

# **British Pamphlets, 19th century – Aydelotte, W.O. Nineteenth Century British Pamphlets at the Newberry Library. The Newberry Library Bulletin 6 (1951): 79-181.**



William Hone. The Political Alphabet. 1830. DA531 1830 .H772.

## **The Newberry Library Bulletin, May 1951**

**By W. O. Aydelotte**

Within the last two years the Newberry has built up a collection of British political pamphlets, mostly of the nineteenth century, which makes an impressive addition to its already excellent holdings in modern English history. The basis of the collection is a group of about 900 pamphlets which formerly belonged to the Carlton Club. These have been supplemented by further purchases, with heaviest concentration on the first six decades and especially on the 1830s and 1840s. Buying for the collection continues.

The great importance of these materials lies in their bearing on one of the most vital problems of the history of nineteenth-century England, the study of political attitudes and beliefs. Victorian England has sometimes been thought of as an age of political stability and self-complacent certainty. Actually, the nineteenth century, particularly in England, was a time of indescribable ideological confusion. It stood undecided and uncommitted both on the extent of the powers and duties of the state and on the selection of the group that was to exercise them. It swayed between alternative concepts of *laissez-faire* and bureaucratic paternalism, of control by the landed interest and control by the business interest, of property franchise and universal manhood suffrage. The newness of the problems of the modern industrial state made thinking about them more confused, and certain combinations or associations of attitudes commonly entertained in the Victorian age appear today simply self-contradictory. We cannot follow these issues within the convenient framework of party politics, for many questions cut sharply across party lines. The parties themselves were dissolving and being reconstituted in new and unfamiliar forms. Thus the prevailing social and political ideas and objectives of the age form a rich and complex pattern which is as stimulating to study as it is difficult to characterize.

For the student, the rich material in this collection can provide flashes of insight into concepts, associations of ideas, and combinations of political objectives that would otherwise be difficult to understand. Pamphlets are especially useful, since in the nineteenth century they played an important role as vehicles of controversy which in our day they have largely lost. But they are fugitive things, hard to re-assemble in any representative fashion a century or a half-century later. It is the great merit of this collection that its core was systematically built up by a private political club in the very years in which most of the pamphlets appeared. Though the Carlton Club was founded only in 1831, its archives contained also materials of an earlier date, many of which were apparently deposited originally at Holland House.

The kernel of historical value in some of the items is not always immediately apparent. The Victorian political pamphlet was a literary form which particularly lent itself to some of the worst rhetorical vices of the age, an excursiveness and an indirectness which both repel and confuse the modern reader. Titles are often singularly unilluminating: *The Crisis Unmasked; Plain Thoughts by a Plain Man; Remedies for Existing Evils; A Fourth Political Word*—the “word,” incidentally, is 221 pages long. Even more confusing, sometimes, are the contents. A Victorian pamphleteer thought nothing of meandering through half a dozen pages before even hinting at his principal business. The author of a pamphlet on political reform, *This Day is Published Some Remarks on Past and Passing Events, with a Peep into the Future*, finds it necessary to preface his argument with a long series of propositions, giving a paragraph or more to each, of which the first three are: that man is naturally a reasonable creature, but moulded by his environment; that government should not restrain natural liberty more than the necessities of a society require; and that a man who justly deserves the confidence of his fellow creatures will spread no dogmas and pursue no projects by which the foundations of society may be affected. Such prosiness, however, often conceals matters of considerable interest, and even the most long-winded effusions are revealing in ways that would have been unsuspected by their authors.

In this brief notice I can do little more than indicate a few of the principal topics. Pamphlets on the Irish question form the largest single group. Church affairs come second, and include such matters as the right of bishops to sit in the House of Lords, redistribution of ecclesiastical

revenues, abolition of pluralities, church rates, the various church bills, and the law of marriage and divorce (including a 213 page narrative of the case of the Marchioness of Wesuneath). Another large segment treats of parliamentary reform: the Act of 1832 and its consequences for the structure of English politics, loopholes in the Act, registration of voters, electoral corruption, and proposals for further reform which include household suffrage, triennial parliaments, the ballot, and colonial representation at Westminster.

Other topics are: The Corn Laws; civil service reform; the Poor Law; public health; freedom of the press; emigration; Sunday observance proposals; the temperance question; the Game Laws; savings banks; impressment; quarantine; usury laws; the code of prison discipline in Louisiana; capital punishment; joint-stock banks; the stamp duty; plans for the British Museum; the People's International League; the right of search; the union of Sweden and Norway; the views of the Liverpool Chamber of Commerce on the proposed limited liability legislation of 1856 (they were against it); and *The Advantages of Historical Reading, Addressed to the Young People of her Native Land*, by a Naval Officer's Wife. These are just a few examples out of many in a collection that is extremely extensive in scope and rich in leads for the study of nineteenth-century attitudes and ideas.