Life Upon the Exchange: Commodifying the Victorian Subject

In 1859 at the venerable age of eighty-four, Lord Thomas Cochrane, tenth Earl of Dundonald and Rear-Admiral of the United Kingdom, contracted George Butler Earp to write his *Autobiography of a Seaman* (1860) recounting his early life and experiences as a naval commander during the Napoleonic Wars. There was much to tell. Having begun in 1793 as a midshipman aboard his uncle’s ship the *Hind*, Cochrane quickly earned a reputation for daring, and received his first command, the *Speedy*, in 1800. By mixing unconventional tactics with clever deceptions – he once had the *Speedy* painted like a Danish brig and hired a Danish quartermaster to complete the masquerade – Cochrane captured fifty ships and more than 500 prisoners in fifteen months while developing a penchant for brutally effective coastal assaults.1 His crowning achievement came in 1809 at Basque Roads when he led a night foray that drove much of the French fleet aground. Only the hesitation of his fleet commander Admiral James Gambier in following up the advantage prevented the decimation of the French ships, a failure that ended in Cochrane complaining publicly of Gambier and irritating Gambier’s many supporters in the Admiralty. Driven to request a court-martial to consider his conduct, Gambier won acquittal. Cochrane resigned his command and retreated to Parliament where he spent the next several years advocating radical reform and attacking “maladministration” and cronyism in the Royal Navy.2 Still, his military service was remarkable enough that in 1887 the *Dictionary of National Biography* called him “one of the greatest of our admirals, whose name must be ranked with those of Nelson, Hawke, Rodney, or Blake,” and his adventures have served as a basis for C.S. Forester’s *Horatio Hornblower* and Patrick O’Brian’s *Captain Jack Aubrey*.3 Appearing at the end of a decade in which the Duke of Wellington died, a new Napoleon rose, and England’s military suffered serious embarrassment in the Crimea, Cochrane’s thrilling accounts of naval victories over the French and his diatribes against
entrenched interests suited his autobiography perfectly to the mid-century Victorian temper.

But *Autobiography of a Seaman* had also another story to tell, or at least one to deny – a story of false identity, conspiracy, and financial intrigue that belonged more to the sensational 1860s than to the decade that came before. In the morning hours of February 21, 1814, a man dressed in military attire and claiming to be Lord Cathcart’s aide-de-camp turned up at the Ship Inn at Dover and demanded a post-chaise to London where he had urgent news to deliver. He could not, he said, proclaim that news publicly until his dispatches had been received in London, but he confided it nonetheless to innkeepers and postboys along the way: Napoleon had been overtaken and cut down by the Cossacks. The war was over. The man’s loose tongue meant that his news preceded him to London, to the jubilation of those on the Stock Exchange. By late afternoon, Omnium, the primary government trading stock, had risen from $26\frac{1}{2}$ to $30\frac{3}{4}$; by late afternoon it was at $32\frac{1}{2}$, though nervous investors were still awaiting official confirmation of Napoleon’s death. None came. By the next morning it was clear that the news had been a hoax, and Omnium fell again to $26\frac{1}{2}$. The ensuing investigation determined that the six primary beneficiaries – all of whom sold Omnium shares on February 21, at a profit of £4,800 – included Cochrane, his uncle, and their stockbroker, and it found also that a military man, whom several witnesses identified as the aide-de-camp, had arrived at Cochrane’s home at around the time that the news reached London. In what the *Autobiography* later described as a politically motivated trial, Cochrane and his five co-defendants were convicted of conspiracy and fraud, and Cochrane was sentenced to twelve months’ imprisonment, a £1,000 fine, and an hour in the pillory across the street from the Exchange. He was also dismissed from the Royal Navy and the Order of the Bath, expelled from the House of Commons, and humiliated by having his banner and coat of arms torn down from Henry VII’s chapel and kicked down the stairs and into the street. The Westminster electors defiantly reelected Cochrane in the special election to fill his seat. But for practical purposes, though he was not yet forty, his naval and political careers were over.

Cochrane’s biographers usually assert that he wrote *Autobiography of a Seaman* mainly to exonerate himself in the eyes of the Victorian public. “What mattered to Cochrane,” Richard Dale writes, “was to have the slate wiped clean, which meant nothing less than restoration to the position he would have been in had the case against him never been brought.” David Cordingly agrees, arguing that although we can read the autobiography as...
the protestations “of an arrogant man . . . it seems more likely to have been driven by the natural desire of an innocent man to clear the stain on his character and on the Dundonald family name.” To be sure, Cochrane was near the end of his life—he died just two weeks after the publication of *Autobiography of a Seaman*’s second volume—and may well have been concerned about posterity. Yet while he likely hoped that his autobiography would set the record straight, he almost certainly wrote it, too, with another aim in mind: reaping a financial windfall by turning his life into a commodity for the literary market. Cochrane had always been avaricious, having been raised in aristocratic penury and instilled with a fierce desire to restore the fortune his father had squandered by abandoning his own naval career and becoming a professional inventor. An Englishman who knew Cochrane in South America in 1820 remarked that “[a]varice and selfishness do certainly appear to form the groundwork of his character,” and Lord St. Vincent, First Lord of the Admiralty, once called Cochrane “mad, romantic, money-getting and not truth-telling,” further remarking that one could not trust him “out of sight.” Cochrane’s earliest disagreements with the Admiralty stemmed not from the Basque Roads affair, in fact, but from an 1808 revision to rules regarding prize money, which slashed the share that captains and fleet admirals could claim while nearly doubling payments to the crew. After he resigned his command in 1809, Cochrane’s financial position deteriorated markedly, at least according to his accounts with his banker. Meanwhile, his reputation for greed, irascibility, and deception made it easy for many to believe him guilty when he was tried for conspiracy and fraud.

In the decades after his imprisonment, Cochrane earned enormous sums but never arrived at a position of financial ease. He softened the loss of his naval pension by spending 1818–1828 in the service of Chile, Peru, Brazil, and Greece, commanding their navies in their wars for independence and, in after years, quarreling with them about how much they owed him in prize money and other claims. Each paid him a handsome salary: £1,200 per year from Chile and Peru, £2,400 per year from Brazil, and a huge £37,000 advance from Greece. But his retirement in England after 1828 found him spending money at astonishing rates, mainly on the kinds of ill-advised inventions that had ruined his father. Late in her life, Cochrane’s wife Kitty recalled bitterly the enormous sums that he had wasted in speculative projects, including £20,000 experimenting with lamp designs and copper-rolling machinery, £16,000 on his failed steamship the *Janus*, and £70,000 on Parliamentary elections. Public opinion during these years had turned steadily in his favor, owing to the more liberal political
climate and his unremitting campaign of petitions and appeals. In 1832 Cochrane received a free pardon and was restored to the Royal Navy, and in 1847 he was readmitted to the Order of the Bath. Yet he never ceased to press financial claims on the Crown, including the remittance of his fine and back pension amounting to £4,000. Just a month before he was remade a Knight Grand Cross, he went so far as to publish a detailed account of the financial losses he had suffered from his conviction – an account, Cordingly points out, that prepared the ground for his autobiography – and was delighted to find that “the pamphlet has made, and is making, a great impression.” He also continued to expand his claims against Chile and Brazil, demanding more than £150,000. Though his public rehabilitation was complete, and despite a lifetime of remarkable earnings, he remained beset by financial worries. Replying just before his death to a letter from his son, Cochrane wrote, “I can not supply you with money, there not being above ground wherewith to put me below it.”

Cochrane’s decision to publish Autobiography of a Seaman must therefore be understood as partly – perhaps principally – a financial endeavor that he hoped to profit from in two distinct ways. First, by using Autobiography to highlight his heroic naval service and deny one last time his involvement in the Stock Exchange scandal, Cochrane likely hoped to strike one final blow in his quest for financial restitution from the Crown. Just a year earlier he had done the same thing to press his claims against Chile and Brazil, working with Earp to publish the autobiographical Narrative of Services in the Liberation of Chili, Peru, and Brazil from Spanish and Portuguese Domination (1859), which pressed publicly the case that the governments of these places still owed him immense sums for helping to free them from colonial rule. He was hard at work on the Narrative, in fact, when he received word in June 1858 that the Chilean prize tribunal had denied him further payments. Incensed, he wrote to his secretary William Jackson, “It is lucky my Memorial is in hand shewing what they really do owe me,” and in another letter he declared his intention of making “[t]he Memorials . . . irresistible.” The plan appears to have worked, in the cases of both Narrative and Autobiography. Though Cochrane received £6,000 from Chile and £34,000 from Brazil in the years just before Narrative was published, subsequent settlements with Brazil eventually netted his estate another £50,000.

In 1878 the Crown, too, made reparation, granting £5,000 to Cochrane’s grandson in lieu of “the arrears of half-pay without interest.”

Second – and more important for the purposes of this study – Cochrane expected to profit from Autobiography of a Seaman simply by selling books,
for he understood what scholars have mostly forgotten: by 1859, autobiography was big business, capable of generating huge profits in the Victorian literary market. Whether this was true of Narrative may be impossible to know. It was published by the radical bookseller James Ridgway, whose business records appear to have been swallowed up by history. Autobiography is another matter, for the information that survives about its publication suggests that Cochrane probably earned a tidy sum by making his life into a literary commodity. Published by Richard Bentley in November 1859, Autobiography’s first volume generated subscriptions for a modest 317 copies. But this must only have whetted readers’ appetites. Publication of the second volume the following October generated 2,700 subscriptions for the two-volume set, 1,000 of them for the circulating library giant Charles Mudie, and in April 1861 the Autobiography passed into a second edition that sold another 1,400 copies. The records do not include the original publication agreement between Cochrane and Bentley, but in November 1861, a year after Cochrane’s death, Bentley paid Earp £750 for his “share” in the copyright. In the absence of the original agreement it is hard to know what this means – whether £750 represents payment for full copyright, half copyright, or another fraction, or how Earp’s share compared with Cochrane’s. But it is striking that several months after the remarkable sales of the first two editions, when the market for the book might well have been exhausted, Bentley was willing to pay £750 to acquire any share in the copyright. The sum was his second-highest payout for copyright between 1840 and 1865. Considering the potential profits from selling more than 5,000 copies of Autobiography of a Seaman’s first two editions, it is not unreasonable to think that Cochrane and his estate profited handsomely. As Ian Grimble puts it, of all Cochrane’s inventions and speculations, his autobiographical works “proved to have been among [his] most profitable enterprises.” Had he lived to see it, the “money-getting” Lord Thomas Cochrane would certainly have laughed all the way to the bank.

Viewed as a literary commodity, Cochrane’s mostly forgotten autobiography illustrates the proposition that drives this project: that Victorian autobiographies were economic as well as discursive transactions, and that they belonged – like The Pickwick Papers, gift books, illustrated newspapers, and sensation novels – to the wondrous complexity of the Victorian literary market. Despite the account of the Stock Exchange scandal that frames this introduction, the following pages have little to do with Threadneedle Street, financial frauds, stockjobbers, speculators, or notorious fictional financiers such as Charles Dickens’s Mr. Merdle and...
Anthony Trollope’s Augustus Melmotte. Rather, this project explores the imaginative and ideological consequences of making “life” into a textual commodity, a material object of exchange like the countless others that were bought, sold, owned, and consumed in Victorian England’s growing, teeming capitalist market. In the forms of thousands of published autobiographies, life really was “upon the exchange” for the first time in England, and in ways that reshaped not only the legal, economic, and discursive practices associated with identity but also the narrative representation and ontological status of subjectivity, which ceased to exist as a thing apart from property and economic exchange. Victorian autobiography was not quite the genre that we have tended to make it, notable mainly for the momentous self-narratives written by such eminent Victorians as John Stuart Mill, Charles Darwin, and Harriet Martineau. It was a commercial force and engine of cultural transformation, pressing identity into the shape required by modern capitalism and driving novelists to represent the implications of subjecting identity to the forces of the emerging capitalist age. The Commodification of Identity in Victorian Narrative: Autobiography, Sensation and the Literary Marketplace thus analyzes the rise of autobiography as a commercial genre during the first decades of the Victorian period and traces the implications of that rise in several mid-century novels—especially, though not exclusively, sensational ones—that center upon the textualization and commodification of identity, by which I mean the literary, cultural, legal, and economic practices by which Victorians transformed identity into a text and thus an object of capitalist exchange. Beginning with an account of the expansion of English autobiographical production 1820–1860, I argue that the proliferation and commercialization of the genre during these years provoked intense anxiety regarding the tendency to transform identity into a text for the literary market, and that novelists responded by representing identity’s thorough pervasion by economic concerns, expressed in recurrent tropes such as multiplied identities, fragmented subjectivities, temporal disruptions, fetishized texts, and transfigured sexual desire. During these years, autobiographies became popular and profitable things for the first time, designed for industrial production and a mass market rather than for private reading by family and friends, or the spiritual edification of religious believers. They became commodities, reifications of the self-alienation that Karl Marx was simultaneously identifying as endemic to the capitalist age. In his account of the rise of Victorian commodity culture, Thomas Richards writes that “fundamental imperatives of the capitalist system became tangled up with certain kinds of cultural forms,
which after a time became indistinguishable from economic forms.”

Early in the period, autobiography became a cultural and an economic form, eroding the conceptual boundary between property and identity by making identity a material thing. Novels came to reflect the cultural and imaginative refiguration of subjectivity that this nexus of textual self-production and commodity exchange provoked.

By writing of subjectivity in this way, I mean for the most part to use the term in its postmodern critical sense: to indicate an intentional and self-reflective individual consciousness, however much that consciousness must be understood as decentered, mediated, alienated, and contested. But throughout this work I will use “subjectivity” and “identity” interchangeably, which may make some readers cringe. Presently, the term “identity” belongs commonly to discussions of the biological, legal, and financial proofs of who one is; it is the sum of an enormous and expanding array of intersecting texts, from DNA profiles to birth certificates to government identification cards to credit histories. Victorians certainly used the word “identity” in this context, but they used it also to cover the aspects of conscious selfhood for which “subjectivity” seems now to be the more appropriate term. It was during the Victorian period that rising literacy rates, cheap paper, finance capitalism, and bureaucratic expansion first converged and created the sense of identity as a thing constituted in and through texts rather than as an essential, insubstantial interiority. And it was this transformation of identity into a material thing that first interlaced it with economic meanings, forming new relations between identity and the law, finance, and other forms of literary and cultural production. We have cultivated the term subjectivity partly in response to this interlacing, to recoup a sense of the conscious, intentional, psychological self that stands apart from the legal, financial, and medical records that constitute our postmodern lives. Using “subjectivity” and “identity” interchangeably restores a purposeful slippage that helps to demystify the commodified status of subjectivity during the middle of the Victorian period.

So, too, does my implicit assertion that subjectivity and autobiography are equivalents – that the former inheres in the latter, such that the Victorian traffic in autobiographies meant, necessarily and unproblematically, traffic in the subjectivities themselves. More typically, we think of self-narrative as constructing identity, and of initiation into language, and mediation by it, as preconditions for the emergence of a conscious self. In this context autobiography is at best, in Avrom Fleishman’s words, “a literary form for the creation of selfhood” rather than a means of exposing or describing it; at worst it is pure performance, a means of constructing
Commodification of Identity in Victorian Narrative

and displaying publicly a self that never was.28 Yet as autobiography rose to prominence early in the nineteenth century, many of its earliest reviewers regarded it as intimate revelation, with the autobiographical text standing for and granting unmediated access to the subjectivity that had produced it. As James Treadwell notes in his excellent account of Romantic autobiography, some early responders celebrated autobiography’s power to create “intimacy between author and reader,” while others saw in it a dangerous “circulation of privacy itself…a prominent and unsettling overlap of public and private spheres, or a reconfigured relationship between them, in the literary field.”29 Both kinds of response agree on the fundamental point that, to a degree, the author’s subjectivity inheres in the autobiographical text, so that an equivalency or identity exists between them. The commercialization of autobiography during the first half of the century eroded this sense of equivalency, made readers and reviewers more aware of its function as discursive performance, but not without leaving behind a sense of violation and disruption, of subjectivity transformed and pervaded by economic concerns. To the extent that Victorians saw autobiography as textualizing real subjectivity, they found in it a dangerous means of exposing identity to the market and rendering it vulnerable to the demands of production, consumption, and exchange. To the extent that they regarded it as a mercenary construction or performance—a form designed to appeal to publishers and readers rather than to reveal the self—they saw it as textualizing a subjectivity that had already been adapted to the terms of its commodification. If, as Linda Peterson suggests, Victorians read autobiographies hermeneutically, with the aim of divining patterns and meanings for their own lives, they found in the ones published at mid-century the impetus for basing their identities upon the formal, symbolic, and ideological structures of commodity culture.30

This focus on subjectivity’s instantiation as a material text subject to capitalist dynamics of ownership and exchange explains why, despite my interest in commodified identities, this project does not take up an obvious subject: the vast, complicated, contemporary problem of slavery in the United States or in colonies such as Jamaica, Barbados, and Antigua. And it does not do so even though abolition efforts in the United States especially relied upon the preparation and dissemination of autobiographies by escaped and emancipated slaves. In The Self in the Cell: Narrating the Victorian Prisoner (2003), I drew heavily upon William Andrews’s account of slave narratives in To Tell a Free Story (1986) in order to describe the ideological complexities that shaped the production of prisoner autobiographies in mid-century English prisons, since these often emerged...
from the interplay of disempowered (even illiterate) subjects, privileged amanuenses, and specific political imperatives. But for reasons both practical and conceptual, slavery lays beyond the scope of the present study. Despite extensive archival research involving the business records of Victorian publishers, I did not discover—or at least did not identify—a single instance in which those records included an entry for a slave autobiography. This may only reflect the lack of an international copyright agreement during the first half of the century, which meant that British publishers of such works did not need to provide contracts, keep records of profits and losses to satisfy authors writing for half-profits, or otherwise maintain specific financial records related to such titles, though many would probably have done so in order to track the sizes of print runs, printings costs, charges for illustrations, subscription lists, and other details. While slave autobiographies served crucial and obvious political purposes in both the United States and England, then, and while they might have been profitable and widely disseminated, I found no particular evidence that they were part of the broad commercialization of life writing that this project takes as its foundation.

In the absence of such evidence, slavery seems qualitatively different from the matter at hand. This book is concerned with the ways in which, between 1820 and 1860, autobiographical production, the rise of paper money, copyright law, census-taking, and the broad cultural conditions produced by finance capitalism collaborated to transform identity from an internal, immaterial thing into a textual, material one. But slavery worked differently, transforming racial difference and violent conquest into the explicit ownership of physical bodies, typically while asserting that non-white bodies contained no relevant subjectivity at all. Moreover, we might understand the Confederacy’s determination to preserve slavery before and during the US Civil War as not only an indication and effect of racial prejudice but also, structurally, a mode of resistance to industrialization and the larger forces of economic modernity. The commodification of black bodies in the American south was, in other words, a linchpin in the rejection of—not an effect of the transition to—the finance capitalism that figures so heavily in my analysis here. Financial evidence related to the publication of slave autobiographies might eventually be found in the archives of British publishers, or this book’s discussion of practices such as census-taking or cartes-de-visite might suggest fruitful avenues by which other scholars might imagine analogs to or components of the explicit forms of commodification that occurred under American and colonial slavery. But this study focuses elsewhere: on the circumstances by which
identity became, early in the nineteenth century, a textual and commodified thing, which transformed it profoundly and perhaps permanently in both the cultural and the literary imagination.

In its attentiveness to the rise of Victorian autobiography as a commercial genre and its use of this development as a basis for assessing the Victorian novel, this book departs markedly from earlier studies of autobiography and from accounts of the relationship between the novel and the financial sphere. It does so first by considering autobiography’s proliferation during the early part of the nineteenth century as a matter of book history, using quantitative data to situate the genre within the broader patterns of the Victorian book trade. The study of Victorian autobiography has produced important books from scholars such as Peterson, Sidonie Smith, Regenia Gagnier, Martin Danahay, and Trev Lynn Broughton, to name only a few. Most of this work has been of two kinds: the historical review of autobiographical forms, conventions, and traditions, often with the aim of providing a bibliographic or structuralist sense of the genre; and the critical/cultural analysis of specific autobiographies for what they reveal of Victorian self-fashioning along the lines of gender, sexuality, race, class, and other aspects of identity. Earlier studies in particular tended to read autobiography as emanating from cultural conditions that provoked a deeply felt need to express the self. In his introduction to Approaches to Victorian Autobiography (1979), George Landow wrote of the genre’s interest in “the question of how the individual relates to what is outside himself” and argued that the Victorian determination to write autobiography stemmed from the period’s momentous “disturbances and dislocations, the break-up of [its] culture.”

Peterson, conversely, intellectualized the rise of autobiography, arguing that Victorians “chose to write autobiography in part because . . . they sensed the disjunction between the inherited literary forms of self-interpretation and contemporary hermeneutic theory.” Jonathan Loesberg agrees, writing that autobiography “offered [Victorians] a mediating position between philosophies claiming that all knowledge is experiential and others that tended to insist on the possibility and indeed central importance of an intuitive knowledge of a priori truths about the world.”

Common to these early studies is a sense of autobiography as a measured, introspective, and comprehensive account of the author’s life—a sense that this project does not share. Instead, I use the term autobiography as Eugene Stelzig does when he calls it “a convenient umbrella term for a type of writing proliferating in a variety of forms and modes . . . in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century . . . To try to