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William Harrison Ainsworth: Manchester's Historical Novelist

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It would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that the novels of William Harrison Ainsworth are unfamiliar to the majority of readers who enjoy nineteenth-century literature today. Yet Ainsworth enjoyed a spectacular success in his own time. The son of a Manchester solicitor, he found the glittering prizes of fame and fortune in the capital at the age of only 30. When fashionable London's ardour cooled, it was his native city that provided him with the ultimate honour and recognition. But, in the course of the 124 years since his death, his works have fallen almost completely from the favour of the reading public. Up until the 1940s and 50s the better known titles were available in pocket editions, published by Everyman and similar presses, but nowadays, Ainsworth's novels are difficult to find. A few are printed in limited quantities by local publishers, and others are available as special 'print on demand' items obtainable through the internet, but the majority of the 40 titles in the Ainsworth canon are only to be found in remote corners of second-hand bookshops. This situation requires some explanation; so, let us take a closer look at the remarkable story of Ainsworth's life and work, beginning with his family background in the latter part of the eighteenth century.

William's father Thomas Ainsworth was a descendant of the Ainsworths of Tottington, near Bury, about two miles from the village of Ainsworth (the original Ainsworths of Ainsworth had died out shortly after the Civil War). He was born in Rostherne, Cheshire, in 1778, but spent his adult life in Manchester where he was a partner in the successful legal practice of Halstead and Ainsworth in Essex Street. In the course of his professional life he was involved with many of the public improvements in the city, most notably the radical remodelling of the Market Street area. The author's middle name was provided by Ann Harrison, who was born in Kirkham in the same year as Thomas Ainsworth. Ann was the daughter of the Rev. Ralph Harrison (1748–1810), who had been minister of Cross Street Chapel since 1771 and became professor of Greek, Latin and 'polite literature' at the newly established Manchester Academy in 1786. The academy moved to Oxford in 1889 and was henceforth known as Manchester

The precocious teenager: William Harrison Ainsworth in Manchester

College, where there is a memorial window by Burne-Jones in memory of the Rev. Harrison. He also found time to take an interest in business matters, particularly concerning the growth of Manchester, and made a small fortune through property speculation. In this he may well have come into contact with Thomas Ainsworth, and it is quite possible that Thomas might have met Harrison's daughter through this business relationship.

Thomas Ainsworth married Ann Harrison in 1802 and the couple established their home in King Street, at that time a prestigious residential address in central Manchester. They had two sons: William Harrison Ainsworth (b. 1805), and Thomas Gilbert Ainsworth (b. 1806), who won a scholarship to Cambridge where he suffered what was described as 'brain fever',[1] leaving him mentally impaired until his death at the age of 70. The Ainsworths also owned a country residence *Beech Hill* in Smedley Lane, Cheetham Hill, which Thomas purchased in 1811. This location was described as 'charmingly situated on high ground, and only a distant glimpse of Manchester was presented across the intervening gardens and fields. From the back of the house, a really beautiful view extended over Crumpsall and Heaton Park – a rich well-wooded country of undulating hills.'[2] Here it was that the family spent many of their summer months when the boys were young. A subsequent occupant was John Edward Taylor, the founder of the *Manchester Guardian*, who died there in 1844. During the twentieth century the house became a Church Army Labour Home, and was eventually demolished. There now stands a modern building, a nursing home which retains the name of *Beech Hill*, but sadly, without the rural aspect.

William Harrison Ainsworth was educated at Manchester Grammar School and, perhaps more importantly, came under the influence at the age of 12 (1817) of a young articled clerk in his father's firm, named James Crossley. Five years his senior, with a formidable knowledge of classical and English literature, Crossley had recently moved to the town from Halifax and was lodging at the Ainsworth family

home. The two soon formed a friendship based initially on shared literary interests, which was to endure throughout their lives. As S. M. Ellis points out in his 1911 biography of Ainsworth, Crossley was 'one who, by his wider reading and experience, could render material aid in consummating those fantasies and romantic ideas thronging in the fertile mind of the younger boy'.[3] Although Ellis is describing a youthful relationship, the description remained accurate throughout the adult lives of the two men, with Crossley providing the research and background information to feed Ainsworth's imagination as a successful writer of historical romances.

The young Ainsworth was instrumental in organising amateur theatricals which became part of life at King Street. A small theatre was set up in the basement of the house and William and his school friends set about staging ambitious productions of the plays which he was already beginning to turn out with impressive speed. Most of the household became involved in one way or another, whether acting, designing and making scenery and costumes, or swelling the ranks of the audience.

King Street, Manchester, 1823. The Ainsworth house is the last on the right

Much of Ainsworth's early work, in the form of essays, short stories and poems, were signed with the name Thomas Hall (who had been a fellow schoolboy at Manchester Grammar School) and many of these were published by journals such as *Blackwoods, The London Magazine* and *Arliss's Pocket Magazine*. The editor of this last journal was the victim of one of the author's youthful hoaxes. Under the name of Hall, the 16-year old Ainsworth wrote to announce that he had discovered a seventeenth-century dramatist named William Aynesworthe, introducing him(self) as follows:

'Beech Hill', Smedley Lane, Manchester, the Ainsworth family's summer residence

> Of all the dramatic writers, one who has met with the least attention, and perhaps deserved the most, is William Aynesworthe. The chaste simplicity of his style, divested of all the ridiculous bombast which characterizes our modern writers; the elegant and rich fulness of his verse, combine to render him a writer worthy to be ranked among the first of our early dramatists.[4]

The writer goes on to offer specimens of six plays from the pen of his newly discovered genius, presumably resurrected from the King Street basement. Inevitably, the editor spotted some anachronisms in the texts, but Ainsworth continued unabashed, offering the plays of 'Richard Clitheroe' to the *New Monthly Magazine* with similar results. He was to use the surname Clitheroe in one of his most important novels some 30 years later, as we shall see.

Arliss did in fact provide the first independent published work of Ainsworth's, a collection of poems under the pseudonym Cheviot Ticheburn (although this *nom de plume* may have been used by other

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"BEECH HILL," SMEDLEY LANE, MANCHESTER. (AINSWORTH'S HOME AS A BOY.)
From a drawing by C. Blacklock.

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youthful Manchester authors).[5] The 1822 volume was dedicated to Charles Lamb, to whom Ainsworth had sent the manuscript and who had suggested a few amendments, commenting: 'It is only a little careless, I mean as to redundancy. I have marked certain passages (in pencil only which will easily obliterate) for your consideration.'[6] Lamb tried to discourage the young man from dedicating the book to him as he feared his name would prejudice some of the critics who were hostile to his work, but Ainsworth's admiration for the Londoner overcame any fears of critical opprobrium.

Two years later Ainsworth ventured to publish a weekly magazine of his own, printed by Thomas Sowler, a bookseller at that time in St. Ann's Square and who, a year later, founded the *Manchester Courier*. This modest journal was called *The Bœotian* (Bœotia was a district of central Greece with Thebes as its capital, whose inhabitants were thought of as unsophisticated, even stupid). The journal's motto was the subject of discussion in the *Manchester Review* in 1945 when the following explanation was offered: 'The motto chosen – *Boeotum crasso jurares aëre natum*, which may be freely translated as "you would swear that he had been born in the gross air of the Boeotians" – may be taken as a playful allusion to the atmosphere of the editor's home town.'[7] The suggestion implicit in the title seems to be a devotion to plain speaking, and the magazine featured articles and poems from Ainsworth's own pen and those of his friends James Crossley and John P. Aston. Some of these were reprinted from other sources such as Crossley's piece *On the Chetham Library*, which had originally appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* three years earlier, in 1821. Only six issues were published (20 March – 24 April 1824), and copies are now extremely rare. In the Central Library, Manchester, there is a small volume containing all six issues, bound together, with Ainsworth's autograph and a handwritten inscription by James Crossley, which begins as follows:

> There were no more numbers of *The Bœotian* published than are collected here. The author was William Harrison Ainsworth, and this is his own copy, which I bought of a Manchester bookseller.[8]

Shortly after the final publication of this journal, Ainsworth left Manchester to pursue his legal training in London. Although he made a sincere attempt to apply himself to his studies, London's literary scene proved to be a stronger attraction than the intricacies of conveyancing and he never returned to his native city, except as a visitor. As soon as he arrived in the capital Ainsworth contacted Charles Lamb, who immediately took to the young man and introduced him to his circle of literary friends. His early impressions of

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London are well documented in the many letters he wrote to Crossley (which are preserved in the Manchester Central Library Archives) and this one from 1825 reveals the uneven struggle between the literary social life and the law:

> Little Charles Lamb sends me constant invitations. I met Mrs. [Mary] Shelley at his house the other evening. She is very handsome; I am going to the theatre with her some evening . . .

Later in the same letter, he turns his attention, with less enthusiasm, to the family business:

> Before I have completed my year I hope to make myself sufficiently useful. [. . .] I wish I knew more of common law.[9]

Ainsworth seems to have been quickly accepted by Lamb's circle and was by all accounts a lively and opinionated conversationalist. Another friend of Lamb's described him as a 'forward, talking young man' and went on, 'he will be a pleasant man enough when the obtrusiveness of youth is worn away a little.'[10] He was eventually admitted as an attorney to the King's Bench, but never returned to Manchester to practise law and the family firm eventually lost the Ainsworth name, becoming Crossley and Sudlow.

At this point there appeared a figure who was to have a profound influence on both the personal and professional aspects of Ainsworth's life. John Ebers was a publisher, and proprietor of the Opera House in Haymarket where the two met and struck up a friendship. Ebers first invited the literary tyro to help write and edit a proposed literary miscellany which, despite initial enthusiasm, ultimately failed to appear. There were a few trifles of verse and prose as well as a curious (and now extremely rare) pamphlet entitled *Considerations on the best means of affording Immediate Relief to the Operating Classes in the Manufacturing Districts*. Having unearthed this document from the British Library, the modern reader may be disappointed that it contains no radical solutions to the problems of poverty in the North of England. In fact Ainsworth announces at the outset that he will look for neither causes nor remedies, as he considers these the responsibilities of, respectively, the historian and the government. However, despite these caveats, the paper remains interesting as it reveals much about the attitudes of a young Manchester Tory in May 1826. Ainsworth was writing in response to recent unrest in the Lancashire manufacturing towns – he specifically mentions Burnley, Chorley and Blackburn – where there had been some rioting in the early months of that year in protest against the introduction of power looms into the factories. Although he acknowledges the 'present and painful suffering'[11] of protestors, he goes on to observe, apparently with

approval, that Manchester no longer suffers from violent disturbances owing to a propensity for prompt armed response: 'where military power is instantly at hand to act in co-operation with civil authorities, the attempts of an unskilled mob have little weight.'[12]

As a palliative to the immediate concerns (presumably starvation) of the workers, Ainsworth recommends the essentially private means of charitable giving, holding up Manchester as a paradigm of the effectiveness of this method. However the employing class are not to be expected to provide relief because they are: 'in consequence of the depression of trade, unable to afford assistance; and, in many cases, exposed to the violence of the distressed labourers.'[13] Instead, we must look to the generosity of the private individual and make donations, to be distributed by the churches (established and dissenting) and other respectable citizens and organisations. Again the example of Manchester is cited as being in the vanguard of such charitable effort, providing such generosity as to convert the Luddites and show them the error of their ways, 'notwithstanding the outrages which they have been led to commit . . . many of them have expressed a penitence for their violent conduct.'[14] By such a display of penitence, the author allows that the ex-rioters have proved themselves worthy recipients of the poor relief. They have become the deserving poor and therefore qualify for the alms donated by the respectable classes.

The final recommendation of our young man-about-town is to advocate fund-raising social occasions, at which the wealthy and fashionable could contribute to worthy causes and have fun at the same time. 'Why', he asks, 'may not benevolence and gaiety mutually assist each other by their alliance?'[15] This is a youthful piece of work, dashed off for publication by Ebers and cheekily dedicated (without permission) to Robert Peel, who was then Home Secretary. Full of confidence at the age of 21, Ainsworth was finding his feet in London at this time, fully aware that his star was in the ascendancy. The pamphlet demonstrates a complacency bordering on callousness, a respect for the immutability of authority and a belief in the ability of the private individual to take rapid and effective action to alleviate immediate social problems. The government is called upon to make the 'broad stroke' decisions to create the right conditions in which the controlling classes can operate most effectively. Given this essentially Tory view, it seems unlikely that Ainsworth would express radical or revolutionary ideas in his fictional writings. But, although violent action in his own time was anathema to him, his romantic imagination allowed him to create heroes out of criminals and espouse anti-government sentiments, provided they were safely buffered from reality by the passage of time.

The first novel bearing Ainsworth's name emerged from the presses

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Ainsworth in 1826 in a sketch by Daniel Maclise, 'as thorough a gentleman as his native city of Manchester ever sent forth'

in 1826. This was *Sir John Chiverton* which, it is now generally accepted, was the result of an earlier collaboration between Ainsworth and John Partington Aston, another school friend and a clerk in the Ainsworth office. Aston had been a contributor to the *Bœotian* as well as a number of better known journals such as *Blackwood's*. *Sir John Chiverton* was first published by Ebers crediting only Ainsworth as the author, and for many years this was accepted without question. It was not until 1874 that Aston made public his claim in the *Manchester School Register*, to which Ainsworth responded, admitting the collaboration. However Aston later extended his suit to claim sole authorship of the novel, an assertion he repeated in 1882 after Ainsworth's death. Crossley (who incidentally provided some introductory lines which appear after the title of the work) maintained a strict legal impartiality, merely observing that 'Mr Ainsworth, whether the owner or not, evidently took great interest in the work.'[16] The case was pursued in 1911 by Henry Harwood who constructed a strong argument, based on Ainsworth's letters to Aston, which seems to suggest Ainsworth's principal role was as publisher rather than

author of the work.[17] There the debate rests to this day, though further research might prove enlightening.

Sir John Chiverton is set in the Tudor period and 'Chiverton Hall' based on Hulme Hall, still standing in Ainsworth's youth, albeit in a state of decrepitude. In Tudor and Stuart times it was the seat of the Prestwych family and later, at the Restoration, it became the property of the Mosleys, to whom Ainsworth was related on his mother's side. In the novel he provides an imaginative reconstruction of Hulme Hall, offering the sort of detailed description for which he became well known in subsequent novels. Rostherne also makes an appearance, as it does in various guises in his later work. Ainsworth, who in his younger days was an ardent self-publicist, contrived to bring the book to the attention of Sir Walter Scott through the offices of his son-in-law John Gibson Lockhart, who then edited the *Quarterly Review* and was a friend of Ainsworth's. Scott acknowledged the homage to himself as the father of the historical romance and praised the young author's work, going so far as to arrange a meeting between them when he encouraged Ainsworth to continue his writing. The other factor in the friendship with Ebers which changed Ainsworth's life appeared in the shape of the younger of the publisher's two pretty daughters, with whom the young man immediately fell in love. The two were married in 1826. They were to have three daughters, Fanny (b. 1827), Emily (b. 1829) and Blanche (b. 1830).[18] However, Ainsworth's literary social life continued unabated, and in 1835, Fanny returned to live with her father. She died three years later, at the early age of 30.

Soon after the marriage, Ebers set up his son-in-law as a publisher/ bookseller at a prestigious address in Old Bond Street, and Ainsworth made plans to publish many worthy literary works. Few of these came to fruition (although he did manage to publish a second edition of *Sir John Chiverton*) and Ainsworth seemed to be more interested in cutting a dash in literary circles. Samuel Carter Hall, the author and editor of *John Bull* and other journals, summed up the impression that the young Mancunian made on his London peers, describing Ainsworth thus:

> I knew him in 1826, not long after he married the daughter of Ebers . . . and 'condescended' for a brief time to be a publisher. [H]e was a remarkably handsome young man – tall, graceful in deportment, and in all ways a pleasant person to look upon and talk to. He was, perhaps, as thorough a gentleman his native city of Manchester ever sent forth.[19]

In 1834, Ainsworth completed *Rookwood*, a Gothic tale modelled on the works of Ann Radcliffe, which featured as its climax the

highwayman Dick Turpin's ride to York. He put aside the business of publishing, and the three-volume first edition of *Rookwood* was produced by the firm of Richard Bentley and not, as might have been expected, by Ebers. The reading public immediately took the story to its collective heart and the book was a runaway success. Ainsworth became the toast of literary London, lionised at the various soirées and gatherings attended by aristocratic patrons of the arts and what would nowadays be called the 'glitterati'. Various evocations of Dick Turpin strode across the London stage in dramatisations of *Rookwood* and Ainsworth's portrait appeared on the new omnibuses to publicise the novel, one of the first examples of this kind of advertising. Ainsworth had found his literary niche, and from that point until the end of his life, a ceaseless flow of novels ensued.

About the time he was enjoying the first flush of success, Ainsworth met the young Charles Dickens, then a 22-year old political journalist and contributor to various magazines. Instantly recognising this fresh and prodigious talent, Ainsworth introduced Dickens to his own publisher and to George Cruikshank, the illustrator of *Rookwood*. The result was *Sketches by Boz* which launched a career that would eventually eclipse that of Ainsworth.

The outstanding success to launch Ainsworth into the literary stratosphere, exceeding all other novelists of the time including Dickens, was undoubtedly the Newgate romance of *Jack Sheppard*, centred on the short life of the eponymous eighteenth-century robber and escapologist. Much has been written about Jack Sheppard and the genre of the Newgate novel but which falls beyond the remit of this discussion of Ainsworth as a Manchester novelist.[20] However, it is worth noting that in choosing criminal heroes for his two most popular novels, Ainsworth attracted some hostility from those critical and genteel readers who did not share the popular taste for such subject matter. Nevertheless, the success of *Jack Sheppard* cemented Ainsworth's reputation as a popular novelist of the first rank. Titles like *The Tower of London*, *Old St. Paul's* and *Windsor Castle* found a ready market, and the furore surrounding *Jack Sheppard* was never repeated. Such was his energy that Ainsworth also managed to run a parallel career as a magazine proprietor. In 1842 he launched *Ainsworth's Magazine*; in 1845 he purchased *The New Monthly Magazine*; and in 1854 he acquired *Bentley's Miscellany* from his old friend and ex-publisher. These magazines were excellent vehicles for the serial publication of the novels, which normally preceded the expensive 'triple-decker' (three-volume) edition of the complete work.

After such a meteoric rise it proved to be impossible for Ainsworth to sustain the high level of mass appeal he had achieved. Although his books remained in print during his lifetime, tastes changed, and

during the 1850s his historical, Gothic and Newgate romances gradually fell from favour with the reading public. George J. Worth, in his 1975 re-appraisal of Ainsworth's work, points out that they were 'succeeded by a new kind of domestic realism focusing on contemporary and near-contemporary materials. It was this sort of novel which, in a very few year's time, was to make the fame of Anthony Trollope and George Eliot.'[21] By the 1850s Ainsworth was no longer the literary lion and he withdrew from the London scene, moving in 1853 to Arundel Terrace in Brighton which he maintained in style. His achievements were officially recognised in 1856 when he was awarded a Civil List pension of £100 per year on the recommendation of the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston. However, despite maintaining an exhausting work schedule, Ainsworth was continually plagued with financial problems. In 1860 he reluctantly sold his childhood home in King Street, and in 1864 he was forced to part with *Beech Hill*. He commissioned Crossley to sell the property, explaining that '[f]or several years I have been obliged to work exceedingly hard, and the strain is almost too much for me, and I may break down.'[22] The downward path continued and 1867 saw a move to a smaller house in Tunbridge Wells. The following year he relinquished the last of his magazine interests when he was forced to return the ailing *Bentley's Miscellany* to its original proprietor for a fraction of the sum he had paid to acquire it fourteen years earlier. After only two years in Tunbridge Wells he decamped once again, this time to Hurstpierpoint in the Sussex Downs, before finally settling, in 1878, into a modest house in Reigate.

The author in middle age (*c.* 1860)

During his period at Brighton he had married Sarah Wells, a match that endured until his death. Not much is known about the second Mrs Ainsworth but a daughter, Clara, was born in 1867, perhaps precipitating the move to Tunbridge Wells. His biographer, Stewart Marsh Ellis, being an Edwardian gentleman, declined to comment about this aspect of Ainsworth's life, only hinting darkly that the

novelist was 'susceptible to feminine influence all through his life' and was 'unfortunate in both his marriages.' Ellis went on to describe Ainsworth's later situation as 'a solitary and – one would imagine – uncongenial existence.'[23] However the 1881 census found him living with his wife and daughter (named as Rose C. Ainsworth) together with a housekeeper and maid. This was hardly a solitary existence but Ellis was contrasting this quiet life with the scintillating social whirl enjoyed by the author at the height of his fame.

The extent to which Ainsworth had withdrawn from the London literary scene is starkly illustrated in a poignant story told to Ellis by the writer Percy Fitzgerald:

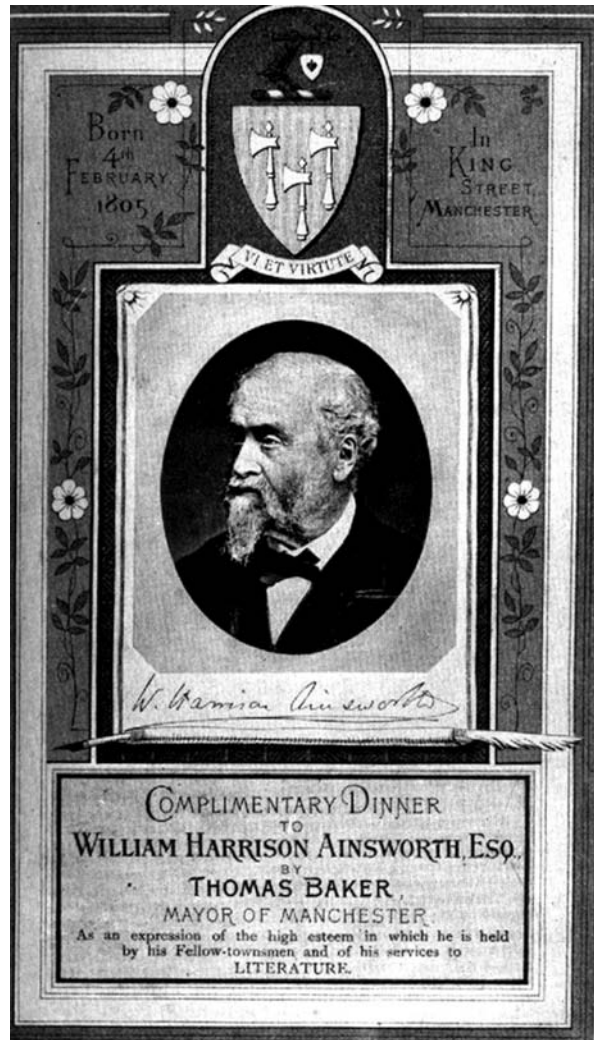
> I recall a dinner at Teddington, in the sixties, given by Frederic Chapman, the publisher, at which were Forster and Browning. The latter said humorously, 'a sad, forlorn-looking being stopped me to-day, and reminded me of old times. He presently resolved himself into – whom do you think? – Harrison Ainsworth!' 'Good Heavens!' cried Forster, 'is he still alive?'[24]

Some of the novelist's later works, such as *Talbot Harland* and *The South-Sea Bubble*, were published in 6d paperbacks by John Dicks, the proprietor of the penny magazine *Bow Bells*. This was a far cry from the 'triple-deckers' of his heyday which would have sold for around 30 shillings, a considerable sum and more than a week's wages for a skilled manual worker.

The Lancashire Novels

Although Ainsworth lived most of his adult life in the south of England, his work is peppered with references to his native county and in particular the Manchester region. There is not space here to look at all of the novels in detail, but we can observe some of the Manchester connections which form a strong part of the work of our author. Of the 40 novels in the Ainsworth canon (leaving out *Sir John Chiverton*), seven can be described as 'Lancashire novels'. Taking these in order of publication, the first is *Guy Fawkes* (1841), a well known tale but not normally associated with the north-west region of England. Undaunted by such details, Ainsworth sets the whole of the first book (entitled 'The Plot') of this three-book novel in the Manchester region, specifically placing the plotters in Ordsall Hall. Later, two real-life characters are introduced into the story: Humphrey Chetham, the Manchester merchant and philanthropist (founder of Chetham's Hospital and Library), and Dr John Dee, the warden of Manchester, divine, mathematician and astrologer.[25] Ainsworth also creates a fictitious romantic attachment for Fawkes, all

of which is woven into the familiar fabric of the Gunpowder Plot. This illustrates his *modus operandi* which always involved a basis of fact, usually in the form of authentic documents (often supplied by James Crossley and other Chetham Society editors). On that foundation were constructed elaborate sub-plots and characterisations linked to a strong, linear narrative, which the reading public found instantly accessible and appealing.



The cover of the souvenir brochure from the dinner given in Manchester, September 1881, showing Ainsworth at 76

In 1848 came *The Lancashire Witches*, Ainsworth's most enduring work and the most readily available of his novels today. Largely based on *Potts's Discovery of Witches in the County of Lancaster* (1613, republished with copious notes by Crossley in 1845),[26] but also drawing on *The Journals of Nicholas Assheton*,[27] it was one of the fundamental texts to begin the still-thriving witch industry in the Pendle area. The novelist transformed Potts's factual and rather dry account into a gothic tale of huge proportions, with chilling tales of midnight meetings in the desolate ruins of Whalley Abbey and Hoghton Tower. The historical background is outlined at the beginning of the book, recalling the Pilgrimage of Grace in 1536–7 when there arose 'a formidable rebellion in the Northern counties of England'[28] in protest against the dissolution of the monasteries and subsequent land enclosures. There are curses, spells, charms and diabolical incantations to be found in the book and Potts himself puts in an appearance as a scheming and self-serving lawyer of a type which might have been familiar to both Crossley and Ainsworth.

Mervyn Clitheroe differs from all the other novels in two ways. Firstly, it is the only book in this group with a contemporary setting and secondly, it is semi-autobiographical, giving detailed descriptions of Ainsworth's time at Manchester Grammar School and the rural

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retreats in Cheshire where he spent his childhood holidays. The Rostherne of his mother's family becomes 'Marston' and nearby Dunham 'Dunton'. Some characters were based on friends of Ainsworth, for example 'Cuthbert Spring' was the prosperous solicitor Gilbert Winter who was also a wine merchant and director of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway. The benevolent 'Dr Foam' was his old friend James Crossley and 'Mrs Mervyn' was inspired by Mrs Eleanora Atherton (great-granddaughter of the poet John Byrom). The book appeared in four monthly numbers from December 1851 to March 1852, but readers' responses were lukewarm as Ellis shrewdly remarked: 'The public, rather unreasonably, had expected a second Lancashire Witches, and was disappointed to find its nerves unrung by *Mervyn Clitheroe*.'[29]

Ainsworth was dismayed at this rejection, and he wrote to Crossley:

> I cannot understand why it has not found favour with the general public, because I have written it carefully, and I think there is interest in the story. But I could not go on at a loss, when that loss might be serious, if increased monthly. It is certainly vexatious.[30]

Consequently he ceased work on the book, leaving those readers who had remained faithful in suspense for six years during which time he wrote three further books (*The Star Chamber, The Flitch of Bacon* and *The Spendthrift*). He resumed *Mervyn Clitheroe* at the behest of Crossley in 1857 and a further eight instalments finally saw the work completed in June 1858. It was published in book form later that same year. Chapter eight opens with a description of Victorian Manchester (Cottonborough):

> A wondrous town is Cottonborough! Vast – populous – ugly –sombre. Full of toiling slaves, pallid from close confinement and heated air. Full of squalor, vice, misery: yet also full of wealth and all its concomitants – luxury, splendour, enjoyment. A city of coal and iron – a city of the factory and the forge – a city where greater fortunes are amassed, and more quickly than in any other in the wide world. But how – and at what expense? Ask yon crew of care-worn men, wan women and sickly children, and they will tell you. Look at yon mighty structure, many-windowed, tall chimneyed, vomiting forth clouds of smoke, to darken and poison the whole-some air. Listen to the clangour and the whirl of the stupendous and complicated machinery within. Count the hundreds of pale creatures that issue forth from it at meal-times. Mark them well, and say if such employment be healthy. Yet these poor souls earn thrice the wages of the labourer at the plough, and therefore they eagerly pursue their baneful task-work.[31]

This fragment of social commentary, which continues for little more than two of the 372 pages in the single-volume illustrated edition, is unique in the entire Ainsworth canon. The narrative is only briefly interrupted as the author takes what he rightly describes as a 'glance' at the city of his birth, because *Mervyn Clitheroe* is in no way a gritty industrial novel like *Mary Barton* or *Hard Times*. Most of the action takes place in the Cheshire countryside and the plot is quite in line with Ainsworth's other novels. The outburst hangs in the air, like a plume of smoke from a factory chimney, and then is allowed to disperse until finally displaced by the clear country air. By any standards this is a fine piece of writing. Ainsworth had a formidable prose technique and was capable of the most vivid and telling descriptive passages. But beneath the word-painting, the most revealing aspect of this chapter is the author's ambivalent attitude to the scene he describes. Ainsworth points up the contradictions to be found in the industrial city: squalor, vice and misery are cheek by jowl with luxury, splendour and enjoyment; the pallor and ill-health of the workers is rewarded with triple rates of pay compared with their country counterparts. This is the price paid (a price worth paying?) for a general civic prosperity. For that, says Ainsworth, is the ultimate prize and the *raison d'être* of the city; a justification of its frenetic pace, and harsh conditions:

> Active and energetic are its inhabitants, enterprising, spirited, with but one thought – one motive – one aim, and one end – MONEY. Prosperous is Cottonborough – prosperous beyond all other cities – and long may it continue so; for, with all its ugliness, and all its faults – and they are many – I love it well.[32]

Ainsworth, in common with many middle class Victorians, was alarmed at the effects of industrialisation while approving of the wealth it brought to the nation. A fairly typical reaction to this discomfort was nostalgia for an idealised idea of rural life, which is the abiding theme throughout *Mervyn Clitheroe*. During the description of Cottonborough, comparisons are constantly drawn between town and country living, especially for the labouring classes:

> I could not then help contrasting the careworn countenances and emaciated frames of the fustian-jackets I now encountered, with the cheerful ruddy visages, and hardy limbs of the country people I had left; and I thought how infinitely preferable was the condition of the latter.[33]

Presumably the fact that the agricultural workers earned only a third of the wages of their urban counterparts did not prevent them from living a healthier life. There is a whiff of moral condemnation

of the industrial workers' desire to share in Manchester's prosperity, though the vast wealth of the merchant princes seems to be acceptable and beneficial to the city. However, Ainsworth's patronising attitude towards the manufacturing classes, unchanged from *Considerations*, discussed above, was typical of the views held by much of the Victorian middle class population. Even those novelists, like Dickens and Gaskell, who focussed on the poverty and distress of the working class in great detail, did not recommend radical solutions, pleading instead for improved conditions in the name of basic humanity and compassion. Despite the graphic images in this description of Manchester, Ainsworth avoids any condemnation beyond a general distaste for the ugliness and dirt involved in the disagreeable but necessary business of money-grubbing. Poverty and ill health are merely unfortunate by-products of this process and the author offers no suggestions for changing the situation. After presenting this observation of life in the industrial city, Ainsworth moves, with palpable relief, back to the countryside. In the absence of moral or political arguments, there is no polemic for Ainsworth to sustain, so he returns to bucolic romance, and in the course of the book we revisit the more familiar Gothic territory of old country houses, mysterious bell-ringing, and even a haunted chamber.

A fairly common response among the more conservative citizens to the pace of industrial change was a retreat into antiquarianism as exemplified by James Crossley, or the less rarefied world of the historical romance, towards which Ainsworth gravitated and in which he excelled, often processing the work of Crossley and his fellows for popular consumption, as we have seen. Towards the end of *Mervyn Clitheroe* Ainsworth describes a visit to the medieval Chetham Library, a shelter from the more egregious effects of the industrial city for many Mancunians and which had also been the subject of an article by James Crossley 37 years earlier.[34] Old Manchester was a far more congenial subject for Ainsworth than the modern city of the mid-nineteenth century. *The Manchester Rebels of the Fatal '45* (1873) takes the Young Pretender Prince Charles's occupation of Manchester in 1745 as its principal subject, and Ainsworth grasps the opportunity of indulging in nostalgic reminiscence of the old town as he remembered it from his youthful explorations with Crossley:

> The lover of antiquity – if any such should visit Manchester – will search in vain for those picturesque black and white timber habitations, with pointed gables and latticed windows, that were common enough sixty years ago. Entire streets, embellished by such houses have been swept away in the course of modern

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> improvement. But I recollect them well … I could conduct the Rebel leaders to their quarters without difficulty.[35]

Ainsworth often admitted to Jacobite sympathies and here, cushioned by the centuries, he could indulge a romantic revolutionary spirit. They made more glamorous heroes and, given his vivid sense of drama, it is tempting to imagine that, had he been born in the twentieth century, he might have turned his talents towards the world of films or television. In the novel a group of prominent Manchester men join the Stuart forces in a spirit of idealism and are eventually executed when the rebellion is put down. Rebel sympathies and a distaste for the 'improvements' of the modern city became the hallmark of Ainsworth's particular brand of romanticism. For the historical background to *The Manchester Rebels*, the author turned again to the Chetham Society, this time *The Remains of John Byrom*, edited for the Chetham Society by Richard Parkinson.

In 1875 *Preston Fight* was published for a fraction of the fees commanded by his earlier works[36] but the novel shows no sign of the author's economic straits, being written with all the style and energy which characterises Ainsworth's best work. The main story follows the course of the Jacobite Rebellion of 1715 from Scotland through Northumberland, Cumberland and Lancaster, culminating in the engagement at Preston and the subsequent fate of the insurgents. For the factual basis of this part of the story Ainsworth consulted a volume published by the Chetham Society in 1845, entitled *The State of the Parties in Lancashire before the Rebellion of 1715* by Dr Samuel Hibbert Ware. This includes an eye-witness description of the conflict and the events surrounding it, written by Peter Clarke, an attorney's clerk from Kendal, under the heading 'Preston Fight'. Divided into eleven sections or 'Books', the progress of the insurgents is traced from place to place until in book seven, chapter one, the rebel army at last reaches Preston. Entitled 'Proud Preston', the chapter opens with an introduction to the town and its people. Ainsworth has been described as 'a prime exponent of the potent concept of Merry England'[37] representing a notion of an idyllic, pre-industrial time, based on traditional pursuits and centred upon rural rather than urban life (indeed, *Merry England* was the title of one of his novels, published the year before *Preston Fight*). The description of Preston is unashamedly nostalgic, looking back with relish to a romantic vision of an earlier age:

> As a place of fashionable resort, where the best society could be found, Preston, at the period of our story, ranked higher than any other town in the North of England. A great number of gentry resided there – many of them belonging to the oldest Catholic

> families in the country, and these persons gave an aristocratic character to the place . . . In the early part of the eighteenth century Preston was but a small place, and could boast little regularity of construction, but it had a remarkably clean and cheerful aspect . . . In the market place, which formed a large square, with an obelisk in the midst instead of a cross, there were several good old houses, and here, also was the town hall, an extremely picturesque old edifice, four stories high, and each story projecting above the other, painted black and white, and having great gables and large windows . . .

Such was Preston when garrisoned by the insurgent forces.[38]

This is a picture of a clean, airy town whose centre is dominated by an ancient market square, which would also have been its commercial heart where farmers would come to sell their produce. In returning to the eighteenth century, Ainsworth evokes a vision untainted by the industrialisation that characterised the age in which he lived, giving his readers a very different portrait of Preston from Dickens's introduction to 'Coketown' in *Hard Times* (1854):

> It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness.[39]

The contrast between Dickens's bleak portrait of nineteenth-century Preston and Ainsworth's idyllic vision of the town in 1715 could not be starker. The river has become polluted, the climate is no longer 'salubrious', and the 'clean and cheerful aspect has given way to smoke, grime, noise and misery. One similarity between these two views of the town is that Dickens's Preston, like Ainsworth's, was a town in the throes of conflict, but in this case it was the inequities between employers and workers that exercised the novelist's mind.

Set during the Civil War, *The Leaguer of Lathom* (1876) focuses on the Siege of Manchester in 1642 and is based on material provided by Canon Francis Raines of the Chetham Society, to whom the book is dedicated. Raines assisted Ainsworth by directing his attention to various Chetham Society publications (particularly *Memoirs of the House of Stanley* and *Memoirs of James, Earl of Derby*, both of which were edited by Raines) which formed the source material for *The Leaguer of Lathom*. When the novel appeared in October 1876,

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Ainsworth expressed his gratitude by inscribing the work to Raines with a full acknowledgement of his contribution. The normally sober canon was surprised and gratified. Receiving the accolade with characteristic modesty, he remarked to Crossley, 'my little book will accompany the great Man of War's ship'.[40] The following year, Crossley, wearying of the seemingly unending task of finding new material for Ainsworth, wrote to Raines saying:

> He [Ainsworth] wants a fresh Historical Subject, for I suppose he will go on writing as long as he lives and he is now 72. His works make a little library in themselves. Can you suggest a story for him? Any fine domestic tragedy? He will be very thankful for it.[41]

The final novel in the Lancashire series was *Beatrice Tyldesley, or The Lancashire Plot of 1694* (1878). The setting of this now extremely rare volume is the unsuccessful attempt to restore the deposed James II to the throne, which resulted in the trial of the plotters in Manchester. Ainsworth wrote to Crossley, just before publication:

> I have just finished my new story, *Beatrice Tyldesley*, which will be published in the course of spring ... One of the principal characters is Colonel Tyldesley of Myerscough, and I have given the trial at Manchester at full length. Beatrice is the cousin of Colonel Tyldesley ... I think the book will be popular – at all events in Lancashire, as it refers to so many of the old county families.[42]

For the factual underpinning of the novel, Ainsworth turned once again to a Chetham Society publication, this time *The Jacobite Trials at Manchester in 1694*[43] edited by William Beamont of Orford Hall, Warrington, of which Ainsworth commented, '[n]o historical document was ever more carefully and judiciously edited'.[44]

Though he had been absent for many years, the city of his birth provided a final accolade which proved to be crowning glory of Ainsworth's career. In 1881 the Mayor of Manchester, Thomas Baker, decided to hold a banquet in honour of the city's most famous living author. Unlike some who had held that office, Baker took a great interest in literary matters and had been a member of the Free Libraries Committee two decades earlier. Rather than a run of the mill civic dinner attended by local government officials and disinterested dignitaries, this enlightened mayor envisaged a smaller gathering. His idea was to invite all the leading literary figures of the city to pay tribute to Ainsworth with toasts and speeches and the final guest list numbered 68 men and three women, including Mrs G. Linnaeus Banks, the author of *The Manchester Man*. Incidentally, the women were allowed in to hear the speeches but were not admitted to the dinner!

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The event took place in the Mayor's banqueting room in the Town Hall and, as the guests arrived at the imposing new building, the bells rang out to welcome them. In the mayor's speech and the others that followed, many tributes were paid to the novelist, reflecting the esteem in which he had always been held by the local community. Ainsworth responded in like manner, acknowledging the compliments paid by the mayor, and his debt to the city:

> My great ambition has been to connect my name as an author with the city of my birth, and with this aim I have chosen certain subjects that would give me a chance of doing so . . . I believe my task to be well-nigh accomplished, and can scarcely hope to write another tale, but should I do so I shall return to the old ground, and strive to maintain the honourable distinction I have acquired as the 'Lancashire Novelist'. (Applause)[45]

A report of the banquet, written by Crossley and John Evans, was printed for private circulation which pleased Ainsworth greatly. He wrote to Crossley: 'I intend to use the Report as an introduction to my forthcoming novel *Stanley Brereton*. It will form a little chapter in my Biography.'[46] Later in that year the novel (which had been completed before the banquet) was published in three volumes including the 27-page report and an inscription to the mayor in appreciation of the banquet. This was to be Ainsworth's last public appearance. He died on 3 January 1882, just over three months after the banquet, and was buried in Kensal Green Cemetery, London, in the same vault as his brother and sister.

Even in Ainsworth's own time, the historical novel as a genre was the subject of critical opprobrium and regarded with some superciliousness by the literary establishment. While there is no evidence that the author or his readers were deterred by such judgements, it was rather the waxing and waning of public taste that blighted Ainsworth's career. More recently, critical evaluations have been few and far between. George J. Worth, one of the few late-twentieth-century academics to consider his work sympathetically, admits that it would be foolish to expect a popular revival of interest in Ainsworth's works. 'But', he continues,

> [h]e is too intriguing a novelist, one too closely connected with important tendencies in his own age and ours, to be forgotten or condemned to a few careless or superficial sentences in histories of literature. He deserves to be read, with sympathy and discernment; and there is much in his best fiction to repay such reading.[47]

A more severe view was taken by Andrew Sanders, writing three years after Worth, who remarked that Ainsworth 'avoids the

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psychological development in character as though he regards it as an impediment to the movement of his story'.[48] Later, Sanders admitted with great condescension,

> [i]n spite of, or perhaps because of, their intellectual slightness, a few of Ainsworth's early novels have remained popular well into the twentieth century. A taste for them may well have been restimulated by their closest parallels as entertainments, the simplified images of European history projected by Hollywood in the 1930s.[49]

It was suggested earlier that the novels could lend themselves to visual treatment in their concentration on plot movement and narrative. In *The Rise of the Novel* Ian Watt's description of some eighteenth-century writing as 'prose which restricts itself almost entirely to a descriptive and denotative use of language'[50] could be applied with accuracy to Ainsworth's technique. So perhaps an earnest search for intellectual profundity and psychological insight is misplaced when considering Manchester's historical novelist. Could we not take this further and admit that, in the hands of Ainsworth at least, the historical novel belongs in the realm of popular culture and is none the worse for that? James Crossley, in a review of *Rookwood*, called Ainsworth 'the English Victor Hugo'[51] and like *Les Misérables* in recent times, Ainsworth's works found their way on to the popular stage as mass entertainment, rather than high art. Popular culture is a legitimate study and I would contend that the novels of William Harrison Ainsworth deserve wider recognition in this sphere which is, after all, the one for which they were intended. Let us, therefore, rejoin Turpin, Sheppard and all the other characters in these unashamedly escapist tales and be transported once more into a world which, though unreal, gives us (as it did its original Victorian readers) a very great pleasure.

Notes

A review by Steve Collins of Stephen James Carver, *The Life and Works of the Lancashire Novelist: William Harrison Ainsworth 1805–1882*, appears on p. 129.

1. S. M. Ellis, *William Harrison Ainsworth and his Friends*, 2 vols (London, 1911), 1, p. 18.
2. *Ibid*., p. 28.
3. *Ibid*., p. 50.
4. Extract from a letter to the editor of *Arliss's Pocket Magazine*, 1821, signed 'T. H., Manchester', Ellis, *William Harrison Ainsworth*, 1, pp. 61–2.
5. There was some controversy about the identity of 'Cheviot Ticheburn'. A handwritten note dated 24 April 1861 on the fly-leaf of the copy of *Poems* in the Manchester Central Library states: 'I think there is hardly

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any doubt that this volume was written by Edward Aston [brother of J. P. Aston], Solicitor, Manchester.' It is possible that the collection could have been the work of more than one author.

6. Letter, Lamb to Ainsworth, 7 May 1822: E. V. Lucas (ed.), *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, 7 vols (London, 1905), 7, p. 565.
7. *Manchester Review* (Winter 1945), pp. 111–2.
8. *The Bœotian* (Manchester, 1824), Central Library, Manchester. The volume also has a handwritten dedication to Fanny Ebers.
9. Letter, 25 Mar. 1825, Ainsworth letters to Crossley, Central Library, Manchester.
10. Henry Crabbe Robinson (1775–1867), diary entry, 9 Feb. 1825. Ellis: *William Harrison Ainsworth*, 1, p. 121.
11. *Considerations on the best means of affording Immediate Relief to the Operative Classes in the Manufacturing Districts* (London, 1926), p. 5.
12. *Ibid*., p. 12. A clear reference to the Peterloo Massacre, 1819.
13. *Ibid*., p. 8.
14. *Ibid*., pp. 17–18. For a detailed discussion of the social issues surrounding charitable giving, see Peter Shapely, *Charity and Power in Victorian Manchester* (Manchester, Chetham Society, Third Series, 43, 2000).
15. *Ibid*., p. 21.
16. James Crossley, handwritten note on the fly-leaf of a copy of *Sir John Chiverton*, Chetham's Library, Manchester.
17. H. Harwood, *The Authorship of Sir John Chiverton* (Manchester, 1911).
18. Of Ainsworth's daughters, Emily and Fanny both died unmarried, in 1885 and 1908 respectively. Anne Blanche married Capt. Francis Swanson in 1861, producing three children: Apphia, Frank and John; she died in 1910.
19. Ellis, *William Harrison Ainsworth*, 1, p. 165.
20. See for example K. Hollingworth, *The Newgate Novel* (Detroit, 1963); J. John (ed.), *Cult Criminals: The Newgate Novels (1830–47)*, 6 vols (London, 1997); M. Buckley, 'Sensations of Celebrity: *Jack Sheppard* and the Mass Audience', *Victorian Studies*, 44:3, 2002, pp. 423–61.
21. G. J. Worth, *William Harrison Ainsworth* (New York, 1972), p. 21.
22. Letter, March 1864, Ainsworth letters to Crossley, Central Library, Manchester.
23. Ellis, *William Harrison Ainsworth*, 2, p. 311.
24. *Ibid*., p. 264.
25. *Guy Fawkes* (London, 1841; Author's Copyright Edition, undated), p. 57. James Crossley edited the *Autobiographical Tracts of John Dee, warden of the college of Manchester* for the Chetham Society (Manchester, Chetham Society, Old Series, 24, 1851).
26. Manchester, Chetham Society, Old Series 6, 1845.
27. F. Raines (ed.), Manchester, Chetham Society, Old Series, 14, 1848.
28. *The Lancashire Witches* (London, 1848; Facsimile edition, Manchester, 1992), p. 3.

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29. Ellis, *William Harrison Ainsworth*, 2, p. 178.
30. Letter, 4 Mar. 1852, Ainsworth letters to Crossley, Central Library, Manchester.
31. *Mervyn Clitheroe* (London, 1858; De Luxe Edition, undated), p. 60.
32. *Ibid*.
33. *Ibid*., p. 61.
34. *Blackwood's Magazine* (June 1821), pp. 299–305, reprinted in the last number of *The Bœotian* (24 Apr. 1824).
35. *The Manchester Rebels* (London, 1873; Author's Copyright Edition, undated), p. vii.
36. See J. A. Sutherland, *Victorian Novelists and Publishers* (London, 1976), pp. 152–60. Sutherland notes that Ainsworth's payments sank from £1,000 per novel in 1837, to a mere £40 per volume (he was paid £125 for the three volumes of *Preston Fight*) in 1875.
37. J. Richards, 'The Lancashire Novelist and the Lancashire witches', in R. Poole (ed.), *The Lancashire Witches: Histories and Stories* (Manchester, 2002), p. 174.
38. *Preston Fight* (London, 1875; Author's Copyright Edition, undated), pp. 178–9.
39. C. Dickens, *Hard Times* (London, 1854; Penguin Classics edition, 1985), p. 65.
40. Letter, Raines to Crossley, 17 Oct., 1876. The James Crossley Papers (Misc.), Central Library, Manchester.
41. Letter, Crossley to Raines, 31 July, 1877. The Francis Raines Collection, Chetham's Library, Manchester, Mun. E. 5.3.
42. Letter, 9 Mar. 1878, Ainsworth letters to Crossley, Central Library, Manchester.
43. Manchester, Chetham's Society, Old Series, 28.
44. From the dedication to William Beamont in the first edition of *Beatrice Tyldesley*, reprinted in Ellis, *William Harrison Ainsworth*, 2, p. 305.
45. J. Crossley and J. Evans, *Banquet to William Harrison Ainsworth Esq., at Manchester Town Hall, 15th September, 1881* (Manchester, 1881), pp. 11–13.
46. Letter, 21 Sept. 1881, Ainsworth letters to Crossley, Central Library, Manchester.
47. Worth, *William Harrison Ainsworth*, preface, p. 4.
48. A. Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel 1840–1880* (London, 1979), p. 36.
49. *Ibid*., p. 45.
50. I. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London, 1957; Paperback edn, 1987), p. 29.
51. *Manchester Herald*, 23 Apr. 1834.