
backing of Andrew Spottiswoode, the Queen’s printer. 7 Hood’s Magazine had its April number. Despite his later professional disagreements with Ward, Hood remained grateful to him for this generous service.

Although Hood endeavored to perform his editorial duties, periods of illness forced him to relinquish many responsibilities to Ward. From June until September 1844, Ward exercised virtual control over the magazine. Hood helped select articles and read proof, but did little real editing, an arrangement which led to serious differences between the men concerning the journal’s content. The “Prospectus” for Hood’s Magazine had promised “harmless Mirth for the Million.” Its articles would never raise a “maiden blush” or treat of political matters. 8 In the July issue, however, Ward printed an essay of an obvious political cast, “The Premier” (88-95), in praise of the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel. 9 But more reprehensible to the editor was Ward’s article on “The Polka” (August, 165-74). What The Athenaeum termed “the present rage of French dancers” 10 had whirled into London and onto the stage of Her Majesty’s Theatre the previous April. Ward wrote that he approved of a “moderate display of the ‘bounteous-waving’ bosom—God’s most beautiful creation. We think that whatever is lovely is pure—if looked at with pure eyes. Indulgent nature has drawn no line along the neck—saying, thus far thou shalt go and no further.” Such comments struck Hood as decidedly risqué, guaranteed to color the cheeks of feminine readers. Ward also attacked Dissenting Protestants who had raised a “pharisaic clamour” against that “licentious invention,” the Polka. Hood interpreted these lines as unnecessary—and foolhardy—antagonism of a large body of valuable subscribers to the magazine.

Ward’s flagrant disregard for the ideals of the publication compelled Hood, convalescing in Blackheath, to chastise him by letter at length and in detail.

[Blackheath, August 1844]

My dear Ward.

I should be an ingrate indeed to forget the storm when you came on board, or the prompt services rendered to the vessel & myself in distress by your zeal & activity. I remember them quite as vividly as the desperate state of which you remind me & my inability to
make any personal exertion. But altho bedridden and crippled for
any physical efforts, not altogether powerless or useless. We are all
liable to mistakes & errors in judgment & especially in positions of
difficulty & novelty, and editing a Magazine does require skill &
practise as well as driving or steering. In such a case I hoped the
ship might derive some benefit from still having on board an old
pilot and sailing-master accustomed for many years to the service,
the craft and the coast; that though unable to walk the deck my
long experience & advice might go for something in the navigation.
In fact I did forewarn you of the very rocks & shoals we have gone
upon, but without inducing you to alter your course a point, or
take in one reef—or to drop metaphor—without your giving up to
me one solitary phrase. I have since had reason to know that my
forebodings were well founded & must therefore be more urgent, or
if you will obstinate in my objections. My very confidence in your
good intentions & my estimate of your former services impel me
the more forcibly to prevent you from neutralizing them & undoing
what you have done, by pointing out where & how you might
harm me or the Mag. by a mistaken course. My personal position
& literary views are of course best (known) understood by
myself, & no one would regret it more than F. O. W. if he
damaged either for want of knowledge on the subject. Especially I
value a certain literary standing & peculiar reputation earned by
many years of care & labour, & which might be seriously
compromised in as many days if I hesitated to point out to you any
proceeding that endangered them. The more so as your
"convictions" in some material points are so opposite to mine—or if
you will the prejudices & professions of a vast majority of the
reading public. At any rate to those of an English one, with whom
for example the French Philosophy & Fourrier's [sic] system, your
pet hobby, my boy, would never be popular—11—I have heard the
last described as Owenism (not Jones's)12 which never found much
favour here—with a dash of Socialism that met with still less—And
such a supposed System, true or false, would not captivate John
Bull a bit the more, though it would it him to your neighbours, if the Armies
of Co-operatives were Co-operatic besides, and all dressed in a
ballet uniform like the St. Simonians, with beards, blue tunics &
pink breeches.13 Seriously, I have read something of Fourrier's
theory—enough to satisfy me that it is too French for the English.14

As to the Polka, my objection to the footnote was that it made
me appear to have read, approved, & appended a comment on the

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article, whereas, tho’ liking it generally I had objected though vainly to particular parts for which I did not wish to be responsible. For the footnote would naturally be taken for mine—as it was obviously not by the Author of the paper since publicly advertised as F. O. W.—but by the party thrice referred to in print as “Editor in Chief.” It is true as you say that I can disclaim any article I might think objectionable as inserted in my absence; but my wish would be to avoid so unpleasant an attitude, which I meant by a “false position”—as exhibiting us to the public not as co-operating or co-editing but acting independently or rather in opposition. For my absence would by [for be] contradicted by the footnote signed Editor. But this is immaterial to your “Explanation” of the Polka which it is my decided opinion had better be dropped altogether as likely to do more harm than good. For example by the allusion to Dr. Hussey. Like you, I agree with what he has said—but I see more in his address, than merely a reprobation of pseudo piety—viz: *A High Churchman’s attack on the Dissenters* who are especially given to the religious tea parties &c, he denounces. I am sure it will be taken so—and I am in the way to know—and that to allude to that sermon with commendation will offend every Dissenter who reads the Magazine, in all probability one half of the subscribers. Now as “Hood’s” is not the “Church of England Magazine” this would be running a needless risk. You are as neutral as I am in a controversy between Church & Chapel & as to our “giving our support to the cause of sound manly & genuine religion” I must smile as surely as some quizzers will grin & others would look grave at the notion of advocating so serious an interest in a frisky article on the Polka. A combination quite as incongruous as “tea and bible.” Don’t you titter at it a little yourself. Or do you really contemplate following it up with a Defence of Christianity in the proposed paper on the Ballet, with a Feature on the True Practice of Piety in your article on Camberwell Fair.

As to the Calico-test, I do not hold that a female must necessarily be a modest one tho tied up to the neck in a sack, especially if she jumps in it—her modesty may be dubious, but she is decent. But there can be no doubt of of [sic] the immodesty of one who goes half naked. Now if your argument was intended to be as (stated) given in the “Explanation,” you did not clearly state it in the article where it certainly reads like a recommendation to carry the costume & capers of the public Ballet into private life.
I understand your sliding scale of modesty, the most delicate may
dance in the shortest petticoats, & the purest of all in fig leaves.  

NOTES

1 Many of these letters are in the distinguished W. Hugh Peal Collection, a treasure-trove of books and manuscripts by English, American, and French authors of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which Mr. Peal is in the process of giving to the King Library.

2 Less than half of this letter—44 of its 102 holograph lines—appeared in the standard Letters of Thomas Hood, ed. Peter F. Morgan (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), pp. 637-38; hereafter cited as Letters. In this instance, Morgan worked not from a manuscript but from the abridged catalogue text given by Maggs Bros., Autograph Letters, 349 (Autumn 1916), 60-61. Two years later, Maggs Bros. offered for sale "Three Lengthy Autograph Letters" from Hood to Ward, the first letter being the one here published. According to the catalogue, none was signed. Extracts, which supplied no new material, accompanied the catalogue description (Autumn 1918, 77-78). As the three individual manuscripts are related by content and thus probably by time of composition, they appear in the Morgan edition as one letter. For the texts of the two letters not here given, the reader should refer to Letters, pp. 638-39, and to Morgan's annotation.

The editor is grateful to the Special Collections Department, University of Kentucky Library, for permission to publish the letter and acknowledges the generous assistance of Professor John Clubbe. Angled brackets ( ) in the text indicate words crossed out by Hood.


4 In a review critical of aquatic effects at Drury Lane Theatre, The Examiner (3 January 1830, p. 4) commented that "The waterfall is admirably accomplished, and perhaps did cost . . . 300 l.; but we would rather have given Mr. HOOD the same money for thirty good practical puns."

5 Clubbe, pp. 229-31, n. 28, presents a modern diagnosis of Hood's condition, on which this paragraph draws.


7 Ward's account of this affair appears in Letters, p. 598, n. 2.


9 Parenthetical citations refer to Hood's Magazine. While Hood chided his assistant, Ward was working with others to secure him a government pension. Because of the precarious state of Hood's health, Prime Minister
Peel settled a Civil List pension of £100 on Mrs. Hood. Clubbe, pp. 180-86, provides a detailed history of the pension scheme.

10 The Athenaeum, 13 April 1844, p. 341.

11 A utopian socialistic system devised by the French author Charles Fourier (1772-1837). The population was to be grouped into phalanges of about 1800 persons each. Members would live together as a family, in communal buildings (phalansteries), working the land, and holding property in common.

12 Humanitarian philosophy of mill owner, utopian theoretician, and social reformer Robert Owen (1771-1858). In 1800 he established a model working village at his textile factory in New Lanark, Scotland, where he discouraged child labor, and improved the living, working, and educational conditions of his employees. His self-contained cooperative community at New Harmony, Indiana, dating from 1825, failed within three years due to dissension and a lack of skills among the brilliant but impractical theorists who settled there.

The English architect and writer Owen Jones (1809-1874) published Designs for Mosaic and Tessellated Pavements (1842), for which Ward provided an essay on their materials and structure.

13 Disciples of the French utopian socialist Claude Henri, Comte de Saint-Simon (1760-1826). To abolish the prevailing system under which captains of industry exploited the proletariat, the Saint-Simonians promoted a form of socialism which made Society the sole proprietor, with social groups managing state properties. In its social hierarchy, the individual would be placed according to his abilities, and rewarded according to his works. In an era of clean-shaven men, the Saint-Simonians at the community in Ménilmontant grew their beards and moustaches to great lengths. They also wore distinctive attire: white pants, red waistcoat (on which was inscribed in large letters the name of the disciple), blue-violet tunic, knotted neckerchief, and red cap.


15 A footnote to "The Polka" (166) compared the anatomical parts "vulgarily called the calves" of Parisian ladies ("largely developed") with those of English draymen ("comparatively diminutive"). While Ward's essay was ostensibly "By A Ringleader" of the Polka Revolutionary Movement, the note was signed "ED. H. M.," that is, "Editor, Hood's Magazine."

In a letter of 4 August 1844, Ward claimed that he had published the article because "the mag [is] declining in sale for want of a fillip," and that, as a result of his efforts, it is "this month improving in sale" (cited in Clubbe, p. 180). Hood denied this in a letter to Ward (September 1844), declaring that "the rise in the sale" was "more probably in spite," than because, of the Polka article (Letters, p. 643).

16 Extracts from "The Polka" appeared in The Atlas, 17 August 1844 (p. 552). The article was also published in London as a twelve-page pamphlet, with Ward's addition of "a few explanatory remarks," dated 15 August
1844, and addressed "TO CORRESPONDENTS" who "misapprehended some passages" in the essay (p. 12). The Kress Room, Graduate School of Business Administration Library, Harvard, kindly furnished the editor with a photocopy of the original reprint, which these notes cite.

Rev. Thomas John Hussey, chaplain to the High Sheriff of Essex, preached a sermon (reprinted in The Times, London, 14 August 1844, p. 6), in which he objected to the modern application of the word religious to events and objects decidedly secular: "there are religious parties, excursions, tea-drinkings, bazaars, tickets of salvation, and draughts upon the bank of faith." In his "Explanation," Ward mentioned Dr. Hussey by name and quoted these and other comments from his "excellent" homily.

Church of England Magazine, London, 1836-75. The phrase "church and chapel" distinguished between members of the Established Church and those of Nonconformist or Dissenting Protestant sects.

Ward claimed in his "explanatory remarks" that, "in lashing (with hearty good-will, we admit) the pseudo-piety of Dissenters, "we do, in fact, give an implicit support to the cause of sound, manly, and genuine religion; the interests of which are compromised by nothing so much as Cant."

In "The Polka" (167) Ward commented, "Little Bethel has been losing ground ever since Boz gave Stiggins that ducking under the pump. 'Tea-and-bible' is found out for a dilute sort of religion after all; and keen noses have smelt something very like gin in all the piety-and-water." Bethel ("House of God") was the name Dissenters often gave to their places of worship. Mrs. Nubbles, in "Boz' Dickens' The Old Curiosity Shop, frequented a dissenting chapel called Little Bethel, which on occasion served "a comfortable cup of tea" before devotions (Ch. xli). The Rev. Mr. Stiggins (Pickwick Papers) is a drunken, hypocritical parson, deputy "Shepherd" in the Ebenezer Temperance Association, and habitué of the "Marquis of Granby" Inn. When he attempts to resume his place in the hostelry after the death of Mrs. Weller, whose generosity he had abused, he is evicted and has his head ducked in a horse-trough.

Ward's essay, "Camberwell Fair—Towards Midnight," appeared in Hood's Magazine, September 1844, 277-88. Hood resumed control of the journal that month. In a letter he commented that Ward's article was "harmless—but French at the end—sentimental . . ." (Letters, p. 640). Hood deemed the fair more a subject for satire or censure than sentiment. Camberwell Fair had, by the 1820s, outlived its rural function, degenerating into a rowdy suburban spree. It disappeared about 1868. Hood lived in Camberwell from June 1840 until November 1841.

In "The Polka" (173) Ward wrote, "Is villanous [sic] calico better to behold than woman's graceful neck? . . . Away with this pinchbeck purity—these millinery-morals! We refuse the calico-test."

In rejecting the 'calico-test' of modesty," Ward maintained in his "Explanation," "we took care to set up in its stead a higher and truer moral standard; affirming that purity of the heart, and an elevated and poetical tone of social feeling, are necessary to justify and render innocent even the customary display of feminine charms; much more any further developments. We may have an opportunity of recurring to this question
of moeurs in an article on the Ballet."

24 The manuscript has neither a closing nor a signature, although a quarter of the page remains. Hood frequently ended his letters to Ward "Yours affectionately, Thos Hood."