Leigh Hunt and
His Pennsylvania Editor

About the middle of 1855 Leigh Hunt received an important letter from Washington, Pennsylvania. This was a most unlikely source, considering that the letter held out to the seventy-one-year-old author one last, tantalizing hope of fame and fortune. And it is the irony of fate that this letter was to lead to one of the most crushing disappointments of his long career.

Few men are disappointed more times in one life than was this English Romantic poet-essayist-journalist. Equally few men, however, finish life retaining more of the adolescent joy of expectation than did Leigh Hunt. A prodigy of great promise, he saw his first book of verse go through five editions before he was twenty years old. But that promise was never fulfilled. His importance as a nineteenth-century man of letters cannot be denied. Inventor of modern journalism, modifier of English poetic style, discoverer of Keats, early exponent of Browning, and friend and counselor to almost every important poet and author of his day, Leigh Hunt nonetheless failed in every project he himself attempted.

Hunt's first major reversal came in 1813 when he was sentenced to two years in Horsemonger Lane Gaol for printing an attack on the libertinism of the prince regent. For years thereafter he was the target for some of the most virulent and caustic criticism in English literary history, and he long wore the denomination “King of the Cockney School of Poetry.” In 1822, on borrowed money, Hunt had moved his wife and six children to Italy to edit a journal for Shelley and Byron, but Shelley drowned, Byron proved incompatible to the Hunts, the journal failed miserably, and the debt-ridden family, this time with seven children, finally managed to return to England four

1 The author is indebted to Mr. Robert D. Christie of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, and to Prof. Raymond M. Bell of Washington and Jefferson College for their assistance in the development of this paper.

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years later, on additional borrowed money. In England he was cruelly caricatured by his good friend Charles Dickens as the imppecunious Skimpole in *Bleak House*. Hampered by ill health, by a psychotic, alcoholic wife, a growing family that included a delinquent son, and a complete naiveté in things fiscal, Hunt was doomed to wander for many years from one failure to another.

Despite his constant misfortune, however, Leigh Hunt was a most happy fellow. He succeeded in failure. He papered his prison apartment with a trellis of roses, and later, being allowed access to the prison garden, he would make a point of dressing himself for a long walk, put on his gloves, take a book under his arm, and stroll into the bower as though it were St. James Park.\(^2\) He never failed to live to the axiom that he put into the mouth of his best-known character—Leigh Hunt loved his fellow man.

The letter that was written to Hunt from Washington, Pennsylvania, in 1855 was from Samuel Adams Lee. A descendant of the well-known Virginia revolutionary, Samuel was a son of the author, lawyer, and retired Washington College professor of belles-lettres, Richard Henry Lee. The father had, in 1854, resigned his professorship to study Episcopal theology, and four years later, at the age of sixty-three, he was to assume charge of Trinity Church in Washington. Samuel had been born in 1829 in Leesburg, Virginia, where his father had been mayor, and had moved to the western Pennsylvania town with his family in 1833 when his father was called to the chair of languages at the college.\(^3\) As did each of his four brothers, Samuel attended Washington College. He is listed in its register as a partial student in 1844 and again 1847, but he did not graduate. In 1855 Samuel was permanently lamed as a result of an injury and was confined to his room where he passed his time on literary projects.

It was Lee's literary interests that prompted him to write to Hunt. He apologized for having written without a formal introduction, but he felt that his admiration for the poet justified his doing so. After

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\(^3\) Edmund Jennings Lee, *Lee of Virginia* (Philadelphia, 1895), 394–395. Although this, and subsequent genealogies based upon it, states that Samuel A. Lee died in infancy, it is in error. That Samuel and his four brothers all survived the father is indicated in the obituary of Rev. Richard Henry Lee in the Washington, Pa., *Reporter and Tribune*, Jan. 18, 1865.
describing briefly his condition, background, and family, Lee suggested that among the new projects that he should like to pursue was preparing an American edition of Hunt's poems. Since Lee's only purpose was to establish for himself a reputation as a man of letters, all financial profit to be derived from the work would go to Hunt. Lee now sought the poet's feeling on the proposal.

Leigh Hunt had long been quite popular in the United States, but he had received nothing for that popularity. Lack of copyright protection for foreign authors at that time meant that any English book could be reprinted in this country without permission from or payment to the author. Hunt's popularity had been widely exploited by American houses. More than a half century earlier, his _Juvenilia_ had been reprinted by Hugh Maxwell of Philadelphia. In 1816, his _Story of Rimini_ had been reprinted by Wells & Lilly of Boston and by Mathew Carey of Philadelphia. The latter firm's successor, Carey, Lea & Carey, reissued in 1828 Hunt's _Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries_ in a thousand-copy edition. A collection of Hunt's poems was issued in 1,000 copies in 1844 by William D. Ticknor of Boston. Indeed, at least twenty-two titles and editions of Hunt's works had appeared in this country before 1855 over the imprints of such outstanding houses as Harper, Wiley & Putnam, Derby & Jackson, A. Hart, and Littell & Henry, but the author had never received a penny from any of them.

Writing in 1850, Hunt had expressed his feeling about the enterprise of American publishers in reissuing unprotected English books without remunerating the author. However, in true Huntian fashion, he managed to derive some satisfaction even from this ill-treatment.

How many poems of mine or editions of poems, or editions of prose writings, have appeared in America, ... I cannot say; but I believe the booksellers there have republished everything I have written; and I confess I can not but be sensible even of the shabby honor thus done me, and heartily glad of every genial hand into which my productions may be carried in consequence; but I should like to know, what an American publisher would say,

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4 This manuscript letter, dated May, 1855, is in the British Museum, Add MSS 38,111 146-147.
if some English traveler were to help himself to the fruits of his labor out of the till, and make off with them aboard ship.\[^7\]

In view of Hunt's half century of unfortunate experiences with America's literary world, it is understandable that he was somewhat wary when he first received Lee's letter. A short time before, however, Hunt had been visited by his American friend, the celebrated artist W. W. Story, who had also suggested that an "authorized" American edition of the poet's works might develop some profit for Hunt. The two nearly parallel suggestions, coming at almost the same time, prompted Hunt to give the proposal serious consideration. When Hunt received Lee's letter, he asked Story if he knew the Pennsylvanian, but Story did not. Story checked the references which Lee had sent and found them satisfactory.\[^8\] Accordingly, Hunt replied to Lee on August 10, 1855, that, although he appreciated very much Lee's testimony of friendship—"My dear hitherto unknown, but most esteemed and most friendly friend"—Hunt felt misgivings on one count. He had recently published his unorthodox *Religion of the Heart* which he felt might render unprofitable an edition of his poems in the United States. Hunt wondered if Lee shared his feelings on this matter.\[^9\]

Lee's answer, which apparently has not been preserved, must have been reassuring, because Hunt soon began work on the collection of poems. Shortly thereafter he was again approached by Lee, who now had an additional project to suggest. Lee felt that a collection of sonnets, half English and half American, would also find sale in this country. Hunt could edit the English sonnets and Lee the American, and again the profit would be Hunt's. The poet apparently felt that this, too, was a workable scheme, because he was soon gathering material for this second book.

Meanwhile W. W. Story had returned to America and had gone to the Boston firm of Ticknor & Fields proposing that it issue an edition of Hunt's poems which would, in some way, bring profit to the poet. On November 11, 1855, he reported to Hunt that, should


\[^8\] W. W. Story to Thornton Hunt, Mar. 4, 1861, in Leigh Hunt, *Correspondence* (London, 1862), II, 272, hereafter cited as *Correspondence*.

\[^9\] British Museum, Add MSS 38.111 f. 141-146.
it meet with his approval, the firm would issue Hunt's poems in two volumes, paying Hunt £30 upon publication and ten per cent of any profits, if Hunt would write a "brief preface to the edition as a sort of acknowledgment of our right to call the collection a complete one and one that merits your approbation." Such arrangements were very satisfactory to Hunt, and on March 28, 1856, he empowered S. Adams Lee to prepare his poems for an American edition to be issued according to this plan by Ticknor & Fields.\footnote{10}

Hunt worked hard, gathering and revising his own poems and preparing the volume of sonnets. On July 4, 1856, he invited his friend and publisher Charles Ollier to visit him and look over the copy. "Next week I verily believe that I shall be able to send off both of my books for America."\footnote{12} Apparently at some time during the year Lee, a man of means, offered Hunt a gift of $500. Hunt refused, but he expressed gratification at the feeling that had prompted the offer.\footnote{13} Correspondence between Hunt and Lee continued throughout 1856, and by the end of the year copy for both volumes was in the latter's hands.

At this time, however, Hunt stopped receiving letters from Lee. Hunt wrote letter after letter during 1857, but could not solicit a response from Washington, Pennsylvania. After a time he sought assistance from his friend Benjamin Moran of the American legation in London, but he proved to be of little help. Hunt wrote more letters. Was Lee ill? He had always been in delicate health. Was Lee still alive? Hunt could not find out. Two whole years passed without the poet's being able to learn a single fact about the Pennsylvanian's health or fortune.

Meanwhile Hunt's poems moved through Ticknor & Fields' presses in Boston. The work was stereotyped on June 30, 1857, the portrait frontispiece was ready on July 7, the book was printed on August 6, and finally, on August 28, 1857, there was published in a 4,000-copy, two-volume edition, The Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt; Now First Entirely Collected, Revised by Himself, and Edited with an

\footnote{10} Quoted by W. W. Story in a letter to Hunt. Luther A. Brewer, My Leigh Hunt Library: The Holograph Letters (Iowa City, Iowa, 1938), 343.

\footnote{11} This manuscript contract is in the Brewer Collection in the University of Iowa library.

\footnote{12} Correspondence, II, 206.

\footnote{13} Brewer, 347.
Hunt did not want to lose hope. Hunt loved America. Both his parents were American. His father, Isaac Hunt, could write himself M.A., College of Philadelphia, now the University of Pennsylvania, and M.A., King's College, New York, now Columbia University. A strong Tory, Isaac Hunt was carried in a cart through the streets of Philadelphia at the time of the Revolution, was imprisoned, but escaped to England, where his wife joined him two years later. Leigh Hunt felt a strong affinity for the American spirit and never disparaged the United States as did many of his countrymen.

By early 1859, however, seventeen months after his poems had appeared in Boston, Hunt began to suspect he had been badly maltreated. Although the letter has not survived, Hunt must have written directly to Ticknor & Fields, because on April 25, 1859, he was apprised by that firm that “in August 1857 we paid to Mr. S. Adams Lee Thirty Pounds as agreed, for your benefit, to be by him paid to you.”16 Hunt’s fears were verified; Lee had absconded with his money. The letter from the Boston firm was accompanied by a personal note from the junior partner, James T. Fields, expressing admiration for Hunt’s work and enclosing a draft for £20, sent “not as a publisher of books, but as a reader of them, loving no one more

14 Ticknor & Fields, 404-405.
15 Hunt to Edmund Peel, Correspondence, II, 242.
warmly than the author of Rimini.” It is typical of Hunt that he never cashed the draft, preferring rather to keep it as a memento.

Hunt had already concluded that he had been fleeced. In February, 1859, he was visited by an American traveler named Hiram Fuller. During the evening Hunt narrated the events that led to his having been swindled by one of Fuller’s countrymen. Fuller returned to the United States and that summer published an account of his travels under the improbable title, *Sparks from a Locomotive; or, Life and Liberty in Europe* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1859). He described his visit with Hunt, in part, as follows:

On leaving, the good old Poet-Essayist presented me with a copy of his latest work, “The Town: Its Memorable Characters and Events,” which ought to be republished in the States for the author’s benefit, especially after the shabby treatment he received from a literary adventurer, who, a few years since, brought out an American edition of Leigh Hunt’s Poems, for which Messrs. Ticknor and Fields paid pretty handsomely, but which has never reached the pocket of the author!

If Lee was alive, he would have to answer this accusation or admit to the swindle. His was the only name that had ever been linked with Hunt’s on an American title page. His crime was before the world.

Lee was alive, and he did have an answer—a highly bizarre and very tragic answer. On August 1, 1859, Lee wrote a long letter to Hunt. He explained that he had for many years been addicted to narcotics, and that in September, 1857, he was sent, at his own request, to “Doctor Walter’s famous Insane Asylum,” where he had apparently remained for more than two years. He had written the poet during the preceding spring, but he assumed that Dr. Walter had not seen fit to forward the letter. Lee was now free and sought Hunt’s forgiveness. Furthermore, he had sent the £30.

I saw a card in a Baltimore paper saying that a Mr. P. T. Legare was about going to Europe, and would take charge of valuables, packages, &c. and would also collect money due in Europe. I wrote to the fellow, and received a polite reply, that he was going, and would, for a reasonable compensation, carry anything for me, and deliver in person. Not being much accustomed to the tricks of such persons, I was simple enough to believe all he said, and entrusted the box to him. I heard nothing from him, or of him, till I met

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17 Brewer, 386.
18 Fuller, 137.
with the enclosed in a newspaper. It seems he swindled several besides me. The box contained many little mementos, that I wished you to have, besides the £30 in gold.10

Unlikely as Lee’s story may seem, there appears to be little reason to question it. “Doctor Walter’s famous Insane Asylum” was undoubtedly the private hospital owned and operated by Dr. Albert G. Walter on the corner of Cooper and Bluff streets in Pittsburgh, about thirty-two miles from Washington. Only a very few of Dr. Walter’s records have survived, so it is not surprising that there is no mention in them of Lee’s case. There is, of course, no way of proving or disproving that Legare was actually commissioned by Lee, but the Pennsylvanian appears to have enclosed in his letter to Hunt a newspaper account documenting the fact that people had been swindled by someone named Legare, and Lee may well have been among the unfortunate. Two rather important circumstances, although at best circumstantial, support Lee’s tale. One is the fact that he was a man of private wealth with little need to steal £30. The second is his continuing ill-health which no doubt left him ready prey to narcotics addiction. Despite this evidence, however, the possibility must be admitted that Lee may have been something less than he claimed.

Leigh Hunt, however, was not destined to learn of his correspondent’s ill-fortune. Lee’s letter was written in Washington on August 1, 1859, and Hunt died in London on August 9, 1859. He could never have seen the letter. Throughout his life Hunt had been able to find something to be thankful for in every defeat. Even in this last misadventure of the Boston edition of his poems, he no doubt received pleasure from knowing that “the American critics have given it hearty welcome”—a kind of pleasure not always allowed him by fellow critics in his homeland.

There remains untold only the story of the book of sonnets. In his last letter to Hunt, Lee reported that “The Sonnets will be out this fall,” but even that project miscarried. Perhaps it was because of his ill-health, his instability and inertia, or perhaps for some other reason that Lee held the book of sonnets in abeyance for the better part of a decade. By 1865, however, Lee had completed his selection of American sonnets and had drafted an introductory headnote to them.

10 Brewer, 340-341.
Dissatisfied with both the selection and the essay, he sought assistance from his friend, the well-known dramatist George Henry Boker. Boker had long been an admirer of Hunt, had written his *Francesca da Rimini* on the same theme as Hunt’s longest sustained poetical effort, and had a keen interest in the sonnet form.

It was apparently due to Boker’s energy that the project finally came to fruition. He revised the selection of American sonnets, obtaining permission to reprint many of the writings of his contemporaries, he completely rewrote Lee’s introductory essay, and he successfully sought out a publisher. Boker’s assistance resulted in Roberts Brothers of Boston bringing out in 1867 the two-volume *Book of the Sonnet, Edited by Leigh Hunt and S. Adams Lee*.

The book of sonnets was Lee’s second and last major literary venture. His name does not again figure in the development of American literary history. Although Lee was never able to establish for himself the literary renown that he desired so much, his offices nonetheless advanced considerably the poetical reputation of Leigh Hunt in the United States.

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22 I have been unable to determine either the place or date of Lee’s death. Although his father, mother, and brothers are buried in St. Mark’s Cemetery in Lewistown, Pa., Samuel Adams Lee is not.