

## INTRODUCTION

### Before the diaries: Francis Place, 1771–1825

Historians already know a great deal about Francis Place's life. A catalogue of the evidence produced, collected, or saved by him is truly impressive. There are multiple volumes of correspondence and notes, an extraordinary array of political and social ephemera, thousands of newspaper clippings pasted into volumes of guard books, numerous articles and pamphlets published during his lifetime, an autobiography, and the fragments of a diary.<sup>1</sup> If we include in this accounting the two full-length biographies and the numerous articles in professional journals that have been produced by later historians, there is probably as much or more information available about this individual than most others of his generation.<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly, however, despite this wealth of evidence and the fact that Place's story has been told many times before, there is still a great deal in dispute about him. A brief review of Place's life and career, therefore, would not be inappropriate here.

Place was born in London on 3 November 1771 in a 'sponging-house' opposite the Drury Lane Theatre. This sponging or lock-up house, operated by Place's father for the Marshalsea Court, imprisoned debtors in somewhat more respectable circumstances than were available to them in the Marshalsea debtors' prison. Naturally, prisoners had to be prepared to pay for this privilege and the prices for food, ale, rent, and the like were by all accounts extortionate. Simon Place, Francis Place's father, supported his family for several years from the profits made in this manner. Place recalled the house as clean, light, and very neat.

<sup>1</sup> Statistically, the Place Collection in the British Library comprises 95 volumes in the Department of Manuscripts and 180 volumes in the Department of Printed Books.

<sup>2</sup> The most significant publications on the life of Francis Place include Graham Wallas, *The Life of Francis Place, 1771–1854*, originally published in 1898, but I refer to the fourth edition throughout (London, 1925); Dudley Miles, *Francis Place, 1771–1854: the life of a remarkable radical* (Brighton, 1988), and Mary Thale (ed.), *The Autobiography of Francis Place, 1771–1854* (Cambridge, 1972). The new *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry is written by William Thomas: 'Place, Francis (1771–1854)' (Oxford, 2004, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/22349>>, accessed 18 February 2005). The following brief account of his life is drawn principally from these sources.

Place remembered his mother as 'the best woman who ever existed. Clean, neat, kind, cheerful, good tempered, [and] warm hearted.'<sup>3</sup> There is very little else known about her and perhaps Place should be forgiven for this rather hackneyed and melodramatic account he has left of her. The portrait of Place's father, however, is altogether more insightful and nuanced. Not surprisingly, the qualities he most admired in his father were the very same qualities he later most admired in himself while, conversely, those personal characteristics he most condemned or disapproved of became the subject of Place's lifelong interest, and examination.

Place certainly disdained his father's 'dissoluteness', which seems to have included just about every vice imaginable, including physical abuse, neglect, drinking, whoring, gambling, and fighting.<sup>4</sup> Yet he was also ready to dismiss his father's excesses as the reflection of the manners typical of an earlier generation of men. Throughout his life, Place exhibited a pronounced fascination for these facets of eighteenth-century urban life despite his abhorrence of them. This is quite evident from Place's collection of bawdy songs, rude rhymes, and contemporary descriptions of the manners and morals of the common people. Admittedly, he intended to use this remarkable collection of materials to prove that the behavior of the ordinary people had improved dramatically since the mid-eighteenth century, but it may not be too far-fetched to suggest that he was also trying to understand that 'rude' part of both his father and himself.

There was also a great deal that Place admired about his father and the culture from which he had sprung.<sup>5</sup> Thus historians risk grossly oversimplifying Place's complex and ambivalent attitude toward popular culture if they see his later behavior merely as the result of a personal choice between the 'rough' and the 'respectable'. Indeed, Place's attitude was much more complex and multivalent than many would like to imagine. He extolled, for example, the qualities of this dissolute man who was, at the same time, 'to be depended upon in all emergencies good or bad',<sup>6</sup> who 'possessed much resolution and unextinguishable [*sic*] confidence in his own powers and resources',<sup>7</sup> and 'generally did his business for himself and left nothing undone in

<sup>3</sup> Place, *The Autobiography*, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Place also included fishing among his father's vices. As an urban exile in the rural Midwest of the United States, I would tend to agree with this categorization; others may not.

<sup>5</sup> Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: prophets, revolutionaries and pornographers in London, 1795–1840* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 26–28.

<sup>6</sup> Place, *The Autobiography*, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

any matter which he once took in hand'.<sup>8</sup> The diaries in this volume indeed suggest that these were the same characteristics that Place fashioned for himself: dependable, confident, independent. Not only would it be misleading to crudely distinguish between the 'rough' and the 'respectable', but it would also be misguided to see these independent qualities as in some way 'bourgeois' or middle-class, for they were essential and important aspects of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century working-class culture. As Place himself noted, 'That such a man should have been able to make his way in the world seems strange, that he should have brought himself to ruin and his family to the most perfect state of Distress and yet have recovered again and again appears to us sober people of the present day almost incredible. But such men as he was, were by no means uncommon in his time.'<sup>9</sup>

Place's father was careful to educate both his two sons and his two daughters. Francis Place was sent to a series of day schools and his father had hopes of apprenticing him to the law as a conveyancer. At age fourteen, however, he was apprenticed instead to a leather breeches maker named Joe France. In part, Place explained this turn of events as a result of his resistance to his father's plans: 'I had an antipathy to Law and Lawyers', he simply explained in *The Autobiography*. Yet it also appears to be the case that the thought of such office work repelled him. Understandably, at his age, Place had developed a healthy dislike and disdain for school and was eager to go out to work. Looking back at this decision, he was as incredulous as we all might have been:

I had for a long time entertained a notion that it was a much greater state of slavery to be compelled to go to school at nine o'clock in the morning and remain till twelve, to go again at two, and remain 'till five, having two half holidays in each week, whole holidays at least a dozen times in the year, besides the four usual vacations; than it would be to be compelled to work for at the least twelve consecutive hours six days in the week, with only three holidays at Easter Whitsuntide and Christmas, and this notion was entertained by me as long as I was an apprentice, Strange as this may seem it is by no means uncommon; I have known many boys who thought as I did on the subject.<sup>10</sup>

Within three years, however, Place's master had become bankrupt and, before the age of eighteen, Place had given up his apprenticeship. Over the next several years, he worked at a variety of jobs, sometimes as a breeches maker and sometimes not. At some point, he joined the Breeches Makers Benefit Society and claims to have paid his

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

subscriptions regularly, despite his irregular employment. Most importantly, however, these years witnessed Place's marriage to Elizabeth Chadd in March 1791. He was nineteen, she only seventeen, and their marriage was later followed by several years of great hardship, poverty, and distress. This was especially the case when, in April 1793, the London journeymen breeches makers undertook a strike to raise their wages. Implicated in helping to organize this action, Place was blacklisted and could not find work for the next eight months. During this time, the despair caused by unemployment and poverty was deepened even further by the death of both his father and his first child. Only in December of that year did Place find employment again.

Remarkably, Place's penchant for organization and support of unionization in the trade was not blunted by this experience. By April 1794, he had helped revive the union, begun collecting subscriptions for a new strike fund, and led a movement to secure higher wages for the journeymen breeches makers by taking advantage of the disruption of trade that had followed the previous strike. Place's *Autobiography* suggests that this second unionization effort was successful, despite the absence of a strike or any other form of industrial action. It is likely, therefore, that some sort of negotiated settlement precluded the necessity of a strike. This experience might help to explain Place's later belief that, if left alone, masters and men could resolve their industrial disputes peacefully. However, there were sound ideological reasons for this belief as well, which will be discussed in further detail below. Place's success with the leather breeches makers also seems to have given him some sort of a reputation for organization among the London trades. He claims to have been asked to undertake the formation of similar societies among the journeymen carpenters, plumbers, and several other London trades.

It was at this time that Place first came into contact with the national political reform movement and, in June 1794, joined the London Corresponding Society. His daring and determination in doing so should not be underestimated. Thomas Hardy, the founder and secretary of the LCS, had just been arrested for treason during the previous month, several other early members of the Society who had also been charged with treason were still at large, and the government had recently suspended habeas corpus. Until he left the Society three years later, Place frequently served both as chair of the weekly meetings of the General Committee, a group comprised of delegates from the London divisions, and on the Executive Committee. His resignation was precipitated by a dispute within the LCS over tactics. Place opposed the continuance of mass demonstrations as a tactic likely to secure parliamentary reform in the oppressive political atmosphere

of the mid-1790s. In *The Autobiography*, he claims that, at first, he continued to support the actions of the LCS, despite their differences of opinion. This eventually ceased to be the case, however; yet, although he resigned over the issue in June 1797, he never totally lost contact with the Society.<sup>11</sup> In April 1798, Place organized and arranged for subscriptions to be collected and disbursed to the families of a number of radicals who had been arrested and held without trial by the government, a function he continued to perform into 1799. As will be noted in the diary below, he was in fact still collecting funds to support Thomas Hardy into the 1820s, and had maintained contacts with a great many of its former members, including Paul Lemaitre, John Thelwall, Thomas Evans, William Frend, Alexander Galloway, and others.

During these same years, Place never wholly neglected his business. He was determined to establish himself as a master and not return to employment as a journeyman. Unfortunately, this often entailed even more hardship for his family. After several fits and starts, Place eventually rented shop space at No. 16, Charing Cross Road and, after refurbishing the premises, opened a shop there in April 1801. By his own account, he stayed away from politics for the next five years and assiduously cultivated his business. In 1815, his business earned a profit of £1500; in 1816, in excess of £3000; and in the following year he retired from work altogether, aged forty-five.<sup>12</sup> Although his annual income varied thereafter, he never worked again.

Retirement and leisure evoked from Place considerable ambivalence. There was, without doubt, the enormous and often overweening pride that he took in the results of his own hard work, determination, and resolve. These latter qualities, as we have seen, were ones that he similarly admired in his father and were not unknown to working-class culture. Perhaps more significantly, a life of leisure called to mind not just idleness, which Place abhorred, but the lifestyle of the aristocracy, which he wholly detested.<sup>13</sup> The unceasing and almost compulsive dedication that he exhibited to the reform movement, to collecting, to writing, to improvement, and to organizing was a reflection of this drive to make his leisure time both useful and productive. In this, whether knowingly or not, Place made his father's reputation for hard work, dedication, and helping others into his own.

Given Place's abhorrence of the peerage, it is not at all surprising that it was the blatantly corrupt and demeaning actions of the

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 144, 154.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226; Miles, *Place*, p. 53; Thomas, 'Place, Francis'.

<sup>13</sup> A point also made by J.M. Main, 'Radical Westminster, 1807–1820', *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand*, 12 (1966), p. 189.

aristocracy that ultimately persuaded him to return to active politics. He was appalled when chunks of bread and cheese were tossed to the crowds during the Westminster elections of 1806 and he remained a fixture of Westminster politics for several decades thereafter.<sup>14</sup> His most notable achievements during this period included the organization of the elections first of Sir Francis Burdett in 1807 and then of J.C. Hobbhouse in 1820, both of whom were elected as radicals although they both eventually retreated from radical politics. While some historians have doubted the extent to which Place personally contributed to the plan that secured the return of Burdett in 1807, the uniquely successful program certainly bears all the hallmarks of Place's prior trade-union and political experience. By combining a system of subscriptions from electors with detailed committee organization in each parish, the nation's 'first constituency caucus', as it has been called, bore a striking resemblance to the manner in which benefit societies functioned and the LCS was organized.<sup>15</sup> While E.P. Thompson drew attention to the historical significance of Place's apparent retreat from the LCS's claim 'that the number of our members be unlimited',<sup>16</sup> the debt that the British political system owes to the method of subscriptions and grass-roots organization that supported working-class trade unions and benefit societies has never been fully acknowledged.

Place's most significant personal achievements, however, probably occurred during the next decade. Indeed, the early 1820s has often been marked by historians as a turning point in Place's political and intellectual development. However, the precise nature of this transformation is a matter of some dispute. For the biographer Dudley Miles, these years marked the beginning of a 'decade of achievement'. William Thomas, on the other hand, viewed them as years when Place more fully embraced utilitarianism and finally rejected the 'utopian radicalism' of the 1790s. Both assessments largely rest upon an analysis of the same event: that is, Place's role in the repeal of the Combination Acts in 1824. Neither view is wholly wrong, but neither view is wholly correct, either. It is essential to revisit this debate briefly, not only for the light it may eventually shed on our understanding of Francis Place, but also for the new perspectives it may offer for our understanding of the origins of the British working class.

For some, like Miles and Graham Wallas, Place's first biographer, 'the repeal of the Combination Laws in 1824–25 was the most striking

<sup>14</sup> Wallas, *Life*, pp. 42–43.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas, 'Place, Francis'.

<sup>16</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, NY, 1963), pp. 17–25.

piece of work that Place ever carried through single-handed'.<sup>17</sup> Yet it is possible to overestimate both Place's role in this endeavor and the overall effect of this repeal on trade unionism. Without doubt, the Combination Acts had great symbolic significance, but much work by historians has gone into the now general consensus that the conflicts and struggles between employers and workers were more likely to find their way into the numerous magistrates' courts, courts of request, or mayor's courts, under the terms of the master-and-servant laws, than they were to be prosecuted under the laws of combination and conspiracy.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, while the repeal of the Acts marked a change in law, it certainly did not herald a comparable sea-change of attitudes toward trade unions among the governing classes. That change was to take at least another four decades and await the reforms introduced under the premierships of Disraeli and Gladstone. Finally, Place's own actions may have been overdramatized for, despite Place's renowned planning, vetting of witnesses, and intense preparation of Joseph Hume, the committee chair, the bill was passed into law principally by stealth.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, as many trade unionists of the time quickly realized, the repeal of the Combination Laws had very little effect upon the nature and practice of industrial relations.

If Place's achievement therefore appears to have been rather modest, it may be worth asking precisely what he had intended to achieve. It has often been argued that Place was motivated to seek the repeal of the Combination Acts because of his belief in the efficacy of the market, a belief imbibed through his contact with James Mill, Jeremy Bentham, and the circle of philosophic radicals. However, it would be quite misleading to read Place's actions in this light. Place's determination to repeal the Combination Acts was in many ways an extension of his 'utopian radicalism', perhaps even its culmination, rather than a utilitarian rejection of it. This will be discussed in greater detail below. For now, it is enough to point out that Place certainly believed that, if left to bargain freely between themselves, masters and men would resolve industrial disputes peacefully. Moreover, he held equally strong convictions that it was ultimately the law's repression that compelled workers to form trade unions. 'Men have been kept together for long periods', he wrote to Burdett in 1825, 'only by the

<sup>17</sup> Wallas, *Life*, p. 197.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Curthoys, *Governments, Labour, and the Law in Mid-Victorian Britain: the trade union legislation of the 1870s* (Oxford, 2004); Douglas Hay, 'England, 1562–1875: the law and its uses', in D. Hay and P. Craven (eds), *Masters, Servants, and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562–1955* (Chapel Hill, 2004), pp. 100–101; Robert J. Steinfeld, *Coercion, Contract, and Free Labor in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2001), esp. chapters 2 and 4.

<sup>19</sup> See Miles, *Place*, pp. 164–166 for a brief account and Wallas, *Life*, pp. 197–240 for a much fuller one.



oppression of the Laws.<sup>20</sup> Yet this opposition to the state's role in industrial relations was not a facet of Place's acceptance of the laws of political economy. Instead, for Place, the Combination Acts were part of the British government's legacy of oppression, of Pitt's Terror, the suspension of habeas corpus, Peterloo, and the Six Acts. The diaries below bear witness to the fact that his fight against this legacy continued well past the repeal of the Combination Acts. In 1827, he can still be found encouraging Joseph Hume to introduce legislation to repeal the surviving portions of the Six Acts. In this, as will be suggested below, the influence of Thomas Paine is far more apparent than that of either Mill or Bentham.

### Francis Place and the historians

Probably sometime in 1826, Place wrote a brief résumé of his activities during the previous year, and it is this sketchy account of 1825 that precedes the diary proper. It is unfortunate that the diaries begin in earnest only in 1826, even though the Place Papers in the British Library offer volumes of notes and letters covering the repeal of the Combination Acts. A record of Place's efforts in this regard would obviously have been a very welcome addition to our understanding of those events. And historians may have lost something more, because the period after mid-decade was marked by the onset of both relative material prosperity and relative political quiescence. Thus, the most dramatic events of the first third of the nineteenth century are not covered by the diary. Perhaps it is therefore not accidental that Place chose to begin and end his diary at just these points in his personal and the nation's history. And yet there is still much that can be learned. Most importantly, the diary may make a significant contribution to the ongoing discussion among historians over Place's role in London's radical movements of the early nineteenth century. However, to do so, it must be read both for what it says and for what it does not say.

The debate over Place's role in the history of London radicalism was neatly summarized many years ago by Iorwerth Prothero: 'Pre-Chartist London', he wrote, 'has been called "the London of Francis Place"'. It should, with much greater accuracy, be known as "the London of John Gast".<sup>21</sup> This quotation, it might be said, encapsulated the political and ideological goals of a generation of labor historians

<sup>20</sup> British Library, Additional Manuscripts (hereafter, BL, Add. MSS) 27802, fos 37–38.

<sup>21</sup> Iorwerth Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century London: John Gast and his times*, paperback edition (London, 1981), p. 7; see also Malcolm Chase, 'Francis Place: a remarkable radical?', *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 54 (1989), pp. 60–61.



who came to prominence in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and who sought to redefine the terms of their trade: artisans rather than proletarians became the center of study, the workshop replaced the factory as the location of agitation, and the experience of workers rather than the history of their institutions became the focus of analysis. In part, this change reflected the ideological riptides of the Left, but Prothero's quotation, more academically, reflected a reaction against the institutional bias and party-political focus that had characterized previous generations of largely Fabian labor historians.

It has often been asserted that the Fabian historians, and in this particular case we are speaking of Sidney and Beatrice Webb and Graham Wallas, had found Place an especially sympathetic character largely because his political tactics were surprisingly similar to their own.<sup>22</sup> Parenthetically, it should be noted that historians who have made this assertion have rarely taken the time either to define or to distinguish the significant differences between Wallas and the Webbs. Still, this claim is not without a good deal of merit. In the Webbs' estimation of Place,

No one who has closely studied his life and work will doubt that, within the narrow sphere to which his unswerving practicality confined him, he was the most remarkable politician of his age. His chief merit lay in his thorough understanding of the art of getting things done. In agitation, permeation, wire-pulling, Parliamentary lobbying, the drafting of resolutions, petitions, bills – in short, of all those artifices by which a popular movement is first created and then made effective on the Parliamentary system – he was an inventor and tactician of the first order.<sup>23</sup>

A minor Fabian historian, Julius West, made the same point more succinctly: 'Francis Place, the greatest organizer English democracy has ever known'.<sup>24</sup>

The new labor historians, however, were much more ambivalent in their estimation of Place's achievements, an ambivalence that mirrored the new orientation of labor history. Willing to acknowledge the accomplishments both of Place and the older labor histories, historians such as E.P. Thompson nonetheless critically analyzed their shortcomings:

<sup>22</sup> W.E.S. Thomas, 'Francis Place and working class history', *Historical Journal*, 5 (1962), pp. 69–70; Alice Prochaska, 'Francis Place and working-class radicalism in London', *Modern History Review*, 4 (1992), p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism*, revised edition (London, 1920), pp. 96–97.

<sup>24</sup> See Julius West, *A History of the Chartist Movement* (London, 1920), p. 29. I owe this quote to Malcolm Chase.

Several of the historians who pioneered the study of this period (the Hammonds, the Webbs, and Graham Wallas) were men and women of Fabian persuasion, who looked upon the 'early history of the Labour Movement' in the light of the subsequent Reform Acts, and the growth of T.U.C. and Labour Party. Since Luddites or food rioters do not appear as satisfactory 'forerunners' of 'the Labour Movement' they merited neither sympathy nor close attention. And this bias was supplemented, from another direction, by the more conservative bias of the orthodox academic tradition. Hence 'history' has dealt fairly with the Tolpuddle Martyrs, and fulsomely with Francis Place; but the hundreds of men and women executed or transported for oath-taking, Jacobin conspiracy, Luddism, the Pentridge and Grange Moor risings, food and enclosure and turnpike riots, the Ely riots and the Labourers' Revolt of 1830, and a score of minor affrays, have been forgotten by all but a few specialists, or, if they are remembered, they are thought to be simpletons or men tainted with criminal folly.<sup>25</sup>

In what is certainly his most oft-quoted statement, Thompson announced that 'I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the "obsolete" hand-loom weaver, the "utopian" artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity.'<sup>26</sup> He might just as well have said that he wished to rescue them from the enormous condescension of Sidney and Beatrice Webb.

To be fair, Thompson was more than willing to acknowledge Place's 'sober manner, his great capacity for organisation, his intellectual application, and his experience of trade union organisation'.<sup>27</sup> However, his scepticism was communicated to those historians who later produced the now-standard histories of early nineteenth-century London radicalism, including J. Ann Hone, Iain McCalman, and Prothero,<sup>28</sup> all of whom sought in part to diminish the centrality of Place in their analyses of working-class radicalism.

As Place's star waned among labor historians, a parallel debate over his goals and ideology episodically made its way into the pages of the historical journals. At nearly the same time that Thompson was issuing his critique of the Fabian veneration of Place, W.E.S. Thomas was publishing a rather withering attack both upon Place's character and his accomplishments.<sup>29</sup> To Thomas, Place appeared rigid, uncritical, uncongenial, sectarian, unrealistic, overeager, tactless, dry, blinkered, and unimaginative, to list but a few of Thomas's

<sup>25</sup> Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, p. 592.

<sup>26</sup> Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>28</sup> J. Ann Hone, *For the Cause of Truth: radicalism in London 1796–1821* (Oxford, 1982). For McCalman's and Prothero's books, see notes 5 and 21 respectively.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas, 'Francis Place and working class history', pp. 61–79.