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Citation

Woodring, Carl R. 1950. Letters from Bernard Barton to Robert Southey. Harvard Library Bulletin IV (3), Autumn 1950: 351-358.

Link

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Letters from Bernard Barton to Robert Southey

BERNARD Barton, amiable Quaker, bank clerk, and poet of Woodbridge, Suffolk, has been remembered because he received from his friend Charles Lamb and from his son-in-law Edward FitzGerald many delightful letters. Barton himself was a correspondent of humor and charm — qualities which his verse swung along piously without. Twenty-three unpublished autograph letters from Barton to Robert Southey are mounted in a volume bound in 1900 for the laureate's granddaughter, Miss Maud Southey, and now held by the Harvard College Library.¹ The earliest letter was written in 1817, some three years after Southey first received (and apparently destroyed) a letter from Barton; the latest, in an angular hand, is dated '1/13/1838.' The volume contains also a prose dedication to George IV, which Barton prepared for *Napoleon, and Other Poems*; a holograph version of 'A Poet's Lot'; verses titled 'To The King'; and a half-page fragment of a letter from Barton to Southey dated '11/15 1822.'

Maggs Brothers once advertised the letters as 'entirely dealing with [Barton's] poems and his Quaker principles.' A ubiquitous subject in the letters, to be sure, is the need for obtaining reviews or other favorable notice for his poems, usually accompanied with a carefully worded suggestion that Southey, even though he does not review poetry for the *Quarterly*, might nevertheless find it within decorum to use his influence mildly on behalf of Christian virtue expressed in rhyme. Almost as frequently, Barton provides documents of importance to historians of the Society of Friends by attempting to justify philosophically his desire to be both Quaker and poet. But he deals also in these letters with matters of more general appeal. He discusses Southey's projected 'Life of George Fox, and the Rise and Progress of Quakerism'; the promise of Southey's *Oliver Newman*; his own critical and religious opinions of Shelley; the quarrel between Southey and Byron; and a tiff between Barton and William Howitt, a Quaker who had joined Daniel

¹ fMS Eng 722.

O'Connell and a number of Nottingham Unitarians in seeking disestablishment of the Church of England. He comments on Hazlitt's character of Southey in *The Spirit of the Age*. Along with anecdotes concerning reviews of his work in the *Gentleman's*, *Brighton*, and *Monthly* magazines and the *Edinburgh Review*, appear references to Lamb, Wordsworth, and Francis Jeffrey; to Major Moor, their common friend and Barton's neighbor and patron; to Joseph John Gurney, banker and philanthropist; to 'the great Bibliophile,' the 'Autocrat of Albemarle St.,' John Murray; William Gifford; Sir Richard Phillips, editor of the *Monthly Magazine*; William Jerdan's *Literary Gazette*; Charles Richard Sumner, then historiographer, librarian, and chaplain to George IV, later Bishop of Winchester; Charles B. Taylor, author of *May You Like It*; J. H. Wiffen, the translator of Tasso; William Mitford, the historian; and Thomas Wilkiuson, the Quaker friend and neighbor of Wordsworth.

The letters contain such plebeian lore as similar collections usually provide: the edition of *A Day in Autumn* consisted of about 250 copies ('10th Mo. 22nd. 1820'); the second edition of Barton's *Poems*, published by Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, was to be 750 or 1,000 copies, 'a pretty large impression, for an obscure Poet's lucubrations, at least' ('11/24th 1820'); he received fifty pounds for the *Widow's Tale*, 1827, in keeping with his usual forty or sixty pounds and leading him to expect one hundred pounds from Murray for *A New Year's Eve* ('5th Mo 24th 1828'); he wrote sometimes, particularly on *Napoleon*, from seven, eight, or nine o'clock at night until midnight; he sometimes rose at four to compose a few lines before going to his desk at the bank ('8th Mo 13th 1821'). The contemporary social stratification of poets and publishers stands out clearly; Barton yearned to be mentioned ceremonially, or at least publicly, in the literary heaven peopled by Murray, Gifford, Southey, and Wordsworth.

These letters were apparently not available to E. V. Lucas for the preparation of *Bernard Barton and His Friends* in 1893. They were quoted neither in the *Selections from the Poems and Letters of Bernard Barton*, 1849, edited by Lucy Barton with a memoir by FitzGerald, her husband, nor in the *Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey*, 1850, edited by Charles Cuthbert Southey. Other letters published in those volumes fill recesses in the story of the relations between Barton and Southey, developing from formal and humble deference by Barton toward genial Christian intercourse, traceable in the collection at Har-

vard. A segment of this collection interlocks with the letters from Southey during 1820-1822 published in the *Barton Selections*.

Caught as Barton was between the quietism of the Society of Friends and the worldliness of other literary practitioners, an enigma to both, his 'aspirations after blameless fame, and blissful Immortality' compel respect (see the letter dated '8/14 1821'). He advanced modest claims ('4th Mo. 21st 1820') for his *Poems*:

There are parts in it which ought, I think, to find their way to the hearts of those who read Poetry for the sake, not of displaying critical talent, but of deriving pleasure; I think so, for this simple reason, I know them to have been prompted by genuine, unaffected feelings in my own; feelings which I foster'd at the time when I was most intensely conscious of them, because I felt their influence was soothing at least, if not salutary, and I have recorded them in the hope that they will find an assenting voice in the hearts of at least a few —

As he was now placing his name upon a title-page, he justified in every letter his position on the 'unfriendly' slopes of Parnassus:

. . . I see no incompatibility between Poetry, and Quakerism; that is if I have at all understood or appreciated the spirit and tendency of the latter; it is congenial with all the purer and nobler elements of Poetry; it does not forbid its votaries to look with an eye of love and admiration on all the beauty and magnificence of Nature; it does not forbid them to hold communion with their own hearts, to cherish all the better feelings of our Nature, to love and adore our Creator, to sympathize with the hopes, fears, joys & griefs of his Creatures. why then should it unfit its votary for becoming a Poet? [1st Mo 16th 1820]

Yet, he wrote later ('5th Mo. 31st 1820'), a poet could only with difficulty become acceptable to the Society:

. . . such an one must obtain, in some degree, the suffrages of the wise, the virtuous, and the good, among the tribes of the Gentiles; he must have been pronounced by the judicious among *them*, to be favorable to morality, and piety, as well as poetical, before we even enquire after him — much less lay out 10/6 to become acquainted with him —

Barton's humor proclaims him immediately as a spiritual companion of Charles Lamb. In a letter of 19 August 1831 he described his daughter Lucy's *Bible Letters for Children*, for which he had written a preface and introductory verses: 'Such is the head & front of *our* offending — for the *magnitude* of the offence the Volume will contain rather over 300 Pages of which about 30 I think are mine . . .'

Barton acted more shrewdly than most of those unfortunate poets who lost their scalps in the era of tomahawk reviewing. On 17 December 1820, he wrote to Southey:

But I am told that my chance of getting into the Pages of the Quarterly is now a perfectly hopeless one: for I understand I am to be in the forth-coming No. of the Edinburgh; and am told by some of my friends to prepare for a trimmer. . . . I have no fears . . . I do not mean that Jeffrey could not, if he chose, write a witty article on a volume of Poems by a Quaker, but I do not think he would imagine it worth while: and indeed to tell thee the plain truth, which I would not tell every body, when my Publishers sent the Book to the Edinburgh, I had it accompanied by a Letter of my writing to Jeffrey, in which I honestly told him I had written the Poems in spite of his assertion, that all the talk of the Quakers was of oxen and Broad-cloth; and, what I confess I did not much expect the Critic sent me a very handsome letter in reply, in which he assured me that he would read the volume with attention; and give me his personal opinion of it with as much down-rightness as if he were a member of my own uncomplimentary Society. As I have long since received that opinion, and it was though candid and unflattering, very encouraging and satisfactory, I am quite certain if the Book be noticed, it will not be an ill-temper'd one. But in spite of all this, and the assurances of all round me, that to be well spoken of in one Journal, is enough to ensure abuse, or neglect from the other (I mean, of course, that the maxim is supposed to hold good *both* ways) yet in spite of all this I shall certainly tell Baldwin to send a Copy of my second edition to Albemarle Street, and accompany it by a Letter to the redoubtable Gifford, and then I shall have done my Part to give the Book a fair chance —

Remembering Southey's promise to mention him in his history of Quakerism, Barton added a postscript: 'Do not think I would forfeit my niche in the annals of Fox, for 20 Pages of the most laudatory notice in any Review in Christendom.' As Barton not only teased Jeffrey into critical tolerance but also viewed clerical and political reform with a Whiggish eye, it was appropriate that the *Edinburgh* rather than the *Quarterly* should acclaim the 'noble sentiments and amiable affections,' the 'solemnity, warmth, and sublimity of devotion,' 'the purity, the piety and gentleness' of Barton's *Poems*.²

Barton referred sincerely but conventionally to Southey's domestic joys and sorrows. The period was one of public conflict and pleas for reform; Southey's enemies were more often a topic than Southey's friends. On 10 February 1825, Barton asked:

Hast thou seen aught of a Vol. called the Spirit of the Age, or Contemporary Poets? (only see what it is for a man's head to run on verse I should have said

² 'Quaker Poetry,' *Edinburgh Review*, XXXIV (1820), 348-357.

Portraits) There is a full length Picture of thee in it, caricatured in its shades but it has redeeming gleams of light thrown in which enable more partial friends to recognize the likeness. I had seen that Portrait extracted, in the Pages of the Eclectic, a week ago; and going to spend a few hours the evening before last at our friend Major Moor's I there found the Book — His opinion confirmed my prior conjecture that Hazlitt was the Artist — and much as we both admired the occasional, and indeed frequent talent displayed, we could not but regret the bitterness of feeling which is as often manifested — Surely Hazlitt must be a most unhappy man —

Though Barton underestimated the durability of Byron's satire, impartial (and even partial) students of Byron's career have agreed with Barton's judgments ('1/14th 1822') on Byron's note in *The Two Foscari* and Southey's reply in the *Courier*.

I had seen the Note which has called forth thy rejoinder, and as I felt confident that there could be no foundation for his charge, the only *real one* it contain'd, of thy having personally calumniated *him*, or *others*; I expected to see that repelled — As to his tirade about the good he has done in any one given year and his assertion "*easily proved*" that it exceeds all done by thee in the course of thy life, it is diverting perhaps from its absurdity, but very sad stuff to think seriously of — I do not see that thy answer could have been better than it is — Its most triumphant part is that Lord B—— has ANSWER'D to, and thereby shown he felt the force of the *designation* conferr'd. In fact the whole spirit and tenor of his Note shows a degree of soreness that I thought he never would have allowed publicly to escape him — I suppose thou mayst have seen that he is *said* to have written a Burlesque of the Vision of Judgment — He had better be quiet —

Less ironical and more significant is an undated letter concerning Barton's poem on the death of Shelley. In 1818 he had dedicated the *Convict's Appeal* to Shelley, J. J. Gurney, and James Montgomery. In 1821 he had published 'Stanzas Addressed to Percy Bysshe Shelley,' urging 'this highly-gifted man' to reconsider his irreligious perversion of rare powers. (In the passage quoted above, 'or *others*' refers primarily, of course, to Shelley, who had signed himself atheist in a register public enough for Southey to see it.) Barton shows himself in the letter a more catholic and tolerant critic than Southey, but one, nevertheless, who had written his two poems on Shelley as part of the righteous campaign led by Southey against the 'Satanic School.' Apologetic remarks in the letter would seem to have been called forth by comments on the poem in a letter from Lamb of 9 October 1822: 'I do not think

it will convert the club at Pisa, neither do I think it will satisfy the bigots on our side the water.'³ Barton wrote Southey as follows:

We differ I expect very considerably in our views of Shelley's Genius; I think it had some traits of uncommon power; but his principles, or rather opinions I regard as having been pernicious in the extreme — I know it has been said his practice was no better, but I have heard this as flatly contradicted: be the latter, or let it have been what it may, my object has been only to controvert the tendency of his opinions; I expect the *manner* in which I have attempted this will be thought by many too tame & feeble, it may, possibly, be consider'd by thee, too lenient — but I have acted according to the best of my judgment — I have not written in the hope of converting the club at Pisa, nor of convincing their admirers here, but with a view of arresting the progress of scepticism in a few young and inexperienced minds, which may possibly have been seduced into admiration of the more delusive features of the Satanic School, but in which a lingering regard to better feelings, and purer hopes may still exist. These are not to be *won* by conferring opprobrious epithets on those in whom they think they see much to admire. Those who have deceived, and warped such minds, I have neither abilities nor inclination to contend with, but if I can recal one wavering mind, or reclaim a single heart not wholly harden'd in unbelief, I shall not have written in vain —

Talking of the Pisa Club thou hast of course seen the announce of their new Periodical — and art aware that its first object is an attack on thyself — I congratulate thee on it —

One of the most striking items in the collection concerns Barton's own plight. He has come down in English literary history as the mildest of men. The five letters from August, 1821, to June, 1822, protest in his usual humble way that he expects little from his dedication of the *Napoleon* volume to the king — perhaps, 'by a special act of grace, guardian of some old hoard of Books or Pictures at Windsor' ('6 Mo 23, 1822'). A Tolstoy can rise spiritually above the expensive appurtenances of art; meek Bernard Barton was awed by a replica of the royal presentation copy of his own verse sent to him by its publisher, Boys. Sumner had invited Barton to Carlton House, and had promised to place the volume before the king on the earliest favorable occasion. Such an occasion arose, but George IV ignored Barton, as he ignored greater poets, more orthodox poets, and more servile poets. Because he was 'not ambitious of exciting pity, at any rate while alive,' Barton did not intend to publish 'To The King,' ten stanzas he mailed to Southey on 26 November 1822. After setting forth the facts, the poem closes:

³ *The Letters of Charles Lamb to Which Are Added Those of His Sister Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas (London, 1935), II, 338.

It is not even Policy's true part,
 At such a time as this, aside to throw
 The proffer'd homage of *one* free-born heart;
 And least of all should England's Monarch so
 A Monarch's proudest privilege forego;
 Or thus a Subject's unsought tribute spurn: —
 If ever Loyalty should cease to glow
 In British bosoms, where must King-ship turn,
 Save, by its fatal loss that Virtue's worth to learn?

The Form which rose upon The Monarch's dream,
 Was Royalty itself in just array; —
 Resplendent as its upper parts might seem,
 The feet were Iron, mixt with miry clay;
 And in those feet were found its strength and stay: —
 What though that dream be now a by-gone tale,
 Yet hath its *moral* never pass'd away;
 This still shows how the impotent prevail,
 Nor less reveals the Power which makes the mighty — quail.

But here I close my strain. I would not be
 Mixt for a moment with the baser crowd,
 Who nothing in their Sov'reign choose to see,
 Except what calls forth their invectives loud;
 If I with sycophants have never bow'd,
 But felt, thought, spoke, — as one to whom was dear
 His Country's welfare; — I am far too proud
 To join the vulgar rabble's ribbald jeer;
 From *Them*, from *THEE* I turn, with *hands*, and *conscience clear!*

Barton here makes his first public appearance as a hearthside Childe Harold. It would be easy to picture Charles Lamb reading these stanzas; it is not easy to guess how Southey received them. At any event, he preserved them.

'I have a similar score,' wrote Barton, 'to clear off with my own Fraternity; but that must be done at greater length.' Yet just as he did not publish his disgruntled stanzas 'To the King,' so he seems not to have settled in public, except amicably, his score with his 'own Fraternity.' We may read his stanzas to the king and his slightly self-pitying letters to Southey with the less discomfort since we know that he gradually achieved greater ease and wider acclaim 'among the tribes of the Gentiles.' We can enjoy the knowledge that he received continually increased understanding and appreciation from the Society of

Friends, that his dedication of *A New Year's Eve* to Sumner in 1828 was followed sixteen years later by a visit to Sumner at Farnham Castle, and that in 1845 Barton's *Household Verses* were, 'with her kind permission, gratefully inscribed' to Queen Victoria.

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