

# “Every Man at Nature’s Table Has a Right to Elbowroom”

GEORGE HARRISON<sup>1</sup> TO DAVID HOLT<sup>2</sup>, 1819

Wandsworth 18<sup>th</sup> 8<sup>br</sup> 1819

DEAR FRIEND,

I sit down to apprise thee of the safe Arrival of thy kind Communication of the 11<sup>th</sup> Inst., with the Packet accompanying it; the Contents of which, of no common Interest, I have read with Attention, & with a cordial Gratification under the Consideration that the poor & the Distressed have so able an Advocate in a Juncture of unprecedented Emergency.

<sup>1</sup> George Harrison (c. 1747-1827), of Wandsworth, Co. Surrey, was a son of Edward Harrison, of Kendal. He was a barrister-at-law. A list of his writings occupies three pages of Smith’s *Catalogue*. An abridgement of *Barclay’s Apology* came from his pen in 1815 and in 1818 he brought out his *Adversaria: or Selections and Reflections on civil, moral and religious Subjects*, etc. He wrote also on the slave trade, education, and capital punishment, and in respect of a Loan Fund for Friends—“married men and widowers with offspring.”

In 1822 the Duke of Gloucester visited Ross, in Herefordshire, and Nathaniel Morgan, a Friend, of that town, shewed him round. “He asked me if I knew George Harrison. I said, ‘Very well,’ and that he was a very excellent man and one of our greatest legislators; he spoke very highly of him and that he was one of y<sup>e</sup> first in Slave Trade, which I had forgotten myself” (xv. 138).

George Harrison, son of George and Susanna, of the Middle Temple, married Mary Coleman, in 1813. He published an edition of the works of Swedenborg and a life of William Cookworthy (c. 1704-1780). He left Friends.

<sup>2</sup> David Holt (c. 1766-1846) was a cotton manufacturer with mills at Holt Town, and a house in Temple Street, Manchester. He accumulated a collection of pictures, then considered large, which ultimately sold for £4,000. He was not successful in business. His son David attained to some celebrity as a poet and was for many years with the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway (v. 20). D. Holt wrote *Miscellaneous Extracts from Various Authors*, calculated to amuse, instruct and edify, with portrait, 1836. He was actively engaged in the local government of Manchester and was the chief promoter of the establishment of a Lancastrian school. In 1843 he published *Incidents in the Life of David Holt . . . during a Period of Forty Years*, in the hope that the sale and knowledge of his “comparative dependence” might help him financially.

The above letter is addressed to David Holt, Chorlton Cottage, Manchester. The original was presented to D in 1921 by Oliver S. Holt.

Thou may rest assured that thy confidential Indulgence, in Regard to the Letters will not in any Degree be abused, but they will be carefully returned, after retaining them, I hope not longer than may be convenient to thee; but in my State of Retirement my Intercourse with my Friends is not so frequent as it used to be in earlier Life.

I am particularly struck with thy Sympathy for the poor & labouring classes. My Opinion is, that every man born in a Country whether England or any other, has as much Right to Subsistence (I don’t mean in Idleness) in *that* Country as any Lord of the Land; in other Words, that *every man at Nature’s Table has a Right to Elbow Room*. And unquestionably it is the first duty of Government to provide such Subsistence. Is it not then deeply to be lamented that in this Age of the World, & under a Dispensation that recommends Love & Goodwill to Men, the Means of effecting such a vital Purpose should rather be expended in the Gratification of Pride, Ambition or Avarice, by the Slaughter of Thousands of Lives & the Dissipation of Millions of Property?

*That* Man, I think, philosophizes the best, who best reduces Science to the Principles of Common Sense, & this seems to be exemplified in Regard to the Science of Political Oeconomy, by what thou has stated both in thy second Letter to the Duke of Kent, & in thy last Letter to the Editor of the *Star*—I mean in Respect to the vast Mass & Weight of human Labour, which presses upon the Manufacturies, the Diversion of a Portion of which to other Purposes, whether to Agriculture or the Fisheries, or other Purposes of profitable Exertion, would of course render the remaining Quantum of Labour more valuable, & such as would afford competent Support to human Life; & here, as I conceive, rests the Upshot of the Matter, & the Quintessence of Relief, if it could be promptly & practically applied by the immediate Exertions of Men of Weight & Opulence, either with or without parliamentary Sanction & Aid.

I have long been acquainted with Robert Owen<sup>3</sup>, of

<sup>3</sup> Robert Owen (1771-1858), as a philanthropist, was associated with several Friends. He wrote *New Views of Society*, in 1812. His model colony was at Lanark, Scotland, and later at Harmony Hall, near Stockbridge, in Hampshire. (This latter became, in 1847, Queenwood College, under George Edmondson, 1798-1863). William Allen was much interested in his work. He published his autobiography in 1857.

*Jnl.* vols. xi-xiii; *Second Period*; *Later Periods*; G. D. H. Cole, *The Educational Ideas of Robert Owen*, 1924.

Lanark, have read his Numbers, particularizing what he calls his *New View of Society*, & have attended his Lectures at the City of London Tavern, but though I think highly of his Benevolence & sincere Wishes to serve the Community, I see no rational Ground whatever to infer that his Project will or can be attended with successful Effect. After his first Lecture I sent a few Strictures on his Plan to the *Monthly Magazine*, which the Editor inserted in his Number for September, 1817, signed Philoponus. His last lecture, at which the Duke of Kent presided, afforded me as little Conviction; but I was glad to notice that the Duke discretely & expressly avoided committing himself, as to the Practicability or ultimate Utility of the Scheme.

Mentioning the Duke of Kent, I am free to say, that from his benevolent Disposition, I feel an interest in his Character & Comfort, which induced me a little while ago to make a Communication to his Friend, Alderman Wood, respecting the Duke's financial Concerns, for which the Alderman, a few Days since was commissioned by the Duke to make me his best Thanks. I wish what I communicated may have a Tendency to add to the Comfort of one, who has on many Occasions, and in so distinguished a Manner, devoted himself to promote the Comfort & wellbeing of others.

I infer, from what thou expresses, the Delicacy that affects thy Mind, lest what thou hast done & art doing may not in some sort comport with thy Character as a Friend, or with the prevailing Sentiments of Friends; but really I see no just Reason for thy being discouraged on that score, surely the characteristic Feelings of the Society for Benevolence cannot upon any sound Principle run counter to thy distinguished Exertions to promote Peace, Harmony & Goodwill upon Earth.

I have said in a late Publication: “We are all sent into this World to do all the Good we can, & every Man is expected to do his Duty,” & I am not prepared to retract what I have said.

I remember, upon a singular Occasion, which occurred many years ago, the 10, 11, 12 & 13th Verses of the 41st Chapter of Isaiah were addressed to me, & I now hand them over to thee, for thy Encouragement also. I don't know whether the sad demoralizing effect of public Houses has ever

particularly struck thy Attention. In this little village of Wandsworth [we] have *twenty one* public Houses which paralyze & defeat every Project to benefit the labouring Classes [and] swallow a large Part of our most burdensome poor Rates through [the] Outdoor poor. On this Subject I have lately sent an anonymous Address to Thos Fowell Buxton to the *European Magazine*, the Editor of which tells me it shall appear in his next Number, but I mention this to thee confidentially, not wishing, & that for a particular Reason, that my Name should be connected with that Address.

I have noticed with Regret what is stated to [have passed] at the late Meeting of our Merchants, Bankers & Traders at the London Tavern. I have indeed regretted that they had not at least petitioned the Prince Regent, to call the Parliament together *immediately*. What did pass seems to have amounted only to this—"Go, be ye fed & be ye cloathed." Poor Comfort for Men in the Depth of Distress! whence may arrive dreadful Irritation. It was wise Advice given by Pythagoras: "Don't stir the Fire with a Sword."

I am apprehensive that thy kindly intended Communication to my late worthy Friend, Joseph Saunders, of Exeter, would not reach him before he died.

I am sincerely Thy Respectful Friend.

GEO. HARRISON.

(The above is confidential.)

Since penning the within I have had put into my Hands an anonymous Pamphlet, ascribed to the Pen of a female Friend, Herrick<sup>4</sup>, late a Schoolmistress at Leicester. It is an Enquiry into the Consequences of the present depreciated Value of Human Labour, etc, etc, in Letters to Tho<sup>s</sup> F. Buxton. I think that thou would like to see it.

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Heyrick (c. 1770-1831) wrote, anonymously, *On the Advantages of a Remunerating Price for Labour*, printed in 1825. This must have been a later edition or another pamphlet on a similar subject.

In the Gateshead Parish Books, under 1684, occurs the following entry: "For carrying 26 quakers to Durham, £2 17s."