

# Ten Minutes with William Hone

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Hone is known today chiefly in three historical contexts:

In **1817** he successfully defended himself against the Attorney General's *ex officio* charges of blasphemy and sedition, thus earning a significant place in the history of a free press in England.

In **1819-21** he collaborated with George Cruikshank to produce a series of illustrated satirical pamphlets whose wide popularity helped define the public reaction to such events as the "Peterloo" massacre and the Queen Caroline affair.

In **1825-27** he edited and published the *Every-Day Book*, an antiquarian miscellany that was widely read and influential throughout the nineteenth century.

The following paragraphs—a "ten minute biography"—will outline the salient aspects of Hone's life. For more information on any of these matters, I invite readers to explore the William Hone BioText at [honearchive.org](http://honearchive.org).

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## A Ten-Minute Biography of William Hone

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### A London Childhood 1780-1800

Hone was born in Bath on 3 June, 1780—his entry into the world occurring almost simultaneously with the Gordon Riots in London. Hone's father, also William Hone, was a devoutly religious man, though as a follower of the charismatic preacher William Huntington S.S., he was technically a dissenter. His enthusiasm was such that he lived according to the strict discipline of his faith, and he may well have inculcated in his sons a deep skepticism about the established church and other such institutions.

The Hone family moved to London in 1783 where the older William Hone was soon employed as a legal copyist and where his son grew up in a house on Grafton Street—at the time bordering the open countryside of what would soon become Regent's Park. The events of 1789 reverberated through the Hone household—as they did throughout England—and the family subscribed to a newspaper and, as Hone put it later, "We became politicians." In fact, the young Hone, at the age of 12, soon assembled his first "publication": a half-sheet broadside entitled *The Contrast* that sets the freedoms of the English constitution against the slavery of the French. A copy of this privately printed work was sent to the conservative

Reeves' Association where it earned the accolades of the secretary.

With help from his father, Hone began work as a "factotum" and legal copyist in 1793 or 94. His "professional life" soon brought him into contact with a much wider view of the world—including poetry, theater, and radical politics. Hone began to doubt the religious foundations of his upbringing and he became affiliated with a branch of the London Corresponding Society. Hone's father, concerned about this turn in his son's thinking, secured a position for him in Chatham, where Hone spent two or three years in the later 1790s and where he wrote some poetry in his little free time. Soon, however, Hone

was back in London working to make his way in the book trade.

### **Early Professional Life: "Tranquillity" and the Book Trade 1800-1810**

In July of 1800, Hone married Sarah Johnson, the daughter of his landlady who was also an old family friend. One year later, the Hones first child was born—a daughter named after her mother. Every two or three years for the next twenty years or so, the Hones ushered a new child into the family. The growing numbers put some urgency into Hone's efforts to find profitable employment, and through the first decade of the 19th-century he tried several ventures—from book and stationery shops to editing (e.g. the popular cookbook called *Millington's Cookery* [1805]).

Two ventures are particularly significant in this context. First Hone, together with LCS acquaintance John Bone, tried to establish a kind of savings bank/annuity company called *Tranquillity*. Though an eminently sensible idea which was in many ways well ahead of its time, and though the project earned the good opinions of several influential persons, it was forced to close for lack of funds less than one year after its initial establishment. Ten years later, Hone recalled the venture as a kind of learning experience for the young entrepreneur and social reformer: "It [the *Tranquillity* project] was very Quixotic—we were mad; mad because we supposed it possible, if an intention were good, that it would therefore be carried into effect" (*Third Trial*, p. 20).

The second venture—a book and print shop—was also undertaken in partnership with Bone. While the Bone/Hone bookshop was not a financial success, it did provide a space wherein Hone was able to establish friendships with such figures as Sir Richard Phillips, Lord Skeffington, and, at the opposite end of the social and political spectrum, Francis Place and Thomas Spence. In addition, Hone was able to establish a reputation for himself as an expert in antiquarian books and prints. That said, in the fall of 1810, the stack of unpaid bills overwhelmed the partners, and the only way forward was through

the bankruptcy courts. They had to liquidate all their assets—"wearing apparel and the wearing apparel of their wives and children only excepted," as the court order put it—and give the proceeds to their many creditors.

### **Projects and Publishing 1810-1815**

In 1810, therefore, Hone had to make a fresh start at a career. This is a sparse period in the surviving documents. Capitalizing on his expertise in the antiquarian book trade, Hone set himself up as an auctioneer of private libraries. Soon, however, his philanthropic energy turned toward other projects. In 1813 and 14, for example, Hone worked with James Bevans and Edward Wakefield to develop a new form of asylum for the humane treatment of the insane. The three pursued the project with some vigor, but were ultimately foiled due to a lack of wealthy supporters. Fortunately, in January of 1814 Hone was named the "Literary Editor" of the venerable *Critical Review*, a position he held for about 18 months. The status (and salary) afforded to Hone by this position enabled him to open a bookselling shop at 55 Fleet Street, where he moved with his family in December of 1814. Shortly thereafter a series of events caused Hone to move increasingly into a "watchdog journalism" that would eventually bring him to the attention of the Attorney General.

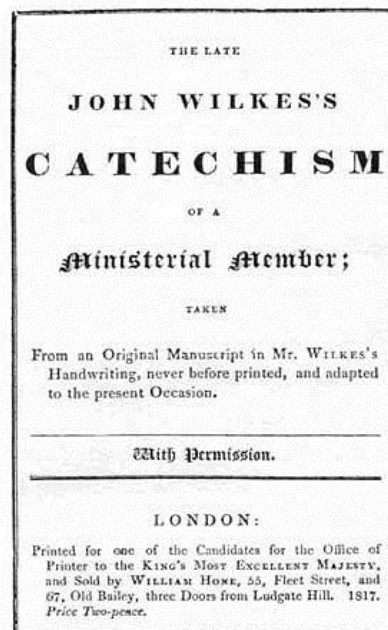
The first event was Hone's concern with the miscarriage of justice (as he saw it) regarding the shooting death of Edward Vyse. Vyse had been present during a street protest about the Corn Laws and was shot from the windows of the home of the MP Frederick Robinson. Hone, who was closely involved in the subsequent trial, saw that every effort was being made to insure that no person of real stature would be held responsible. Hone took it upon himself to publicize this miscarriage of justice.

The second event was the trial and execution of Elizabeth Fenning, a servant girl who was accused of poisoning the family of her employer. The evidence against Fenning was scant and entirely circumstantial, and

Hone once again publicized the case. He also wrote a short narrative pamphlet about the case—*La Pie Voleuse, or the Maid and the Magpie*—which was very popular in itself and which inspired Hone to produce other pamphlets documenting the abuses of power within the legal and political systems.

### **Radical Publisher: A Parodist on Trial 1815-1818**

The years 1815-1817 saw Hone consolidating his status as a writer of radical critiques of the government, and, in addition, he began to write in his characteristic parodic/satirical style. (With hyperbolic conservative rhetoric about the end of the war with France and the excesses of the Prince Regent, he was by no means short of material.) In addition, Hone continued to publish the public journalistic exposés that were already associated with him. For example, just days after the Spa Fields Riots of late 1816, Hone published his own account of the affair—and his account included a broader social and economic analysis founded loosely on the principles of Thomas Spence.



At the beginning of 1817—when political tensions and the threat of social unrest were running so high that

the government suspended *habeas corpus*—Hone began publishing a radical weekly newspaper called the *Reformists' Register* and he wrote and published four parodic pamphlets that used the forms of church liturgy to attack the self-serving corruption of the current government. These latter pamphlets caught the eye of Home Secretary Lord Sidmouth and his network of domestic spies, and on 3 May, 1817, Hone was arrested on *ex officio* charges of blasphemy and sedition. He was held in the King's Bench prison until 2 July when he was released on orders from the Chief Justice himself.

During his stay in prison, Hone began preparing for his forthcoming libel trials by collecting other parodies that used liturgical models for political ends. His strategy was to argue that many writers—including George Canning, a current cabinet minister — had published such parodies and that the Attorney General's claim that such parodies were blasphemous was obviously very partial. For a few months, it looked as though the libel charges would be dropped, but then in late November of 1817, Hone received notice of his trial date.

The trials themselves constituted a strangely comical episode in English law. The Attorney General had singled out three of the offending parodies for separate trials, and these occurred on successive days, 18, 19, and 20 December. In each case, the Attorney General's argument held that using liturgical texts as the basis for comic-satirical parody was an act of blasphemy because it necessarily degraded the sacred quality of religious language. In each case, Hone brought in armloads of books containing liturgical parodies written by highly respected persons (including George Canning), and he defended himself by reading these parodies in the courtroom. There were frequent eruptions of laughter from the packed galleries, and equally frequent but pompously ineffectual warnings from the presiding judge, Lord Chief Justice Ellenborough. After each day's trial,

the jury returned a verdict of "Not Guilty" which was met by enthusiastic cheers from the gallery. The trials were widely publicized and as a result Hone became a popular hero—a kind of humble common man who had bravely stood up to the political authorities of the day. The forces of repression, as Hone put it later, had been "laughed out of court."

### **Illustrated Satire, Adaptations, and the Apocryphal New Testament 1818-1825**

Hone was uncomfortable with his new status as public figure and popular hero, and in 1818, thanks to a subscription that had been taken up in honor of his acquittals, he spent much of his time engaged in his first love: antiquarian reading in the British Library. But events of the later Regency, as well as a highly productive collaboration with the artist George



Cruikshank, brought him once again into the spotlight. In early 1819, Hone and Cruikshank published the famous *Political House that Jack Built*—a pamphlet that went through dozens of editions and that literally defined the radical response to "Peterloo."

This highly influential pamphlet was followed with *The Man in the Moon* (early 1820) and a series of illustrated satirical pamphlets on the Queen Caroline affair. (See, for example, *The Queen's Matrimonial Ladder* and *Non Mi Ricordo!*) Finally, Hone capped this phase of his career with two more political parodies: *A Slap at Slop and the Bridge Street*

*Gang*, and *The Political Show-man, At Home!* Each of these works was extremely popular; indeed, Hone and Cruikshank were among the best-selling writers in England during this tumultuous period.

What is less known about this extraordinarily productive period is Hone's continuing fascination with antiquarianism. In 1820, Hone published a highly controversial edition of the *Apocryphal New Testament* which was set in double column pages in imitation of the standard format of the Bible. Hone was instantly attacked as a blasphemer who called into question the authenticity of the Bible itself, but for Hone, the publication was probably more antiquarian in intent. At any rate, he followed in 1823 with a still useful volume called *Ancient Mysteries Described* which, among other things, identified sources for medieval mystery plays in the *Apocrypha*.

Finally, this period of Hone's career is marked by two other "derivative" publications. In 1819, immediately after John Murray anonymously published the first two cantos of Byron's *Don Juan*, Hone wrote and issued his own *Don Juan, Canto the Third!* as well as a stinging indictment of the conservative Murray's hypocrisy called "*Don John,*" or *Don Juan Unmasked*. The second work was a much abbreviated and edited version of Daniel Defoe's *Jure Divino* (1706) which Hone calls *The Right Divine of Kings to Govern Wrong!* This last publication is revealing because it

Miss Haidee and Don Juan pleaded well;  
At least my publisher of late so tells me,  
Although the world he does not chuse to tell,  
Yet, every body knows 'tis he who sells me:  
To sing what furthermore the pair befel,  
(As he declines my book and thus compels me,  
Because my "guinea trash" he will not own,)  
And send this Canto into Mr. Hone.

*from Don Juan, Canto the Third!*

demonstrates, especially when coupled with the correspondence between Hone and the Defoe biographer Walter Wilson, that at least from about 1813, Hone was modelling his own practice as a writer and pressman on the example of Defoe.

**Antiquarian Works: *The Every-Day Book, The Table Book, The Year Book*  
1825-1834**

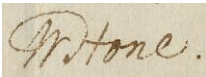
January 1, 1825, saw yet another turn in Hone's career. On this date, Hone published the first number of his *Every-Day Book*, a remarkable repository of all sorts of descriptions of antiquarian and contemporary popular culture. The idea of the work was to develop a network of contributors from across England who would document the local customs and practices that, even in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, were rapidly disappearing. The book would be published in weekly numbers with readings appropriate for each day of the year. The idea proved very popular indeed, and soon more orders for the *Every-Day Book* were coming in than Hone could immediately satisfy.

As the principal writer and editor of the publication, Hone was a very busy man, and, despite his admirable energy, the numbers began to fall behind. Unfortunately, the great success of the *Every-Day Book* did not translate into great prosperity for Hone, and in April of 1826, he once again was bankrupt. This was a severe blow: while Hone was able to secure the copyrights of the *Every-Day Book*

"The misery of debt is the greatest misery I ever experienced—never while I live will I, if possible, owe a shilling to a human being."

Hone to his son Alfred, March 1829

from his creditors, everything else—his presses, his property, and even his private library—had to be sold, and a disheartened Hone had to spend the next two years laboring under the Rules of the King's Bench to pay off his creditors. The *Every-Day Book* itself ceased publication at the end of 1827, but Hone collected some of his remaining materials and produced two other antiquarian miscellanies: *The Table Book* (1828) and *The Year Book* (1832).



By late 1829, Hone began to clear himself of his financial difficulties and, with the help of several friends—including Charles Lamb, Basil Montagu, Joseph Parkes, John Childs, William Behnes, and even Robert Southey—Hone began to collect enough funds to enable him to establish a small coffee house called The Grasshopper which opened its doors on 19 June, 1830. For a time, The Grasshopper was the scene of many convivial dinners and meetings, but soon it too began to fail, and by the summer of 1833, Hone shuttered the shop and moved to a small house in Peckham Rye Common. Though England itself had just passed the Great Reform Bill of 1832—vindicating many of Hone's earlier political efforts—he seems at this point to have fallen into another period of despondency, heightened, no doubt, by the first of a series of "paralytic attacks" (strokes) that occasionally left him utterly incapacitated.

**The "Proudest Heart"  
Subdued: Conversion and  
Late Years  
1834-1842**

During these last years of his life, Hone kept largely free from public attention and certainly from public controversy. There were likely several reasons for this relative silence—poverty, illness, and (perhaps surprisingly for a person with Hone's reputation) religion. Though Hone was never really the blasphemer he was made out to be, as early as the later 1820s, Hone's interest in formal religion was rekindled, probably by the charismatic preacher Edward Irving. (An August 1832 letter from a bemused Charles Lamb to Walter Wilson claims that "Hone is turned Believer in Irving and his unknown Tongues" [LCML iii, 342].) Then in 1833 Hone began to attend the services at the Weigh House Chapel with its influential preacher Thomas Binney. This led to the full-fledged

conversion and formal admission into that congregation of Hone and many of his family. Hone's newly confirmed Christianity became the dominant theme of his later life.

In one aspect, Hone's religious conversion led to another episode in his political activism, though this one kept Hone deliberately out of the public eye. From about 1835 to 1839, Hone earned £2/week as the sub-

The proudest heart that ever beat  
Hath been subdued in me;  
The wildest will that ever rose,  
To scorn thy cause, and aid thy foes,  
Is quelled, my God, by thee.

1834

editor of a dissenters' newspaper called *The Patriot*. This was a time of great turmoil in the ecclesiastical world as a number of prominent persons were protesting the Church Rates levied by the established church. One of the key figures in this controversy was Hone's old friend, the printer John Childs from Bungay. It seems that Childs would send materials useful to the protesters' cause to Hone who would in turn publish them in *The Patriot*. As this controversy played out, Hone's newspaper became the chief organ for dissemination of the dissenters' political views, though Hone himself remained anonymous.

For the most part, however, Hone's last years were occupied with keeping up his correspondence, reading his new favorite author Charles Dickens, and writing his own autobiography (a "sinner-saved" narrative suggested by Binney, the drafts of which are held in the British Library). By 1840, Hone had given up his position at *The Patriot*, and, thanks to another stroke, a letter to Childs in that year says simply, "I am past writing. The hand will not answer to the will." Hone lived another two years in a tiny house near Bruce's Castle in Tottenham where he died in November of 1842. Hone is buried in Abney Park Cemetery.

Kyle Grimes — January, 2013

*The William Hone BioText* — <http://honearchive.org>