CHAPTER 1

Religious Dissent and the Aikin–Barbauld circle, 1740–1860: an introduction

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We have no portrait of the Aikin family actually *en famille*, despite their extraordinary achievements and their powerful presentation of themselves as a group. The Edgeworths are famously pictured clustering around a manuscript; Isaac Taylor shows his family joyfully at ease in their garden – but despite the Aikins' similarities to both these writing dynasties, no image remains of them together. The closest we can come to a group portrait of the Aikin–Barbauld circle is an engraving commissioned for Thomas Macklin's *The Poets' Gallery*, by Francesco Bartolozzi from a drawing by Henry William Bunbury. Macklin intended to commission one hundred paintings illustrating the works of the English poets; this 1791 engraving celebrates 'The Mouse's Petition', by Anna Letitia Barbauld (1743–1825) (see Figure 1).[1]

Barbauld – then Anna Letitia Aikin, before her marriage to Rochemont Barbauld in 1774 – was visiting the theologian and experimental scientist Joseph Priestley in Leeds in 1771 when she wrote the poem, one of her most popular and widely reprinted. It intercedes on behalf of a mouse, 'found in the trap where he had been confined all night by Dr. Priestley, for the sake of making experiments with different kinds of air':

> Oh! hear a pensive prisoner's prayer,
> For liberty that sighs;
> And never let thine heart be shut
> Against the wretch's cries.[2]

In the engraving, a woman – dressed in white, and looking the very picture of sensibility – lectures a sage figure, as he studies the imprisoned mouse, watched by another woman and a child, the whole set in a pastoral glade. The image invites obvious comparison with the figures of the Aikin–Barbauld circle: the woman lecturing evokes Barbauld, and the seated sage, Priestley. The other woman in the picture could well be Joseph Priestley's wife, Mary, to whom the subsequent verse, 'To Mrs. P ---- .; With Some

Figure 1 'The Mouse's Petition', Macklin's *British Poets*, print by Francesco Bartolozzi, after Sir Henry Bunbury, pub. Thomas Macklin (London: 1791). © Trustees of the British Museum.

Drawings of Birds and Insects', in *Poems* (1773) is dedicated. The little boy who eagerly looks on surely represents Barbauld's adopted son, Charles Rochemont, the child of her brother John Aikin. Barbauld's celebrated series of *Lessons for Children* (1778–9) were written to teach little Charles to read, tracing his development from 2 to 4 years old; countless eighteenth-century and Victorian readers learned along with Charles.

And yet the image is hardly a faithful portrait of the Aikin–Barbauld circle. It is a representation which in many ways works to downplay some of the potentially disturbing aspects of the circle, and of the poem itself – not least the radical implications of the mouse's plea for liberty. Recent criticism has brought out the political edge of 'The Mouse's Petition', as well as its potential feminist critique of oppression.[3] Furthermore, by 1791, the defence of the 'free-born mouse', with its echo of 'free-born Englishman', had taken on a still more dangerous aspect.[4] The print is dated 20 November 1791; in July of that year, Joseph Priestley had had his

house and laboratory burnt down in the Birmingham riots. In the early 1790s, his image was far more frequently to be seen in the caricatures of Gillray and Cruikshank; widely denounced, and even burnt in effigy alongside Tom Paine, he became, as David Wykes has recently put it, 'a national figure of hate'.[5] If the Aikin–Barbauld circle was one of sensibility, polite poetry, familial and friendly conversation, it was also, simultaneously, one which grappled with Revolutionary ideals, with experiments both scientific and social, with moral problems, and with radical politics. This is perhaps why the image evades direct representation of the figures to whom it alludes: Priestley becomes transformed into a figure reminiscent of Rousseau, his Leeds laboratory transfigured into a shadowy glade. Both 'Gunpowder Joe' and the radical aftershocks of Barbauld's poem are defused in this pastoral setting, safely placed in a context of familial and friendly interaction.[6]

The ways in which the poem and its illustration pull away from one another make this image a particularly appropriate starting point for this volume. 'The Mouse's Petition' shows how a domestic moment might open onto wider social and political questions. It encapsulates a moment of Enlightenment exchange, as the literature of sensibility speaks to the language of science, and the drive towards discovery and experiment is tempered by larger ethical considerations. Yet, from its publication, it was read against its author's intentions: Barbauld complained that reviewers accused Priestley of cruelty towards the mouse, and inserted an indignant footnote in the third edition to argue that 'cruelty could never be apprehended from the Gentleman to whom this has been addressed'.[7] Its 1791 illustration, however, perpetuates, in William McCarthy's words, 'Barbauld's public image as a preceptress on the ethics of benevolence to animals'.[8] The difficult political and social questions raised by Barbauld are closed down into a scene of domestic sensibility: indeed, the poem itself is only represented by a few verses. Its evasive representation of Barbauld and Priestley also prompts us to consider changes in attitude between the 1770s and the 1790s: a reflection of the way in which the whole collection attempts to trace the troubled passage of Enlightenment figures and ideals through the shifting perspectives of the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These essays set out to explore the changing stories and histories of the Aikin–Barbauld circle from the 1740s to the 1860s, across a range of disciplines – theology, education, medicine, geography, literature and history. The essays function both as a means of recovering the extraordinary achievements of the individuals within the Aikin family, and also, collectively, as an exploration of a particularly powerful familial ethos and its shifts across the generations. They ask, too, how the Aikin–Barbauld

circle has been read, reread and misread through the centuries, and probe their legacies.

As in the engraving, Anna Letitia Barbauld is in some ways at the centre of this group: certainly, she is the member who has prompted most recent critical work. Of late, Barbauld scholarship has emphasized the importance of reading her poetry as part of a larger context of family and friends. Scott Krawczyk, for example, shows how her poems and political pamphlets conduct a responsive conversation with the work of her brother, and Michelle Levy persuasively argues that Anna Barbauld and her brother 'stand as the period's exemplary family authors': indeed, 'collaboration with family lay at the root of their literary practices and ideals'.[9] For Anna Barbauld was surrounded on all sides by talented relations. Her father, John Aikin senior (1713–80), was first a schoolmaster, and then a tutor at the celebrated Warrington Academy; her brother John junior (1747–1822) was a physician, literary critic, geographer and editor. John junior's children were also widely accomplished: Arthur Aikin (1773–1854) was a natural scientist and author; Charles Rochemont (1775–1847), adopted by his aunt, became a surgeon and chemist; Edmund (1780–1820), was an architect, and Lucy Aikin (1781–1864), an author, memoirist and historian. The creativity continued into further generations with Charles Rochemont's daughter, the writer and family memoirist Anna Letitia Le Breton (1808–85). Every member of the family over three generations has an entry in the *New Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, together with the circle of intellectuals associated with them. As Anne Janowitz explores in our final chapter, the very creation of these entries in both editions of the *ODNB* is bound up with the way in which the family reputation has been created and maintained across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: they were tenacious chroniclers of their own doings and legacies, and their memoirs were informed by the structuring image of themselves as an ideal family unit. This volume examines these memoirs critically and analyses the enduring power of their reputation, asking how and why the Aikins have been read, and setting their achievements in a broader context of religious belief, family creativity and sociable networks of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We aim to offer a form of group biography, setting family members and disciplines in conversation, and suggesting the subtle patterns of change and continuity across different time periods, and different forms of writing.

The chapters move across the generations, beginning with a close look at Kibworth School in the days of John Aikin (senior). David Wykes shows us how his teaching methods there, and his pupils – who have not previously been traced – afford a valuable insight into the educational structures of

Dissent. Aikin's children inherited his skills as educator and took his legacy forward in different ways: William McCarthy explores Anna Letitia Barbauld's range of writing, from her children's work to her elegant and lively poetry, while Kathryn Ready considers John Aikin (junior) as literary physician, and Stephen Daniels and Paul Elliott demonstrate his importance as a geographer. In the next generation, Ian Inkster outlines the family's contributions to science and industry through the work of Arthur and Charles. Lucy Aikin's innovative historical writing is reread by Michelle Levy, and my own chapter traces some of the tensions in Lucy's family biographies. Our closing chapter, by Anne Janowitz, looks back at these pieces, and at the family's own conception of itself, critically exploring not only the Aikins' individual achievements, intellectual and literary, but also the shaping of their reputation against a changing backdrop of religious and secular preoccupations.

The different chapters of this volume, then, not only try to recover the important contributions of this family but to see them *as* a family, working together, returning to particular issues, furthering ideas from one generation to the next – or, alternatively, differing from one another, diverging from each other and struggling to establish their own perspectives. This sense of a larger network of voices and ideas connects with recent critical preoccupations with sociable groups and modes of collaboration. '[W]e need to recover the significance of sociability', argue Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite, 'as a kind of text in its own right, a form of cultural work', which has been obscured by 'Romanticism's traditional identification with the lone poet'.[10] Instead of the solitary bard, brooding on the mountain, we have the crowded theatre, clusters of voices in the periodical, at the coffee house, in the streets and shops of the metropolis, and in the domestic circle. Work is being done to investigate different forms of sociability and sociable places: the family is one such site, where boundaries of private and public, individual and community, are negotiated. The Aikin–Barbauld circle, with its close ties of affection, intellectual connection and religious belief, allows us to see this culture of sociability at work, and to examine a particular form of collaborative creativity.

'Family connexions', wrote Noel Annan in his 1955 essay, 'The Intellectual Aristocracy', 'are part of the poetry of history'.[11] Annan was thinking of the great webs of kinship and intermarriage represented by the Macaulays, the Gurneys, the Darwin–Wedgwoods, the Stephen and Strachey families, stretching from industrial potteries to the heart of Bloomsbury, from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Furthermore, these families were rooted in Nonconformity – the Clapham sect, the

Quaker Gurneys and Frys, the Unitarian Wedgwoods – even if their sons and daughters did sometimes end by turning to the Anglican church. Annan's is a somewhat impressionistic gallop through Victorian intelligentsia and into the society columns, but his 'sketch' has larger implications. He closes the essay with the thought that this is 'an aristocracy that shows no signs of expiring', and although the world he describes has faded, the interest in family connections as a key to exploring larger cultural questions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is still growing. Of course historians have long been interested in defining the nature, and the changing structure, of English family life. We might point to the discussions of what might constitute a 'household' by Peter Laslett and others, or Lawrence Stone's influential narrative of the rise of 'affective individualism', or Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall arguing for the close connections between 'the sexual division of labour within families' and 'the development of capitalist enterprise'.[12] More recently, critics have been particularly interested in how ideas of family might connect with broader networks of relationship, as in Naomi Tadmor's study of friendship and kinship ties through the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, or Adam Kuper's *Incest and Influence*, which goes back to Annan's sets of families to demonstrate the complex dynasties of cousin-marriage underpinning them.[13] As Davidoff and Hall comment in their introduction to the 2002 edition of *Family Fortunes*, fifteen years after its first publication, 'the family itself may no longer be considered as a unitary thing but rather a set of practices and expectations in process'.[14] Looking at the Aikin family across time perhaps helps to give a sense of how those expectations might develop and shift, from the 1740s to the 1860s.

The process takes on a further aspect, moreover, in the context of religious Dissent. The enormous intellectual and cultural contribution religious Dissenters made to English society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is now beginning to be appreciated in scholarship and criticism. Recent studies of the experimental scientist and theologian Joseph Priestley, of the radical rhetoric of Richard Price, of the networks of publisher and bookseller Joseph Johnson, or, in the nineteenth century, of figures such as Harriet Martineau and women writers of Dissent, represent a small handful of the ways in which we are recognizing Dissent as central to our understanding of the culture, literature and politics of the period. Yet more work still needs to be done on identifying Dissenters, and on establishing denominational differences, which are so often overlooked. The Aikins' commitment to Rational Dissent, for example, remains strong throughout this period, but their precise sectarian denomination is harder

to pin down. John Aikin (senior) may be described as English Presbyterian with Arian views; by the nineteenth century, Unitarianism had become the main form of heterodoxy with respect to the Trinity, and thus Lucy Aikin identifies herself specifically with Unitarianism. We hope this study, with its local focus, helps towards an understanding of the nuances of Dissent, and the involvement of particular Dissenters in social, political and literary life, both nationally and at the local level.

We hope, too, that it gives an insight into the creative power of Dissent. There is a long tradition of denigrating Dissenters' capacity for imaginative response. Burke's description of the '*hortus siccus* of dissent', for instance, suggests that Dissenters are hopelessly entangled in dry – yet potentially dangerous – controversy and dispute. From a different background, William Hazlitt's uncompromising conclusion that 'it would be in vain to strew the flowers of poetry round the borders of the Unitarian controversy' carries the same implication.[15] Indeed, many of the male Romantic poets' comments on Barbauld – despite their debts to her – contribute to this impression of Dissent as disputatious, cold and lacking in imagination. Robert Southey, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Charles Lamb all joined in general denigration of 'Mrs Bare-bald', and Coleridge not only made snide remarks on her inability to interpret 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' correctly, but also cruelly commented on the suicide of her husband. Rochemont Barbauld 'must have had a very warm constitution', Coleridge is reported to have said, 'for he had clasped an icicle in his arms for forty years before he found it was cold'.[16] This denigration may have shaped Matthew Arnold's view of Dissent as narrow and constrained – a 'life of jealousy of the Establishment, disputes, tea-meetings, openings of chapels, sermons' directly opposed to 'sweetness, light, and perfection'.[17] However, the richness and lyric power of Barbauld's work is now once more appreciated by critics, as William McCarthy discusses in Chapter 3, and Anne Janowitz in Chapter 9. After a long period of neglect, she is now fully recognized as a vital voice in the transition between Enlightenment and nineteenth-century poetry, and in the formation of Romantic literature. Her bold, lively voice sets the tone for early Romantic poetry such as Coleridge's conversation poems; lyrics such as 'The First Fire' question and adapt Romantic conventions with, in John Anderson's words, 'subtlety and spirit'.[18] More broadly, studies such as Daniel White's *Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent* uncover the great debt that Romantic culture – from Godwin to Coleridge to Southey – owes to Dissent, not simply in terms of context but on a deeper, formal level. Similarly, Helen Thomas, in *Romanticism and Slave Narratives: Transatlantic Testimonies* has followed

up the traces of Dissenting spiritual narrative in Romanticism, and Richard E. Brantley and Jasper Cragwall have argued for the intense importance of Evangelical Nonconformism to Wordsworth's development as a poet, and, in Brantley's case, to wider Anglo-American Romanticism.[19] The essays which follow celebrate the creative power of Rational Dissent through the imaginative, lively, varied work of the Aikin family, from educational material to polemical articles, from lyric poetry to historical memoir and biography.

Indeed, part of the aim of this collection is to think about what we might learn from the different models of creativity put forward by the Aikin family. They were, for example, innovative biographers; Michelle Levy's contribution (Chapter 7) explores Lucy Aikin's court histories in light of her theory that 'it is from intimate views of private life in various ages and countries that the *moral* of political history is alone to be derived'.[20] Similarly, several of the chapters in this volume are interested in the ways in which domestic and private lives might uncover larger stories, how a family story might open onto wider meanings, and how biography of the Aikin family – and the Aikin family's biographies themselves – might inform our understanding of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century life writing. We have also tried to reflect the interdisciplinary interests of the family and their wider circle: the volume attempts to continue their conversations between different disciplines and areas of expertise, bringing together religious history, literary criticism, geography and the history of science. In so doing, we hope to uncover some of the intricate, multilayered connections between families and intellectual circles, disciplines and institutions.

The story of this collection begins in a village south-east of Leicester, Kibworth Harcourt, in an imposing house on the road to London. The 'Old House', a fine Restoration brick building, is in a dominant position – 'one of the best houses in Kibworth', as William McCarthy reminds us, just across from the village green, with its cross and pump.[21] This is where John Aikin senior began his school in 1742, and where, in 1743 and 1747, his two children, Anna Letitia and John junior, would be born. More generally, it offers a useful insight into the situation of the Aikin family in the eighteenth century. They were important members of the community, both locally and nationally: the distinguished appearance of the house is matched by the reputation of Aikin's establishment there in the 1740s. As David Wykes traces in Chapter 2, Aikin's was a forward-looking, intellectually adventurous provincial school, which serves to remind us of the broad intellectual and scholarly contribution Dissenters made to English society and

to education in particular in the eighteenth century. Although the village might at first glance seem a pastoral retreat, nestled in Leicestershire fields – Barbauld remembered 'Kibworth's tufted shade' fondly in a poem of 1768 – it was one of the hubs of Nonconformist activity in the East Midlands. A short walk from the 'Old House' was the building which had housed John Jennings' Dissenting academy, where Philip Doddridge had been a student. Doddridge would, in turn, become tutor to John Aikin senior, and it was at Doddridge's academy in Northampton that John Aikin would meet his wife, the Jennings' daughter, Jane, whom Doddridge had himself courted at one time. Doddridge would send his own son, Philip junior, to study with his former pupil at Kibworth. It is hard to find definite evidence of other pupils at Kibworth, but those traced, as Wykes shows in the appendix to Chapter 2, represent an important insight into Aikin's school, including divines such as Newcome Cappe and Thomas Belsham, one of the founders of the Royal Humane Society, Thomas Cogan, and businessmen such as John Coltman. The Aikin house at Kibworth was therefore well connected, both geographically and socially, to a wider Dissenting network which stretched across the country, from the Midlands to Glasgow, from Somerset to Sheffield.

Yet in spite of this standing in the community, the Aikins were also, in some senses, outsiders, thanks to their religious views. Dissenters occupied an uneasy place in relation to the establishment, supposedly excluded from public office and from Oxford and Cambridge because of their unwillingness to sign the Thirty Nine Articles. In practice, they could evade the Test and Corporation Acts by the practice of occasional conformity, and could matriculate at Cambridge (but not Oxford) without signing, although they could not receive a degree without doing so. Despite this ambiguity, they were 'often capable of wielding considerable local power', and thus frequently viewed with suspicion.[22] The Aikin family may have felt their marginal position as Dissenters the more keenly since the major landowner in Kibworth was Merton College, Oxford; the impressive 'Old House', after all, was only rented for a relatively short time, from 1742 to 1758. When Aikin first established his school, moreover, it had been less than a decade since Doddridge had been prosecuted for not having a licence to teach at his academy in Northampton, when Aikin himself had been studying there and assisting Doddridge to teach. By the mid-eighteenth century, Dissenters might not have been openly persecuted, but the sense of their difference persisted. 'Not a few amongst us', warned Anglican clergyman-turned-Dissenter Theophilus Lindsey at the opening of the Essex Street Chapel in 1774, 'lye undeservedly under the terror of severe,

unjust, penal laws, made in bad and dark times'.[23] Although he went on in optimistic Enlightenment tone to point out that 'these laws sleep', it is clear that the history of the previous century was constantly present for Dissenters. This would come to the fore in the 1790s. As Ian Inkster discusses, Dissent had multiple links to radical activity; in a climate of post-Revolutionary anxiety, and of Dissenters' disappointment at the failure of the proposed Repeal of the Test Acts, this was to prove an explosive combination. As we have heard, Priestley was attacked, and, less violently, both Barbauld and John Aikin (junior) also suffered. Barbauld was critically attacked; for Horace Walpole, previously an admirer, she became a dangerous 'prophetess', a Crown and Anchor 'poissonnière'. John Aikin, as Kathryn Ready details, lost his Yarmouth practice. For all the solid respectability of the Kibworth house, Dissenters occupied an uneasy social position through the eighteenth century.

This possibility of persecution and social exclusion from establishment groups meant that those extended networks of worship, education, business and family took on special importance. We might see this at work, for example, in Barbauld's obituary poems, 'On the Death of Mrs. Jennings' and 'On the Death of Mrs Martineau', both celebrating family members who were also powerful in the Dissenting community. Anna Letitia Wingate Jennings was Barbauld's grandmother, wife of Dissenting minister John Jennings, who had officiated at the Kibworth Academy; after Jennings' death, his old pupil Doddridge had become her lodger and, as William McCarthy puts it, 'unofficial household chaplain'.[24] The subject of the other poem, Sarah Meadows Martineau, the descendant of a Unitarian minister, was matriarch of the Norwich Martineau clan, who had sent her children (including the future surgeon Philip) to the Barbaulds' school at Palgrave; she was the grandmother of Harriet Martineau and related through marriage to the Taylors of Norwich. 'An Israelite indeed', exclaims Barbauld about her grandmother, turning her own family of Dissenters into a chosen race; the Martineaus, similarly, are seen as children of Israel, in verse which celebrates Sarah Meadows Martineau and echoes Psalm 78:

> –Long may that worth, fair Virtue's heritage,
> From race to race descend, from age to age!
> Still purer with transmitted lustre shine
> The treasured birthright of the spreading line![25]

Those two poems nicely demonstrate the power of this extended Dissenting network of families, friends and tutors, stretching across the country and