Leigh Hunt in Philadelphia

An American Literary Incident of 1803.

In 1775 Isaac Hunt was driven through the streets of Philadelphia in a wooden cart to the accompaniment of beating drums and the jeers of spectators, protected from "gross insults from the populace" and a "good American coat of tar and feathers laid on with decency" only by the company of Associators who conducted him and by his own meek, public acknowledgment of loyalist sins. He had dared defend a peddler who sold British goods. What is more, he had authored a pamphlet which he called The Political Family, in which he had pled for "uninterrupted union between Great Britain and her American colonies." Not long afterwards he escaped to England by way of the West Indies—we presume in one of the ships with which his ingenious father-in-law, Stephen Shewell, carried on a profitable trade during the Revolution. There, putting behind him the profession of law in which he was beginning to make progress in America, he took Holy Orders and became a popular preacher at Paddington.

Theatrical, fond of good society, strong tobacco, and rich port, Isaac Hunt was perhaps too pleasant a companion to rise among his more steady Anglican brethren, even if he had not been a colonial, born in Barbados and educated at William Smith's promising but nonetheless provincial small college in Pennsylvania. A choleric man, he made haste to prepare a fifteen-page defense of The Case of Isaac Hunt, Esq; of Philadelphia, which helped bring him the small


2 The Political Family: or a Discourse Pointing Out the Reciprocal Advantages, which Flow from an Uninterrupted Union Between Great-Britain and Her American Colonies (Philadelphia, 1775).


4 London, 1776.
loyalist pension which he was to mortgage before it ever came into his hands. It is sometimes suggested that he sought an easy road to preferment when in 1784, while tutor in the household of the Duke of Chandos, he named the last of his four sons James Henry Leigh in honor of his high-born pupil. At any rate, it came to nothing, and Isaac Hunt died in 1809, impoverished but never quite embittered. In addition to the titles already mentioned there was little to show for his lifelong itch for writing except the handful of satirical tracts with which as “Isaac Bickerstaff” he had scandalized Philadelphia in 1765 when he was a young man just out of college, two “discourses” published in London, and a pamphlet on Rights of Englishmen which in 1791 was smothered among dozens of better answers to what Hunt called the “whimsical attacks” of Tom Paine. There were only these, plus a headful of titles of books he might someday write, a list longer—said his son with some sympathy—than that of Rabelais.

James Henry Leigh Hunt never forgave his American grandfather Shewell or his grandfather’s country for the manner in which his father had been treated, more particularly for the strain and suffering his mother had been allowed to undergo as she watched her husband’s ignoble passage through Philadelphia streets, as she worried through his escape from that turbulent city, and as two years later she bundled up her three young children for the perilous, storm-tossed voyage which would allow them to join him in London. “My father’s danger, and the war-whoops of Indians which she heard in Philadelphia, had shaken her soul as well as frame.” She always seemed old to Leigh Hunt, and with cause. Among other things, the countenance of Tom Paine, who had visited at her father’s home, had “inspired her with terror.” The skirmishing she

5 Carl and Jessica Bridenbaugh, Rebels and Gentlemen: Philadelphia in the Age of Franklin (New York, 1942), 123–131, present a delightful exposition of the background of Hunt’s early pamphleteering. There is some doubt that the thirteen pamphlets and broadsides attributed to Hunt between 1764 and 1765 in Charles Evans, American Bibliography, are all his; see C. R. Hildeburn, “Authorship of a Pennsylvania Pamphlet of 1764,” Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, VI (1882), 251.

6 Discourse Delivered at St. Paul’s Church, Shadwell, for the Benefit of the West Indian Sufferers of the Islands of Jamaica and Barbadoes (London, 1782) and A Discourse . . . with . . . Remarks on the Present Miserable Situation of the (Once Happy) United States of America (London, 1786).

7 Hunt, Autobiography, I, 23.
had seen in America during the early days of the Revolution so
affected her that years later “the sight of two men fighting in the
streets would drive her in tears down another road.” Walking with
her small son through a London park, “she would take me a long
circuit out of the way rather than hazard the spectacle of the
soldiers” who drilled there. To her last days, however, she was
American, retaining occasional colonial eccentricities of speech:
“haive” for “have,” “shaull” for “shall.” She was darker than most
Englishwomen, as if “Anglo-Americans already began to exhibit
the influence of their climate in their appearance.” Always a little
homesick, timid and with “no accomplishments but the two best
of all, a love of nature and a love of books,” his mother was per-
manently marked both by her experiences in America and the
hardships which her wealthy father allowed her to suffer in exile
from it. “Never shall I forget her face,” her son vowed, “with
that weary hang of the head on one side, and that melancholy
smile.”

Mary Shewell Hunt was proud of this youngest son who became
so good a companion to her. “My boy Leigh,” she wrote to her
father in Philadelphia, “is a steady sensible boy and I copy some of
his exercises for your perusal. They are serious and uncommon
for his years. He is not yet fifteen.” Well may she have been proud
when two years later young Leigh became the talk of literary
London, as his verses began to appear regularly in such periodicals
as the Morning Chronicle and the Monthly Mirror, and were repre-
sented—nine of them—in the impressive Poetical Register, and
Repository of Fugitive Verse, for 1801. Moreover, his collected
Juvenilia, “dedicated by permission to the Hon. J. H. Leigh,”
contained, said the reviews, “proofs of genius, and literary ability
... taste and ingenuity” seldom found in one so young. More than
eight hundred people had subscribed for the volume. Important
among them were Americans: the Ambassador of the United States,
Rufus King; John Trumbull, the painter from New England who,
arrested in London years before in retribution for the death of
Major André, always considered his deliverance in large measure

8 Ibid., I, 39, 32, 101.
9 Landrée, op. cit., I, 30.
10 Monthly Mirror, XI (1801), 254.
due to the friendly intervention of Isaac Hunt;\textsuperscript{11} the young author’s
great-uncle, Benjamin West, whom some Americans thought a
renegade but of whose position as president of the Royal Academy
all were proud; and William Cobbett, known to every Pennsylvanian
as “Peter Porcupine,” whose pointed satirical quills had pricked and
would again prick them sorely. There were others: Joseph Gilpin,
Samuel Sitgreaves, D. Murgatroyd, and the poet’s oldest brother,
Isaac,\textsuperscript{12} each from Philadelphia, had signed for a copy. Then—
inevitably perhaps—as the young man’s fame grew through publi-
cation in England of a second and a third edition of his astounding
first volume, Philadelphia claimed him her own: “A youth of
American origin whose native powers, fostered by the discernment
of friends . . . have produced a variety of original poems, which,
in fertility of invention, and vivacity of expression, may be compared
with many of the tardier productions of veteran wit.”\textsuperscript{13}

Stephen Shewell, grown old and increasingly wealthy in Philadel-
phia, seems also to have been proud but at the same time a little
worried about this grandson he had never seen. “My grandfather,”
Leigh Hunt reported blandly, “sensible of the new fame of his
family, but probably alarmed at the fruitless consequences to which
it might lead, sent me word, that if I would come to Philadelphia,
‘he would make a man of me.’” Still resentful of what he considered
Shewell’s “niggardly conduct to my mother,” the young poet
denied the invitation with some heat: “men grew,” he replied,
“in England as well as America.” Better perhaps! Leigh Hunt never
visited the country which he characterized as a nation of linen
drapers, standing behind the gigantic counter which they had built

\textsuperscript{11} Autobiography, Reminiscences and Letters of John Trumbull, from 1756 to 1842 (New York,
1941), 319-320.

\textsuperscript{12} Little is known of Isaac Hunt, Jr. He had left England to seek his fortune in the new
world, probably by 1791, when a letter from young Leigh to his aunt, Lydia Shewell of New
York, records the seven-year-old’s precocious observation concerning his brother that “a rolling
stone gathers no moss.” Mrs. Hunt worried about Isaac in a letter to her father in 1799, and in
1804 spoke of him to her sister, Mrs. Frances Smith of Philadelphia, as her “long lost Isaac.”
See Landré, \textit{op. cit.}, I, 21. To the best of my knowledge, this recording of “Hunt, I. Mr.
Philadelph.” among the subscribers to the \textit{Juvenilia} (p. xix) is the only evidence of his residence
in that city. Leigh Hunt, \textit{Autobiography}, I, 141, mentions his oldest brother, “who had been
‘wild,’” who nearly fifty years before had been in America, and who “has never been heard of
since.” I shall be glad to receive notification of evidence of young Isaac Hunt’s residence in
America which I have overlooked.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Port Folio}, III (1803), 169.
along their coast from Massachusetts to Mexico: "Americans are Englishmen with the poetry and romance taken out of them." But America, and especially Philadelphia, did not easily forget that Leigh Hunt, except for the accident of his birth in England, might have been one of theirs.

The boy poet, or his more worldly advisers, did, however, go to some pains to nourish the interest which America showed in him. When the third edition of the *Juvenilia* appeared in London in 1803, not only was there an increase in number of American subscribers, but many of them were also identified—introduced, as it were, to English readers—with words of high praise. David Rittenhouse was "one of the greatest philosophers of the present age," as John Ewing was "one of the first mathematicians and philosophers in the United States." Benjamin Rush was remembered as the physician "whose tender care of the lives of his fellow citizens, at the risque of his own, when the yellow fever raged, endears his name to every philanthropist in the old, as well as the New World." John Dickinson was "the celebrated author of the Farmer's Letters—member of the American Congress—good, as well as great." Nicholas Waln was explained as "in his youth an eminent barrister at Philadelphia, and for some years as eminent a preacher in the Society of Friends—a people simple, yet for the most part subtle." More equivocally, William Franklin was "son of the late ingenious Benjamin Franklin, *prime conductor* of the American revolution, and *principal founder* of the United States of America—without his *type* in our days." We suspect the hand of the grandfather in these fine words, for he stands out, naked in comparison among them, simply listed as "S. Shewell, esq." Philadelphia responded by printing with approbation two of the young man's poems in the *Port Folio.* It responded more cordially with a long essay by "Samuel Saunter" which recommended Hunt


15 This description, if Hunt's, is at best ironic, at worst sycophantic, for he later tells us (*Autobiography*, I, 130) that at this time "I acquired a dislike for my grandfather's friend Dr. Franklin, author of *Poor Richard's Almanack*: a heap, as it appeared to me, of 'Scoundrel maxims,'" exemplifying the worst of the linen drapers' philosophy.

16 On the other hand, they may have represented belated apologies from the Rev. Isaac Hunt, who in pamphlets of 1764–1766 had attacked most of these gentlemen.

17 For publication of Hunt's separate poems in the *Port Folio* see note 23 below.
as a deserving object of American patronage. "Such juvenile merit naturally challenges the curiosity of mankind and such splendour nothing can long conceal." It listed with commendation the dukes, the lords, and the bishops among his English patrons—two thousand names including the "most eminent characters in England." It spoke with modest approval of the "distinguished Americans, whom our author with patriotic partiality," had listed with "affection and respect." It made the most of the boy's kinship with Sir Benjamin West—the *Port Folio* as edited by Joseph Dennie was never one to neglect a title—and suggested with some pardonable local pride that as "Sir Benjamin has transplanted himself from the genial soil of a republic to the cold and comfortless region of a Monarchy, he may be curious to discover whether another Scion, from America, may not shoot luxuriantly, under all the disadvantages of a foreign climate." Yes, Leigh Hunt belonged to Philadelphia. He was her gift to the great English world of letters. His apostrophe "To Genius" was reprinted entire; lines from "The Progress of Painting" were copied, with some variations from the original—American improvements, perhaps—in phrasing and punctuation. His "The Palace of Pleasure" was quoted with great approval: not in the *Faery Queen*, in Shenstone's *Schoolmistress*, or Thomson's *Castle of Indolence* was there to be found more vivid personification!

Then, in the final two paragraphs, comes the whole point of the essay: "A proposal has been issued, in this city, for the republication of these poems, for the benefit of the author." A nation of linen drapers, indeed! The young poet deserved American patronage. "We are not to calculate, with pedlar's slate and pencil... a Poet's receipt and expenditure." Philadelphia's would be "but a tribute which Opulence owes to Genius," which "when paid, honours the giver and receiver." On this note "Samuel Saunter" ends the essay:

I have now imperfectly fulfilled a voluntary and pleasing task. I recommend a boy of genius, blest by the Author of Intelligence with a mind of premature strength, fertile to the tiller's care, and copious of the fairest flowers. I give him, it is but little, my solitary subscription and suffrage. I hope others may give much more to one, who glowing with the flame of Fancy, has always repressed its unhallowed fire, and who is not less the friend of Virtue, than the darling of the Muses.\*

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Joseph Dennie himself may have written the essay, though the style is florid even for his more exalted moments. At any rate, the editor, intent now as always in correcting vulgar errors and improving the literary taste of his American countrymen, presented two weeks later under his long familiar heading, "From the Shop of Messrs. Colon and Spondee," his own dithyrambic on "one of those ethereal spirits, who glitter in the van of life, and are so copiously endowed with mental stores, that, like the exquisite pulp of certain generous fruits, they burst forth before the tardy period of ordinary maturity." Mr. Dennie's critical boiling point was not ordinarily so easily reached; yet it is perhaps unfair to him to note that the proposed Philadelphia edition of the *Juvenilia* was to be printed, "for the benefit of the author," to be sure, but by Hugh Maxwell, from whose shop at 25 North Second Street, the *Port Folio* was also issued. Dennie offered his name as an additional subscriber—when the volume appeared it headed the list: "Although fortune does not permit me to be a Maecenas, yet I shall cheerfully cast in my mite of subscription for the American edition of the poems of this boy bard." The boy bard was now almost twenty, but "his early blooming genius," Dennie reminded American readers, "is a blossom from our own garden." What was more, "his mother is a native of Philadelphia." As for the young poet himself, however, "let him remain in London," for there "his privileges are numerous and glorious." His mother's country would watch over him—even with parental advice: "Let him not, in common with the troop of young and sanguine bards, slide too fast down the slope of pleasure, but prefer watchfulness by the midnight lamp, to dalliance with the syrens." Meanwhile, Dennie reprinted four of Hunt's poems which had appeared in the *Poetical Register*, "a volume so recent, and scarce in this country, that to a great majority of readers, they must be entirely novel."

The same issue of the *Port Folio* announced a rare treat for American readers: "An original manuscript from Mr. Hunt, the juvenile poet of so much renown, shall be inserted with alacrity." Dennie

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19 Authorship of this number of "The American Lounger" is not identified in Randolph C. Randall, "Authors of the *Port Folio* Revealed by the Hall Files," *American Literature*, XI (1940), 379-416.

20 *Port Folio*, III (1803), 186–187. For the poems reprinted, see note 23 below.
was without doubt sincere in believing that he would publish an entirely new poem from the young author whom as an American he considered such "an honour to that country from which he is descended." As a matter of fact, the mistake which has passed on down to present-day standard literary texts was probably really no one's fault at all. The poem was submitted by a reader of the *Port Folio* who signed himself "J. E. H.," and who was probably John Elihu Hall, then a young man reading law, an occasional contributor and later editor of the magazine, whose interest in poetry was soon to bring him kindly attention from Thomas Moore. Hall, only one year older than Hunt, was enough his admirer to be listed among the subscribers to the Philadelphia edition of the *Juvenilia*. There may even be suspicion that his friendship with the Shewells, through his grandfather, the venerable Samuel Ewing, might have placed him in a position to receive, if anyone would, an original manuscript, if they had owned it. Perhaps he did believe that what he submitted was an original manuscript. Perhaps, indeed, it was a copy, even in Hunt's own hand, which someone among the family in England had sent to his American relatives. But Hall did not quite claim the manuscript to be original: "I send you," he said, "a short piece on Melancholy, from the pen of that youthful bard." It is not beyond reason to suppose that neither he nor Dennie knew that the poem had appeared eighteen months before in the *European Magazine* and *London Review.*

No poem of Leigh Hunt's in the *Port Folio* was a first printing.

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21 See, for example, Harold Milton Ellis, *Joseph Dennie and His Circle* (Austin, 1915), 169 and 173, and Frank Luther Mott, *A History of Early American Magazines, 1741-1850* (New York, 1930), 231, both of which state that Dennie printed an "original" poem of Hunt's.

22 XL (1801), 448. "Melancholy" appeared in the *Port Folio*, III (1803), 200.

23 Poems which appeared before the publication of the *Juvenilia* were as follows: April 2, "Ode to Contemplation," which had first appeared in the *London Morning Chronicle*, November 30, 1802; May 14, untitled lines, from "Retirement," *Juvenilia* (3d. ed.), 34-35; May 28, ["To Genius"], *ibid.*, 114-116; two long excerpts from "The Progress of Balloons," *ibid.*, 120-122, 123-124; excerpts from "The Palace of Pleasure," *ibid.*, 170-173; June 11, "Sonnet, Written at the Close of Eve," from *Poetical Register, for 1801*, 300; "Ode to Thomas Campbell," *ibid.*, 224-225; "Song, in Imitation of Sir John Suckling," *ibid.*, 129-130; "Anacreontic," *ibid.*, 110-111; June 18, "Melancholy," from *European Magazine*, XL (1801), 448; September 10, an excerpt from "Retirement, or the Golden Mean," from *Juvenilia* (3d. ed.), 33-34; September 17, ["Translation of Horace's Ode . . . to Septimus"], *ibid.*, 41-42, and ["Paraphrase of Horace's Ode 'Inter Vitae,' etc."], *ibid.*, 45-46; October 15, "Parody on Dr. Johnson's Hermit Hoar," *ibid.*, 7, and "Anacreon, Ode 19," *ibid.*, 34; October 29, ["Wandles Wave"], *ibid.*, 130-131.
They continued occasionally to appear during the next several months, each time with a short introductory paragraph praising the "boy bard." Philadelphians were not to be allowed to forget him. Note was made of his present occupation in composing a tragedy, called "The Earl of Surrey." A complimentary English review was reprinted from the Poetical Register. Nonetheless, subscriptions for the Philadelphia edition seem to have come in slowly. It was not until one year after the project had first been broached that Dennie was able to announce to his readers that "after a lingering delay, the natural effect of the base, ignominious, and republican mode of printing books by subscription, the ingenious poems of Mr. J. H. L. Hunt have made their appearance." The American edition made a handsome volume of something over two hundred pages. Three hundred and fifty-two subscribers had signed in advance for three hundred and seventy-two copies, with J. Dennie at the head of the list. John Blair Linn was represented, Samuel Ewing and John Elihu Hall, but the roll of Hunt's Philadelphia patrons is unimpressive and must have been disappointing. Clearly, the book did not do well, for printer or for author. Nor did everyone share Dennie's enthusiasm for the young poet. Charles Brockden Brown's Literary Magazine, and American Register was candidly severe: "Men do not go forward in poetry as they are accustomed to in other intellectual paths. . . . Age may be expected in some degree to refine the taste, and enlarge the stores of imagry, but the ultimate exaltion is not proportioned to the height of the point from which we set out. . . . We may venture to predict that Hunt will not reach a higher station than Campbell, Moore, or Bloomfield." Leigh Hunt had other American admirers, then and later. Washington Irving is once said to have thought him a finer poet than Wordsworth, though he did find a "dash of vulgar flippancy about his writings." Lowell praised him; Bayard Taylor enjoyed visiting

24 Port Folio, III (1803), 207: The statement is printed, with very slight expansion, from a note which had appeared in the London Monthly Magazine, XII (1802), 553.
25 Port Folio, III (1803), 197; from Poetical Register, and Repository of Fugitive Poetry, for 1801, 430-431.
26 Port Folio, IV (1804), 158-159.
27 II (1804), 531.
him; Emerson in 1848 found him "very agreeable"; and Hawthorne a few years later thought him "thoroughly American, and of the best type"—the American of the future. And Hunt reciprocated in kind; he admired Bryant and Emerson and Lowell. But not Americans in general, not the linen drapers. After The Story of Rimini appeared in 1816, the poet reported that one day in London he was surprised to receive a strange, new edition. It was, he said, "like witchcraft . . . the identical poem, in type and appearance, bound in calf and sent to me without any explanation." He turned it over in his hands a dozen times, "wondering what it could be, and how it could have originated." Then, to the title page, to discover that it had been pirated by Mathew Carey of Philadelphia! "I thought how the sight would have pleased my father and mother." Some years later, he received a copy of another American edition with which was enclosed an impertinent letter—so thought Hunt—in which the publisher, having wind of still another work soon to appear, suggested that he would be happy to print it, too, if the author would send him a copy. "Not a syllable did he add about the happiness of disbursing a doit for the permission." How many of his works were thus pirated, Hunt did not know, but he believed he had been paid the "shabby compliment" of having all of them reissued there. "Being a cousin-germane of the Americans I am very popular in their country," he explained, "and receive from them every compliment imaginable except a farthing's payment."

So the linen drapers did not repay the huckster of literary wares. "How came my mother to have been born in such a country?" he asked. Leigh Hunt returned little of the admiration Philadelphia offered, but never was quite able to shower on him. "Why do they not get a royal court or two among them," he asked, "and then

29 Ralph Leslie Rusk, ed., The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson (New York, 1939), IV, 86.
30 English Note-Books (Boston, 1863), I, 323.
31 Leigh Hunt is not quite accurate. His The Story of Rimini was published by Wells and Lilly of Boston and Mathew Carey of Philadelphia in 1816. The Feast of the Poets had been pirated in New York two years before; Foliage, or Poems Original and Translated appeared in Philadelphia in 1819, and Byron, and Some of His Contemporaries in 1828; during the 1840's several of his volumes were printed in Boston or New York. The extent of the piratage does not, however, seem to have been as great in his case as he would make it seem: it is, certainly, minor beside the number of unauthorized editions of Longfellow and other American authors which appeared during these years in London, as shown by Clarence Gohdes, American Literature in Nineteenth-Century England (New York, 1943).
learn that there is something else in the world besides huffing and money-getting?" He respected every American who differed from his booksellers, those parasites "who do us so much honour in taking our books, and giving us nothing in return." Lastly, and chivalrously, for his mother's sake, he loved all American women, "and all Philadelphia women in particular." That was all. He made it sufficiently plain that, for himself, he would have no part of the "arrogant," the "slave-holding," the "payment shirking" America in which, but for its ill-use of his parents, he might have been born.

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\[32 \textit{Autobiography}, \text{I, 129-130, and II, 18-19.}\]