

A Portrait of Leigh Hunt

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James Henry Leigh Hunt was born on October 19, 1784, at Southgate, near London, England, where his father, Isaac Hunt, was tutor to the Duke of Chandos's nephew, James Henry Leigh. The Hunts were a colonial family, the father being descended from generations of Barbados clergymen and the mother being the daughter of a wealthy Philadelphian merchant. Leigh Hunt's parents had actually met in Philadelphia where his father had studied and practiced law until his Loyalist sympathies and strong pamphlets in the War of Independence had necessitated his urgent migration to England.

There his wife and four sons—Leigh was the fifth—had joined him and he had entered the church. Thenceforth his career was downward, from fashionable employment and friends, to the Kings' Bench Prison for debt: indeed prison was to be the earliest recollection of the infant Leigh Hunt. The gentle, religious mother, now ill, overanxious, and despondent, was unusually close to this youngest surviving child, and many of his future nervous troubles can probably be traced to this intense childhood empathy with his mother. Leigh showed his intelligence early, and to his parents' credit he was placed in an excellent charity school, Christ's Hospital, where as well as the classics he learned to fight for others but not for himself, to be a martyr and enjoy it. These qualities would last all his life. He also became a stammerer, which prevented, he would claim, his entering university. Certainly his health, both physical and nervous, suffered under the Spartan school regime, but he would always look back with affection on his school days, and in particular on its lasting friendships.

On leaving school, Leigh Hunt published a book of verse, *Juvenilia*, financed by subscriptions canvassed by his proud father and also pondered a future career. After proudly rejecting his brothers' professions of law, art, and printing, he eventually joined his brother John—eight years older than himself—a printer who had founded a newspaper called the *News*. John was stern, strong, politically minded, and above all, dedicated to independence in life and work. His staff, he insisted, must

write the unbiased truth. Leigh, who already loved the theater, became its drama critic, and at a time when most theatrical reviews were a dutiful response to free tickets and dinners, his lively, well-written and impartial assessments were revolutionary and highly successful. They also showed him a new and fulfilling path, for he discovered the headiness of journalistic power. His reviews were noted for their aggression as well as for their independence. It was such success that emboldened John Hunt in 1808 to turn to Leigh for his next main journalistic venture, a political weekly, the *Examiner*. He invited his talented brother to be chief writer and editor.

The *Examiner* was radical and yet careful to remain respectable. John Hunt was a Deist, probably a republican, and certainly a man of iron will dedicated to fighting oppression, but he was determined not to alienate his large and intelligent middle class audience.¹ At the same time he was uncompromising in opposing scandals in the government, the army, the monarchy, in criticizing England's conduct in the Napoleonic Wars and in calling for Catholic emancipation, abolition of the slave trade, and above all for parliamentary reform. Leigh, though not by nature politically minded, was strongly allied to his brother and well qualified to fire his brother's political bullets. Together through fearless journalism they rode the storms of the wartime government's attempted censorship, always maintaining their stance as loyal Englishmen.

Quickly the *Examiner* fell foul of the law. At that time, censorship was imposed by means of actions for seditious libel. These were both costly and unnerving to editors and proprietors, imposing large costs for defendants even in unsuccessful prosecution, and sometimes imposing a type of intimidatory bond for good behavior where the cases were initiated and then withdrawn. By this indirect means an insecure government attempted to censor an unruly press. In less than a year, the *Examiner* was in trouble because an article by Leigh exposed the Duke of York's scandalous selling of army commissions. Fortunately for the Hunts, events in parliament forestalled their coming to trial, and charges were withdrawn. In 1810 they were again charged, for reprinting a purportedly libelous article from the *Morning Chronicle*; but when that paper was acquitted, the charges against the *Examiner* were dropped. In 1811 the brothers did eventually come to court, for exposing the cruelty of army discipline and exclaiming that Bonaparte's men were

¹ Hunt claimed in 1809 that the circulation was over two thousand and in 1812 Jeremy Bentham would write that the *Examiner's* circulation was between seven and eight thousand a week and was in vogue "especially among the high political men." It would have fallen to about four thousand a week by 1817 and 1818. George D. Stout, "Political History of Leigh Hunt's *Examiner*," *Washington University Studies* 19 (1949): 5, 37.

better treated than English soldiers: seditious words in the climate of war. Thanks to the skillful defense of Henry Brougham, a lawyer of literary taste and future lord chancellor, they were acquitted. A year later, the Hunts were on trial again, the most sensational of their career. Like many reformists, Leigh Hunt had become increasingly disenchanted with the prince regent; and an article in the Tory *Morning Post* describing the prince as the glory of his people, a champion of the arts, and an "Adonis in loveliness,"² roused Leigh's resentful pen, and in scathing phrases he called the regent a corpulent libertine and violator of his word. This was clearly libelous, as Hunt knew. The charges were duly laid. An unsure government attempted negotiation, intimidation, and reconciliation but the Hunts would not bargain or yield. In February 1813 they were convicted, John being sent to Coldbath Fields Prison and Leigh Hunt to Surrey Gaol: a triumphant two years of martyrdom.

While in one way Hunt's imprisonment was the high point of his life, in another it was a period of genuine suffering. Back in 1805, soon after his mother's death, he had been afflicted with an extreme anxiety and depression. In the following seven years, he wrote many thousands of words, was much given to convivial visiting, entered marriage and fathered two sons, but this entire period was bedeviled by symptoms of nervous disturbance and physical illness. Thus when he entered prison, the feeling of isolation and helplessness, already present, became acute. His wife and children came to live with him in prison, and workmen transformed his cell into the celebrated poetic bower of trellised roses, a ceiling painted like the sky, books, portraits, busts, and vases. Here his friends visited and even stayed. It was more like a boarding house than a prison. Recognizing his needs, friends and family devised a complicated network of support so that he was never alone, and most evenings were enlivened with wine, music, and good talk. His visitors included Jeremy Bentham, Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, Thomas Moore, Lord Byron: the lights of the reformist literary establishment. Moreover, he managed to edit the *Examiner* as aggressively as ever, astounding the printer with his stamina and energy. In some ways he coped more effectively with his nerves than he ever would again.

In prison Hunt had time to study literature, for he had never relinquished his ambition to be a creative writer, especially a poet. Though he always felt some tension between his poetic role and political journalism, he had managed some literary exercises—for example *Classic Tales*, a critical anthology in 1809—and in 1810 he had set up a short-lived magazine for political and literary writing called the *Reflector*, much

²J. H. Leigh Hunt, *The Autobiography of Leigh Hunt*, ed. J. E. Morpurgo (London: Cresset Press, 1949), p. 231.

of which he wrote, with help from old school friends and his new friend Charles Lamb. The *Reflector* was a milestone in Hunt's life. In it he renewed his interest in poetry and literary criticism, decrying the artificiality of Pope and the French school, a cause he would continue for the rest of his life, and pioneering a new literary form, the familiar essay. Hunt the editor, enjoying a trusting rapport with a weekly audience of devoted readers, found the familiar essay particularly sympathetic to his taste and talents, its intimate and informative style an easy adaption of his editorial utterance. He and Charles Lamb were to break new ground with this essay in the *Reflector*, just as in 1815 he and a newer friend, William Hazlitt, would evolve the style further in the essay series called the "Round Table." In the *Reflector*, too, Hunt for the first time explored the life-enhancing effects of simple, safe pleasures. A depressive himself, he had come to realize the beneficial effect of cultivating positive enjoyment, and henceforth he saw this as a moral duty to himself, and its dissemination as a moral duty to mankind.

During his prison years his approach to poetry changed radically. In 1812 he had called the Lake Poets puerile: now in prison he discovered their revolutionary manifesto in the preface to Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, and from that starting point he began to form his own revolutionary poetic views on subject, meter, and diction. He read also his favorite poets of the past—Spenser, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, and Dryden; and they too influenced his poetic evolution. While he agreed with many of Wordsworth's dictums concerning naturalness of subject and language, Hunt advanced his own bold opinions on subject, style, language, and meter. These theories found practical application in the writings of his prison years, especially in the *Feast of the Poets* which had originally appeared in the *Reflector* and was now refined and enlarged in fresh editions in 1814 and 1815. But it was his narrative poem *The Story of Rimini*, published in 1816, that expressed clearly his new views: a poetic experimentation that fails and yet is full of interest both in its own right and in its significant place in literary history. While Hunt's innovations often did not succeed, they influenced other poets; and John Keats especially would find *Rimini* a seminal work.

The Story of Rimini had a mixed reception. Hunt's friends were rapturous, and even Byron, who later would belittle it, read the manuscript with delight and relatively few reservations. Hunt, however, had many enemies from his *Examiner* pages, and some criticized the poem's idiosyncratic, colloquial style and the sympathetic treatment of incestuous adultery. The Tory *Quarterly Review*, an old enemy, leaped in with a bitter review, which was amplified with savagery and malice by the new *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. It was in *Blackwood's* notorious series of articles that the term "Cockney School of Poetry" was coined, with

Leigh Hunt dubbed as Leigh, King of the Cockneys. The work, tastes, habits, appearance, religion, and even sex life of Hunt and his near friends were vicious targets of these two anonymous *Blackwood's* reviewers, later revealed as John Wilson and John Gibson Lockhart. The attacks over a period of nearly ten years caused Hunt and his circle much pain and would reach a climax, though not cease, in 1821 when John Scott of the *London Magazine* was mortally wounded in a duel with a friend of Lockhart near Chalk Farm.

When Hunt left prison in February 1815, his nerves were deplorable, and for some time his agoraphobia prevented almost any outing. Worse, he was beginning to sink into the morass of debt in which he would flounder for the rest of his life. Byron would later say that to rescue Hunt financially was like trying to save a drowning man who persisted in throwing himself back into the water. The increasing complications of Hunt's indebtedness largely date from these months when he struggled to pay the £500 fine—part of his legal sentence—with promissory notes and with money received from publishers for books as yet unwritten. He had no capacity for figures and his attitude to spending was highly emotional: when depressed he spent money in order to cheer himself up, and when happy he spent to express his exuberance. In his spendthrift ways and in his capacity for positive enjoyment, he had inherited much of his father's nature, just as his satisfaction in duty and martyrdom owed much to his ascetic mother.

At the end of 1816 he moved to the favorite of all his homes: Hampstead, the site of his mother's grave and the place to which, above all others, he felt strongly attached. The place—near enough to London for visiting friends, bookshops, and theaters but sufficiently rural to provide peace and quiet—soothed his jangled nerves and he entered into a happy and fruitful period. The focus of his life was changing. Previously it had centered on his brother John and the *Examiner* to the detriment of his wife and babies. In prison he became a different person, his priorities committed less to John and the paper and more to his wife and three children, and to those literary friends who had so faithfully supported him through his sentence. Inwardly he was moving away from politics and outwardly he felt less need to play the part of *Examiner* Hunt. The *Examiner* had flourished with few competitors, in a wartime England, but this was now a peacetime country with a middle-class readership less interested in reform or tempted to turn to the pages of new radical newspapers.

As the *Examiner's* falling circulation testified, these were to be lean years in journalism for Leigh Hunt but they were to be years of literature and friendship. A book of verse in 1818 called *Foliage*; an *Examiner* with strong literary bias; three volumes of collected poems in 1819;

and a literary journal from 1819-21, the *Indicator*, displayed Hunt's enthusiasm for his literary role.

Meanwhile Hunt had made two of the most important literary friendships of his life. In October 1816 the young, unknown poet John Keats visited Hunt for the first time at Hampstead, and in December Percy Shelley, still unknown as a poet, visited Hampstead. All three were ripe for this friendship: Keats because he was just becoming aware of his full poetic potential, Shelley because he was in personal crisis after his first wife's suicide, and Hunt because he stood at a crossroads and now favored the path of literature. To both these young men, Hunt gave his ardent friendship, dispensing enthusiasm and encouragement and sympathy, and, as a literary critic, he lent them the columns of his *Examiner*. Hunt stands high in literary history because he was the first to recognize Keats and Shelley and was their constant publicist in the early years. Unfortunately he also gave them, by association, the taint of Cockney. To Keats this was especially destructive, and his relationship with Hunt declined from mutual enchantment to resentment at Hunt's lack of genius, coupled with a basic affection that struggled to survive. On the other hand, Hunt's generosity and affection to Shelley were at once acknowledged and repaid. They quickly became dearest friends (dear in terms of "costly," quipped the wits, for Shelley would be Hunt's financial benefactor on a grand scale). Shelley was a lifelong hero, possessively adored as Hunt had once adored his similarly idealistic mother.

Hunt's emotional insecurity turned most of his friendships into stormy affairs. In his friendships with intellectual equals of similar insecurity, both men began by warmly admiring and usually ended by choosing to find fault. With calmer and lesser intellects like the musician Vincent Novello or the writers Charles Cowden Clarke and Charles Ollier, Hunt was able to shine to their joint delight. With more gifted friends like the unstable artist Benjamin Haydon or the brilliant, troubled writers Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt, the path was darker but often was lit with reciprocal affection. His relationship with Byron began with mutual good will and respect and Hunt's own thrill at intimacy with a poetic celebrity. From enthusiastic overreaction, Hunt went to indignant reaction as dependence and too close proximity in Italy bred hurt and resentment that Byron did not understand. On the whole Byron behaved well to Hunt, seeing his faults but respecting his integrity and financing him with generosity.

In his own marriage, Hunt found it necessary to dominate or be dominated. In his courtship days he dominated his Marianne all too forcibly, and his letters during their seven-year engagement show him attempting to transform her to the educated woman he craved. After marriage,

and still uneducated, Marianne would become the stronger, and he, as their son Thornton saw, would be her "child," especially in practical matters.³ In practical matters she was often wrong; this was a cause of mutual ruin, and few of those who would try to assist him could say a good word for spendthrift, alcoholic Marianne Hunt. Of course there were mitigating circumstances. She was a limited, consumptive girl beset by chronic poverty, illness, and a family of ten children; and he was an impractical, insecure, and intensely demanding man whose intellect and friends were beyond her. For much of her married life she shared her husband, emotionally, with her younger sister Bess, who for a time lived in the house and almost certainly was in love with Hunt.

In his postprison years, Hunt shone in literary society where his fluent conversation, ready wit, playful charm, dramatic sense, and fine baritone voice made him a bewitching if sometimes superficial performer. In pursuit of his philosophy of positive enjoyment, he cultivated a simple life-style of wine and music, rural walks, books and flowers and firesides, which he commended to his readers. But as the decade ended, his gentle joys were clouded. Debt, the Cockney school, a declining *Examiner*, Marianne's tuberculosis, and his own illness made his fireside visibly less cosy. By 1820 he was ill, poor, and desperate. Shelley had gone to Italy and wrote persuasively of the cheap living, the sunshine, and the classical culture. Hunt, who since adolescence had loved all things Italian, and especially its literature, sighed to join him. In 1821 Shelley offered another incentive, for he and Byron planned to set up a literary and political journal for Hunt to edit from Italy. The prospect was too inviting to refuse but the one drawback was the fare. Shelley and Byron even provided that, along with a house and means to live, and so Hunt and his family and a milk goat set sail in the autumn of 1821. Alas, the wildest seas sent them back to Plymouth and it was 1822 before they sailed again. In Leghorn, Shelley met their ship for a blissful reunion, before he sailed along the coast to Lerici to rejoin his family. He was never seen alive again.

As Hunt stood on the beach with Byron and watched Shelley's drowned body burn on the funeral pyre, he seemed to sense that a major era of his life was ended. And so it proved to be. Shattered by his friend's death, afraid for Marianne who was desperately consumptive and pregnant as well, he could barely cope. Living virtually as unpaying lodgers in Byron's house at Pisa, the entire Hunt family became resentful and peevish. Nor did matters improve at Albaro to which they soon moved

³ *The Correspondence of Leigh Hunt*, ed. Thornton Leigh Hunt (London: Smith, Elder Co., 1862), I, 111.

in order to live near Byron and with Mary Shelley. His anger, formerly for Byron, was now unleashed as well on Shelley's widow. Meanwhile the magazine called the *Liberal* was in difficulties, and Byron, who had had grave doubts from the beginning, clearly lost interest in both the Hunts and the journal. With Byron's departure for Greece in 1823, the family moved to the expatriate English colony at Florence and found crushing poverty, illness, and depression. Hunt, the lover of Italy for years, at firsthand found little but disillusion; every step around Fiesole made him long for his beloved Hampstead. He would gladly have returned home but he lacked the passage money for the voyage and he could not face the prospect of being arrested for debt, or of trying to resolve the argument with his brother John (from whom he had borrowed heavily) over proprietorship of the *Examiner*. The truth of this tangled legal situation is difficult to unravel, but according to one independent witness, Charles Armitage Brown, Hunt may never have received his proper share from brother John. At forty Hunt felt and looked old and broken.

As Louis Landré has pointed out,⁴ the Italian sojourn cost Hunt dearly, and when he did return to England in 1825 with the aid of a publisher's advance, it was to a fragile base. He had hoped that Italy would improve his finances and raise his reputation: it had done the reverse, and he had severed contact with an integral part of his financial and emotional well-being, the *Examiner*. Now the Cockney school attacks continued, a weekly journal he started up soon failed, poverty oppressed him, and in 1827 his son Swinburne died. In 1828 he compounded his troubles by writing a book which was the folly of his career. Influenced by the rush of popular books on the late Lord Byron, the publisher Colburn persuaded Hunt to turn a volume of general reminiscences into an account of his own relations with Byron. No sooner was his pen in hand than the spleen and bitterness poured out. When *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries* appeared, it created a scandal that almost overwhelmed its author. Hunt was at his lowest ebb. Nobody wanted him or his work. His children had no shoes. Bailiffs besieged his house. To survive he began another magazine, writing almost everything himself, but *Chat of the Week* failed after a few months, as did its successor, the *Tatler*. In extremity, Hunt fought back with the only means he knew: the philosophy of positive enjoyment. But he had so little in reality to enjoy that he had to withdraw into that private inner world where such enjoyment alone was possible. Increasingly this was the half-world where he would live, and that half-world found its way into his mellow and cheerful writings.

⁴ Louis Landré, *Leigh Hunt: Contribution à l'histoire du Romantisme anglais* (Paris: Société d'Édition, 1936), I, 172.

Hunt's lowest point was passed and in the 1830s his fortunes improved. His plight moved his former friends, and people remembered but forgave. The list of subscribers which published his collected poems in 1832 bore the signatures of several old enemies as well as many old friends. A new generation of young writers saw him as the survivor of the glamorous poetic world of Keats, Shelley, and Byron. A young literary lawyer named John Forster excitedly took him up and arranged the private publication in 1832 of a book of unorthodox devotional exercises and meditations, which religiously reinforced his theories of positive living, called *Christianism: Or, Belief and Unbelief Reconciled*. It meant much to Hunt and he would revise and republish it in 1853. Through Forster he met other budding writers like Charles Dickens, and a group of these organized a private pension and agitated for a government pension which was first paid to Hunt in 1847.

In the meantime in 1833, Hunt moved to Chelsea—that combination of town and country he loved, and the second favorite of his homes. It was on his suggestion that Thomas Carlyle became Hunt's neighbor in Cheyne Row, and his firm though clear-eyed friend. Most visitors to Chelsea—and later to Kensington—came away appalled by the thriftless gypsiness of the Hunts' chaotic household. Hunt floated above it all in his flowered dressing gown, reading Chaucer and discoursing on the beauty of nature, with the philosophy of positive enjoyment in full flight. He edited two short-lived magazines and he wrote ceaselessly: essays, articles, poems, literary guide books to London, reworkings and recyclings of former works, and a number of anthologies which he rounded out with essays—often excellent—on literary criticism. Above all, he wanted his readers to enjoy as he enjoyed. He aimed to be an introducer and educator through the medium of enjoyment.

Thus passed the thirties and forties. In 1850 Hunt published his *Autobiography*, a charming book, courteous, mellowed but distant, the work of a seductive self-effacer. He was serene and he was grateful, but life still had its tragedies. In the mid-1840s his eldest daughter and his second son—a delinquent child who had grown into a delinquent adult—had died, but their deaths did not hurt him as much as that of Vincent, his youngest son and favorite child. Tubercular Vincent, born in Italy, had been his father's amanuensis and protector, and as Hunt nursed him through that last illness in the autumn of 1852 they became closer than ever. His grief was extreme. It was therefore the sadder that such anguish coincided with the publication of his friend Charles Dickens's novel *Bleak House*, in which the airy, improvident, objectionable Harold Skimpole bore an instant resemblance to Leigh Hunt. Literary London was agog, and Hunt's friends were aghast. Forster had urged Dickens to change the character before publication and now he and other friends

attempted to keep the knowledge from Hunt. Inevitably, Hunt was told, and he felt deep distress, which Dickens's denials and apologies only partly healed.

Three years later, in January 1857, Marianne Hunt died. Her last years had burdened Hunt, who feared even to leave the house for a moment in case, in alcoholic stupor, she set fire to herself. Marianne, poor woman, had continued to run up selfish debts, beg and lie to his friends, alienate on all sides, but he had kept on choosing to look the other way. His uncomplaining faithfulness showed up much that was best and worst in his nature: his stoicism and loyalty and at the same time his overready acceptance and helplessness.

Hunt was now in his last home in Hammersmith. Here, living from 1853 with his married daughter Jacintha, her author husband, and his grandchildren, he found solace. He had become a literary tourist attraction. Young writers came to look at him—Nathaniel Hawthorne found him a beautiful old man—and Hunt enjoyed their praises. In his seventy-fifth year, he grew feeble, and his old friend Charles Reynell invited him to his house at Putney to recuperate. There, on August 28, 1859, Leigh Hunt died. His death was characteristic of his life. His last words, his son would recall, were of Italy and her enlarging hopes under Mazzini, and his last breath uttered messages of affection for those he loved.

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