Rummaging in an old curiosity shop

'The Petition of an Old Uninhabited House in Penzance

to its Master in Town'

and other verses

The Morrab library is like an old curiosity shop. There is no more pleasant way of whiling away an afternoon than in rummaging among its dusty volumes which are a treasure trove of interest, eccentricity and long forgotten controversies. Many of these volumes appear never to have been taken off the shelves but turn out to disguise under their dull titles the secrets of social history and manners, of personal feuds and bitter controversy. It was in this way that I came upon a volume that I do not believe had been opened in decades. The volume has an unpromising title, *Penzance Tracts,* and was among the books donated to the library by the Revd. Prebendary Philip Hedgeland.[1] It contains an eclectic collection of fifteen pamphlets/tracts/poems and sermons which were collected by Hedgeland and expensively bound together in a single volume. Among them is a poem of over two hundred lines entitled *The Petition of an Old Uninhabited House in Penzance to its Master in Town*. The poem is such a curiosity that it cried out for further examination.

The Penzance printer T. Vigurs published the poem for the price of 1s. in 1811 adding on the title page 'with hints to the author of John Bull, a comedy'; the poem was published with notes on some of the lines, some of them in Latin, by the author. There is no information on the author of the poem on its cover.[2] The epigraph on the title page is a Latin tag: *Merito celebratur in Digressionibus Pindari felix audacia* ('The happy audacity of Pindar in his Digressions is rightly celebrated') which is a quote from the sermons of Bishop Robert Lowth on Hebrew poetry at the University of Oxford. Even at the time of publication it must have been an obscure work.[3] The tag is intended to give some information about the content of the poem. The impish author seems to regard the poem as a 'digression' and even hints at a comparison with the great ancient Greek poet Pindar which is a wild exaggeration. The poem must have enjoyed some success. A second edition with an illustration of the old uninhabited

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[1] Prebendary Philip Hedgeland (1825-1911) came from Exeter where he became a Prebendary of the Cathedral. After studies at Pembroke College, Oxford, and ordination he settled in Cornwall becoming curate of Ludgvan (1854-1860) and Vicar of St Mary's Church Penzance (1860-1895). He was a personage of great standing and influence in the town. He became a member of the committee of the Morrab Library in 1855, its Secretary 1868, the Honorary Librarian in 1882 and President from 1889 to his death in 1911. He was a person of wealth and an ardent book collector. After his death most of his enormous collection of books and pamphlets covering a wide range of interests was donated to the Morrab Library.

[2] Although the name of the author and date of publication do not appear on the title page but have been added in pencil to the Morrab library copy of this edition.

[3] Bishop Robert Lowth (1710-1787) was Professor of Poetry at Oxford University and Bishop of Oxford. In 1753 he published his Latin lectures on Hebrew poetry under the title *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum* ('On the sacred poetry of the Hebrews') from which Le Grice quotes.

house and an appendix was published in 1823 by Vigurs and there was a third edition published in 1858 by F. T. Vibert.[4]

The poem is a lament for the past in which the poet contrasts the ancient, ruined house with the contemporary gentrification of Penzance. It is in the form of an address by the crumbling ruin to its absent owner, the 'master in town' of the title. The house, illustrated in the second edition, was in the Alverton Road and was, despite the plea of the poet, demolished in 1824-1825. It was no hovel; the image in the second edition is of a substantial mansion but in a sad state of dilapidation. It has four arched windows flanked by a substantial door at ground floor level and on the floor above six large windows. There is a gate and iron railings and to one side a collapsed archway to another entrance perhaps for admitting carriages.

The advertisement in the first edition sets out the poet's purpose. It refers to the pressure of improvement in the town so that hardly a trace of the existing town will be visible in the future. The poet imagines his poem being consigned to an old chest and forgotten but later found to the great comfort of some Fellows of an Antiquarian Society 'which is now unborn'. He closes the advertisement with a quote of three lines from book 8 (310-312) of Virgil's *Aeneid* [*Miratur, facilesque oculos fert omnia circum …virum monumenta priorum*] in which King Evander of Latium tells Aeneas the history of Latium and shows him around its ancient monuments. Aeneas marvels at what he hears and at the stories of men of old.

The anonymous poet was the Revd. C. Valentine Le Grice (1773-1858) who was the incumbent of St. Mary's chapel, as it then was, in Penzance from 1806 to 1831.[5] He was a man of many parts who was described as ''A wag and wit' and something of a controversialist who crossed swords with the powerful Bishop of Exeter, Henry Philpotts (1778-1869). He was a frequent contributor to the influential Victorian periodical, *The Gentleman's Magazine*. It is not at all clear why he and the publisher chose anonymity but perhaps the poem might not have been considered the sort of literature appropriate for the incumbent to author.

Le Grice was born in 1773 and educated at Christ's Hospital where he became friends with Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), the essayist Leigh Hunt (1784-1859) and the essayist and poet Charles Lamb (1775-1834). He increased his circle of literary friends when he went up to Trinity College, Cambridge, and met the eminent lawyer John Singleton Copley (1772-1863), later to become 1st Baron Lyndhurst and Lord Chancellor, and Christopher Wordsworth (1774-1846), brother of the poet William. Christopher became Master of Trinity College. Le Grice later wrote an affectionate reminiscence of Coleridge in the form of a sonnet in which he recalled how he listened breathless to Coleridge's talk in 'cloister'd walk'.[6] At Cambridge he distinguished himself as a classical scholar where he won a prize for a declamation delivered in Trinity College chapel.[7]

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[4] The first and second editions are held in the Morrab Library. But the Library does not appear to hold the third edition.

[5] See Boase, G.C. and Courtney, W. P. (1874, London) *Bibliotheca Cornubiensis*. vol. 1 p.312.

[6] According to the bookseller's notes inserted in the copy of the secomd edition in the Bodleian Library in Oxford Coleridge, Lamb, Wordsworth and Southey were all critical of Le Grice in private correspondence.

[7] See Boase and Courtney (1874) *l.c.*

Le Grice left London for Cornwall in 1796 to the amazement of his friends and in the process, in the words of his friend Coleridge, 'cutting Miss Hunt'. We hear nothing further of Miss Hunt. He became tutor to William John Godolphin (ob. 1815) son of a wealthy widow, Mrs Nicholls of Tereife House, Newlyn. In 1821 he married Mrs Nicholls. When she died, her son having predeceased her, Le Grice became very wealthy inheriting Tereife House.

He was a prolific poet with a strong line in satire and a pamphleteer**.** A favourite genre of his poetry was the sonnet; some of his sonnets were written as a tribute to or in memory of literary friends like Wordsworth or Coleridge. But his *The Petition of an Old Uninhabited House in Penzance* is a long comedic poem in jaunty rhyming iambic tetrameters about the ruined house which is contrasted with the way in which Penzance is being cleaned up and restored and generally gentrified. It is a lament for the past contrasting the ancient ruin with the modern gentrification of Penzance. Unlike many towns Penzance had paved streets. A theatre had opened in 1789 and the Assembly Rooms in 1791. The first bank opened in 1797. The elegant houses of South Parade were built in 1790 and the North Parade houses followed in 1826.

The poet adopts the conceit of speaking in the voice of the old, ruined house in 'Alverne Street' [the Alverton Road], Penzance who addresses its owner:

> Don't be surpriz'd, my honour'd Master,
> If your Old House, in sad disaster,
> Should find a tongue to lay before ye
> It's [sic] upper, lower, and middle STORY-
> In zig-zag ruin upon my brow
> Of tottering rails, and rotten row,
> Cry out, "Take care," to all below;…
> The Passengers, who daily pass,
> Peep through my broken panes of glass,
> But cobwebs with a friendly veil
> My inward solitudes conceal' (5-10 and 20-22).

The poem must have been written for the benefit of a local readership with topical allusions like Will Toll's Bakehouse, Humphry's Shop and Phillpott's Cakehouse, Will Cock's Back-let, Market-jew street' (89-91). Among these topographical references is 'Woolcock's back let' which Le Grice explains in a Latin entry in the notes to his poem. He says that it refers to the area behind the houses (*posterior pars vicorum sic dicitur*). Using the same polished and polite form of speech instead of 'an ass' we say Jack Bottom, Jack Behind and other similar (*eadem venusta et polita oratione utentes pro Asino dicimus Jack Bottom, Jack Behind, et alia similia*) which suggests that he is referring to a privy. The poem ends with an appeal to the Master not to succumb to modernism but to repair the house's crumbling masonry:

> 'Oh! Then, my ever honour'd Master,
> Have pity on my sad disaster
> And call for mortar, brick and plaister [sic].
> No more I'll moan, no more I'll fret,
> If once I see in our Gazette
> Your house in Alvern Street "To LET"'.

There are some truly terrible lines like:

Chairs untouch'd by mortal bottom,
(If worms had not already got' em,
Time may at his leisure rot'em;) (61-63)

But Le Grice was a serious poet. He knew what he was doing. Such lines must be part of his roguish humour.

Although the poem is intentionally comic it is not without poetic merit as in the lines describing the stream from 'Mardon well' [Madron well]:

Swoll'n with its tributary rills
Devolving from the Maddern hills,
The shoot, which at its foamy spout
Washed all the filth of Rabble-rout (120-123).

Le Grice goes in for subtle word play; among the detritus of the deserted house and in its wine cellar he notes 'the Bottled Bier'. In his notes he insists that this is no misprint. 'If empty bottles are called "dead men", surely it is not too bold a metaphor to style the shelf, which supports them, a Bottled Bier'. He then goes on in the notes with an imagined debate between Doctors A, B, C, D, E and F which might take place at some future date: 'If my epistle had been found in the corner of an old chest some centuries hence'. It is a satire on the learned debates which were conducted by scholars on textual emendations to manuscripts. He finishes this imagined debate with the comment: 'Oh Shakespeare, Brother Bard, if thou hadst used my precaution, Thou wouldst not have so suffered by commentators!''.

Le Grice's classical learning is never far below the surface of his poetry, and he must have expected at least some of his readership to savour its subtlety.

The poem contains one whole line in Latin. In describing the arms of the town on the old market-house with the carved head of John the Baptist he adds a line in Latin: *Et marmore ostendit duro* (And it appears in hard marble) (168).

He writes that 'The horses of the storm' go prancing 'in quick successive turns' (145-146) through the horrors of the muddy streets carrying the town's 'Beaux and Belles' to dinner, supper and dancing. This is a subtle reference and a contrast to the horses of the Sun driven by Phaeton. In classical myth Phaeton drove the chariot of his father, the Sun. The chariot had four horses named Aethon, Eous, Phlegon and Pyrois. But in his notes Le Grice informs us that the names of the two horses of the Phaeton of Penzance driving the Beaux and Belles to their revelries were named Doctor and Smiler: 'I had their names from their Driver's own mouth, who stopped a moment and readily informed me'.[8]

Then there are the damsels of Buriton, another name for Penzance, (128-129) who fill their urns morning and evening from the water shoot. They are compared to the Muses 'circling the fount of Hippocrene'. This a covert reference to Horace *Odes* 3 13 where he writes of the Blandusian fountain *Loquaces/lymphae desiliunt tuae* (Your babbling waters leap down) and

[8] There may be a further irony. In classical myth Phaethon came to a sticky end. He lost control of the horses and came plunging into the sea.

splendidior vitreo (More splendid than glass) (126-129).[9] The irony is that Le Grice's water shoot is of the purist water while Horace's Blandusian fountain was disfigured with goat's blood.

Appended to the published text of the poem is a letter addressed to the editor of the *The Cornwall Gazette* by Le Grice although he has not signed with his name.[10] It is clear from Le Grice's notes that his poem was a riposte to a play entitled *John Bull* by the Victorian comic playwright George Colman, the younger, which he had seen at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden in London and which disparaged Penzance. He adds as a kind of addendum to his poem six lines at the end:

> If you think Poetic diction
> Adopts the source piquant of fiction,
> And that Penzance with all its gaieties
> Is not so splendid as I say it is,
> Peruse some prose hints to that droll man
> The comic Writer, Mr. Colman.[11]

He rails, in satirical prose, against Colman's abysmal ignorance and prejudices about Penzance. 'Imagine my surprise at finding the vicinity of Penzance represented as a desert moor, and that too with the uncouth name of "Muckslush Heath"'. His letter was published in the *Cornwall Gazette* on 15th November 1803**.**

The second edition with an illustration of the old uninhabited house and an appendix was published in 1823 by Vigurs, who adds a detailed promotional page on the last page, and there was a third edition published in 1858 by F. T. Vibert. The second edition was considerably embellished but is still without the name of an author and is much more commercial in intent. The price is now 2s. 6d. The publisher has included on the back page a notice of his services with details of his stationary as well as 'School and Children's books, bibles, prayer and hymn books, in various bindings as well as 'a well selected assortment of genuine perfumery'.[12] It has a second and much longer advertisement exploring the same theme as the first in a mock-heroic style. The author says that he was acquainted with the "Old House's Amanuensis' who had suggested some additions to the poem. It is a suggestion which he rejects. He writes: 'My dear sir, I grant you that the Library, the Geological Museum, the Bathes, the Dispensary, the Quay are all subjects of praise; but my Muse, whose sparrow wings may support her flight, or rather fluttering, about the walls of an Old House, shrinks from such bold soaring'. It contained a view of the old house on the front cover page and additional verses by Le Grice. The additional verses all had a connection to West Cornwall and would have resonated with a local readership, which is, no doubt, why they were chosen. A vein of melancholy nostalgia runs through most of them. There is a sonnet

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[9] The irony is that in Horace's ode he addresses the Bandusian Fountain with the words: 'You will also be counted among the famous fountains because of the song I sing'. A classical scholar would have picked up the reference and the irony,

[10] *The Royal Cornwall Gazette* was first published in 1803 under the full title *Royal Cornwall Gazette, Falmouth Packet & Plymouth Journal* and continued publication until 1917. It was Conservative leaning.

[11] *John Bull, as performed at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden* (Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, London, 1806).

[12] Unfortunately, the Morrab library copy has lost its cover page. It was owned by one William Roberts who must have acquired it in 1839.

entitled '*On to the Old News Room at Penzance'*. The newsroom had been established in 1799 and appears to have been something of a gentleman's club. The sonnet is a celebration of the newsroom as a quiet retreat, 'sheltered and warm' from 'the demon of destruction' that raged in the town at the time. The poem is signed 'An Original Member'.[13] In '*Lines addressed to An Old Pleasure House'* Le Grice describes how the Old Pleasure House was built 'with promise fair of many a happy day' but now 'wild moss along thy path is spread and ruins moulder nigh.

Oh! let not from thy weed-clad cell
One leaf removed be;
Where Melancholy's wont to dwell,
Is Pleasure's house to me'.

His poem '*Inscription for Lanyon Cromlech in Its Fallen State*' is a romantic reflection on the passing of the ages while the cromlech has stood lonely upon its silent hill:

The naked Britain has paused to gaze
Upon the pond'rous mass, ere bells were chimed,
Or the throng'd hamlet smok'd with social fires.

According to a footnote to the text the cromlech, which is now restored, had collapsed on 19th October 1816 on the day when the boat Delhi was wrecked in a tremendous storm near St. Michael's Mount.

There is a sonnet addressed 'To Visitors at the Land's End' which also ends in lines of melancholy at the passing of time:

Pause at your Country's bourn: and, as a day
So won from other revolving years
May ne'er return, or marked by smiles or tears
Embalm it here by some romantic lay.

The poem was in fact written on 25th October 1819 in the album at the Land's End Hotel in response to the Landlord's appeal in the form of a poem of three stanzas begging visitors not to deface the walls and windows of the hotel with pencil markings and other scrawls but 'Before your first and last farewell/Pray write your names with in it [this little book]'. The publisher has then added an appeal to visitors at Land's End 'to add your name to the List of Subscribers to the Penzance Dispensary' followed by a copy of a six-verse hymn composed by Le Grice in c.1805 'on the First Institution of the Dispensary at Penzance'.

One poem stands out as different in tone from the others. *'Lines written for a Fete in Penzance, given in Celebration of the Princess Charlotte's Birthday ,1814'* when the Princess would have been eighteen**.** They are anything but melancholic but when they were published in 1823, they were tragic. They are a joyous celebration of the Princess 'whose future story/shall rival great Eliza's name,/ and mingle with an Anna's fame'. Princess Charlotte of Wales (1796-1817) was the daughter and only child of the dysfunctional marriage between King George IV and Caroline of Brunswick. She was, therefore, the heir to the throne on the deaths of her grandfather, George III, and father, George IV. She was a feisty young woman who refused her father's preferred choice of husband, William Hereditary Prince of Orange, and insisted on marrying Leopold of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfied, the future King of the Belgians.

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[13] The 'demon of destruction' is not identified but since Le Grice was writing about the development and gentrification of Penzance he may be referring to Dr Borlase, the Mayor of Penzance, in 1811 who was responsible for many of the improvements in the town.

They were married in 1816, but Charlotte died in childbirth to great public sorrow the following year aged only 21.

Le Grice wrote other comedic poems of which perhaps more later but *The Petition of an Old Uninhabited House* for all its comedy gives an insight into the life of Penzance at the time. These were boom years for Penzance. The Napoleonic wars were raging so the continent was shut to the usual travellers from England and Penzance provided something of an alternative.