

# WILLIAM ROSCOE, THE ROSCOE CIRCLE AND RADICAL POLITICS IN LIVERPOOL, 1787-1807

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Read 16 March 1967

IT IS fourteen years since Dr Chandler collected and edited the poems of William Roscoe and thirteen since Professor J. R. Hale in his *England and the Italian Renaissance* indicated the niche, albeit a rather narrow and provincial one, which this first of a long line of Liverpool men of letters should occupy in the cultural history of the homeland. Meagre and sometimes appalling as a poet, Roscoe could nonetheless claim to have rekindled along with others a new enthusiasm for the long-neglected study of renaissance Italy. It was no part of Chandler's or Hale's concern to detail Roscoe's political career, and this was perhaps appropriate, for Roscoe the man of letters and Roscoe the impassioned radical are in some ways two separate personalities. Granted that a vague romanticism informs both his poems and his political attitudes, and granted that his vision of Liverpool as the Venice of the North must owe something to his Medici studies, there is scarcely any more positive connection between Roscoe in his different capacities as *littérateur* and politician. Roscoe disclaimed any affinity between the two ruling passions of his life: the barbarous methods by which the makers of the Italian city states established their sovereignty and beautified their capitals were scarcely worthy of imitation by those who looked for a cleaner, purer Liverpool arising from the ruins of the slave trade. Hence Roscoe's almost despairing attitude to his historical studies: they were 'tales of old times bearing but little relation to the momentous occurrences of the present day'.

## I THE LIVERPOOL JACOBINS

But if the shelves of his far-famed library gave William Roscoe little stimulus for an active political career, the gaunt walls of Benn's Garden Presbyterian Chapel, the very spirit of Puritanism

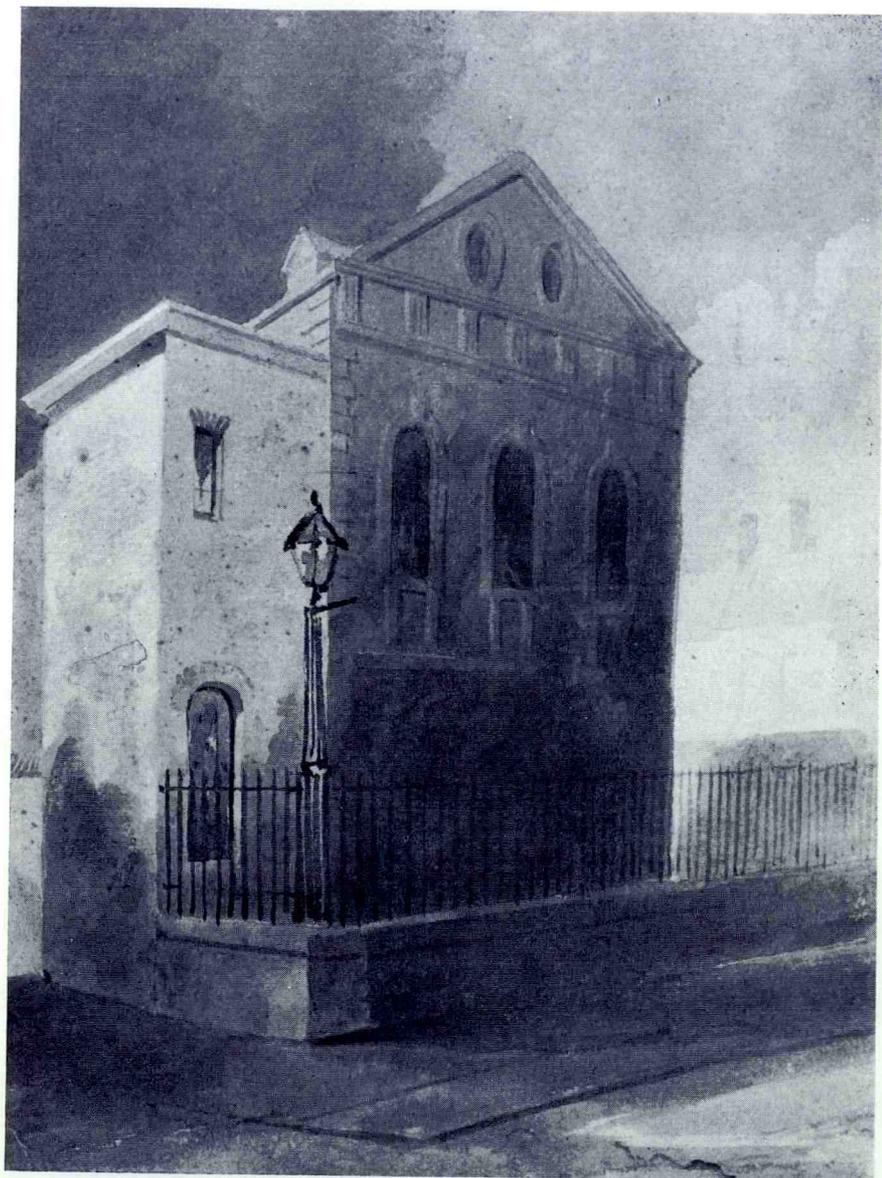


Plate 1

BENN'S GARDEN CHAPEL

From the watercolour by W. G. Hardman,  
by courtesy of Liverpool Public Libraries.

turned to stone, seem to have been the nursery of his civic radicalism. In the early eighteenth century the English Presbyterians, or moderate dissenters as they called themselves, had wielded some political power and social prestige. Their portraits, men of assured dignity in formal wigs and clothes of elegant cut, bespeak the fact. In Liverpool the two Presbyterian congregations in the early Georgian period had contributed their fair share of Mayors, bailiffs, aldermen, councillors, and even, for a brief period in 1757, a local M.P. But afterwards there was a period of rapid theological change as the churches passed into Unitarianism. Radical political ideas made themselves felt in the meeting houses, and the old Whig aristocracy cut itself away from its Dissenting allies as the academies began to fail. There was a marked decline in social standing, and in Liverpool, at least in the 60s and 70s, a positive flight of erstwhile Presbyterians into the arms of the Establishment.<sup>1</sup> In the closing decades of the eighteenth century there were still many young faces in the Presbyterian/Unitarian congregations, especially those of newcomers lately arrived from the country. But they now realised only too clearly that they dwelt far from the seats of power, both nationally and in the close corporations of towns such as Liverpool. Once again their portraits, like that of Roscoe himself, are most revealing, for they show persons of individual and calculating mien, with natural hair and clothes of sombre grey. These are men of a segregated middle class, cut off like their compeers in France from the sources of civic honour and profit to which they imagined themselves entitled, and seeking further outlets for their talents than the mere accumulation of capital, at which, as in Roscoe's own case, they seemed so peculiarly adept.

Thus in 1789 the earnest, young, freethinking, intellectual, fortune-hunters of the town's two Presbyterian chapels were as proud of the rôle their forebears had once played in the politics of the town as they were now conscious of their own minority status, for all stood outside the mainstream of Liverpool commercial life, long since dominated by the slave-owning Corporation families.<sup>2</sup> For a number of years Roscoe, Currie, Rathbone and Rushton with the Reverends Shepherd, Smith and Yates, together with a solitary Anglican, William Smyth (later Regius professor of modern history at Cambridge), had been associated in a number of literary and cultural ventures.

<sup>1</sup> See A. Holt, *Walking Together* (1938), chapters 6 and 7; H. L. Short in *The Hibbert Journal*, vol. 64, no. 254 (1966), 127f.

<sup>2</sup> See S. G. Checkland in *Economic History Review*, New Series, vol. 5. (1952).

When, with the coming of the French Revolution, the outlook of this coterie suddenly acquired a political tinge, they bore the brunt of the political abuse which attached to all who were suspected of sympathy with the infidel French.<sup>3</sup>

Though these reformers were dubbed the 'Liverpool Jacobins', sympathy with contemporary developments in France was only one aspect of their radical enthusiasm. At least four other causes were upheld simultaneously by this same handful of zealots: the first major attack on the Liverpool slave trade, a campaign for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, a movement for free trade with the Indies, and an intensive struggle with the close corporation of the town. In the third and fourth of their five onslaughts the Jacobins were clearly promoting their own ambitions, in the second they were defying the real interests of the town's freeman population, and in the fifth just as readily upholding them. Not for the first time the reformers of Liverpool found their political principles strangely confused, both at variance and in accord with the basic attitudes of the working classes.

Even before the Revolution broke out, a great service held at Benn's Garden Chapel on 16 November 1788, to commemorate the centenary of the Glorious Revolution with a hymn specially composed by Roscoe for the occasion, brought together in a reforming atmosphere the future leaders of Liverpool Jacobinism. An 'Ode To The People of France' appeared from Roscoe's pen in 1789, and on the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, a number of 'friends of liberty' assembled for a celebration, and Roscoe composed for the occasion a new song, 'Unfold Father Time',<sup>4</sup> which he followed up the next year with a bitter reply to Burke's *Reflections*, 'The Life, Death and Wonderful Achievements of Edmund Burke'.<sup>5</sup> In 1792 it was Shepherd who gave the most vocal expression to local revolutionary sentiment in his 'Verse Epistle to Edward Rushton', a surprisingly anti-clerical poem from the minister of Gateacre Chapel, and his scurrilous 'Edmund Burke To The Swinish

<sup>3</sup> Jacobinism in Liverpool was wholly a middle class protest movement. No branch of the London Corresponding Society was ever founded among the town's loyalist working people.

<sup>4</sup> See *Liverpool Bulletin*, vol. 9 (1961), 44.

<sup>5</sup> Roscoe, who here expresses his indebtedness to Paine and Mary Woolstonecraft, was an admirer of Vergniaud and the Brissotins; Currie more cautiously favoured Lafayette and the Feuillants. See H. Roscoe, *Life of William Roscoe* (1833), vol. I, 110.

Multitude'.<sup>6</sup> By this time the anti-Jacobin crusade in other parts of the country was beginning to affect the Liverpool reformers: during her father's imprisonment, Miss Wakefield had come to stay with the Cromptons at Eton House,<sup>7</sup> and Shepherd was soon to dismiss his school early so that he could visit Joyce and Wakefield in their London prison.

The last literary sally by the Liverpool Jacobins was Currie's 'Letter Commercial and Political Addressed To The Rt. Hon. William Pitt' (1793), written under the pseudonym of Jasper Wilson, a moderate work which sees political liberty and free trade as the obverse and reverse of the same coin.<sup>8</sup> By this date the atmosphere was becoming increasingly inflamed, and the Liverpool Jacobins had deemed it wise to meet no more for a public avowal of their beliefs.

Though Roscoe had attacked the slave trade in his poem 'Mount Pleasant', which appeared in 1777, and again in 'The Wrongs of Africa', published together with Rushton's 'West Indian Eclogues' ten years later, it was only in the latter year that a serious prose work of his, 'A General View of the African Slave Trade', provoked the famous controversy with the Jesuit Fr Harris, whose defence of the 'Licitness' of the Traffic earned him a pension from the Corporation. There was a bitter reply, 'A Scriptural Refutation', from Roscoe. The Corporation was inspired through Mr P. W. Brackner to petition Parliament vigorously to uphold the trade,<sup>9</sup> and a small group of Liverpool reformers founded a local branch of the Anti-Slavery Society in 1788.<sup>10</sup> It was an act of considerable moral courage on the part of the four Quakers, Dr Binns, Nathaniel Daulby, the two William Rathbones and the three Unitarians, Roscoe, Wallace, and Yates who were the original members.<sup>11</sup> Smyth wrote from Cambridge to Currie, cautioning him lest he be 'thrown into the dock',<sup>12</sup> and Roscoe admitted that from any point of view

<sup>6</sup> Shepherd's pen was dipped in vitriol. He had, however, an uncanny knack of keeping out of trouble. See Anon, *Selections from the early correspondence of the Rev. William Shepherd* (1835), 49, 61. Such good fortune did not attend his assistant teacher, Thomas Lloyd, who was lodged in gaol for a seditious song and afterwards found his health permanently impaired. See E. Axon, *Memorials of the Nicholson Family* (1928), 112.

<sup>7</sup> T. Fletcher, *Autobiographical Reminiscences* (1893), 69.

<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless Wilberforce considered Currie's attack on Pitt most unfair. See R. D. Thornton, *James Currie and Robert Burns* (1963), 213.

<sup>9</sup> See G. Williams, *The Liverpool Privateers* (1897), 572f, 609f, for these events.

<sup>10</sup> It was for this group that Yates produced an epoch-making anti-slavery sermon the same year. See *Monthly Repository*, vol. 22 (1827), 68.

<sup>11</sup> E. Rathbone, *Records of the Rathbones of Liverpool* (1913), 90.

<sup>12</sup> Currie Papers (L'pool RO) 239, 241, 21 Jan. 1787, 7 Feb. 1787.

their action had been 'injudicious',<sup>13</sup> but fearlessly they persevered, Currie and Roscoe devoting the profits from 'The Wrongs of Africa' to the national committee of the Abolitionists. In 1788 Rushton and others even brought out a newspaper, *The Liverpool Weekly Herald*, largely concerned with the attack on the slave trade. (*The Herald*, no copies of which appear to have survived, perished during the great anti-Jacobin reaction of late 1792.)

As early as 1790, during the election, the temper of the town towards the anti-slave traders was revealed. The squibs of Gascoyne and Penrhyn, the sitting members, and Tarleton, the challenger, all of whom were in some way concerned in the trade, contained dark hints as to Liverpool's fate if the trade were to be swept away.<sup>14</sup> By April 1792, when vital discussions on the issue were taking place in Parliament, workmen in Liverpool were openly boasting that 'some houses in the town which they had marked should be pulled down' if abolition were to succeed.<sup>15</sup> After this no further comment was heard from the Liverpool abolitionists for a decade and more.

The agitation for the repeal of religious tests (which had not, of course, bothered the occasional conformist Presbyterians of the mid-eighteenth century in the slightest) was again part of a national movement with which the Liverpool Jacobins were fully identified. In January 1790 James Currie took the lead in organizing the Liverpool response to the repeal campaign by forming a local organisation and publishing an open letter in the local press.<sup>16</sup> Currie, Arthur Heywood, France and Yates were the Liverpool representatives at a great Dissenting meeting held in Warrington a little later, and Currie indulged in a pamphlet war with the Rev. Edward Owen, an Anglican clergyman whom he forced publicly to recant his anti-nonconformist polemic.<sup>17</sup> This particular campaign was, however, soon submerged under far weightier issues, and nothing more was heard of the Clarendon Code until the turn of the century.

The struggle for the repeal of the East India Company's charter is likewise chiefly important as a foreshadowing of what was to become a major controversy at a later date. A great public meeting was held on 23 November 1792 to denounce the East India monopoly and the Company's proposal to raise an

<sup>13</sup> Roscoe Papers (L'pool RO) 239, 241, 21 Jan. 1787, 7 Feb. 1787.

<sup>14</sup> Holt and Gregson papers (L'pool RO), vol. 50.

<sup>15</sup> A. Aspinall, *The Early English Trade Unions* (1949), 2.

<sup>16</sup> Gore's *Liverpool Advertiser*, 14 Jan. 1790.

<sup>17</sup> R. D. Thornton, *op. cit.* 202.

additional capital of £2 million. Once again the leading Liverpool Jacobins gathered together on a common political platform,<sup>18</sup> but this agitation, intended to be the first in a series, was soon subsumed into the much weightier confrontation between the Liverpool freemen and the close corporation.

The long-standing struggle of the freemen against oligarchic privilege flared up after a long period of uneasy peace in October 1790, when a memorial signed by 36 prominent freemen complained to the Mayor and bailiffs of the method of filling recent vacancies on the Council and of the men chosen to fill them. The Liverpool Jacobins were this time not alone in their democratic protests. Anglican Whigs such as Willis Earle and Ellis Hodgson, and even a few Tories were among the signatories.<sup>19</sup> At the start of 1791 a petition of 1,028 freemen was collected, calling for a Common Hall to select new Council Members. The Hall met on 17 January, duly chose the members, and emboldened by William Rathbone's leadership then demanded an audit of the Town Books, which was refused. The Corporation challenged the new councillors' credentials, and a protracted law-suit ensued in the King's Bench, which was only terminated in 1792 when the freemen leaders' patience and funds were both exhausted. Tumultuous scenes were witnessed throughout these proceedings, and the Nicholson family was mobbed in the streets by excited freemen.

At the end of November 1792 an ominous note was struck when the Recorder and Mayor of Liverpool ordered 10,000 copies of an anti-Jacobin declaration to be printed and distributed free in the town. To this document (the Resolutions as it was subsequently called), which was both violent in tone and contained implicitly an encouragement to violence against the local reformers, Rathbone at once replied with a pamphlet entitled 'Equality', and was rewarded with a libel action for his pains.<sup>20</sup> Democratic feeling was running high and the pressure of moderate Whigs finally forced the Mayor to summon a General Meeting of the inhabitants to the Town Hall on December 8, so that the true sense of Liverpool opinion could be gauged. Here, despite Tory opposition, Rathbone and Roscoe, 'the Mainstay of the reforming party',<sup>21</sup> produced a spirited address, containing 1,100 signatures, 'the parsons and the high church found themselves in an unaccustomed minority', and a

<sup>18</sup> E. Rathbone, *op. cit.* 96.

<sup>19</sup> J. A. Picton, *Memorials of Liverpool* (1875), vol. I, 220f.

<sup>20</sup> Rathbone Papers II. i, 162 (letter of 23 Dec. 1792).

<sup>21</sup> Rathbone Papers II. i, 162.

moderate declaration of grievances drawn up by Joseph Birch was overwhelmingly approved.<sup>22</sup> The last word, however, lay with the Corporation. At an adjourned meeting at the Exchange on December 10, an angry Tory mob confronted Rathbone at the head of what he was pleased to call his 'sansculottes', and the eloquent Quaker was shouted down and jostled.

From this point on the Liverpool Jacobins were 'marked men,'<sup>23</sup> and the collector of customs kept a careful check on their activities with a view to future prosecution.<sup>24</sup> In early 1793 Rathbone attempted to call another meeting to petition for the dismissal of Pitt, and he wrote a stirring pamphlet pleading for peace with France,<sup>25</sup> but his influence even with the freemen (whose loyalism had been aroused again by Liverpool's involvement in war with France, as well as by anti-Jacobin pamphlets and sermons) was now completely at an end. The crisis of November to December 1792 had left him a physical and emotional wreck, his hair turned white almost overnight (hence his nickname, 'the hoary traitor') and full of religious doubts and perplexities.<sup>26</sup> For public affairs, 'having regard to the lunacy of the town',<sup>27</sup> he had no longer any inclination; he would devote the rest of his life to religious enquiry. Currie was similarly disillusioned. The government authorities, noting the moderate, even apologetic, tone of the Jasper Wilson letter, commissioned George Chalmers to write a reasoned, moderate reply with the intention quietly to silence rather than to harry this skilful and widely respected pamphleteer. Their success was complete.<sup>28</sup> Currie threw himself heart and soul into his medical work among the poor, though as a precaution he borrowed £1,200 and enquired after a property in Virginia, for, as he wrote, 'The poor, persecuted and abused Presbyterians are universally broken-hearted, and are preparing for emigration to America in vast numbers'.<sup>29</sup> Shepherd too secured a property in

<sup>22</sup> H. Roscoe, *op. cit.* 121. A copy of this address survives in the L'pool RO.

<sup>23</sup> Shepherd's *Introduction to the Poems of Edward Rushton* (no date).

<sup>24</sup> H. Roscoe, *op. cit.* 128. An amusing verse account of the crisis of 1792 is to be found in the Rathbone Family Scrapbook, Rathbone papers, xix. 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Monthly Repository*, vol. 4 (1809), 230.

<sup>26</sup> Rathbone Papers II. i, 163.

<sup>27</sup> E. Rathbone, *op. cit.* 107.

<sup>28</sup> W. W. Currie, *Memoirs of James Currie* (1831), vol. I, 217.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* vol. I, 177.

Kentucky in preparation for flight, while Roscoe, his revolutionary passions completely extinguished by the fall of the Gironde, wrote to Lord Lansdowne that 'the leaders have apostatised and the disciples perish'.<sup>30</sup> Even the meetings of the literary circle were suspended in view of the severity of the anti-Jacobin reaction, and Shepherd in one of his rare poems bade his friend Roscoe find peace from 'intestine broils and foreign rage' amid his 'domestic comforts'. It was prudent advice wisely acted upon.

## II THE RISE OF THE RATIONAL DISSENTERS

The next few years saw the Liverpool Jacobins silenced and on the defensive. There was a slight stirring in November 1795 when a petition was organised against the government's repressive measures:<sup>31</sup> 4,000 signatures were obtained, but a loyal petition received far more, and no delegation was sent up to London. A year later Roscoe was in print again, with his *Strictures On Mr. Burke's Two Letters*, a tract pleading for the re-opening of peace negotiations with France. In 1797, however, when Roscoe sent an article to the *Morning Chronicle* on the same theme, it was not allowed to appear. Rathbone and Roscoe were both in despair, lamenting that no minority view could now obtain a hearing, fulminating against the men and events which had reduced their party to silence.<sup>32</sup> Fortunately the Jacobins had plenty of opportunity for expanding their social energies in other directions. Currie, for example, apart from the medical work which led him in 1802 into a clash with local property owners over the already notorious cellar-dwellings,<sup>33</sup> conducted with the help of Rathbone and Roscoe a vigorous campaign for improved conditions among the French prisoners of war. He secured the appointment of a government commission to visit the prison in 1801, but involved himself meanwhile in a number of clashes, one of them unpleasantly violent.<sup>34</sup> Above all, these were the years when Rational Dissent acquired in Liverpool the economic base for the social and political role it was later to occupy. The Booths emerged unquestionably as the spokesmen

<sup>30</sup> H. Roscoe, *op. cit.* 110.

<sup>31</sup> Rathbone Papers, Wm. Rathbone IV's Scrapbook, 51.

<sup>32</sup> Rathbone Papers II. i, 146, 151.

<sup>33</sup> B. D. White, *The Corporation of Liverpool* (1951), 33.

<sup>34</sup> See A. de Curzon, *Dr. James Currie and The French prisoners of war in Liverpool* (1926). Currie was nevertheless given the freedom of the Town in 1802, largely on account of his efforts to rebuild its defences against a possible French attack.

of the Liverpool corn trade; Roscoe, by means which are even today obscure, acquired his personal fortune;<sup>35</sup> the Rathbones built up the commercial ascendancy of their trading house. The cotton broker who was generally a Dissenter and deeply concerned for the abrogation of the East India Company's charter first made his appearance in the town;<sup>36</sup> and, following the lead of the Heywoods in the 1770s, George Booth, Currie and Rathbone combined to found the St George's Fire Office (1802), thus initiating one of the most necessary and lucrative ancillary services to the 19th century expansion of Liverpool shipping.<sup>37</sup>

Of considerable, though largely hidden significance is the pace of social mobility within the two Unitarian congregations. It was during the same period that certain old families, the Heywoods, Nicholsons and Frances transferred their economic interests to other towns, while a few more, such as the Englishes, Durnings and Wallaces continued slowly to fade from civic prominence, and others, the Mathers and Prestons for example, began to tread the road which would lead them eventually to conform. Their places were quickly taken by newly-rich seat-holders, of whom Roscoe is the most conspicuous but among whom the Rathbones (whose theological liberalism now proved finally incompatible with the Quaker tradition), the Fletchers, the numerous progeny of the Rev. James Yates, Dr Currie, and the Harvey brothers (the family of radical lawyers) must clearly be included. Then again, the war and the commercial possibilities of the growing port attracted a host of newcomers (whom within a generation Liverpuddlians would be including among 'our old families', the town's favourite epithet for its Unitarian élite). Joseph Hancox hastened to Liverpool in 1790 when his father's Birmingham ironworks failed; Thomas Jevons, the son of a Staffordshire nailmaker, set up on his own in Liverpool in 1798; Peter Crompton, M.D., removed from Derby to Eton House, Wavertree, the same year. From Knutsford came Charles Holland, from Rochdale George Holt, from North Wales Hugh Jones the banker, and from Nottinghamshire George Lissant Cox. The Thornleys, who like the Yates first tasted affluence when apprenticed to the Rathbone House, the Boltons from north Lancashire, the Musgroves and the Bowrings added to the influx of new men. They were anxious, and generally able through successful business partnerships and marriage alliances

<sup>35</sup> It was suggested at the time that his wealth was indirectly derived from the slave trade, but the same could be said of almost every propertied man in Liverpool.

<sup>36</sup> F. E. Hyde in *Econ. Hist. Rev.* New Series, vol. 8 (1955).

<sup>37</sup> R. V. Holt, *The Unitarian Contribution To Social Progress* (1952), 60.

within the tightly-knit Dissenting community, to turn the pittance with which they arrived in the town into a fortune within a generation or less.<sup>38</sup> The growing prosperity of Liverpool's Unitarian community is naturally reflected in their gradual admission to an ever greater share in the affairs of the local Whig party until, by 1806, though by no means all of them possessed the right to vote, they may fairly be said to dominate the same and were able to arrogate to themselves the organization and financing of election campaigns and even the choice of parliamentary candidates.

In the election of 1796 their role was fairly small. Two military gentlemen, Colonel Gascoyne and General Tarleton, again presented themselves to the voters of Liverpool. The former was a mean and selfish man, who later on habitually secured election by an embarrassing display of his war wounds, the latter an exhibitionist who carried favour by obscene antics and curious ribaldry, and both had political careers which were completely undistinguished.<sup>39</sup>

Tarleton, a sitting member, had in the anti-Jacobin atmosphere of the times erred gravely in identifying himself with the Whigs and advocating peace with France: accordingly a third candidate offered himself for election, Tarleton's own brother, John, whose High Tory principles were identical with Gascoyne's. Naturally the Rational Dissenters lent their aid to the aggrieved sitting member, despite the fact that Tarleton's fortunes were largely based on his slave trading interests. The Tories made the most of the General's Unitarian support, publishing a handbill appealing for the 'rejection of all those who openly avow their disbelief in the important truths of Christianity',<sup>40</sup> castigating Tarleton as a Jacobin himself, and issuing a squib which ended:

Yet I can't spare the men who the General support,  
Proper objects of satire, fit only for sport,  
Presbyterians and Jacobins round him unite,  
Who their sovereign detest and sedition incite.<sup>41</sup>

The two soldiers were elected and the impetuous challenger appeared at the foot of the poll with only 317 votes. By 1802 the Rational Dissenters were prepared to play a larger role in local politics, and in the election of that year the official Whig

<sup>38</sup> Information on these families is derived from the Registers of Renshaw St and Paradise St Chapels, and obituary notices in local newspapers.

<sup>39</sup> Colonel Gascoyne twice achieved notoriety: in 1812 because he happened to have arrested Perceval's assassin, and in 1831 when he moved the rejection of the Reform Bill. Tarleton was even less conspicuous.

<sup>40</sup> Holt and Gregson papers, vol. 53, 44.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 73.

candidate chosen to oppose the generals was in fact Joseph Birch of the Hasles, Prescott, a Liverpool merchant often seen in the Prescott Unitarian congregation. (A fourth candidate, Mr F. Chalmer, a local tobacco broker, stood on behalf of the Independent Freemen but received only 31 votes). In his campaign Birch made much of the obvious absurdity of a great commercial centre being represented by two inept soldiers<sup>42</sup> and, proclaiming himself a friend of Peace, Trade and Prosperity, took as his symbol the 'Big Loaf'. This was enough for the Tory pamphleteers, who denounced him as a corn jew, a merciless exploiter of the poor, and his and Chalmer's supporters as 'a canting, hypocritical, jesuitical set of Presbyterians who preach up the liberty they never wish to see in practice'.<sup>43</sup> Birch was then given some sage advice:

Exclude from your councils all Jacobin pates,  
Nor put too much trust in that Calvinist Yates,  
That grim-looking doctor from Derby expelled,  
In contempt and derision will always be held.<sup>44</sup>

Once again the two soldiers were elected, though Birch, who polled well with 477 votes, had taken the precaution to stand for Nottingham also and was duly returned for that town.<sup>45</sup>

### III WILLIAM ROSCOE, M.P.

By November 1806, when Liverpool was again plunged into the excitement of a contested election, Arthur Heywood had emerged as the undisputed Whig organizer and not unnaturally Roscoe himself was nominated, after an attempt to secure Lord Sefton as parliamentary candidate for the town had failed.<sup>46</sup> This time everything seemed to be conspiring towards a notable success for the reform party. Roscoe was at the height of his literary and business career, and could certainly afford the expense of a Liverpool election (he paid out about £12,000, most of it in direct bribery). The two soldiers were by this time

<sup>42</sup> Squib Book of the Liverpool Election of 1802, 33.

<sup>43</sup> Holt and Gregson Papers, vol. 36, 43.

<sup>44</sup> Squib Book, 19. The reference is to Dr Crompton.

<sup>45</sup> J. A. Picton, *op. cit.* vol. I, 296.

<sup>46</sup> Lord Sefton's reasons for refusal were explained by a Tory Pamphleteer:

To himself thus he argued: those Whiggish Dissenters  
Will afterwards prove my eternal tormentors,  
In Kirkby and Croxteth they'll take their diversions,  
And to please them at last I must give my reversions.

exceedingly unpopular, especially Tarleton, who had ignored several local deputations to Parliament, had once again been guilty of a political *volte-face*, deserting Fox for Pitt, and had become a government pensioner. Roscoe on the contrary was basking in the reflected glory of his reputation as a philanthropist, which his Liverpool admirers readily turned to political account.<sup>47</sup> Again the soldiers, confused in any case by the recent death of Pitt, had never expected their re-election to be contested seriously, took few steps to bribe the electors (spending between them a mere £7,000) and, most seriously, ignored the 'outvoters', an all-important factor in Liverpool politics, then as now. Roscoe was at great pains to bring in his supporters from Manchester, where the Heywoods opened a 'house' for their benefit,<sup>48</sup> and from as far away as Sedgley and Plymouth.<sup>49</sup> The soldiers enjoyed no fresh accession of electoral strength from any quarter. Roscoe was inundated with letters of support from the Duke of Gloucester, the Earl of Derby and Lord Holland among others, and, as a representative of their interests, enjoyed the services of the 'phalanx of clerks' attached to the hard-pressed American commercial houses, a decisive contribution to his eventual success.<sup>50</sup> But the two most significant factors in the election would doubtless be the attitude of the freemen and the question of the slave trade, and in both instances events unexpectedly worked in Roscoe's favour. Relations between the freemen and the Corporation were now as bad as they had been in the early 1790s, for the latter had not only been busily enclosing stretches of common land, but had also committed the error of employing non-freemen in Corporation works, to the anger of the townfolk. Roscoe had thus no difficulty in presenting himself as the freemen's champion, upholder of their liberties against their masters' oppression, the candidate who would give them their first opportunity to express their political independence since Sir William Meredith's election in 1761.<sup>51</sup>

The reform candidate at once expressed his determination that as many as possible of the 3,000 Liverpool electors (about five-sixths of whom could be described as *working men*), who had held back in 1796 and 1802, should this time dare to register their votes. This would create a situation where it would there-

<sup>47</sup> John Adam's Squib Book of the 1806 Liverpool election, 62.

<sup>48</sup> Roscoe Papers, 2976.

<sup>49</sup> Roscoe Papers, 2975, 319, 3118.

<sup>50</sup> Roscoe Papers, 1745, 1187, 2090, 2091; Wright and Cruickshank's Account of the 1806 election, viii.

<sup>51</sup> John Adams, *op. cit.* 17.

after be impossible 'for any man or any body of men to dictate to men determined to exercise their dearest right.'<sup>52</sup> Again Roscoe, the notorious abolitionist, was addressing an electorate now convinced that the slave trade was doomed. Wilberforce's victory was regarded as so certain that the previous two years had seen a tremendous burst of slave trading activity in Liverpool, only to be explained as an attempt to make a hasty profit while the abuse still lasted.<sup>53</sup> Roscoe had only to insist on the two necessary principles of gradual abolition and compensation for losses<sup>54</sup>. Otherwise the inevitability of abolition made the slave trade 'a false issue',<sup>55</sup> though Roscoe was careful to paint a magnificent picture of the future commercial greatness of the port when the East India Company's monopoly was abolished, the new South American trade put on a proper footing, and the profitable Liverpool-American connection developed as fully as it deserved to be. (Critics did not fail to point out that Roscoe's chief backers were the American merchants, or that the Rathbones and Croppers had achieved such primacy in that trade that they were already acting as a kind of unofficial consular service for the American government in England.)<sup>56</sup>

With every advantage in his favour Roscoe could well afford to give no political pledge at all during the election campaign of November 1806, other than his complete sympathy with the claims of the Independent Freemen. The Tories' every ruse seemed somehow to fail: the old cry of Corn-Jews and Grocers he could treat with disdain, and attempts to whip up religious prejudice (the Anglican clergy were far more active in the streets on this occasion than in any previous election) rebounded to their discredit. 'Church and King' was, declared Roscoe, 'an exploded cry. We are all for Church and King'.<sup>57</sup> Alarmist and scurrilous cries such as 'No African Trade! The workhouse for carpenters, coopers, riggers and sailmakers. Roscoe for Ever!' or 'You will beg your bread and quit your country, for you will never obtain relief from the Presbyterians'<sup>58</sup> he could afford to ignore. Even the Tory charge that he was of lowly birth and formerly of humble occupation Roscoe could counter by refer-

<sup>52</sup> Jones and Wright's *History of the 1806 Election*, 3.

<sup>53</sup> C. N. Parkinson. *The Trade Winds* (1948), 258.

<sup>54</sup> Jones and Wright, *op. cit.* 43.

<sup>55</sup> J. Adams, *op. cit.* 67.

<sup>56</sup> See F. Thistlethwaite, *The Anglo-American Connection in the Early 19th Century* (1959), 79, 80; S. G. Checkland in *Journal of Economic History*, vol. 18 (1958), 145.

<sup>57</sup> Jones and Wright *op. cit.* 7.

<sup>58</sup> J. Adams, *op. cit.* 45, 47.

ence to the respectability of his supporters, Sefton 'a gentleman of birth and extensive property', or Stanley, 'the illustrious'.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile Tarleton floundered from error to error, first of all making a coalition with Gascoyne and then, when Roscoe's victory seemed assured, trying to identify himself with the freemen's hero. When the polling closed, Roscoe was at the head with 1,151 votes, Gascoyne second, though of course still victorious in this two-member constituency with 1,138, and Tarleton at the foot of the poll with 986. Amidst scenes of tremendous popular enthusiasm Roscoe on November 25 did what he had consistently refused to do during the election, and outlined the principles which would guide his parliamentary conduct: to work for an honourable and lasting peace, 'when our superiority of manufactures in fair competition will bring blessings on the land,' to encourage industry and agriculture and eliminate crippling taxation, to work for the abolition of the slave trade, for 'gradual and temperate measures of parliamentary reform', and to modify the East India Company's charter.<sup>60</sup>

Roscoe's parliamentary career, begun so auspiciously, turned out to be a bitter and agonizing experience. The difficult circumstances of London life and the separation from his family proved demoralising and contributed to a recurrence of his nervous disorders,<sup>61</sup> which Leyland's unexpected dissolution of their commercial partnership did nothing to allay.<sup>62</sup> Roscoe in consequence was rarely in the House, and his failure to make the resounding speeches expected of him perplexed his ardent supporters.<sup>63</sup> He was besieged with demands for action on the part of the American merchants, who behaved with excessive importunity as well as unnecessary discourtesy to his fellow member, Gascoyne,<sup>64</sup> together with a flow of exhortations from his friend Rathbone urging him to greater efforts over the East India question.<sup>65</sup> He soon found himself drawn into political alignments which were bound to have serious repercussions in Liverpool. In the debate over Catholic emancipation in the spring of 1807 Roscoe upheld Catholic claims against the eloquence of Canning.<sup>66</sup> On the slave trade question, Roscoe,

<sup>59</sup> Jones and Wright, *op. cit.* 22.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* 43.

<sup>61</sup> Roscoe Papers, 2775.

<sup>62</sup> H. Roscoe, *op. cit.* 361.

<sup>63</sup> Roscoe Papers, 1087, 3054.

<sup>64</sup> Roscoe Papers, 3101.

<sup>65</sup> Roscoe Papers, 3058, 3059, 3060.

<sup>66</sup> Roscoe, *op. cit.* 383.

grossly distorting his former pledges, spoke of the 'real compensation' for abolition which would be found in the opening up of the East India trade. With frightening naivety he wrote to Rathbone that 'adherence to one's principles can hardly be made a very substantial cause of reproach'.<sup>67</sup> Unfortunately the news from Liverpool, of erstwhile supporters thrown out of work, of financial losses to the port which a recent historian has calculated at £7½million,<sup>68</sup> of hot speeches at the Church and King club, and a sudden and 'infatuated' Tory reaction which was redolent of the worst excesses of the anti-Jacobin period,<sup>69</sup> all indicated that Liverpool's enthusiasm for the cause of Reform was likely to be short-lived. By April 1807 Roscoe had probably resolved not to contest the seat again.

At the dissolution of Parliament he did not shirk what was his obvious duty, to return to Liverpool and give an account of his conduct. But the reception he was accorded by bands of half starved seamen armed with bludgeons, the break-up of his procession and the stabbing of one of his horses in Castle Street proved too much. Having reached his bank, Roscoe amid great clamour referred with pride to his parliamentary conduct, but declared that he would not give his enemies further opportunity for excesses such as he had just witnessed, and withdrew from the impending contest.<sup>70</sup>

A few days later, however, a handful of his keenest supporters raised a sum of money, and to his deep regret, nominated him for re-election against the two soldiers, Tarleton having returned to seek his fortune in Liverpool again. During the seven days (May 7 to 15 1807) that Roscoe's nomination was sustained, his Tory opponents launched on the town a campaign of scurrilous squibs and pamphlets whose vitriolic tone seemed to reflect the distressing circumstances in which many townsmen now found themselves. A series of mock 'Papal Bulls' called upon 'all apprentices, ragamuffins, jailbirds, Presbyterians, rogues, Methodists and whores' to support Roscoe, 'the stimulator of His Holiness' person'. The Quakers, whose political activism belied their quietist pretensions, were an especial target of abuse, while

'The silky-fleeced Presbyters we'll eagerly spurn,  
The foe to the slave-trade we'll never return'.

Even Roscoe's literary reputation was used against him, and

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 391.

<sup>68</sup> E. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1954), 63.

<sup>69</sup> Roscoe Papers, 1748, 3069.

<sup>70</sup> H. Roscoe, *op. cit.* 394.

a Liverpool workman was represented as exclaiming, 'He is an ornament to the town, but what have we poor folk to do with ornaments?'<sup>71</sup> Meanwhile, on the occasions he could make himself heard, Roscoe conducted one of the feeblest campaigns in Liverpool's electoral history. It was in vain for him to speak of the fillip he had given both to the West Indian and American merchants, for this dubious claim only played into the hands of his opponents, in vain to dwell on the respectability of his support before starving men, and in vain to remind the voters that he had given the independent freemen their first opportunity to defy the domination of their masters, a privilege that they should not lose, despite the 'temporary losses' arising from the abolition of the trade. It was the height of folly to claim that as his own vote in favour of abolition was only one of a majority of 64, it was really immaterial to the final result—a piece of casuistry treated with the outraged anger it deserved. Finally, amid cries of 'down with the Rump, the canting Presbyterians, the vile corn-jews,' Roscoe on May 15 withdrew his candidature. He polled a mere 377 votes to Tarleton's 1,461 and Gascoyne's 1,277. Lord Holland described the defeat as a 'disgrace to the country', the Duke of Gloucester reassured Roscoe that he could now fulfil his natural inclination for peace and retirement, and another correspondent, Dr J. E. Smith, comforted him with the reflection that 'the world is not worthy of you'.<sup>72</sup> Roscoe, blandly attributing his defeat to the 'temporary delusion of the public mind',<sup>73</sup> withdrew to Allerton Hall to resume his interrupted renaissance studies, declining with thanks an offer from Lord Derby of a deputy-lieutenancy on the grounds that, as a firm Dissenter, the occasional conformity which would be demanded of him was obnoxious to his principles.<sup>74</sup>

Roscoe's brief parliamentary career left behind it a bitter heritage of disillusionment and ill-feeling. His later political career, before his bankruptcy in 1816, is certainly not without interest, but after the famous contest of 1812 political honours fell entirely to his enemies and the town was satisfied to be represented by mercantile Tories of the calibre of Canning and Huskisson who, when weightier arguments failed them, could always dilate on the miseries the electorate had suffered during the ministry of All The Talents. It was appropriate that Roscoe's parliamentary career should have coincided exactly with that particular regime,

<sup>71</sup> Holt and Gregson Papers, vol. 41, 11, 18, 153.

<sup>72</sup> H. Roscoe, *op. cit.* 407f.

<sup>73</sup> Holt and Gregson Papers, vol. 41, 146.

<sup>74</sup> Roscoe Papers, 1190, 1191.

for it was the moral and ethical idealism of his political vision which chiefly impressed at the time, and can still strike a chord of sympathetic understanding among radicals today. Roscoe was certainly the first local example of the intellectual in politics, and it became an unwritten law of Liverpool's nineteenth century electoral behaviour that he should be the last. The voters year after year returned 'practical' shipowners, uninspired but well-disposed businessmen, colourless attorneys or the occasional younger son of a noble house (for 'Liverpool loves a Lord' was another unpalatable truth which threw democrats like John Bright into a rage with this city). Men of talent and intellectual attainment like Augustine Birrell sought their franchise in vain. Only in rare circumstances, such as those attending the election of William Rathbone VI or Samuel Smith, could a true intellectual achieve success, and then only because he had first proved his mettle by accumulating a fortune in business and afterwards giving a generous part of it to local charity. Yet even in the case of these two men, who are the only Liberals to have represented the most conservative city in the kingdom for any length of time and with any distinction, it was their ponderous intellectual equipment and heavy nonconformist moralising which led eventually to ignominious rejection. The awful lesson of Roscoe's altruistic meddlesomeness was not easily forgotten or forgiven.