William Harrison Ainsworth:
The Life and Adventures of the Lancashire Novelist

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Introduction: The Victorian Critical Heritage

"Some books are undeservedly forgotten," wrote W.H. Auden, "None are undeservedly remembered."[1] Yet the subject of this present study has been very undeservedly forgotten. The years have not been kind to the memory of the Manchester-born Victorian author William Harrison Ainsworth (1805 — 1882), a prolific English novelist once held in such high regard that many of his contemporaries viewed him as a natural successor to Sir Walter Scott. Ainsworth's romances were hugely popular amongst the serial-reading middle classes in the 1830s and 40s, although his melodramatic excesses were a constant source of ridicule among his literary peers. As popular fashion changed therefore, Ainsworth's novels did not survive as canonised works of Victorian literature, but instead faded largely from critical view. Ainsworth's creative vision was an idiosyncratic one, and in many ways he was punished by the literary establishment as a result, assisted, indirectly, by his own refusal to conform to the moral and aesthetic standards of the Victorian novel. If we look beyond the traditional critical dismissals of Ainsworth's writing however, what is revealed is a virtually unexplored resource of kinetic, generically hybrid and singular texts which deserve attention in their own right as significant works of literature while also contributing further to an understanding of the development of the English novel in the immediately post-Romantic period.

A cover story appearing in the May 22 issue of [G.W.M.] *Reynolds's Miscellany of Romance, General Literature, Science, and Art* in 1847 named, "The three most popular writers in England" as, unsurprisingly, "Mr. Charles Dickens, Sir E. Bulwer Lytton, and Mr. William Harrison Ainsworth."[2] Of this august Victorian triumvirate, only Dickens has endured in the national memory. Lytton is of course not unknown; an academic revival would seem to be in the offing while many devotees of the esoteric are at the very least familiar with his occult romances *Zanoni* (1842), and *A Strange Story* (1862). But few indeed these days have read, or even heard of, William Harrison Ainsworth, the author of *Rookwood, The Tower of London, The Lancashire Witches* & co.

Ainsworth was one of the original “Fraserians”, a flamboyant editor and darling of the D'Orsay set who numbered among his close friends the literary elite of the first half of the nineteenth century and Charles Dickens's only serious commercial rival until the late 1840s. His name, however, is now as obscure as it was once famous. The critical orthodoxy at present is generally that Ainsworth was a second-rater in his own day and deserves his place in the dustbin of history, with the only exception being George J. Worth's largely sympathetic monograph of 1972. Ainsworth made some powerful enemies at the height of his fame, and their critical annihilation of his work was so absolute that future generations of literary critics often do little more than paraphrase the original attacks, with little apparent attention paid to his actual writing.

In a collection of critical essays intended to capture the new Victorian literary zeitgeist, *A New Spirit of the Age* (1844), Dickens's friend and collaborator R.H. Horne described Ainsworth as a “reviver of old clothes”, whose novels were “generally dull, except when [they are] revolting” in a unilaterally damning entry.[3] A generation on, the tone had still not moderated. In J. Hain Friswell's collection of critical essays, *Modern Men of Letters Honestly Criticised* (1870), the chapter devoted to Ainsworth begins:

> Let us start with an opinion, fearlessly expressed as it is earnestly felt, that the existence of this writer is an event to be deplored; and the fact that he is able to assume that he is a Man of Letters who has been of service to his country, and that he has received from the hands of a Prime Minister, himself a Man of Letters, the reward of £100 a year pension for literary services, is a disgrace to this bewildered and Philistine nation.[4]

Honestly criticised? Perhaps not. So closely, in fact, does Friswell follow Horne's model of 26 years previously that Horne's description of Ainsworth's historical fiction as a “romance of old clothes” is regurgitated, unacknowledged, as “a mere list of the frippery of the wardrobe”.[5] And so it goes on. In Andrew Sanders's post-Lukácsian study, *The Victorian Historical Novel, 1840—1880* (1978), Ainsworth is summarily dismissed with:

> In Horne's terms, Ainsworth was little more than a reviver of old clothes, and his novels were destructive of the real potential of historical fiction. In considering whether or not that potential was ever realised in the Victorian novel, it is essential to look beyond the model that Ainsworth left.[6]

So Horne's vengeful spirit is invoked once again. The above are offered merely as representative examples, the name of those ranged against poor old Ainsworth are Legion. My feeling, rather, is that it is essential to look beyond the model of Ainsworth's texts that the critics have left.

Ainsworth was born in Manchester on February 4, 1805, the first child of Thomas Ainsworth, a prominent local solicitor, and Ann Harrison, the daughter of a Unitarian minister. The family had one other child the following year, Thomas Gilbert, who was destined for a long life of mental illness.

Ainsworth attended the Manchester Free Grammar School (also the alma mater of that other great literary rebel, Thomas de Quincey), and was contributing literary articles, short fiction and poetry to national periodicals from the age of sixteen. His first published book was a collection of poems under the pseudonym of "Cheviot Ticheburn" (dedicated to Charles Lamb), in 1822, followed in 1823 by the anonymous collection of short stories and literary essays, *December Tales*. He moved to London to study law in 1824, where he met Lamb, and through him J.G. Lockhart, Henry Colburn, Leigh Hunt, Mary Shelley and John Ebers, lessee of the King's Theatre, whose daughter, Fanny, he married in 1826.

Ainsworth never again lived in Manchester, but remained constantly in touch with his best friend there, James Crossley (1800－83). Originally from Halifax, Crossley had joined the legal firm of Thomas Ainsworth and John Sudlow of Manchester as an articled clerk in 1817, where he eventually became a partner. Crossley and Ainsworth met when the former was a young clerk and became friends owing to a mutual love of literature and history. Crossley was something of a literary and antiquarian dilettante, and as a young man contributed widely to the newspapers and journals of the day, including *Blackwood's* and the *Quarterly Review*. This early promise was never really fulfilled, although he later edited numerous volumes for the Chetham Society (of which he eventually became President) including the works of Sir Thomas Browne and Thomas Potts's *Discoverie of Witches in Lancashire*, and he counted among his friends some of the most distinguished literary figures of his age. Crossley never left Manchester, but he and Ainsworth remained life-long friends, corresponding, often on a daily basis, from 1822 to Ainsworth's death in 1882. As Ainsworth's lawyer, Crossley managed to keep him relatively financially stable (often lending him money against future fees from writing). As Ainsworth's friend, fellow antiquarian and bibliophile (possessing a private library of over 100,000 books), Crossley provided much of Ainsworth's primary reference material and many project ideas. *The Lancashire Witches is* therefore dedicated to Crossley in acknowledgement of his contribution to the work. Crossley never married, and died a year after Ainsworth. Looking at their correspondence, it is clear that Crossley was providing the historical documentation while Ainsworth told the stories — in this sense, Crossley was as important to Ainsworth's work as was the great illustrator George Cruikshank, with whom the author collaborated closely in the 1830s and 40s. Crossley also carefully preserved Ainsworth's letters, which offer a fascinating insight into Victorian literary life.

Ainsworth's first novel, *Sir John Chiverton*, a little gothic number (written in collaboration with school friend John Partington Aston), was published in 1826 and bought him to the attention of Sir Walter Scott, to whom he was presented the same year. Scott's journals privately refer to him as an "imitator".[7] As Scott's journals are a deal easier to find than Ainsworth's first novel, Scott's version has endured in literary history, although Ainsworth was hardly the inferior imitator of Scott that he is often painted. His literary project was very different. After a failed attempt at publishing, Ainsworth returned to the law to sup-

port his wife, his three daughters and his debts, but his professional struggle between literature and the law came to an end in 1834 with the publication of his hugely popular gothic romance *Rookwood*, which bought fame over-night. Ainsworth also met and befriended Charles Dickens that year, introducing the young journalist to Forster, Macrone and Cruikshank at one of his legendary parties. Fanny Ainsworth could not cope with her dandy-husband's celebrity however, and left the following year, dying tragically young in 1838.

I. New English Gothic

Rookwood is set in Yorkshire in 1734. According to legend, whenever a branch falls from an ancient lime-tree in the grounds of Rookwood Place, a death in the family is sure to follow. Under such ominous circumstances, Sir Piers Rookwood, lord of the manor, dies suddenly, leaving his wife and two sons, one legitimate and one not, to battle over the inheritance against a backdrop of plots, counterplots, supernatural events, ill-omens and ancient prophecy. To compound matters, both brothers are in love with their cousin, the fair Eleanor Mowbray, and another prophecy indicates that when their two families unite in matrimony, the ownership and future of the house of Rookwood is assured. Ranulph Rookwood, the legitimate heir, is every inch a hero of melodrama, handsome, brave, honorable and a little slow. His half-brother, Luke, is a dark, brooding romantic figure, raised by gypsies and consumed by jealousy and rage. Neither brother realises that they are being manipulated by their seniors, Lady Maud Rookwood and the local Sexton Peter Bradley (Sir Piers's long-lost and disgraced brother, Alan, in disguise). Into this heady mix comes the English adventurer Jack Palmer (the famous highwayman Dick Turpin in disguise), although who he sides with in the family plot is often unclear. In a completely peripheral episode, Turpin thrashes his horse, Black Bess, from London to York in one night to establish and alibi. Meanwhile Luke and a band of gypsies kidnap Eleanor and force a marriage, but unbeknown to Luke, Sybil, his former gypsy lover, has changed places with Eleanor, who escapes with Ranulph. Sybil commits suicide, and Luke is killed by a poisoned lock of her hair. Lady Maud and Peter Bradley/Alan Rookwood perish in the labyrinthine vaults beneath Rookwood Place and Ranulph and Eleanor are free to marry. Turpin escapes to fight another day, but a L'envoi laments that he was apprehended and hanged five years later, dying a noble, samurai death.

The publication of *Rookwood* in three volumes by Richard Bentley in 1834 launched Ainsworth into literary celebrity with the speed of Black Bess herself. For a reading public and critical press mourning the passing of Scott and weary of "Tales of Fashionable Life", *Rookwood* was a revelation: a chaotic, wild and energetic narrative which combined claustrophobic, charnel-house gothic horror with the romance and adventure of the outlaw and the open road. The section of the novel devoted solely to Dick Turpin, "The Ride to York", became so popular in its own right that it was often published separately.

The well-known legend that Turpin rode from London to York in one night is in fact entirely of Ainsworth's invention. *Rookwood* was dramatised at the Adelphi and, among working and middle-class readers alike, a "craze" for highwaymen ensued. For the brief period between the death of Scott and the rise of Dickens the novelist, Ainsworth became the National Author, being viewed as the natural heir to the legacy of Scott.

Ainsworth's most exciting writing tended to alchemically blend different genre devices within a single text. As the author explained in the preface to the 1849 edition of *Rookwood*: "I resolved to attempt a story in the bygone style of Mrs. Radcliffe (which had always inexpressible charms for me), substituting an old English squire, an old English manorial residence, and an old English highwayman, for the Italian marchese, the castle, and the brigand of the great mistress of Romance."[8] And so he did. *Rookwood* is an enthusiastic amalgam of gothic, picaresque and historical romance, up-dated and transplanted to England, complete with morbid ballads, comic songs and all the blood and thunder of melodrama. *Rookwood* also perfectly suits the period of cultural transition to which it belongs: written two years after the first Reform Act and during the brief reign of William IV, *between* Regency and Victorian. It has an infectious, creative exuberance which carries it along at a dizzying pace. Most significantly, Ainsworth had superseded Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) and finally bought the gothic novel to the mainland, albeit dressed in historical costume. *Rookwood* represents a transitional moment in the development of the genre, taking the Radcliffean design and then turning it into something quite different, quite new: a bridge between the eighteenth century gothic and the soon-to-come contemporary urban nightmares of Reynolds, Dickens, Poe and Stevenson.

II. The Newgate Controversy

Ainsworth followed *Rookwood* with a more conventional historical novel, *Crichton*, in 1837. This was only a moderate success, and public pressure and financial problems (bought about by a bitter battle with his in-laws over the custody of his children after Fanny's death), meant than Ainsworth desperately needed another hit. His brief period as Scott's literary successor in the eyes of the press after *Rookwood* had also given way to Dickens's meteoric rise, a literary superiority to which Ainsworth cheerfully deferred. For example, in arranging a visit to Manchester with Dickens and Forster, Ainsworth had written to the proprietor of *The Temple Inn*: "I need not enlarge upon the merits of Mr. Dickens; as, by common consent, he has been installed in the throne of letters, vacated by Scott".[9] The answer to his problems was to return to the Newgate Calendars, serialising the exploits of the Georgian criminal John "Jack" Sheppard, briefly famous in the days of Defoe for several daring prison escapes before being finally hanged in 1724.

Jack Sheppard is the story of two apprentices, Thames Darrell and the historical criminal Jack

Sheppard, the basic plot and moral closely following the model of Hogarth's series of twelve engravings, *Industry and Idleness* (1747), with just a dash of Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), both of which had been in part inspired by the short career of the original Jack Sheppard. The novel is divided into three books, or "epochs", each resembling the acts of a play, which suits Ainsworth's fundamentally theatrical style. Epoch the First, 1703, takes place in one night when the main protagonists are new-born babies, and acts as a prologue. Epoch the Second, 1715, takes place over a few days in June and shows the adolescent Jack's fall from grace and into the clutches of the evil thieftaker and criminal mastermind, Jonathan Wild (and the beds of Edgeworth Bess and Poll Maggot). Thames, meanwhile, rather foolishly falls into the equally nasty hands of his evil uncle, Sir Rowland Trenchard, who is Wild's silent partner. Epoch the Third, 1724, encompasses the six months leading up to Jack's capture and execution. It opens with Jack at the height of his success as a criminal (and consequent depths of depravity), and the return of Thames, who escaped his uncle and fled to France where he became a prosperous merchant. Disgusted at a murder which takes place during a robbery arranged by Wild, Jack turns against him and spends much of the remainder of the narrative assisting Thames in the restoration of his family fortune, except when incarcerated, which allows Ainsworth to recreate the daring prison escapes which had guaranteed the original Jack Sheppard his place in the Newgate Calendars. Wild murders Sir Rowland and traps Jack at his mother's grave-side. Jack dies bravely on the gallows, Thames's birthright is established and he marries his childhood sweetheart, Winifred, his old master's daughter. We are reassured, in one of Ainsworth's characteristic historical closures, that Wild was convicted and hanged, "seven months afterwards, with every ignominy, at the very gibbet to which he had brought his victim."[10]

Jack Sheppard began its serial run in *Bentley's Miscellany* in January 1839. Dickens's serial *Oliver Twist* was at this point coming to a conclusion in the same magazine, and for four months both appeared together. As both stories concerned young boys being drawn in to the criminal underworld and shared the graphics of George Cruikshank they became implicitly connected in the minds of their original, and massive audience, compounded when Ainsworth succeeded Dickens as the editor of *Bentley's* in March. In October, before its completion in *Bentley's, Jack Sheppard* was issued as a novel in three volumes by Bentley. Sales were enormous, initially exceeding three thousand copies a week, eclipsing those of *Oliver Twist*. By the end of October there were eight theatrical versions running concurrently in London.

It couldn't last. Led by an attack in the *Examiner* written by Dickens's best friend and biographer, John Forster, the "Newgate Controversy", a moral panic, exploded among the literary elite. Named from popular criminal romances (dubbed "Newgate novels" after the infamous London prison), the work of Ainsworth, Edward Bulwer-Lytton and even Dickens was savaged by the press. Particular concern was expressed over the cheap, theatrical adaptations of their stories, and the possible influences of

such productions on fundamentally urban working-class audiences. The *Athenaeum* also published a long article on contemporary literature and the condition of England under the heading of a review of Ainsworth's novel. "All the Chartists in the land", wrote Mary Russell Mitford, "are less dangerous than this nightmare of a book".[11] On 5 May 1840 Lord William Russell was murdered by his valet, François Courvoisier who, it was claimed, had stated that the idea for the crime had come to him while reading *Jack Sheppard*, where the wife of Jack's old Master is murdered during a burglary. A working-class man had risen up against his master after allegedly reading a Newgate novel. This was unprecedented. After the killer was condemned, the *Examiner* returned to its original review, which foretold such a disaster and ran a smug editorial which again denounced *Jack Sheppard*, declaring that, "If ever there was a publication that deserved to be burnt by the common hangman it is *Jack Sheppard*".[12] This is an early example of what is nowadays referred to as the "Effects Theory" of popular culture. You couldn't *buy* publicity like that. The book continued to sell, while its author became a literary pariah, black-balled at the Trinity Club and forced to withdraw from candidacy for the Athenaeum Club because of the certainty of defeat and further public humiliation. Dickens distanced himself from his old friend Ainsworth privately and publicly, adding a preface to the third edition of *Oliver Twist* in 1841 denouncing criminal romance and making a case for his own social realism by comparison (he also discreetly removed a footnote praising *Rookwood* from subsequent editions of *Sketches by Boz*). A generation later, the accepted effect of *Jack Sheppard* made Ainsworth an easy target for petulant literary criticism and, whatever novel was being reviewed, the reviewer would invariably conclude with a rant about *Jack Sheppard*. Such simplistic attacks go a long way to explaining Ainsworth's unwarranted and current exclusion from the Victorian literary canon.

III. History and Tragedy

Down, but not yet out, Ainsworth took over the editorship of *Bentley's* from Dickens in March 1839, and began the serial publication of two historical romances, *Guy Fawkes* and *The Tower of London* in 1840, abandoning the underworld gothic at which he was so adept, and setting the tone for the rest of his career as a novelist.

The Tower of London is pretty representative of everything that followed. Where Ainsworth's deviated from Scott as a historical novelist was that he preferred to dramatise the lives of famous historical figures. *The Tower of London* is chiefly concerned with the political plots and counter-plots to gain control of England after the death of Edward VI: the nine-day reign of Lady Jane Grey, the coronation of Mary I, her marriage to Philip of Spain and the restoration of the Catholic faith in England, along with Sir Thomas Wyatt's failed insurrection. The Duke of Northumberland is determined to take power through the corona-

tion of his daughter-in-law, Jane, and to consequently make his son, Lord Guilford Dudley, the King. When this fails and Mary I is crowned while Northumberland goes to the block, Dudley's fanatical obsession to regain his former position leads to a doomed attempt at insurrection and the executions of himself and his wife. Meanwhile the Archbishop of Canterbury schemes with the French Ambassador to depose the Catholic Mary and replace her with the Protestant Elizabeth. The arch-plotter is the Spanish Ambassador Simon Renard, who manipulates everybody in order to force the marriage between Mary and Philip of Spain and "establish the Inquisition in the heart of London within six months".[13] Comic relief is present in the lives and loves of the lower-orders (the servants and soldiers who actually run the *Gormenghast*-like citadel), particularly the three giants of the Tower, Og, Gog and Magog (gate-keepers who are rumoured to be illegitimate children of Henry VIII, and who therefore function as a comic opposite to Jane, Mary and Elizabeth), and their friend, the dwarf, Xit, who they torment constantly. There is also a melodramatic sub-plot involving the esquire Cuthbert Cholmondeley, Mistress Cicely (the "Rose of the Tower"), and Nightgall the Jailer (the camp villain who is sexually obsessed with Cicely). Cicely is an archetypal secondary gothic heroine, her blighted relationship with Cholmondeley closely matching the disastrous romance of Agnes and Raymond in Matthew Lewis's quintessential gothic novel *The Monk* (1796). The luckless life of Lady Jane gives the novel its temporal frame. Ainsworth begins with her entry to the Tower as Queen on 10 July 1553, and ends with her execution on 12 February the following year. This allows the author the use of two coronations, a royal wedding, several executions and a siege without recourse to undue invention as, he explains in his original preface, he was "Desirous of exhibiting the Tower in its triple light of a palace, a prison, and a fortress".[14] In a model a least partially inspired by Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831) the Tower itself is the focal-point of the narrative, a controlling metaphor for the nation's history.

As Ainsworth's histories are concerned with the well-known stories of equally well-known historical figures of title, position and political power, it is useful to compare his work with that of Sophocles or even Shakespeare rather than Scott, which remains the erroneous critical norm. Just as theatre audiences know that Oedipus will marry Jocasta and that Richard II will be usurped by Bolingbroke (or, indeed, that the *Titanic* will sink), Ainsworth and his readers accepted that Lady Jane Grey was only a nine-day queen, and that she would ultimately be executed. In choosing then to re-tell such stories, Ainsworth overcame historical determinism by employing the codes of tragedy to his narratives - the central tenet of tragedy being, of course, *inevitability*. Lady Jane is therefore a tragic heroine, and the common charge that Ainsworth's historical characters tend to lack any psychological depth or insight (just collections of old clothes) may be ascribed to this dramatic status. As with the ghosts of Tower Hill, cursed to enact their last hours over and over again like automatons, such characters are robbed of agency and are instead doomed to act out the fate that history has dictated they must. In the female characters, this disposition is manifested

by an almost angelic passivity, in the male, a brooding melancholy. Lady Jane is therefore often forewarned by Cassandra in her many guises but, like the Trojans, she pays no heed. This marriage of melodrama and classicism exemplifies Ainsworth's dramatic technique.

The minute particulars of the Tower's architecture and history were obsessively researched by both Ainsworth and Cruikshank. As the author constructed a parallel narrative of romance and antiquarian detail, the artist produced forty atmospheric engravings of events in the story and a further fifty-eight woodcuts devoted to purely architectural features, while both pestered The Governor of the Tower and the Keeper of the Regalia to visit areas that were then closed to the public while researching. As always, the author has excelled at hybridisation. Fact and fiction are skilfully blended here, resulting in a cohesive whole so complete in detail that its reputation as an authority on the history of the Tower endured as late as the 1950s. *The Tower of London* is also one of the few novels to be equipped with a full index. When Ainsworth began this project, the Tower was an abandoned garrison, closed in most part to the public and mutilated by modern alteration in some areas while practically falling down in others, but as the romance progressed thousands of people visited the monument to trace the places and events depicted by Ainsworth's pen and Cruikshank's pencil. Demolition ceased due to renewed public interest, and the Tower was restored, both as one of the first Victorian museums and as a patriotic symbol in the national psyche. The novel was therefore extravagantly dedicated to Queen Victoria. *The Tower of London* set the standard for Ainsworth's history of England. Forty years on he was still turning national landmarks into gothic castles and populating them with fated monarchs, paupers of noble birth, gothic villains and gory ghosts.

The wonderfully apocalyptic *Old St. Paul's* followed serially in the *Sunday Times* in 1841 and Ainsworth and Cruikshank began their own literary periodical, *Ainsworth's Magazine*, in 1842. A stream of increasingly unremarkable historical romances followed, with Ainsworth buying the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1845. Taken together, this body of work comprises a history of the English monarchy from Henry VIII to George III. His last notable work was, however, The *Lancashire Witches* of 1848.

IV. The Lancashire Witches

The Lancashire Witches is set on and around Pendle Hill in early-seventeenth century Lancashire, with an introduction set in 1536. The Cistercian monk Borlace Alvetham is falsely accused of witchcraft by his rival, Brother John Paslew, and condemned to a lingering death. Alvetham escapes by selling his soul to Satan, and returns as the warlock Nicholas Demdike during the Pilgrimage of Grace, to witness the execution of the now Abbot Paslew for treason. Paslew dies cursing Demdike's daughter and "that infant and her progeny became the Lancashire Witches".[15] The remainder of the narrative is set about a century later,

when the ancient witch Mother Demdike wields tremendous supernatural power over the area, her evil family challenged only by the rival witches Mother Chattox and Alice Nutter. The elaborate plot centers around the fate of two lovers, the pious Alizon Device (raised by the Demdike clan, but in fact the long-lost daughter of Alice Nutter), and the young aristocrat Richard Assheton. In Book I Alizon discovers her birth-mother is Alice Nutter and resolves to save her soul. Book II chronicles the rivalry between Demdike, Chattox and Nutter, Demdike's attempts to corrupt Alizon and the eventual destruction of Demdike and Chattox in a fire on Pendle Hill. Book III follows Alice Nutter's penitence, a visit from James I, and the final struggle between Heaven and Hell for the souls of Alice and her daughter. Both are killed in a violent confrontation with Alice's ex-demon familiar, but they die in prayer and the mark of Satan fades from Alice's brow. Richard Assheton, who has been cursed repeatedly by various vindictive witches throughout, pines away and the lovers are buried in a single grave.

The Lancashire Witches was to be Ainsworth's last major, national success and marks the end of his literary celebrity, at least in the South of England, although a further twenty-eight novels were yet to be written. The original *Sunday Times* serial was a hit, as was the complete novel upon its release the following year. Regrettably the work was not illustrated by Cruikshank, and remained unillustrated until the third edition of 1854 which contained twelve drawings by Sir John Gilbert, all of which contribute to the fairy-tale qualities that are often apparent in the text by depicting the witches as pointy-hatted, warty old hags with flying broomsticks. Largely because of a popular fascination with the occult, *The Lancashire Witches* is the only of Ainsworth's forty-three novels to have remained consistently in print to this day, often shelved alongside the worse excesses of Dennis Wheatley and Montague Summers - both of whom it undoubtedly influenced, given that each offer "historical" accounts that are much closer to Ainsworth's version than the facts of this unusually well-documented case.

In his presentation of powerful women who have, by social necessity, embraced the word and world of Satan over God, Ainsworth offers his best and, perhaps, the ultimate, romance of fall and redemption. His Faustian protagonists are not modelled after those of Goethe or Byron, but return instead to source: to Eve herself. As with Milton's Eve, or the "Eve Titan" which Charlotte Brontë's Shirley would see in a vision a year hence, Ainsworth's women know in the main that they have a much better chance with Satan than with the God of Abraham. Although the Alizon narrative seems to confirm a more conventional moral interpretation, the possibility that it is good to be bad remains forever teasing and present. Ainsworth is also well aware of his literary antecedents. The dramatic witches of Shakespeare, Middleton, Heywood and Shadwell which precede Ainsworth's all have enormous fun playing elaborate tricks on the male population, despite tending to lack any real power - in *Macbeth*, the Weïrd Sisters can only torment the master of the *Tiger*, they cannot destroy the ship. The dramatic witches which follow Shakespeare, and to which Ainsworth links his novel by epigraph, are also often sexually liberated to the

point of perversion (in this sense, they are sisters to the underworld girls of *Jack Sheppard*). In their obvious role of gothic Other to patriarchal versions of femininity, the witches are allowed, like a medieval fool, to say and do things that would be completely taboo outside the carnival realm to which such figures belong. Like a playful regiment of Bertha Masons, they torment male authority figures, personify the frustration of the culturally-imprisoned female characters and ultimately facilitate the true desires of such heroines, although they themselves are invariably destroyed in the process, usually by fire. Ainsworth at times appears on the threshold of more serious writing on persecution but chooses, instead, magic realism. The narrative therefore works according to the logic of a fairytale, which is really where witches belong, and much of the story therefore takes place in an enchanted wood.

More than a little stylistically anachronistic for its time, this characteristic synthesis of history, romance and melodrama is also the last novel in English literary history that can truly be said to belong to the original gothic tradition, exemplifying Ainsworth's position as the author of transition between the eighteenth century form and its nineteenth century successors. It is also the first of an irregular series of works devoted to the history of Ainsworth's beloved Lancashire, which would result in the epithet of which he was so proud: that of "The Lancashire Novelist."

V. The Lancashire Novels

Ainsworth followed *The Lancashire Witches* with the pseudo-autobiographical *The Life and Adventures of Mervyn Clitheroe*, the first book of which was serialised by Chapman and Hall between December 1851 and March 1852. The central character is very recognisably the author himself. The setting, "Cottonborough" was, of course, Manchester, and the book is dedicated to: "My contemporaries at the Manchester School." Friends and critics alike seemed to warm to the story, but Ainsworth's audience was not so ready to accept this new direction, wishing instead for another blood-soaked historical romance. The serial was not a commercial success, and Ainsworth did not complete the project until Crossley nagged him into producing a complete novel in1858.

The story of *Mervyn Clitheroe* reads rather like a conventional Ainsworth plot with its lost inheritance and star-crossed lovers, but without the overall frame of great historical events and personages (which is why his die-hard fans felt so short-changed at the time) but, as they say, the devil is in the detail - the most interesting features by far are those which give us an insight into the way in which Ainsworth saw himself as a youth, his friends and the city of his birth. This is Ainsworth's portrait of the artist as a young man:

> Though I had entered upon man's estate, I still possessed a very youthful appearance, and I have seen the upper lip of many a bewitching Andalusian dame more darkly feathered than mine was

> at the period in question. Some people told me I was handsome, and my tailor (excellent authority, it must be admitted) extolled the symmetry of my figure, and urged me to go into the Life Guards … I was a hard rider, fond of shooting, and of all field sports, and had stalked deer in the Highlands, and speared the wild-boar in the woods of Germany … To complete my personal description, I may refer to the passport which I obtained on going abroad, and where I find the following items in my signalement: — "Hair, dark brown, and worn long; eyebrows, arched; eyes, blue; forehead, open; nose, straight; mouth, small; chin, round; visage, oval; complexion, rosy; beard, none; height, five feet eleven inches." As these particulars were meant to convey some idea of me to foreign authorities, they may possibly serve the same purpose to the reader.[16]

From the numerous society reports of the young dandy as he was, as well as Daniel Maclise's equally numerous sketches and portraits, the above can be read as a fair description rather than the mere vanity of middle age. Ainsworth, like his fictional counterpart, had always cut quite a dash.

Most importantly of all, we have Ainsworth's own description of Manchester at the height of its industrial prosperity, the cityscape dominated by giant warehouses and ostentatiously gothic public buildings, reflecting a fantastically wealthy mercantile middle class who had left the cramped city center to their new workforce. The dichotomy of extreme wealth matched by equally extreme poverty is not lost on Ainsworth (who had himself written a political pamphlet on the condition of the Manchester poor), neither is the excessive pollution.[17] As a middle class Mancunian himself however, he does seek to find a balance which is generally absent from better known contemporary accounts of this potent symbol of Victorian industrial capitalism:

> What a wondrous town is Cottonborough! How vast — how populous — how ugly — how sombre! Full of toiling slaves, pallid from close confinement and heated air. Full of squalor, vice, misery: yet also full of wealth and all its concomitants — luxury, splendour, enjoyment. The city of coal and iron — the city of the factory and the forge — the city where greater fortunes are amassed, and more quickly, than in any other in the wide world. But how — and at what expense? Ask yon crew of care-worn men, wan women, and sickly children, and they will tell you. Look at yon mighty structure, many-windowed, tall-chimneyed, vomiting forth clouds of smoke, to darken and poison the wholesome air. Listen to the clangour and the whirl of the stupendous and complicated machinery within. Count the hundreds of pale creatures that issue forth from it at meal-times. Mark them well, and say if such employment be healthy. Yet these poor souls earn thrice the wages of the labourer at the plough, and therefore they eagerly pursue their baneful taskwork. Night comes; the mighty mill is brilliantly lighted up, and the gleam from its countless windows is seen afar. It looks like an illuminated palace. Come nearer, and you may hear the clangour and the whirl still going on, and note the steady beat of the huge engine, that,

> like the heart of a giant, puts all in motion; and you may see the white faces flitting past, and the young girls and boys still toiling on, sweltering beneath the glaring gas that consumes the vital air. The owner of that mill, and the worker of that vast machinery of flesh and blood, iron and steam — for all are mere machines with him — is rich, and will soon be richer — richer than many a prince.[18]

The above extracted from a very elaborate tour through the city. In common with the Manchester of Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), Ainsworth makes much of the contrast between countryside and city life. Although Mervyn asserts his love of this city of contrasts, he cannot help but return again and again to the squalor that surrounds him - the corrosive air, ankle-deep sludge and creeping black snow are also particularly memorable details of industrial and moral pollution as all is sacrificed in pursuit of profit. We might also usefully compare "Cottonborough" to the better known accounts of Manchester from James Kay's *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes Employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester* (1832), Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844—5), and Dickens's "Coketown" (Preston), the setting of *Hard Times* (1854) - Dickens having first seen the cotton mills of Lancashire on a visit up North in the company of Ainsworth and Forster in November 1838. As is well known, Dickens's famous "Condition of England" novel side-steps the working class movement in favour of an appeal to Christian brotherhood, much as Gaskell had done in *Mary Barton*, where Chartism does not come off much better than the trade unions do in *Hard Times*. Kay also had his own axe to grind, and Engels was effectively researching the *Communist Manifesto*. With Ainsworth, it is virtually impossible to ever identify a political agenda in his writing (baring an out-dated Jacobitism), in this case an advantage for the historian. "Cottonborough" may be one of the few genuinely objective accounts of Manchester to be found from this period. Once bitten, twice shy however, Ainsworth did not try anymore contemporary narratives, and *Mervyn Clitheroe* remains a significant anomaly in his bibliography.

In later life, however, Ainsworth's thoughts did turn more and more towards his native city, exhibiting a desire to chronicle its history in much the same way that he had so successfully done with London over the long years. As soon as he completed the romance of the "Royal Oak", *Boscobel* (1872), Ainsworth turned his attention to the Jacobite occupation of Manchester in the rebellion of 1745. This project became *The Manchester Rebels of the Fatal '45*, published in three volumes by the Tinsley Brothers for the pitiful fee of £150 in 1873 — an indication of how far down the commercial snake Ainsworth had by now slid.

Northern Jacobites had already paid dearly for their involvement in the previous uprising of 1715. Nonetheless, Manchester raised a regiment and the city was occupied by the Young Pretender Charles Edward Stuart himself. This is in part explained by Manchester's curious civic status. The city had no borough charter, despite its rapid industrial expansion by the standards of the day, and was conse-

quently somewhat isolated from Westminster - the hand of national government being much ignored in turn. Manchester was also bitterly divided by religious factions, and many an old Catholic family was raised according to Jacobite principles and prepared for another uprising. As Ainsworth shows in his text, influential figures such as the Reverend John Clayton and Dr Byrom ensured that Manchester remained spiritually Jacobite.

The Manchester Rebels is Ainsworth's Mancunian version of Scott's seminal *Waverley* (1814). By his own admission, what Ainsworth is doing here is retelling the stories of elderly relatives and family friends (as had Scott):

> All my early life being spent in Manchester, where I was born, bred, and schooled, I am naturally familiar with the scenes I have attempted to depict in this Tale.
>
> Little of the old town however, is now left. The liver of antiquity if any such should visit Manchester — will search in vain for those picturesque black and white timber habitations, with pointed gables and latticed windows, that were common enough sixty years ago. Entire streets, embellished by such houses, have been swept away in the course of modern improvement. But I recollect them well. No great effort of imagination was therefore needed to reconstruct the old town as it existed in the middle of the last century.
>
> When I was a boy, some elderly personages with whom I was acquainted were kind enough to describe to me events connected with Prince Charles's visit to Manchester, and the stories I then heard made a lasting impression upon me. The Jacobite feeling must have been still strong among my old friends, since they expressed much sympathy with the principal personages mentioned in the Tale — for the gallant Colonel Townley, Doctor Deacon and his unfortunate sons, Jemmy Dawson, whose hapless fate has been so tenderly sung by Shenstone, and, above all, for poor Tom Syddall. The latter, I know not why, unless it be that his head was affixed on the old Exchange; has always been a sort of hero in Manchester.[19]

The preface is a telling one. The author's nostalgia for the old city is very prominent within the text, comparisons made constantly between Manchester as it was (not only in 1745 but in the author's own Regency youth) and the dirty, industrial metropolis it had become by the second half of the nineteenth century. Like Scott before him, Ainsworth has invested much of himself in his work, writing to Crossley at its conclusion: "No one I think could have written it but myself, and though I am not altogether satisfied with what I have done, I believe that the tale will become popular in Manchester".[20] The novel was indeed particularly popular in Manchester, Public Library statistics showing it to have been as much loved as Ainsworth's "classics" such as *The Tower of London*. The local journalist Edward Mercer, in a retrospective on Ainsworth, later explained this obvious appeal:

> We doubt whether Ainsworth ever told a tale more interesting to a Manchester born reader — As

> a plot it is smooth and straightforward as the alphabet; as history its main incidents are true; as a description of Manchester and Manchester life at the time it is the more realistic as the scenery is, so to say, allowed to draw itself, and the characters were all real men and women with well-known figures, traits and dispositions. Ainsworth's style is here at its lightest, and its very simplicity adds so much to the verisimilitude of the dialogue that he might have seen and heard all he relates, might have been an actual participator in the events that happen. Perhaps the secret of this is that he was born in the town and personally knew every street in it, and — that he often heard (from lips repeating what eyes had seen and ears had heard) the doings in Manchester at first hand.[21]

Mercer was making much the same argument I offered above regarding *Mervyn Clitheroe*. *The Manchester Rebels* remains, however, strangely out of place in literary history. It reflects Ainsworth's growing sense of age and isolation from contemporary Victorian Britain, and would have been a huge commercial success if it had appeared in print when the historical novel was still in vogue. Almost 60 years after *Waverley*, it is something of an anachronism. As Constance Rawcliffe exclaims to Atherton Legh in the text: "With such exalted sentiments, 'tis a pity you did not live in the days of chivalry".[22] She might just as well have been addressing her author.

Ainsworth continued the Lancashire Jacobite project with *Preston Fight, or The Insurrection of 1715. A Tale*, again tapping into a rich vein of regional history, backed up as usual by Crossley and the Chetham Society. It is obvious that such a heroic failure would appeal to Ainsworth, doubly so given the location of the final battle, Preston, where the northern insurgents met a greatly superior government force under General Wade. Despite inflicting almost ten times as many casualties as they suffered in the ensuing battle, the Jacobite army was sold out by its leaders, who lost heart in the cause and surrendered in much the same way as their successors were to do in 1745, as chronicled in *The Manchester Rebels*. As with the inglorious Derby retreat of the second rebellion, the author lays the blame for the outcome at the door of overly cautious and gutless generals rather than the heroic rank and file, which does not fall far short of the truth. *Preston Fight* was issued in three volumes by the Tinsley Brothers in May 1875. This time, the fee was only £125.

Ainsworth followed *Preston Fight* with the Civil War and the siege of Manchester in 1642, *The Leaguer of Lathom, A Tale of the Civil War in Lancashire* (1876), again published by the Tinsley brothers. The narrative is principally concerned with the brave defence of Latham House against Parliamentary forces by Charlotte de la Tremouille, Countess of Derby, during the absence of her husband. The author also describes the storming of Lancaster and Bolton and the surrender of Warrington. The narrative concludes with the martyrdom of the gallant Cavalier Derby at Bolton in 1651.

After the unintentionally opportunistic *Chetwynd Calverley* (1876), where the poisoning of the

title-character's father by his wicked stepmother uncannily mirrors the sensational "Balham Mystery" surrounding the murder of Charles Bravo at the time of publication (a connection Ainsworth urged the Tinsley Brothers to exploit), and a story of my home town, Norwich, during Kett's Rebellion, *The Fall of Somerset* (1877), Ainsworth returned, one last time, to Manchester, and the Jacobite trials of 1694. Against the historical background of James II's dispossession, Ainsworth weaves an uneven love story concerning the Jacobites Beatrice Tyldesley and Walter Crosby. *Beatrice Tyldesley* was serialised in *Bow Bells* and again published in three volumes by the Tinsley Brothers in April 1878, again for £125.

Thus ended Ainsworth's irregular series of Lancashire novels. They did not pay well, but seem to have been written as much for the author's own pleasure as for profit. Despite the huge success of his earlier works, it was the Lancashire novels of which Ainsworth was most proud. "My desire", he admitted towards the end of his life, "has really been to write a Lancashire novel, a novel that should please the whole county, and I don't care whether it pleased anyone else".[23]

Conclusion: The Contemporary Critical Heritage

By the end of the 1850s, Ainsworth had slipped from the literary mainstream, stylistically out-classed and superseded by a rising generation of Victorian literary novelists. The shifting sands of his position in popular culture can also be identified quite clearly in Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1849-50). In the section entitled "The Literature of Costermongers," the great social explorer explains that:

> It may appear anomalous to speak of the literature of an uneducated body, but even costermongers have their tastes for books. They are very fond of hearing one read aloud to them, and listen very attentively ... What they love best to listen to — and, indeed, what they are most eager for — are Reynolds's periodicals, especially the "Mysteries of the Court." "They've got tired of Lloyd's[24] blood-stained stories," said one man, who was in the habit of reading to them, "and I'm satisfied that, of all London, Reynolds is the most popular man among them. They stuck to him in Trafalgar-square, and would again. They all say he's 'a trump,' and Feargus O'Connor's another trump with them."[25]

While the article concludes that:

> The tales of robbery and bloodshed, of heroic, eloquent, and gentlemanly highwaymen, or of gipsies turning out to be nobles, now interest the costermongers but little, although they found great delight in such stories a few years back. Works relating to Courts, potentates, or "harristocrats," are the most relished by these rude people.[26]

The above description undoubtedly signals Ainsworth and his imitators, in particular it signals the plot of *Rookwood*, being the well from which the popular craze for penny dreadful tales of highwaymen had sprung with its resurrection of the spirit of Dick Turpin. But Turpin and Jack Sheppard are by this point no longer working class icons, they have now been replaced by the more tangible figures of O'Connor and G.W.M. Reynolds as the working class find a political voice in Chartism.

Ainsworth was awarded a Civil List Pension by Lord Palmerston in 1856, and retired to Tunbridge Wells to look after his ailing brother in 1867, resigning his last editorship (the *New Monthly*) in 1870, although continuing to write. Although largely forgotten in the South, Ainsworth, the "Lancashire Novelist" to his fellow Mancunians, was honoured at a Lord Mayor's banquet in Manchester Town Hall in September 1881 as "an expression of the high esteem in which he is held by his Fellow townsmen and of his services to Literature", an accompanying article in Punch affectionately describing him as, "the greatest axe-and-neck-romancer of our time"[27] which was not far short of the truth. He consequently visited the city of his birth one last time. Ainsworth died of a heart attack on 5 January 1882, almost pen in hand, shortly after his final romance, *Stanley Brereton*, concluded in the *Bolton Weekly Journal*.

Thus far, there have been no Oxford World's Classics editions of Ainsworth's novels, no cheap Penguin paperbacks, no BBC costume dramas, no adaptations on Radio 4, no Hollywood movies in glorious Technicolor, not even a scratchy, pre-war, black and white film version of *Jack Sheppard* starring Tod Slaughter as Jonathan Wild. A revival seems unlikely.

Throughout his life, "Newgate" was a code by which increasingly prurient Victorian critics were able to attack Ainsworth's essentially Regency sensibilities - a practice that has remained in literary criticism, virtually unchallenged, to this day. Perhaps Ainsworth's works were not great literature, but what is often too readily dismissed as merely pulp fiction can have more cultural resonance than many authors and scholars might care to acknowledge. While admitting that the popular culture of any age can often be derivative, poorly-written or just downright silly, it can also, at its best, touch the sublime in the most unlikely of scenarios. At his best, Ainsworth's story-telling could be magical - at his worst, he was usually fun to read, if often unintentionally. As he cheerfully admitted:

> If the design of Romance be, what it has been held, the exposition of a useful truth by means of an interesting story, I fear I have but imperfectly fulfilled the office imposed upon me; having, as I will freely confess, had, throughout, an eye rather to the reader's amusement than his edification.[28]

Although hardly the only Victorian to prefer adventure stories to moral fables, literary criticism has been more harsh on this author than on any other of his age. Ainsworth's work, more than that of any of his contemporaries, is thus the reflection of the Victorian literary novel cast in the black and lurid tarn, a figure Dickens once felt he must define his own work against. Ainsworth, like his greatest heroes, remains an

outlaw in literary history yet, in the words of Dick Turpin: “England, sir, has reason to be proud of her highwaymen”.[29]

NOTES

[1] W.H. Auden, ‘Reading,’ *The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963) 10.

[2] *Reynolds’s Miscellany* May 22 1847.

[3] R.H. Horne, *A New Spirit of the Age*, 2 vols, vol. 1 (London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1844) 220.

[4] J. Hain Friswell, *Modern Men of Letters Honestly Criticised* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1870), 257.

[5] Friswell 266.

[6] Andrew Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel, 1840—1880* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 46.

[7] Sir Walter Scott, journal entry, October 18 1826, *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. W.E.K. Anderson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 213.

[8] W.H. Ainsworth, preface, *Rookwood, A Romance*, Collected Works (1834 London: George Routledge and Sons, 1881).

[9] William Harrison Ainsworth, letter to Hugh Beaver, December 12 1838, James Crossley Papers, (Archives Section, Local Studies Unit), Central Library, Manchester.

[10] Ainsworth, Jack Sheppard, A Romance (1839) Works 344.

[11] Quoted from S.M. Ellis, William Harrison Ainsworth and his Friends, 2 vols, vol. 1 (London: John Lane, 1911), 376.

[12] *Examiner*, June 28 1840, 402.

[13] Ainsworth *The Tower of London, A Historical Romance*, (1840) Works, 398.

[14] Ainsworth, preface, *The Tower of London*.

[15] Ainsworth, *The Lancashire Witches. A Romance of Pendle Forest*, (1848) Works, 62.

[16] Ainsworth, *The Life and Adventures of Mervyn Clitheroe* (1858) Works 129.

[17] Ainsworth, *Considerations on the best means of affording Immediate Relief to the Operative Classes in the Manufacturing Districts* (London: John Ebers, 1826). This sounds more intriguing than it is in actuality. The argument begins powerfully by suggesting that the horrors experienced by the crowd at Peterloo (which was not far from the Ainsworth’s family home in King’s Street, Manchester) were “less operative than the certainty of present and painful suffering”, experienced by the urban poor every day, but the author quickly abandons the radical call for state intervention he appears initially to be suggesting in favour of rather insipid suggestions involving charity.

[18] Ainsworth, *Mervyn Clitheroe* 60—62.

[19] Ainsworth, preface, *The Manchester Rebels of the Fatal “45* (1873) Works.

[20] Ainsworth, letter to Crossley, October 10 1873.

[21] *Manchester Evening Chronicle*, December 24 1904.

[22] Ainsworth, *The Manchester Rebels*, 94.

[23] James Crossley and John Evans (eds), *Specially Revised Accounts of the Recent Banquet to William Harrison Ainsworth, Esq., by Thomas Baker, Mayor of Manchester. As an expression of the high esteem in which he is held by his Fellow-townsmen and of his services to literature* (Manchester: 1881).

[24] Edward Lloyd, publisher of *The History of Pirates, Smugglers, & c. of All Nations (1835), The Calendar of Horrors* (1835, interestingly in association with Thomas Peckett Prest, creator of, among others, Sweeney Todd, who made Lloyd's fortune but was left to die in poverty), and *The History of and Lives of the Most Notorious Highwaymen, Footpads and Robbers of Every Description* (1836-7).

[25] Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor,* ed. Victor Neuburg (1851 London: Penguin, 1985) 25.

[26] Mayhew 27.

[27] *Punch*, September 21 1881.

[28] Ainsworth, preface, *Rookwood.*

[29] Ainsworth, *Rookwood* 53.

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