THE HARVEST OF FAILURE: EBENEZER RHODES (1762-1839)

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In the *Dictionary of National Biography*, the entry for Ebenezer Rhodes occupies three-quarters of a column as compared with the four and a half columns devoted to his friend James Montgomery. And the restrained, not to say gloomy, tone of the D.N.B.'s remarks on Rhodes's personal circumstances suggests that his achievements merit little more than a brief notice. Yet in his day — that is to say, for upwards of fifty years — Ebenezer Rhodes was almost as celebrated among the *cognoscenti* of Sheffield and district as, say, Samuel Bailey, Thomas Asline Ward and James Montgomery himself. Admittedly, Montgomery's conspicuous position as editor of *The Iris*, and his association with a number of philanthropic and religious organisations did much to enhance his reputation, quite apart from the standing he attained as poet and critic. Many of Ebenezer Rhodes's writings appeared anonymously, which means that a full and adequate assessment of his literary status is not easy to arrive at.[1]. The aim of this paper is to advance the view that in spite of serious frustrations, Rhodes's career as a man of letters was at least one of unique promise; his various publications entitle him to a kind of esteem enjoyed by few other early nineteenth-century authors resident in Sheffield.

(I)

Ebenezer Rhodes was the subject of a 'Memoir' by John Holland, published in *The Reliquary* for January 1863. This is an altogether more satisfying biography than the one offered by the D. N. B.; but it contains a number of inaccuracies and passes over some important aspects of Rhodes's career. Unfortunately, it is impossible to verify many of the statements Holland makes about Rhodes's formative years: such, for example, as the claim that 'being encouraged by some of his friends with the notion that he had talents for an actor, he spent a season on the stage.' This conclusion is not supported by Rhodes's single published drama. In an article on 'Broomhall Spring' in Volume III of *The Hallamshire and Derbyshire Magazine* (30 March 1833) Rhodes recalled the time when he was 'a boy at Mr. Eadon's school, now more than fifty years ago' — a reference, presumably, to the 1770s. But the facts of Rhodes's youth are obscure. John Holland enlarges on his close friendship with James Montgomery, and certainly the two men were intimately associated for a long period. But since Montgomery did not arrive in Sheffield until 1792 — when Rhodes was already thirty years of age — the latter's taste for literature and the drama must have owed something to the influence of others besides Montgomery. We can well imagine that an ambitious young man serving an apprenticeship in Sheffield at the end of the eighteenth century would have been glad enough to join the informal gatherings such as Robert Leader speaks of in his *Reminiscences;* but there is reason to believe that initially Rhodes may have derived less stimulus from Montgomery than from Montgomery's master, Joseph Gales. For it was Gales, the proprietor of the *Sheffield Register* (1787), who was perhaps the strongest force acting upon the formation of public opinion in Sheffield during the Revolutionary era.

Evidence that Rhodes was in contact with Joseph Gales and his circle is found in *The Trial of Henry Yorke*, published about 1795. This establishes that he appeared at this trial — held in York — and submitted to cross-examination. From Rhodes's testimony we learn that he had been present at the fateful meeting at the Sheffield Castle Hill on 7

April 1794, when Henry Redhead Yorke addressed the Sheffield populace: the main outcome of this gathering was that the Crown decided to prosecute Yorke, thereby implicating Joseph Gales, who shortly afterwards fled the country under suspicion of having uttered seditious literature. The printed account of this trial shows that Ebenezer Rhodes was on very good terms with Gales, even though he was not himself a member of the Sheffield Constitutional Society; yet it is quite clear that he was more than casually interested in contemporary political events. The nature of his position is suggested by an answer he gave to Henry Yorke's question: 'What do you think was the general tendency of my speech upon the Castle Hill?' Rhodes replied: 'I conceive it was to advise the people to be very orderly in their conduct, to disseminate political information, and that your ideas extended to no greater a degree than that, and by that means they would become sensible of any abuses in the mode of election or representation.'[2] This — with certain modifications — constitutes a fair summing up of Rhodes's own convictions. He was at this time radical in disposition, though disinclined to militancy; persuaded that there was need for reform, he advocated lawful and reasonable adjustments rather than any violent transference of power.

According to a statement he made in 1812, Ebenezer Rhodes had then been in business for twenty-one years. This takes us back to 1791, by which time he was well established in the cutlery trade. But it was not until after the turn of the century that his participation in civic affairs brought him conspicuously to notice. His efforts in support of social amelioration took many forms. He was, for instance, a leading figure in the establishment of the Association for the Prosecution of Felons. A society of this name, to which Joseph Gales and David Champion (afterwards in partnership with Rhodes) belonged, existed in the 1790s. Its objective was to bring malefactors to justice and to assist on a voluntary basis the work of the constables, of whom in 1807 there were still only sixty-one in the whole of Sheffield. The Society was reconstituted in 1804, and as an 'acknowledgement of his Public Service in the establishment of their Institution' the members of the 'Association for the Prosecution of Felons and Receivers of Stolen goods' presented Ebenezer Rhodes with a silver cup of considerable value (*Iris* 23 August 1808). At about the same time, Rhodes was elected Master Cutler, and in this capacity he was called upon to convene meetings at which important resolutions were drawn up. Even when his term of office had expired, he was much in demand. In 1810, for example, he took the chair at a meeting held to consider the affairs of the notorious Col. Wardle. A public subscription was floated to help defray expenses incurred by Wardle in his apparently estimable attempts 'to stop that torrent of Corruption which has always been found not only destructive of the Rights of the People but fatally dangerous to the existence of Government itself'. For a time the country was impressed by Col. Wardle's efforts to uncover the scandals associated with the name of Frederick, Duke of York, then in command of the British army. But little did Ebenezer Rhodes and his fellow townsmen realise that although the principles on which Wardle acted may have seemed worthy of support, the Colonel's own private affairs were totally disreputable. Within a matter of months this would-be champion of the public good was unmasked and dislodged from his seat in parliament.

The year 1810 was a very active one for Ebenezer Rhodes. In June he took the chair at a public meeting of 'from Seven to Eight Thousand of the Inhabitants of the Town and Neighbourhood of Sheffield', assembled 'to take into Consideration the assumption of Privilege by the House of Commons, of imprisoning His Majesty's Subjects for Offences cognizable in the Courts of Law; the subject of a Parliamentary Reform: — and the propriety of returning Thanks to Sir Francis Burdett for his services to his Country . . .' The 'Resolutions' printed on the front page of *The Iris* for 12 June 1810 constitute a powerful manifesto, the formulation of which must have been largely Rhodes's work. In this same month of June he was placed on the Committee of the Sheffield Humane Society, which had as its object the spreading of knowledge about life-saving and the possible resuscitation of drowned people. In December 1810 he was invited to join a committee formed for the purpose of supplicating the government for a 'Police Act' for Sheffield. Like many others Rhodes was evidently much exercised by

the need to secure private property and to improve public amenities. As it happened, another eight years were to pass before the 'Act for cleansing, lighting, watching and otherwise improving the Town of Sheffield in the County of York' received Royal Assent (May 1818). But when this came about Ebenezer Rhodes was appointed one of the Commissioners charged with the duty of putting the act into effect. Rhodes also gave his support to the movement for abolishing the practice of employing 'climbing boys' as chimney sweeps. But perhaps his most notable contribution to public welfare was the work he did in connection with the rescinding (1812) of the Orders in Council.

On 7 July 1812 the *Iris* published a chronological *résumé* of the Orders in Council since 1806. Introduced to frustrate the policies of Britain's enemies, the Orders in Council had the effect of depressing trade, especially between England and America. The serious recession of 1810-11 induced Lord Brougham to order an enquiry into the situation, and submissions were heard from provincial manufacturers. At Sheffield three representatives — John Bailey, George Naylor and Ebenezer Rhodes — were chosen to give evidence at Westminster; and in the 'Examination of Mr. E. Rhodes' it was revealed that after trade began to decline in 1811, Rhodes's firm had been forced to lay off a quarter of its work force. In Sheffield generally, Rhodes stated, goods were having to be sold at much reduced prices: pocket knives, for instance — normally very much in demand on the American market — were now fetching less than sixty-six shillings a gross, as compared with the usual price of ninety-six shillings. The effect on employees was calamitous, the pawnbrokers doing a roaring trade. Eventually the Orders in Council were revoked, and the valuable cutlery exports to America largely restored. We must not, of course, over-estimate the importance of the testimony offered by the Sheffield deputation: other cities also sent representatives. But Arthur Aspinall makes the important point that 'this was the first occasion on which the new industrial interests triumphed over the Government, and (that) further instances of their growing supremacy over the old landed aristocracy must soon be expected . . . .'[3] A consummation of this kind was exactly what Ebenezer Rhodes looked for; he did not, however, live long enough to see it realised fully in practice.

We have no means of ascertaining the extent of Rhodes's private means from the time of his becoming Master Cutler. He could hardly claim to rank among the major industrialists of Sheffield, though he was credited with a high standard of professional competence. Yet as John Holland pointed out, the dissolution of his partnership with David Champion in 1813 conspired with the growing spirit of trade competition, and other causes, to 'narrow the basis of his business action . . .' At his premises in the Wicker, he specialised in the manufacture of scissors and razors. In an advertisement dated 1828 he quoted an extract from the fourth volume of Samuel Parkes's *Chemical Essays . . .* (1815, 1823) in which the author commends the particular alloy used by 'Messrs. Rhodes and Co. of Sheffield' in 'what they call the 'NEW FRAME-BLADED RAZOR'. . .' After the break with Champion, Rhodes remained in business for many years, producing, among other things, an especially fine type of steel plate for use in mezzotint engraving. But from about 1815 it would appear that his literary interests began to occupy more and more of his time. He fancied his chances in journalism, and for some years had a hand in the editorship of the weekly *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent* (1819); his contribution to the *Northern Star* and the *Hallamshire and Derbyshire Magazine* will be noticed in due course. His more ambitious publications were mainly issued by subscription, and it is said that he lost money on them. But throughout the 1820s he continued to play a part in public affairs, serving on the Committee of the Sheffield Subscription Library and patronising the Sheffield Shakespeare Club. There are references to Rhodes in the *Tagebuch* of the German metallurgist J. C. Fischer, who visited Sheffield in 1825. Fischer solicited from Rhodes an opinion as to the quality of the steel he was using in his own factory, so Rhodes's workmen put this to a test; Rhodes then wrote a short testimonial on the subject.[4] But by the mid-1820s, Rhodes's business was declining, and in 1827 he was declared bankrupt. He survived another twelve years; but was forced to fall back on what John Holland calls 'the grateful beneficence of his friends, including the Duke of Devonshire,

Sir Francis Chantrey, James Montgomery, and John Bailey . . .' Chantrey, with whom Rhodes had long been associated, arranged for him to receive a regular allowance; this, and the good offices of James Montgomery saved the Rhodes family from complete destitution.

Rhodes is numbered by R E. Leader among the 'rational dissenters'; there is, however, no firm indication of religious affiliation on his part. In 1831 he supported Samuel Bailey's nomination as prospective MP for Sheffield; but intellectually Rhodes was not on the same level as the 'Hallamshire Bentham'. Yet in Pawson and Brailsford's *Illustrated Guide to Sheffield* (1862) this 'merchant and manufacturer' is classed with 'Other Notabilities' such as Barbara Hofland, Joseph Hunter, Samuel Roberts and John Holland. Portraits of Rhodes were executed by Chantrey and William Poole; it is on the strength of his artistic connections and literary efforts that he has been remembered by more recent authorities.

(II)

Rhodes's first substantial publication was *Alfred, an Historical Tragedy. To which is added A Collection of Miscellaneous Poems, by the Same Author.* This was issued in 1789 by Joseph Gales, who was himself one of the subscribers. Of the 'Miscellaneous Poems' — brief and unpretentious verse essays which utilise conventions followed by scores of eighteenth-century poetasters — hardly anything can be said in commendation. The Odes to Poesy, Bacchus, and Contentment show little originality, and the effusions addressed 'To Maria' and others are in no case 'Aided by Johnson's nervous line' ('Ode to Poesy' IV) as the author no doubt hoped they might be. The one poem from this collection which may be said to transcend commonplace is 'A Pastoral Epistle from Damon to Collin' which, despite its hackneyed theme and predictable phraseology, at least presents a reasonably fresh idea of the plaintive lover assessing the nature of his despair.

But if the 'Miscellaneous Poems' will hardly bear a second reading, the drama of *Alfred* is not devoid of merit. An address 'To the Reader' tells us that the story is taken from the French of M.d'Arnaud: but the actual historicity of the play is very much in doubt. The action opens with Eldred and Egbert, urged on by their sister Ethelwitha, informing their father Albanac of the desire they share to join forces with Alfred in the national struggle against the Danes. Albanac approves of their resolution, but is troubled in mind by the suspicion that Alfred is entertaining a partiality for the fair Ethelwitha. Determined to satisfy himself that the king's intentions are honourable, Albanac confronts Alfred and learns that the monarch does indeed aspire to make Ethelwitha his wife. After hearing something of Alfred's strategy, Albanac finds it impossible any longer to think evil of him, and concludes:

> Heroic youth! when England's good thy zeal
> Demands, no other cares are thine. Pardon,
> Pardon me, Heav'n! that I have dar'd suspect him
>
> (III.2)

Thus are the differences among the Saxons smoothed over and 'unity' assured.

Meanwhile, in the camp of the Danes there is contention over another female — Cristina, daughter of King Guthrem. Originally promised by her father to Hardune, it turns out that Guthrem would really prefer to bestow her on a rival chieftain, Haldane. This unwise move has the effect of transforming Hardune into a dangerous malcontent. So when Alfred, disguised as a minstrel, turns up in the Danish camp, Hardune obtains his revenge by betraying military secrets to the Saxon interloper. Subsequently, Hardune is slain by Haldane. But in the finish Guthrem, guilty of carousing with his officers when he ought to be preparing for a state of emergency, is obliged, after an encounter in single combat, to submit to the superiority of his adversary; or, as he puts it:-

> Alfred, thy nobleness of soul amazes me.
> This cursed ambition, the bane of monarchs,

Has led me on too far — and yet can I behold
With admiration, the noble flights of
An heroic soul —

(V.16)

So the play ends, with Alfred, having packed Guthrem off to Denmark, returning to Ethelwitha with the sounds of victory ringing in his ears.

It is, we may think, a victory that has been won too easily: the 'heroic' nature of Alfred is something the play asks us to take very much on trust, since the action does little to enforce it. In the Prologue to *Alfred* the author writes:-

E'en now, methinks, *your* would-be critics say,
'What! — a mechanic dare to write a play?'

Throughout there is indeed ample evidence that this is the work of a tyro. It is printed as blank verse: but only occasionally does an authentic verse rhythm assert itself. Here, for example, is Albanac in Act I Scene 8:-

By heaven! your preference,
Join'd with these endearing marks of friendship
Unimpair'd, joys me as much as when, in
One engagement, side by side we fought, and
Drove those Danish chiefs, Hastings and Leff, back
To their own domains; or, in conjunction
With the valiant Odun, tore from the hand
Of warlike Hardune, the magic standard
Wrought by Ivar's sisters; that standard which
So oft has led the superstitious Danes
To undeserving victory!

This is sadly lacking in verve; but before we dismiss Rhodes's effort as 'rhyme doggerel', we should ask ourselves where it has gone wrong. It is clear that the dramatist has taken care to equip himself with the copious store of what he regards as true dramatic language ('joys me as much', 'their own domains', 'the valiant Odun'); but he has not succeeded in discovering how to make what he wants his characters to say assume an appropriate metrical form. Yet if the dialogue is at times falsely rhetorical, the narrative as a whole is handled with some skill, and the motives which prompt Alfred on the one hand and Hardune on the other are following through in a way that carries conviction. Like William Ireland's *Vortigern* (1796), Ebenezer Rhodes's tragedy of *Alfred* may not now be worthy of revival on any stage; yet its primitive simplicity has a kind of rough integrity that commands respect. The mechanic's 'first production', for all its lack of sophistication, was not entirely futile.

(III)

Had Ebenezer Rhodes left us nothing but *Alfred*, his name would have remained in more or less total obscurity. His interest in artistic pursuits, however, led him to abandon poetry and drama in order to attempt prose works which, as he hoped, would find acceptance among connoisseurs who shared his own enthusiasms. Rhodes's *Essay on the Manufacture, Choice and Management of a Razor* (James Montgomery, 1809; George Ridge, 1824) hardly calls for detailed treatment here, expertly written though it is; his major achievement, unquestionably, is *Peak Scenery, or Excursions in Derbyshire,* for which a prospectus was issued in 1815. This ambitious undertaking was published at intervals between 1818 and 1823, the four separate parts costing twenty-four shillings each, or £3 for the large-size edition. A one-volume edition without illustrations was issued in 1824. Part of the attraction of the work lay in its being illustrated 'with engravings by Messrs. W. B. and Geo. Cooke from drawings made by F. L. Chantrey, Esq. Sculptor, R.A.' *Peak Scenery* had a long list of subscribers, including the Dukes of Bedford, Marlborough, Norfolk and Devonshire who availed themselves of the 'Imperial' edition limited to fifty copies. Locally — if guide books and other items of

tourist literature are anything to go by — *Peak Scenery* enjoyed a considerable celebrity for many years. As recently as 1962, K. C. Edwards, R. H. Hall and H. H. Swinnerton in their study of *The Peak District*, after surveying earlier accounts of Derbyshire, wrote 'It was left to Edward (*sic*) Rhodes in the early nineteenth century . . . to establish for the Peak a lasting reputation as an area of beautiful scenery with many attractions for the tourist.'

We must not conclude from this, of course that there was any shortage of books on this region before Rhodes's time. The 'wonders' of the Peak had been celebrated poetically by Thomas Hobbes and Charles Cotton in the seventeenth century; of later date were William Bray's *Sketch of a Tour into Derbyshire and Yorkshire* (1777) and Dr. John Aikin's *Description of the Country . . . round Manchester* (1795). Other authors to whom Rhodes was indebted include James Pilkington, compiler of the exhaustive *View of the Present State of Derbyshire . . .* (1789) and Edward Dayes, whose 'Excursion through Derbyshire and Yorkshire' appeared as part of *The Works of the late Edward Dayes*, edited by E. W. Brayley in 1805. The writer who, in Rhodes's opinion, might have done justice to the beauties of the Peak — William Gilpin — had, unfortunately, 'treated Derbyshire with apparent indifference', possibly feeling that after the Lake District this area lacked impressiveness. This is fair comment on Rhodes's part; but we must remember that Gilpin's desire to establish the presence (or absence) of recognisably 'picturesque' elements in the scenes before him — horror, immensity and so forth — sometimes led him to pass rather hasty judgements, which are reflected in his very idiom of expression. His characterisation of Dovedale, for example, in Section XXIX of his *Observations, relative chiefly to Picturesque Beauty . . .* concerns itself with the 'grand, solitary, pointed rock . . . which by way of eminence is known by the name of Dove-dale-church . . .' and he is happy to observe that 'It's rising a single object among surrounding woods takes away the fantastic idea; and gives it sublimity . . .' Rhodes's account of the same scene employs a more measured prose style — reminiscent now of Johnson, now of Scott — to suggest the totality of the prospect before him. Rhodes, too, notices the 'mighty pillar of insulated rock', and goes on: 'The forms of some of the rocks are peculiar, perhaps fantastic — yet accompanied as they are, with a variety of beautiful foliage, hung with ivy, they are not only interesting, but even picturesque objects . . .' It is useful to compare this with Edward Dayes's vision of Dovedale: '. . . It is of that high cast of character, which Pallas holds among the females in poetry. Borrowdale, in Cumberland, is sublime from its magnitude; yet, being destitute of wood, it wants the power to please: all there is barren and desolate; here beauty reigns triumphant. Delightful Dove-Dale! In thee Nature exhibits one of the finest of her productions! Beautiful spot! . . .' Among Rhodes's virtues as a man of letters is his ability to establish a mean between the curtness of Gilpin and the rhapsodic enthusiasm of Edward Dayes.

Not that Ebenezer Rhodes underestimated the significance of Gilpin's achievement. In Part II of *Peak Scenery* he incorporated a passage from Gilpin's description of the River Wye into his own account. But he recognised that minute itemisations of scenic features are likely to give rise to a certain tediousness and that, indeed, the very language of natural descriptions has its limitations, since 'the choicest terms become tiresome from repetition, and the impression they produce faint and imperfect.' For this reason, Rhodes decided to vary his purely topograpical material with disquisitions on other subjects of collateral interest. He was, of course, convinced from the outset that Picturesque landscape had a unique ability to afford sustenance to the mind. 'That heart must be cold indeed,' he writes, 'which can contemplate the finely diversified view which nature here presents without experiencing sensations that for a moment at least, exalt the soul above the considerations of this sublunary sphere, and all the petty cares and interests it involves' (II.60). Yet he is conscious that an appreciation of 'nature' embraces much more than the mere study of 'beautous forms'. He takes into his purview the actual structure of the earth beneath him, the meteorological conditions that have helped to shape the landscape, the ecological characteristics of the localities passed through, and the human *fauna* peculiar to the areas surveyed. At first glance

Peak Scenery may appear to be a curious miscellany made up from oddly assorted pieces of information. In fact, it is a work designed not merely to illustrate the varieties of landscape contained within a relatively small geographical radius but also to show how a frequentation of such an environment prompts certain types of reflection on the part of the author.

Many passages could be quoted to demonstrate the acuteness of Rhodes's 'vision'; he had the true artist's capacity for noticing the features which give particular localities their individual charm. The following occurs in this account of Stonnis, which he regarded as a place unequalled in Derbyshire: 'The parts of which it is composed are of the first order of fine things, and they are combined with a facility that but rarely occurs in nature. Scarthing Rock, the woods of Wellersley Castle, Matlock High Tor, the hills of Massen, Crich, and Riber, are all noble objects; and the rude masses that constitute the foreground of the picture are thrown together, and grouped and coloured in a manner strikingly picturesque . . . An hour at Stonnis on such a day impresses the mind with a series of beautiful images, which in after life are often recurred to and recollected with delight.' (III.105-6) Not all of *Peak Scenery* is as impressive as the passage from which this is taken, though there are pages of comparable quality which carry similarly Wordsworthian overtones. But, unlike some other writers, Rhodes does not regard the obtrustion of the 'poor laborious natives' as necessarily an impediment to his enjoyment of the natural scene. There are many times when every prospect pleases: but the notion that only man is vile seldom occurs to Rhodes. Of Buxton, Gilpin had written that it was 'surrounded with dreary barren hills; and steaming, on every side, with offensive lime-kilns . . .' But for Rhodes the existence of such amenities at Stoney Middleton only enhances the prospect: 'The romantic pictures of this dale,' he writes,' are often essentially improved by the fires of the lime-kilns, with which it abounds; the volumes of smoke sometimes throw an obscurity over the objects of Middleton Dale, which increases their effect, and occasionally imparts a sublimity to the scene . . .' (I.36). The fact that industrial enterprises are to be found in such rural places as Hathersage, Cressbrook and Tideswell is not necessarily deplorable. But when, at Broad Bottom Bridge, Rhodes finds that the presence of a factory is visibly deleterious, he is moved to protestation. 'Man scarcely every meddles with the scenery of nature,' he observes, 'without imparing its beauties, and at this place he has been eminently successful. Rocks have been removed, and a situation scooped out of the picturesque banks of the Etherow for the erection of mills, and the noise and clatter of machinery have succeeded to the solemn stillness that once pervaded this retired dell.' (III.42)

Coming as they do from one who was himself an employer of labour, Rhodes's comments on the industries of Derbyshire are of especial interest. At Cressbrook he does not go so far as to confirm the glowing account given in Mrs. Mary Sterndale's *Vignettes of Derbyshire* (1824) of the excellent conditions under which juvenile labour was employed there; but he does express confidence in the ability of the superintendant to treat his charges well. About the position at Tideswell he is less happy. In 1789 James Pilkington had written of Tideswell 'It contains about two hundred and fifty-four houses, and one thousand inhabitants. In it there are a few hand machines or jennies for spinning cotton; but the chief dependence is on the mining business.' (II.410). In Rhodes's time the spinning and weaving of cotton occupied nearly one half of the population. 'I was surprised,' he writes, 'to find that the moral-murdering system of congregating a great number of boys and girls together in the same factory, had ramified so extensively into this part of the Peak of Derbyshire; it is no doubt a source of wealth, but may not the riches thus acquired be obtained at the expense of public morals? . . . ' The concern expressed here is compatible with that which induced Rhodes and his friends to take up the cause of the Sheffield chimney sweeps. Such interpolations as the passage just quoted are reminiscent of the eighth book of Wordsworth's *Excursion* (1814); and if it should be objected that they are out of harmony with the rest of a work addressed primarily to the tourist and the lover of nature, one can only insist that Rhodes saw humankind as intimately associated with the natural processes dependent on the soil for their livelihood and therefore too significant to pass over as of

less consequence than their habitual surroundings.

Much more could be said about Ebenezer Rhodes's antiquarian interests, and about his geological speculations, which are informed by up-to-date knowledge of earth sciences. Sometimes a political note is struck when, as a sympathiser with the plight of Mary, Queen of Scots, he shows contempt for the 'exorbitant power of the nobility, and the miserable situation of the Roman Catholics in the days of Elizabeth'; in reflecting on the Pentrich rebellion of 1817 ('one of the most silly and absurd attempts that ever entered into the contemplation of men') he must have recalled the case of Henry Yorke over twenty years earlier, for he writes: 'Under such circumstances (when a number of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire operatives took up arms, largely at the instigation of Jeremiah Brandreth), it was worse than cruel to send spies and informers among them to make then rebels, that they might be punished for being so' (IV.107). On the score of 'human interest' there are two aspects of *Peak Scenery* which are worthy of notice. Rhodes seems always to have been conscious of the phenomena of accident and fatality. He dwells at some length on the consequences of the plague which entered the village of Eyam in 1666, and takes over from James Pilkington the story of the Irish clergyman who perished in a misadventure with a horse in Dovedale. He is also fascinated by the plight of the man or woman who is in some way an outcast or 'deviant' from normal society. At Buxton, for instance, he interests himself in the case of the young man of Werther-like disposition 'who evidently laboured under the effects of a strong mental depression.' A little further on we have the history of Crazy Kate, whose reason 'was overthrown by the intensity of her feelings'; later we hear of the stray Hindoo encountered along the road who, on being interrogated, explained that he had left his native India in a vessel bound for Hull, but 'when he arrived there he was no longer useful, and was therefore discarded . . .' These unusual characters would no doubt appear strange to a man who, like Rhodes, had spent most of his life in well-regulated social intercourse. But it may not be too fanciful to suggest that individuals such as he singles out are generically akin to some of those who form the subject of poems by Wordsworth, such as 'Ruth', 'The Mad Mother' and 'Alice Fell'. The most remarkable parallel between the two writers, however, occurs in Ebenezer Rhodes's account of the environs of Matlock. On his way from Willersley House he passed a small lead mine, called Mouse Hole, which was worked by 'one poor solitary individual, apparently about eighty years of age, industriously pursuing his daily avocation..' The old man explained how he worked without any assistance, entering the mine in order to fill a bucket with lead ore, and then returning to the surface with the product of his labours. 'The dull unvarying monotony of this man's employment in no way affected his spirits,' we learn; 'though old and poor, he was naturally cheerful; his little mine afforded him but a scanty subsistence — yet he observed, bad as it was, it was his best friend, for it had supplied all his wants, which were now so very few. . .' (III.115). And Rhodes concludes, quaintly: 'I could go buffets with myself, for having any time indulged in a repining spirit, when I think of this poor miner, delving in his little mouse-hole den, through eighty years of existence, without a feeling of discontent.' Did the author of *Peak Scenery* know his 'Resolution and Independence' as well as he knew 'Tintern Abbey' — quoted on the title-page of his Part IV? It is difficult to resist the impression that, whether Rhodes were conscious of the fact or not, the miner at Mouse Hole was *his* version of Wordsworth's Leech Gatherer.

These notes do not by any means exhaust the interest of *Peak Scenery*. Rhodes shows himself to be unusually well-informed on such subjects as architecture, archaeology, social history and local lore. He can take issue with established authorities on such matters as the composition of the medicinal waters found in Derbyshire and the mineralogical deposits of the Peak areas; when he comes to write about such places as Ilam and Chatsworth he reveals considerable ability as an art critic. His attempts at moral and philosophical speculation, on the other hand, are marred by an unfortunate kind of pompous solemnity ('The lesson of mortality taught by the silent monitors that crowd these hallowed receptacles,' etc.) which is hard to take seriously. Such passages are not, however, numerous enough to detract from the general value of *Peak Scenery*.

As for the sketches by Sir Francis Chantrey, it can only be added that these give evidence of facility rather than depth; but they do make a very suitable contribution to the whole.

(IV)

Part I of *Peak Scenery* was reviewed in *The Northern Star, or Yorkshire Magazine* for May 1818. 'The pen of Mr Rhodes, like the pencil of Mr Chantrey,' said the reviewer, 'delineates rural scenes with a facility which has been seldom attained even by the best writers, and his composition is at once distinguished by taste, judgment and feeling. . .' Such high praise as this led the author, not unnaturally, to attempt another work of the same kind. The result was *Yorkshire Scenery, or, Excursions in Yorkshire* (1826). In his dedication to Viscount Milton, Rhodes declared that 'The Part now published, is issued as a specimen of what may succeed; if it fail to excite an interest in the county to which it relates, the fault, I am aware, will be solely mine.' No second part of *Yorkshire Scenery* did in fact appear, so we must conclude that it did not attract public acclaim. As it stands, the book covers only a small part of Yorkshire and the 'delineations' are by artists (T. C. Hofland, William Cowen and Robert Thompson) of less consequence than Chantrey. All the same, this work, despite its limited scope is in no sense inferior to *Peak Scenery*: indeed, in some ways it reveals a firmer grasp of material and more assured command of the 'excursion' genre. In his first section Rhodes expounds a convincing rationale for his procedure. Starting from Gilpin's dictum that 'few men know how to take a walk,' he enlarges on the fact that there is far more around us than we habitually take notice of. The very multifariousness of nature is an invitation to cultivate an extended vision among the objects that surround us. The sustained appreciation of nature thus becomes a means of mental and spiritual improvement, as the custom of 'nature-worship' among the poets testifies.

There is, of course, nothing strikingly original in these observations, or in Rhodes's remarks (Section IX) on the varieties of taste discernible among different people. What makes *Yorkshire Scenery* remarkable is the fact that although Rhodes keeps up his interest in the beauty of the landscape, and once again produces some notable accounts of places like Tickhill and Roche Abbey, he also gives us a lively presentation of the Don Valley and its environs in an age of significant transition. Wisely correcting Edward Dayes's characterisation of the country round Sheffield as *'poor* and *flat'*, he sketches out the amenities of the district in a manner slightly different from that employed in *Peak Scenery*. He is concerned, among other things, to communicate his sense of the Spirit of the Age — an age in which the more far-reaching effects of industrial and commercial developments can already be anticipated. Wandering among the ruins of Roche and other places, Rhodes tries to account for the pleasure he derives from visiting scenes of past splendour. 'It is not the period when these structures flourished, of which we are enamoured,' he tells us: ' no! they were days of misrule and oppression; and such as mankind would, at all times, be glad to be emancipated from.' (p. 18). Clearly, Rhodes would not wish to endorse Robert Southey's view that Englishmen were better off in the days of Sir Thomas More. All the same, he finds it a matter for regret that modern 'improvements' have too often been accompanied by a decline in moral rectitude. 'Feeling for the character and reputation of the place where I have spent nearly the whole of my life,' he writes, 'I may, I trust, be permitted to express an honest solicitude — that one branch of its manufactures at least (i.e. Sheffield plate) may remain uninjured by that false notion of gain which often defeats its own object.' (p.36). The suspicion that the present may be a time in which riches can too easily be obtained 'at the expense of public morals' (to quote *Peak Scenery*) seems to have been something of an obsession with Ebenezer Rhodes.

To the student of industrial archaeology Rhodes's masterly account of the Rockingham Porcelain factory renders *Yorkshire Scenery* a source-book of inestimable value; in this volume, unquestionably, antiquarian and circumstantial interests predominate over the love of the picturesque, which means that Rhodes's descriptions of natural

scenery are less ample than those in *Peak Scenery*. Some of the most attractive writing concerns Conisborough Castle: 'In this view,' we learn, 'the declinations of the hills, independently of their sylvan clothing, and the objects with which they are adorned, present a variety of graceful outlines that play beautifully amongst each other, and delight the eye of the spectator. The castle, the winding river, the woodland scenery, with meadows of the freshest verdure intermixed, and enriched with modern mansions, furnish altogether a combination of forms and objects but rarely united in nature. . .' (pp. 125-6). In this particular instance Rhodes seems happier when describing architectural features or when taking issue with the historians as to whether Conisborough really is the 'grave of Hengist' than when attempting to delineate the picuresque *per se.* As in *Peak Scenery* he puts in a word for the unfortunate and the obscure — in this case a Sheffield musician by the name of Bradbury who was accidentally (?) killed at Wickersley, and John Bigland, the Yorkshire schoolmaster who achieved fame as an author relatively late in life. But when speaking of the various country seats set in the landscape he surveys, Rhodes calls to mind two individuals — the Earl of Effingham and Samuel Walker — whose moral and political principles strike him as outstanding. At the time of the American War of Independence, the Earl resigned his commission in the British Army on the ground that England had no right to make war against the Americans simply because they resisted an unjust system of taxation. 'When the duties of a soldier and a citizen become inconsistent,' the Earl told the House of Lords on 18 May 1775, 'I shall always think myself obliged to sink the character of the soldier in that of the citizen' (pp. 63-4). From what we know of Ebenezer Rhodes's early career, we can well imagine that the motives which prompted Effingham's decision would make a strong appeal to him. Samuel Walker (1715-82) was a Captain of Industry *par excellence,* and Rhodes devotes a good deal of attention to his career as a factory-owner at Masborough. Rhodes's father had been Clerk and General Manager at Walker's Iron Works, so what he has to say is of especial interest. 'In politics,' we are informed, 'he (Samuel Walker) was unalterably attached to the constitution of his country, but he was a whig and a reformer, and he lived in times when these characters were an honour, not a reproach. He hated war, and most of all, the war with America, because he considered it unjust, tyrannical, and oppressive. The considerations that he applied to public affairs, influenced the transactions of his private life. . .' (p. 150). Such, in short, is Ebenezer Rhodes's idea of a true-born Yorkshireman; and it may not be going too far to trace somewhere in the Walkers' dissenting background the origins of Ebenezer Rhodes's own political sentiments.

After *Yorkshire Scenery* Rhodes directed his literary efforts into two main channels — topography and periodical writing. He now attempted to make further use of his knowledge of Derbyshire by setting it out in a form which would make a popular appeal. The one-volume edition of *Peak Scenery* (182 4) dispensed with pictorial illustrations, but contained 'Road Sketches' (with mileages) and a map of Derbyshire, showing in different colours the routes followed by the author in his various itineraries. In 1831 appeared a slim volume called *The Palace of the Peak, or, Chatsworth. . .* printed by J. C. Platt, of the *Sheffield Courant.* Four years later this was revised and enlarged with the title reversed to read *Modern Chatsworth, or The Palace of the Peak*; in 1837 it was re-issued with only a few minor alterations. In the same year Rhodes brought out an ambitious *Derbyshire Tourist's Guide and Travelling Companion. . .* This drew a good deal on *Peak Scenery* and occasionally resembles it in style; but it is of a more practical nature, going into such questions as public amenities, accommodation and travelling conditions in a way that would have been inappropriate in the earlier work. Section II of this *Guide* is merely a reprint of *Modern Chatsworth*: but much of the material on Haddon is new. After recalling the manner in which certain artists have depicted the east front of Haddon Hall, Rhodes remarks: 'Turner, with such materials, would produce a picture of a far more elevated character. The water in the foreground, managed by him, would assume unusual consequence in composition. . . His pencil would give to the whole the charm of a poetic creation, and at the same time preserve the identity of all the parts. . .'(p.122). Before the days of Ruskin and the St. George's

Museum at Walkley, there can have been few more discerning enthusiasts for the work of J. M. W. Turner than the author of *Peak Scenery*.

According to John Holland, Rhodes contributed at least four items to a journal produced in Sheffield in 1817 and 1818 under the title of *The Northern Star*.. This magazine ran for eighteen months; a later enterprise, *The Yorkshire Magazine,* survived for only a year. But this lack of success did not deter Ebenezer Rhodes from starting up his own monthly paper, *The Hallamshire and Derbyshire Magazine* (1833). Published by James Sutherland of Baker's Hill at a shilling a copy, the price was soon reduced by sixpence, the editor constantly appealing to his readers for support and contributions. 'Personal reflections or illiberal abuse,' Rhodes declared, 'will find no place in our pages. Principles not men shall be the objects of our advocacy.' (p.2). Local affairs might well form the subject of discusison; but criticism was to be conducted in a courteous and gentlemanly way. From the first, Rhodes seems to have been in some doubt as to whether he would be able to keep the journal afloat; the disparate nature of the contents, however, is enough to reveal that he could not hope to secure enough contributions to ensure survival. In the finish he was put to the necessity of writing most of the articles himself. So, after five issues, *The Hallamshire and Derbyshire Magazine* ceased publication in May 1833. In his valedictory address 'To the Public' Rhodes admitted the sober truth that 'In our attempting to establish this Magazine, we find we have greatly miscalculated our power of amusing. . .': and the publisher was constrained to point out that he could neither expect the editor to continue his labours without remuneration nor go on losing money himself.

It has to be confessed that the entertainment value of *The Hallamshire and Derbyshire Magazine* was not high; Rhodes would have been advised to model his journal more deliberately on some of those then appearing in London. As it was, he stuck too rigidly to the subjects he had already exploited more than once. The purely informative articles on the rise and progress of attornies or the landlord and tenant laws no doubt had their place; but Rhodes's own longer contributions on the Cutlers' Company and the mineralogy of Derbyshire were mainly re-hashings of material he had used before. As for the polemical side of the *Magazine*, Rhodes does not seem to have taken into account that this was to a large extent featured in the pages of the local daily papers, which offered some astute commentary on current affairs. Rhodes's strictures on modern electioneering, the iniquity of publishing poll books and the clamorous futilites of the Sheffield Political Union were indeed highly topical, but his arguments were lacking in weight. Perhaps the most interesting items in *The Hallamshire and Derbyshire Magazine* were the critical notices of artistic publications and the account — by Rhodes's daughter — of life in modern Sicily. Had Rhodes been able to guarantee more contributions of that kind his *Magazine* might have survived.

(V)

Before it finally collapsed, *The Hallamshire and Derbyshire Magazine* carried an advertisement for what could well have been Ebenezer Rhodes's most valuable literary production. It was to have been called *My Last Volume. (The Reminiscences of Former Days.)* and was to have introduced the reader to Wentworth Castle, Wentworth House and Bretton Hall, together with 'A Day at Wimbledon, with Anecdotes of Horne Tooke' and 'A Visit to Benjamin West. . . and a Variety of Anecdotes and Information relative to Arts and Artists. . .' Why this book never appeared remains unexplained; we can only surmise that the necessary subscriptions were not forthcoming. Or was it that the market was already saturated with 'anecdotes' and 'excursions'? Whatever the truth of the matter, it is to be regretted that Rhodes did not leave more writings of a directly autobiographical nature. He lived through a particularly interesting phase of Sheffield's history and was in a position to report authoritatively on the attitudes adopted by his fellow townsmen right from the days before the French Revolution until the era of the Reform Bill. His effort to establish for himself a literary reputation shows what could be done by a provincial author who lacked the advantage of secure patronage. Even the success of *Peak Scenery* did not ensure adequare financial returns. R. E. Leader referred

to Ebenezer Rhodes as 'the best litterateur Sheffield has ever produced,' and this is probably a just assessment. But it was his misfortune to have lived in an environment unfavourable to the fullest development of his unique talents. All the same, a personal idiom is perceptible in most of his writings — an idiom strong and distinctive enough to give him a modest pre-eminence.

REFERENCES

1 The theory was advanced by W. T. Freemantle that Ebenezer Rhodes was the editor of the *Proceedings of the Sheffield Shakespeare Club* (1829). Rhodes was certainly an active member of this Club; but since no editor's name is given on the title-page of the *Proceedings*, it cannot be assumed that Freemantle's argument, though highly persuasive, is necessarily correct.

2 *The Trial of Henry Yorke*, 162.

3 Aspinall, *Lord Brougham and the Whig Party* (1927), 25.

4 see W. O. Henderson, *J. C. Fischer and his Diary of Industrial England 1814-51* (1966), 107.