

Choice 14

Walpole's Chattertoniana

Coming back on the *Olympic* in 1925 I met Dr Edward Clark Streeter, to whom I later dedicated my *Collector's Progress*. He had been at Yale twenty years ahead of me, had formed a fine library of medical history, and was then making his notable collection of weights. After I had held forth on Walpole he looked at me quizzically and asked, "But what about the Marvellous Boy?" He was quoting Wordsworth,

"Chatterton, the marvellous boy,
The sleepless soul that perished in his pride,"

This was the youthful genius, Thomas Chatterton, who committed suicide in his eighteenth year, a victim of opium as well as of pride and whose brief life fills twenty columns in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, as compared to Boswell's sixteen and Walpole's eleven. While we walked the decks of the *Olympic* I explained to Ned Streeter that I couldn't collect Walpole if I wasn't convinced he was innocent of Chatterton's death and Ned accepted his innocence when I finished.

The Choice in this chapter is Walpole's collection in four volumes of sixteen pieces dealing with Chatterton. To appreciate them one must know the boy's story and how he, a precocious adolescent in Bristol, the son of a poor schoolmaster, secured a special place in English literature.

In 1776 Chatterton, aged sixteen, sent Walpole "The Ryse of Peyncteynge yn Englande, wroten bie T. Rowleie, 1469, for Mastre Canynge." Rowley was a fifteenth-century monk of Bristol invented by Chatterton who allegedly composed a treatise on "peyncteynge," that might, Chatterton wrote Walpole, be "of service to you in any future edition of your truly entertaining *Anecdotes of Painting*." He added ten explanatory notes to "The Ryse of Peyncteynge." The first of them was on Rowley whose "Merit as a biographer, historiographer, is great, as a poet still greater . . . and the person under whose patronage [his pieces] may appear to the world, will lay the Englishman, the antiquary, and the poet

under an eternal obligation." This was a hook well baited for Horace Walpole who sent Chatterton "a thousand thanks" for his "very curious and kind letter" and went so far as to say he would "not be sorry to print" a specimen of Rowley's poems. What pleased Walpole most in Chatterton's letter was the confirmation of the conjecture in *Anecdotes of Painting* that "oil painting was known here much earlier than had been supposed," but before long Walpole began to suspect, with the aid of Mason and Gray, that the examples of the fifteenth-century manuscripts that Chatterton had sent him were forgeries. It *was* odd that Rowley wrote in eighteenth-century rhymed couplets.

Meanwhile, Chatterton disclosed to Walpole his age and condition in life. The letter in which he did so has been almost entirely cut away. Walpole's recollection of it nine years later was that Chatterton described himself in it as "a clerk or apprentice to an attorney, [that he] had a taste and turn for more elegant studies," and hoped Walpole would assist him with his "interest in emerging out of so dull a profession." The learned antiquary turned out to be an ambitious youth. Walpole sent him an avuncular letter to which Chatterton returned, according to Walpole, "a rather peevish answer" in which he said "he could not contest with a person of my learning (a compliment by no means due to me, and which I certainly had not assumed, having consulted abler judges), maintained the genuineness of the poems, and demanded to have them returned, as they were the property of another gentleman. . . ."

When I received this letter I was going to Paris in a day or two, and either forgot his request of the poems, or perhaps not having time to have them copied, deferred complying till my return, which was to be in six weeks. . . .

Soon after my return from France, I received another letter from Chatterton, the style of which was singularly impertinent. He demanded his poems roughly; and added, that I should not have *dared* to use him so ill, if he had not acquainted me with the narrowness of his circumstances.

My heart did not accuse me of insolence to him. I wrote an answer expostulating with him on his injustice, and renewing good advice—but upon second thoughts, reflecting that so wrong-headed a young man, of whom I knew nothing, and whom I had never seen, might be absurd enough to print my letter, I flung it into the fire; and wrapping up both his poems and letters, without taking a copy of either, for which I am now sorry, I returned all to him, and thought no more of him or them, till about a year and half after, when [a gap in all printed versions].

Dining at the Royal Academy, Dr Goldsmith drew the attention of the company with an account of a marvellous treasure of ancient poems lately

discovered at Bristol, and expressed enthusiastic belief in them, for which he was laughed at by Dr Johnson, who was present. I soon found this was the *trouvaille* of my friend Chatterton; and I told Dr Goldsmith that this novelty was none to me, who might, if I had pleased, have had the honour of ushering the great discovery to the learned world. You may imagine, Sir, we did not at all agree in the measure of our faith; but though his credulity diverted me, my mirth was soon dashed, for on asking about Chatterton, he told me he had been in London, and had destroyed himself. I heartily wished then that I had been the dupe of all the poor young man had written to me, for who would not have his understanding imposed on to save a fellow being from the utmost wretchedness, despair and suicide!—and a poor young man not eighteen—and of such miraculous talents—for, dear Sir, if I wanted credulity on one hand, it is ample on the other.

Seven years after Chatterton's death an article on him in the *Monthly Review* for April 1777 stated that he had applied to Walpole, but "met with no encouragement from that learned and ingenious gentleman, who suspected his veracity." A month later in the same magazine George Catcott of Bristol went a step further. Chatterton, said Catcott, "applied . . . to that learned antiquary, Mr Horace Walpole, but met with little or no encouragement from him; soon after which, in a fit of despair, as it is supposed, he put an end to his unhappy life." "This," comments E. H. W. Meyerstein, in his *Life of Chatterton*, 1930, "was a perfectly monstrous accusation, considering that Walpole never saw Chatterton, whose application to him was made over a year before he came to London, and seventeen months before his death." The accusation was repeated a year later by the editor of Chatterton's *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse*. These statements fastened the responsibility for Chatterton's death on Walpole in many minds. His Twickenham neighbour, Miss Letitia Hawkins, wrote that he "began to go down in public favour from the time when he resisted the imposition of Chatterton." Coleridge wrote of "the bleak freezings of neglect," in his "Monody on the Death of Chatterton." "Oh, ye who honour the name of man," he cried, "rejoice that Walpole is called a lord!"—a remark that has been frequently quoted and was echoed by the youthful Browning. An extreme Walpole-hater has written: "To blame Walpole for not assisting the youth to put the Rowley romance before the public is absurd; but for the man's cowardly, mean, untruthful attack upon Chatterton's reputation, after the lad's death, all fair-minded persons must hold him in contempt." This writer objected to Walpole's saying to various correspondents that Chatterton was a liar, a forger, and

a rascal (all of which Chatterton was), as well as the genius that Walpole repeatedly called him. Critics of Walpole have been outraged by the passages in his *Letter to the Editor of the Miscellanies of Thomas Chatterton*, 1779: "All of the house of forgery are relations"; and "[Chatterton's] ingenuity in counterfeiting styles, and, I believe, hands, might easily have led him to those more facile imitations of prose, promissory notes," a remark that was certainly injudicious.

Walpole has not been without defenders from his own day on, notably Lort, Malone, Sir Walter Scott, and Saintsbury. The *Life* of Chatterton that will probably never be superseded, Mr Meyerstein's, puts Chatterton's connection with Walpole as fairly as possible: "Chatterton's attempt to make Walpole his patron has always been a favourite theme with the poet's apologists" who "have strained the facts to meet their theory of an inexperienced plebeian's encounter with a heartless man of the world; but Chatterton's action in this matter was for the most part less that of a distressed poet than a bold, presumptuous decoy duck, on his mettle, and Walpole is to be pitied rather than blamed, at any rate up to 1789, when the problem, such as it is, emerges; before that date there are few historic doubts of importance."

In 1789 William Barrett's *History of Bristol* appeared. It contained Chatterton's letters to Walpole of 25 and 30 March 1769. Walpole wrote Lort 27 July 1789, "I do assure you upon my honor and veracity that I never received such letters," and permitted Lort to pass this assurance on to George Steevens and his friends at Cambridge. He also wrote Hannah More a similar denial in September 1789. "Nothing," notes Mr Meyerstein, "has prejudiced Walpole more severely than this denial, as it has been interpreted as taking a despicable advantage of Chatterton when he was in his grave; and this is the only real problem in his relations with the poet."

The explanation of Walpole's misstatements in 1789 is not, I think, a bad conscience or a black heart. He was not a liar; he did not take "despicable advantage" of the dead or living. The explanation, I think, is the merciful instinct that expels the unpleasant from one's mind. Ten years earlier Walpole had spoken of the two letters five times in his *Letter to the Editor of the Miscellanies*. Anyone over fifty knows that his memory is not what it once was. And how many readers of this page under fifty can be certain they remember every circumstance of a distressing incident that took place twenty-one years earlier? An incident, moreover, that for nine years appeared to be closed. What is remarkable in Walpole's rela-

tions with Chatterton is not this one lapse of memory, but that he recollected so much so accurately about an unknown antiquary who was scraping acquaintance with him as the author of the *Anecdotes of Painting*.

Chatterton's letters to Walpole show as much genius as his other fabrications. They have been the cause of as much controversy as the authorship of Rowley's poems, and will be of more, because Chatterton's forging of Rowley's poems has been accepted for generations, whereas Walpole's brief part in his life will perhaps be twisted by those who hate the rich. As Walpole himself was always attracted to the causes of underdogs his relations with Chatterton are ironical; if he had given Chatterton as little encouragement as James Dodsley apparently gave him he would have avoided the opprobrium that fell upon him. Had he been the sort of person his critics said he was—heartless, purse-proud, a trifler—he would not have given Chatterton a thought. Walpole was seduced by his love of antiquities and suffered for the virtues his critics have denied him.

Walpole feared that "the Chattertonians" would produce forged letters after his death to blacken his reputation, as he wrote Lady Ossory. He urged her to preserve his letters on the subject. His best defense appears in his letter to her of 11 August 1778.

Somebody [he wrote] has published the poems of Chatterton the Bristol boy, and in the preface intimates that I was the cause of his despair and poisoning himself, and a little more openly is of opinion that I ought to be stoned. This most groundless accusation has driven me to write the whole story—and yet now I have done it in a pamphlet of near thirty pages of larger paper than this, I think I shall not bring myself to publish it. My story is as clear as daylight, I am as innocent as of the death of Julius Caesar, I never saw the lad with my eyes, and he was the victim of his own extravagance two years after all correspondence had ceased between him and me—and yet I hate to be the talk of the town, and am more inclined to bear this aspersion, than to come again upon the stage. . . . It is impossible to have a moment's doubt on this case. The whole foundation of the accusation is reduced to this—If I had been imposed upon, my countenance might have saved the poor lad from poisoning himself for want, which he brought on himself by his excesses. Those few words are a full acquittal, and would indeed be sufficient—but the story in itself is so marvellous, that I could not help going into the whole account of such a prodigy as Chatterton was. You will pity him, as I do; it was a deep tragedy, but interests one chiefly from his extreme youth, for it was his youth that made his talents and achievements so miraculous. I doubt, neither his genius nor his heart would have interested one, had he lived twenty years more. You will be amazed at what he was capable of before eighteen, the period of his existence—yet I had rather anybody else were employed to tell the story.

This was among Walpole's fifty letters to Lady Ossory that came to light in 1936 and so was not seen by earlier commentators.

In 1933 I found out that sixteen pieces of Walpole's collection of Chattertoniana bound in four volumes were in the Mercantile Library in New York; a seventeenth piece was (and is) in the British Museum. The Mercantile Library, a lending library of contemporary books, acquired the four volumes in 1868. I of course hurried to see them. Only the first volume was in its Strawberry covers with Walpole's arms on the sides, but all the pieces had his notes and formed a major Walpolian recovery. The first volume has a title-page written by Walpole on a fly-leaf: "Collection/of/Pieces/relating to/Rowley/and/Chatterton;/ containing,/ the supposed poems/of Rowley; the acknowledged works/of/Chatterton; and/Mr Walpole's letter/ to the Editor/ of the Latter;/ with notes to it/ by/ Mr Walpole himself./" The first piece is "*Poems, supposed to have been written at Bristol by Thomas Rowley, and others in the fifteenth century The Greatest Part Now First Published From the Most Authentic Copies, with An Engraved Specimen of One of The MSS to Which are added A Preface An Introductory Account of The Several Pieces and A Glossary,*" 1777. Beneath this Walpole wrote "By Mr Tyrwhitt," Thomas Tyrwhitt, 1730-86, a classical commentator, who played a big part in exposing Chatterton. The second piece in this volume is *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse; by Thomas Chatterton, the supposed author of the poems published under the names of Rowley, Canning, etc.* In his Preface to it the editor wrote, "One of his first efforts, to emerge from a situation so irksome to him, was an application to a gentleman well known in the republic of letters; which unfortunately for the public, and himself met with a very cold reception." Walpole identified the gentleman in the margin, "Mr H. Walpole." The third piece in the first volume is Walpole's *Letter to the Editor of the Miscellanies of Thomas Chatterton*, Strawberry Hill, 1779. After "Letter" he wrote, "From Mr Horace Walpole." He made a dozen annotations in ink, and pasted in relevant newspaper cuttings and a romantic view of "Monument to the Memory of Chatterton." If the Almighty allows me to rescue only one of the four volumes this is the one I shall choose without hesitation.

When I asked the Librarian of the Mercantile Library if she thought there was any possibility of the trustees selling me the four Walpole volumes she thought that they might. I urged her to have Dr Rosenbach appraise them, which he did at \$600. This enabled the Library to buy many recently published books of more interest to its subscribers.

We printed Walpole's extensive annotations of his Chatterton collec-

Havinge whilome yn dyscourse proved a sought to prove the Doct^r of
 Chryste by his Workes Names and Attributes, I wil seeke to prove the Doct^r of
 Holie Spryte. Manne muste be supplied with holie Spryte to have commensurable
 yghtfullie of thynges whiche bee of Gods. Sancte Paule praith the holie Spryte
 to aspyt his Flocke ynde this Wordes. The holie Sprytes Communion to wyth you, Lette
 us there desyre of hym to ayde us. I in unphylsinge and you yn onderstandynge hys
 Doctryne let us saie wyth Seynte Cyrill Adeo sancto Spiritus & peracvum tuum
 expectantibus illaboro coolitw, sanctifica templum corporis nostri, et consecra
 inhabitaculum huius. Sancte Paule sayeth ye are the Temple of God for the Spryte
 of Gods dwelleth ynn you. Gif ye are the Temple of Godde alleyn by the dwellinge of
 the Spryte, wote ye not that the Spryte is Godde, and solaine praefer of the personne
 and Glorie of hyde Personne. The person, Gifte Operations, Glorie, and Doct^r are al. measure
 in. Holie Spryte as bee proved for dyffamto Doct^r of Scripturars. Beynge as
 Sphe sayeth of the same Esentialem matter as the Fadre and Sonne who are Godde the
 holie Spryte muste undoubtedly bee Godde. The Spryte or divine Wylls of Godde moved upon
 the Water at creatynge of the Walde, this meaneth the Doct^r. I sayde yn mye laste
 dyscourse, the promys of Chryste who wyth Godde the Fadre wolde dwelle yn the sought
 of his Dyscyples, have coude hope so bette enjoy myfym of holie Sprytes? ye moe.
 Myne the prooveth no alleyn the personallitie of holie Sprytes bette the wordes foundat^r
 and Ground Warcho of the Fupit^r yfselfe. The holie Sprytes cannot be the gods they
 and Virtues of a Mannis Mynde sythence by hym was too to faste loope ynn
 gods thynges; gif we are too to hope a Value by yet Value yfselfe meethynge by
 the bester bee not fytte to the Change. The Spryte or Godde is the Auctore of ynn
 gods thynges and by hys obeisance their mate alleyn be hold: I may not be
 colish or hereticall, to saie whatte we calle Conveyance, is the hystorye ear wyng
 of the Spryte, to save our ^{eyde} Waye before he dothe volente leave our stonied Soules

tion in the Yale Walpole. One note I particularly like is where Chatterton refers to "the redoubted baron Otranto." Walpole explained quietly in the margin, "Mr H.W. author of the *Castle of Otranto*," but he has no comment on Chatterton's wittiest sally, the reference to "Horace Trefoil."

The second volume is Jacob Bryant's *Observations upon the Poems of Thomas Rowley in which the Authenticity of Those Poems is Ascertained*, 1781. With it, annotated spiritedly by Walpole, is a 'Recapitulation.' Of the remaining eleven pieces in volumes 3 and 4 the most interesting is Thomas James Mathias's *Essay on the Evidence, External and Internal Relating to the Poems Attributed to Thomas Rowley, etc.* 1783, in which Walpole's notes are more critical than those in the other pieces.

The runner-up in this Choice is a collection of manuscripts and letters that belonged to Thomas Tyrwhitt. Among them are six pages in Chatterton's hand, including his poem "Happiness" and several drawings and inscriptions inspired by the documents and monuments in St Mary Redcliff, Bristol. "Happiness" concludes:

Content is happiness, as sages say-
But what's content? The trifle of a day.
Then, friend, let inclination be thy guide,
Nor be by superstition led aside.
The saint and sinner, fool and wise attain
An equal share of easiness and pain.

Chatterton's handwriting is so mature it is easy to see why it was mistaken for that of an older man. As his manuscripts are chiefly in the British Museum and the Bristol Library, we are fortunate at Farmington to have these pages that bring us into the most vexed chapter of Walpole's life.