Reign of the Beast

The Atheist World of W. D. Saull and his Museum of Evolution

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Cover illustration: A spoof of the "Devil's Chaplain", the Rev. Robert Taylor (left, on the podium). His patron, the atheist Richard Carlile, is seen on the right, landing a punch. The wine merchant W. D. Saull funded both men and grounded his evolutionary talks in their dissident sciences. Such pastiches reinforced the prejudices of pious readers, by depicting the moral rot caused by irreligion. The wall posters on the left advertize contraception manuals and licentious memoirs, and a lecture by "Miss Sharples", Carlile's common-law "wife". Taylor's character is being impugned by portraying the mayhem caused by his infidel oratory. Beyond the brawling and debauchery, thieves are shown in the audience (bottom right) and a dagger-wielding agitator (centre). In reality, Taylor's congregations were respectable and attentive.
Etching, in the author's possession, entitled "The Triumph of Free Discussion" (the motto of Carlile's Fleet Street shop selling subversive prints). The caption reads, "A Sketch taken in the Westminster Cock Pit on Wednesday the 24th. of September 1834. Subject A Lecture by the Revd R. Taylor, A.B.M.R.C.S. 'On the importance of Character'."
Cover design by Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

11. Creation on the Cheap

The blasphemy chapels and Owenite halls attracted a particular sort of aggrieved, politically-astute, and inquisitive artisan. Here politics, economics, science, and irreligion were bartered, with audiences participating in the free-for-all. What snippets of irreligious geology attendees picked up, often incidentally, was fine-tuned to this reformist platform. And for the real enthusiast, there was always the extensive LMI library, or the cut-price pirate editions of Toulmin's *Antiquity and Duration of the World* and Lawrence's *Lectures on Man*. Leather-bound gentlemanly tomes had no shelf space here, but urban agitators could access a plethora of cheap pamphlets and books falling from the presses operated by Carlile, Hetherington, Watson, Cleave, Brooks, and others. Even so, few could afford the shillings, in which case the aficionados would club together. Anne Secord has discussed how the rural artisan-botanists chipped in to buy texts and used the pub as their club house. Urban operatives were better paid, and could fork out the shilling fee and "trifling" ha'pence a week to join the Operatives' Literary Association (founded 1834), which put 'Mirabaud' (Holbach) and every other destabilizing work within reach.[1]

If that was still too expensive, mechanics had other leisure choices. Workmen in town mostly got their meals in pubs,[2] but, by the 1820s, the proliferating coffee houses catering to operatives were the preferred haunts of the radical intelligentsia, many of whom were temperance advocates. Away from the prying eyes of the licensing justices, the coffee houses could stock the latest penny trash and provide a talking shop. For Christina Parolin, these 'free-and-easies' were the archetypal "public

1 *PMG*, 16 Aug. 1834. A. Secord 1994. A skilled artisan, say a compositor on London's dailies, could earn £2 8*s* a week, six times a farm labourer's wage (*LMR* 1 [13 Nov. 1824]: 28).

2 Lovett 1920, 1: 32.

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sphere", now to become hotbeds of sedition and materialism as the political temperature rose.[3] The Operatives' Literary Association met in Presley's Coffee House on John Street. An NUWC branch held meetings in the Hope Coffee House in Snow-hill. Police spies crawled from one to another, keeping their ears to the ground. William Lovett, having started off as a cabinet maker attending a book-sharing "literary association" in Gerrard Street—which first fired his intellectual curiosity—had gravitated to Tom's Coffee House in Holborn, where he heard Carlile, Taylor, and Gale Jones, and to Lunt's on Clerkenwell Green. By the 1830s, he had his own coffee house in Hatton Garden. Here, coffee by the pint came with the unstamped press free to peruse. His Reading Room with several hundred volumes led to a "commodious" Conversation Room where issues could be thrashed out from five till eleven nightly.[4]

But the more immediate and exciting entertainment was to be had in talks. And much of the dirt cheap or even free science lecturing was now dominated by Saull's ubiquitous appearances. His venue of choice switched to "Watson's", as the spy called it. Saull's friend James Watson had cut his teeth as a Carlile shopworker. He had already spent a year in Coldbath-fields jail for selling Palmer's *Principles of Nature* to an undercover informer. According to Saull, Watson had worked at Owen's Bazaar after Carlile's shop.[5] Then in 1831, when Pierre Baume moved out of his Optimist Chapel in Windmill Street, Watson moved in, and he renamed it the 'Philadelphian Chapel'.

Watson had already bought out Baume's printing and book-selling premises—the sale sponsored by the renegade old Etonian Julian Hibbert, still using his family's wealth to finance freethought. Like Hibbert, Watson was abstemious, but grave, showing none of Hibbert's *joie de vivre*: a bit too cold for the coming generation of hotheads. "Watson was of the old Puritan type of our great Cromwellian time, such a man as Ireton [the commonwealth commander and Parliamentarian who signed Charles I's death warrant], simply wise, serious, and most earnest".[6] But despite his fearsome reputation, one broad-minded Congregationalist, stepping into his shop one day, and fearing that

3 Parolin 2010, 225.
4 *PMG*, 25 Jan. 1834; 28 Feb. 1835; Lovett 1920, 1: 35, 37; NUWC: *PMG*, 11 Oct. 1834.
5 *Reasoner* 16 (5 Feb. 1854) Supplement, 97–112.
6 Linton 1894, 38.

"righteous retribution should bring the bells down upon his head", was surprised to find Watson "mild and temperate, transparent and honest".[7] Watson was another who split his time between the NUWC and Owenites, hence at the Philadelphian, the weekly topics covered the gamut: Sunday: philosophical discussions; Monday: NUWC meetings; Tuesday: co-operative subjects; Thursday: theological debate. And lest the last should be misunderstood, adverts pointed out that it was to examine "the claims of a certain Book to infallibility", to which end the faithful appealed "to the inquisition and ... torture for its support."[8]

Advertisements for Philadelphian meetings in the *Poor Man's Guardian* gave nothing away bar lecture titles. But police reports reveal that Saull was lecturing here, and at least two of his more vituperative talks the nark thought worth reporting. The first was in March 1832, amid the Reform turmoil, as Benbow and Hetherington were taken into custody. (And as NUWC members practised their "sword exercise" in Goodman's Yard, behind the Tower, fearing the worst,[9] armed with Colonel Macerone's hot-off-the-press *Defensive Instructions for the People* with its lance-making help for street warfare.[10]) At such a moment, Saull, undeflected, spoke on "Creation" at Watson's. By this, he meant the production of species without any supernatural aspect. His vehement tone matched the political mood. The talk had "a Strange harshness", reported the spy, "I never saw or heard so much abuse."[11]

Again, in September 1832, Saull lectured on the "The influence of Science upon the future condition of Mankind". Only one part did the spy think worth passing on to the police, and that was Saull ploughing his old furrow. He advocated

> Principles of Materialism against any Religious or Superstitious systems got up by the tyrants of Mankind to rob them and keep them in ignorance and went to prove that the best way for Men to act was to leave all such

7 *Reasoner* 16 (15 Jan. 1854): 37.
8 *PMG*, 3 Sept. 1831; Prothero 1979, 261.
9 HO 64/12. f. 67 (26 Mar. 1832), "sword exercise" underlined by the police, to raise Home Office awareness of it.
10 Macerone [1832]; *PMG*, 10 Mar. 1832. Macerone's pamphlet mooted the fall of the Whigs, necessitating armed resistance to the returning anti-reform Tories. As Hollis (1970, 41–42) says, the pamphlet was "alarming in working-class hands". Watson displayed his Macerone lance at the Philadelphian chapel (Barker [1938], 22–23).
11 HO 64/12, f. 67 (26 Mar. 1832); *PMG*, 24 Mar. 1832.

> foolish Dogmas to the wind and follow their own wants as Nature dictated to them.[12]

This, given the times, was hardly incendiary, but it fitted the pattern of resistance to state authority. It was the month when the fearsome Bronterre O'Brien took over editing the *Poor Man's Guardian* to ratchet up attacks on the profiteering middlemen, from shopkeepers to merchants. At the same time, Lovett became a national figure by orchestrating resistance to the draft—the "Militia Laws", which saw the poor forcibly recruited into local militias—and, having resisted himself, he found all his property seized, in what was damned as "undisguised, downright, absolute robbery".[13] Saull's remained a more passive, scientific undermining of authority. Through all, he stood resolute, undeviating, with his eyes on the "Creationist" ball—and un-arrested.

It seems that Saull often spoke at the Philadelphian after a lecture, denouncing Christianity.[14] Watson was another who mixed co-operation, Carlilean freethought and NUWC class-consciousness, but his activism was quite different from Saull's. Imprisonment was an occupational hazard for seditious printers and vendors, and borne with fortitude as a badge of honour. There was the odd court triumph. In 1832, Watson (with Benbow and Lovett) was acquitted of unlawful assemblage and riotous behaviour on the 'Farce Day'. (The government, to assuage the Almighty in the face of the coming cholera, had ordered a national 'Fast Day', inflicting still more punishment on the poor, and a loss of a day's wages. A radical procession to protest it had been met by police truncheons, and subsequent prosecutions.[15]) In 1833, Watson was fresh out of jail, having served six months in Clerkenwell for selling the *Poor Man's Guardian*. Freedom did not last long, for he was back in prison in 1834, two months after his marriage. As Saull reminisced later, "He [Saull] had not suffered personally as his friend Watson had done", at least in terms of incarceration. Saull was very careful to keep out of prison, but with prosecutions piling up he was to expend ever increasing sums on court costs for comrades-in-arms.[16]

12 HO 64/12, f. 142 (18 Sept. 1832); *PMG*, 15 Sept. 1832.
13 Wiener 1989, 27; Lovett 1920, 1: 66–68.
14 HO 64/12, ff. 96, 105.
15 Lovett 1920, 1: 80; Benbow 1832; Hollis 1970, 53.
16 *Reasoner* 16 (5 Feb. 1854) Supplement, 97–112; Linton 1879.

With Hibbert's backing in 1833, Watson's Windmill Street presses started churning out usable Enlightenment philosophy in twopenny parts: Volney's *Ruins of Empires* sold at 2*d* a sheet weekly from August, or three numbers stitched for 6*d*—and it was still a "beautiful little edition". Then came a uniform edition of Mirabaud's (that is, Holbach's) *System of Nature* in twopenny numbers.[17] Others later recalled that "before there was so much talk of cheap printing, our friend was printing and publishing cheap".[18] But Watson could only do it because he was so heavily subsidized. Otherwise, it meant going into debt, as he knew well from Carlile's case. It was only a bequest on Hibbert's death in January 1834, which Saull oversaw as an Executor, that wiped out Carlile's £492 losses.[19] Watson no less benefited from Hibbert's munificence. Watson and Hetherington were left 450 guineas apiece in Hibbert's will. Hetherington invested in his first steam press, a machine that could speed up production ten-fold, turning out 2,500 sheets an hour. Hetherington and Watson were fellow publishers who never fell out with one another, indeed they worked in conjunction. Harassed by the authorities for refusing to pay fines, Hetherington made over his *Poor Man's Guardian* press to Lovett, who installed it on Watson's premises, then Hetherington sold his book stock to Watson. But it proved an unsuccessful manoeuvre, for the police raided Watson's and confiscated £1500-worth of print, type and stock in 1835.[20]

Nonetheless, Watson's wholesale depot was probably the most important radical warehouse in the country in the 1830s–1840s. He shipped the subversive works of fellow unstamped publishers and his own stock-in-trade: Volney, Palmer, Holbach, and Paine.[21] With Holbach never out of print, or out of financial reach, the fundamental question of origins, taboo in gentlemanly geological circles, remained alive on

17 *PMG*, 10 Aug. 1833; 23 Nov. 1833; also 16 Feb. 1833; Linton 1879.

18 *Reasoner* 16 (5 Feb. 1854) Supplement, 97–112.

19 Julian Hibbert, Will, Public Record Office, National Archives, PROB 11/1827, 14 Feb. 1834. *Satirist*, 30 Mar. 1834; *Patriot* 2 Apr. 1834, 113. Carlile used his windfall to put out a new "pocket edition" of *System of Nature* in 1834, but it still cost seven shillings—a Tolpuddle Martyr's weekly wage: *PMG*, 20 Sept. 1834; Watson also published a twopenny *Life* of Holbach in 1834: *PMG*, 12 Apr. 1834.

20 See Hollis's (1970, 130–31, 162, also 126) unravelling of events. *PMG*, 8 Aug. 1835. *Reasoner* 16 (5 Feb. 1854) Supplement, 97–112.

21 Then came titles on atheism, communism, Owenism, anti-Church tracts, and later the *Reasoner* as well as the *Free-Thinker's Information for the People*.

the street. Political titles were snugly shelved alongside pamphlets and digests on subversive science. To take some examples: his *Facts versus Fiction: An Essay on the Functions of the Brain* was a twopenny pamphlet culled from Lawrence's *Lectures on Man*.[22] This was ostensibly to test whether "the mind of man is a separate and distinct principle residing in his corporeal fabric, or simply the function of an organ—the result of the action of the brain". But Watson's introduction makes plain that the result would counteract the "wild and imaginary notion" of a soul enjoying a paradisaical afterlife to compensate for the brutality of this one, a "fantastical" idea necessary to the apparatus of social control used by repressive governments.[23] Other offerings included the American Dr Thomas Cooper's anti-Mosaic *Connection between Geology and the Pentateuch*[24] and *Galileo and the Inquisition*.[25]

Watson later published an address that caused a kerfuffle in the medical press, the young physician William Engledue's *Cerebral Physiology and Materialism*. This was another clever piece of piracy. Seditious publishers kept an eye on the medical press, as they had done in Lawrence's day. Many GP-supporting medical papers were themselves radical, as they fought the nepotistic hospital consultants and unreformed medical corporations. So, when Engledue's iconoclastic address to the Phrenological Association, published in the *Medical Times* raised hackles[26]—for rejecting souls, spirits, and mind as too mystical, and for making the brain 'secrete' thoughts as the mouth does saliva[27]—the pirates took notice. At a stroke, Engledue had undermined, in Roger Cooter's words, "two decades of carefully rehearsed, endlessly reiterated, and successfully sown rhetoric on phrenology's harmony with socioreligious views."[28] By invoking the non-responsibility of man for his actions, Engledue would let the critics tar phrenologists as atheists who denied all "religious obligation". His talk led to mass resignations

22 *PMG*, 25 Aug. 1832.
23 Lawrence 1840; first edition: *PMG*, 25 Aug. 1832.
24 Thomas Cooper M.D. 1837 was challenging Yale Professor Benjamin Silliman's "Mosaic" bowdlerising in his American edition of Robert Bakewell's *Introduction to Geology*. Cooper's riposte was re-published by Watson: *Reasoner*, 3 June 1846, 16.
25 *NMW* 11 (28 Jan. 1843): 252.
26 *Medical Times* 6 (2 July 1842): 209–14. Desmond 1989 and Underhill 1993 on the medical politics.
27 Engledue 1843, 4–9.
28 Cooter 1984, 94.

from the Phrenological Association and demands that the phrenological society in future exclude all reference to "materialism".[29] Man not being responsible was, of course, the Owenites' doctrine. And Owenites were the first off the blocks, reprinting his address in their *New Moral World*.[30] It was too good for Watson to pass up. He got out a 32-page, fourpenny pamphlet of the Address in November 1842.[31] And he capped it by attaching a provocative letter from the London University physiologist John Elliotson, arch-materialist and mesmerist, who viewed the brain as so much thinking-matter. He agreed in the bluntest terms that cerebral stuff needed no 'soul' to help it spew out thoughts.[32]

All these examples show that the street tracts had to be terse, non-technical, cheap and pointed. And opportunism played a huge part: as political issues flared, or addresses fired up the orthodox, the pauper presses were prepared to capitalize with immediate effect.

The Mechanics' Hall of Science

The lease of the Philadelphian Chapel expired in October 1832, and, in another typical reversal, it was snapped up by Finsbury's Baptists.[33] As a result, Watson used Hibbert's bequest to move his "Cheap Publications Warehouse" to "more eligible premises" in Commercial Place, off the City Road, Finsbury, in March 1834. Here he set up a circulating library of rationalist books, charging 1*d* a week.[34] The spy reported that he had revamped his shop front "to more expose his business as a Pamphlet seller of which he boasts a very great increase lately".[35]

Attached to the shop was a huge, barn-like hall, and, through the winter of 1833–34, Saull and his lifelong friend, the radical apothecary

29 *Medical Times* 6 (2 July 1842): 266–67, 295; *Lancet*, 2 (13 Aug. 1842): 702.
30 *NMW* 11 (17 Sept. 1842): 94–95, 102–03, 118–19.
31 He undercut and beat by weeks the medical publisher Bailliere's one shilling version of the Address: *Medical Times*, 7 (17 Dec. 1842): 194.
32 *NMW* 11 (12 Nov. 1842): 164. Watson then advertised his fourpenny pamphlet in the medical press: *Medical Times* 7 (3 Dec. 1842): 162. Henry Atkinson, who was to introduce atheism to the middle classes with his and Harriet Martineau's *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature* (1851), was working with Engledue at this point and praised his address as "truly philosophical"—meaning seriously disturbing to conservative factions (*Medical Times* 8 [5 Aug. 1843]: 294).
33 HO 64/12, ff. 149, 161.
34 *PMG*, 22 Mar. 1834.
35 HO 64/12, f. 170.

Thomas Prout, along with others, mucked in to help Watson fit it out as a new venue. This was one that would prove, finally, to be long-lasting. They branded it the "Mechanics' Hall of Science".[36] The title "Hall of Science" is telling—'Science' was now viewed in these infidel circles as a rationalist saviour, an explanation of the true meaning of life and society. This was not the first use of the name, which would come to encompass all later socialist venues, but it was the first and most prominent London "Hall of Science".[37] With Watson and Saull behind it, the "Science" in the title had an overt anti-Christian meaning. Despite this, the original idea was to make it an auditorium for a sparkling lecturer, the former fustian-cutter and factory worker, Rowland Detrosier. He was a brilliant orator, a deist who believed in design, and another interested in working-class education. His star was rising, and although young and self-taught in the sciences, he was already sitting in the Secretary's seat as Saull chaired mass NPU meetings.[38]

Julian Hibbert's bequest made the hall, but it was tainted in orthodox eyes. This was the Hibbert who had caused outrage by refusing to swear on the Bible in court. Was not this Hall of Science, cried the failing Tory *Albion and the Star,*

> established with the aid of funds bequeathed for the purpose, by a professed Atheist who, but a few months before his death was, in consequence of a public declaration of his infidelity, dismissed from a Court of Justice as unqualified to give evidence upon a trial?

It was enough to damn the hall. The evening *Albion*, as one of its last gasps, decried the "pestiferous harangues of revolutionary demagogues" in Commercial Place, with all their "absurd doctrine of the 'majesty of the people'". Under "the insidious pretence of diffusing knowledge", these defilers spread "the destructive principles of blasphemous infidelity" in the hope of scouring from the "breasts every virtuous and social feeling". True science reinforced religion, these were "babblers of a jargon they pretend to call philosophy". And, with Watson's "beggarly shop"

36 Linton 1879, 19; Royle 1976, 104.

37 Frances Wright ran a "Hall Of Science" in Broome Street, New York, the old Ebenezer Church, from March 1829 (*Free Enquirer* 2nd ser. 1 (25 Mar. 1829): 174. In Britain, *The Poor Man's Advocate* (25 Feb. 1832) was discussing a "Mechanics' Hall of Science" in Manchester in 1832.

38 G. A. Williams 1965.

festooned "with obscene and indecent prints, profane and blasphemous placards", shock turned to outrage. For the *Albion*, this disdainful trash was enough "to demoralise and deprave the rising generation."[39]

At the gala opening on 7 April 1834, the spacious 2000-seat lecture theatre was packed to the gills. Owen in the chair lauded the institution's aim of placing "rational education within the reach of the working classes". Detrosier then made an eloquent speech, denouncing caste, war, nationalism, and the ignorance in which men were kept by Church and state. Saull seconded his resolution on the need for "really useful knowledge"—that is, class-useful knowledge—to arm the working people.[40] But Detrosier did not enjoy his platform for long. He died of a "chill" (presumably a lung infection) a few months later, aged only 34.

True to its aims, the Hall hosted talks turning on the origins of Heavens and Earth, equality, the education of women, meteorology, astronomy, prison reform, the air pump, colonization and capital punishment, anything on a Sunday, screamed a disgusted Tory press, "except religion". As such it is "a place which the local authorities ought long since to have indicted as a public nuisance and a scandalous disgrace to the neighbourhood".[41] It was large enough for fortnightly social festivals, with the Owenites enjoying dancing, music and dining. And Owen's right-hand-man, Saull, as usual would talk on the rise of fossil life and its astronomical driver, subjects always twinned in his eyes.[42] The authorities' antipathy showed again in the *Morning Herald*'s account of the Irish Nationalist Daniel O'Connell's opening salvo here in favour of Irish municipal elections (in which, needless to say, he was backed by Saull):

> A public meeting of the idle and dissolute of the metropolis, but purporting to be one of the electors and inhabitants of the borough of Finsbury, was held last night at a barn-looking place, called the "Hall of

39 *Albion and The Star*, 5 June 1835, 2. On the faltering Albion, [James Grant] 1837, 2 ed. 2: 112

40 *TS*, 8 Apr. 1834, 2, 6; *Republican* (Hetherington), 13 Apr. 1834; HO 64/19, f. 395; Johnson 1979 on "Really Useful Knowledge".

41 *Albion and The Star*, 5 June 1835, 2.

42 *NMW* 4 (6 Jan. 1838): 85; 5 (26 Jan. 1839): 224.

> Science," in the City-road, at which O'Connell re-opened his campaign against the Lords, with a ferocity surpassing all his previous attacks.[43]

Such attacks graphically demonstrate the sneering attitudes of the authorities to this non-cap-doffing and nose-thumbing "Mechanics' Hall of Science". And Saull's talks here, on corporate reform, anti-creationist science, and the production of destabilizing knowledge,[44] only reinforced their fears. From now on, this, with Owen's "Institution of the Industrious Classes", was to be Saull's regular haunt.

43 *Standard*, 28 Apr. 1837; *Courier*, 7 July 1836, 4. Saull too demanded the reform of the Lords (*TS*, 2 Dec. 1835, 2).

44 *TS*, 28 Aug. 1835, 2; *NMW* 6 (26 Oct. 1839): 848.