

PROLOGUE

# So many characters before us

*Amazed, we see the hand divine  
Each thought direct, inspire each line...  
Still shall the sacred fire survive,  
Warm all who read, touch all who live.<sup>1</sup>*

— HANNAH MORE

from *The British Review* (September 1821)

Amid the bitter cold that gripped north-eastern America in January 1835, with below zero readings from the campus of Harvard to the Potomac River in Virginia, the citizens of Boston's Cornhill section kept home fires burning, and few thought to venture outside.

Yet some did in Cornhill, Boston's literary center, with reasons why.

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<sup>1</sup> *The British Review and London Critical Journal*, Sept. 1821, (London: 1821), 104.

This fine thoroughfare, set out by Uriah Cotting in 1816, ‘from Court Street to its terminus with Washington Street at Adams Square,<sup>2</sup> was home to the city’s most prestigious book-sellers. On its cobblestone walks, surrounded by handsome brick buildings of the early Federal style, tradesmen and teamsters had to brave the cold to make deliveries.

So they did: for the well-to-do patrons of bookshops, like Brattle Street Book Store, wished to stay current and fully apprised of literary news from London, and elsewhere in Europe. New arrivals, from these ports of call, were always much in demand.

But one periodical from the city itself commanded the attention of Boston’s literati. It was *The North American Review*, at that time under the editorship of A.H. Everett, the noted diplomat, politician, and man of letters. His brother Edward, two years younger, would later give a famous speech prior to Abraham Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address*.

A man of intellect and brilliance, Everett had graduated from Harvard ‘at sixteen with the highest honors.’<sup>3</sup> With his connections, and literary acumen, he secured contributions from writers like Daniel Webster, George Bancroft, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In cultural standing *The North American Review*, it was asserted, ‘had no occasion to ask quarter from its English rivals,’ the *Quarterly* or the *Edinburgh Review*.<sup>4</sup>

So it was that for the January 1835 number of *The North American Review*, Everett had published William Bourne

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2 R.W. Owen, “Cornhill.” In *Forgotten New England*, an online regional magazine. This article is archived and published at the following web portal: <https://forgottennewengland.com/2012/06/04/cornhill-once-bostons-literary-center-today-replaced-by-government-center/>

3 R.W. Griswold, *The Prose Writers of America: A Survey of...Intellectual History...*, (Philadelphia: 1852), 284.

4 J.H. Ward, “The North American Review,” in *The North American Review* (New York: 1915), 128.

Oliver Peabody's long, insightful article about Hannah More,<sup>5</sup> and her 'Life and Correspondence.' And if patrons of Brattle Street Book Store bought this issue of *The North American Review*, they came upon a fascinating discussion.

For this copious, nineteen-page article told a literary story all its own...

Peabody opened with an informative, arresting premise—meant to capture readers' attention. The life of Hannah More, he stated—

*covers a large space in literary history, reaching back from the present times to those of Garrick, Johnson, and Burke; she was thrown into acquaintance and intimacy with a great variety of characters, and all who were capable of appreciating character seem to have felt great respect for her excellent heart, and her active and practical mind...*

*She secured the respect and attachment of such a variety of eminent persons, that we are actually confounded at the wide reach of associations which her life brings before us in a single view.*<sup>6</sup>

This was telling; but here, a cautionary word was called for. Peabody did not shy away from stating it decisively. William Roberts, the author of Hannah More's *Memoirs*, was 'not, by any means,' the writer who 'should have been chosen for the office.'<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, he showed a 'want of grace and skill in writing' that was disqualifying. Such a book called for 'taste and

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5 "The Life and Correspondence of Hannah More," in the January 1835 issue of *The North American Review* (Boston: 1835), 151-170. See also page 142 of *The Index for The North American Review*, vols 1-125 (Cambridge: 1878), confirming Peabody's authorship of this review.

6 *North American Review*, January 1835, 151.

7 *North American Review*, January 1835, 151.

discrimination' to 'produce his materials to the best advantage.' But Roberts' text, incessantly 'grave and inanimate,'<sup>8</sup> was far from that kind of book.

Peabody greatly regretted this, given the wealth of materials to be used—

*There is Horace Walpole on one page, with his lordly foppery, writing to his 'dear St. Hannah;' on the other, we see the melancholy majesty of Johnson. Here is Garrick, 'whose death eclipsed the gaiety of nations;' there is Burke with his wonderful powers, resembling that pavilion in the fairy tale, which could cover the territory of a nation, or be contracted to the dimensions of a sentry-box, at pleasure.*

*But it would take too much time even to run over the list of memorable names, which are thus connected with [Hannah More].*

*We know of nothing, except the Waverley novels, which brings so many various characters before us; and we cannot help thinking that a writer, thoroughly versed in literary history, might have made a work from these materials, which would have taken as fast hold of the public mind as Boswell's Johnson.<sup>9</sup>*

Building on this unique, if unexpected premise, Peabody proceeded to describe the kind of book he sincerely wished *had* crossed his desk—

*Say what we will of [Boswell's] coxcombry, nothing is more certain, than that his work is the model for a biography, since it tells what the reader wants to know.*

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8 *North American Review*, January 1835, 151 & 152.

9 *North American Review*, January 1835, 151-152.

*This is the great point, on which success in this kind of writing depends,—to tell what the intelligent reader wants to know. In the case of Johnson, [one] wants to know his conversation, his familiar remarks...*

*In writing the Life of Hannah More...Boswell, had he undertaken it, would have liked nothing better than sketching an illustrious group of distinguished characters, himself also among them. In his hands, all would have been life and bustle...<sup>10</sup>*

Roberts' failure notwithstanding, portraits do exist of the kind Peabody wished to see: one in prose, while another is a painting of Hannah More by the artist John Opie, a member of the Royal Academy.

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As to the prose portrait, in the June 1866 issue of *The Art Journal of London*, S.C. Hall, F.S.A., recounted the story of a visit to Barley Wood, the home of Hannah More.

It took place in January 1825, when she was nearly eighty. Yet Hall's recollections cast images far from the common road, as to someone then considered an elderly invalid.

Indeed, the person who met Hall's gaze was not at all what he expected. And given this, his thoughts afterward were both vivid and arresting. As he remembered—

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<sup>10</sup> *North American Review*, January 1835, 152. See also W.H. Prescott's review of Lockhart's *Life of Sir Walter Scott* in *The North American Review*, April 1838, 433: "in passing from the letters of Scott, with which the work is besprinkled, to the text of the biographer, we find none of those chilling transitions...in more bungling productions; as, for example, in that recent one, *in which the unfortunate Hannah More is done to death by...Roberts.*"

*Her form was small and slight, her features wrinkled with age; but the burden of eighty years had not impaired her gracious smile, nor lessened the fire of her eyes, the clearest, the brightest, and the most searching I have ever seen.*

*They were singularly dark—positively black they seemed as they looked forth, among carefully-trained tresses of her own white hair; and absolutely sparkled while she spoke of those of whom she was [the] link between the present and the long past.*

*Her manner, on entering the room, while conversing, and at our departure, [was] sprightly; she tripped about from console to console, from window to window, to show us some gift that bore a [famous] name...some cherished reminder of other days—almost of another world, certainly of another age...*

*She was clad, I well remember, in a dress of rich pea-green silk. It was an odd whim...yet [withal, it] was in harmony with the youth of her step, and her unceasing vivacity, as she laughed and chatted, chatted and laughed; her voice strong and clear [and] her animation as full of life and vigour as it might have been in her spring-time.<sup>11</sup>*

Not quite forty years before S.C. Hall visited Hannah More, in 1786, artist John Opie painted her likeness, and created ‘the most flattering of her portraits.’<sup>12</sup> Opie had made his London debut in 1781, and became famous as ‘the Cornish Wonder.’ His style was one of ‘strong realism, and striking contrasts of light and dark.’ He was widely recognized ‘as a painter of historical and literary subjects, especially for *Boydell’s Shakespeare*

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11 S.C. Hall, “Memories of the Authors of the Age: Hannah More,” in *The Art Journal of London*, 1 June 1866 (London: 1866), 186.

12 Anne Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian* (Oxford: 2003), 200.

*Gallery*,<sup>13</sup> which was sited ‘in Pall Mall, one of London’s most sophisticated neighbourhoods.’<sup>14</sup>



Hannah More, by John Opie, R.A. (1786),  
from the Girton College collection, Cambridge University

The Opie portrait of Hannah More is now kept in a hallowed hall of British academia: Girton College, Cambridge University.

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13 see The National Portrait Gallery biographical sketch, “John Opie (1761-1807),” at: <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp03371/john-opie>

14 see the academic article chronicling this facet of British eighteenth-century history, “Marketing Shakespeare: the Boydell Gallery, 1789–1805, & Beyond,” at: [https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/Marketing\\_Shakespeare:\\_the\\_Boydell\\_Gallery,\\_1789-1805,\\_%26\\_Beyond](https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/Marketing_Shakespeare:_the_Boydell_Gallery,_1789-1805,_%26_Beyond)

To stand before it is to see why it won praise as soon as it was completed; and to understand also why one of Hannah More's most famous friends, Horace Walpole no less, promptly ordered a copy to be made after seeing it.<sup>15</sup>

The play of light, especially, sets Opie's portrait apart: it falls softly and perceptively—to suggest and unriddle a story the painting has to tell.

Here, subtleties persist, the first in the gaze of Hannah More's dark brown eyes. Opie rightly discerned how they captured who she was: keenly intelligent, kind, and vivacious—in keeping with the 'playful woman'<sup>16</sup> that Marianne Thornton (novelist E.M. Forster's aunt) so fondly remembered. Then too, there is much of thoughtfulness and depth in More's likeness. These two traits were the 'lucid streams'<sup>17</sup> of her poems, plays, and essays.

All this is a credit to John Opie's gifts, and his fine discernment as a painter.

Last of all, there's a quality in this painting that beckons to the world Hannah More looked upon, *and the world that she hoped to see*. The touch of a smile is there also, revealing a warmth of heart that many found—in a person they wished to know better.<sup>18</sup>

William Wilberforce was one of them, writing gratefully of Hannah More's kindness in 1786, arranging an introduction to Charles Wesley that he remembered all his life with deep gratitude.<sup>19</sup> He cherished Hannah More, and her constant gift

15 Stott, *Hannah More*, 200.

16 E.M. Forster, *Marianne Thornton* (London: Edward Arnold, 1956), 140. Edward Arnold Publishers no longer exists as a publishing firm.

17 line 469 from John Hunter, ed., John Milton, *The First Book of Paradise Lost* (London: 1861), 44. Milton was, with Shakespeare, one of the poets Hannah More admired most.

18 Stott, *Hannah More*, 64: "above all perhaps, [through] the warmth of her affections, she had become valued and accepted by literary London."

19 Robert and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce* volume one (London: 1838), 248.

of fostering friendships among those she knew—who had yet to meet one another. Over time, he became the younger brother she never had. As both delighted in Shakespeare, they took to citing passages with great spirit from the Bard in their many letters, often from *Henry IV*.<sup>20</sup> An opening from one of Wilberforce's letters was typical: "What! Did I not know thy old ward, Hal?"<sup>21</sup>

1786 was a watershed year for More in another way; for it was then her much-admired poem, *The Bas Bleu*, was published. One among its admirers was King George III, who 'liked it so much that he wanted a copy of his own,' and More 'sat up one night to write it out for him.'<sup>22</sup> When the poem was first composed, in 1782, it circulated for some time among her friends in manuscript. Samuel Johnson was one of them, and after he finished reading it, 'the great Cham' said 'there was no name in poetry that might not be glad to own it.'<sup>23</sup>

Not long after, in a letter to Hester Thrale, Johnson stated: 'Miss More has written a poem called *Bas Bleu*, which in my opinion is a very great performance.'<sup>24</sup> This was the more singular, as Johnson had said to More herself, 'I give you the opinion of a man who does not rate his judgement very low in these things.'<sup>25</sup>

Fast forward to 2003. In the pages of a distinguished Oxford University Press study, More's multifarious legacy, too little known today, was captured this way—

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20 Stott, *Hannah More*, 273. "In 1965, the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library at Duke University acquired from Winifred A. Myers an album of approximately 130 autograph letters from [Hannah] More to William Wilberforce, dated 1790-1830."

21 Wilberforce, *Life of Wilberforce*, volume 3, 399.

22 Stott, *Hannah More*, 64.

23 M.G. Jones, *Hannah More* (Cambridge: 1952), 47-48; "the great Cham" was a sobriquet for Dr. Johnson in Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (London: 1910), 215.

24 Jones, *Hannah More*, 48.

25 Jones, *Hannah More*, 48.

*In the history of her age, she was one of its prime movers, leaving her imprint on the theatre, the bluestocking circle, the political debates sparked by the French Revolution, elementary education, the anti-slavery movement, the growth of Evangelical religion, foreign missions, and female philanthropy.*<sup>26</sup>

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I first learned about Hannah More through my study of William Wilberforce, during research for a master's thesis in the early 1990s. Their friendship, and philanthropic work, chiefly in the spheres of abolition and education of the poor, left a lasting impression. Lives were changed for the better, in many places, because of this.

I saw too that Hannah More had written deeply eloquent lines, like these—

*Let us implore the aid of holy hope and  
fervent faith, to show  
that religion is not a beautiful theory, but a soul-  
sustaining truth.*<sup>27</sup>

And of faith also, she described what it meant 'to communicate the sacred flame.'<sup>28</sup>

Here, I began to see why Wilberforce set such store by More's letters and writings. They lent richness and meaning to his journey of faith, as they did for many others.

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<sup>26</sup> Stott, *Hannah More*, 333.

<sup>27</sup> Hannah More, *Practical Piety*, volume two, 4th ed., (London: 1811), 246.

<sup>28</sup> Hannah More, *An Essay on the... Writings of Saint Paul*, volume one, 4th ed., (London: 1815), 275.

Her own journey, I found, was often trying, as she experienced chronic pain for much of her life, saying in her later years: ‘and as for pain, I never was absolutely free from it for ten minutes since I was ten years old.’<sup>29</sup> There were deep wells of fortitude in her character.

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Ten years following my thesis, during a trip to York Minster, I met an elderly woman who’d been part of a ‘women’s benefit club’ Hannah More had established.

In those few moments, something special unfolded.

Stepping into a hotel elevator, I said hello to this thoughtful lady and her friend. My American accent caught her attention, and she asked what I was doing in England.

It was then she noticed I had a newly-published biography of Hannah More in my hand. ‘Hannah More,’ she exclaimed, ‘I was once a member of one of her women’s benefit clubs! It closed sometime in the 1950s, but I remember it very fondly.’

This unlikely meeting, and point of connection, was a gift I’ve thought about often. Somehow the life of a twenty-first century American had touched, however tangentially, strands of a story that had been unfolding in England since the early 1800s.

Not long after this, I was able to visit Hannah More’s homes, Cowslip Green and Barley Wood. I will always remember time inside Barley Wood, seeing beautifully carved woodwork all around, and wondering what it must have been like to see her

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29 S.C. Wilks, “Reminiscences of Mrs. H. More,” in *The Christian Observer*, March 1835 (London: 1835), 168n. That laudanum was a palliative used by the More sisters at need (during illness or injury causing excessive pain) is confirmed in Stott, *Hannah More*, 308, and 301: “She took it herself, under prescription.” From this “purely medicinal” use she may, like William Wilberforce, have suffered opium poisoning over time, which weakened her eyesight.

room full of books—handsome texts that were like so many friends for Hannah More the reader.

Later, at Syon House, the Duke of Northumberland's home, I was invited as a visiting historian to look through any volumes on the shelves of the Long Gallery I wished to. Seeing a rare 19-volume set of Hannah More's *Collected Works*, I spent time looking through it in a great room she would have happily lost hours in—it was 136 feet long, and full of books.

Here, words recur that biographer Mary Alden Hopkins wrote about Hannah More: 'she leaped at any library that came her way.'<sup>30</sup>

Last, I've stood in the Church of All Saints, Wrington, where More worshipped, and walked the Mendip Hills she knew in Somerset. To see these places is to catch a glimpse of a world from long ago—and while there, recall that it did much to influence our own.

That is no small part of Hannah More's legacy: for its tributaries remain.

Tracing them, there's much to discover. And therein lies a story—but not of someone who was a faultless paragon: for none of us are—then, as now.

Rather, the story concerns someone who, yes, did much good in the world—but someone as well who knew what it was to fail, to suffer, to sorrow and succeed. She knew beautiful places, and fascinating people; but she also knew sombre scenes and moments marred by brokenness. In an era when revolution unfolded in France, and war threatened England's shores, she weathered those storms, and worried over what might happen.

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30 M.A. Hopkins, *Hannah More and Her Circle* (London: 1947), 71.

Amid those trying times, from 1789 through to 1815, she remembered words spoken by Lord Halifax, and set them on the title page of one of her books: ‘may you so raise your Character that you may help to make the next Age a better thing.’<sup>31</sup>

Faith bestowed fortitude and hope as she tried to.

For faith was, as she said, ‘a sacred flame,’—alight and renewing.

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To better understand the sacred flame More cherished in her life, her writings are the key: letters, yes,—but also what may be gleaned from a careful reading of her published works. They trace the tenets of her Christian belief, and her thoughts about so many things.

Here, I am grateful for an insight that, at first blush, might seem a world away from anything connected with Hannah More. But really, it isn’t.

In her review of modern composer Brian Wilson’s instrumental album, *At My Piano*, jazz musician Aimee Nolte’s reflections cast a guiding thought for me as I considered how to approach a reading of the thousands of pages that comprise Hannah More’s *Collected Works*.

Looking to Wilson’s stature, as a composer, Nolte said it required something—

*This is...Brian Wilson [I thought,] and he needs all of your attention...*

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31 *Miscellanies by the Late Lord Halifax* (London: 1700), 83; and Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (London: 1799), title page.

*So I decided to go on a walk, I went on a long walk in the hills, and I listened to the entire album. It didn't take long for me to feel the depth of this music...*

*[We] get to hear Brian Wilson in his 79th year, re-tell his stories—the way that he wants us to hear them—the way that he hears them—and at such a sacred place—sitting at his piano...<sup>32</sup>*

The gist of this review—about an artist from a different time—and very different from Hannah More, led me to picture something in idea—a glimpse of her, writing in the library at Barley Wood. Because of sickness, and her invalid state in later years, this was the only way she *could* speak to many then. But as I thought about it, I realized this was also the way that she “spoke,” through all her works, during the whole of her writing life.

This is to be kept in mind, as More's letters have to be cited carefully. The only source for so many is none other than Roberts' *Memoirs of...Hannah More*. And scholarly guidance is often needed as to what lines from Roberts' much-edited text may be cited safely.

But when it comes to More's published works, a very different scenario arises.

There, we have the words *she chose*, and the final texts *she approved*.

This brings a reminder of what she once told William Wilberforce, with an admirable dash of wit: ‘I will be answerable for nobody's faults, but my own.’<sup>33</sup>

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32 Aimee Nolte's YouTube review of Brian Wilson's *At My Piano* album is posted online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LW7mb62Ls8w&t=113s>

33 Demers, *Hannah More*, 130.

Last, rather than treat all of More's works, including, say, her fiction or didactic works, I have focused on books exploring her Christian belief, especially two companion volumes that were a late-in-life flourishing of her writerly gifts: *Practical Piety* and *Christian Morals*.<sup>34</sup>

These books, to follow Aimee Nolte's wisdom, call for the kind of reflection that rests, metaphorically, in the image of a 'long walk in the hills;' taking time to discover the person these writings reveal her to be, tracing the tenets and signposts of her faith.

To look across the years, and tell of such things, is the task of these pages.

Here also, I recall Hannah More's insight about letters, and what she looked for in them. 'I have a particular notion about correspondence,'<sup>35</sup> she stated. 'What I want in a letter is a picture of my friend's mind, and the common sense of his life.'<sup>36</sup> Citing these words, in 1915, *The Yale Review* said: 'Hannah More never wrote wiser sentences than these.'

And they've much to do with the art of biography.

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34 Due to space limitations, I do not cover the writing of More's best-selling novel, *Coelebs In Search Of A Wife* (1808). It "went through twelve London editions in its first year, was translated into German and French...and appeared in six American editions in More's lifetime." Here, I commend Dr. Patricia Demers' definitive scholarly edition of the novel (Peterborough: 2007).

35 Roberts, *Memoirs...of Hannah More*, volume two, (New York: 1834), 190.

36 C.B. Tinker, "Walpole and Familiar Correspondence," in *The Yale Review: New Series*, volume four, (New Haven: 1915), 585; See also Jones, *Hannah More*, ix.