

The Politics of Lamb, Peacock and Romantic "Russophobia" Abstract

Spurred on by Duncan Wu's talk for the Charles Lamb Birthday lunch on 12 February 2022, which focussed on Lamb's connection with the radical William Hone, I want to return to Lamb's politics. This talk focused on Lamb and his fellow East India Company employee Thomas Love Peacock. Both men have much in common, and not only in their marginal status as friends of half of the Big Six. Although scholarly classicists, neither Lamb nor Peacock attended university. Both suffered depression, which they similarly countered by making puns and jokes; and each served long with the East India Company. The Company was, Thomas Babington Macauley writes, "the strangest of all governments; but it is designed for the strangest of all empires. [...] intrusted with the sovereignty of a larger population, the disposal of a larger clear revenue, the command of a larger army, than are under the direct management of the Executive Government of the United Kingdom." Lamb served the EIC for thirty-three and Peacock thirty-seven years. Both also survived to be superannuated men on substantial pensions: from 1825 received Lamb £450 per year and Peacock £1333, 6s. 8d. from 1856.

Any reader of Lamb's invective political poetry, which contains lines such as "thou must, surely, loathe thyself" to George Canning in "The Unbeloved" (*The Champion*, 1820), knows he was not always "gentle" Charles. Lamb's busiest period of writing political poetry, between 1820 and 1822, would see him siding with radicals against a government that used spies to subvert the politics of his city, as his poems on the Cato Street Conspiracy attest. However, prior to this, Lamb had already been utilised by radicals. *The Manchester Observer, or Literary, Commercial and Political Register*, founded by John Knight, James Wroe, and John Saxton in January 1818, found both Canning and Lamb useful in pushing its radical agenda. Oddly, the first poem to make it into the paper was future Prime Minister George Canning's "The Massacre of the Ducks", which was published in its second number on 10 January 1818. The editors utilised an old tactic of using an

ultra-Tory's early writing against them by publishing a poem that was written when Canning was a schoolboy at Eton. The paper co-opted Lamb twice in its early numbers printing both Lamb's "SONG FOR THE C—N" and his "On the Inconveniences Resulting from Being Hanged." which had first appeared in No. II. of the *Reflector* in 1811, and again in his *Works* of 1818. "Inconveniences" finds Lamb negatively comparing the British judicial system with 'barbarous countries' such as China, Turkey and Russia. The piece had contemporary relevance as the week before the publication of Lamb's essay the *Manchester Observer* has an editorial on the conviction of 38 people at the Old Bailey for uttering forged notes, which the writer calls "murders".

Peacock displays similar views on Russia in his "Memorandum respecting the Application of Steam Navigation", which was entered into evidence for a Select committee on Steam Navigation to India in June 1834. Peacock argued that ships should go via the Euphrates river as the "first thing the Russians do when they get possession of, or connection with any country, is to exclude all other nations from navigating its waters. It is therefore of great importance that we should get prior possession of, or at least an established footing on, the Euphrates. [...] They have long been supposed to have designs on Bagdad". As Jean Sutton notes, "Over the remaining forty years of 'company *raj*', Russophobia replaced the Francophobia of fifty years earlier to justify expansion to the north and northwest." Thereafter Peacock devoted himself to helping check the influence of Russia and China through concentrating on the development of the first gunboats, some of which engaged in the first opium war. This talk will concentrate on the personal politics of Peacock and Lamb and the contexts their politics engaged with.