'Charles Lamb, Captain Starkey and the Eccentrics of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: A Lecture for Richard Terry'

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[This essay was originally delivered as a lecture at the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle-upon-Tyne on 24 June 2022, in memory of Professor Richard Terry, Professor of English at the University of Northumbria, who died in July 2020. I gave a shorter version of the talk on 18 June 2022 at the 'Charles and Mary Lamb: Elia and Beyond' conference at the University of York, organised by Gillian Russell and Jim Watt.]

Good evening everyone. I am deeply honoured to be delivering the first annual Richard Terry Memorial Lecture, organised by the North East Forum in Eighteenth-Century and Romantic Studies. The Forum, of which Richard was one of the founders, in the year 2004, meant a great deal to him and it is wonderful that its work continues, nearly two decades on, and that we are able to commemorate Richard in the Forum tonight, and especially, perhaps, in the Lit and Phil, where he and I frequently met, talked literature and office politics, and ate Peek Freens biscuits, 50 pence each. Richard was one of the UK's leading scholars of eighteenth-century literature, so this Library, itself of late Georgian provenance, is a very appropriate place in which to remember him. I am very grateful to David Stewart, Gillian Skinner, and Meiko O'Halloran for inviting me to give this lecture in Richard's memory. It is great to see

so many of Richard's friends and colleagues from Northumbria, Sunderland, Newcastle, Durham and beyond, and it is wonderful that Richard's beloved wife Carol is here this evening, and I would also like to acknowledge his equally beloved children, Hannah and James.

It is still hard to comprehend, even two years on, that Richard has gone. Several times in writing this essay, my eyes welled up at the thought of it. He was one of my oldest friends. I first met Richard thirty years ago, in 1992, when he was on the interview panel when I applied for a lectureship at the new University of Sunderland. I realised, when I was offered that job, that he was a man of the soundest judgment, and nothing he ever did since caused me to revise that opinion. Richard was one of the best literary critics I ever met, and I have met a great many, and he was a fine man and an excellent colleague and friend to many of us here this evening. To me, he was first mentor, then friend, colleague – at both Sunderland and Northumbria Universities – and co-author, over a period of nearly thirty years. Richard and I published our textbook, *Poetry*, with Edinburgh University Press in 1999, and the last time I spoke to him it was concerning a possible third edition of the book, which, sadly, is not to be. In writing the first version and in revising it for its second edition in 2012, we never had a cross word. The occasional barbed comment when I wrote something questionable, yes, but that was Richard, and he was almost invariably right in his comments.

I

Richard Terry and I have something else in common beyond our long-time collaboration, our interest in eighteenth-century and Romantic literature, and our critical fascination with comic and satirical writing. Both of us published our first articles in the *Charles Lamb Bulletin,* though his predates mine by a couple of years, and both essays concerned Charles Lamb; so it seems appropriate to talk about Lamb this evening, and, indeed, to use Richard's article as a starting point to discuss one of Lamb's least-known essays, 'Captain Starkey' (1825), which concerns a figure, Benjamin Starkey, who both taught Mary Lamb at Mr Bird's School in London, where Charles Lamb was afterwards educated, and was also was a well-known Newcastle 'character', I think the right word is, and please imagine quotation marks around that term.

Richard's essay was called 'Lamb, Shenstone and the Icon of Personality'. It appeared in the *Charles Lamb Bulletin* in October 1991, and was published, in those days of the binary in British universities, as being from Sunderland Polytechnic. It's quite simply a brilliant start to a publishing career - confident, judicious, unafraid to take on critics with large reputations, and, of course, very well-written. Richard, indeed, emerged full-formed as a critic thirty years ago. He opens by setting up a position he wishes to criticise, but he does so fairly and not by immolating a straw man: 'The cornerstone of Lamb criticism', he begins, 'has long been Lamb's personality: his incorrigible whimsy, undemonstrative resolve in the face of gruesome misfortune, selfless fidelity to dependants and friends, and fragile susceptibility to fits

of depression'.[1] There is much truth in this picture, alongside its element of caricature, though sometimes it has not helped our perception of Lamb. Terry sees the most recent example of the smiling-through-it-all view of Lamb as that of Lord David Cecil's *A Portrait of Charles Lamb* (1983), a book then less than a decade old: 'Cecil's lyricism and sentimentality induce the perception that Lamb's puckish good spirits ultimately win through: "Lamb's smile [writes Cecil] remains … as if half amused by its own fancies"'.[2]

Terry then summons to his aid a critical witness he admires, Roy Park, whose anthology *Lamb as Critic* (1980) had appeared a decade or so earlier; the Victorian critical establishment, according to Park, had adopted Lamb as a kind of 'cultural teddy-bear'.[3] Indeed, there is something of Sebastian Flyte about Lord David himself, in Terry's view; '"half-amused" and "fancies" here', he chides Cecil, 'betray a rhetoric whose cushioning is slovenly'.[4] Nor does Terry have any time for the more revisionist version of Lamb evident in Thomas McFarland's *Romantic Cruxes; The English Essayists and the Spirit of the Age* (1987), where Elia becomes a kind of tortured Byronic hero, dismissing 'McFarland's equally two-dimensional view of Lamb as a Romantic suicidal depressive ... his "loneliness and desolation" mak[ing] him, in McFarland's view, an iconic figure, exemplary of the Romantic "essence"'.[5]

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[1] Richard Terry, 'Lamb, Shenstone and the Icon of Personality', *Charles Lamb Bulletin* N.S. 76, October 1991, 124.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Quoted in Terry, 'Lamb, Shenstone and the Icon of Personality', 124.
[4] Terry, 'Lamb, Shenstone and the Icon of Personality', 124.
[5] Ibid.

Terry steers a course between these two versions of Lamb - the cuddlesome Scylla and the gloomster Charybdis. He objects to both 'the tintedness of Cecil's *Portrait*'[6] and, perhaps worse, the assumption underpinning McFarland's *Cruxes*, that Lamb needs saving for seriousness: 'McFarland attempts to rescue his subject from the triviality of the figure critics normally cut for him, that of the "mere" humourist'.[7] 'Mere' humour – Richard was right to cast a baleful eye at that idea. He was a brilliant critic of parody, mock-heroic and satire, most notably in the excellent monograph based on his Cambridge PhD thesis, *Mock-Heroic from Butler to Cowper: An English Genre and Discourse* (2005). And here, at the start of his writerly career, he addresses one of the most renowned and yet elusive of English comic writers.

'Matters of personality preoccupied [Charles] Lamb a good deal', writes Terry, and his thoughts on this issue are worth quoting at some length, not least to give us a sense of Richard in full critical flow:

> Matters of personality preoccupied Lamb a good deal. Part and parcel of his notoriously unschematic habits of crucial exposition was the tendency to make *ad hominem* judgements on authors based on appraisal of character. He had, for instance, such a trenchant aversion to Byron as ruled out any regard for his poetry. In his *Elia* essay 'Imperfect Sympathies,' he expressed exception to Burns's poetic bragging … [These] are judgements made on grounds other than the strictly literary. His sensitivity to how his own personality could be high-jacked [as per 'my gentle-hearted Charles'] even by the affable idealizations of his friends, may have spilled over into his famous essay on the stage representation of Shakespeare's tragedies with its suspicion of the inevitable disservice done to character as wrought in dramatic language by its being rendered through the clumsy gestural notation of performers. Quite how much Lamb's anxieties about the vicarious rendition of character feed into the 'Elia' project, his own beguilingly unreliable rehearsal of himself is hard to say, but its continuity with some of his perennial concerns is obvious.[8]

[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

This could be nobody else. S. T. Coleridge once wrote of some verses by Wordsworth that 'had I met these lines running wild in the deserts of Arabia, I should have instantly screamed out "Wordsworth!".[9] Well, this is quintessential Terry - trenchant, judicious writing, all its phrases well-turned, never tendentious, willing to stop short of a final conclusion when it can't arrive at one, and brilliant, incisive critical judgement.

II

The essay I want to examine tonight, Charles Lamb's 'Captain Starkey', deals with what Terry calls the 'icon of personality' and, indeed, the personality of a peculiar form of iconography. However, it is not one of Lamb's better-known efforts; indeed, I know of no essays or critical articles dealing with it, and it has no record in the indices to the *Charles Lamb Bulletin*, both in the New and, indeed, the Old Series, dating from 1939. To some extent this might be attributable to the fact that it did not appear above the signature 'Elia', was not published in the *London Magazine*, and did not appear in either the *Essays of Elia* (1823) or the *Last Essays of Elia* (1833). That is what 'Captain Starkey' is not; but what can we say about what it is? The essay, which had to wait until 1864 to be collected in the *Eliana, being the Hitherto Uncollected Writings of Charles Lamb,* is an occasional piece, prompted by an article in an 1825 number of Lamb's friend William Hone's *Every-Day Book*. Lamb made a series of responses to Hone's calls, sending ten letters and articles to Hone for publication in the serially-published

[9] S. T. Coleridge, *Collected Letters,* 6 vols, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956-71), 1. 453.

*Every-Day Book a*nd the *Table Book* and celebrating him in a poem published in the former, 'To the Editor of the Every-Day Book'.

In Hone's *Every-Day Book* article for July 9th, the great antiquarian and, let us not forget, satirist, announces that he was in possession of 'a fine uncut copy of Captain Starkey's very rare "Memoirs",[10] Starkey having died 9 July three years earlier, in 1822. 'Auto-biography is agreeable in the writing', Hone begins, 'and sometimes profitable in the publication, to persons whose names would otherwise die and be buried with them. Of this numerous class was Captain Starkey, who to his "immortal memory" wrote and published his own "Memoirs"'.[11] And this is indeed the case. Here is the title page of Starkey's *Memoirs of the Life of Benj. Starkey, Late of London, but now an Inmate of the Freeman's Hospital in Newcastle. Written by Himself*, which was published by William Bell of the Groat Market in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1818. Starkey (1757-1822), as we will see, had a minor role in the life of Charles and, especially Mary Lamb, as a teacher at Mr Bell's school, which both siblings attended, before Mr Starkey became, in Charles Lamb's vivid phrase, a 'broken bulrush' and commemorated as such in print by both Charles Lamb and William Hone.

Fig. 1. Title page of Benjamin Starkey, *Memoirs of the Life of Benj. Starkey, Late of London, but now an Inmate of the Freeman's Hospital in Newcastle. Written by Himself* (1818).

So who was this 'Captain' Starkey, who was not a military man and whose title was a jocularity granted him by north country wits, and why did he find it 'agreeable' to

[10] William Hone, *The Every-Day Book; or The Guide to the Year: Relating the Popular Amusements, Sports, Ceremonies, Manners, Customs, and Events. In Two Volumes*, 2 vols (London: J. Haddon and Son for William Tegg and Co., 1826), 1. 466.
[11] Ibid.

write his autobiography? A Novocastrian by background, but born in 1757 in London to parents from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Benjamin Starkey lived in the metropolis as a young man, where he briefly taught no less a figure than Mary Lamb at William Bird's School at Holborn, more of which later. He then had various misadventures, if that is what we must call them, at both Newcastle and Sunderland, and spent most of the last years of his life dependent on late Georgian charity as a resident of the Freeman's Hospital in Newcastle, becoming a well-known character – and I will return to the implications of that phrase - on Tyneside, sponging politely, and boozing with various tavern notables at the Hell's Kitchen public house on the Groat Market. Robert Gilchrist's character sketch of 1829 is as a good place to start as any:

> Benjamin Starkey was an inhabitant of the Freeman's Hospital in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. He told me he never could account for the term Captain proceeding his name. He was diminutive in his figure, but uncommonly polished in his manners, taking off his hat and kissing his hand with an air of excessive good breeding … He was vain of being accounted company for the great and would converse familiarly of his friends, Sir Matthew Ridley and Charles Brandling Esq.. Starkey wrote a good hand, and was in the habit of giving promissory notes for certain pence he had borrowed from certain persons. He was fond of being treated to a glass of ale and very grateful for trifling favours. Any one showing him with deference were for ever entitled to a polite bow from Benjamin Starkey who died July 9, 1822, an old man in his 65th year.[12]

Starkey's *Memoirs*, which are dated 'Newcastle, September 22nd 1818', begin by explaining that 'The writers of biographical accounts have *always* prepared articles, which at once, when held forth to the public, *were highly entertaining, useful and*

[12] Quoted in *Allan's Illustrated Edition of Tyneside Songs and Readings, with Lives, Portraits and Autographs of the Writers and Notes on the Songs* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Thomas and George Allan, 1891), 190.

satisfactory'.[13] It is this tradition of romantic-era autobiographers which Starkey is joining, though 'Highly entertaining' is a bit of a stretch when it comes to Starkey's *Memoirs*, which are prosaic almost to a fault. Tedious incidents are recorded at excessive length, while the author moves swiftly on from potentially interesting moments. William Hone, indeed, calls Starkey's *Memoirs* 'the adventureless history of a man who did no harm in the world', while Charles Lamb, in a brilliant phrase, calls it a tale from 'the Annals of Insignificance', and one which demonstrated, in places, 'a state of imbecility'. But whether 'adventureless' narratives are interesting ones is a moot point. At times in Starkey's *Memoirs*, one is reminded of E. L. Wisty's diary in one of Peter Cook's monologues from the 1960s in which that lugubrious fellow reflects on his life, and how dull it is:

> I've been looking at my dairy. It's the most boring document I've ever seen in my life. I hadn't realised what a boring life I've been living until I read my diary. It's unbelievably boring. It's probably the most boring book in the world … Listen to this: 'Monday, got up, went for a walk, had lunch, went to lavatory, came out again, wrote up diary'. And then the next day, it reads: 'Got up, went out, came in again; went to bed'. Didn't even go to the lavatory … It's not what you would call exciting reading, is it?[14]

In the *Memoirs*, we learn that Starkey's mother 'kept a preparatory school', and 'by her kind means and endeavours', Starkey says, that he 'learned to spell and read well',[15] and developed 'a great desire for the pursuits of learning'. 'After staying at school till the age of fourteen', he 'was bound apprentice' in 1771 'to MR WILLIAM BIRD,

13 Benjamin Starkey, *Memoirs of the Life of Benj. Starkey, Late of London, but now an Inmate of the Freeman's Hospital, in Newcastle. Written by Himself* (Newcastle: William Hall, 1818), iii.
14 Quoted in William Cook, *Tragically, I was an Only Twin: The Comedy of Peter Cook* London: Arrow Books, 2013), 71.
15 Starkey, *Memoirs*, 7.

teacher of languages and mathematics who kept a large Academy at Fetter-Lane, Holborn, in the City of London'.[16] After this 'apprenticeship of seven years' as an usher at Bird's school, during which time he taught Mary Lamb, none too well but very kindly according to her brother, he then set up a smaller school in London on his own, and however, several times went up to 'Bonny Newcastle' for a sport of electioneering, principally in the Whig interest. In 1784, he went electioneering to Northumberland, leaving left a small school in London to the care of a substitute, who 'managed to reduce twenty-five scholars to ten altho' he was paid a weekly allowance',[17] laments Starkey.

So, returning to the north-east of England, Starkey established 'a school in Sunderland in the County of Durham'.[18] Here are his adventures in Wearside:

> [I] returned here again – and was, after a short time, favoured with the assistance of a worthy gentlemen in the Town, and by him very greatly assisted in obtaining a school in Sunderland, in the County of Durham; but, as the greatest success did not attend me in that, I had the happiness and the honour of receiving a better employment in the aforesaid Town of Sunderland; for, after addressing a line to the late Comptroller of the Customs, I had the honour of receiving employment from that ever-to-be-remembered gentleman, WILLIAM GOOCH, Esq., with whom I served the long space of eight years, which service I held until his death, which, unfortunately for me, happened in the latter end of the year 1791 … I was obliged to leave, it not being the pleasure of the then Collector, C. HILL, Esq. that I should continue any longer in office.[19]

Ten years of his life in one paragraph. Of the 'ever-to-be-remembered gentleman, WILLIAM GOOCH' as Starkey somewhat over-optimistically calls him, Hone jests, 'Great as the sensation must have been at Sunderland on this important change "in

[16] Ibid. 9
[17] Ibid., 10.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid, 11-12.

office", the fact is entirely omitted in the journals of the period, and might at this time have been wholly forgotten if the Captain had not been his own chronicler'.[20]

In the following year, Starkey returned to try his luck once again in London, but 'not finding any employment … again returned to Newcastle' where he 'had the good fortune of meeting my ever worthy friend Mr Richard Hill … who recommended' him 'to the late Robert Shaftoe Hedley (yes, that Bobby Shafto), and so he arrived at the Freeman's: 'the time came which placed me in the situation I now hold, through the mercy of God, and the kind protection of my worthy, honourable, and worshipful friends. In which situation I have now been twenty-six years, enjoying the invaluable blessing of health and good friends'.[21] The end.

'[T]he situation I now hold', despite Starkey's positive spin on it, was that of a pauper. As Lamb puts it, 'Starkey appears to have been one of those mild spirits which, not originally deficient in understanding, are crushed by penury into dejection and feebleness. He might have proved a useful adjunct, if not an ornament to society, if fortune had taken him into a very little fostering; but wanting that he became a captain—a by-word—and lived and died a broken bulrush'.[22] Maybe something happened to Benjamin Starkey to lay him low, as Lamb puts it, 'the gentle Usher of [Mary's] youth, grown into an aged Beggar'.[23] Whether this was simple bad luck, or debt, dipsomania, or graft, we do not know. But, however it happened, the earnest young school teacher became a middle-aged charity case, scoffed at - sometimes

[20] Hone, *Every-Day Book*, 1, 467.
[21] Starkey, *Memoirs*, 13-14.
[22] Lamb, 'Captain Starkey', in Hone, *Every-Day Book*, 1, 489.
[23] Lamb, 'Captain Starkey', 467.

gently, sometimes not - and jestingly nicknamed 'Captain'. Newcastle-upon-Tyne has never been short of tavern habitués and famous local characters, and Starkey became one of the group of somewhat extraordinary people who gathered at the Hell's Kitchen tavern, alongside such notables – it is hard to avoid the mock-heroic register that Richard Terry loved in this context –as Bold Archy, Bugle-Nosed Jack, and Blind Willy.

Fig. 2. Engraving (1871), after Henry Perlee Parker, 'Eccentric and Well-Known Characters in Newcastle-upon-Tyne' (c. 1810-20)

This engraving is of an oil painting which has not survived, as far as I know, by the west country artist Henry Perlee Parker. More than a dozen people feature in the picture, gathered in the Hell's Kitchen, a nickname for, depending on your account, the Flying Horse tavern itself or a particular room in the tavern, generally the tap room. The premises are now the Golden Bengal Indian restaurant; *sic transit gloria mundi*. The key to the painting is from the illustrated versions of Thomas Allan's *Tyneside Songs* (1862; 1871; 1891), an image which was used as a frontispiece for that book in its third edition. There is also a useful essay by Joanne Major in the her "All Things Georgian' website which describes each of the eccentrics. This is her commentary on this detail:

> The four gentleman here are Bugle-Nosed Jack … Hangy … Bold Archy … and Blind Willie. Bugle-Nosed Jack was also known as Cuckoo Jack and Bold Archy was really Archibald Henderson, a huge, well-built man but absolutely a gentle giant, devoted to his mother who often had to lead him away from fights as he was a magnet for trouble due to his size. He died, on the 14th May 1828, at the age of 86 years. Blind Willie, or William Purvis, was probably the best known of the Newcastle Eccentrics. … blind from birth or from very early in his childhood) [he] was a fiddler, song writer and performer, often to be found in ale houses where he asked for a drink and entertained the regulars. He was a great favourite on the streets of

> Newcastle, renowned for never wearing a hat, no matter what the weather, having got fed up of it being stolen from his head by idle boys. [H]e ended up in the All Saints poorhouse where he died on the 20th July 1832 aged 80.[24]

These men and women, says W. E. Adams in *the Monthly Chronicle of North Country Lore and Legend* for March 1890, possessed 'certain distinguishing whimsicalities, by which they gradually attained a popularity more or less remarkable and worthy of admiration'. They were frequently commemorated in a series of verses written by Newcastle wags and musician. They were celebrated in both and the oral and written tradition in Newcastle. Here is an example, Robert Gilchrist's 'Bold Archy & Blind Willie's Lament - On the Death of Captain Starkey' (1827). It's to be sung to the air of 'The Bold Dragoon', if you know it:

> What! is he gyen? Bold Airchy said,
> And moungin' scratch'd his head--
> O can sic waesome news be true?
> Is Captain Starkey dead?
>
> Aw's griev'd at heart--push round the can--
> Seun empty frae wor hands we'll chuck it--
> For now we'll drink wor last to him,
> since he has fairly kick'd the bucket.
> …
>
> For O! he was a lad o' wax!
> Aw've seen him blithe, an' often mellow--
> He might hae faults, but, wi' them a',
> We've seldom seen a better fellow.
> …
>
> Nice chep! poor chep! Blind Willie said--
> My heart is pierc'd like onny riddle,
> To think aw've liv'd to see him dead--
> Aw never mair 'ill play the fiddle.[25]

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[24] Available at https://georgianera.wordpress.com/2016/01/14/the-newcastle-eccentrics-of-hells-kitchen/
Accessed 4 November 2022.

[25] *Allan's Illustrated Edition of Tyneside Songs*, 191.

The world of Bugle-Nosed Jack and Captain Starkey is, to borrow a phrase from the sociologists, a 'non-elite community'. Though they have relative poverty in common, there are differences: some are men, some are women; some disabled; some neurodiverse; some none of these things. So how do we react to nonconformists, social deviants, call them what you will. Are they mascots or scapegoats? Are these outsiders in a curious way insiders? Or not?

Newcastle-upon-Tyne has never been short of alehouse habitués, tavern rowdies and famous local characters – indeed I can remember one or two of the latter breed here in the Lit and Phil from the time when I was a regular here. This is nothing new. During the last generation, writes Joseph Nicholson in the 1890s, Newcastle 'was wonderfully prolific in "characters"',[26] and he uses inverted commas around the word character even then. Perhaps the same might be said to be evident in the *Viz* comic's catalogue of Geordie grotesques: 8 Ace, Sid the Sexist, Biffa Bacon, and so on. But what is a community, a city, signifying by its fondness for eccentrics, for 'characters' in inverted commas? What does our relish for the eccentrics of Newcastle-upon-Tyne or anywhere else mean? A tolerance of difference or a taste for a freak show? James Gregory, in an important essay published in *Northern History* in 2005, 'Local Characters. Eccentricity and the North-East in the Nineteenth Century', maintains that: 'In Newcastle a close … association between eccentrics and local identity existed'. Gregory argues that cherishing local characters was 'demonstrative of regional individuality … "character" [again the inverted commas] reflected local pride and

[26] Jos. L Nicholson, 'Cuckoo Jack', *Monthly Chronicle of North Country Lore and Legend, March 1890,* 110.

local-centredness, sentiments that generated an unusual volume of local songs and historiography'.[27] Nineteenth-century Novocastrians as one antiquarian put it were 'fond of local lore, and of collecting objects with local associations', but Gregory argues that they were also asserting local character in a wider sense: 'those wanting a credible regionalism' needed "cultural and mythological maps" as well as economic and political actions'.

III

A copy of Captain Starkey's *Memoirs*, as we have seen came into the hand of William Hone. Hone himself has some sport with the Captain, beginning with a ten-line mock-encomium to Starkey, complete with comical feminine rhymes

> Reader! see the famous Captain
> Starkey, in his own coat wrapt in;
> Mark his mark'd nose, and mark his eye,
> His lengthen'd chin, his forehead high,
> His little stick, his humble hat,
> The modest tie of his cravat;
> Mark how easy sit his hose,
> Mark the shoes that hold his toes;
> So he look'd when Ranson sketch'd him
> While alive—but Death has fetch'd him.[28]

As well as this cheerful doggerel, Hone also focuses on Starkey's disabilities – his tiny stature, the quack medicines given him as a child and speculates that he had rickets in youth: 'From the whole length portrait at the head of this article, which is copied from an etching by Mr. Thomas Ranson, prefixed to captain Starkey's "Memoirs", it is

[27] James Gregory, '"Local Characters": Eccentricity and the North-East in the Nineteenth Century', *Northern History*, 42, 2005, 166.
[28] Hone, *Every-Day Book*, 1, 465.

reasonably to be conjectured that the captain in his childhood had been ricketty and had worn irons'.[29]

Despite having some pretty gentle fun at Starkey's expense, Hone's overall attitude to the man, like that of Charles Lamb, is ultimately one of sympathy. The *Memoirs*, he writes, are 'the adventureless history of a man who did no harm in the world, and thought he had a right to live, because he was a living being'.[30]

Coincidentally, the very next item in the *Every-Day Book* after the Starkey essay is Charles Lamb's tribute poem to Hone:

> I like you, and your book ingenuous Hone!
> In whose capacious, all-embracing leaves
> The very marrow of tradition's shown;
> And all that history—much that fiction—weaves
>
> By every sort of taste your work is graced.
> Vast stores of modern anecdote we find,
> With good old story quaintly interlaced—
> The theme as various as the reader's mind.[31]

Lamb concludes:

> Phœbus loves your book—trust me, friend Hone—
> The title only errs, he bids me say:
> For while such are—wit—reading—there are shown,
> He swears, 'tis not a work of every day.[32]

In the very next number of the *Every-Day Book*, Lamb appears again, with a letter to the Editor on the Starkey piece:

> I read your account of this unfortunate Being, and his forlorn piece of self-history, with that smile of half-interest which the Annals of Insignificance excite, till I came to where he says 'I was bound apprentice to Mr. William

[29] Ibid., 1, 466.
[30] Ibid., 1, 468.
[31] Charles Lamb, 'To the Editor of the Every-Day Book', in Hone, *Every-Day Book*, 1, 468.
[32] Ibid.

> Bird, an eminent writer and Teacher of languages and Mathematics', &c.—when I started as one does on the recognition of an old acquaintance in a supposed stranger.[33]

Though Charles was never taught by the Captain - 'Starkey', as he writes, having 'quitted the school about a year before I came to it', he was part of the mental furniture in the Lamb household given that he was so vividly remembered by Mary: 'this then was that Starkey of whom I have heard my Sister relate so many pleasant anecdotes; and whom, never having seen, I yet seem almost to remember. For nearly fifty years she had lost all sight of him - and behold the gentle Usher of her youth, grown into an aged Beggar, dubbed with an opprobrious title, to which he had no pretensions; an object, and a May game!'.[34] Charles Lamb's sense of a man laid low - a 'forlorn piece of self-history' is echoed in the beautiful phrase which summarises his attitude to Starkey: 'he was not always the abject thing he came to'.[35]

Lamb also notes the vigorous language of Starkey's use, which is nowhere evident, of course in the *Memoirs*: however old age and a long state of beggary seems to have reduced his writing faculties to a state of imbecility, in those days his language occasionally rose to the bold and figurative, for, when he was in despair to stop their chattering, his ordinary phrase was, 'Ladies, if you will not hold your peace, not all the powers in heaven can make you'.[36]

Thoughts of Benjamin Starkey lead Lamb to thoughts of his own experiences at Mr Bird's School. 'The school-room', he says, still 'stands where it did, looking into a discoloured dingy garden in the passage leading from Fetter Lane into Bartlett's

[33] Lamb, 'Captain Starkey', 486.
[34] Ibid., 488.
[35] Ibid., 487
[36] Ibid.

Buildings'. Lamb's recollection of Bird and his school contain some brilliant writing, writing that would certainly not look out of place in an Elian essay:

> Starkey presided, under Bird, over [the] establishment … I well remember Bird. He was a squat, corpulent, middle-sized man, with something of the gentleman about him, and that peculiar mild tone - especially while he was inflicting punishment - which is so much more terrible to children, than the angriest looks and gestures. … To make him look more formidable - if a pedagogue had need of these heightenings - Bird wore one of those flowered Indian gowns, formerly in use with schoolmasters; the strange figures upon which we used to interpret into hieroglyphics of pain and suffering.[37]

In one of the few mentions of Captain Starkey in Lamb criticism, Percy Hetherington Fitzgerald, in *Charles Lamb, His Friends, His Haunts and His Books* (1866) claims that this is 'as good as anything in the official Elia'.[38]

Similarly, the November 1864 *Atlantic* Magazine notice of the *Eliana*, J. E. Babson, another of the few to notice this essay, reprinted 'Captain Starkey' in full in the *Atlantic,* and introduces the essay with words of high praise: 'We herewith present the reader with one of the best and most remarkable of these articles. Of course, all will observe, and admire, the humorous, yet very gentle, loving, almost pathetic manner in which Elia describes the person and character of Mary's old usher':[39]

> [T]hough Lamb's articles in that amusing and entertaining miscellany are not very highly finished or very carefully elaborated, they contain many touches of his delicious humor and exquisite pathos, and are, indeed, replete with the quaint beauties and beautiful oddities of his very original and very delightful genius.[40]

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[37] Ibid., 488.
[38] Percy Hetherington Fitzgerald, *Charles Lamb, His Friends, His Haunts and His Books* (London: R. Bentley, 1866). 99.
[39] J. E. Babson, 'Charles Lamb's Uncollected Writings', *Atlantic Magazine*, 14 (Nov. 1864), 554.
[40] Ibid.

This is pretty close, of course, to what Roy Park, in *Lamb as Critic* (1980) calls the Victorian critical establishment's adoption of Lamb as a sort of 'cultural teddy-bear', but its sense that 'Captain Starkey' is one of the 'best and most remarkable' of Lamb's uncollected essays, is, I think, a fair one.

Richard Terry calls the *Essays of Elia*, Charles Lamb's 'beguilingly unreliable rehearsal of himself',[41] and there was something about Starkey's rehearsal of himself which spoke to both Hone and Lamb. Starkey's work - more of a pamphlet really, being no longer than twenty pages long – is elevated to a book, and the pauper elevated to a Captain. The *Memoirs* were used to rustle up sixpences and shillings for Captain Starkey. It would be too much of a stretch to call the memoirs a late Georgian version of a modern street newspaper in the manner of the *Big Issue*, but Hone maintains that Starkey 'may have compiled his "Memoirs", without affixing a price, for the purpose of saying, "what you please", and thereby raising "supplies" by sixpence and a shilling at a time'.[42] 'It is to be observed to his credit', Hone adds dryly, 'that had he made his book more entertaining, it would have had far less claim upon an honest reader'.[43]

Lamb's sense is that Starkey, a person of restricted growth, was similarly restricted in his hardscrabble life before the Freeman's. He sensed a wounded dignity in Starkey, a man who 'thought he had a right to live, because he was a living being'. Despite the mock-heroic register of his title, 'Captain' Starkey – the Hell's Kitchen boozer granted one the most dashing of military ranks, despite the comic poems

[41] Terry, 'Lamb, Shenstone and the Icon of Personality', 124.
[42] Hone, *Every-Day Book*, 2, 486.
[43] Ibid.

written in his tribute (of which Hone's was by no means the first), despite his disabilities, despite his dependence on charity, this was, a man, in Lamb's account, who was 'not originally deficient in understanding', but who was 'crushed by penury into dejection and feebleness'.