Unexpected Friendship:
John McClintock and Auguste Comte

On three occasions during the early 1850s, Auguste Comte, the controversial French thinker now known as the "father of sociology," received financial contributions from an American Methodist clergyman named John McClintock. This money, intended to sustain Comte's scholarly work, is the most tangible example of an unusual relationship that developed between the two men. Although they disagreed on fundamentals—McClintock was an evangelical Christian and Comte, an agnostic positivist—there was mutual appreciation and respect. McClintock served as an intermediary between the Frenchman and certain American friends and disciples; Comte placed a long letter to McClintock prominently in the preface to the second volume of his *Système de politque positive*. Such bonds are unexpected. McClintock's behavior belies the often held stereotype that early Methodist clergymen were poorly educated itinerants, insulated from trans-Atlantic intellectual ferment. The friendship is even more striking because Comte's ideas were not theologically respectable and, until recently, not thought to have been widely known in the United States.

Auguste Comte (1798-1857) outlined the foundations of his thought in the six-volume *Cours de philosophie positive* (Paris, 1830-1842). The *Cours* presented at once a theory of history, an epistemological standard, a classification of the sciences, and a prescription for society's ills. Comte theorized that human history had advanced through three stages. In the earliest of these, the theological, man lacked the scientific awareness needed to explain natural phenomena.

---

and so, superstitiously, invented gods, and eventually a single God, to explain events. As scientific understanding increased, mankind outgrew the need for religion and after passing through an intermediate era, the metaphysical, arrived at the positive stage. Here humanity recognized what Comte believed to be the inescapable truth: that the human mind was incapable of comprehending anything beyond phenomena and their relationships. Knowledge of anything transcendental or spiritual was impossible and its pursuit futile. Humanity could make no final progress until this epistemological limit was accepted. The true positivist abandoned philosophy and religion, and placed a rightful reliance on empirical science. This positive spirit had spread from the simple to the more complex sciences until, by the nineteenth century, it was possible to develop a science of society, which Comte called "sociology." Within its grasp lay the keys to social progress and reform.

Comte further elaborated the political and religious implications of his ideas in *Système de politique positive* (4 vols., Paris, 1851-1854). Since positivism allowed no heavenward dimension, the object of human duty was selfless service to collective humanity. Comte coined a word to express the new ethic: altruism. Ultimately—and here he tried the patience of many of his otherwise devotees—Comte proposed an eccentric Religion of Humanity, complete with priests and liturgies, to celebrate and foster devotion and commitment to humanity.

His American admirer, John McClintock, was born in Philadelphia in 1814, the son of a dry goods merchant residing at 153 North Third Street. After a brief stay at Wesleyan University, which was ended by an illness, McClintock enrolled in the University of Pennsylvania in 1832, where he proved himself an excellent student, finishing the program in but three years and standing near the top of his class.

After graduation, McClintock, now a Methodist clergyman, took

---

2 Standard biographical information on McClintock is found in George R. Crooks, *Life and Letters of the Reverend John McClintock* (New York, 1876). His Dickinson period is enlightened by Charles Coleman Sellers, *Dickinson College: A History* (Middletown, Conn., 1973), 202-229. By far the largest collection of McClintock manuscript material is at Emory University, Atlanta [hereinafter McClintock Papers (Emory)]. Smaller groups of papers are at Dickinson College, and Drew University, Madison, N. J. Some relevant correspondence is in the Auguste Comte Papers, Maison d'Auguste Comte, Paris.
a small church in Jersey City. His pastorate was interrupted by a severe throat difficulty which would plague him the rest of his life. Unable to preach, he turned to teaching, and in 1836, with the enthusiastic recommendations of his Penn professors, secured a chair at Dickinson College in Carlisle. Dickinson was to be his base for nearly twenty years. There he taught mathematics and, after 1840, classics. He took an active role in both college and town affairs, preached when his throat permitted, spoke vigorously against slavery, wrote several textbooks for students of Greek and Latin, and translated Augustus Neander’s *Leben Jesu* into English.

In 1848, McClintock assumed the editorship of the *Methodist Quarterly Review*. He tried living in Jersey City and then New Brunswick to be closer to the New York editorial offices, but his health, never strong, drove him back to the more salubrious town of Carlisle in 1853. During the 1850s, he traveled to Europe on four occasions, primarily to seek relief from his ailing throat—his esophageal pain was such that he mistakenly feared that his heart was damaged as well. During this period in Carlisle he began, with James Strong, a twelve-volume *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* (1867–1881), three volumes of which appeared before his death.

By 1856, when his tenure as editor of the *Methodist Quarterly Review* ended, his voice was strong enough to permit his holding successive pastorates at St. Paul’s in New York City and the American Church in Paris. But in 1864 his health broke down again and he fell back on administrative work for the denomination, primarily plans for celebrating the centenary of American Methodism. Among

---

3 “My wretched health,” he wrote to a friend, “will not allow me to do anything in the way of reading or writing, not to say thinking, much longer. I have bought a house in Pennsylvania... [hoping that the change will] mend me.” McClintock to James O’Connell, Mar. 16, 1853, Letter Copy Book I [hereinafter LCB-1], McClintock Papers (Emory).

4 McClintock toured Europe in the summers of 1850, 1854, 1857, and 1858. His trip in 1857 was occasioned by the Evangelical Alliance assembly in Berlin. McClintock lived in Paris from 1860 to 1863 as pastor of the American Church there. Crooks, *Life and Letters*, 222, 250–251, 267, 292. There is no evidence concerning the possibility of a visit with Comte. McClintock kept no diary for the 1854 trip, the most likely occasion for a visit. The 1850 travel diary records only the ocean voyage. Travel diaries for the two later trips record routine travel arrangements and numerous medical appointments, but not personal meetings. (In any case, the 1858 trip and the 1860–1863 residency occurred after Comte’s death.) McClintock Papers (Emory).
the projects undertaken in connection with that event was the endowment of a Methodist theological seminary by New York businessman Daniel Drew. Drew was so impressed with McClintock that he made his gift conditional upon his accepting the presidency of the school. McClintock did so, and served in that capacity at Drew Theological Seminary from 1867 until his death in 1870.

The story of John McClintock's relationship with Auguste Comte—which is the focus of this article—begins with McClintock's friendships with three other men: George Frederick Holmes of Tazewell County, Virginia; Horace Binney Wallace of Philadelphia; and James O'Connell of New York City. All three had an unusual admiration for Comte, and, especially in the cases of Wallace and O'Connell, at least a qualified commitment to his ideas. Although McClintock did not share quite the same fascination with the Frenchman that his friends did, he was soon an important catalyst in their transoceanic exchanges.

In April 1851, McClintock printed in his *Methodist Quarterly Review* an article by Holmes entitled "Philosophy and Faith." Although it was plainly intended to be introductory and included only a short reference to Comte, it was quickly followed by two more articles devoted to an analysis of positivism. The triad was the beginning of a five-year period during which the *Methodist Quarterly Review* under the editorship of McClintock, gave a degree of attention to Comte that was unmatched by any theological journal in America. The articles also initiated a period during which McClintock and Holmes were in correspondence, not only with Comte himself, but also with other key American thinkers interested in positivism.

McClintock clearly was acquainted with Comte's ideas before receiving the articles from Holmes. Indeed, Holmes' articles—as


6 This statement is based upon a tabulation and comparison of citations and references to Comtian positivism in twenty-three other American theological journals.
others complained—really assumed a prior knowledge of positivism.\textsuperscript{7} They discussed and analyzed rather than described. Their unquestioning acceptance and publication by McClintock suggests that he was sufficiently knowledgeable to follow what others found unduly cryptic.

Although it is difficult to be certain, it is most likely that McClintock gained his initial awareness of Comte from British journal literature, such as the \textit{Westminster Review} or the \textit{Edinburgh Review}, in which Sir David Brewster published an article on Comte in 1838. McClintock's carefully kept reading index establishes his awareness of these rather commonly available sources, although it fails to date the entries very precisely.\textsuperscript{8} In any case, he was very widely read, especially after 1848 when he undertook his editorial responsibilities.

Once intrigued, McClintock pursued his interest in Comte and, by 1851, had acquired his own copy of the six-volume French edition of \textit{Cours}.\textsuperscript{9} McClintock's background in mathematics provides the most plausible explanation for his unusual interest since the mathematical sections were the first parts of \textit{Cours} to be excerpted and translated into English—in 1851 by William Gillespie, a Union College mathematician. McClintock himself wrote a review of the Gillespie edition for the \textit{Methodist Quarterly Review} and revealed his knowledge of the original when, unlike reviewers elsewhere, he questioned Gillespie's selection of passages from the full text.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{7} See \textit{MQJR.}, XLVII (1865), 602: since Holmes was "a writer more remarkable for his powers of acquisition than of exposition, his presentation, as many think, failed to give a clear view of the nature of the philosophy to the great body of our readers."

\textsuperscript{8} McClintock's reading index consists of eight bound volumes of notations arranged roughly by topic; dating, however, is imprecise, with various entries extending from 1842 through the 1860s. Also, McClintock kept a bound notebook, "Notes on Various Points of Theology . . .", undated [c. 1850s], McClintock Papers (Emory).

\textsuperscript{9} A specific date for McClintock's acquisition of \textit{Cours} is not possible, but the reading indexes and circumstantial evidence suggest the late 1840s or perhaps 1850. McClintock had to purchase an incomplete set, lacking Volume I which was secured after a difficult search, probably in 1854. See McClintock to O'Connell, July 1, 1853, and Jan. 28, 1854, LCB-I, McClintock Papers (Emory). McClintock's six-volume edition, with the odd first volume, is now in the Drew University Library. With the exception of a small group of Unitarians, possession of the French edition of \textit{Cours} was very rare for an American prior to the late 1850s and unusual even then. Most Americans had only indirect knowledge of Comte until Harriet Martineau's two-volume translation, \textit{The Positive Philosophy}, was published in 1853, and then they generally made do with her abridgement.

\textsuperscript{10} William M. Gillespie, \textit{The Philosophy of Mathematics} (New York, 1851). McClintock's review is in \textit{MQJR.}, XXXIII (1851), 485.
During the same period, McClintock established contacts with the small positivist circles which were active in Philadelphia and New York City. The key to the Philadelphia group was a college friend, Horace Binney Wallace. Wallace, whom McClintock knew as a fellow mathematics student at the University of Pennsylvania, finished his undergraduate education at the College of New Jersey (Princeton). Like his father, he became an attorney and gained a considerable reputation as a writer on science, mathematics, classics, and especially jurisprudence before his suicide at the age of thirty-five. Wallace became deeply interested in Comte's work and personally acquainted with the French thinker. He was especially impressed by Comte's clarification of the scientific method and its application to society and politics. Although Wallace stopped short of Comte's atheism and maintained his ties to the Episcopal Church, he was sufficiently enthused with positivism to contribute 500 francs a year to Comte's support and to provide a similar legacy in his will.11

McClintock, aware of Wallace's expertise concerning positivism, sent him a copy of Holmes' first major article on Comte, the only one Wallace would see before his death. Wallace, although critical of its underemphasis on the classification of the sciences, found much to admire. The author, Wallace wrote, "is possessed of a profound, enlightened, and fearless intelligence." The article, he believed, exhibited "extensive and correct knowledge."12 In addition to sharing scholarly effort, McClintock also consulted with Wallace about the best way to assist Comte financially, and after Wallace's death McClintock penned a lengthy tribute to him in the Methodist Quarterly Review.13

The tie between McClintock and the New York positivist community was the somewhat erratic James O'Connell. O'Connell, less talented than Wallace and less discriminating in his infatuation with


13 McClintock to Comte, Comte Papers, June 29, 1852, McClintock to John W. Wallace, June 22, 1833, LCB-i, McClintock Papers (Emory); John McClintock, “Horace Binney Wallace,” MQJR., XXXVI (1854), 132–135.
Comte, was the author of an 1851 volume entitled *Vestiges of Civilization*. Both McClintock and Holmes wrote article-length reviews of the book for the *Methodist Quarterly Review*. Although both were impressed with what Holmes called O'Connell's "singular vigour of intellect," neither could agree with the results of the New Yorker's labor. It was a "strange hybrid" of positivism together with O'Connell's own speculations and a smattering of German idealism. (When O'Connell journeyed to Paris in 1853 to visit Comte, McClintock and Holmes amused themselves imagining the confrontation between what they rightly judged to be two rather inflexible and egocentric thinkers.) Nonetheless, McClintock befriended the young man and entered into correspondence with him. He ran errands in New York City for O'Connell while the New Yorker was overseas (although O'Connell's impatience occasionally tried McClintock's good humor), accepted for paid publication in the *Methodist Quarterly Review* O'Connell's reviews of recent French literature (including a number dealing with French positivism), and interceded on O'Connell's behalf with publishers.

But it was in concert with George Frederick Holmes that John McClintock's relationship with Auguste Comte reached its peak. The Holmes-McClintock-Comte association began to take shape in 1852 when Holmes' articles reviewing *Cours* were printed by McClintock in the *Methodist Quarterly Review*. Holmes hoped that the two articles would redress the previous neglect of Comte in this country and present a "sufficient and impartial" analysis of his merits and limitations. The merits were deemed to be considerable: Comte was a genius of the first order, second only to Aristotle and Bacon. Holmes was able to "assent most cordially to nearly all of M. Comte's strictures on the present age." He found Comte particularly useful in clarifying the limits of science. But Holmes did not accept Comte's exclusion of religious and metaphysical forms of truth. Religion

---

15 McClintock to Holmes, Mar. 17, 1853, LCB-I, McClintock Papers (Emory).
resulted not from superstition, but from "instinctive impulses" innate to man. As a result of this epistemological blindness, Comte had destroyed any claims to lead society in this generation's primary task: the reconciliation of science and religion. In sum, Holmes wrote, "we do not think that any of the professed followers of M. Comte can admire his genius and learning, the ponderous strength of his intellectual powers, their graceful and easy play, his fearlessness, sincerity, and simplicity more highly than we do, nor appreciate more cordially, nor accept more gratefully his philosophy so far as it is correct and applicable. . . ." Yet Comte's denigration of true religion was a "blunder which has deprived M. Comte of the highest crown of intellectual greatness." 17

McClintock initiated a more personal relationship by forwarding copies of these articles to Comte. Shortly after he received and read the first part of Holmes' review, Comte wrote back to McClintock expressing his pleasure at the attention given to his work by such an "éminent adversaire." 18 (Since articles in the Methodist Quarterly Review were unsigned, Comte did not know Holmes' name. He asked McClintock how he might contact the author; McClintock obliged, and Holmes and Comte started a correspondence which lasted until 1854. The Holmes-Comte letters ranged widely from science and religion to St. Simonism to American spiritualism.) 19 As a token of his appreciation, Comte included copies of some of his miscellaneous papers and promised to forward, as soon as feasible, autographed presentation copies of the first volume of his Système de politique positive. Later on, Comte would also send complimentary copies of his Catechisme. 20

Sensing a responsiveness in his new American acquaintances,
Comte also included two copies of the annual financial circular which had been prepared to solicit support for his work. He asked McClintock if he might not find a fitting way of publicizing his cause in America. McClintock, after consulting Horace Binney Wallace, decided that any public announcement in the *Methodist Quarterly Review* would be inappropriate; rather, a more discreet appeal could be made privately to a few friends. McClintock and Holmes each agreed to subscribe an annual amount, contributions which they sustained for at least three years. Holmes provided fifty francs annually; McClintock sent twenty-five francs the first year and fifty thereafter.\(^{21}\)

Over the years, McClintock found his friendship with Holmes strengthening. Holmes continued to write lengthy articles on positivism which he submitted to McClintock. In turn, three articles comparing Comte and Bacon, a review of O'Connell's *Vestiges of Civilization*, and an article analyzing Comte's positive religion filled the pages of the *Methodist Quarterly Review*.\(^{22}\) As time passed, the relationship between Holmes and McClintock came to include a certain personal warmth. Despite frequent invitations, the two never met, but through their correspondence they shared family woes, personal ill-health, and financial difficulties. Their common interest in Auguste Comte and their mutual scholarly respect kept the two together despite their marked disagreement on the slavery question. After the Civil War, the friendship was resumed, and Holmes provided sound articles on "Auguste Comte" and "Positivism" for the *Cyclopaedia* which McClintock was editing with James Strong.\(^{23}\)

McClintock's own views on Auguste Comte and positivism exhibit an ambivalence similar to that of Holmes. Clearly he was no con-

\(^{21}\) McClintock to Comte, June 29, 1852; Mar. 12, 1853; May 17, 1854, Comte Papers; McClintock to Holmes, Mar. 17, 1853, LCB-I, McClintock Papers (Emory); Gillespie, *Collapse of Orthodoxy*, 141.


vinced positivist. His own philosophical preferences included an admiration for the nineteenth-century romantics Coleridge and Carlyle, and especially for the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. All told, they indicate a stance assuming innate ideas, quite the opposite of Comtism. “That the human mind has a range beyond phenomena, and independent of them—so far as its sources are concerned—that is the indestructible position on which we rest . . . ,” wrote McClintock.24 And, predictably, McClintock’s Methodist sensibilities were offended by Comte’s liturgical, priestly Religion of Humanity. “Ludicrous” was the best word he could find for it. Nor did McClintock feel any great affinity with Comte as a person. He estimated the Frenchman as arrogant, inflexible, disagreeable, and lacking an adequate sense of propriety, especially regarding the annual financial circular. For instance, Comte published his letter to McClintock regarding the subscription in the preface of the second volume of Système de politque positive. McClintock had recommended discretion and understood his own contributions to be private; he was more than a little upset at having his name associated with a public appeal. “All this is very vulgar,” he concluded, “very unworthy of a philosopher.”25

And yet, behind all that there was a sincere respect for Comte’s achievements. It was unfortunate, he wrote, that Comte’s “atheistical” ideas had prevented the English-speaking world from “appreciating and employing the really sublime results to which his penetrating acuteness and severe logic have led him within the domain to which his method is strictly applicable.”26 It was in mathematics and the hard, physical sciences where Comte’s method should prevail. At the same time, Comte clearly pointed to the limits of science, its inability to leap past phenomenal knowledge. Thus Comte pointed to the flaw in modern thought, and, by McClintock’s reading, to a need for the proper recognition of a spiritual dimension. As Holmes believed, Comte’s critical evaluation of contemporary culture was well targeted; his proposal for a new order was found wanting. Like a few others who knew Comte, from Cal-

24 “Positive Science,” MQR, XXXIV (1852), 143.
25 Ibid., 637–638.
26 MQR, XXXIII (1851), 485.
vinists on the right to Unitarians on the left, McClintock was selective, borrowing elements that suited his needs. And he was convinced, as was his friend Horace Binney Wallace, that all this was totally compatible with Christianity.  

Perhaps, paradoxically, it was the strength of his own Christian faith that enabled McClintock to develop his unusual relationship with Auguste Comte. Even Comte seemed to sense as much, commenting as he did that of all the American clergy, this Methodist's faith, misplaced though it was from his perspective, seemed the most genuine and sincere. McClintock's faith never seems to have gone through any particular period of crisis. Whatever doubts or questions emerged, as inevitably they did, he took as normal. And he urged his students at Dickinson to maintain a similar equilibrium. Hence, secure in his own mind, McClintock was able to range widely, investigate, and even establish friendships where others felt compelled to stand distantly and pronounce anathema.

Indeed, McClintock's willingness to open the *Methodist Quarterly Review* to numerous articles on positivism seems to have been part of a deliberate crusade to force his fellow Methodists out of their parochialism and into a dialogue with the molders of modern thought. In one respect, McClintock was successful: the *Review*, during his tenure, equalled, if not bettered, the scholarly quality of denominational reviews sponsored by the Unitarians, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians who dominated the intellectual establishment. It was, a friend remembered, a “bold line of policy for Dr. McClintock to pursue.” But the movement was too much and too fast for many Methodists. Complaints mounted. One cynic, Stephen Olin, even questioned the very concept of a Methodist scholarly review. “I should say,” he volunteered, “make it less a ‘Review,’ a little more of a magazine. The ‘Quarterly’ is about as well adapted to our literature as the archepiscopal palace of his grace of Canter-

29 *Ibid.*, 208
bury to one of our bishops.”

McClintock drew back. He wrote to James O'Connell that he was “embarrassed” about an article which O'Connell had submitted on Comte; “we are all drenched with Comte here,” and it was unlikely it could be used just now. Moreover, McClintock lamented, “I find that my Review has a little too much solid matter in for my readers, and I am losing subscribers.” Six months later the paper was still unused. McClintock wrote bluntly: “My readers are tired of Comte, and I dare not insert your paper.” Both O'Connell and Holmes were encouraged to seek new subjects, hopefully something literary or historical. But the retreat was too late. In 1856, McClintock, his position even more seriously damaged by his outspoken antislavery views, was not re-elected as editor.

With the end of his editorship in 1856 and the death of Auguste Comte in September of the following year, McClintock's experience with positivism was, despite a certain lingering interest, essentially over. Nevertheless, the relationship between John McClintock and Auguste Comte, brief and limited though it was, is revealing. It communicates, in the first place, something of the quality of intellectual life at Dickinson College in the 1840s and 1850s. McClintock's presence in Carlisle assured the availability of the most recent European thought. Especially during the years when the Methodist Quarterly Review was edited there, it also enabled a confidence and excitement that came from being at the center of the denomination's intellectual life and shaping its future. In one sense, then, there was a certain similarity to nearby Mercersburg where Philip Schaff and John Nevin guided the intellectual maturation of the German Reformed Church. Typical of his attempts to reach outward in every direction, McClintock was a correspondent of Schaff also, the latter supplying access to and advice on German thinkers and writings, as well as an occasional contribution to the Methodist Quarterly Review.

31 Quoted by ibid., 209-210.
32 McClintock to O'Connell, Jan. 28, 1854, LCB-1, McClintock Papers (Emory).
33 McClintock to O'Connell, Oct. 18, 1854; Apr. 5, 1855, ibid.
35 McClintock to Schaff, Dec. 22, 1845; Jan. 20, 1846; Feb. 8, 1847; Nov. 17, 1847, ibid.
More broadly, however, McClintock's activities reveal the emergence of a vigorous, adventurous, intellectual dimension within mid-nineteenth-century American Methodism. The promptness and range of the book review columns, the ambitiousness of the articles, is impressive. This is true not only of the work on Comte, but also on Hegel, Darwin, and other current topics. It points to a growing number of Methodist scholars who were more well versed and up-to-date than historians have often allowed. The most distinctive quality of this ferment was its openness. In part, this was an effect of the noncreedal, experiential nature of Methodist theology and, in part, a paradoxical result of the lack of an earlier, strong academic tradition which might set young minds in a predetermined pattern. Consequently, the mid-century Methodist scholarship varied from that of the academically dominant Congregationalists and Presbyterians. It was less settled and less committed to the standard Scottish common sense philosophy which suffused most American colleges. Although the Methodists kept abreast of the latest Scottish work, the accompanying Calvinism left a distaste never altogether washed down. Therefore, they were more open to continental sources; in McClintock's case (as the tie with Auguste Comte illustrates) this meant especially French writers. Readers of the Methodist Quarterly Review had available to them a better survey of current French thought than nearly anyone.

As to McClintock's personal influence in these matters, one must be careful not to claim too much. McClintock was not the only intellectual seeking to extend denominational habits (Daniel Whedon, his successor as editor, continued that effort), and he was never a creative thinker in his own right. But, like many editors and educators, he was a superb facilitator of others' work. Moncure Conway, a Dickinson student who thought of McClintock as his mentor even after he had made his way from Methodism to Unitarianism, long maintained a fascination with positivism. While in London in 1880 he made contact with leading Comtian apostles and "gradually reached a belief that positivist religion is a refined variety of the general democritization of Christianity."36

But Conway's radicalism was an extreme case; the more usual result, later in the nineteenth century, was a more progressive, more self-consciously intellectual Methodism. The exposure to Comte which McClintock instigated, although not by any means the only influence, was nonetheless important to that development. It forced critical epistemological issues; it called attention to social responsibility; and it opened the possibility of the social sciences. Later Methodist thinkers—some, like B. F. Cocker of the University of Michigan, relatively obscure; some, like Bordon Bowne of Boston University, less so—would respond to these issues in their own various ways. But wherever they found themselves in the denomination's expanding intellectual ventures, they could look back, and there, near the beginning, was John McClintock and his unexpected friendship with Auguste Comte.

*Indiana University of Pennsylvania*  CHARLES D. CASHDOLLAR