THE

SYDNEY SMITH ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER

APRIL 1997

Settlement Community Players are producing a play about Sydney Smith in Yorkshire.

3 July 1997
A visit to St. Paul's Cathedral Library to see the Westmacott bust of Sydney Smith to be followed by a reception at 14 Doughty Street, Sydney's first home in London.

6/7 September 1997
A weekend based on Combe Florey, near Taunton, Somerset.

Details and booking forms are enclosed. Please note that numbers are limited for the events on 3 July and 6/7 September 1997.

Your annual subscriptions are now due. From next year on, we would like your subscriptions paid before or on 1 March. It would help us, and make things simpler for you, if this could be done by Banker's Order.

Major Diggle has agreed to act, for the time being, as our Membership Secretary. He plans to make a list of Association members' names and addresses available at a cost of £2.50, but says that if you wish your address to be kept confidential, would you please let him know by 31 May this year.

Any comments, suggestions or contributions for next year's newsletter would be most welcome and should be sent to me.

Alan Hankinson
Editor

The Humourist on Humour

by John Walsh

We usually think of Sydney Smith as a spontaneously funny man, but in wit and humour, as in most forms of human self-expression, there is the inevitable element of craftsmanship. So it was with Sydney: the humour bubbled up like fresh spring water, but it was skilfully bottled and sometimes discreetly carbonated. Some of his best jokes clearly received a matinée performance. He even claimed of wit that it was not a kind of "lightning flash", an "inexplicable visitation", but something that could actually be learned, like mathematics, or public speaking, (at least if one was prepared to put in a good six hours a day working on it).

And he reflected on his talent. Between 1804 and 1806 he delivered a sensationally successful course of Saturday lectures at the Royal Institution in London, entitled Elementary Sketches of Moral Philosophy. He was diffident about these ("the greatest swindle of the season") and concocted them largely because he needed the money to decorate his house. Significantly, he never published them, but his widow had them printed after his death, with a nervous note warning the reader "this is very far from a learned book". Two of the lectures are devoted to Wit and Humour, and show Sydney reflecting, rather uneasily, on the talents which he himself possessed in such luxuriant abundance.

The Elementary Sketches are largely based on the writings of the Scottish philosophers which he had encountered in his recent sojourn in Edinburgh: Hutcheson, Kames, Reid, Adam Smith, Beattie, and his friend Dugald Stewart. Sydney had been impressed by the strenuous intellectualism which he met in Scotland - the only part of Britain, he noted, where moral philosophy was taught in the universities. He always liked the cut-and-thrust of philosophers' debate: he delighted in a breakfast party of "muffins and metaphysics, crumpets and contradiction". Nonetheless, the penchant of the Scots for serious philosophizing gave him cause for merriment. He describes hearing a maiden at a ball remarking earnestly "what you say, my Lord, is true of love in the aibstract, but ..." - here the fiddlers struck up and the rest was lost. After a

visit to Edinburgh, he writes to Holland House parodying the vocabulary of idealist philosophers: "I take the liberty to send you two brace of grouse, curious, because killed by a Scotch metaphysician; in other and better language they are mere ideas, shot by other ideas, out of a pure intellectual notion called a gun ... The modification of matter called grouse which accompanies this note is not in the common apprehension of Edinburgh considered to be dependent upon the first cause, but to have existed from all Eternity. Allen will explain". (Allen was the Hollands' Scots librarian).

Like the rest, the lectures on Wit and Humour were largely quarried from Scottish writers. There is a nice irony here, for Sydney held a stereotypical view of the Scots as a rather dour people. "It requires a surgical operation to get a joke well into a Scotch understanding," he claimed. "Their only idea of wit is laughing immoderately at stated intervals." Yet, paradoxically, it was earnest Scottish philosophers who had done most to develop the theory of humour, and, indeed, to broaden the scope of its use in polite society.

Stuart Tave has described the development through the 18th century of the notion of "amiable humour", a tradition which Sydney had inherited. (1) Not all humour is amiable. It can be sharp, cruel and destructive. A famous theory of laughter was that posed by Thomas Hobbes in his Leviathan (1651) which described laughter as a "sudden glory", triggered off by delight at recognising our own superiority over the misfortunes of others - an idea which had some validity in an age in which cripples and lunatics were considered legitimate objects of mirth. This view was increasingly challenged in the 18th century by new currents of humanitarianism and by Enlightenment views of human nature as essentially benevolent. The stress lay upon laughing with, not laughing at people. Ideally, mirth was seen not as something based on self-love and imagined superiority, but as innocent; as the product of good-nature and good humour. It was therapeutic; it was socially valuable as entertainment. Many of the theoreticians of this quiet revolution were the Scots writers on philosophy and aesthetics whom Sydney plundered for his lectures. Especially important, perhaps, was Francis Hutcheson, who attacked Hobbes directly, distinguishing true laughter from ridicule, and suggesting that

the essence of mirth lay in our ideas of the congruity or incongruity of ideas and perceptions. Other writers read by Sydney - like James Reid - developed the debate along this line. (2)

Sydney traversed well-trodden ground when he tried to distinguish between wit and humour. Wit, he argued, rested on the sudden perception of a surprising, clever relationship between ideas, in a way that pleased our intelligence. Of course, not all pleasing resemblances were witty: it was hard to be witty about things which aroused strong emotions, or which had grandeur, like the sublime or the beautiful. He emphasised the crucial element of surprise (here he did agree with Hobbes, with his idea of mirth as a "sudden glory"). Surprise, Sydney claims, is so essential an ingredient of wit that "no wit will bear repetition:- at least, the original electric feeling ... can never be renewed. There is a sober sort of approbation succeeds at hearing it the second time, which is as different from its original rapid, pungent volatility as a bottle of champagne that has been opened for three days is, from one that has that very instant emerged from the darkness of the cellar". To make a witty remark, we must relate one idea to another in a way that is strikingly fresh: "remote from all the common tracks and sheep-walks of the mind".

If wit depends on a sudden discovery of a relationship between ideas, a pun came from the sudden discovery of a relationship between words. A good pun had two distinct meanings, one of them common and obvious, the other more remote. The pleasure of the pun derived from the little shock which that relationship excited in us. He cites the example of a boy who always read the word "patriarchs" as "partridges": a friend of his teacher remarked that this was making game of the patriarchs. Following his authorities, Sydney professed to despise the pun, (even though he used it himself). It was in bad repute, he said, and deservedly so. The jocosity of language was greatly inferior to the wit of ideas.

Of irony, Sydney was more tolerant. Irony, he says, consists in the surprise which exists in the discovery between apparent praise and real blame. He cites a spoof letter of admiration penned to Oliver Cromwell by a humorous royalist, full of high-flown double entendre. Sarcasm was a species of wit that usually consisted of

an oblique invective. It must not be established by direct assertion, but by inference and analogy, and it must have a sting in the tail. He compares it to a swordstick which at first sight looks more innocent than it is, "till, all of a sudden there leaps something out of it - sharp, deadly and incisive - which makes you tremble and recoil".

The second lecture dealt with Humour. Sydney rejects Hobbes' idea that our laughter is necessarily based on perceiving the misfortune of others. Who could laugh when a friend fell ill or lost a fortune? He follows Hutcheson and others in seeing incongruity as a key to humour - "the conjunction of objects and circumstances not usually combined". Wit was caused by seeing a connection between things: humour depended on seeing the incongruities. "If a tradesman of a corpulent and respectable appearance with habiliments somewhat ostentatious, were to slide down gently into the mud and de-decorate a pea-green coat" we might well laugh. But if a dustman fell into the mud we might well not laugh, because the incongruity was so slight. Surprise was as essential to humour as to wit. It is the sudden and unexpected that makes us laugh. And again it must be a surprise that was devoid of any strong emotion, like tenderness or compassion. Would we laugh if that corpulent tradesman in the mud had broken a leg?

But Sydney did not totally dissociate himself from the Hobbesian theory of humour. Having gone a long way towards emphasising the innocence of laughter, he back-pedalled as he recognised that one could and sometimes should laugh at people. As the reforming journalist of the Edinburgh Review, he himself used the weapon of genial ridicule and liked to "barbeque" (his word) those whom he considered dangerously misguided, be they Ultra Tories, persecuting bishops or fanatical Methodists. Ridicule was an important social discipline, for there were very few people who would not rather be hated than laughed at. "In polished society, the dread of being ridiculous models every word and gesture into propriety and produces an exquisite attention to the feelings and opinions of others; it is the great cure of extravagance, folly and impertinence." He conceded that there was such a thing as the mirth of ridicule, in which the people doing the laughing did feel superiority over the butts of their merriment. But Sydney suggested

that as long as people went on laughing at the object of their contempt, things were under control. Humour helped to soften the harshness of criticism and make it more humane.

He did not deny that being funny had its dangers. Heartless wit, flippancy and ridicule could trivialise important human values. This was an especial danger among impressionable young people who could be turned against principles which they knew in their hearts to be good, merely by the mockery of their peer-group.

But wit and humour did much more good than harm. Sydney was convinced that they were given by God to add flavour and perfume to life, "to enliven the days of man's pilgrimage" and to "charm his pained steps over the burning marle". Of wit, he wrote, in a final peroration, "when combined with sense and information ... softened by benevolence, and restrained by strong principle; when it is in the hands of a man who can use it and despise it, who can be witty and something much better than witty, who loves honour, justice, decency, good-nature, morality and religion" more than wit - then it was a wholesome part of human nature in its fulness. He could have been speaking of himself. Sydney's own wit and humour surely fell into this benevolent category.

Notes

1. Stuart M. Tave, The Amiable Humorist, a Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries, (Chicago, 1960)

2. The most accessible version of Frances Hutcheson's views on this subject can be found in Reflections upon Laughter (Glasgow, 1750) which went into several editions. This reproduced essays printed much earlier, to be found in Letters 10 and 11 of A Collection of Letters and Essays Lately Published in the Dublin Journal, (1729). For James Beattie's views and his summary of other theories, see his "Essay on Laughter" in Essays on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, (2 vols, Dublin, 1778).

Review of Peter Virgin's "Sydney Smith"

(HarperCollins 1994 £22.50)
by Graham Parry (Association Secretary)

Peter Virgin's biography makes much of the irony that the most talented clergyman in England failed to achieve high office in his Church. The first third of the 19th century was not an age of great churchmanship: there were no bishops outstanding for their qualities of spiritual leadership, no irresistible preachers. Who now remembers the archbishops of the time? It was an age of deep conservatism in the Church, of venality and sloth, conditions that would prevail until the Oxford Movement brought about spiritual renewal in the 1830s. Yet Sydney Smith was highly intelligent, articulate and compassionate, a thoughtful man with a social conscience and possibly the most compelling preacher in the land - but a radical. In spite of being on familiar terms with many of the most influential political figures of the time, he ended his time as rector of Combe Florey in Somerset. The canonry of St Paul's he received in 1831 was a consolation prize for not getting the bishopric his abilties merited. His radicalism was the impediment. Support for Catholic emancipation, attacks on the slavery behind the sugar trade, denunciation of the game laws and the haughty privileges of the gentry, and approval of the Reform Bill, all inspired mistrust in the conservative hierarchy of the Church. Even when the Whigs were finally in power after years in the wilderness, and the Reform Bill was passed, Lord Grey and Lord Melbourne lacked the courage to promote him, fearing to antagonise the bishops and the predominantly Tory clergy. "Our not making him a bishop was mere cowardice," Melbourne later admitted.

Virgin writes well about the difficulties of Sydney Smith's career in the Church, emphasising the paradox that a man so relegated to provincial obscurity, as Sydney Smith was in Foston or Combe Florey, could nonetheless make a significant impact on national opinion, through his writing for the Edinburgh Review and his pamphlets. He emphasises too the inconsistency of Sydney's reformist views: he would point out the unreasonableness of maltreating the Irish or of mantrapping poachers or of roasting little boys in chimneys, but he was outraged at Shaftesbury's

attempts to regulate the conditions of work in the industrial world. "It does seem to me very absurd to hinder a woman of 30 from working as long as she pleases, but mankind are getting mad with humanity and Samaritanism." Sydney had little sense of the value of legislation as a cure for abuses; he had all his life a laissez-faire mentality that assumed men would behave better if they could be made to recognise the folly or cruelty of their present practices. When it came to reform of the Church in the 1830s, he proved, surprisingly, as conservative as most of his fellow clergy. Proposals to eliminate pluralism, enforce residence, abolish simony and moderate the stipends of bishops met with his firm opposition. How was a clergyman to live, how maintain the dignity due to the cloth, if he could not accumulate livings and augment his income? Granted, these examples of reactionary attitudes mostly dated from his later years, but they suggest that we should not think of Smith as habitually opposed to the traditional Toryism of his time.

This is a biography intent on linking the life of its subject with the social and political circumstances of the age. The intellectual ferment of fin de siècle Edinburgh, where Sydney Smith's literary talents were first stimulated, is credibly evoked. The Holland House set that provided Sydney with his most valuable political contacts and most appreciative audiences is also effectively characterized here. The combination of shrewd aristocrats, witty litterateurs and spirited women was certain to release his most brilliant conversational sallies, and it was here at Holland House, at those lambent dinner parties, that he established his reputation as the most accomplished master of conversation since Johnson. His fondness for Lord and Lady Holland ensured that he did not use these occasions just as an arena for his wit: he took great pleasure in knowing that he upheld his patrons' reputation for social eclat as well as his own. Lady Holland remained a lifelong friend and confidante, and his affection for her was always apparent, and expressed in engaging ways. Remarking on her fear of travelling by train, Sydney promised that "she is to be escorted from the station by the yeomanry. The clergy ... will wait upon her. Brunel, assisted by the ablest philosophers, is to accompany her upon the railroad; and they have been so good as to say that the steam shall be generated from soft water, with a slight infusion of camomile flowers".

Sydney's friendships were numerous and enduring, and they alleviated the longueurs of rural life and the depression induced by criticism and lack of preferment. This sustaining network of friends is animated by Peter Virgin in a succession of vignettes that enables us to imagine the warmth and stimulus these friends brought to all stages of Sydney Smith's life. The complicated history of Sydney's family is also clearly laid out: the Hugenot ancestry on his mother's side, the strangely differing siblings, and his own children who were a source of such delight and dismay.

Virgin's biography is particularly strong on the financial details of Sydney's career. The emphasis seems appropriate, given the lifelong anxiety Sydney Smith experienced over his income. His early life was conditioned by his need to improve his finances. Writing for the Edinburgh Review was an exceptionally profitable form of journalism, and Sydney's numerous contributions were motivated as much by the need to make money as by the desire to spread his enlightened views. In his London years he was effectively a jobbing preacher, and within two years of his arrival he had accumulated three preacherships, bringing in about £250 per annum. In 1805, he tried to lease a chapel for himself in St James's Square, counting on his eloquence to fill his pews with fashionable people whose pew rents might bring him some £400 a year profit; but the rector of St James's, Piccadilly, blocked his application, fearing that Sydney's presence round the corner might diminish his own congregation. He desperately needed money to underwrite his social life in London; preaching and lecturing did not bring in enough, nor could his Whig political friends secure him a well-paid living in London. Instead, they came up with Foston in the agricultural desolation of the North Riding, an almost God-forsaken place that was notoriously twelve miles from a lemon. Although Foston had only a handful of families in the parish, the living was worth £850 a year, a considerable sum - such a large sum, indeed, that it explains why Sydney was willing to cling on to it for so long, in spite of his dismay at being exiled from "the sacred parallelogram" of fashionable London life. After 20 years in the north, he was able to exchange Foston for Combe Florey in Somerset, but his financial situation remained unchanged until he was awarded the canonry at St Paul's in 1831 which brought in an extra £2300 a year, and suddenly

Sydney was wealthy. Only 25 clergy out of ten thousand in the country made more than he, according to Virgin's calculations. Towards the end of his life, money poured in from legacies and inheritances, but by that time he didn't need it. This Trollopian preoccupation with clerical finances does much to clarify the forces that shaped Sydney Smith's career.

The figure we encounter in this book is essentially a man of his time, a man of secular instincts who made his way in a church to which he had no strong calling, and with whose conservative clergy he had little affinity. A legal or literary life might have suited him better. He awakened the conscience of his contemporaries on many social issues, but his irony, wit and his sense of the absurd were more important in affecting the age than his appeal to Christian values. In any event, many of his most effective attacks on social injustices were anonymous. His most successful cause, however, was that of civil rights for Catholics, and there he really was prepared to hazard his career by insisting long and publicly that Catholic disabilities were morally and socially intolerable. His wit both helped him and hindered him, making him acceptable in Regency social circles and ensuring that his articles and pamphlets were read, but alienating many who thought that such worldly wit was unbecoming a man of the cloth. Peter Virgin lets Sydney Smith's wit run freely through this biography, but it is not allowed to dominate or obscure the narration and analysis of the life. Although inclined to emphasise the disappointments and frustrations of Sydney's career, Virgin has delivered a fair and well-balanced assessment of a man whose memory can too easily elicit an uncritical enthusiasm or a selective recollection of entertaining stories.

"Twelve Miles from a Lemon"

This book, compiled from Sydney's writings by Norman Taylor, the Association's Treasurer, and Alan Hankinson, the editor of this newsletter, was published by the Lutterworth Press of Cambridge in November 1996. Members of our Association were circulated with a cut-price offer and the response was gratifying. There have been some reviews, mainly favourable.

The book is reviewed here by Mr Adam Fergusson, the author and journalist. Adam Fergusson is probably best known for his book "The Sack of Bath", which put a stop to the violation and desecration of Bath's architectural heritage. The effect of this book can best be summed up in the words of Lord Goodman: "The indebtedness of the citizens of Bath and indeed the whole country must be extended to Mr Fergusson". We too are indebted to him for reviewing "Twelve Miles from a Lemon".

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> "What I have said *ought* to be done, generally *has* been done, but always twenty or thirty years too late; done, not of course because I said it, but because it was no longer possible to avoid it."

Sydney Smith, glancing backwards in the last years of his life, thus measures his achievements and does himself less than justice in the same breath. The reforms he speaks of - Roman Catholic emancipation, penal settlements, child labour, legal representation, the Game Laws - were not too late, but simply later than they should have been. Because of him, they were almost surely earlier than they might have been. And Sydney (let me adopt at once the familiar address of his anthologists), that leading light of the humanitarian movement, pushed forward many other causes about which time proved him right, from the proper education of women to the better treatment of Ireland, from the over-crowding of prisons to slavery. Most reform is too late, and comes from the judicious well-timed application of pressure by those who see more clearly and early than the rest what needs to be done. Sydney saw that himself:

> "Human beings cling to their delicious tyrannies, and to their exquisite nonsence, like a drunkard to his bottle, and go on till death stares them in the face."

His life held its regrets, of course, most of which, including the long periods of rustication "twelve miles from a lemon" which the Church obliged him to endure, he immortalised by being funny about them. But it had its great pleasures, among which his happy family life and the company of his (mainly Edinburgh and London) friends were supreme. And it had its triumphs: when he preached in St Paul's in 1837 on the duties of the young Queen Victoria, he could say:

> "I have lived to see the immense improvement of the Church of England - all its powers of persecution destroyed ... and all its unjust and exclusive immunities levelled to the ground."

Every anthology has a character of its own, deriving from the choice of material, the care of its presentation and the tact of the commentary that conducts us from place to place, item to item. Norman Taylor and Alan Hankinson have performed their task with much affection and much skill, helpfully compartmentalising each of their subject's interests - targets may be a better word - and worlds. Maybe the result is one-sided: we marvel at the logic, share in the indignation and laugh at the wit of the prosecution, but seldom hear the defence - but it *is* an anthology, not a biography. And it includes Sydney's reviews of travel books just as faithfully as his attacks on bishops, his critiques of boring sermons, and his letters (the Peter Plymley letters) arguing for Catholic emancipation.

An intelligent collection such as this is of the writings and sayings of Sydney Smith can hardly fail to be a *tour de force* from the man himself. Time and again one is struck by the simple power of common sense - "toleration never had a present tense"; "idle people know nothing of the pleasures of idleness"; "you must give me, not the best medicine you have in your shop, but the best you can get me to take". For the aspiring politician he lists "the true principles of legislation - what subjects are fit for legislative interference, and when men may be left to the management of their own interests; the mischief occasioned by bad laws, the perplexity which arises

from numerous laws". For enjoying life, he recommends reading, and several books at a time "not as a recipe for becoming a learned man, but for becoming a cheerful one". "Every night," he wrote, "the room in which I sit is lighted up like a town after a great naval victory, and in the cereous galaxy and with a blazing fire, it is scarcely possible to be low-spirited". Perhaps because he knew about low spirits in himself he knew so well how to disperse them in others.

Here, then, is a portrait of a man of the broadest interests and deepest understanding placed revealingly in his historic setting. The early 19th century was no time to be a Whig - the tensions after the American and French revolutions, the deprivations and scares of the Napoleonic wars, then the years of prejudice and resistance to social and political reform in the United Kingdom before a measure of enlightenment dawned. It was, perhaps, no time to be attempting the changes Sydney spent his life calling for, undaunted and unmuzzled. Yet his battles were the greater for being against the surly suspicious reactionary intolerance of the Regency - a thick-skinned dragon worthy of his lance.

A familiar aphorism of Sydney Smith's is that he never read a book before he reviewed it because "it prejudices a man so" (and how many must have wished that he meant it, whose works were remorsely dissected and scorched by his pen in the *Edinburgh Review*!). This reviewer who first met Sydney in Hesketh Pearson's *The Smith of Smiths* 40 years ago came to *Twelve Miles from a Lemon* with his prejudices well in place. It is a positive feast of the man - of his kindness, his common sense, his wit and, not least, his relevance to all our problems today. I must report that I came through a delightful experience, thank Heaven, with my prejudices intact and confirmed.

Tribute to an active admirer of Sydney

by Peter Diggle

The late Denis Arnold of Osmotherley, North Yorkshire, was author of a most informative booklet "Sydney Smith Reformer and Wit". When writing it, he had in mind local audiences and those people who so frequently asked him where they could learn more about this local worthy.

I shall always remember the enthusiastic support Denis gave to the various events which were organised in the early 1980s on behalf of the Foston Church Sydney Smith Appeal, one of the aims of which was the perpetuation of the memory of Sydney Smith.

Denis had been a most indefatigable promoter of Sydney's many and diverse accomplishments and virtues. Over the years he collected cuttings about Sydney and built up a card index which, together with a number of slides, he employed for his much-appreciated talks. Mrs Arnold has generously donated these cuttings, card index and slides to the Association for the benefit of those members who might wish to use them in their researches or for giving talks about Sydney. Also there are some copies available of "Sydney Smith Reformer and Wit".

Denis died just after our Association was formed, but not before he had given it his support and blessing, knowing that through the Association the perpetuation of the memory of Sydney Smith was assured.

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Baptismal date

Miss Gillian Nolan, a member of our Association who lives near Woodford in Essex, the place where Sydney was born, says she has done a little local research. She has established that Sydney was baptised at the church of St Mary the Virgin on 1 July 1771. The man currently in charge of the church, Canon Simeon Robert Birchnall, is impressed by the connection and intends to commemorate it in some way as yet undetermined.

A Sydney descendant

Viscount Knutsford, who joined our Association in May last year, says he is a double-descendant of Sydney's. He explains the relationship in these words:

> "My family name is Holland-Hibbert and Sydney Smith was really the progenitor of both families. His younger daughter Emily had a grand-daughter Elizabeth Hibbert who married my great-grandfather Harry Holland, 1st Viscount Knutsford. Later Sydney's elder daughter Saba married Sir Henry Holland, as his second wife. Sir Henry was Harry Holland's father. I am therefore a blood descendant through the Hibbert line, but not of course through the Holland line".

Lord Knutsford lives 30 miles or so from Combe Florey, so perhaps we may hope to meet him at our September gathering there?

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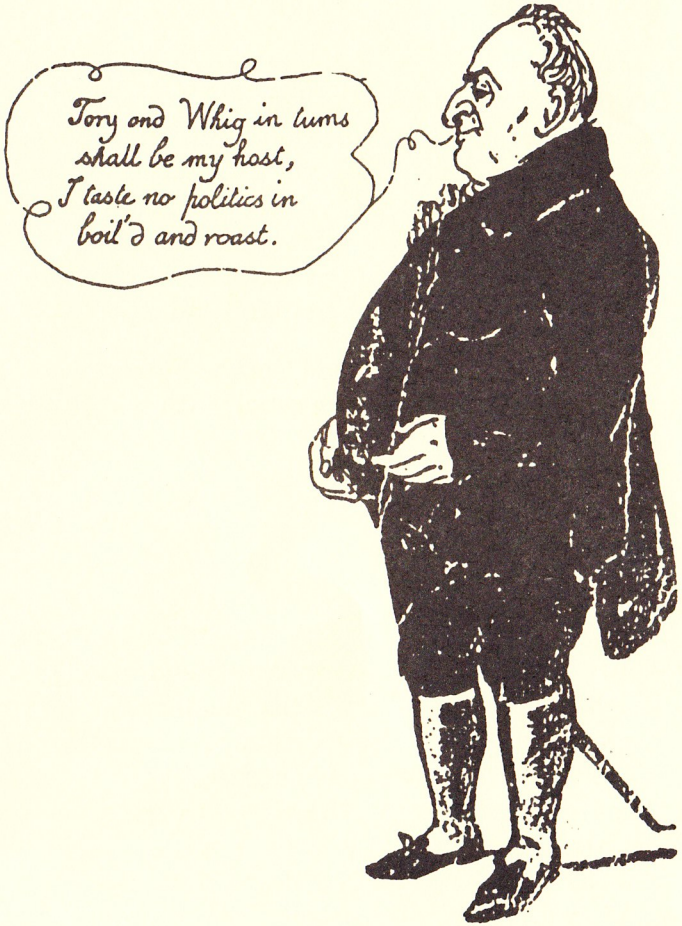
Sydney and Sterne

A point that has been puzzling me ....

A few miles north-west of Foston lies the village of Coxwold, famous as the place where the Reverend Laurence Sterne preached for many years and where he wrote much of his masterpiece "Tristram Shandy". That remarkable comic novel caused a sensation in the 1760s; Sterne died in 1768, three years before Sydney was born. But both were Anglican clergymen, they lived in the same region of North Yorkshire, and Sydney was a widely-read man. Nevertheless, as far as I have been able to find, Sydney never mentioned Sterne in any of his writings.

It is hard to believe he would not have thought "Tristram Shandy" remarkable and amusing. Perhaps he also thought it reprehensible. Sydney took a strongly moral line about writing - he deplored the licentious spirit of the Restoration comedies, for example - so perhaps he felt Sterne's lifestyle has been too rackety and his writing too outrageous to be worthy of his notice. Is that sufficient explanation for the silence?



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