

# As others saw us

## Insights and insults from visitors

by Mary McVeigh

“Having trudged around in the rain, refusing to believe that there is not a single place to eat except hotels on the outskirts of the city, I see a sign for an upstairs restaurant in a darkened building. At the top of steep stairs, a closed door suggests a pool hall or an illicit drinking den – it turns out to be a gloomy restaurant serving alcohol. The décor resembles a restaurant which I used to frequent in the Gaza strip: deep flock wallpaper; on the walls hideous landscapes of improbable tropical islands, a smell of something which is not food...The only feature missing is the Palestinian flag and old men in corner smoking hashish from a water pipe. During the two hours which I spent there, the groups at the tables talked in a conspiratorial manner, heads bowed over their tables”.<sup>1</sup>

Would you ever have guessed that the godforsaken hell hole described here is Armagh? Indeed this is how one visitor described his experience when he found himself with nowhere to go on a wet Sunday night just over ten years ago. Whilst there is no doubt Armagh could be found seriously wanting when it comes to night life there is more poetic licence than accuracy in the picture portrayed. Granted there are more places to eat now than there were a few years back but even in 1997 it was possible to get a meal in a centrally located hotel. The Charlemont Arms has been open for many a long year and has been serving meals seven days a week as far back as most of us can remember.

This portrayal of Armagh in a particularly grim light serves well to remind us that how some-one views a place can be coloured by a whole range of things – bad weather, uncomfortable footwear, a hangover, personal prejudice – to name but a few. We should therefore always take how others see us, either in the near or distant past, with a large pinch of salt or, in other words, never take at face value the accounts of visitors, no mat-

ter how well they are regarded or how elevated their reputations. Brian Lalor, the man who suffered a wet Armagh Sunday may be the editor of the award winning Encyclopaedia of Ireland but he was still prepared to bend the truth for dramatic effect.

### Twiss who took the p---

Whatever we think about Lalor’s negative portrayal of Armagh it is unlikely to be on the scale of indignation felt by many of the Irish populace on the publication of “A tour in Ireland in 1775” written after a five month visit by an English travel writer, Richard Twiss.<sup>2</sup> The public outrage at the unflattering representation of Ireland inspired an enterprising earthenware manufacturer to exploit the situation for his own profit. He produced a chamberpot on the base of which the offending writer’s portrait was painted along with the accompanying verse:

*Here you may behold a liar  
Well deserving of hell-fire  
Everyone who likes may p---  
Upon the learned Doctor T---*

Authorship of this rhyme is attributed to none other than one Anne Whaley whose famous family had Armagh connections. Her husband was John Fitzgibbon Lord Clare, Lord Chancellor of Ireland and architect of the Act of Union of 1800<sup>3</sup> When Twiss came to Armagh however, there was just a slight hint of his caustic comment. He noted that although it was an archbishopric and the ‘metropolitan see of all Ireland’ it only contained ‘a single church’. Interestingly his description of the cross in the market-place: ‘...a cross of two stones, with old basso-relievos, representing Christ on the cross between the two thieves, and some ingenious fret-work’<sup>4</sup> was repeated verbatim in an anonymous traveller’s account of a sojourn in Armagh some thirteen years later.<sup>5</sup> This ‘compleat Irish traveller’, as we might expect from the high

aspirations noted in the long winded title of his work (see endnotes), had a bit more to say about the city. He was one of many down through the ages who, dare one say, became increasingly monotonous in their praise of Archbishop Robinson’s efforts to improve Armagh. However, it is unlikely it would have consistently remained an attractive proposition for so many visitors, particularly those who considered their views could interest or influence others, had it not been for the good archbishop’s efforts.

According to ‘compleat Irish traveller’: “His grace therefore, with ideas truly episcopal, would have Armagh a city not only of courtesy, but in reality, and to effect it, he makes it a condition with his tenants, that they shall all build good houses, and slate them. Nor has he stopped here. He at his own expense, has built and endowed a sumptuous diocesan library, and by his influence and contribution he has erected a magnificent hospital, a college, and even a barrack. His clergy are all following his steps, and new houses, new churches, and spired steeples are every day rising through every quarter of his diocese”.<sup>6</sup>

### Arthur Young found a ‘nest of mud cabins’

Less inclined to exaggeration and flowery turn of praise was the well known and often quoted agricultural reformer, Arthur Young, who would seem to have made it his business to know all the right people. He actually stayed with the archbishop in Armagh as his guest when he toured Ireland from 1776-1779<sup>7</sup>. By the time he arrived in the country Young had already made a name for himself as an authority on farming matters and had several books and awards under his belt including very successful accounts of two tours in England. Apparently he was looking for a new project and a visit to Ireland seemed to fit the challenge.

Indeed he ended up getting a job as Lord Kingsborough's resident agent with responsibility for supervising a large estate at Mitchelstown, County Cork where he stayed for a year.<sup>8</sup>

Fact and figures abound in his description of the farming practices and the manufacturing of linen in the area and they cover all sorts of topics from the type of bulls bred by the archbishop to the observation that the wives of linen manufacturers drank tea for breakfast. As might be expected the endeavours of his host, Archbishop Robinson, are much lauded. Armagh was just 'a nest of mud cabbins' when the reverend gentleman arrived here but thanks to him it was going to become 'a well-built city of stone and slate', Young decreed.<sup>9</sup> Whilst there is no doubt that Young is a useful source for those interested in the socio-economic aspects of Irish society in the latter part of the eighteenth century it is well to remember the perspective from which he viewed things was that of the coloniser.

## A French man with a green umbrella

Of an apparently more lively disposition was another eighteenth century visitor to these shores, a French aristocrat and émigré, Le Chevalier De Latocnaye, who travelled all over Ireland on foot between 1796-7.<sup>10</sup> Armed with letters on introduction he stayed when he could with the upper echelons of society but when circumstances decreed appeared to be able to make himself at home with those less advantaged. He appeared to take a keen interest in the politics of the period and did not seem at all reticent in airing his views. The United Irishmen did not meet with his favour as might be expected from one who was said to have fled from revolution in his own country. One of his comments on the subject was: "I have known cases of men, who having practised the most barbarous cruelties on their compatriots on religious pretexts, affected in the name of United Irishmen, to say that all religions were equal, while they appeared not to believe in any."<sup>11</sup>

On his way to Armagh from Tandragee

he encountered a band of Orangemen complete with orange cockades or ties. This would have been just a year or so after the Orange order was formed. He observed that the 'peasantry seemed very much afraid of them'. He went into one or two cabins to rest himself where he was offered hospitality but not with the same 'air' as he had experienced previously. It was only when he was coming near Armagh that the cause dawned on him. It was after a woman said to him: "Sir I hope your umbrella or the string of it will not bring you into trouble."

Although he laughed at her fears he then realised if she had noticed that his umbrella was 'greenish' and its cord 'bright green' so too could soldiers and it would be 'very disagreeable to have trouble over such a silly thing'. In the interest of health and harmony he cut the offending string.<sup>12</sup>

Although he waxed lyrically about his sojourn in Armagh he was not unaware of the religious discord and sectarian strife at the time which often resulted in violence. "The country in the neighbourhood of Armagh is charming, full of little hills and plains and pretty little lakes. Among the places I saw I remarked, especially Castle Dillon and Drumilly, where I was received by Colonel Spencer, whose acquaintance I had made at Westport in the summer. Certainly there could not be a more agreeable quarter; the country is a little paradise. It is impossible to conceive anything better cultivated or more romantic". However, he went on: "What a pity then that the spirit of discord and fury has laid hold of its inhabitants to the point that might well make one fear to live among them. Every morning there is news of crimes committed during the night. Not a day passes without murders or the burning of houses."<sup>13</sup>

## Of hearts and herrings

In spite of his keenly observant eye and ability to mix freely on his travels it would seem that De Latocnaye has had little written about him. To date information on his life, before he went walk-about, would seem to be very scanty. This is certainly not the case as far as one J.S. Dodd, M.D. was concerned. His entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography is far more interesting than his travelogue in 1801 which is another work with an extravagant title which is virtually a page long.<sup>14</sup>

The son of a Spanish nobleman who fled his native country after a duel took the name of the captain of the ship on which he left after marrying his daughter, Dodd trained as a surgeon and served for a time in the navy. He had literary leanings and published a number of works including, 'A satirical

lecture of hearts to which is added a critical dissertation on noses'. He also wrote 'An essay towards a natural history of the herring'. Obviously a man of many talents he turned his hand to acting later in life but this was only after he had lost his money financing an abortive trip to Russia which he had been conned into taking by the promise that he was to be an ambassador charged with proposing the Czarina to enter an alliance.

It was said of him that he was 'a lively smart little man, with a cheerful laughing face'.<sup>15</sup> No humour however is detected in his writing. Of Armagh it had just this to say: '... a neat, large and well built town situated in the east side of the river Callen, in a rich and populous country, chiefly occupied in the linen manufacture'.<sup>16</sup>



## Dean Swift and 'wild and romantic mountains'

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In view of his history we might have expected Dodd's writing to have been less impersonal and unemotional but we certainly would not have expected the 'scientific tourist'<sup>17</sup> in 1818 to have described Markethill and its environs in the following heightened prose: '...a thriving town about 4m S.E. of Armagh, with good inn. -In the Fews, a wild, barren, but romantic district, the admirers of Dean Swift will be gratified in tracing many spots noted by that eccentric character; especially Hamiton's Bawn, Gosford Castle and Draper's Hill, about 1m. distant. Throughout these wild and romantic mountains there is something very interesting, awful, and grateful, to the lover of nature, elevating the inquisitive mind, and inspiring a strong desire to explore their innermost recesses, and a desire to become familiar with so sublime a solitude.'

This could probably be described as a tourist guide, an early 19th century version of maybe not a 'Lonely Planet', more a Frommer's guide. In the same ilk was the Rev. G. N. Wright's "Scenes in Ireland" published in 1834.<sup>18</sup> He devoted about ten pages to elaborate on 'this elegant and respectable little city', Archbishop Robinson's Armagh.<sup>19</sup> An example of his eloquent prose: "The stately palace, the towering obelisk, the classic temple, that proclaim the taste and munificence of their founder, are now overshadowed by venerable forest trees that interrupt the noontide rays, and shed a solemn grandeur on the scene".<sup>20</sup>

What might be generally described as a more practical guide for the traveller in Ireland was "Leigh's new pocket road-book of Ireland" although when it noted Armagh's assets and the part played by the archbishop in providing them referred to him as 'the virtuous though eccentric primate Robinson'.<sup>21</sup>

An undated book of scenic engravings including one of Armagh by the highly prolific English landscape painter, Thomas Creswick who died in 1869 was also very complimentary: "The city is for

the most part built of limestone, and the streets are paved with the same material, which gives a remarkably clean and solid look to the place. Altogether, Armagh is one of the nicest towns in Ireland".<sup>22</sup> The concluding paragraph pointed out: "The motive of this little book is 'recreative, not political or economical. Still one cannot look back upon a country so beautiful without hoping and believing that there must be better times in store for her;..."<sup>23</sup>

## Two kinds of travel books: 'must see' places or actual accounts

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Essentially there are two kinds of travel books. One lot like the few quoted above which mainly focus on the 'must see' places are effectively guides. Then there are the accounts of visitors' experiences which give people free rein to recount their impressions including their horror stories and air their opinions, informed or otherwise. Most who came to Ireland from across the water in the first half of the nineteenth century belong to the latter group. They often felt obliged to pontificate on what they saw as the moral defects and backwardness of the Irish and few were reticent in putting forward their solutions. Remember these were the years before the period of the Great Famine of 1845 to 1850 when the population had increased way beyond all expectations; there was little industry to speak of and there was insufficient work on the land to keep people employed all year round. Ireland was the 'Third World' of the time and the subject of much debate, reports and surveys if not remedial action.

An example was the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Poorer Classes in Ireland, set up in 1833 and, in the next few years, published three reports, the first of them containing eight extensive appendices.<sup>24</sup> The Commissioners had recognised that working out the real causes of Ireland's 'massive poverty ...was a daunting task' and so engaged Assistant Commissioners to help collect the evidence.<sup>25</sup>

## More miseries than beauties

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One of these, Jonathan Binns, whose brief was agriculture went on in 1837 to publish two volumes dedicated to Queen Victoria, of his experiences gained while collecting evidence. His motivation was to acquaint his fellow countrymen with the 'real situation and dispositions of the Irish people, and to encourage a more practical sympathy for their sufferings'.<sup>26</sup> Despite its title: "Miseries and beauties of Ireland" there was little evidence of much in the way of 'beauties' there was certainly a great emphasis on 'miseries'. As might be expected from someone with agricultural interests Binns devoted much of his discourse on farming and those involved in it. He visited the Gosford estate and various farms on it. One of the tenants he encountered was James Lennon who was thus described: "he was without shoes and stockings; his matted locks informed us that they and a comb were strangers; and his half-witted countenance was altogether calculated to cast ridicule upon the idea of attempting to make such people successful agriculturists."<sup>27</sup> Mr Binns, this serious, sober Quaker gentleman probably ascribed to the notion that cleanliness was up there near to godliness and thus was apparently unable to apprehend that a neat appearance was low on the priorities for a person struggling for survival. He later went on to comment "Very many instances of the good nature and perseverance of these half-naked and half-starved people constantly occurred- instances tending to establish the conviction I had previously formed, that when they can place implicit dependence upon their landlord, they are ready and willing to adopt any system that may be proposed for their advantage." No doubt this explained why Lennon, though 'not a bright specimen' in the eyes of Mr Binns was able to pay his debts and keep his family. He farmed seven acres, had a cow and a pig, owned one loom and hired another which were worked by his two sons.

Whilst Binns comes across as somewhat patronising and paternalistic in tone there is no doubt that he was well intentioned and he does supply some worth-

while insights into rural life and practices such as how mud cabins were built and the employment of women and wages earned. In view of his detailed accounts of rural life it is surprising that his work is not more often cited in works relating to the social and economic conditions of the period and there is virtually no information available about him.

He visited Armagh but was disappointed that he could not get a glimpse of the Archbishop's Palace because of the high walls surrounding it. He noted that other buildings were 'handsome' and the environs 'beautiful' although he also wrote: "In some parts of the town the streets are narrow and the houses nothing better than filthy hovels".<sup>28</sup>

This view was not shared by the Halls who wrote a three volume and often quoted account of their impressions of Ireland in the early 1840s. Armagh certainly pleased them and according to them 'even the lowest alleys have a character of decent and orderly arrangement'.<sup>29</sup> They devoted an entire chapter to the county. 'Few of the Irish counties fill so prominent a page in ancient Irish history as the county of Armagh',<sup>30</sup> they claimed and went on to describe not only some of towns and villages but also gave a full account of the birth and growth of the Orange Order. They too were not averse to voicing their solution to the Irish poverty problem: 'a termination of hostilities between its people on the ground of differences in religion'.<sup>31</sup>

## Newtownhamilton – 'a miserable place'

Another visitor with plenty to say but in fewer words and without any potted histories was Baptist Wriothlesley Noel, an evangelical clergyman who left the Anglican fold to become a Baptist minister and later President of the Baptist Union spent the summer of 1836 touring the 'midland counties' and went on to publish his 'observations on the condition of the peasantry'.<sup>32</sup> Armagh was not on his itinerary but he travelled through part of the county including Newtownhamilton which did not impress him: "Newtownhamilton, the only town between Newry

and Castle Blaney, is a miserable looking place. Here we watered our horses, and from the door of the public house at which we stopped, I counted twelve spirit shops almost within a stone's throw. There were ten more in the street by which we left the place. How many there may be on the whole I cannot say as we had reached

the heart of the town before I noticed them. Multitudes of unemployed men were standing in the street, and many in rags."<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless he was optimistic about the future because in the concluding paragraph of his book he asserted: "Poor Ireland! Ere long she will have our wealth, our civilisation, our laws, our arts, our literature and, as I confidently hope, our religion."<sup>34</sup>

Also with strong religious convictions was Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, born in Norwich in 1790, whose first husband was an Irish army officer with an estate near Kilkenny where she lived for a time. She was a prolific writer of religious tracts and social reform literature including opposition to slavery and the factory system.<sup>35</sup> In her "Letters from Ireland"<sup>36</sup> she recounted visits to various parts of the country including Tandragee Castle where she was the guest of Lord Mandeville, a landlord whose estate management greatly impressed her. She praised the appointment of a Mr Porter as 'moral agent' and his efforts to improve the lot of the tenantry including the establishment of schools with lending libraries. She was particularly fulsome about what she saw as a 'great reform...introduced among the girls in the branch of needlework'. She wrote: "Mr Porter justly observes that teaching children in their rank embroidery, is calculated to give

them a taste for dress, unsuited to their circumstances; he was vexed to see girls able to work a fine collar, cap, or gown,



who could not make a common article of apparel for themselves. Accordingly he commenced by setting all the girls to work on some strong coarse shirts, suited to the wants of the labouring classes; and the increasing demand for these and for school-knit stockings led to a more extensive manufacture than had been dreamed of ..."<sup>37</sup>

## Observations from a well travelled local

Less pretentious but more sensitive and perceptive were the observations made by Thomas Reid. No doubt because he was not a visitor as such because he came from the Blackwatertown area. He was a naval surgeon and prison reformer who had travelled to New South Wales in Australia on board both male and female convict ships and afterwards highlighted the dreadful conditions which prisoners endured both on the ships and on arrival in Australia. He returned to Ireland in 1822 and made an extended tour which he recorded in an immensely readable book which merits reprinting.<sup>38</sup>

He stayed at Blackwatertown and from there made excursions on horseback into counties Armagh, Tyrone and Monaghan. He had this to say about rural Armagh: 'the humblest cottages have a superior degree of neatness, and

convey an idea of comfort beyond what is commonly found even in those of a higher order in Tyrone. Many of the labouring poor in Armagh have shoes and stockings; indeed the condition of the peasantry seems to be much improved, and they appear much more intelligent than the generality of their neighbours. The face of the country is diversified with hill and dale; it is also well wooded, abounds in orchards, and is highly cultivated; it may be justly called the garden of Ireland'.<sup>39</sup>

The Moy also gained his approval. He described it as 'a pretty little village on the left bank of the Blackwater, and verging on the county of Tyrone. Society here is very respectable; most of the persons of whom it is composed, are liberal and well-informed'. However, he was less complimentary about the 'fortified town of Charlemont', which, he said, had 'an ill-attended market on Saturdays, which has long been celebrated for bad beef'.

## Prison better than life outside

Armagh prison was obviously of interest to him and he described in detail his visit there. He recounted how one of the female convicts showed him a letter from her husband, Arthur McCann, on a prison ship at Cork bound for New South Wales begging her to stay in Armagh after her release to commit a further crime so that she too would be transported. She wanted to know if her two children would be allowed to go with her but Dr Reid impressed upon her the 'deplorable situation of unfortunate women in that country'. Whilst she seemed to heed his warning several of her fellow prisoners were not deterred and 'appeared anxious to be sent thither'.<sup>40</sup>

He praised the efforts of the prison authorities in establishing a school for male prisoners, some as old as eighty, who were taught not just to read but to write as well whilst the women were taught to read the Scriptures and do needlework. The food ration for each individual of seven pounds of potatoes, a pint of 'new milk', and a pound of 'best bread' a day with a 'sufficient quantity of salt' also met

with his approval. Indeed he wrote: "Ye wise and good who legislate for Ireland, compare the gaol of Armagh with the cottage of the peasantry!"

Shortage of space has meant that only a few of those who visited these parts in the years before the Great Famine have been mentioned. There are others who also had interesting if not enlightened comments to make and they can be consulted in the Irish and Local Studies Library, Armagh. A second article looking at visitors after the advent of the railways is scheduled for the next edition of *History Armagh*.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> LALOR, B. 'The laugh of lost men: an Irish journey', Edinburgh, 1997

<sup>2</sup> TWISS, R. 'A tour in Ireland in 1775 with a view of the salmon-leap at Ballyshannon', third edition, Dublin, 1777

<sup>3</sup> CARPENTER, A. 'Verse in English from eighteenth century Ireland', Cork, 1998, page 375

<sup>4</sup> TWISS, R. page 86

<sup>5</sup> ANONYMOUS. "The compleat Irish traveller containing a general description of the most noted cities, towns, seats, buildings, loughs and etc. in the Kingdom of Ireland interspersed with observations on the manners, customs, antiquities, curiosities and natural history of that country. Vol. I.", London, 1788, page 194

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, page 195

<sup>7</sup> YOUNG, A. A tour in Ireland 1776-1779, volume , Shannon, 1970 [facsimile of 4th edition London, 1892]

<sup>8</sup> MINGAY, G.E. Young, Arthur (1741-1820), agricultural reformer and writer, Oxford Dictionary of national Biography, 2004-8

<sup>9</sup> YOUNG, p119

<sup>10</sup> DE LATOCNAYE, A Frenchman's walk through Ireland 1796-7 (Promenade d'un Francais dans L'Irelande) translated from the French by John Stevenson, Belfast, 1917

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*., p260

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*., pp255-256

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*., p258

<sup>14</sup> DODD, J.S., The traveller's director through Ireland: being a topographical description not only of all the roads but of the several cities,, twns, villages, parishes, cathedra, churches, abbeys, castles, riverslakes, mountains, harbours and the seats of noblemen and gentlemen on those roads: their antiquities and present state repecting parliamentary representation, patronage, trade, manufacture, commerce, markets, fairs distances from each other, and natural curiosities with an account of their foundations, vicissitudes, battles, sieges, and other remarkable events that have occurred at them – insomuch that this work comprehends in itself, an accurate Irish

itinerary, an extensive Irish gazetteer; an Irish chronological remembrancer; and an epitome of the ecclesiastical, civil, military, and natural history of Ireland, from the earliest accounts to the present year; and every information necessary for the resident, or the stranger. Embellished with two elegant maps; one of the roads and post towns in Ireland, the other of the city of Dublin. Compiled by the most authentic authorities by J.S. Dodd, M.D., Dublin, 1801

<sup>15</sup> BEVAN, M., "Dodd, James Solas (1720/21-1805), surgeon and actor, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2004-8

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p.32

<sup>17</sup> ANONYMOUS. "The Scientific tourist through Ireland in which the traveller is directed to the principal objects of Antiquity, art, Science and the picturesque by an Irish gentleman aided with the communications of friends".

<sup>18</sup> WRIGHT, G.N. "Scenes in Ireland with historical illustrations, legends and biographical notices", London, 1834

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*. p.234

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*. p.231

<sup>21</sup> "LEIGH'S new pocket road-book of Ireland containing an account of all the direct and cross roads; together with a description of every remarkable place...". 3rd edition, London, 1835

<sup>22</sup> "Picturesque scenery in Ireland drawn by Thomas Creswick, R.A. engraved on steel with descriptive jottings by a tourist". London, n.d.g.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*. p.123

<sup>24</sup> BURKE, H. "The people and the poor law in 19th century Ireland". Dublin, 1987

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*. p.25

<sup>26</sup> BINNS, J. "The miseries and beauties of Ireland in two volumes", London, 1837

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*. p.156

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*. p.200

<sup>29</sup> HALL, MR AND MRS S.C. Ireland, its scenery, character etc. [3vols.], London, 1841 p.454

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*. p.453

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*. p.468

<sup>32</sup> NOEL, B.A., "Notes on a short tour through the midland counties of Ireland in the summer of 1836 with observations on the condition of the peasantry", London, 1837

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid* p.83

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid* p.389

<sup>35</sup> LENARD, M. "Tonna (nee Browne), Charlotte Elizabeth (1790-1946), writer and social reformer", Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2004-8

<sup>36</sup> CHARLOTTE ELIZABETH [TONNA], "Letters from Ireland 1837", London, 1838

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid* p.307

<sup>38</sup> REID, T. "Travels in Ireland in the year 1822, exhibiting brief sketches of the moral, physical and political state of the country: with reflections on the best means of improving its condition." London, 1823

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p.158

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p.166