

## CHARLES LAMB'S CIRCLE AND THE PROCESS OF MARKETING CHANGE

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### ABSTRACT

London in the early 19th Century saw a number of entrepreneurial initiatives in advertising and publishing that occurred when opportunities created by a rapidly changing environment were identified and exploited. The author examines the role of Charles Lamb's circle in facilitating such developments, and whether similar groupings today constitute predictors of change.

### INTRODUCTION

Late 18th and early 19th century London holds enormous fascination for the marketing historian. It is the period that saw increasing use of product branding, the appearance of the advertising agent (several decades before Volney B. Palmer in the United States), the recognition of copywriting as a discrete craft, improvements in the social and professional status of journalists, and early unsubtle attempts to use editorial publicity in promotion.

The question this paper sets out to answer is why these developments should have taken place when and how they did. It then may be possible to determine whether the factors and circumstances responsible are unique, or whether they are likely to recur in the 21st century, thus giving further impetus to the development of marketing and promotional practices and institutions.

### THE ENVIRONMENT

This was a time of tremendous economic growth. The population of Britain expanded rapidly from 8.9 million in 1801 (the first national census) to 10 million in 1811 and 12 million in 1821. London was the largest and wealthiest city in the Western world, with one million people in 1801 and 1.21 million in 1821. It was also the center of government, the royal place of residence, and one of Britain's main ports. It therefore also became the center of the growing newspaper industry, because the government at that period was the major source of news, and because additional information might also be gleaned from travelers, merchants, ships' captains, and banking houses such as Rothschild's, all of which were to be found there.

The pervading atmosphere of the period was one of uncertainty as profound changes on a number of fronts were reaching down to the foundations of British society. The enclosure movement, together with the Industrial Revolution which gathered momentum from the middle of the 18th century, brought a movement of population from rural to urban areas, especially London and the new manufacturing concentrations in the north. The French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars brought a threat the established order. This prompted a frightened government to use taxation in an effort to raise the price of newspapers beyond the reach of the general public so that they would not read about such disturbing events. Meanwhile, the prestige of the monarchy, another pillar of British society, was under threat from George III's periods of insanity, and the scandals surrounding the lifestyle and marital problems of the Prince Regent.

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

While the volatile environment provided a suitable setting for change, the actions of individuals were needed to bring it about. This paper focuses on Charles Lamb and his circle, an influential group in London whose interests ranged over literature, poetry, journalism, publishing, and advertising. There was a good deal of interaction between members of the group, a number of whom were involved in more than one of these fields. The ensuing sections present details of the main members of the group and attempt to assess the extent of their interaction. It is not suggested that this was the only such group in existence, but for reasons that will become apparent, it may well have been the most important. In particular it illustrates the crucial role of social bonding as a factor in business transactions and as a facilitator of change.

### Charles Lamb (1775-1834)

Lamb seems to have been the focal point of the group. Although he was often short of money, he was famous for his hospitality of which his friends took full advantage. The conviviality of the "Lamb Suppers" was well known. Lamb certainly seems to have been affected very easily by alcohol, although there was some dispute among his contemporaries as to whether he was an habitual heavy drinker. Worries about money, about family insanity (his sister stabbed his mother), and a serious speech impediment were said to have led him to over-indulge.

The foundation of Lamb's circle of friends had been laid some years before. His father, a man of modest means, was clerk and servant to Samuel Salt, Bencher of the Inner Temple. Salt used his influence to obtain a place for Charles at Christ's Hospital School. Charles spent seven years there, forming a number of friendships that were to be highly important in later life, notably with James White, who became an advertising agent; John Mathew Gutch, who became a newspaper publisher; and the poet Coleridge. The school also provided a common bond between Lamb and Thomas Barnes, editor of The Times, with whom he was to become friendly in later life, although the two were not contemporaries there.

Lamb's regular employment was as a clerk in the East India Office, but he turned to his pen as a means of supplementing his income. The booming world of newspapers provided a ready outlet for his talents, and he later drew upon these experiences in Last Essays of Elia in an essay titled "Newspapers Thirty-Five Years Ago".

In those days every Morning Paper, as an essential retainer to its establishment, kept an author, who was bound to furnish daily a quantum of witty paragraphs. Sixpence a joke, and it was thought pretty high too - was Dan Stuart's settled remuneration in these cases. The chat of the day, scandal, but, above all, dress, furnished the material. The length of no paragraph was to exceed seven lines. Shorter they may be, but they must be poignant.

In this account Lamb states that he moved from the Morning Post to the Albion, which was edited by his friend John Fenwick. In fact, according to Morpurgo (1948) Lamb wrote for the Albion in 1801, moving then to The Morning Chronicle and subsequently to The Morning Post in 1802. He wrote paragraphs and theater reviews for The Morning Post but did not like the proprietor Daniel Stuart who, according to Lamb's friend Southey, rejected two-thirds of Lamb's submissions (Morpurgo 1948).

Lamb also supplemented his income by working as a copywriter for his friend James White, the advertising agent. This, it should be noted, was at a period when advertising agents were popularly supposed not to be involved in the creation of advertisements. On 7 November 1809 Charles' sister Mary wrote to Sarah Hazlitt:

"A man in the India House has resigned, by which Charles will get 20 pounds a year; and White has prevailed on him to write some more lottery puffs. If that ends in smoke, the 20 pounds is a sure card, and has made us very joyful."

Lamb's circle also included a number of other influential figures in the world of publishing. These included Walter Coulson, editor of The Morning Chronicle; Henry Crabb Robinson, at various times special correspondent and foreign editor of The Times; James Henry Leigh Hunt, editor of the Examiner; Ralph Fenwick, at various times editor of the Statesman, the Plough, and the Albion; William Hazlitt, who wrote at various times for the Morning Chronicle, the Champion, The Times, and the Examiner; and Thomas Massa Alsager, a renowned journalist on The Times.

Lamb's entrance into the more serious world of literature also seems to have owed much to his social connections. It was Hazlitt who introduced him to William Godwin, the children's publisher, for whom he and Mary wrote Tales from Shakespeare. Hazlitt also introduced Lamb to John Scott, editor of London Magazine, to which Lamb was invited to contribute occasional essays which were to become his main claim to fame. Later the Lambs were to befriend an orphan girl, Emma Isola, paying for her education and eventually adopting her. She subsequently married the publisher Edward Moxon in 1833, and in the same year Moxon published Lamb's Last Essays of Elia.

#### James White (1775-1820)

White was born in the same year as Charles Lamb, and was educated with him at Christ's Hospital School. He left in 1790 in order to take a post in the school treasurer's office. The school was near to Fleet Street, which was already becoming the center of the rapidly developing newspaper and advertising businesses. It was an area which had many coffee houses and reading rooms which took advertisements for newspapers, and so tended to attract offices of the newspapers themselves. White seems quickly to have grasped the opportunities offered by this new type of business, and in 1800, at the age of 25, he founded an advertising agency. It seems, in fact, to have been only the second of its kind, the first having been established in 1784.

For several years White combined his new activity with his duties at Christ's Hospital, which is said to have been his first client. Eventually, however, the governors of the school seem to have decided that the advertising business was taking up too much of his time, and he left with a substantial honorarium to devote himself to the career of advertising agent. The transition was probably not difficult since he would have had access to many of the leading journalists and publishers of the time through friendships made during his school days and from his membership of the Lamb circle.

Lamb and White remained close friends until the latter's death in 1820. In his essay "The Praise of Chimney Sweepers" Lamb described him as "my pleasant friend Jem White" and lamented later "James White is extinct . . . he carried away with him half the fun of the world when he died - of my world at least." White was signatory to a £500 bond which Lamb needed for his post at East India House, and Lamb stayed with him in the traumatic period after Mary's murder of their mother. It was therefore natural that White would turn to Lamb when he needed the help of a skilled copywriter.

White had a further entree into the world of publishing and advertising. He married Margaret Faulder, daughter of a famous Bond Street bookseller, at a time when booksellers commonly accepted advertisements on behalf of newspapers they sold. After White's death, his widow continued to operate the agency, initially on her own and later in cooperation with her second husband, Richard Barker.

White provides another example of the blurring of the borders between authorship, publishing, and advertising. In 1796 he published The Falstaff Letters, a Shakespearean pastiche. White apparently bore the cost of production himself, since Lamb wrote to Coleridge (28 October 1796) "Poor fellow, he

has (very undeservedly) lost by it, nor do I see that it is likely ever to recompense him the charge of printing." White's friends tried to help as best they could. A favorable review in the Monthly Review in November 1796 is thought to have been written by Coleridge. Lamb, for his part, mentioned the book favorably whenever he had the opportunity. For example, he wrote to Thomas Manning (1 March 1800) "I hope by this time you are prepared to say, the 'Falstaff's letters' are a bundle of the sharpest, queerest, profoundest humours, of any of these juice-drained latter times have spawned [sic]." He also bought copies of the book to give to his friends. He wrote an appreciation of the Letters which appeared in the Examiner (5 and 6 September 1819), and which was reprinted by their mutual friend Leigh Hunt in the Indicator (January 1821). It may be that Lamb was doing rather more than helping an old friend, since both Gutch and Southey declared the Letters to have been a cooperative venture between Lamb and White, a view later reiterated by critics Edmund Blunden and E. V. Lucas.

#### James Henry Leigh Hunt (1784-1859)

Leigh Hunt was another product of Christ's Hospital School. Although Lamb, White, and Coleridge had already left when he arrived in 1792, he formed an enduring friendship with Thomas Barnes. Both were subsequently to be numbered among the preeminent journalists of the age.

Leigh Hunt had articles published in the Traveler while still in his teens, became theater critic for the News (edited by his brother John) at the age of 21, then after a short spell with the War Office joined the Examiner as editor and leader writer in 1808, remaining there for 13 years. According to the entry in the Dictionary of National Biography, "As a journalist no man did more . . . to raise the tone of newspaper writing, and to introduce into its keenest controversies a spirit of fairness and tolerance." He even continued to edit the paper from prison when he received a two year sentence for libeling the Prince Regent.

Leigh Hunt provides an excellent example of how one individual could bridge the gap between commerce, journalism, and the arts. His involvement in publishing management would have made him painfully aware of the importance of advertising revenue, particularly after John Fenwick was committed to the debtors prison following the collapse of his Albion newspaper. In this respect he was fortunate in having access to James White whose position as advertising agent would have made him extremely influential. In addition to meeting White socially at the Lamb's, the importance of attending the same school - even two centuries ago - should not be underestimated. When Leigh Hunt and his brother launched the short-lived magazine the Reflector he was able to call on contributions from Barnes, Lamb, and other friends.

Leigh Hunt was equally at home in the world of poetry. His poems were published while he was still in his teens, and in later life he was friendly with Lord Byron (who visited him in prison), Shelley and Keats.

#### John Mathew Gutch (1776-1861)

Gutch was a friend and contemporary of Coleridge and Charles Lamb at Christ's Hospital School. Initially he went into business as a law stationer, and Lamb lodged with him in 1800 during Mary's "absence". In 1803 Gutch bought the proprietorship of Felix Farley's Journal, one of the nation's leading provincial newspapers, which was published in Bristol.

Gutch soon built an enviable reputation as a provincial journalist and was subsequently to establish a London newspaper, the Morning Journal. However, this venture was unsuccessful, costing Gutch most of his savings and involving him in a prosecution for libeling George IV.

Gutch married for a second time in 1823 and moved from Bristol to Worcester to join his

father-in-law as a banker. Nevertheless, he still traveled every week to Bristol, a distance of some 60 miles, to oversee production of Felix Farley's Journal. He was to continue this routine until disposing of the proprietorship in 1844.

Bristol at this period was an important seaport for trade with the American continent and the West Indies, as well as being a major commercial center. The Journal, therefore, would have been invaluable to businesses wishing to sell to the Bristol market. At the same time, Gutch, as a publisher and banker, would have been well aware of the importance of attracting advertising revenue. Like Leigh Hunt, he was fortunate in being able to call on the services of his old school friend James White, who could channel advertising to the Journal and ensure that accounts were duly paid.

#### Thomas Barnes (1785(?)-1841)

Barnes was also educated at Christ's Hospital School where he became a close friend of Leigh Hunt. Unlike the other members of Lamb's circle, however, he continued his education to university level, graduating from Pembroke College Cambridge in 1808.

Moving to London, he was introduced by Leigh Hunt into the literary circle that included Lamb and Hazlitt. He wrote the theatrical reviews for the Examiner when Leigh Hunt was imprisoned, and in 1817 became editor of The Times. During his early years in London, Barnes was a frequent visitor at the Lamb household. Later, according to one biographer, "He was always ready to assist by the kind word of the powerful journal in which he became most potent, the expanding reputation of his schoolmate and friend" (Fitzgerald 1886, Vol. I, p. 196).

### MINOR PLAYERS

A number of individuals moved on the periphery of Lamb's circle, providing its members particularly with links to the world of journalism. William Hazlitt married Sarah Stoddart, the daughter of Barnes' predecessor as editor of The Times, who was also a friend of theirs. The Lambs were among the guests at the wedding, and later stayed with the couple at their home near Salisbury. Hazlitt became parliamentary reporter for the Morning Chronicle and later its theater critic. After quarreling with the proprietors, he subsequently wrote for the Champion, The Times, and Leigh Hunt's Examiner.

Henry Crabb Robinson was a friend of John Walter II, proprietor of The Times, and through him obtained a post as the paper's correspondent in Altona during the Napoleonic wars. He subsequently had two spells as the paper's foreign editor, separated by an assignment as special correspondent in Spain. He subsequently gave up journalism to pursue a legal career. Although not a regular member of Lamb's circle of friends, Crabb Robinson was a welcome guest at their suppers, and the accounts in his Journal are a useful source of information on the circle's members.

John Fenwick, editor of the ill-fated Albion, figures in three of Lamb's essays, "The Praise of Chimney Sweepers", "The Two Races of Men", and "Newspapers Thirty-Five Years Ago". After the Albion's demise Lamb wrote to Thomas Manning (31 August 1801) about "The two and twenty readers of the Albion (this calculation includes a printer, four pressmen, and a devil)."

Although it is clear from Lamb's essays that Fenwick was a personal friend of James White, the latter was apparently unwilling to support the Albion by means of advertising. In this regard commercial judgement may be said to have triumphed over personal friendship, because a newspaper with such a paltry circulation would have had no value as an advertising medium.

Two famous poets, Coleridge and Southey, had some association with Lamb and his friends.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, another former pupil of Christ's Hospital, was a friend of Southey, with whom he planned at one time to set up an ideal community in America. He also knew Gutch and White, presumably from his school days. Stuart records having met him at a gathering at the Lambs (Stuart 1838a, 1838b). Robert Southey had attended Westminster, another famous school, from which he was expelled for writing an article for the school magazine critical of flogging. His introduction to the Lamb circle presumably came from Coleridge. Southey is an interesting example of how it was becoming possible to bridge the gap between poetry and journalism. Although he became Poet Laureate in 1813, he nevertheless continued to write for the Quarterly Review and was paid handsomely for so doing. Between 1808 and 1839 he wrote 95 articles, for which he was paid L100 each - a remarkable sum by the standards of the time.

Other visitors to the Lamb's included Daniel Stuart, proprietor of the Morning Post; Robert Allen, paragraph writer for the Oracle, True Britain, Star, and Traveller; and Thelwall, editor of the Champion.

#### ANALYSIS

It would appear environmental factors at the beginning of the 19th century created a generalized potential for change, which in turn produced opportunities which were exploited by entrepreneurs. The growth in the number of newspapers occurred because they were able to meet two needs: the need of the public for news about current political developments, and the need of the new class of manufacturers for a means to promote the sales of their products. However, in order for newspapers to be successful journalistically and commercially, they first had to be perceived as respectable (Aspinall 1945). Samuel Johnson had written in 1758, "An Ambassador is said to be a man of virtue sent abroad to tell lies for the advantage of his country; a News-writer is a man without virtue, who writes lies at home for his own profit." The status of journalists thus had to improve before a respectable tradesman would consider reading or advertising in the newspapers for which they wrote.

As the number of newspapers and the volume of advertising increased, so did the need for some method of formalizing and facilitating relations between the press and businesses wishing to advertise. The entrepreneurial response was to be the advertising agency. In some instances these agencies combined the business of advertising with that of supplying news from London to the provincial papers, thus meeting a still further need.

The role of Lamb and his circle in furthering their developments appears to have been considerable. The members lacked aristocratic connections - generally the preferred route to power and influence - but were for the most part educated at one of the best schools in the country, had associations with prestigious members of the legal profession and the arts, and were a major feature of the literary scene. They were thus able to bring respectability to journalism, to publishing, and also to the business of advertising. At the same time, they were prepared to exploit their literary talents for business purposes. They worked for and with each other. Editors such as Barnes and Coulson provided publishing opportunities, members provided other members with introductions to useful acquaintances, and they helped further each other's careers by publicizing and promoting each other's work. White paid Lamb for writing lottery advertisements, Lamb publicized White's Falstaff Letters.

Lamb and his friends were not alone in employing their pens for commercial ends. Mrs. Warren, wife of a well known shoe-blackening manufacturer of the period, is said to have replied to a question about the firm's advertising, "Sir, we keeps a poet." There was some speculation that the poet in question was Lord Byron, whose straitened financial circumstances were well known, and who was rumored to be receiving L600 a year to turn his talents to copywriting - something he did not deny (Turner 1965, p. 55). Recently it has been argued that Byron collaborated with his publisher, reviewers, and public to create a commercial literary persona (Christensen 1992).

## CONCLUSION

It remains to assess whether these events provide a reliable guide to the evolutionary pattern likely to be followed by marketing under similar circumstances, or whether they are unique to the circumstances of the age. In general terms, we may say that a period of social and political turmoil produces a general atmosphere of receptivity to change, which is likely to facilitate the introduction of innovations. It also seems clear that entrepreneurs will seek to identify and exploit the opportunities offered by changing circumstances. Even the issues of respectability and social acceptability, so important in early 19th century Britain, may have parallels today in the way that trade in some developing countries is associated with certain ethnic or religious groups, and the way some advertisers do not wish to be associated with certain media - for example, "Girly" magazines.

Lamb and his circle were able to help bring about change because the range of their interests happened to coincide with certain needs of the time, and because they enjoyed the social status and connections to make things happen. While it is possible that a comparable situation may be found today in certain developing or newly industrialized countries, it appears unlikely in the case of developed markets. Other times require a different catalyst.

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