1 Joseph Henry Oates: a world of madeira and honey

Sometime towards the end of January 1825, Joseph Henry Oates, merchant of Leeds in the West Riding of Yorkshire, had a dreadful day. On the 31st he wrote to his brother in London.

> The day I received your letter of Monday, say on Wednesday last I was under engagement to Mr Cass to have an operation performed – I had prepared a written order to Beckett's complying with your request, but unfortunately had omitted to give it to our Clerk and the future events of the day put all out of my head – I submitted to the operation of having my bottom mangled and have been in bed and on the sofa ever since – I write this lying down.[1]

January 1826 was even worse. On 1 February he told his brother,

> The fact is simply this and as true as it is simple. We owe Beckett's so much money that without putting a bill of some description into their hands I dare not ask a renewal of credit at Glynn's – I assure you I have not had it in my power to pay a Clothier one penny during the last month, but the very first remittce I receive shall go immy to Beckett's accompd by a request to renew yr credit at Glynn's for £400 – we have received only one remittance since this year came in and after looking with confidence for something handsome from J S Smithson there arrived a line from him yesterday without a penny.[2]

Beckett's were Joseph Henry's bankers, who held his balances both positive and negative and transmitted funds to London when needed, just as they did for a large part of the trading and manufacturing community of Leeds.[3] A week later the alarm was even greater.

> But really money is not comeatable – I have actually suspended what? payment? no! not exactly, but I have suspended purchases of every description except bread,

[1] J.H. Oates, Oatlands to Edward Oates Esq., 12 Furnival's Inn, London, 31 January 1825. Oates O/R. [All letters were addressed to Furnival's Inn unless otherwise stated.]
[2] Oates, 1 February 1826.
[3] *Select Committee on the Bank of England Charter*, Parliamentary Papers (House of Commons), 1831–32, 6, evidence of William Beckett, Q. 1237.

meat and potatoes, and I have driven Clothiers away with a 'can't you call again next month?'[4]

These two incidents were buried in a bundle of letters which the Leeds merchant sent to his brother during the mid-1820s. Reading them is rather like listening to one side of a telephone conversation. They were written and kept because the merchant and his lawyer brother were settling matters of family business raised by their father's death and the probate of the will. There is no way of finding out if Joseph Henry got any sympathy for his financial problems or the discomfort of his piles but, as the business of settling their father's estate went forward, the letters show that energy was diverted from business by the insecurities of both middle-aged health and an uncertain economy.

Joseph Henry was partner in one of the leading merchant firms in the woollen textile trade of Leeds. He seems a fairly ordinary sort of individual, perched upon the higher ground of Meanwood, above the smoke of Leeds, surrounded by neighbours who were also part of those commercial and professional elites which dominated the provincial towns of England. He was unusual in that his family had been merchants since the late seventeenth century and was distinctive in his dissenting Unitarian religion and Whig politics.[5] There were many like him who could trace their origins back into the merchant, manufacturing and landowning families of the north of England. Others had within a generation come from craft, retailing and petty manufacturing families. In the 1820s they drew their income from a variety of sources in trade, manufacturing, land and the professions. As Joseph Henry went backwards and forwards to his counting house in the commercial centre of Leeds, just behind the chapel where he worshiped on Sunday, he saw a town which was growing rapidly in size and complexity.[6]

The letters between the two Oates brothers went to the heart of the family economy because their major concern was the transfer of property between generations after their father's death. The need for equity and certainty in this process opened up the family to the historian's gaze with a directness that few other life cycle events can offer. The brothers' willingness to fill their letters with the chatter of family and business life created a sense of context for this transfer, which was rare in probate

[4] Oates, 9 February 1826.
[5] R.G. Wilson, *Gentlemen Merchants. The Merchant Community in Leeds, 1700–1830* (Manchester, 1971).
[6] R.J. Morris, *Class, Sect and Party. The Making of the British Middle Class: Leeds, 1820–50* (Manchester, 1990), pp. 1–85.

documents. The major characters emerged slowly but clearly from the letters, as did the objectives which each participant had in mind.

Joseph Henry, the writer of the letters, was probably in his late thirties.[7] He was the active member of the Leeds firm of Oates, Wood and Co., merchants. He was second son of Joseph Oates of Weetwood Hall, who died in 1824 aged 82. Joseph was one of eight children and his father one of eleven, hence they were called the Weetwood Hall Oates to distinguish them from a number of cousins and uncles who headed other successful merchant and professional families. Joseph Henry was an active and industrious man, anxious to do what was right, whilst at the same time to get what was due to him. He was the one who undertook the probate of the will and negotiated the division of the estate. He also tended to be rather cautious,

> I know to my sorrow that I am one of the most procrastinating chaps in the world

He was always worried about his health,

> I am a poor timid mortal – particularly since the Piles have made such a formidable attack upon me.[8]

For him the family inheritance brought political and religious loyalties as well as the merchant business. Family involvement with old dissent made them an important part of the elite of Mill Hill chapel as it developed into the major Unitarian centre of Leeds, as well as making them members of the local Whig elite. Joseph Henry was not an activist. He was not an Edward Baines, founding editor of the Whig newspaper, or a John Marshall, wealthy flax manufacturer and MP after his successful challenge to the landowners' dominance of West Riding politics. But Joseph Henry paid his pew rent and his politics were clear enough to affect his social and business activity in times of conflict such as the 1826 county election. This election saw a hard fought contest for the West Riding seat at Westminster in which fellow urban capitalist and co-religionist, John Marshall, took a seat from the landowning Tory interest.[9]

> The election sends us all to loggerheads and there is scarcely a blue mercht in the town who wd at present admit me within his doors – and perhaps the great bulk of our merchts are blue . . . With respect to this election, you will learn more from

[7] R. Thoresby, *Ducartus Leodiensis* (Leeds, 1816) edited by T.D. Whitaker. This was a substantially augmented version of the work of Ralph Thoresby, the early eighteenth century antiquarian, and included a number of genealogies of 'older' Leeds families.
[8] Oates, 14 May 1826.
[9] F.M.L. Thompson, 'Whigs and Liberals in the West Riding, 1830–60', *English Historical Review* 74 (1959).

Baines's paper, which I send by this post, than I can tell you, never having been beyond the Countg ho since this stir began – of course the mortification has been great – George is in the thick of it . . . Monday must show what is to be done – but I think there is every appearance of a hard contest – My vote and interest you may be sure are pledged to Milton and Marshall – George is on the York committee[10]

Joseph Henry wanted a well run business and a quiet family life, but family and chapel drew him into politics whether he liked it or not.

The Wood of Oates and Wood was George William Wood of Manchester who had married Sarah, eldest daughter and fourth child of Joseph. George William was the eldest son of the marriage between Joseph's sister Louisa Ann and Rev. William Wood. He had been the minister of Mill Hill Chapel who had followed Joseph Priestley and consolidated the position of the chapel as a leading Unitarian congregation.[11] Another crucial relationship in this puzzle was the marriage of George William Oates, a younger brother of Joseph, to Mary Hibbert, daughter of a Manchester merchant. These marriages, often involving cousins like GWW and Sarah, were important for many middle class elites. They consolidated family links and family capital. Such marriages also consolidated chapel links. Men like Rev. William Wood were not just leaders of a religious congregation. They developed and consolidated the ideology that sustained the religious faith, family values and political loyalties of families like the Oates. Joseph Henry Oates followed a rational God and guided his politics by calls for 'civil and religious liberty' against the monopolistic pretensions of the established Church of England. He also looked to his minister to justify and explain the family relationships which were crucial to his life style and economic fortunes.[12] Joseph Henry devoted substantial time and resources to sustaining these relationships and men like the Rev. William Wood provided him with motivation and legitimation.

George was the eldest child of Joseph. He was the 'awkward squad'. Considering the character of brother George explains why a little motivation and support from the likes of the Rev. William Wood was often needed. When difficulties arose over the settlement of their father's estate it was always George who was the target of Joseph Henry's letters of despair,

[10] J.H. Oates, Oatlands to Edward Oates Esq. at John Philips Esq., Heath House, nr. Cheadle, Staffordshire, 10 June 1826.
[11] W.L. Shroeder, *Mill Hill Chapel, 1674–1924*, (Leeds, 1925).
[12] J. Seed, 'Theologies of Power: Unitarianism and the Social Relations of Religious Discourse, 1800–1850', in R.J. Morris (ed.), *Class, Power and Social Structure in British Nineteenth Century Towns* (Leicester, 1986), pp. 107–56.

He declines to act . . . but he has every disposition to act in many ways – and does act – he receives rents and gives orders and makes payments at his pleasure.[13]

A foundry, which their father had financed, proved especially difficult to settle. George first wanted to break it up and sell, then to run it himself. The bulk of the property had been left to the brothers as 'tenants in common'.[14] This meant that if the individual items like Carr House and the 'mill' were to be controlled by an owner who had sole rights over them, and hence had the certainty needed to make investments and other dispositions regarding that property, then the brothers had to go through a complex operation of mutuality. This forced them to act and negotiate as a family if the property was to be released into the world of capitalist accumulation, risk and disposition. Such mutuality placed considerable stress on the brothers' ability to co-operate, yet co-operate they must if they were to get sole and unrestricted access to a fair share of their father's property. The difficulties with a character like George in the negotiation were clear.

I do not suppose we shall make any exchange of property; he wishes only to rent my portion of Carr House and receive interest for the sum due him on account of the Mill; this plan however will not suit me – I cannot pay 4% Intt for example on the £2600 (which is the sum we had in great measure settled six months ago as the price to be paid by me for his share in the Mill, Land and Improvemt at the Cottage) and receive £50 per an rent from a farm worth a full £2600. I must sell part of my acres at least.[15]

The foundry, which no-one really understood, and the fact that Edward in London was entitled to a share, and that all the brothers had property in their own right, which they might be tempted to sell and exchange, only added to the complications. They were still arguing a month later. The tangle of personalities, properties and calculations was intense.

You may be very sure I am equally anxious with George to arrive at a settlemt of accts. At the time Brown was about purchasing this place we made a sort of settlemt it is true, but I am by no means agreed with him in his statement to you that it was at a low rate – the rate was such as I was willing to sell for myself, and this under an impression that I could replace it for even less by building again – nothing but a good price was calculated to induce me to sell, and in case I had ever come to close quarters with Brown and actually fixed him a price, that price was to have been twice the sum fixed by George (as his share) for what was our joint interest – £400 per acre for the original land with something added for the

[13] Oates, 17 January 1825.
[14] Oates, 26 February 1825.
[15] Oates, 17 January 1825.

house . . . The idea of a sacrifice quite amuses me – giving up the Mill whch pays $7^1/_2$% in exchange for land which will only pay 3 – an exchange is not necessary – it will suit me equally well to pay him in money though I might have to sell my land to enable me to do it, but that would be no matter of his – still he might call it a sacrifice to give up the Mill paying $7^1/_2$ for money which will pay only 4% – what I can say is that I considered it a very excellent thing for him when I consented to take the whole burden of the mill upon myself and release him from so cumbersome a clog – nothing but my very strong desire to release him from the dilemma which the circumstances of my father's deed of gift brought him into could have led me to take such a step and had I ever dreamed that the affair would have gone so long unsettled I should not have agreed to take his share at all

Beneath all this good will was a manoeuvre designed to get sole control of a vital piece of capital, the mill. In order to achieve this Joseph Henry was willing to give up some of the land he owned in north and northwest Leeds. The deed of gift, which was dated 1819, together with the will, had given the brothers a tangle of joint control and obligations from which each was trying to negotiate his way out with the maximum of advantage. These arguments took place within the close confines of family politics. After yet another set of arguments about what had been agreed regarding the foundry, Joseph Henry wrote,

I wonder at this (the misunderstanding) as George seldom spends Sunday elsewhere than with us.[16]

George was to die on 17 October 1832 at the age of 52.

The object of all this letter writing was Edward, the third son of Joseph, an enigmatic figure. He was based in London practising as a lawyer with his address at a respectable 12 Furnival's Inn. He was to return to Leeds in 1836 to marry Susan, the daughter of Edward Grace of Kirkstall. Late marriage was characteristic of the Oates. His letters were full of concern for his books, pictures and drawings, many of which he had purchased on a trip to Italy in 1819. Joseph shared some of this interest but without the same commitment as his younger brother. The Oates were not major patrons of the arts in Leeds but, like many of the elite, their houses contained small and valued collections.[17] Edward carried out all the legal business of the family. He had an interest in the firm of Oates and Wood as well as in the estate of his father. His demands were less complicated than those of George because all he wanted was to get his

[16] Oates, 25 November 1825.
[17] R.J. Morris, 'Middle Class Culture, 1700–1914', in D. Fraser (ed.), *A History of Modern Leeds* (Manchester, 1980), pp. 200–22; J. Woolf and J. Seed (eds.), *The Culture of Capital: Art, Power and the Nineteenth Century Middle Class* (Manchester, 1988), esp. pp. 45–82.

interest out in cash and have it transmitted to London to support a consumption and investment pattern hinted at in his letters. Edward was the listener of these letters, the London link for the family and, although he stood a little apart from day-to-day family politics, he was still very much part of the Weetwood Oates.

The most vulnerable of all Joseph's children who grew to adulthood was Mary, his youngest daughter. Mary played a vital part in maintaining the family structure on which the Oates depended. It was she who kept the links between Manchester and Leeds working smoothly. About a fifth of the letters note that Mary was in Manchester, going to or just returned from Manchester. Mary was the late child of a late marriage. Her mother had died in 1798, about the time of Mary's birth. By the early 1820s, Mary had become housekeeper companion to her father. George thought of her in the same role but she would have none of that. The failure of his bargaining with Mary lay behind some of George's prevarications with Joseph Henry.

> I think he changed his mind the moment he found Mary did not intend to take up her quarters with him at Carr House.[18]

Mary herself was very uncertain of her position. The debate over the fate of the various properties continued.

> Rest assured we shall have stranger doings before that day comes – Mary is apprehensive that she will never be allowed to go again to the house to pack up even what is her own – the most charitable construction which I can put upon his conduct is that it must be the result of derangemt, whether temporary or permanent time only will shew[19]

Mary's major asset in the delicate and ill-balanced negotiations of family politics was the income she drew from a property in Call Lane in the centre of Leeds. Even here she had to rely on the goodwill and help of both Joseph Henry and Edward in the management of that property. She escaped from George's plans to recruit her as housekeeper but in the end her role as carer and maintainer of the family network caught up with her. It was the role frequently allotted to unmarried adult women in the family structures of the elite middle class. Mrs Headlam of Thorpe Arch, a female relative, frequently mentioned in the correspondence, was ill and off Mary went.

[18] Oates, 26 February 1825.
[19] Oates, 19 March 1825.

Mrs Headlam has had an attack of cholera morbus at Thorpearch which has left her in a very debilitated state – Mary had scarcely been returned from Manchester 12 hours before she was sent for to Mrs H – she is gone this morning.[20]

It proved a harrowing experience. Joseph Henry quoted some of his sister's letter.

Her (Mrs Headlam's) head was a little confused last night and I (Mary) hoped she might be released from all her sufferings . . . I wish you would request Dr Hutton's prayers for her on Sunday. I shd say for her release but I almost fear lest there shd be any selfish feeling in it and that I may wish myself to be released from my situation for it really is more wretched than any one can imagine who does not witness it.[21]

A letter later in the year claimed 'Mary was no worse for the shaking she got.'[22] When Ann Headlam died in July 1834, Mary received a legacy which included the linen, books, wine, wearing apparel and ornaments as well as a half share of the residual estate which amounted to £145.[23] Mary's role in the family was certainly not one of leisure. Banging backwards and forwards across the Pennine Hills in the pre-railway days was probably less restful than crossing the Atlantic in a 747, and then she had to listen to all the family ills and property disputes before coming back to George's designs for a housekeeper and Mrs Headlam with her fevers and bed sores.

There was a large supporting cast of uncles and aunts. Uncle Smithson was in Harrogate in 1825 and planned to winter in Bath or Brighton the next year. More important, he had a substantial sum of money invested at 4 per cent on a more or less permanent basis in Oates and Wood.[24] J.S. Smithson traded with Oates and Wood and was a trustee for Mrs Headlam who was related through marriage and chapel. She had money in the firm and was expected to leave property to Mary. Uncle Robinson was executor for Uncle George's will. Thomas Robinson had married Joseph's youngest sister and was a third Manchester link. Aunt Robinson seems to have died in 1826 adding to Joseph Henry's worries as nobody could find Uncle George's will. And so it goes on. Some of the

[20] Oates, 15 July 1826. This cholera could not have been the epidemic Asiatic Cholera of 1831–32. The label *cholera morbus* was often given to any savage stomach infection which produced diarrhoea, vomiting, cramps and dehydration – dangerous and painful enough to need care and strength to survive many attacks; R.J. Morris, *Cholera, 1832. The Social Response to an Epidemic* (London, 1976).
[21] Oates, 5 August 1826.
[22] Oates, 29 September 1826.
[23] Legacy Receipt on account of the personal estate of Ann Headlam, 13 April 1835, Oates Papers.
[24] Oates, 22 January 1825.

links, such as the Smithson one, went back three generations before finding a common ancestor.

This detail showed that each set of family relationships increased the density of other social and economic relationships. The investment of capital in the firm and the Manchester links reinforced one another. There were other more general patterns. The comfortable old age and independence of Uncle Smithson and Mrs Headlam depended upon the fortunes of Oates and Wood. When they went to Brighton or Bath, the economies of those leisured towns[25] depended upon the fortunes of the wool textile industry of the north of England.

The main protagonists in this family story were:

George, the eldest brother, unmarried;
Joseph Henry, the letter writer, married with young children;
Edward, younger brother, unmarried, seeking professional life in London;
Sarah, who had 'escaped' to a marriage in Manchester which served to deepen a variety of family and business links;
Mary, young and unmarried, always busy in keeping family networks and domesticity in good order.

Their life style was privileged, circumscribed by a variety of half specified rules and duties and threatened in often ill-defined ways. It was a life of substantial urban mansions on the northern and northwestern edges of Leeds away from the smoke. It was a life of madeira and honey, of books and pictures and fine wine, with the time to visit and dine at family tables covered with plate. As Joseph Henry tidied up Weetwood Hall, he packed up many of the things which Edward had left there after going to London. In April 1825 the plate was packed. Next week it was the books and pictures. Many of these had been acquired in the long tour Edward had undertaken in Italy between 1819 and 1821. These tours were not limited to gentry and aristocratic culture but were common to many of the established elite families of Leeds. Some of the books had to stay in the warehouse for a few months but Edward got two dozen bottles of madeira after complaining that he felt melancholy. In November, jars of honey were sent to London to remind him of home. In March 1826, the distribution of property began again in earnest. First the spoons were sent and then it was the turn of the pictures; hunting scenes and father's portrait. Joseph Henry was offended that Edward thought the pictures had been thrown about at Carr House. George, awkward as ever, had refused them space whilst others had been damaged in the canal trip from

[25] R.S. Neale, *Bath. A Social History, 1680–1850* (London, 1981).

Liverpool. He would complain to Rathbones, the agents in Liverpool. In May it was back to the subject of wine.

> The wine promised to you long ago is now bottled – it is the wine alluded to by my Uncle S when we were last at Heath – it is Madeira and I think of a very fair quality – price to you 36/- per doz exclusive of bottles – indeed you drank of it at Oatlands the Sunday George dined with us.[26]

The next lot of pictures were going by carrier. The Oates were consumers in that limited consumer society which had grown in the eighteenth century. Objects, which may have been acquired in response to fashion and novelty or to demonstrate taste and status, were now invested with family meaning. The nature of the transaction varied. There were gifts of honey and madeira at special prices, but plate, pictures, spoons and tableware were carefully documented and accounted for.

In many ways this was a privileged and contented life but it was also insecure, and threats to health were prominent in that insecurity. Enough has been said about Joseph Henry's troubles. He was fortunate compared with his wife. In November 1825 at the end of a long letter on family business and property matters he told Edward,

> I am very sorry that it is not in my power to send you a favourable report of my wife's health – She has not derived the benefit from sea bathing which I hoped was in store for her – she looks well but is so weak in the back as to be unable to sit up for a quarter of an hour at a time – there is a decided tendency to inflammation but Mr Cass states decidedly that the spine itself is not diseased – it is ascribed to child bearing and God grant that it may be nothing worse – and no more such labours I trust are in store for her and henceforth we are to occupy separate beds – indeed we have done long – Mary and children all well.[27]

It was not clear exactly what was wrong, a prolapse, some persistent infection or maybe damage to the base of the spine. His wife's health became a constant topic of the letters. Rest and sea bathing were tried but she never regained her energies. In late 1826 he wrote,

> If the Almighty saw fit to restore strength to my dear wife I should be happy.[28]

With care neither were burdened with life threatening conditions but for both of them, fully active adult life was at an end. In assessing the economic histories and strategies of the middle classes, it must be remembered that for many of them medical conditions, which would form brief if sometimes unpleasant episodes in the lives of their counterparts in the late

[26] Oates, 19 May 1825.
[27] Oates, 22 November 1825.
[28] Oates, 29 September 1826.