

CURRAN FELLOWSHIP REPORT 2015

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I applied for Curran Fellowship support to further my continuing work on the comic artist Robert Seymour, who worked for a range of periodicals in the 1820s and 1830s.. My main outlet for this study will be through a contracted monograph for what was Ashgate's 'Studies in 19th. Century Publishing History' series, but I have wider interests in the relationship between jobbing engravers and draughtsmen and the periodical press which will eventually find their way into print. The central element of my application for a Curran Fellowship was a planned visit to the Houghton Library at Harvard, which holds a good range of Seymour's work, including some publications I have been unable to find in the UK. I have already had the chance to work in the British Library and the Bodleian Library on a regular basis, and I have also been able to spend a fair bit of time in New Haven and at Princeton. While the bulk of the Curran funds were geared towards the trip to Boston, I hoped to have sufficient monies over to fund day trips to London and Oxford during the final drafting of my book.

In the event, I spent ten extremely fruitful days in Cambridge in the Houghton Library. Accommodation in Cambridge was more expensive than I had expected, and the trip, even with my puritanical tendencies, used up the bulk of the Curran money. It was, however, money extremely well spent in terms of what I was able to see and learn, and I am immensely grateful to RSVP for supporting my work so generously. I have managed to keep back enough money for the planned day trips to British libraries which I am continuing to make as the need and opportunity arises.

Some of the work I undertook in the Houghton Library was confirmatory – I wanted to look again and at longer length at a number of key periodicals and serials, especially the full run of *The Looking Glass*, Thomas McLean's extremely ambitious bringing together of the caricature mode with both the newish reprographic technology of the lithograph and with the idea of seriality. Seymour drew extensively for *The Looking Glass*. The Houghton copy was coloured and in exquisite condition – this changed my perception of it a lot after spending time previously with grubby monochrome versions. Indeed, one problem for me with the Houghton collection derived from the astonishing perfection of their copies of everything – when you work with material from relatively lowly parts of 19th century print culture, you don't expect clean, brightly coloured, and immaculately bound things to be put down in front of you, and your evaluation of who these publications were for begins to falter. The work of Seymour's that completely astounded me was his series of large scale lithographs 'The Schoolmaster Abroad' which provides the best sustained and certainly the wittiest critique of Lord Brougham's great educational project that I have seen – it has a rather splendid if deplorable undercurrent of reactionary nastiness. I had seen several plates from this work before, and looked at internet reproductions, but the work's physical presence was quite extraordinary. (By coincidence I found a copy of one of the plates on sale for £1 the week after I got home to England – I recognised it immediately from yards away).

Other items I saw were more exploratory and, indeed, revelatory. A volume that promised me *Asmodeus, or The Devil In London* (which I knew) also contained three other illustrated periodicals from 1832, *A Slap at the Church*, *The Church Examiner and Ecclesiastical Record* and *The Schoolmaster at Home*, (which I didn't know) all with Seymour illustrations, among much else of interest. I also wanted to see something called *The Penny Comic Magazine*, published by William

Marshall in 1832, and claiming illustrations by Seymour and C.J. Grant, of which I have seen scattered issues, and which had caused me endless confusion about titles with 'Comic Magazine' in them. The Houghton Library has two copies of this periodical. The first is called *The Midsummer Comic Annual for 1836*, which proved to be a bound copy of a re-issue of the 1832 *Penny Comic Magazine* under a new title, and the second comprises, unbelievably for something so rare, all seventeen part issues of the magazine, unbound, and in pristine condition complete with covers. It seems from advertisements in the magazine that Marshall was mainly a dealer in work clothes who did a bit of publishing on the side. Quite how he managed to persuade Seymour and Grant to offer up illustrations is hard to imagine – I suspect he may have bought the blocks in from somewhere...

Of such obsessive detail is a week in a research library made up. I saw much else, including a couple of really significant scrapbook volumes of miscellaneous comic prints from the 1830s.. Perhaps the best thing about the trip was the chance to sit quietly in the hotel in the evening and work through the implications of what I had seen – it led to many clarifications in my thinking. The new things I saw are beginning to find their way into the Seymour manuscript, which is nearing completion, and seeping out into various articles I am writing. An essay on Seymour I have written for the new on-line ESPRIT journal also incorporates some Houghton material.

I remain hugely indebted to RSVP for giving me this opportunity.

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