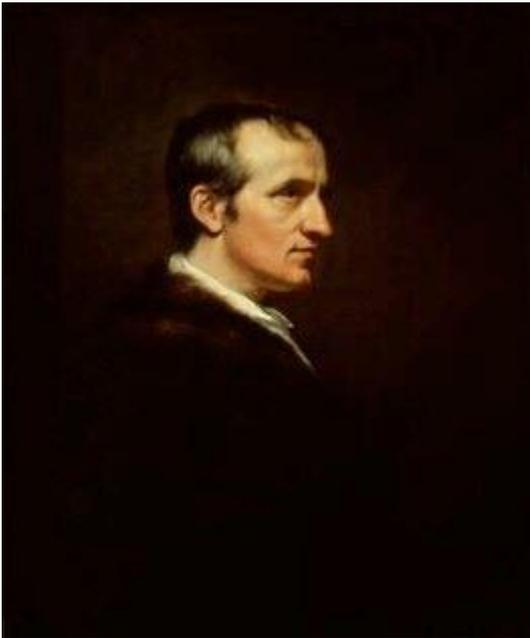# DIGIT.EN.S

The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

William Godwin (and his diary)

PHILP Mark

Keywords

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Abstract

William Godwin kept a detailed diary from the late 1780s until shortly before his death in 1836. It is an invaluable source on the radical sociability of the 1790s and its aftermath. But it raises questions about how he reconciled his extensive sociability with his critique of social conventions, manners and fashion. Recognizing this tension should encourage us to see that the appearance of extensive sociability in his *Diary* disguises a concern to establish strong, deliberative relationships and communication with a select group of people.

William Godwin (1756-1836) was the founding father of philosophical anarchism and was also a major novelist, although he is perhaps better known today as the husband of Mary Wollstonecraft and the father of Mary Shelley. He was the seventh child of thirteen in a family of a Dissenting minister in East Anglia. Against his parents' wishes and from an early

age he sought a career as a Minister and was eventually trained in the Hoxton Dissenting Academy. He was noted for his fervent Calvinism but within two years of starting to practice his vocation he found his religious beliefs evaporating under the influence of the *philosophes* he read – mainly Rousseau, Holbach and Helvetius. He moved to London and sought to support himself by his writing. After a precarious start he was entrusted with writing the British and Foreign History section for the *New Annual Register*, which kept him in moderate circumstances while he read voraciously in philosophical, political and theological controversy.

In 1788, at the age of 32, Godwin made his first diary entry in a small notebook, each page of which he had divided into the seven days of the week. It was to be the first of 36 such notebooks that charted a world of radical sociability until 1836.[1] The entry reads:
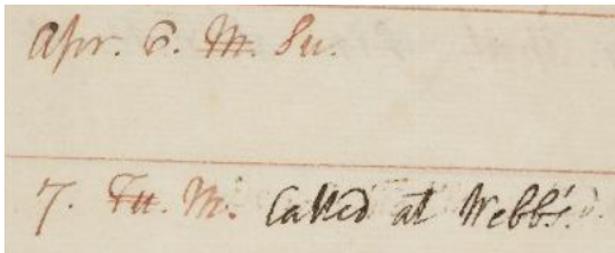
'Apr. 6. M. Su.

7. Tu. M.Called at Webb's.'

The errors suggest that there he was writing up entries from earlier notes, and subsequent episodes in the diary also imply that the version we now have was compiled at intervals from notes which he then destroyed. The first three years were not, according to the diary, especially lively ones. Godwin listed dinners he went to and people he saw, and more occasionally events he participated in, such as attending the theatre, but these were intermittent. The record begins rather imperfectly, but gradually picks up in its detail. In the June of 1791 he came to an agreement with the publisher of the *New Annual Register*, George Robinson, to the effect that Robinson would support him while he wrote a critical study of recent political and moral philosophy. Having discharged other writing obligations, he turned to this task on 4 September 1791, at which point the entries in his diary became substantially fuller and more systematic. He recorded what he read, what he wrote, whom he saw and with whom he ate. He occasionally noted topics discussed, and in later years inserted comments on his declining health, and recorded the morning and evening temperature inside the house. He sustained this level of detail until ten days before his death in April 1836. Nonetheless, the *Diary* is a cryptic source: Godwin's record included no reflection or commentary and it rarely responded to public events – although he added occasional lines like 'Execution of Louis' (on the 21 January 1793). He was similarly reticent about private events – the publication of the

magnum opus that Robinson had funded, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* was recorded on 14 February 1793 as 'publication'.

In the course of the diary over 60,000 names appear. Some are the same name referring to the same person; more challengingly, the same name often refers to different people; and some entries with different names refer to the same person. What is clear is that Godwin led a very sociable existence. He occasionally took breakfast with someone (in the course of the diary he breakfasted with someone some 330 times); he would then work through the morning; and in the afternoon and evening he would undertake rounds of visiting and go to meals at the houses of others (dining on over 4,900 occasions, supping over 3,000 times, and taking tea on 2,000 or more occasions). When he had his own establishment, people visited him much more often than before, but the level of activity was similar (over 20,000 calls by others or to others in the course of the diary). After the first decade of his huge success with *Political Justice*, and subsequently with his novel *Caleb Williams*, or *Things as They Are* (1794), there was a political backlash against the literary radicals but, while there was certainly some decrease in the total volume of visits, the numbers remain impressive.

Scholars have used the *Diary* as a resource for tracking who knew whom, especially in the 1790s, and it can be invaluable for this – with the Lake poets Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey, making appearances; the targets of the Treason Trials Horne Tooke, John Thelwall, Thomas Hardy and others clearly being close associates of Godwin; and with a raft of literary women – Elizabeth Inchbald, Ann Radcliffe, Charlotte Smith, Mary Hays, and of course Mary Wollstonecraft, becoming central characters in the lists of visits paid.

Yet, there is something of a paradox in Godwin's noting of this flurry of sociability into which he cast himself. He saw himself as a philosopher, and a central feature of his philosophical outlook, profoundly influenced by Rousseau, was a disdain for the false manners and decorum of 'society' and the world of fashion. From this perspective, it seems puzzling that he should seem to be so heavily committed to the rounds of visiting, dinning, drinking tea and conversing from the early afternoon until the late evening.
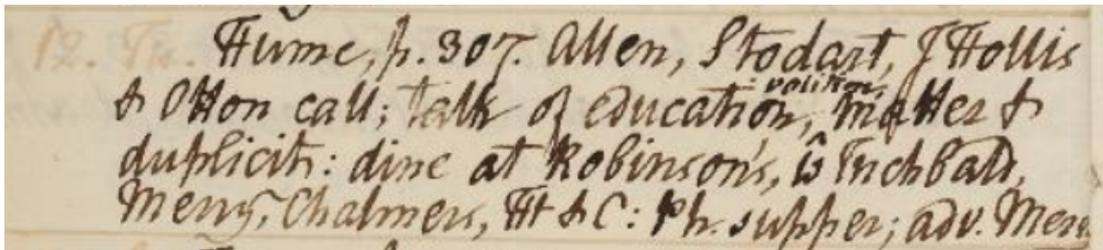
In practice, for Godwin, not all sociability was equal. In many respects it seems he tolerated (one might say endured) a good deal of his social life because he was looking for something very specific from it. If we follow the suggestions of work by Allan Silver and Mark Granovetter, we can distinguish two types of social relation that Godwin had. On the one hand, 'weak ties' of acquaintance, that might prove useful as a way of gaining information, securing invitations, or bridging to others whom he hoped to meet; on the other, 'strong ties' – less in Granovetter's sense of familial relations, and more in Silver's sense of disinterested friendships with people that were not dependent on trade, profession, class or status, and which, in the 1790s, seemed to promise the free exchange of ideas and open discussion.[2]

Political Justice was a manifesto for achieving extensive social and political change through the full and free exercise of private judgement and public discussion. Godwin's commitment to these activities owed a good deal to his background in Rational Dissent but he secularized

those ambitions and, in the heady days after the outbreak of the French Revolution, he actively sought to create relations in which the pursuit of truth through the disinterested debating of ideas was the major aspiration:

> 'if there be such a thing as truth, it must infallibly be struck out by the collision of mind with mind […] All that is requisite in these discussions is unlimited speculation […] once we are persuaded that nothing is too sacred to be brought to the touchstone of examination, science will advance with rapid strides.'3

We can see evidence for his search for deliberative companions in some of the letters he wrote. On 12 January 1796 the Diary notes:

> '12. Tu. Hume, p. 307. Allen, Stodart, J Hollis & Otton call; talk of education, volition, matter & duplicity: dine at Robinson's, w Inchbald, Merry, Chalmers, Ht & C: Ph. supper; adv. Merry.'

For John Stoddart, who is listed second, it was the first meeting with Godwin. Nothing in this entry prepares the reader for the letter he wrote to Stoddart on 14 January:

> 'I indulge with some impatience the hope that you will repeat your visit to me before you leave town. I do not recollect any instance of a total stranger having won so much of my esteem in a single interview, as you have done. I want to know whether in exhibiting so many excellencies you have put a deception on me; or whether, as I rather believe, I have found a treasure.'4

Throughout his long life we can see Godwin seeking out people and trying to engage them in discussion. That he did so was characteristic of the literary circles in which he moved, but the intensity of his engagement and his commitment to disinterestedness were less common. As a result of his attentions he developed a number of close friendships, perhaps especially with

younger men (something that was less common in his circles), which were both important to him, and often transformative for them. These included his relatives, Willis Webb and Thomas Cooper, and Stoddart, George Dyson, Basil Montagu, John Arnot, Patrick Patrickson, and, perhaps most notably, Percy Bysshe Shelley – who ran off with Godwin's daughter Mary.

Another candidate for this group was the young radical Joseph Gerrald, who was an enthusiastic supporter of the cause of reform, attended the Scottish Convention in January 1794, and was arrested and then sentenced to fourteen years transportation. He was sent to London, to await a ship and was held in Newgate from the end of March 1794 until May 1795, before leaving for Australia to die from fever.

We know that Newgate was a relatively convivial place. Richard Newton immortalized the radical presence in the prison in three prints, *A peep into the State Side at Newgate* (July 1793); *Soulagement en Prison, or Comfort in Prison* (August 1793), and *Promenade in the State Side of Newgate* (October 1793), each indicating the social side of prison life – indeed Gerrald appears in the second and third of these.5 Moreover, judging from these prints, and from some of the entries in Godwin's Diary, it was difficult not turning prison visiting into a social occasion. Nonetheless, if we look carefully at Godwin's Diary we should be struck less by how sociable the prisons were, and more by how far Godwin used Newgate as a site for exclusive bilateral conversations with Gerrald. Half of Godwin's visits to Newgate do not register other people as present. The most likely reason for this is that it exemplifies Godwin's commitment to the clash of mind on mind. He was going to see Gerrald for that purpose – not as part of a network of support or solidarity, but as an opportunity to engage in intense conversational exchange that was central to their intellectual friendship.

This leaves us with a major tension in Godwin's diary – between the complex social networks on the one hand, that provide a wonderful opportunity to map circles in London between 1788 and 1836; and Godwin's own attitude to these circles. He clearly valued his connections; and after 1793, he lived in constant interaction with people, many of whom were linked to cultural and literary experimentation, political reform, and challenging the status quo. And in that sense they are 'networks of reform'. But in a profoundly other sense Godwin brings to these networks expectations (perhaps more accurately, hopes) for relationships that are bilaterally intense, mutually educative and fulfilling, morally enlightening – and deeply personally engaging.

These intense friendships were a central feature of Godwin's life, but many of them came to grief. Silver's work is suggestive in pointing to a shift in friendship from interested to disinterested friendship – where there is no instrumentality to the relationship and where it revolved wholly around shared ideas and enjoyment in each other's company. David Hume's convivial Edinburgh dinners might be such occasions. In London in the 1790s, however, the political atmosphere helped to accentuate the hopes and aspirations of many men and women who saw their intellectual exchanges as integral to the progress of ideas and thereby to the progress of society. That gave these relationships more meaning and intensity and attached to them a considerable weight of expectations. But those expectations and the intensity of the exchanges also made them more fragile, both because of their demandingness and because

they sought to set aside convention and customary practice and to ignore the niceties of fashion and social form in favour of reason and discussion in a time when politics became more invasive in its attention to private conduct.

Open and disinterested deliberative exchange lay at the heart of Godwin's utopianism in *Political Justice*. What he and others underestimated was their own embeddedness in and dependence on conventions and expectations and the difficulties of breaking free from these, so that relations involving the opposite sex, matters of money and property, and considerations of class and status, repeatedly proved obstacles to true disinterestedness, candour and the pursuit of truth. In the early 1800s Godwin wrote a manuscript note in his papers listing the many friends he had lost from the previous decade. That list included Dyson, Montague, Stoddart, Samuel Parr, John Pinkerton, Inchbald, James Mackintosh, Maria Gisborne, John Arnot, Henry Dibbin, Hannah Godwin, Amelia Opie, William Bosville, Francis Burdet, and Thomas Kearsley. It is a list that testifies eloquently to the failure of his deliberative ambitions.6

When Godwin wrote: 'Real sincerity [...] compels me not to dare to utter what is false, or conceal what is true. [...] What I know of truth, or morals, of religion, of government it compels me to communicate [...]' (Philp, IV, iv, App. ii, 131), he had little idea how demanding that could be in the social world in which he had begun to move. Godwin sought a truly emancipatory exchanges – but these proved serially evanescent and elusive. Nonetheless, his experiment helps raise profound questions about the inbuilt limits to the radical potential of late eighteenth-century sociability.

1. See, The Diary of William Godwin, (eds) Victoria Myers, David O'Shaughnessy, and Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford Digital Library, 2010) (http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac. uk).

2. Mark Granovetter, 'The strength of weak ties' American J. of Sociology, 78, 6 (1973), 1360-1380; Allan Silver, 'Friendship in commercial society; Eighteenth-century social theory and modern sociology' American Journal of Sociology (95, 6 (1990)), p. 1474-1504.

3. An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, ed. Mark Philp (Oxford University Press, 2013) I, iv, 21.

4. The Letters of William Godwin Vol 1: 1778-1797 ed. Pamela Clemit (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 147-148.

5. David Alexander, Richard Newton and English caricature in the 1790s (Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 36-38.

6. Bodleian Library MS. Abinger c. 32/Dep .b. 227/5.

Cite this article

Further Reading

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On Conversation (1793)