THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF FRANCIS PLACE
FRANCIS PLACE IN HIS SIXTIES
The Autobiography of FRANCIS PLACE (1771-1854)

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY

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PREFACE

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Francis Place's autobiography has been the major personal source of information about social conditions of working-class London in the late eighteenth century. Historian after historian has sat in the Manuscript Room of the British Museum, reading the neat regular handwriting in which Place recorded his memories of life among small shopkeepers, poor artisans and their children, in the crowded streets between Temple Bar and Charing Cross. Some of Place's recollections of this London have been presented to us by social historians.

From such a social history I first learned of Place's autobiography. A quotation in which Place described his schooling made me want to read the whole work from which the excerpt was taken. I soon discovered that the autobiography had never been published. After reading it in manuscript, I thought it should be made available to other readers. The autobiography is worth reading solely for its unique record of what Place called 'correctly detailed domestic history' and 'manners and morals' of the past. It is also valuable for its intentional and unintentional revelations of the character of this important and controversial figure in the Reform Movement.

In preparing this edition, I was helped by many people in many ways. To all of them I am grateful. Frank X. Thale, Janet Fendrych and George P. B. Naish assisted me in establishing the text. The attendants in the Manuscript Room and the Reading Room of the British Museum patiently and willingly located other Placean materials. H. A. V. Warner investigated copyright regulations. Edward P. Thompson made many valuable suggestions about my introduction and notes. William D. Grampp, Yohma Gray and Wren Staley read and recommended useful changes in my introduction. Most of all and longest of all, Jerome Thale helped, advising me in every detail at every stage of the editing.

I wish to thank the British Museum for permission to publish the autobiography, the National Portrait Gallery for permission to reproduce the picture of Place (most likely by Samuel Drummond in 1833), and the English Department of the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle for assuming the cost of typing and duplicating the manuscript.

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MARY THALE
EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION

Francis Place was known to his contemporaries (and has passed into history) as ‘the radical tailor of Charing Cross.’ The description implies three of the roles in which he was known in his time – reformer, member of the working class, and Londoner. In the present work we see Place in a fourth role – autobiographer and historian – and one that arises out of the first three.

As a Londoner, Place ranks with Pepys and Johnson – three men who were absorbed in the activity of the city. Unlike the other two, Place had a lifelong involvement with London. He was born (in 1771) opposite the south side of Drury Lane Playhouse, and died (in 1854) in Earls Court. In between he lived in seventeen other houses in London, the most famous of which was at No. 16 Charing Cross, where he lived for thirty-two years. During his first thirty-eight years he only once went more than thirty miles from London. The only visit of friendship which ever took him away from the city for more than a night, he recalled, was to see James Mill. During his adult years in London he recorded the city as it had been in his youth and the changes he saw in the lives of working-class Londoners and the improvements in housing, streets, lighting, bridges, etc. From the time he gained leisure, Place was constantly walking through back streets, dockside areas, fairs, observing and noting the details of lower-class London. His lower-class London was a world seen from a patronizing distance by Boswell and Johnson, not seen at all by the inmates of Parson Woodforde’s circle, unimaginable to Jane Austen’s characters. Place’s London is remarkable, and he was rare in realizing that it was worth observing and describing.

Place experienced London life with a sharp eye and a retentive memory, but he did not merely record recollections. He attempted to record and understand his youth and the London of that era in the light of later times. Fortunately he had the leisure to reflect and to study London life because, having risen from poverty to affluence, he retired from business at the age of forty-eight. The account of his economic success has many of the marks of the Horatio Alger story. Starting out poor but clever, he worked hard and prospered. He was apprenticed at fourteen to a master in the leather breeches trade. After he married at nineteen he had trouble supporting his wife; two years later, after he managed an unsuccessful strike of journeymen breeches-makers and was proscribed by all the masters, he had even more of poverty and hunger. He spent his eight
months of unemployment reading and studying, hoping and planning. His more conservative wife hoped only that they could have journeyman's wages again. But Place aimed higher. He saw that only by becoming a master could he pull himself and his family out of poverty. His chance to make the upward leap came in 1799 when he opened a tailoring shop with his lodger, Richard Wild. For eighteen months they prospered, and Place approached the Christmas of 1800 with hopes that his aim of financial security was about to be realized. But on Christmas morning he discovered that Wild was planning to break up their partnership. Ten days later, when the partnership ended, Place and his family moved from the lodgings above the shop. By then, he had so impressed customers with his business ability that they loaned him £1,600 to start his own business. On March 8, 1801, three months after the end of his partnership, he opened a tailoring shop at No. 16 Charing Cross. He succeeded so well that in 1816 he made a net profit of £3,000. In 1817, having achieved his aim of securing a comfortable living for his family, he handed the business over to his son, Francis Place Jr. He was now a man of leisure and might have aspired to the status of a gentleman, but neither he nor his enemies ever forgot that he was that most ungentlemanly of beings, a tailor.

The retired London tailor then became a full-time reformer, an appropriate career for an intelligent, self-educated ex-working-class man who would not bow before his social betters. In the course of his long life he was active in almost every major reform movement of the first half of the nineteenth century – the repeal of the Combination Laws, the Anatomy Bill, the establishment of London University, the Reform Bill, the Penny Postage, the Chartist Movement, the Anti-Corn Law League.

His apprenticeship in political life began in 1793 with a minor reform activity, a strike of the journeymen leather breeches-makers. He took over the direction of a faltering strike and persuaded the men to take measures which enabled them to hold out much longer. Though they lost the strike, Place showed the talent on which he most prided himself – 'the power I have possessed of influencing or governing other men individually and in bodies.' In the next year, when he joined the London Corresponding Society, he extended the scope of his activities in influencing men. He rapidly rose from an ordinary member to being a member of the general committee, and then the chairman of the general committee of the society, which was dedicated to annual parliaments and universal suffrage. When the government arrested two LCS members who had been sent to Birmingham, Place was dispatched to arrange bail and organize their defence. In 1798, when the government arrested the

1 See below p. 244.
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whole general committee of the LCS, Place, though no longer a member, organized a subscription of funds for the relief of their families. He managed this fund until 1799 when he and Wild opened their shop in Charing Cross.

This date marks the end of his apprenticeship in political life. For the following six years he devoted himself to his tailoring shop and to the needs of his large family (eventually, fifteen children). When he next set out to influence opinion, he was in the big league. He was a master.

This entry into the larger arena of reform came in 1807 when he successfully managed the campaign which resulted in the election to Parliament of Sir Francis Burdett. Since 1780 the Whigs and Tories had maintained a gentleman’s agreement whereby they split the two seats for Westminster. Consequently, although Westminster was a borough in which every rate payer was allowed to vote, the electors were virtually disenfranchised by this Whig-Tory arrangement. Place had become friendly with some of the other electors of Westminster, mostly shopkeepers like himself or artisans; and the evening after Parliament was dissolved in April of 1807, some of these electors came to Place’s library, above his shop, and decided to run two reform candidates. Place recorded in detail his version of this election. ‘We were all of us,’ he wrote, ‘obscure persons, not one man of note among us, not one in any way known to the Electors generally, as insignificant a set of persons as could well have been collected to undertake so important a public matter as a Westminster Election, against, Wealth – and Rank and Name and Influence.’¹ In particular, they worked without the advantage of wealth, for their candidate, Sir Francis Burdett, refused to spend his time or money in this election. Place managed the campaign, plotting the strategy, keeping the records of money spent, and always staying quietly in the background. During the polling (which lasted fifteen days) he was at the committee room every morning at seven o’clock and he stayed until after midnight every night except the last. When it was evident after three days that Burdett was not winning enough votes, Place himself went out canvassing. He even agreed to a measure which offended both his thrift and his republicanism – hiring ponies and fancily dressed riders to go about advertising the candidate. On the fifteenth and last day, Burdett was 5,000 votes ahead of the second candidate, a maverick Whig. The official Whig and the official Tory candidates each had about half as many votes as Burdett. The Whig–Tory alliance for Westminster was destroyed; and for twenty years Place and the other members of the Westminster Committee determined the candidates for Westminster.

¹ Add. MS 27850, f. 67.

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For almost thirty years thereafter Place’s library was a meeting place and information centre for the parliamentary reformers in London. Place seldom went to the homes of these reformers, but made himself available in his library for several hours every day and evening. After retiring from business in 1817, he spent even more time in his library on reform activities. He drafted minutes and queries to be presented in Parliament; he advised Burdett, Joseph Hume, Joseph Parkes, John Cam Hobhouse, George Grote and others.

Besides the parliamentary manoeuvring, Place had a hand in many other reform projects. He often represented groups of labourers petitioning for better working conditions. He was active in the London Lancastrian associations, which tried to provide inexpensive (a penny a week) schooling for children. He also helped found the London Mechanics’ Institute (now Birkbeck College), and rejoiced at the large numbers of workers who attended lectures on astronomy and chemistry.

Early in this period of intense reform activity Place gained two close friends who influenced his notions of reform – James Mill and Jeremy Bentham. Mill and Place were frequent visitors to each other’s homes and regular correspondents when Mill was away from London. Mill’s son John Stuart also became a correspondent and a visitor to Place’s library. Bentham and Mill invited Place to visit them at Ford Abbey, their rented summer home in Devon; there Place spent two months in 1817, studying and talking. His feeling toward Bentham was almost reverential. He was a Utilitarian of the Benthamite kind and spoke of Bentham as ‘my good master,’ ‘my constant, excellent, venerable preceptor,’ ‘my twenty years friend.’

Like other disciples of Bentham, Place helped to produce a couple of the master’s books (Not Paul, but Jesus and Plan of Parliamentary Reform). His reform activities were like those of the Benthamites, but, unlike some of the Benthamites who were interested primarily in such middle-class movements as the repeal of the Corn Laws, Place was especially eager ‘to promote the welfare of the working people.’ Place was not always clear how to do this. He once wrote, ‘I was not . . . for many years sufficiently acquainted with the Principles of Political Economy to be able to judge accurately what were the true means permanently to better their condition.’¹ The Benthamites believed they knew what the true means were. One of them, although it was not as consequential as others they advocated, was the repeal of the Combination Laws which were oppressive to the working class.

The repeal of these Combination Laws in 1824 was the great achieve-

¹ Add. MS 27798, f. 5.
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ment in Place's attempts 'to promote the welfare of the working people.' These laws forbade either masters or journeymen to organize in order to change the hours or wages of their work. In practice, violations by masters were ignored, but violations by workers were often severely punished. Place had felt the tyranny of these laws in the 1790s when he was an apprentice and a journeyman breeches-maker, especially when he managed the organizations of workers who had to disguise their real aims by pretending they were forming a society to benefit their sick members. Place opposed these laws not only because they humiliated workers by forcing them to subterfuge, but also because he believed they produced an atmosphere of hostility towards employers which encouraged the workers to enter into combinations. If the laws were repealed, he was convinced, combinations, or trade unions, would 'fall to pieces.'

In 1814 he seriously set to work to have the Combination Laws repealed. Whenever he heard of a case involving them, he wrote to the parties and requested information; he sent articles to the newspapers; he tried to convert individual members of Parliament. Joseph Hume, a radical M.P. whom Place regarded as his protege, announced in Parliament in 1822 that he intended to introduce a bill for the repeal of the laws. Thinking Hume was premature, Place did not urge him to do more than announce his intention. At the next session of Parliament, a select committee, with Hume as chairman, was ordered to investigate the efficacy of the Combination Laws. Place interviewed all the delegates of the working people at his home and made briefs for Hume to use when examining them. Each brief contained all the questions Hume should ask a witness and the answers the witness would give. This interviewing and arranging took all Place's time for three months. In the end the committee submitted to the House resolutions urging the repeal of the Combination Laws. To Place's annoyance, Hume employed a barrister to draw up the bills from Place's manuscripts. He made a mess of the matter, and Place and Hume rewrote the bills. They passed both Houses in 1824. 'Place's achievement,' said E. P. Thompson, 'was a remarkable feat of intelligent wire-pulling and of enormously industrious and well-informed lobbying.' According to the admiring Hammonds, 'the repeal of the Combination Laws . . . is perhaps the most remarkable achievement in this period. It is certainly the greatest achievement in Place's remarkable life."

It may have been the greatest achievement in his life: it was by no means the last, for during the following twenty years he shared in several other important reforms. In the long campaign for the Reform Bill,

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during the 1820s and early 1830s, Place managed public meetings, advised reform members of Parliament, helped organize the Parliamentary Candidates' Society and the National Political Union, and even made contact with high-ranking military officers when the reformers envisaged revolution. This was an extreme action for Place to take because he believed in orderly reform and was averse to mobs.¹ The Reform Bill as it was passed he regarded as inadequate. Still hoping to achieve the London Corresponding Society's aims of annual parliaments and universal suffrage, Place became an active member of the Chartist movement and drafted its basic document, the 'People's Charter.' The founders of the Working Men's Association, which issued the 'People's Charter,' consulted with him and accepted his advice about the format of their meetings. In 1838, when Chartistism was to be officially inaugurated in London at a large open-air meeting, the Working Men's Association asked Place to be one of its delegates. Two years later, in 1840, when the newly founded Anti-Corn Law League sent a deputation to London to organize a chapter, the deputation was told to go to Place and enlist his assistance. He at first declined, saying he wanted to stay at home, but he finally agreed to become the business manager of the London branch.

In 1841, although he had a severe cold, Place went to a meeting of the Anti-Corn Law League at Manchester because he believed he was needed to persuade a prominent Birmingham member to accept the limited goal of the League. Place succeeded, but the trip worsened his illness; he did not recover for nine months, and from then on his health was never really good. Whenever he could, he attended meetings of the Anti-Corn Law Committee until the Corn Laws were finally repealed in 1846.

During the last few years of his life – he died on January 1, 1854 – his influence was slight. He was old and ill, and some of his notions of what was conducive to the welfare of the workers had been outdated by events (for example, his Benthamite convictions that trade unions would die out if the Combination Laws were repealed and that wage strikes could not increase the workers' buying power).² Unwilling to be idle in his old age, he spent his days pasting into large guard books his lifetime accumulation of newspaper cuttings, most of which deal with the conditions

¹ Place has some similarity to Martin Luther King Jr, in that both reformers were regarded as dangerous radicals by people who should have been grateful that they urged reform within the system and not revolution.
² I have not attempted a critical examination of Place's achievement as a political reformer. This is an undertaking better left to the social and economic historians, who must disentangle the curious confluence in Place of Benthamite theory, working-class militancy, and what we would identify as middle-class self-help attitudes and belief in constitutional reform.
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of the working class. We do not know how many such books he assembled, but the British Museum now has one hundred and eighty-one volumes of these newspaper cuttings.

The accumulating and assembling of these volumes of cuttings reflect several traits of Place’s career as a reformer – his patience, his thoroughness, his tenacity. But especially they reflect his desire to work away without publicity or prominence for himself. Of course, he could not have played the role he did without some awareness of its becoming public. The conservative periodicals – The Times, Frasers – had unpleasant things to say about him; the European Magazine suggested that his was the real voice behind the speeches of Burdett and Hobhouse, and that he and Hume manufactured the philosophies of Bentham, Mill and Birkbeck. But this publicity was unsought. Place refused to run for Parliament. His name seldom appeared in lists of persons collecting for a good cause. Indeed, in his first venture into political action, the Westminster election of 1807, one of his earliest recommendations was that the names of the committee members should not be advertised. Before Place’s retirement from his shop, he was partly motivated in his desire for anonymity by business considerations; he had learned that ‘gentlemen’ do not wish to give their custom to a tailor who has wider interests than tailoring. But the more important reason for his staying in the background may have been his republicanism. He believed improvement came from groups of people working together for their betterment, not from an inspired leader advocating change. Though well aware of the blindness, indifference, or self-interest of most working-class people, Place remained confident of the possibility that groups of clear-sighted, disenchanted workers could improve the welfare of the working class, particularly if they followed his advice. Accordingly, his preferred mode of action was to convince the committee or the group of workers of the reasonableness of his position, and then to have them demand reform. Although, for tactical reasons, Place did not seek publicity, when he wrote his account after the event he did give his own actions a good deal of prominence and did recount matters from his own point of view. In all these accounts, however, Place showed himself working – or trying to work – within the group.

By temperament, too, Place was a committee man rather than a firebrand. The notion of a compelling leader implies a passion and emotionalism which Place found frightening in his own character. (He always regretted that he had raged against his wife during the period of unemployment in 1793.) On the other hand, committee action implies the

1 European Magazine, n. s. n (1826), 227–33.
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power of reason, the rationality on which Place prided himself and which, in one form or another (e.g. education), he urged as a cure for the social ills. ‘Be persuaded,’ he wrote to his wife about their children, ‘that whatever cannot be effected by reason, cannot be effected at all.’ Behind-the-scenes committee work rather than public oratory also accorded with Place’s temperament in that he craved power not publicity. Publicity could come to any highwayman who ended up at Tyburn. But power, in Place’s social class, required force of character. In addition to his statement that he prided himself on his power to influence bodies of men, he provided evidence in every chapter of his autobiography of his need to hold a position of power in a body of men; he recorded that he was leader of his boyhood gang, top boy at school, manager of France’s tailor shop at the age of nineteen. From these positions of power, it was only a step to becoming the chairman of committees, the organizer of meetings. Very possibly, by organizing, rallying, advising the reformers in Parliament, by even writing speeches for them, Place exerted more real power to change English life than he could have exerted if, with all the liabilities of his status as a tailor, he had been in Parliament.

As a result of his preference for staying in the background and of changes in theories of reform, Place’s reform activities were slipping from people’s memories by the time of his death and were generally ignored for the next forty years. At the beginning of this century Place was hailed as an ultra-liberal, a precursor of the trade union movement. More recently he has been treated as an ersatz reformer because he rejected schemes now popular among reformers (e.g. Thomas Spence’s land communism) or because he appears to have been more nearly a middle-class conservative than a working-class radical. The autobiography can support either view. It can also support a middle view of Place, showing him as a reformer trying to help the working class by bending the middle-class political structure. There is a curious parallelism between Place’s view of his own character and the view of him as a reformer that emerges from his autobiography. Place strikes us as a self-made man with many of the features of the type – the sense of his own virtue that appears in his references to the improvidence of others; the sense that a man who is diligent and patient may succeed, rise, find the happiness of achievement (as opposed to the man who proposes that the structure of society needs to be changed). Place was not a conservative; he laboured to make important changes in the character of his society, with an eye always upon the condition of the working class. But like

1 Add. MS 35143, f. 208e.
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many self-made men he had a certain sense that the society which had rewarded him with wealth, power and position was not wholly bad.

Just as Place’s life seemed to prove that the truly diligent could flourish if they would only work hard and be patient, so his approach to reform suggested that reforms may be made within the system, and that they must be made by patient, diligent, responsible men. It is not surprising that later ages have admired Place; he is indeed a hero of the age of reform, that is, the age which proves that reform will work and revolution is not needed.

Place began to record his reform activities in the second decade of the century, when he started writing histories of the elections he had helped manage and of the reform societies in which he had been active; at about the same time he also began to collect data on the social conditions of the late eighteenth century. By the time of his death he had filled about one hundred large volumes with these histories and data. Some of the volumes or portions of them have disappeared; but ninety-one of them remain. It is from this unpublished collection in the British Museum manuscript department that Place is now known as a writer.

These guard books are of much more interest than Place’s published writings. The published works – one book, three or four pamphlets, and many articles – are mostly sound but uninteresting pieces of argumentation, rightly intended to be useful only at the time of composition. Perhaps a partial exception should be made of Place’s book Illustartions and Proofs of the Principle of Population of 1822. As its title indicates, this contribution to the arguments of Malthus and Godwin was intended to be more philosophical than most of Place’s publications. Ironically, Place, who no more sought publicity from his writing than from his other activities (most of his writings were unsigned), gained notoriety from the book because he outraged decency by advocating contraception. But apart from its marking Place as the first to urge publicly the use of contraceptives, the book is not of great interest.

On the other hand, many of the unpublished volumes are of great interest, because they contain unmatched records of the past. To accumulate these records Place kept copies of most of the letters he sent as well as the letters he received. With the thoroughness of a scholarly hoarder he preserved such documents as accounts of the moneys disbursed in 1798 and 1799 to the families of the state prisoners and money collected in 1828 for the subscription for Thomas Hardy, the founder of the London Corresponding Society. It is not that he valued trivia, but
that, ahead of his time, he was working from the perspective of an historian who did not restrict his focus to M.P.s, generals and admirals. His history of the Westminster election of 1807 illustrates the virtues of his perspective. He started with himself and other shopkeepers meeting and discussing politics, hearing rumours of a new Whig–Tory alliance, responding to it. Then he described the rigged meetings of the electors of Westminster, leading to the unopposed nomination and election of Lord Percy. Instead of proceeding to the next dissolution of Parliament, Place described the Hogarthian scene of post-election benefactions which made him determined to oppose the Whig–Tory alliance in Westminster.

‘I saw the servants of the Duke of Northumberland in their shewy dress liveries, throwing lumps of bread and cheese among the dense crowd of vagabonds they had collected together . . . these vagabonds [were] catching at these lumps, shouting swearing.’ In the next paragraph he described himself and some fellow ‘respectable’ shopkeepers watching with disgust as the mobs broke open the butts of beer, fought for it, even scooped it up from the gutters.¹ After revealing the indignation he and others felt at this ‘disgraceful scene,’ he continued from his shopkeeper’s viewpoint, ‘I therefore suggested the propriety of looking out for a proper person to represent Westminster.’ Place then recounted all the small actions of these Westminster shopkeepers – their visiting Burdett’s city house and finding him gone, their travelling to his country house, his refusing to see them (because they were nobodies), their meeting at the Crown and Anchor tavern, their reacting to the poor showing of Burdett at the beginning of the polling, and so forth. In short, he showed how a series of minute events, involving insignificant people, helped create a big event.

This same thoroughness in preserving details of everyday behaviour pervades his six volumes of data on manners and morals. Place was irritated by charges that the behaviour of the working class was becoming constantly more dissolute (and by the consequent implication that more restrictive laws were in order). To counter this accusation he began to assemble data showing that the manners and morals of his countrymen had greatly improved since the previous century. (Place’s optimism – his belief that the manners and morals of the working class were improving and were capable of more improvement – resembled the optimistic side of Benthamism and the views of his young followers who constituted the philosophical radicals.) Part of the data Place collected consists of charts on such matters as mortality rates and the consumption of spirits. Part consists of summaries, synopses, and quotations which

¹ Add. MS 27850, fs. 19–20.
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illustrate his thesis. But part also consists of his own observations on the improvement in decorum, sanitation, cleanliness, humaneness of punishments, etc. He recorded all the obscene songs he had heard as a boy; he revisited and described changes in the tenements, taverns, tea gardens, dockside streets, and fairs that he had frequented as a young boy or as an apprentice.

The comprehensiveness of Place’s historical records creates an effect of accuracy that may not be wholly warranted. Where there are records correlative to Place’s narratives of elections and reform movements they do not always show Place as the central figure he makes himself out to be. And they sometimes show that Place’s ‘power . . . of influencing or governing other men’ was seen by other reformers as cantankerous bossiness. Moreover, some of his proof of the improvement in manners and morals may be suspect. He did have a thesis and, while comparatively conscientious, he was hardly a systematic social researcher. But despite challenges to Place’s larger hypotheses and to certain features of his self-portrait, his historical writings remain of immense value, because Place was of a class we now find important and yet enough apart from it to record exhaustively the details others would take for granted or dismiss as unimportant.

Consequently, in 1823 when Bentham and Mill urged him to write his autobiography in order to show how a man could rise to wisdom and prosperity from an unpropitious background, Place had already trained himself to recollect and record details. And he had long since appreciated the importance of writing history from the perspective of the people acting it, particularly if they were people of the lower classes.

As a result, the strongest interest of the autobiography is its portrait of a kind of life we can scarcely believe existed. The father who regularly beat his sons until the stick broke. The brother-in-law under sentence of death who was a great favourite with his gaolers. The employers (France, Allison) who made the swift descent to the workhouse or the madhouse. The ‘respectable’ customers of his father’s public house who were reduced to selling a ward or a niece. A society of such people almost seems as if it must be a caricature. But this society was reported not by a sentimental reformer or by a horrified blue book writer but by a man for whom all this was simply a matter of fact, the way life was. A fine case in point is Place’s brief, matter-of-fact narrative of his apprenticesing. He told his father he did not want to become a lawyer. ‘This was in the evening, and my father went immediately into his parlour and offered me
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to any one who would take me. A little man named France said he would, and I was sent the very next morning.¹

In the course of this almost Dickensian history, Place has told us how he became a tailor and later a respectable merchant, but he has not told us what a modern reader might most want to know – how and why he became a radical.² Place did not directly explain this process because he was not curious about his own character. Or rather he did not understand his character. He saw himself as a man whose character had been formed by a series of reasoned responses to situations. On the few occasions where reason could not control feeling (e.g. after the death of his wife), he believed he had displayed a flawed character. His extraordinary confidence in the reasoning power by which he educated himself, prospered in business and persuaded bodies of men to accept his thinking quite blinded him to other sides of his character. A frightening obtuseness and arrogance about himself, his father, and his children is revealed in a sentence he wrote to Mrs Grote in 1836. After she had read the first part of his autobiography, she commented that very few of the good people she knew had ‘worthy’ parents. Place replied: ‘Worthy parents but too generally prevent the development of energy in their children and real efficient goodness is incompatible with mediocrity in this oddly constituted best of all possible worlds.’³

If Place’s unawareness of his character prevented him from telling us directly how and why he became a radical, he did tell us indirectly. The harsh self-discipline which was necessary for survival in his London and the even tighter discipline necessary for success gave him the curb on immediate appetites, the vision of long-range goals, which are starting points for any effective constitutional reformer. More important, though, the cruelty of his father, which he could not combat, led him to transfer the notion of oppressor from father to government, which he could openly attack. Two points are suggested here. When Place showed his memoir to Mrs Grote and she made comments on it he replied at length to every comment of hers, except one. He had no amplification to make to her observation, ‘What an eminent savage that was who begat you!’⁴ Then, in the autobiography he specifically connected his father with the

¹ See below p. 71.
² It is an interesting question just what kind of radical Place was. Since the interest of the autobiography is as a revelation of character and social history rather than as a source of information about the political aspects of radicalism, I have not attempted to assess Place’s radicalism. Such an assessment would have to weigh the charge that he was a government spy in the LCS.
³ Add. MS 35144, fs. 348, 358. Not only does this passage show Place’s obtuseness about self, father and children, but it also has for us alarming socio-political implications.
⁴ Ibid. f. 346.

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larger social order. After describing some of his father’s savage ways, he added, ‘These were common notions, and were carried into practice not only by the heads of families and the teachers of youth generally, but by the government itself and every man in authority under it.’ A few words later, he started a new paragraph with a phrase as applicable to his father as to the government – ‘Indiscriminating, sanguinary and cruel as our Statutes are . . . ’1

After reading the account of his cruel father, of the working conditions of breeches-makers, of his management of their strike, of his tough stand against the families of the state prisoners in 1798, we see why he became pugnacious and a bit hard in pursuit of justice and of a less hard society. We see, in short, how he became a paradoxical kind of reformer, strange to us who may think of reformers as sentimental men of good will.

Little as we may have expected to find Place a tough and unsentimental reformer, even less would we have expected to discover, as we do in the autobiography, that this working-class radical possessed and extolled some of the Victorian virtues we have come to scorn or to patronize, those Samuel Smiles virtues of thrift, industry and self-reliance. But because his sense of social fact, of economic reality, was so good Place has enabled us to understand these Victorian virtues. Quite without self-pity he has made clear the terrible pressures that drove him to be so concerned with them.

But even after coming to understand the reasons for thrift and industry, we may be bothered by another Victorian virtue which often seems at worst repugnant and at best puzzling – respectability. Place has never allowed us to forget how important this virtue was to him; he stressed that he and his wife ‘contrived to dress . . .respectably,’ that they worked ‘to keep up . . . respectable appearance.’ He kept contrasting the ‘loose characters’ of the past with the ‘highly respectable’ families of the present, the ‘sad miscreants’ like Old Joe France with the ‘well doing respectable persons’ who abounded in the 1820s. If a preoccupation with respectability seems repellent to us, Place’s autobiography may help us to understand how the significance of the word has changed. For us it is an external matter, the good repute which, rightly or wrongly, other people accord us. But for Place it was primarily an internal disposition, even though such externals as clothes may have helped create it. Respectability meant having a good self-image, a sense of one’s self as an important being. Furthermore, we may sneer at respectability because we have always had it and have found it of little use or importance. But to Place and his associates respectability was a hard-

1 See below p. 62.
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won and perilous acquisition. All around him he saw failures, people whose ruin was tied to their loss of respectability – his fellow apprentices, the patrons of his father’s public house, his own sister. In the world which he presents, every reinforcement of respectability was some insurance against destitution, the workhouse, prison, or prostitution. Respectability was almost a condition of survival. Place called attention to these alternatives of respectability or ruin when he wrote that a respectable appearance is ‘a matter of the greatest importance to every working man, for so long as he is able to keep himself up in this particular, he will have resolution to struggle with... his adverse circumstances. No working man, journeyman tradesman is ever wholly ruined until hope has abandoned him.’

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Place’s, respectability and other ‘Victorian’ virtues are amply revealed in the autobiography, and I am not going to labour them or attempt a complete analysis of his character. But there are some aspects of his personality which either do not come out in the autobiography or do not emerge in their full force. Since they subtly modify the picture of Place in the autobiography they warrant some consideration.

The first of these traits is one we would hardly expect from our reading of the autobiography – romanticism. In the autobiography Place presented himself as a man of practical traits, a no-nonsense, sturdy Victorian pursuing success. In good measure Place created this limited picture of himself in pursuance of the goal set by Bentham and Mill, showing how he educated himself and became successful. But there is evidence that Place shared with the poets of the Romantic period a need for, and an intense response to, external nature. Just after his marriage, when he had little employment and much leisure, he used to go out into the fields all around London and deep into Surrey. Later when he was a journeyman, working long hours in the one room where he and his family lived, he often had to put down his work and run to Hampstead, Norwood or some other rural spot. Then, refreshed, he could return, as he said, ‘to my vomit.’ Afterwards, when he had established his business securely, he delighted in making excursions to picturesque parts of the countryside. His account of his first sight of the sea is Wordsworthian in sentiment, though certainly not in style. At Christmas 1809, as he was riding

1 See below p. 128. Place’s insistence on respectability was shared by other reformers he knew, such as Hardy, the Grotes and the Manchester activists.


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over a hill near Chelmsford to take an order for mourning clothes, he unexpectedly saw the sea in the distance. After describing the circumstances and the sight, Place summed up his reaction thus: ‘My sensations were very remarkable. I was so extremely elated that I was scarcely conscious my own body had any gravity. It seemed as if I could leap from the chaise to the ocean. I was at the moment more exhilarated than I ever had before been or ever have been since.’ ¹

Place’s romantic response to nature had no tinge of religious feeling; we would not expect any after reading some of his irreligious comments in the autobiography. But perhaps these comments scattered through the autobiography fail to convey the intensity of his atheism, or infidelity. As he explained, he first doubted the Gospel account of the Virgin birth, and then doubted the whole concept of a supernatural agency. From then on he was an avowed atheist, dismissing his sister’s religious practices as ‘absurd’ and ‘fanatical,’ expressing mild contempt for a former associate’s attempts to convert him, and generally noting with disgust religious practices and clergymen. When he read a prison chaplain’s testimony that many families were demoralized by the drunkenness of the mother, though he could not recall an exact instance, Place carefully wrote in the margin: ‘This saint is as usual a Twaddler.’ ²

Late in life, when he pasted into a guard book a newspaper cutting about the christening of Queen Victoria’s fourth daughter, he annotated this too with a comment which sums up his feelings about religion—‘Surely the time will come when these Barbaric Ceremonies will cease.’

His atheism was more than just a matter of condemning barbarous christenings and hypocritical clergymen. It determined his choices. When he was seeking a defence attorney, his first reason for wanting Erskine was that ‘he was suspected of being but a weak christian.’ The same sort of motive obviously governed his choice of Steward Kyd as an attorney, for he explained that ‘Mr Kyd was an infidel and a man on whom reliance could be placed.’ One wonders if even Lawrence, the surgeon who operated upon Mrs Place, was not chosen in part because he was known to be a materialist. It is undoubtedly fitting that the longest obituary of Place appeared in a magazine called The Reasoner: Gazette of Secularism and that it lauded him for his atheism, ‘a profession of opinion which Mr Place always made . . . It was known to everybody through all Mr Place’s political connections, from first to last, that he was a decided materialist.’ Referring to a shorter obituary, which appeared in the more prestigious Spectator, The Reasoner concluded that this tribute

¹ Add. MS 27143, f. 168. ² Add. MS 27880, f. 238v.
must be ‘regarded as a testimony to the character, taste, integrity, and public services of an atheist.’¹

Less explicit than his atheism is Place’s egocentric insistence on the rightness of his theories. For example, once he had adopted the political goals of universal suffrage and annual parliaments, he tenaciously tried to exact written subscription to these aims from reform candidates. No arguments could convince him of the impracticability of annual parliamentary elections. This single-mindedness which contributed to his success as a reformer at the same time often made his dealings with other reformers difficult. Similarly, his relations with his first wife must have been strained by his conviction that he knew what was best. ‘Suffer me to guide,’ he urged, on the ground that she possessed ‘that hastiness of temper, which prevents, reason and deliberation.’ Place had total confidence in his own powers of reason and deliberation.

Although this egocentric atheist radical, with his insistence on reason and practicality, had some of the hardness that Dickens and others found in the nineteenth-century reformers, his philanthropy was not ‘of that gunpowderous sort that the difference between it and animosity was hard to determine’ (Edwin Drod). Place had compassion. This trait does not show up much in the autobiography; but in other writings where his concern is primarily with social conditions, he displayed a rational sympathy for groups of people who were generally disapproved of – for example, working-class drunkards. Far from condemning them for weakness of character, as many people did, Place sympathetically argued their case throughout his life – in a pamphlet, before parliamentary committees, in his unpublished writings on manners and morals (one-third of which deal with drunkenness). Those people who drink, he argued, do so because they are too ignorant to have any pleasures but the sensual ones of drinking and copulating. Yet, ignorant as they are, they know that their lives will end ‘in the most abject poverty and misery,’ for they have no hope of bettering their condition. What is surprising, then, is not ‘that they should occasionally get drunk; [but] that it should be only occasional.’² The compassion he expressed for drunkards Place also extended toward another group then usually denied tolerance, the Jews. He completely lacked the anti-semitism that pervaded the nineteenth century and infected even reformers like Cobbett. Recalling his childhood, when ‘it was thought good sport to maltreat a Jew,’ he clearly indicated his horror at the way Jews were ‘hooted, hunted, kicked, cuffed, pulled by the beard, spit up, and . . . barbarously assaulted in the

¹ The Reasoner, xvi (1854), 209.
² Improvement of the Working People, pp. 11–12.

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streets . . . Dogs could not now be used in the streets, in the manner, many Jews were treated.’

The cessation of such persecutions, he asserted, ‘marks a considerable improvement in right habits of thinking.’ Place also maintained a humane attitude in the area of female chastity, where right habits of thinking were declining. In a period when there was a sharp increase in the intensity of the disapproval of unchastity (just before the period when unchaste heroines died at the end of novels), he was able to think about sex independently and originally. He recalled that in his youth the tradesmen’s daughters, who were not expected to remain virgins till marriage, had made good wives. The evil, he concluded, lies not in the woman’s deed but ‘in the hypocrisy of men.’ As for prostitutes, far from condemning them as immoral women to be redeemed by preachments, he saw them as ‘miserable wretches,’ victims of the universal law that ‘Chastity and poverty are incompatible.’ Place’s ‘law’ and his unwillingness to condemn unchaste women resulted from his ability to reject conventional assumptions, to make his own analysis and distinctions. His chain of reasoning was this: Sexual intercourse is normal and appropriate; celibacy is unhealthy. Therefore people should be encouraged to marry young. Poverty and the fear of a large family often prevent early marriages. What should be repressed are poverty and fertility, not sexual instincts.

Place, as we see, could be a hard man but he could also be a compassionate one, not without a sympathetic imagination. Yet if we take the picture Place gave of himself in the autobiography and try to modify it with these and other instances of his compassion in order to produce a portrait of a not-quite-saintly reformer, untempted but sympathetic, we would be over-simplifying Place. He was much more ambivalent. His six volumes of data on the deplorable moral conditions of the eighteenth century could only have been assembled by a man who felt considerable fascination for these conditions. For example, the collection of obscene ballads which he heard in his youth, one small segment of his manners and morals series, represents great devotion. He wrote the ballads neatly, with special flourishes to the capitalized letters in the titles; he replaced inaccurate versions with correct ones when he could; and he included four pages of songs and observations recollected by one of the two friends who assisted him in compiling the songs. His ambivalence about these songs is further illustrated by his behaviour when he gave testimony before the Select Committee on Education (1835). He felt that these songs were too obscene to be read aloud to the committee members;

1 Add. MS 27825, fs. 144–6. 2 Add. MS 27828, f. 55.
but, on the other hand, he wanted to be sure they knew the songs and knew how deplorable manners used to be. He solved this desire for both concealment and exposure by giving the committee members written copies of the obscene songs.

Place’s mixed feelings about the wickedness of the past are especially evident in his extensive notes on Greenwich Fair, the annual outing for working-class Londoners. Place had gone to the Fair as a child and as an apprentice. Then, about 1824, he began to go again – to see if the amusements had improved. Obviously he was delighted to be there for he kept returning year after year for the next fifteen years. But, though he clearly enjoyed it, he rejoiced that respectable people no longer let their children come. ‘They have learned how to enjoy more rational amusements than could be found at Tea-gardens and Fairs, filled with all sorts of persons.’

The persons who then patronized the Fair engaged in more decorous amusements than those in Place’s youth had done, but his description of them again reveals his pull towards the improper pleasures of his childhood. He wrote: ‘All evidently enjoyed themselves and did their best to be happy, but there was little of gaiety, no hilarity, no running, bawling and squalling and loud laughing as there used to be, no “Kissing in the ring” [a game he elsewhere described with mixed relish and disapprobation], no “thread my needle,” no “drop handkerchief,” no lively sports of any kind.’

These visits to Greenwich Fair resemble Gladstone’s ambiguous behaviour in bringing home prostitutes so that he and Mrs Gladstone could hear their life stories. Place was not quite so wholesome and disinterested as he thought.

Analogous to his ambivalence about the deplorable morals of the past is his mixed attitude about publicity. Place did not encourage publicity by seeking a seat in Parliament, by signing all his writings, or by having his name on many published lists of committee members. Yet he spent hours and hours publicizing himself for posterity in his narratives of elections and reform movements.

In the end, he turned out to be, like most of us, a mixture of opposites. In his case it was a mixture of the respectable and radical, the rationalistic and romantic, the hard and compassionate. Like Augustine, he found the gross ways of his youth both deplorable and attractive. At the same time that he shunned publicity he was preparing to live in history. But what is finally important about Place and the story he has told us is not so much that he shared our common humanity as that he was so much more than the sum of all his contradictions. Probably every human being is more than the sum of his analysable parts; but because Place so copiously revealed the parts of his personality, we are especially aware of

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¹ Add. MS 35144, f. 220. ² Ibid. f. 214.
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the discrepancy between the picture of the man that can be made up of these jig-saw puzzle parts and the real man, whose efforts to demolish the Whig-Tory hold over Westminster, to repeal the Combination Laws, to pass the Reform Bill – in short, whose lifelong efforts ‘to promote the welfare of the working class’ – were major steps in the creation of a society where working-class Londoners of Walworth now describe themselves as ‘the middle class.’

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After Place’s death some of his guard books were sold to his friend Joseph Parkes. Others were retained by Place’s children. When Parkes’ library was sold in 1868, the British Museum bought seventy volumes of the Place papers. In 1897 Place’s grandson, Francis C. Miers, presented to the Museum thirteen volumes of papers, including Place’s autobiography and letter books. In 1901 Place’s biographer, Graham Wallas, presented the Museum with eight volumes of Place’s memoranda and commonplace books. And in 1909 the Miers family gave the Museum two volumes of letters written to Place by famous people.

Place’s autobiography is contained in the first three of the six volumes of manuscripts dealing with his personal life. The first thirteen chapters, which form a consecutive narrative, are in Add. MSS 35142 and 35143. The first of these volumes contains chapters one to eight, the second contains chapters nine to thirteen. This division into two volumes is Place’s, for he put a separate table of contents before chapter nine. The rest of this volume (Add. MS 34143) consists of letters that Place wrote his family while he was making picturesque tours of England between 1810 and 1814 and while he was visiting Mill and Bentham in 1817. Chapter fourteen – and Place so numbered it, indicating that he intended it to be a continuation of the earlier material – comes in the middle of the third volume (Add. MS 35144), being preceded by two narratives of public events in which Place was involved and being followed by his reminiscences and observations of manners and morals of working-class people on holidays and at fairs.

Place’s methodical habit of dating his narratives establishes the time when he composed the autobiography. He started the first draft in August of 1823. By November he was finishing chapter three, and in December he was composing chapter four. By January of 1824 he was

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1 Add. MSS 27789–27859.
2 Add. MSS 35142–35154.
3 Add. MSS 36623–36628.
4 Add. MSS 37949–37950.
5 See below p. 5 n1.
6 pp. 67 and 94.
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up to chapter seven. In June he composed the appendix to chapter ten. In September he was writing the rough draft of his account of the London Corresponding Society. And at some time during the year he wrote what he then intended to have as his final chapter, thirteen. Not surprisingly, Place proceeded chronologically, spending a little over a year composing his autobiography.

During the next nine years he rewrote or made substantial additions to this narrative. In 1825 he rewrote part of chapter six and added the appendix on gun lock improvement to chapter thirteen. In 1826 he added two long quotations to the introduction. In June of 1827 he added to chapter five an extended description of one typical tradesman’s family. As he noted, in 1833 he rewrote the introduction. In 1835 he apparently rewrote chapter thirteen, because he added that date parenthetically to a comment about the state of Charing Cross during the last twenty years; and the dated comment is part of the continuous narrative, not a later interpolation. Besides making these revisions, Place made many small additions of one or two sentences. He kept adding these comments through the rest of his life; the dates on them range from 1825 all the way to 1851.

Chapter fourteen is somewhat different. Unlike the earlier chapters, the material forms neither a continuous narrative nor a chronological sequence. It consists of letters and narratives, often unrelated to each other, composed over the twenty-year period from 1825 to 1845. The first document – a letter praising Place, his reply spelling out his accomplishments, and his commentary on English society in 1825 – may well have been intended to go with the autobiography he had composed in 1823 and 1824. This document is unconnected with the following documents – copies of letters about his wife’s illness and death, of letters about his courtship of his second wife, and narratives of his financial losses. These letters are dated 1827, 1828 and 1829. The narratives of his losses he composed in 1833 and 1834. But they are followed by an earlier narrative brought up to date – the history of his health, written first in 1825 and then in 1838. A still different sort of narrative follows – an account written in 1828 of a visit to Shepperton, where his father used to angle. Next, there is another account of his health, written in 1845. Finally, there is a narrative, written in 1831, of the Lord Chancellor’s offer to make him an official assignee under the new Bankruptcy Act.

Place’s decision to assemble these disparate documents into another chapter may have been prompted, in 1836, by Mrs Grote’s enthusiasm.

1 p. 105 n2. 2 p. 166. 3 Add. MS 27808, fs. 83, 83.
4 See below p. 226 n*. 5 pp. 97 and 230 n1. 6 p. 8 n1.
7 p. 89 n3. 8 p. 5 n1. 9 p. 214.

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for the previous chapters. On December 26, 1835 she returned the first volume (presumably chapters one to eight) with a note praising it and asking, ‘Pray furnish me with more; I am ravenous.’ Place complied; she rapidly read the last five chapters and on January 7, 1836 wrote, ‘I hope you have got another vol: for me. Never was any novel of Sir Walter Scott’s so interesting . . . I shall return this vol: on Saty. Please feed me with a fresh batch.’1 The next day Place sent her chapter fourteen and the following note: ‘My dear Mrs Grote. Your wish is accomplished, with this is Vol 3. This volume differs considerable from the two you have had.’2 It is difficult to tell what documents then comprised the new chapter. From a later letter we know that it included the account of his financial losses. But in the letter accompanying chapter fourteen Place spoke of other documents, which Mrs Grote might see if she wished: ‘From 1818 to the present time there are only detached articles. You shall see them if you wish and will tell me you do.’3 Later in the same month, January 1836, Place had chapter fourteen back and was making additions to it. On January 26 he wrote to Mrs Grote: ‘I think I sent you in the last volume a paper headed, “My own Revolution,” . . . I have said that I had enough of fortune left for my own comfort, but not enough to meet occasional but unavoidable calls of my family. I have therefore put into the volume – a letter from my daughter Mary which you can read, I have also put into the volume a letter I wrote to Mill respecting my poor wife in 1827.’4 The letter to Mill remains; the letter from his daughter has disappeared and is not listed in his table of contents for this final chapter. Place made other determinable changes to the chapter – he brought the medical history of 1825 up to date and later added a further chronicle of his state of health.

Curiously, although he often altered this material, Place never rewrote it as a continuous narrative. Perhaps he was deterred by the difficulty of compressing events of many years into one chapter, or by the lack of themes such as those which gave cohesiveness to his earlier chapters. Or, he may have found it impossible to write a narrative of his life after 1817 (his retirement year) without describing his numerous reform activities. These reform activities he had long before started to record as separate histories. Probably when he found that his account of the London Corresponding Society had become too extensive for the autobiography he decided to keep his narratives of reform activities separate from his autobiography.

The fact that Place had an autobiographical tale to tell was made public

1 Add. MS 35144, fs. 847–8. 2 Ibid. f. 349. 3 Ibid. f. 354. 4 Ibid. f. 361.
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in 1835 when he testified before the Select Committee on Education. He gave the committee details of his childhood, of the kind of life he and other apprentices had led at the end of the eighteenth century. The Tory newspaper The Times promptly attacked these working-class reminiscences. An editorial titled 'Autobiography of Francis Place' ironically stated 'that it would be an injustice to arts and letters to allow all [Place’s testimony] to remain stitched up within the forbidding blue sheets of Parliamentary collections.' After quoting several statements from Place’s testimony, the writer asked, ‘Was it worth incurring all the expense of a committee, of clerks...to have such miserable and vulgar twaddle printed?’ Place’s autobiographical recollections, The Times concluded, are ‘merely trash.’

In a predictable opposition to The Times, Place had a strong sense that his autobiography was an important historical record. He sent it not only to the Grotes for their reactions (which took the form of marvelling at his rise) but also to his devoted follower Samuel Harrison who responded with a sheaf of glosses on the manners of the past, giving further information about the dress, amusements and the schooling of Londoners as he encountered them, a decade or two after Place.

It is indeed for its record of improved manners that Place valued it (and it is this feature of the autobiography which received the most additions in later years). When Mrs Grote suggested that she might write her memoirs recording the changes in manners, Place urged her to do so and stated that autobiographies such as his or hers would do ‘much good’ by making ‘the changes which have occurred familiar to the people,’ He added that ‘the errors into which they fall from want of such information are exceedingly pernicious. Well instructed in such matters a whole century of intelligence would be gained.’ His high opinion of such autobiographical records was expressed even more strongly in the autobiography, where he claimed that ‘correctly detailed domestic history,’ because ‘it would enable us to make comparisons [and] shew clearly the progress of civilization’ is ‘the most valuable of all.’

Place undoubtedly expected that his papers would be published or that he would be the subject of a biography. The autobiography was evidently intended to stand on its own, as were some of his histories of reform agitation. But about other narratives he was doubtful. On the first page of his account of the Combination Laws he stated, ‘In the following papers references are made to printed papers and manuscripts contained in 5 folio and in 2 octavo Volumes. Whoever may Edit these

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1 Wednesday, Dec. 23, 1835; in Add. MS 35144, f. 826.
2 Ibid. f. 388.
3 See below p. 91.

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Memoirs must carefully compare the M.S. with these volumes and use his own discretion as to the use he will make of their contents – either as comment notes or appendices.¹ Still other collections of his papers he kept only in order that an editor might digest their contents. On the table of contents for his memoranda, diaries and journals of the 1820s and 1830s he put two notes, indicating this reason for preserving them. In 1838 he wrote, ‘These Memorandums &c would have been put into the fire, but after consideration I thought they might be useful to any one who should Edit the Memoir, as they contain parts of political matters alluded to in other places . . . They are preserved only for this purpose. When they have been used in this way they should be destroyed.’² Twelve years later, in 1850, when Place re-examined these documents, he added a stronger note before his diary for 1826: ‘I have just now concluded looking over this Diary and request my Executors to burn it with their own hands as soon as it has been examined and such few particulars as some competent person or one of themselves may think are necessary for the elucidation of my memoir have been used.’³

Place was wrong in his assumption that his memoir would be edited shortly after his death, so that his executors could burn his diaries and journals. No biography of Place was published until forty-four years later, when Graham Wallas brought out his Life of Francis Place.⁴ This biography is more favourable than Place could have anticipated. Not only did Wallas rely exclusively on Place’s version of the events in which he took part but also, in the necessary process of selecting quotations, he sometimes removed evidence of warts on Place’s character.

The autobiograph which Place rightly valued as an example of domestic history has never before been published, though Wallas quoted portions of it detailing Place’s dramatic rise in the world, and many writers on London life have quoted occasional sentences.

Place’s son, Francis Place Jr evidently planned to publish it because he went through the manuscript correcting with pencil a few errors, adding a gloss or two, crossing out many passages and writing ‘Delete’ or ‘Dele’ in the margins opposite them. At least part of his editorial work was done in 1873; this date and his initials are pencilled in the margin of Add. MS 35148, f. 122.

The chief effect of the deletions intended by Francis Place Jr is to neutralize his father’s atheism. Where Place spent two pages describing the reading and thinking that led him to atheism, his son scored the

¹ Add. MS 27798, f. 4.
² Add. MS 35146, f. 2.
³ Ibid. f. 9.
⁴ In 1898 (hereafter referred to as ‘Wallas’). I am indebted to Wallas for many details in this introduction.

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whole passage for omission. He also cancelled Place’s explanation that he chose Erskine as a defence lawyer ‘because he was suspected of being but a weak christian,’ and his statement that ‘Mr Kyd was an infidel.’

Besides these irreligious passages, the son also crossed out a few comments about people whose descendants might be living. Opposite the comment that Parke let the rooms at 16 Charing Cross ‘in any way he pleased,’ Place Jr pencilled in 1873 date and the comment, ‘Initial must be used here some of the family still live.’

The same motive undoubtedly induced him to score out not only the name but also the description of the Duke of Norfolk as a man ‘than whom it might upon the whole be difficult to find a greater scoundrel.’ Finally, in chapter fourteen, he planned to omit all the references to Place’s second marriage – about ten pages of the manuscript.

Opposite the beginning of this massive deletion he wrote, ‘So purely domestic and uninteresting out of the family that it had better be cut out.’

Several passages in the text were literally cut out, but we can guess that most of them dealt with immoral or indecorous behaviour of Place and of his father. The first of these excisions concerned what Place, in chapter three, called ‘an occurrence which had considerable effect on me.’ This event occurred one Thursday when the fourteen-year-old Place was left in Mr Bowis’ school to hear the older girls’ sums after the master had left. At this point in the text, four lines down on the page, someone cut off the rest of the sheet. On the opposite page Francis Place Jr wrote, ‘The consequence was bad for both parties giving rise to much licentiousness.’ Later in chapter three, at the end of the section on ‘Dress of Boys,’ there has been an excision of all but three lines of the page. A footnote for the beginning of this excised material has been crossed out by Place, suggesting that he made this deletion. The cancelled footnote reads: ‘Pages A. B. C. come in before the article on the Dress of Boys.’ In the extensive table of contents that Place made later he indicated that the section before ‘Dress of Boys’ contained ‘Specimens of Songs sung in Tradesmens Houses.’ It is probable, then, that Place made this cut in order to rearrange his material and that later he or someone else removed the songs from the chapter. In chapter four, after Place described the unchaste girls he and his fellow apprentices associated with, someone cut off three-quarters of a sheet. A few pages later there has been an excision of a page and a half, probably dealing with the dissolute amusements of apprentices. Near the end of the chapter, a section of a page and a half was sliced off; in this deleted material, Place

1 See below pp. 45–6.

2 pp. 160 and 162.

3 p. 215.

4 p. 85.


6 p. 56; Add. MS 35142, f. 99.

7 See below p. 76.

8 p. 81.