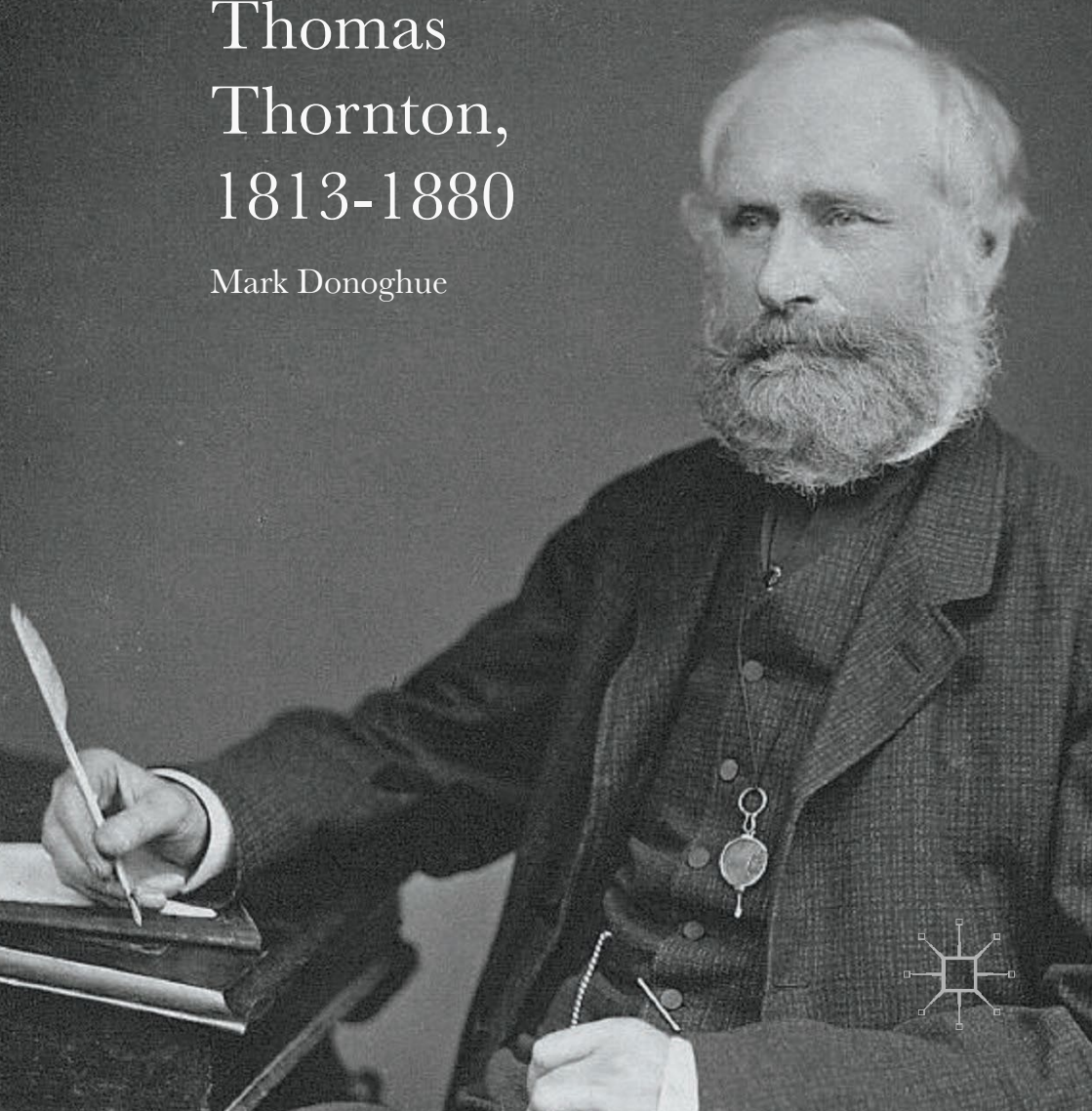


Faithful  
Victorian,  
William  
Thomas  
Thornton,  
1813-1880

Mark Donoghue



# Faithful Victorian



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William Thomas Thornton, 1813-1880

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*I dedicate this book to my whanau.*



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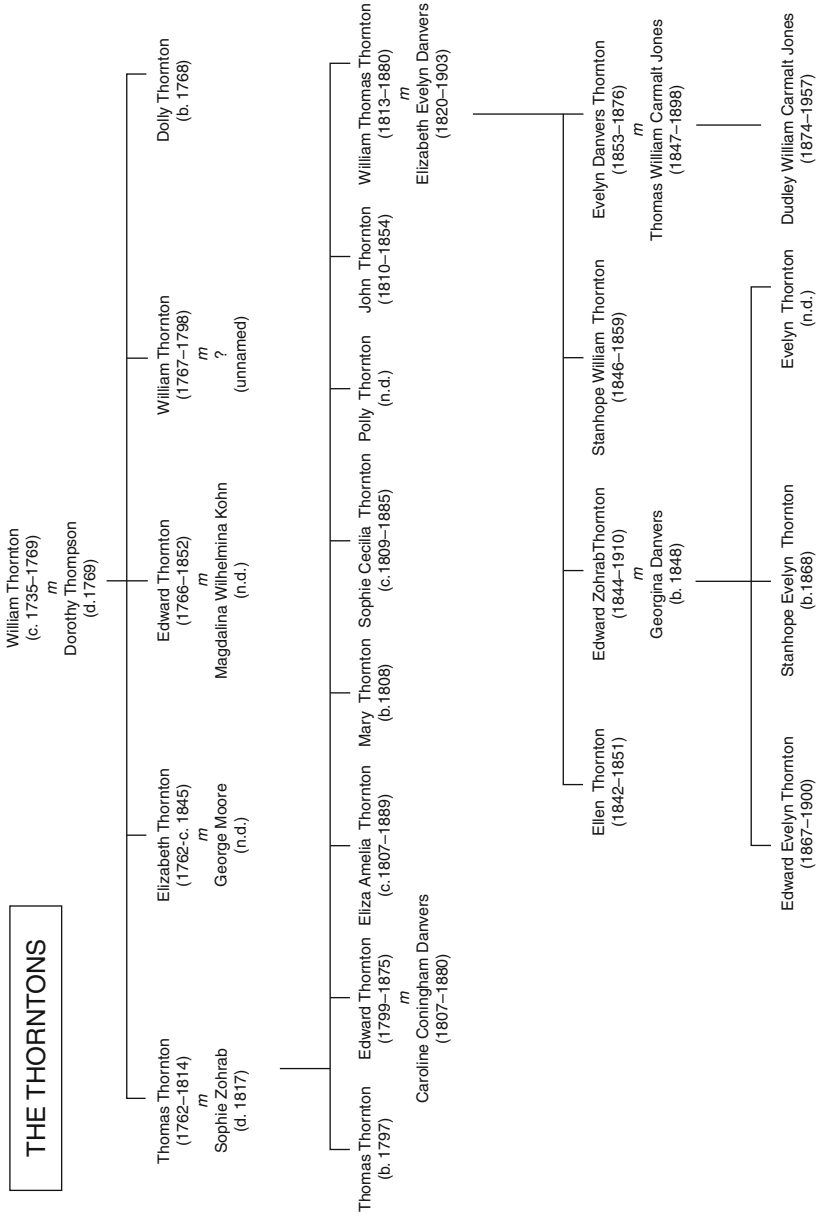
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# THE THORNTONS



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## Prologue

This book on the life and work of William Thomas Thornton (1813–1880) grew out of earlier research on the history of the classical wage fund doctrine in nineteenth-century political economy. What became apparent while examining William Thornton’s pivotal role in the theoretical debates in the 1860s and 1870s around the wage fund doctrine was the lack of documentation concerning his past, almost as if all records of it had been carefully and deliberately erased. A handful of memoirs were produced by people connected with William Thornton at various stages of his life. As useful as these reminiscences are in constructing a better understanding of many areas of Thornton’s endeavour, none of these (sometimes, vivid biographical accounts) can lay claim to being either exhaustive or reliable. Gaps in Thornton’s life story certainly prompted his close friend, Leslie Stephen, to insert colourful titbits on Thornton in his own biographical reminiscences, ever mindful that “little has been told of Thornton’s private life” (Stephen 1900 3: 187 n.2). Indeed, the details of William Thornton’s exotic ancestry, family alliances and early years remain little visited and surprisingly elusive for someone of his standing within Victorian middle-class society. Beyond a few perfunctory fragments of biographical information, most accounts of the man’s life and work remain superficial at best; they lack the personal testimonies of his colleagues and acquaintances. Nor does the available literature attempt to place him in the relevant intellectual and social milieu; the stages of his intellectual development in relation to events occurring in Victorian intellectual and cultural life are

completely bypassed. Biographical details of his father, mother, siblings and other relatives are either incomplete or incorrect. Thornton did not help matters by his own silence concerning his childhood and adolescence, education, family background and professional career. Beyond a few biographical fragments, no vivid anecdotes bearing on the development of his emotional life have been left to posterity, including details of the lessons he learned during his youthful sojourn on the Continent, relations with his parents and siblings and the depression that followed the deaths of three children from tuberculosis. Although occasional insights into his social milieu are provided by some of his private correspondence with well-known Victorian personalities of the day, his own writing seldom intrudes upon his personal experiences, his personality or his private life.

The dearth of family memoirs and letters, diaries, unpublished manuscripts and other biographical information that customarily form the nucleus of any comprehensive biographical study poses a number of interesting challenges. For one thing, there has been little reason to fuss or fret over what to include, what to omit and how to shape the account as the small amount of available biographical material has generally meant that every shred of available evidence has been marshalled in reassembling Thornton's life story. The lack of such conventional biographical sources as diaries, letters and personal memoirs should not be taken as an indication that the Thorntons were infrequent letter writers or of a disinclination for personal record-keeping. There are several personal letters between family members that point to a pattern of fairly regular correspondence, particularly when a family member was either travelling or living abroad—which, at one time or another, could include a number of Thorntons. Nor is it apparent that the Thorntons formed the habit of systematically discarding letters and other private papers after a family member had died; there remain a sufficient number of such extant documents to rule out this practice. Perhaps some family members were less certain of the significance of their lives to want to retain their correspondence, or quite simply, it never occurred to them that their letters might be worth keeping, and so they were casually discarded after being read. Fortunately, there have been a number of important survivals, including the small cache of letters that William's father, Thomas Thornton, wrote to his sister, Elizabeth, while he was stationed in the Levant during the 1790s, which contain a number of intimate revelations about Thornton family members that are nowhere matched in other surviving personal letters presently available. In addition, several surviving letters that Thomas Thornton wrote

to Robert Tweddell shed light on his activities and connections while he was working in Turkey as a private merchant. William's uncle, Sir Edward Thornton, a high-profile British diplomat, appears to have kept all his official correspondence, now preserved in the Thornton collection in the British Library. Yet, as important as these documents may be in shedding light on crucial aspects of nineteenth-century British foreign policy, they nowhere intrude upon family matters. For present purposes, several letters that William Thornton received from prominent Victorian figures have survived, as have a number of letters he wrote to key Victorian personalities—most notably, John Stuart Mill who was instrumental in advancing both Thornton's professional and literary careers at different stages of his life. There remain, however, significant gaps in the correspondence. Most noticeably, there are very few extant letters between Thornton and other family members. Their absence constitutes the single greatest obstacle to the prosecution of an exhaustive account of his whole life. The earliest specimen of Thornton's penmanship was a rather formal letter he wrote to his Aunt Moore from the Moravian settlement where he completed his schooling. Outside of this letter, another that he wrote to his Aunt Moore during his sea voyage to Constantinople and one that his aunt wrote to her nephew in the mid-1840s, there is no sign of any other surviving correspondence between Thornton and family members. He obviously, at one time or another, did manage to write letters to his siblings, children, his wife and extended family members, but these have either been lost or were discarded at some unspecified time. From time to time, William is mentioned in letters between other Thornton family members, but these typically consist of passing references to his activities that hardly constitute a basis from which an evaluation of his experiences and way of life can be made. Nor does it appear that Thornton kept a diary or personal journal detailing his own introspections, personal feelings and thoughts. For instance, Thornton evidently derived aesthetic pleasure from art, sculpture and music, but no letters or memoirs of a personal nature survive corroborating these artistic hobbies. Other family members, however, kept a diary. Georgina Danvers, Edward Zohrab Thornton's wife, intermittently kept a diary during the period she, Edward and their children were living in India, which gives a vivid account of life on the Indian frontier during the heyday of the Raj. In retirement, Sir Edward Thornton began writing a personal memoir. Although the memoir was never brought to completion, the unfinished manuscript contains useful snippets on the Thorntons, as does the autobiographical portrait prepared by William's

grandson, Dudley William Carmalt Jones. Even though William himself never appeared to confide in a diary or personal journal, this should not be seen as evidence of his suppressing his inner feelings. In fact, he was a very demonstrative person, who poured out his personal feelings and remorse on several occasions in his poetical works, as discussed below. Such outpourings prompted several critics to suggest that Thornton would have been better served had he restricted the circulation of his poems to his family and close circle of friends since their revelations were far too intimate for the wider public. Finally, there exist a handful of letters between Thornton's siblings and extended family members, providing tantalizing insights into their wider connections. These indicate that members of the Thornton family were able to mobilize the family's extensive network of contacts when they were travelling or living abroad for either professional or social reasons—another indication of the way in which English middle-class families exploited kinship ties, at home and overseas.

The story of the Thorntons is, to some extent, the story of the Danvers, or, at least, that branch of the Danvers family that, through several marriages, forged close connections with the Thorntons during the nineteenth century. William himself, his son and elder brother all married a Danvers woman. The Danvers family had, at one time, been what might be described as a notable family with a long and distinguished recorded familial history. They could, at intervals, claim extensive landholdings in and around Oxfordshire and count among their kith and kin several prominent figures in British history. By the nineteenth century, however, they were no longer landed gentry, but were comfortably well-off in the ranks of the professional middle classes. The decision made by several Danvers women to marry Thornton men is suggestive of the change in fortunes of each family, with the relative decline in the stocks of the Danvers matched by the rise in the social standing of the Thorntons. As far as it can be ascertained, William's brothers and uncles occupied coveted positions, often with a connection to India, within either the colonial administration or the diplomatic service that produced a very comfortable standard of living. Such positions, accompanied by steadily rising incomes, placed the Thornton men well within the ranks of the professional middle class. In fact, to begin with, it was most likely the standing of William's uncle, Sir Edward Thornton, within diplomatic and Whitehall circles that opened the door for other Thornton men to be recruited into similar occupations. It is worth remembering, too, that the posthumous reputation of William's father, Thomas Thornton, added lustre to the family's reputation

because he had forged close ties with the Levant Company's establishment in Constantinople over many years and had duly been appointed consul general to the Levant Company in Egypt shortly before his death in 1814. As a result, the Thornton men were on the sort of career paths that made them an attractive catch for the Danvers women. Equally, marriages to members of such a prominent family as the Danvers served to bind the Thorntons more closely into the social world of the English middle classes. These marital alliances were highly valued in the nineteenth century because they enabled two families to solidify and extend their kinship network. This can be seen, of course, in the way in which different members of the Thornton-Danvers family maintained regular contact with each other, thereby creating a sense of an established family with extensive family connections. It is clear from the autobiographical manuscript that Dudley William Carmalt Jones penned, for example, that he had been instilled with a sense of the importance of the Danvers name and took pride in his ancestral heritage. Equally, the Thorntons were always happy to acknowledge their Persian heritage.

William Thornton and his siblings were the products of an interracial marriage at a time when such unions were generally frowned upon. William's father, Thomas, had married Sophie Zohrab, whose family had fled religious persecution in their homeland, Armenia, before initially settling in Constantinople. Again, the Zohrabs had been a prominent family in Armenia before escaping religious persecution. Although they had fallen on hard times, the family took great pride in its own intellectual, cultural and social heritage. Like the Thorntons, the Zohrabs were prominent in diplomatic and imperial circles during the nineteenth century, and it was these commonalities that bound the two families together. Still, in the nineteenth century, it was a particularly brave decision to marry someone of another race, owing to the social stigma attached to such interracial marriages. There is, however, no evidence in the Thornton family's extant correspondence to suggest that the liaison between Thomas and Sophie excited anything other than genuine unwavering enthusiasm. In time, Sophie Zohrab and Elizabeth Moore established a close bond, as shown by their warm and spontaneous letters to each other. What's more, Elizabeth's letters to her brother, written after she had learned of Thomas's intention to marry a Persian lady, signal her acceptance of the match. In spite of the fact that Thornton was of mixed parentage, he seemed to be accepted within Victorian Britain. Nor did William or his siblings ever display feelings of shame or embarrassment about their Persian heritage;

in fact, the opposite is more clearly in evidence as William made great efforts throughout his life to keep in touch with his maternal family. The solitary surviving letter that Thornton wrote home from Constantinople reveals that he had forged close relations with members of his mother's family. Besides keeping in touch with his maternal family, he chose to give his youngest son the middle name "Zohrab", dedicate his first book of verse to his cousin, Edward Zohrab and include "Zohrab" in the title of his first volume of poems as a form of homage to his mother's "old historic name". Such actions attest to his immense pride in his maternal lineage. Thornton himself was a tolerant person, accepting of other races and cultures—a trait perhaps attributable to his mixed family heritage.

In addition to the fact that he hailed from "a rather remarkable family", William Thornton himself led an interesting and varied life. However, there are few details of his experiences in England and on the Continent during his formative years—that is, most crucially, from the time of his father's death in 1814 through the 1820s as a schoolboy on the Moravian settlement to his return to London in the mid-1830s, following lengthy stints spent living in Malta and the Levant. Little is known of his childhood or the culture within the family home. Likewise, the story of his all-too-short relationships with his father (who died when he was aged one) and mother (who died when he was aged four) remain shrouded. Furthermore, the details of his relationship with his elder brothers and sisters remain opaque, although it seems he was close to them all. Once Thornton is posted back to London in 1835, the general contours of his life are somewhat easier to trace, particularly when he finds his voice as an author; although, even here, his appearances in archives remain fragmentary, while details of his personal life remain elusive. As a result of these deficiencies in Thornton's biographical record, the sequence of the chapters in this book follows a thematic rather than strictly chronological structure. Some chapters—including the first chapter dealing with ancestry and family background—combine biographical material and intellectual history across a wide arc. Other chapters, focusing primarily on an exploration of Thornton's intellectual compositions, follow a firmer temporal progression. Despite gaps in the historical record, this account provides new insights and much new information about Thornton's life and work. This telling of William Thornton's life story, moreover, corrects several careless mistakes contained in earlier biographical accounts and builds on several recent interpretations of his work. In reassembling the fragments of Thornton's life story currently available, it seems inevitable

that contemporary understanding of his inner life and final achievement remains frustratingly incomplete. Nevertheless, this book attempts to create a coherent portrait of William Thornton's life and times, to show what is weak as well as what is good in his person and in his work and to mould the multifarious parts of his life into a whole.

Until now, Thornton's voice has primarily been heard within a small community of scholars working on Victorian political economy, where he is portrayed not inaccurately as having played a seminal role in overturning certain key tenets of the prevailing classical orthodoxy. While neither a universal genius nor a great economist, he was an original thinker whose work provoked a critical reaction—sometimes called a revolution—in economic thinking in mid-to-late Victorian England. Beyond this, however, his work had a validity that entitled it to be regarded as constitutive of a larger body of work involved in transforming and shaping the period. Renewed scholarly interest in his contributions to Irish land reform (Gray 1999; Kennedy 1996) and Anglo-Indian politics (Stone 1984; Kerr 2007; Ahuja 2009) constitute more tangible evidence of the durability of Thornton's wider enterprise. Indeed, what is too little appreciated is that Thornton was an accomplished author who produced a steadily increasing stream of diverse writings from the 1840s until his death in 1880. Although his poetry and philosophical writings never made a lasting impression, his prose writings did occupy a representative place within Victorian letters, contributing admirably to the intellectual firmament of the time. His various public policy proposals enable a better understanding of the manner in which his work was woven into the fabric of mid-Victorian intellectual and public debate. Thornton's private correspondence and published writings reveal a character that was the epitome of the Victorian ethos—devoted father, dutiful husband and loyal friend and colleague. Yet, in the working out of his “distinctive conservative radicalism”, as Lipkes (1999: 111) has put it, he was also the embodiment of the rebellious spirit of the age, as shown in the unrestrained and often spontaneous tone of his writings on the seismic events and burning issues of the Victorian era—the Crimean War, Irish Land Tenure Reform, Spiritualism, the American Civil War, among the more prominent. “They are that peculiar amalgam of philosophy, history, politics, and sociology”, Himmelfarb (1962: xvi) once wrote, “that was the distinctive quality of the English essay in the age of the great Reviews. They are the product of a lively, cultivated, interested, and engaged mind, in which all the resources of thought are brought to bear upon any subject, and in which any subject may be made to bear the burden of truth”. This

pre disposition to challenge the prevailing current of opinion doubtless endeared Thornton to John Stuart Mill, inarguably his most loyal patron. Despite provoking several exasperated reprimands from the Victorian sage for occasional indecorum, Thornton always remained aware of the fact that Mill's patronage had helped to open many new doors for him. After all, Mill, while suffering his acts of defiance with stoicism, acknowledged his work in shaping and defining public debate on a host of topical issues that refract the uncertainties and ambivalences of mid-Victorian Britain. His humanistic outlook on the conditions and prospects for society and commitment to the casualties of the new industrial order was shared by Mill and his confreres. All that now remains is to unveil this compelling story of an unheralded, dissenting voice within the rich fabric of Victorian life and culture.

## Beginnings

*Strange indeed was the influence of you Thorntons on my former life.*

—George Liddell, secretary of the Levant Company

### INTRODUCTION

William Thornton's parents, Thomas Thornton and Sophie Zohrab, came from strikingly different backgrounds. Thomas Thornton was English. He lost both parents in adolescence. He was then sent to a London boarding school, Christ's Hospital, which admitted boys from middle-class, albeit straitened, backgrounds who typically went on to find employment in large mercantile houses. After the completion of school, Thomas, who was imbued with a buccaneering spirit that his own children inherited from him, was posted to the Ottoman capital, Constantinople, where he carved out a colourful, if not entirely successful, career for himself as a private merchant and member of the British factory there. By all accounts, he was a likeable character who won friends easily and enemies rarely. He later published a book on Turkish habits and customs, which established his reputation as an authority in the area. Sophie, who was much younger than Thomas, had been forced to flee her homeland, Armenia, with her parents and brothers in the late eighteenth century. Sophie and her family initially settled in Constantinople, where her father and brothers found employment as interpreters or *dragomen* in the various foreign legations located there. It was in Constantinople where Thomas met and

married Sophie Zohrab. Between 1797 and 1813, Sophie gave birth to eight children, several of whom were born in the Levant. The youngest, William Thomas Thornton, is the subject of this study.

William Thornton never knew his parents. Both died when he was an infant, but they did leave their mark on the Thornton children. William and his siblings were sent to live with their aunt, Elizabeth Moore (Thomas's twin sister), a doughty and resourceful character who became something of a surrogate parent to all the Thornton children. She lived to a ripe old age and was a constant presence in their lives. By all accounts, Elizabeth and her husband, George Moore, never had children of their own. Instead, all their energies were funnelled into raising the Thornton children, all of whom received an education. It is not known precisely where and when William's elder brothers and sisters received their schooling, but, at the appropriate age, the decision was taken to settle William and his brother, John, in a boarding school at the Moravian settlement in Derbyshire. After the completion of their formal education, William and John followed much the same path trodden by their father and uncles on both sides of the family and were sent abroad to learn the craft of the colonial administrative service that formed the bedrock of British mercantile expansion. These positions were brokered by their influential uncle, Sir Edward Thornton, who rose to high distinction in the British diplomatic service. The motive was largely financial. When Thomas Thornton died in 1814, the family had lost its main breadwinner, and the Thornton males, once they had completed their formal education, were found suitable employment in order to lend support to other members of the family. Until his return to England in 1835, William Thornton led a peripatetic life, initially travelling to Malta in the 1820s, where he resided with a well-connected relative, Sir William Henry Thornton, the auditor general, before sallying off to the Ottoman Porte, Constantinople, where he secured employment on the staff of the British consul, John Cartwright. When he returned from the Levant, he settled in London, where he gained employment at the East India Company—a post secured through family connections. Although appointed to the lowest rung within the Company's administrative structure, Thornton was now confidently making his way in the world and seemed destined for bigger things. William's brother John journeyed to and lived in the West Indies for many years. He married there before eventually settling in Calcutta at mid-century. William's sisters, who do not appear to have married, inherited the adventurous spirit of their parents. Eliza Thornton, William's eldest sister, was a

pioneer female missionary in the Dutch East Indies, where she established and, for many years, ran a school for local girls in Batavia at a time when it was most unusual for single women to travel, live and work abroad. Correspondence between Thornton family members—sadly very little of which survives—indicates that the Thornton children were a close-knit group.

William Thornton married Elizabeth Evelyn Danvers on 15 April 1841. Elizabeth came from a distinguished family whose recorded line stretched nearly all the way back to the Battle of Hastings. She counted among her kith and kin a whole host of noble figures who, in various ways, had left their mark on the historical register. The Danvers, over the centuries, amassed extensive hereditary land holdings, mainly in and around Oxfordshire. There was, in other words, nothing remotely humble about the Danvers family. By the time William had met his future wife, however, the Danvers were no longer members of the landed gentry. The branch of the Danvers family to which Elizabeth belonged was mainly involved in mercantile and professional occupations. Thus, Elizabeth came from comfortable and respectable middle-class stock whose fortunes had declined over the centuries. This shift in family fortunes was accompanied by other changes that ensured the family's prominence and social status remained firmly intact. In Victorian times, the most common way for a prominent family to consolidate their social status was through the union of marriage. It seems highly likely that William's marriage to Elizabeth was to cement the Thornton family's middle-class credentials by marrying into an establishment family with an illustrious and colourful past. In fact, the Thornton and Danvers families were very closely knit due to a succession of intermarriages—not uncommon within Victorian society.

What becomes very clear about the extended Thornton and Danvers families is their close connection with the administration of the Indian empire. Both families had a keen sense of their connection to India. For example, Juland Danvers, who was Elizabeth's first cousin, had a long and distinguished career in the Indian civil service. Like William, he joined the East India Company during its heyday, rose to become assistant to the director of the Indian Railway Company, before being appointed secretary of the India Office's Department of Railway and Electric Telegraph and government director of Indian state railway companies. In other words, Juland Danvers achieved the same level of seniority as William Thornton within the India Office's administrative structure. Indeed, at various times, both men worked closely together and were recognized as authorities in

their respective areas, and Juland Danvers replaced Thornton as secretary of the Department of Public Works upon the latter's death in 1880. Other family members were also deeply imbued with the sense of the family's Indian connection. William's elder brother Edward Thornton (1799–1875), who joined the East India Company in 1814, rose to become head of its Statistical Department and published several important works on India—notably, a *History of the British Empire in India* (1841–1845) and a compendium of Indian statistics (1853). He married Caroline Coningham Danvers. William Thornton's "soldier son", Edward Zohrab, seemed destined from childhood to follow his father into the Indian service. Edward, who was admitted into Addiscombe Military Academy through family connections, served as an officer in the British Indian Army and completed a lengthy tour of duty in India's harsh and hostile north-west provinces. He, too, married a Danvers, Georgina, who gave birth to three children while they were stationed in northwest India. Like most Danvers women, Georgina was a most competent and resourceful woman, who often spent lengthy stretches alone in isolated areas with her young children while her husband was away on military duty. She was also a gifted amateur artist who left behind a diary and delightful sketches as mementos of the places and peoples she encountered on the Indian frontier in the second half of the nineteenth century, a common practice among European visitors to India and adjacent areas at this time.

For all this, the details of William Thornton's family life, particularly his forty-year marriage to Elizabeth, remain opaque. From the few extant fragments of family biography, it would appear that William and Elizabeth had a most companionable marriage of the Victorian kind. She attended to the home, husband and children as the "dutiful" Victorian wife, although it is apparent from the few surviving snippets of biographical information that she was a strong-willed and capable woman, invested with a deep sense of her family's longevity and distinctive tradition, "which was in her very bones and marrow". Although Victorian society privileged the male as head of the household, many Victorian women exercised considerable influence within the household. What becomes clear from the historical record is that Elizabeth, apart from lending a woman's touch to the hearth and home, was the bedrock in the Thornton household. William revered his wife and respected her as an equal. He even composed a poem, included in his first volume of verse, which celebrated her family's illustrious past. Theirs was, from all accounts, both an affectionate and fulfilling marriage. William and Elizabeth had four children, an equal number of boys and

girls, two of whom died during infancy and a third in young adulthood. The loss of three children was a devastating blow for the Thornton family. Later, William dedicated a poem to his eldest daughter, Ellen Aird, when she died. Shattered by her early death, the poem helped to assuage his profound sense of loss. The death of their youngest daughter, Elizabeth Evelyn, while giving birth to her second child, left William bereft. Her death so altered his brittle mental constitution that even the presence of his grandson, Dudley William Carmalt Jones, failed to raise his flagging spirits. He was left a broken man.

### CONSTANTINOPLE

In the spring of 1790, a young Englishman by the name of Thomas Thornton (1762–1814) set sail from the East India Company docks on the Thames River in search of destiny and fortune in the Levant. Ultimately bound for the Ottoman capital of Constantinople, the ship started towards the Mediterranean Sea, briefly dropping anchor at the British naval base of Gibraltar to load victuals and mail before setting a course eastward for the ancient biblical city of Smyrna on the Aegean coast. Thomas Thornton disembarked at Smyrna and stayed a little more than two months onshore. He found comfortable lodgings on Frank Street, where he seems to have whiled away time either paying “a visit to every family of distinction either in town or in the country” or attending lavish evening balls thrown by the various European consulates. Despite having been fortunate enough to “have seen the pillars of Hercules, the famous Mount Etna, the birth place of Venus and many other places celebrated by the ancients”, Thomas Thornton felt that Smyrna had little to recommend it. Describing in a letter from May 1790 the soldiers in the city as “the most lawless set of scoundrels that I ever heard of”, he was clearly impatient to reach his final port of destination, Constantinople, in search of a new beginning. He sailed from Smyrna and, finally, late in November 1790, Thomas Thornton caught his first sight of the magnificent Church of St Sophia, standing out in bold relief against the jumbled rooflines of Constantinople, a riveting spectacle from any perspective, but particularly so from the harbour.

Thomas Thornton was the eldest son and first child of William Thornton (1738–1769), an enterprising and doughty individual, who was a native of the town of Hull in the historic East Riding of Yorkshire, who moved to London where he kept an inn, establishing himself as a

freeman, and Dorothy Thompson (d.1769), who is described in an autobiographical memoir by their son Sir Edward Thornton (1766–1852) as “a countrywoman of his own, a native of the same East Riding, of a very respectable family”. William Thornton (our William’s grandfather), having removed to London with a view to bettering himself, was, in fact, prospering as an innkeeper when, “at the age of thirty or thirty-one years, in the latter half of 1769”, he was suddenly taken ill, eventually succumbing to the illness. In the same biographical account, Dorothy Thompson is said to have “preceded him to the grave eight months before, scarcely three months after giving birth to a daughter”. William Thornton and Dorothy Thompson had five children: Thomas (1762–1814), Elizabeth (1762–1845), the aforementioned Edward, William (1767–1798), and Dolly (b.1768).<sup>1</sup>

Following the premature deaths of their parents, the Thornton children’s interests were vested in a guardian, whose connections allowed Thomas (who, at seven years old, was “exactly of the requisite age for admission”) to attend Christ’s Hospital, a boys’ boarding school located on one of the oldest thoroughfares in the city of London. In Thomas’s day, the school was wedged between Newgate prison, St Bartholomew’s Hospital and the slaughterhouses adjoining the Smithfield meat market. In every direction, the prospect was somewhat grim, with the stench of blood and execution hanging in the air. Despite its insalubrious surroundings, Christ’s Hospital has attracted an aura of myth as the “fam’d school” of “youthful bards” where such literary lights as Charles Lamb, Leigh Hunt and Samuel Taylor Coleridge received their education (Roe 2005: 34). In fact, the school saw its mission as preparing disadvantaged boys for apprenticeships with merchant and trading companies involved in the exploration and mercantile expansion of the emerging British Empire. Thomas’s education at “that noble foundation” certainly prepared him for a career in one of the many flourishing English trading houses of the time; in 1790, aged 28, he decided to establish himself as a merchant in Constantinople, attached to the Levant Company, one of the great merchant firms trading in the Near East. Yet, although “he had been educated in mercantile habits, his mind was of a higher cast than those habits are usually found to supply” (Tweddell 1815: 301). Indeed, in the next fifteen years, primarily spent in Constantinople, Thornton successfully amassed a wealth of material for a book he intended to write on Turkish customs, habits and institutions. “He made several excursions to the provinces of Anatolia, and to the islands of the Archipelago. He had particularly viewed

the Troad with a critical eye; and had made some remarks on the subject in one of the periodical journals, which a profound scholar need not have blushed to own" (ibid.). This culminated in the publication in 1807 of a valuable work, *The Present State of Turkey*, which established his reputation as an authority on the Near East (Schiffer 1999: 402).

Throughout his fourteen years of residence in Constantinople, Thomas Thornton, despite his self-avowed "extreme aversion to familiar letter-writing", kept up a lively correspondence with his twin sister, Elizabeth ("Betsy").<sup>2</sup> Their letters provide a vivid record of daily life in the Ottoman capital, where people within the European legation lived, on the whole, a peaceful and leisurely life. The arrival of letters from home filled Thomas with a sense of nostalgia, made all the more intense by his personal reaction to events concerning family life in England: the disappointment on learning that his younger brother Bill had been "neglecting the education of his children", delight on learning of his brother Ned's academic success at Cambridge in 1791 (preceding his appointment in 1793 as British vice consul to the USA), distress that his "sister Dolly is so alarmingly ill" and the "melancholy accounts" of his "dear aunt's health". Thomas Thornton, to be sure, derived overwhelming pleasure on receiving news from England, particularly from his "dear sister", to whom he was deeply devoted. Letters were now all that held the family together—an emblem, both of connection and separation. All the while in Constantinople, Thomas was under no illusions about chasing his fortune there, yet all the years he spent there were dedicated to one cause: the hope of returning to England as a man of means. As one of his letters says, "I hope even before I am wrinkled & while I walk without crutches to shake the dust of Constantinople from off my feet", and then, "if my affairs turn out so that I can return at the beginning of the next century I shall not regret the time I shall have passed here". This was a familiar refrain in his early letters.

Certainly, the most common topic of conversation between Thomas and Elizabeth was the question of her future. While Thomas was absorbing the tantalizing sights and sounds of life in Constantinople, Elizabeth was living in London with her elderly uncle and aunt. Elizabeth seemed very unhappy most of the time, largely because her life revolved around nursing her aunt, whose health was rapidly deteriorating. Indeed, the correspondence reveals that her decision to remain with her uncle and aunt was a constant source of friction between brother and sister. In a letter dated 1 October 1794, Thomas pleads with his sister to "quit the state of cheerless celibacy as soon as you can with decency and propriety"; Elizabeth, then

in the blossom of youth, had received several attractive marriage proposals, all of which she had chosen to spurn. Thomas considered her “confoundedly mealy-mouthed not to have married any of them”. The same letter implores her to choose one of her suitors: “My wish is that you should have a husband, a reasonable, cheerful, even-tempered man, a man endowed with such capacities by nature; & not too old to improve, would become in time, under your management, all that a human should be.” In a subsequent letter, dated 9 January 1796, Thomas tells his sister how miserable he feels about her “unhappiness” and instructs her to “leave Mr. Hodgson’s house immediately, place yourself in some respectable family and be cheerful”. He tries to allay her feelings of guilt, adding “the obligations you give to your aunt prevent your quitting a house where you are continually exposed to ill-treatment, & deprived of all the comforts, without which life, particularly at your age, is scarcely tolerable. What absurd reasoning is this!” Thomas, who had made special arrangements with a family friend, Mr. George Liddell (1769–c.1863), a banker and secretary to the Levant Company, for his sister’s financial security, questions the decision to remain loyal to their aunt: “Does the care my aunt took of some of our family in our infancy, & which by the bye was certainly not detrimental to her own interests, require the sacrifice of the most valuable part of your life?” This continuous badgering seems to have made little impression; Elizabeth remained with her uncle and aunt for many years before finally marrying Mr. George Moore, a servant of the East India Company, in 1799.<sup>3</sup> The couple appears not to have had any children. Elizabeth survived her husband, living to a ripe old age, a permanent fixture in the lives of her nieces and nephews.

The question of marriage was, however, very much on the mind of Thomas Thornton. In the same letter dated 9 January 1796, he mentions that he may “contrive to come home in the autumn, though perhaps but for a few weeks”. His intention, however, was certainly not “to look for a wife”. He then declares: “I don’t like English women, neither their persons, nor their manners, nor their education, nor their cookery, nor anything that they have, but their goods & chattels, and even those I don’t much care about.” This was the first occasion on which Thomas had raised with his sister the subject of his own marriage. Evidently, he was attempting to disclose his decision to marry “out of England”, but it is not until much later in the year that he mustered the courage to write to Elizabeth, informing her of his decision “to marry in this country” (Turkey). “It is not hastily”, he writes, “that I have formed

my resolution". Concerned that his sister might believe, because of his earlier dalliance with his Italian landlady, that he was becoming involved with an unsuitable young woman, he went on to reassure her that, while "my wife is without a fortune ... she is young, & of a temper well suited to my own". He suspected the decision might nonetheless displease his sister, who was perpetually concerned that she might never again see her twin brother. As Thomas explains, "My wife is a girl whose attachment to this country is by no means strong, so that the connection will not operate in the least as an impediment to my return to England, or alienate my affections from my country relations." Before signing off, Thomas reaffirms his attachment to his sister. "It will always be among the first of my wishes to see you happy", adding, "nothing is capable of making any change in my affection for you." Thomas Thornton was, at the time, thirty-four years of age. He married his fiancée, Sophie Zohrab, in Constantinople in 1797 (see Thornton 1807: vii).

Despite Sophie's youth, it appears that her maturity, even temper and sensibility made her a suitable match for Thomas. She was, by all accounts, resourceful, unswervingly supportive of her family, and steadfast through personal traumas, financial austerity and the most arduous journeys she took with her husband.

### SOPHIE ZOHRAB

It has been speculated that Sophie Zohrab was the daughter of a Greek merchant (Norgate 1909: 790–91; Pastrello 2004: 1207; Vint 2004: 647). This is incorrect. *Zohrab* is Persian (meaning "glaring with red"), not Greek. Sophie Zohrab was, in fact, a member of the Armenian Church (Tweddell 1815: 301). Her family was, therefore, of the orthodox Christian religion. The Zohrabs had risen to prominence in their native land, but in the late eighteenth century, Aga Mohammed Khan, the Shah of Persia, took a dislike to the family, perceiving them as a direct threat to his rule in Armenia. Thus, the Zohrabs were forced to emigrate to neighbouring countries as refugees fleeing religious persecution (see Maddocks 1989: 50–51, for further details). In 1795, in hopes of bettering their lot, Sophie, her parents and two brothers fled to Turkey, crossing the border near Mount Ararat, once a part of historic Armenia.<sup>4</sup> They journeyed westward before settling in Constantinople. Sophie's father, Paul Zohrab (d.1798), eventually found employment as an interpreter or *dragoman* "in the service of His Danish Majesty" in Constantinople, where it

seems he made the acquaintance of Thomas Thornton. Sophie's brother, Constantine Zohrab, settled in Constantinople too, becoming the first dragoman to the Dutch legation.<sup>5</sup> He married Mary de Serpos, daughter of the Marquis Joseph de Serpos. Sophie's other brother, Peter, was also a dragoman. He left Turkey and, for a time, resided in England, subsequently marrying Elizabeth Hitchins, an Englishwoman, on 17 September 1807 in St Pancras Old Church in London. In 1816, he remarried, settled in Malta, where he raised a large family with his second wife, Frances Williams (1793–1862). Peter Zohrab died in Malta in 1852.

On Christmas 1797, in the first year of their marriage, Thomas and Sophie found themselves stranded in the newly founded city of Nicolaef, in a country “formerly called Little Tartary”, along the Black Sea coast. In a letter dated 23 December 1797 to his sister, Thomas communicated the exciting news that Sophie had given birth on the nineteenth to their first child, “a boy who appears strong and healthy”. He also informed Elizabeth of his firm intention to return home in the spring of 1798 for a short visit. Thomas duly arrived in London in April the following year, his first time on English soil since his departure in the spring of 1790. He was, of course, accompanied by Sophie and their son, who had been “given the name of his father”. Their visit home, as exciting as the reunion should have been for Thomas and his family, was tinged with sadness: Thomas's younger brother William had recently passed away, leaving behind a young family. His other brother Edward, having been successfully elected to a fellowship at Pembroke College, Cambridge, in the same year, was still away in the USA, having been appointed, in 1796, secretary of the legation under Mr. (later, Sir) Robert Liston.

It seems likely that Thomas, Sophie and their baby boy stayed in London for the duration of a month before safely returning to Constantinople in May 1798. Thomas had a great deal on his mind: the welfare of his brother's orphaned family, supporting his own young family, work-related absences from Constantinople much of the time—all contributing to his worries. As he confided to his sister in a letter dated 25 May 1798, “the subject nearest my heart & the cause of the uneasiness is the state of my brother's family”, in particular, “the expense of maintaining & educating the children”. Thomas feared that the additional financial responsibilities “will bear heavy upon me unless there is peace very soon”. At the time, Britain and her allies were at war with Napoleonic France. The result of the conflict was a depreciation in the value of sterling that made it relatively more expensive to remit funds to England: “at this time”, explained

Thomas, “were I to send home money it would cost me half as much more as it did a few years ago”. Nevertheless, Thomas felt that as the eldest brother, it was his duty to support his “brother’s orphan family”: “do not suppose I mean to shrink from what I feel to be my duty”. He requested Elizabeth to reassure his sister-in-law of his “unalterable affection for her, & of my endeavours to console her to the utmost of my power for the loss she has sustained in my dear brother”. In the same letter, he informs his sister that it is his every intention “to return & settle in England as soon as I can, which I hope will be in less than five years, so that perhaps we may meet again”.

In fact, Thomas Thornton himself had suffered something of a financial reversal in the spring of 1799, when his mansion and warehouse at Péra were completely destroyed in a fire that engulfed much of Péra. Although the fire destroyed most of Thornton’s possessions, he was, however, able to save the literary property of his close friend John Tweddell, who had left an extensive collection of journals, notes and drawings in Thornton’s care before embarking upon an extensive tour of Greece and surrounding areas. In a letter to John Tweddell, dated 15 April 1799, Thornton wrote: “Your trunks were in the warehouse adjoining to my house. I can only tell you what I saved from it, and hope that your loss, if any thing, will be small. I find two trunks—the one which I lent you, and in which are things belonging to yourself; the other, a hair-trunk, belonging, I believe, to Préaux. They smelt so strong that I was induced to break the lock, to see in what state they were within, and I find everything perfectly unhurt. Besides the trunks, I have only an empty leathern portmanteau, and a blue stuff bag, filled with books and other things. If you left anything else, which I hope and believe was not the case, you must console yourself, as I have done, for the loss of my books, clothes, and furniture” (Tweddell 1815: 372). Thus, thanks to Thornton, who was injured in the fire, two trunks containing Tweddell’s valuable literary possessions were saved.<sup>6</sup>

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Sophie Zohrab wrote to her sister-in-law with news of the birth of a second son, Edward (1799–1874), whom she described as being “much more robust than Thomas although both enjoy perfect health”. Thomas and Sophie Thornton remained in Constantinople for another four years. In 1804, just as he had earlier promised his sister, Thomas and his young family returned permanently to England. Before their departure, however, Thomas Thornton made representations to Sir Robert Liston, a career diplomat in the British Foreign Service, on behalf of Sophie’s two brothers, Constantine and Peter Zohrab,

to obtain Danish naturalization papers. In a letter dated 15 August 1803, he wrote: "I avail of the opportunity of your being at Copenhagen to request you will oblige me by obtaining for my Brothers-in-law letters of Naturalisation, as Danish subjects, in virtue of the grant to their father, of which a literal translation is annexed."<sup>7</sup> It seems unlikely that Sir Robert was able to assist with the request, as there is no evidence to suggest that either brother had ever lived in Denmark.

Several months later, Thomas Thornton, in a letter acknowledging Sir Robert's reply, recounted a dramatic heist of which he had been a victim during a journey by stagecoach from Vienna to Constantinople. He recounts the ordeal as follows: "My journey through Turkey has been unfortunate. I was met by robbers soon after the Danube who took from me, besides my own property, more than £10,000 in jewellery which I was carrying to Constantinople to the address of Mr Drummond." Having been threatened with his life if he didn't turn over the valuables, and having lived to tell the tale, Thomas was under no illusion as to the fortuity in his near escape from death. Fate had intervened on this occasion; it might not be so kind on the next. In any case, he had grown weary of life in Constantinople, as evidenced in his letters to his sister Elizabeth. Its climate still agreed with him, and the unruly bustle of its bazaars bulging with exotic wares from distant lands continued to fascinate him, and yet, he now referred to it as "barbarous Turkey, the acropolis of despotism."<sup>8</sup> With a young family to take care of now and the sirens of "Merry Olde England" beckoning him home, Thomas, packed his bags, boarded a tall ship and departed Constantinople, never to return.<sup>9</sup>

Sophie had departed earlier, travelling first to Holland by mail coach and onward to Germany, where she boarded a small mail packet crossing the North Sea to Falmouth, an English coastal port. There, she was received by her brother-in-law, Mr. George Moore (the husband of Thomas's sister Elizabeth), who had arranged for her overland journey to London, where she hoped to be reunited with her husband and children. Thomas Thornton and the children had arrived together in London prior to Sophie. She arrived in London in September 1804. This was the family's first Christmas in England. There is some evidence in the Thornton papers suggesting Thomas's continued employment, after his return to England, in the Levant Company.

At some stage between 1805 and 1810, Thomas and his family had taken up residence in the English country town of Burnham, Buckinghamshire, where it seems they lived in straitened, but not harsh conditions. The

choice of Burnham was not an obvious one as the Thornton family had no family ties or existing friends to draw them to this small but prosperous provincial town. Perhaps it was chosen as a more salubrious, not to say less expensive, location to raise a large, young family. In any case, Sophie Zohrab gave birth to several children in England: four girls—Mary, Polly, Sophie and Eliza—and two boys—John and William.<sup>10</sup> Thomas and his wife probably found the leisurely pace of rural life more conducive to raising such a large family.

Sophie Thornton and Elizabeth Moore continued to exchange letters as well as jars of preserved fruit. Indeed, the two families appear to have maintained close ties—a fact that seems to have eased Thomas’s transition through the period of financial reversal he perhaps suffered in late 1812 or early 1813.<sup>11</sup> In a letter dated 18 February 1813, he thanks his brother-in-law George Moore “for the trouble I have given you in paying my last bill”. The same letter also conveys the happy news of Sophie’s delivery four days earlier of baby William: “My wife was safely delivered on Sunday evening of a healthy boy—whom we call William, in memory of my dear brother. She herself is well and begs now to make her kindest remembrances to you and my sister.” William Thomas Thornton—the main subject of our interest—was born on 14 February 1813, a day that was midway in a month of dark skies and biting frosts.

In late 1813, Thomas was made consul general to the Levant Company, an appointment that required his journeying to Egypt, then still part of the Ottoman Empire under the charismatic governor Mehmet Ali. His decision to journey abroad, leaving his wife and family behind in England, remains unknown; perhaps it was with a view to replenishing his fluctuating personal finances. On 19 November, he wrote to George Moore from Burnham, mentioning a change in his travel plans; it was now his intention, “instead of coming to town, to set off for Ryde in the Isle of Wight and to wait there till a convoy sails”. However, Thomas had been suffering from chronic ill health for some time, but it was continually downplayed.<sup>12</sup> In order not to cause alarm, Thomas insisted that Elizabeth be kept in the dark. “I think myself to be better both in health and appetite”, he wrote, adding, “The night sweats, she will be glad to hear, have left me, and I have not quite the death’s head appearance that I had in town.” The illness, however, took its toll. On 28 March 1814, while he was preparing to set sail for Alexandria, Thomas Thornton died suddenly of a “pulmonary complaint”, leaving behind his newborn son—barely a year old and already deprived of a father figure. Thomas’s sudden death shocked and

grieved the entire family.<sup>13</sup> At the time of their father's death, William Thornton and his brothers and sisters would have been totally dependent upon their mother.

### EARLY YEARS

After her husband's untimely death in 1814, Sophie suddenly found herself shouldering the heavy responsibility of providing for eight children. Needing support herself after her husband's death, Sophie appears to have received it from her extended family. Given her straitened finances, Sophie's sister and brother-in-law, Elizabeth and George Moore, almost certainly offered to lend her assistance, perhaps even agreeing to support her and the children by clearing bills and supplying household provisions to tide Sophie and the children over until such time as she could cope on her own. At some point following Thomas Thornton's death, Sophie Zohrab and her children had moved from Burnham to London to live with the Moores.

The bond between the Moores and the Thornton children grew even closer when, in 1817, tragedy once more struck the Thornton family. Sophie Zohrab died suddenly on 6 February, a week before William's fourth birthday, adding further gloom to what was already a beleaguered household.<sup>14</sup> Another parental separation coming so soon after the loss of their father must have taken its toll on all the Thornton children, particularly for those in their formative years, old enough to have formed a bond with both parents. Internal evidence indicates that the younger Thornton children remained with Elizabeth Moore, who became a sort of surrogate parent. It was not uncommon, in fact, for orphaned children to be accepted by members of their fathers' family. In the same year in which William Thornton's mother passed away, 1817, George Moore also died, leaving behind a widow, Elizabeth Moore, and the orphaned Thornton children to fend for themselves. With the loss of the main breadwinner as well as her nieces and nephews now dependent upon her, Elizabeth Moore addressed a petition to the Court of the East India Company "for relief" in the form of an annual pension as the widow of a Company employee. The Company's official records, dated 18 June 1817, read as follows: "[t]he Petition of Elizabeth Moore, widow of Mr. George Moore late an Extra Clerk in the Examiners Office praying relief. Ordered, that the said Letter, Requests & Petition be referred to the Committee of Correspondence to examine and report" [IOR/B/165/245ff]. Over a month later, on

23 July 1817, the Court “Resolved, that Mrs. Elizabeth Moore, widow of Mr. George Moore late an Extra Clerk in the Examiners Office, be granted a pension of £50 per annum to commence from the date when the payment of Mr. Moore’s pension ceased, and to be chargeable to the Fee Fund” [IOR/B/165/374ff]. The Company’s generous determination was, doubtless, a welcome addition and Elizabeth Moore immediately wrote, “expressing her thanks to the Court for the pension granted to her” [IOR/B/165/412ff].

Regrettably, the Thornton family papers lack documents shedding further light on the fate of the Thornton children immediately following the deaths of Thomas and Sophie Thornton. There does exist, however, an important series of letters addressed to Elizabeth Moore dating from the second half of the 1820s. Composed by Mary Liddell (c.1775–1842), wife of the banker whose services had some years earlier been retained by Thomas Thornton, this correspondence contains useful snippets of information on the later activities of the Thornton children. Even a cursory perusal of the letters leaves the reader with the impression that Elizabeth Moore had become, after her twin brother’s untimely demise, a more or less permanent fixture in the children’s lives. At the time, Elizabeth was residing in modest lodgings at 12 Homerton Terrace, Hackney, East London, an area immortalized by its famous horse-drawn coaches. A letter to Elizabeth, dated 7 July 1826, confirms that William Thornton’s eldest sister, Mary Thornton, was then residing in what Mrs. Liddell described as “the most agreeable part of Ireland”. The letter goes on to describe Mary Thornton as “very good tempered and obliging”. It also mentions Thornton’s other sisters, Eliza and Sophie, as “comfortable and happy” and “going on very well” in their lives.<sup>15</sup> Mrs. Liddell assumes, however, that Elizabeth Moore is in low spirits, owing to “the loss of the society of your nieces”, who had recently taken leave of their aunt’s place of residence.

Another letter to Elizabeth from Mary Liddell, dated 28 March 1828, conveys more detailed information on the activities of the Thornton children, including William. It appears that Mary Thornton has attracted the attention of an admirer and is “happily situated”,<sup>16</sup> while William, then resident in Malta, is said to be “doing well, and happy [living abroad] with his cousins”. The eldest sister, Eliza, is mentioned as being disappointed “in not going to Constantinople”. Undeterred by this setback, however, Eliza has found herself “thrown among good and superior people”. The letter goes on to add that “to a clever girl like her ... [a] thinking, pensive

girl”, a social network comprising “the good, the gifted, and the polite, must be a great advantage”. Referring to the youngest sister, Sophie, Mrs. Liddell hopes that she “will soon meet with a situation suitable for her, with a salary proportioned to her merits, and that she will then become all you wish her in every respect”. The letter then acknowledges Elizabeth Moore as having “so nobly performed many arduous duties”, while adding, “may you be rewarded also by the gratitude and affection of those who owe everything to your care and attention”. As far as the care of the Thornton children was concerned, Elizabeth had dutifully carried out the responsibilities that had so suddenly been thrust upon her.

There is a gap in the correspondence between the two women, with almost a decade elapsing without any surviving letters to continue the narrative. The next available letter is dated 25 July 1838. On this occasion (and on all future ones), the letter was written by Mr. George Liddell on behalf of his wife Mary, whose increasing frailty and failing sight prevented her from corresponding in her own hand. It begins with Mr. Liddell congratulating Mrs. Moore on her robust health, and continues with a fairly innocuous passage, confirming Elizabeth Moore’s parental role in relation to her nieces and nephews. “We are happy to learn that you continue to enjoy good health and the full use of all your senses. May it be so to the end of your life. And may that end be still far off, not for your sake but for that of others to whom you have been and are father and mother as well as aunt.” The letter goes on to mention a recent journey made by one of the Thornton sisters to Batavia, in what was then known as the Dutch East Indies. The passage continues: “Your niece . . . is at Batavia is she not? What human being ever thrived there, or thereabouts long? Whoever aspires to martyrdom may be sure of obtaining it at Batavia.” Mr. Liddell had clearly formed the opinion that Batavia was not an appropriate destination for a young, God-fearing English woman. The young lady in question was Eliza Thornton, who had the distinction of having been chosen as the first female missionary to be sent to the Far East by the Church Missionary Society to promote indigenous female education.<sup>17</sup> Passing reference is also made to the “successes” of both William Thornton and his elder brother Edward, who was “first placed in the India House for the benefit of the family”.<sup>18</sup> It appears that their uncle Sir Edward Thornton, then in retirement, played a supporting role in securing his nephew’s employment in India House. Indeed, more generally, the political alliances that the Thornton’s forged during the late eighteenth century certainly helped to pave the way for the family’s relative security and prosperity during the nineteenth.

Elizabeth Moore and George Liddell continued their correspondence throughout the early 1840s, keeping each other abreast of family news. From a letter dated 24 May 1843, it is apparent that Mary Thornton, William Thornton's elder sister, had been composing her aunt's letters on her behalf. Liddell acknowledges, "Miss Mary I know is an excellent secretary", and "I thank her for her kind letter." A similar refrain is found in a letter dated 16 May 1844, which begins: "Your Miss Mary's letter of the 30<sup>th</sup> October written for you reached me punctually—a most kind letter it was." All of this suggests that Elizabeth Moore's health was failing rapidly, making her increasingly reliant upon her "daughters" to perform everyday tasks. Nevertheless, the Liddells and Elizabeth Moore continued corresponding with each other for another eighteen months; the final letter from Mr. Liddell is dated 3 November 1845. After this date, no further correspondence survives.<sup>19</sup> Despite her advancing years and frail health, Elizabeth Moore lived well into her nineties, eventually passing away on 23 December 1860, at Woodlands, Cheshunt, in Hertfordshire,<sup>20</sup> a few years before her close friend, George Liddell, passed away.<sup>21</sup> She was an attractive and strong-minded woman, and by all accounts, her love for the Thornton children was boundless. She remained a family figure of great importance in their lives, perhaps in her own mind, repaying the debt she felt she owed her twin for securing *her* financial independence many years earlier.

### MORAVIAN EDUCATION

The most striking feature of William Thornton's life in the 1820s and 1830s is how little is known about him and how few verifiable facts remain available. It seems likely that, by the late 1810s and early 1820s, the question of William's education—not to say, that of his siblings—was now looming large in the Thorntons' and Moores' calculations, the answer to which revealed a great deal about the way in which middle-class families traded on wider family connections when faced with this type of dilemma. The family's precarious financial circumstances meant that the great public schools—Eton and Harrow—were not a possibility. Equally, it would be demeaning to send the boy to one of the charity schools for paupers. For whatever reason, the institution that offered a middle way, Christ's Hospital, which had been attended by William's father and uncle, was overlooked. Instead, in the early 1820s, the decision reached was to send William and his older brother, John, to board at the Boys' School at the Moravian Settlement at Ockbrook, Derbyshire.<sup>22</sup>

The Thornton family papers contain early correspondence between the Thornton brothers, William and John,<sup>23</sup> both roughly of an age, and their Aunt Moore. These letters reinforce the impression of a close bond between her and the Thornton children. Two of the letters are particularly important because they are the only source of information concerning (1) William's (and John's) education at the Moravian settlement as full-time boarders, and (2) the period of his subsequent residence in Constantinople. William apparently took longer to settle down to his studies, as is detailed in a short note attached to William's letter to his Aunt Moore, wherein the school principal, Mr. O'Connor, informs Mrs. Moore that both boys "afford us much satisfaction by their general conduct and attention to their studies", while continuing that "William is much more diligent than he was."<sup>24</sup>

Evidence points to the Thornton brothers having entered the Moravian school when William was either seven or eight years old. According to John Thornton, in a letter to Aunt Moore, dated 3 May 1822, there were "now 34 boys" in the boarding school "divided into two rooms", evidence of the communal approach to education within the Moravian church schools. The Ockbrook Church School attempted to create a culture reflecting both secular and religious values. Emphasis was laid on spelling and writing, Bible study, music and the hymn of the Moravian Church. The earliest specimen of William's penmanship is a letter dated 30 April 1822 to Aunt Moore, in which he mentions "an examination every quarter, at which time we are examined in whatever we are instructed". After an initially slow start, William immersed himself in his studies, increasingly appreciating the importance of the learning process. He writes, "To the instructions which I now enjoy, I trust I shall give my entire attention, ever remembering their great importance." He concludes by reiterating a desire to "do everything according to your pleasure, and also hope that I may improve in all various branches of my education". There is evidence, then, that William was quite an able pupil who could conceivably have proceeded to Cambridge or Oxford, had the family's finances permitted this as an option. Both letters also confirm that Aunt Moore had made, by then, her home with the Thornton children. In closing, William writes of his intention "to meet with your esteem and approbation when I return home", while John beseeches his "dear aunt" to "give my love to my Brother and Sisters, and accept the same yourself", while adding, "I hope I shall soon hear from my sisters and beg to be kindly remembered to them, and to all my friends, who I hope are quite well." Also apparent

from John's letter is that one of his two older brothers (Thomas) had passed away.

It is not known whether the Moravian education Thornton received at Ockbrook made a lasting impression; no references to Moravian teachings occur in his published writings, nor is there any evidence to suggest that he continued his association with the Moravian Church. The undercurrents of Christian faith and belief, however, remained with him for the rest of his life, as documented by some of his later poetry and prose writings, inspired as they were by theological experiences. His religiosity remained anchored to a Victorian moral code, driven by the principles of duty, moral uplift and good deeds. At the time, acting on these principles was believed to affirm one's commitment to God. In addition, the tuition that Thornton received in classical literature and grammar laid the foundation for his exploration of classical mythology in his poetical works of the 1850s, several of which were composed in Latin and Greek. In this, the discipline of mastering classical languages in the school room was a stimulus to William's literary ambitions in later years.

### SETTING OUT

William stayed at the Moravian settlement until he was fifteen years of age. In 1827, having completed his formal schooling at the Moravian Boys' School, it was time to quit the school that had been his home for six years and enter the world beyond. The family's straitened circumstances made it imperative that William be settled in work like his elder brother, John, who had already been sent to the West Indies to work. So, young William was sent to live in Valetta with his well-connected cousin Sir William Henry Thornton (1786–1859), the auditor general of Malta.<sup>25</sup> The family resided at 61 Strada Brittanica, in an accommodation paid for by the local government. Unfortunately no records remain of young William's sea passage to Malta, his initial impressions of Valetta or the details of his daily life in the British colony. Nevertheless, it is fair to assume that during his three-year stint in Malta, he occupied a junior administrative post in the auditor general's office, honing the skills he would need to fashion a successful career as colonial administrator when he returned to the land of his birth. It is also apparent that William came to know his mother's brother, Peter Zohrab, who had migrated to Malta from England some years earlier, married, and subsequently, raised a family there. Beyond these scattered biographical fragments, however, there is no further information

detailing this formative phase of William's life on the tiny Mediterranean island.

At some point in the autumn of 1830, having resided in Malta for three years, young William decided to try his fortunes elsewhere. Once again, little is known of the stages by which this decision was reached, either by himself, or—as more likely—a family member, most likely Elizabeth Moore and Sir Edward Thornton. The teenager packed his bags and journeyed east to the Ottoman capital of Constantinople, securing employment on the staff of the British consul general, John Cartwright.<sup>26</sup> The opportunity presented itself, thanks to a letter of introduction from General Ponsonby of Malta “to the English ambassador here, Sir Robert Gordon”. From Constantinople, William wrote a letter, dated 19 June 1830, providing his Aunt Moore with a full and frank account of the rigours of his sea voyage from Malta to Turkey. The letter describes a chance meeting with an Italian nobleman en route to Constantinople, their brief inland foray “almost as far as the plains of Troy” and their brief excursion “to a miserable Greek village”, where they enjoyed a short respite before setting sail again. Upon disembarking in Constantinople, Thornton stayed with his cousin Edward Zohrab, whom he described as an “excellent young man”. He also met another uncle, Constantine Zohrab, Sophie's second brother, and immediately formed a very positive impression of Constantine and his family, an impression in sharp contrast to one he had formed of Peter Zohrab and his family in Malta, so much so “that one can scarcely believe that they are so nearly related”.<sup>27</sup> He went on to say that Constantine's family were “generous, good-natured and industrious which certainly is not the character of the others”.

Soon after disembarking at Constantinople, William tells his aunt, he received an invitation from Sir Robert Gordon, asking William “to dine with him ... which of course I did”. The account goes further to say that “the rooms of the Palace are magnificent, and beautifully furnished.” They “ate at dinner off solid silver, there was not a plate or dish at table of anything else”. At one point during the course of their dinner, Ambassador Gordon asked Thornton “a few civil questions; among others, as an Italian performer was singing and playing on the guitar, ‘Mr. Thornton, do you sing?’ ‘No Sir,’” William replied, although he “could not help laughing at the oddity of the question”.

The letter ends with William's pleading with his aunt to write to him as well as encourage his sisters to put pen to paper. This important letter is the first unambiguous evidence of the existence of William Thornton's

previously unmentioned siblings Polly, Eliza and Sophie Thornton. “Don’t you think, dear Aunt, that ... both you and my dear sisters might write to me so much oftener.” He goes on to say that his last letter from Eliza mentioned that “poor dear Sophie ... was very ill,” and he beseeches his aunt for details: “Tell me how she is ... you can’t think how anxious I am about her.” The letter is loving and good humoured in spirit. Polly is addressed as “my dear little Poetical Polly,” and, in signing off, William instructs his aunt to “give my love to dear Polly and Sophie and give them everyday three kisses more than their usual quantum as coming from me”. The same letter urgently requests information on the precise whereabouts of his brother John, his childhood companion at the boarding school on the Moravian settlement. John, it seems, had been living in Tobago (West Indies) for two years. Beyond that, however, William confesses ignorance as to “why he is gone, what he is doing, what salary he received, not in short anything more than the bare fact that he is gone”.

It is highly likely that the communication between William and his Aunt Elizabeth continued, although sadly, none of the correspondence has survived. A solitary letter, however, from William’s cousin M. Thornton survives.<sup>28</sup> Written from Valetta to William’s elder sister Eliza, then residing in Corfu, and dated 1 March 1831, the letter makes several references to William, by then resident in the Ottoman capital for ten months. The letter recounts that William seems content with life in Constantinople, is getting along well with his mother’s family, the Zohrabs, and is diligently pursuing horse-riding lessons in his leisure time: his employer, Mr. Cartwright, “lets him ride whenever he likes .... he hopes soon to be a tolerable rider”. The letter further reveals that William had been invited by the British ambassador to Turkey, Sir Robert Gordon, to attend the 1831 New Year’s celebration, of which “he was not a little proud”. It also mentions Elizabeth Moore’s having written earlier to her nephew “on the subject of your William going out to Constantinople which she fully approved of”. The letter also mentions the possibility of Sophie Thornton, who had recently been unwell, but was now “better than she had been”, travelling abroad to live with the Sandisons, who were thought to be contemplating a move to Constantinople. While the Sandisons were known to William Thornton, they were unknown to the rest of the Thornton family.<sup>29</sup> “I hardly know what to think would be the best for her to do with regard to going to live with the Sandisons as we know nothing of them. Of course it would be quite a chance whether it were for her happiness or not. The change of climate might be of service to her.” Although William spent

five years in the Ottoman capital, his reaction to the everyday life going on around him or the particulars of the civil service apprenticeship served in the office of the consul general in Constantinople have, sadly, not survived. The most that can be said is that the earlier period in Thornton's life passed in Constantinople solidified, perhaps, his own intense political and cultural attachment to the Ottoman cause, which he almost certainly derived from members of his mother's side of the family, several of whom rose to prominence in their adopted homeland (Lipkes 1999: 116–17).<sup>30</sup> By the time William had entered his early twenties, he had spent nearly eight years away from home—initially, in Malta working as an assistant to his cousin, Sir William Henry Thornton, and later, as an office clerk in the employ of Sir John Cartwright, from whom he acquired much of the knowledge he needed to forge a successful career as an East India Company administrator when he returned to England.<sup>31</sup>

In 1835, Thornton returned to London, doubtless eager to be reunited with family and friends whom he had not seen in many years and to make a career for himself. He had not seen his siblings and Aunt Moore for more than eight years. The Thornton children must have rejoiced in the partial reunion under Elizabeth Moore's roof. In the following year, William secured, through family connections, a junior clerkship in the East India Company, the lowest rung on the Company's administrative ladder. But he was an ambitious young man with prospects, already singled out for success. He now worked for a distinguished company that would provide an entrée into London society. It was not long before he met his future wife, Elizabeth Evelyn Danvers, with whom he eventually raised four children.

### FAMILY LIFE

At some stage during William Thornton's mandatory three-year probation period at the East India Company, he made the acquaintance of his future wife, Elizabeth Evelyn Danvers (1820–1903). It is difficult to fathom how this came about, other than to remark that the Thornton and Danvers families remained closely interknit, both professionally and personally. Elizabeth was the daughter of Charles Danvers (1789–1865) and Elizabeth Nockells (1793–c.1878), who had themselves met and married in the West Indies. The Danvers, whose family name is derived from the French village of Alvers in the Cotentin, have a long and distinguished family history. Tradition has it that the family are descended from

a Roland d'Alvers, who fought at the Battle of Hastings and acquired large landholdings, "chiefly about the Northants-Oxfordshire border". Over the centuries, family members consolidated their landholdings by marrying into other notable landowning families in Oxfordshire. Several family members achieved considerable distinction, others notoriety. In the fifteenth century, a John Danvers was involved in the foundation of All Souls College, Oxford. William Danvers, also known as "Danvers of Culworth", claimed to be "Founder's Kin at Winchester", while a descendent of John Danvers (who married Anne Stradling of Dauntsey in 1487) sat on the commission responsible for the trial of King Charles I and signed his death warrant. Many family members matriculated from Oxford or "entered at one or other of the Inns of Court". By the seventeenth century, however, the branch of the Danvers family to which Elizabeth Evelyn Danvers belonged had ceased to be landed gentry. Instead, members of this branch of the Danvers family steadily made their way in the commercial world, sometimes founding business concerns in the City or entering the ranks of the professions, thereby establishing themselves as comfortable and solid middle-class families.<sup>32</sup> Thus, if not rich, the family was not without means and their social standing was secure.

It is not known when William and Elizabeth were first introduced to each other; sadly, no letters between them exist to illumine the origins and progress of their relationship. In any case, the young couple married on 15 April 1841 in the English county of Herefordshire. In one source, Elizabeth Danvers has been described as "a lady who had eight hundred years of tradition behind her, of which she never boasted, but which was in her very bones and marrow". "She was in no sense a *grande dame*", the account continues, "her family had long ceased to be landed gentry and were most of them comfortably off people in the professions". By all accounts, she was "a most competent house-keeper and an excellent hostess" who knew how to entertain to advantage, almost certainly a great social asset to her husband. Evidently, William and Elizabeth "had to entertain a great deal", and "up to the very end of her life she had a wonderful capacity for making a spread" (Barraclough 2009: 4). In short, the Thornton marriage was, from all accounts, a happy one, with Evelyn's efforts centred on bringing up the children, keeping their house in order and playing hostess to her husband's friends and colleagues. She survived her husband by more than two decades. When William passed away in June 1880, Elizabeth Evelyn was left with an annual pension worth £400.<sup>33</sup> She died on 18 October 1903.

It was not long before Elizabeth gave birth to Ellen Aird (1842–1851), the first of four children. Subsequent children were Edward Zohrab (1844–1908), Stanhope William (1846–1859) and Evelyn Danvers (1853–1876).<sup>34</sup> Although the Thornton family papers do not contain any correspondence between William and Elizabeth from this period, the collection does include letters from other family members, conveying details of their domestic life, the characters of their children, family rivalries and feelings and the general atmosphere in the family home. A letter to William from his Aunt Moore dated 22 July 1842, for example, portrays one such scene. “Anticipating the time when your dear little Ellen will sit at your table, and solace and delight you, with her cheerful prattle”, wrote Aunt Moore, “I have sent for her use, knife, fork and spoon. Accept them ... as a token of one who loved her father and her father’s father.” Ellen Aird Thornton’s existence is corroborated in another letter from William’s eldest sister, Mary Thornton (at the time, resident in Malta), dated 12 October 1847. Mary inquires of Aunt Moore, “I suppose little Ellen is a great amusement to you”, adding, “William wrote word how much she was improved since she had been with you.” Sadly, Ellen Aird died at the age of nine, almost certainly of tuberculosis.<sup>35</sup> Her death was acknowledged in Thornton’s first volume of poetry, *Zohrab; or, A Midsummer Day’s Dream: And Other Poems* (1854a). The poem in question, “Stanzas Written in Kensal Green Cemetery”, carries “expressions of sincere grief on the loss of a child” that “will reach the heart of many a bereaved parent”.<sup>36</sup>

Little is known about Stanhope William Thornton, other than that he attended Repton School in Derbyshire between January and April 1859 and passed away in his early teens, probably of tuberculosis.<sup>37</sup> His elder brother, Edward, subsequently named one of his own children after him.

Edward Zohrab Thornton, William’s “soldier-son”, was born in 1844. Like his siblings, he was often in poor health. Just before his sixteenth birthday, he was taken seriously ill with a lung complaint, as is detailed in a letter dated 28 January 1860 from John Stuart Mill (1972, 15: 660) to Helen Taylor: “I was very glad to find that Thornton has again high hopes for his poor boy—who appears to have gone through a crisis, evacuated the contents of an abscess or an ulcer in the lungs, and to be now better.” Educated at Wimbledon School from August 1857 to August 1859, Edward Zohrab subsequently enrolled at Cheltenham College from October 1859, receiving instruction in classics and mathematics. According to the school’s headmaster, a Mr. Southwood, Edward Zohrab’s

general conduct “has been very satisfactory”. The second half of 1860 saw his successful entry into the Royal Military College at Addiscombe, his nomination as a cadet having been provided by Captain J. Eastwick, a close family friend.

Edward Zohrab went on to serve in the British Indian Army in the post-1857 period, when the concentration of European military personnel had been increased. He journeyed to British India in 1861 as a seventeen-year-old ensign, joining the Bengal Fusiliers, 104th Foot Infantry, a regiment of British infantry raised from the 2nd Bengal European Fusiliers.<sup>38</sup> On 26 July 1862, while serving with the Bengal Fusiliers, he was commissioned as a lieutenant. In 1866, he was transferred to the 36th Native Infantry, at the same rank. On 29 August 1866, he married Georgina Danvers (at Abbot’s Langley, Buckinghamshire), his first cousin, who subsequently gave birth to two sons—Edward Evelyn and Stanhope Evelyn—and a daughter, Evelyn.<sup>39</sup> All three children were born in the north-west frontier of India. Unfortunately, Edward Zohrab never kept a journal of his encounter with the Raj, although his wife Georgina Danvers, who was somewhat of an amateur artist, left behind a series of delightful watercolours and sketches depicting scenes of everyday life in India that imitated the pioneering work of intrepids such as Thomas and William Daniels and William Hodges. On 6 October 1875, Edward Thornton exchanged as a Captain from the 104th with a certain Captain Davidson and is listed as serving with the 1st Battalion in Gibraltar. It was presumably at this stage of his military career that he “assisted to form an army for the Sultan of Morocco who presented him with a sword of honour”. After further service in India and Gibraltar, Edward brought his family back to England. In 1879, he transferred to the staff, became a Major (in the Royal Lancashire Regiment) in 1881 and retired on a Major’s pension with the rank of Honorary Lt. Colonel on 6 May 1882.<sup>40</sup> Edward Zohrab Thornton survived both his parents and died on 6 December 1908 of coronary thrombosis.

Thornton’s youngest daughter, Evelyn Danvers Thornton, born in 1853, married Thomas William Carmalt Jones (1847–1898), a London surgeon. Their only son, Dudley William Carmalt Jones (1874–1957), attended Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, later establishing a career as the distinguished Mary Glendining Professor of Systematic Medicine, Otago University, New Zealand, during the interwar years. Although William Thornton did not normally refer to family members in his writings, he did, one time, include an anecdote in *Old Fashioned Ethics and*

*Common-sense Metaphysics* (1873a), indicating that “a fair daughter of the house” (Evelyn Danvers) was known for “executing a brilliant performance on the piano” of either “*Là ci darem la mano* or *Non mi voglio maritar*” (Thornton 1873a: 124). During her second pregnancy, Evelyn Danvers developed “galloping consumption”.<sup>41</sup> On 28 February 1876, at the age of twenty-two, she died in childbirth. Dudley William Carmalt Jones was then sent to live with his maternal grandparents, William Thomas and Elizabeth. According to his autobiography, Carmalt Jones was six years old when his grandfather (our William) passed away. In the same manuscript, he says that while living in his grandparents’ house, he was “under his grandmother’s care”. He believes that she was responsible for “all my early upbringing”, adding, “her influence, in matters of conduct and manners was beyond question excellent, in physical matters perhaps not so good”. Carmalt Jones wrote that his grandmother “had an inherited standard of conduct which she did all she could to instil into me. *Fort en loyalte* is the family motto and *fort en loyalte* she was, if ever a Danvers deserved the description” (Barraclough 2009: 4).

Following the death of their daughter Elizabeth Evelyn (Carmalt Jones’ mother), William Thornton and his wife received several letters of condolence, including one from John Stuart Mill’s stepdaughter, Helen Taylor.<sup>42</sup> She assured them that William and Elizabeth were among “those who will find in the disinterested care for the happiness of others and the progress of our fellow creatures the only comfort, the consolation, or at least the anodyne for grief”. Her letter seemed momentarily to lift Thornton’s spirits. He wrote thanking Helen Taylor for the sympathy offered, describing it as “one of the few that have soothed instead of grating upon our feelings”, although another passage in the same letter says, “the colour has gone out of our lives”. Filled with the pain of bereavement, Thornton expressed his profound grief: “How impossible for us must be any approach to happiness in this world, now that she, in whom all our joy and hopes were centred, has passed away.” Thornton also received a letter (dated 13 March 1876) of condolence from the Duke of Argyll, who devoted considerable effort in writing to him, an indication not only of his sympathy, but of the high esteem in which the duke held him: “The duchess and I are sincerely distressed to hear of your sorrow, and that of your wife. Pray don’t think of troubling yourself to call here one day sooner than you like or than is good for you. Of course we shall always be glad to see you.” Thornton battled on stoically, but the death of his youngest child left him struggling with self-doubt and remorse.

It has been possible, using England census records and other related documents, to trace the various residential addresses of the Thornton family home as well as the corresponding composition of the household.<sup>43</sup> The physical location of a Victorian family's residence speaks volumes about the environment in which the children were raised, the sort of education they received, the household income, the number of servants employed, and so forth. In the mid-1840s, the Thornton family found themselves residing in a comfortable bungalow on Millfield Lane, Kentish Town, immediately adjacent to Hampstead Heath and a short stroll from Highgate Village, the location a sign of their upwardly mobile social status. This was the sort of comfortable, representative lower middle-class neighbourhood that individuals occupying relatively minor clerical positions within the British civil service might aspire to. Although the earliest records concerning their habitation are incomplete, the family most certainly employed household servants to perform everyday chores.

The 1851 England census records William Thornton, his wife, two sons and three servants—a cook, a maid and a nanny—as then residing at No. 10 Marlborough Hill NW in the borough of St Marylebone. Situated between Hampstead and Kensington, not far from Regent's Park, the new residence was closer to Thornton's workplace in the City of London. There is no record of Thornton's oldest daughter Ellen Aird in the census, owing to her death earlier that year. Sometime in the mid-to-late 1850s, the Thorntons moved into 84 Cadogan Place, Chelsea. The move into this exclusive district in West London was almost certainly a result of William Thornton's promotions at India House. Thereafter, the Thorntons remained in West London, moving on two further occasions—first into a commodious residence at 23 Queen's Gardens, immediately behind Kensington Palace, a house situated in a row of three-storey Victorian terraces. The larger residence boasted numerous rooms, besides the spacious basement and pantry accommodation. Located in a desirable area of London, it is further evidence of the solid, comfortable, middle-class credentials that the Thornton family had by then achieved. According to the 1861 census records, William and Elizabeth Thornton were still living at this address at that time, and employed three servants. Ellen Aird and Stanhope William had both passed away, Edward was stationed in India with the army, and their youngest daughter Evelyn, who normally lived with them, was staying at the time with her uncle Edward and aunt Caroline in Sussex. The 1871 records show that William, Elizabeth and their

daughter “Eve” were still resident at the same address. They employed four household servants. Within a few years, however, the Thornton family moved again. Their final address was 7 Cadogan Place, near Sloan Square, a fashionable West London address between Belgravia and Knightsbridge, quite befitting a Victorian gentleman. In fact, the Thornton family had lived very near here in the late 1850s before moving to Queen’s Gardens. The gradual improvement in the location of the Thornton family residence mirrored the course of the steady promotions William earned at the India Office, all of which enabled the Thornton family to live in a very comfortable situation, employ several household servants to take care of day-to-day chores and to educate their children at reputable boarding schools.

The decades of the 1830s and 1840s, before the deaths of Ellen and Stanhope, were, therefore, a relatively happy and successful period in William Thornton’s life. He was earning between £500 and £600 a year at India House, was married to a delightful young woman from a respectable English family and had three children—the picture of a warm and stable family was almost complete. The 1840s were marked by Thornton’s meeting with and befriending John Stuart Mill. Their first discussion resulted from the publishing in 1846 of an economic tract by Thornton (*Over-population and Its Remedy*), a key event for the future direction of his life. However, interspersed among the quiet successes Thornton enjoyed at both the India Office and in the literary world during the 1840s and 1850s, were several torturous occasions, namely, the deaths of two of his four young children: his eldest daughter Ellen and youngest son Stanhope, both of whom succumbed to pulmonary tuberculosis. The darkening shadow of tuberculosis was perhaps the greatest trial endured by family life in the Victorian age. It loomed over every quarter of Victorian society, indiscriminately afflicting victims, irrespective of age, wealth or social background. It was the commonest cause of death in young adults in late-nineteenth-century Europe, killing rapidly in weeks or months, or lingering chronically for years. It was, without doubt, the most feared affliction within Victorian society. The loss of the Thornton’s youngest daughter, Elizabeth Evelyn, later in life was another devastating blow from which Thornton never seems to have fully recovered. Not even the presence of his young grandson, Dudley William Carmalt Jones (Evelyn’s son), was able to provide him with solace.

## CONCLUSION

Family was a cornerstone of William Thornton's life from childhood. He was the youngest child in a large supportive family that, over the course of his life, helped him to endure life's dramas, trials and tribulations. He also drew sustenance from a dedicated, dependable and trustworthy wife, with whom he suffered the shattering loss of three children (and several grandchildren). Such devotion to family is, perhaps, not unexpected in someone who lost his own parents at a very young age. The few surviving letters that William penned to family members as an adolescent confirm his closeness to his siblings and to Elizabeth Moore. Other letters and fragments of biographical information indicate that Thornton maintained close relationships with members from both his father's and mother's families throughout his life. His extended family network was certainly helpful in finding employment and offering shelter, both when he journeyed abroad as a young man and when he subsequently returned to England. In this and other respects, Thornton's family experience was representative of Victorian times.

The details of Thornton's marriage and family life remain frustratingly elusive even though it is clear from the scattered shards of biographical information that William and Elizabeth had a close and loving marriage, based on mutual trust and understanding. It is remarkable, therefore, that not a single letter has survived between them. Likewise, the relationship between Thornton and his children was warm and supportive, nothing like the stern upbringing that many children experienced during the Victorian era. Again, though, there are no surviving letters between Thornton and his children. Emphasis should be laid, however, upon Thornton's own silence with respect to aspects of his personal life.

What is apparent from the historical record is that all the familiar trappings of middle-class life that the Thornton family enjoyed were due mainly to a family tradition of Indian service during the nineteenth century. William Thornton's rise through the Indian civil service mirrored, to some extent, his successful emergence as a writer on economics and other subjects. In this, he was aided and abetted by another key Indian administrator, John Stuart Mill, who did more than any other person to enhance Thornton's professional and literary standing. The small cache of letters between Thornton and Mill that has survived, together with other supporting documents, affirm the strong bond that developed between them from the time of their initial meeting in 1846. These documents also reveal

that Mill came to play a pivotal role in advancing the younger man's professional and literary careers. The younger man had impressed Mill as much by the quality of his intellect as by his easygoing personality. The two men, who seem to have been equally keen to cultivate each other, soon struck up a remarkable friendship, a bond fuelled by a reciprocal desire for understanding as well as a mutual respect for the other's unique talents. It would be fair to say that Thornton's life would be largely forgotten and unvisited if it had not been for his association with Mill. Mill was, without exaggeration, the source of Thornton's intellectual and professional preferment.

## NOTES

1. Edward Thornton was the most prominent of the Thornton children of this generation. For further details, see Donoghue (2008 n.3 516–517).
2. Much of the information in this chapter is derived from materials in the Thornton Family Papers, including the correspondence between Thomas and Elizabeth Thornton, on which this section is based.
3. Elizabeth Thornton, a spinster of the Parish of St Luke Middlesex, married George Moore, a widower of the Parish of St George Bloomsbury, on 25 November 1799 at St George Church, Bloomsbury. Sophie Zohrab congratulates her sister-in-law Elizabeth Thornton on her recent marriage in a letter dated 26 July 1800.
4. The Zohrabs lived in the plains of Mazanderan (meaning “within the mountains”), north of Teheran and south of the Caspian Sea. Their capital was Asterabad (see Maddocks 1989: 50).
5. For a discussion of the role of the dragoman in the Levantine diplomatic service during this period, see Berridge (2009).
6. For further details of Thornton's salvaging Tweddell's notes and drawings at great personal risk, see Tweddell (1815).
7. This letter is preserved in the papers of Sir Robert Liston, National Library of Scotland.
8. This harsh judgement stands curiously alongside the generally sympathetic account of Turkish manners and customs in *The Present State of Turkey* (Thornton 1807).
9. Thomas's decision to return to England may have, perhaps, been hastened by the fact that his house had burned down, as reported in an anonymous article appearing in the *Quarterly Review* (1816, 14: 258).
10. Eliza Amelia Thornton (c.1807–1889) and Sophie Cecilia Thornton (c.1810–1885) both survived their younger brother William, as recorded respectively in the England censuses of 1871 and 1881. For further details of Thornton's sisters, see Donoghue (2008 n.9 524–525).

11. The nature of the financial reversal is unknown.
12. In a letter to the Reverend Robert Tweddell dated 10 November 1813, Thomas Thornton mentioned having been “seriously ill for the last four months” (Tweddell 1815: 380).
13. Thomas Thornton’s date of death is recorded in the *Annual Register* (1814, 61: 133). He also received obituaries in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* (April 1814, 84: 419) and the *European Magazine; & London Review* (April 1814, 65: 368).
14. Sophie’s cause of death, recorded in *Gentleman’s Magazine* (1817, 87: 97), remains unknown.
15. William Thornton’s sisters, Mary, Eliza and Sophie, are mentioned regularly in the letters Elizabeth Moore received from Mary and George Liddell between 1826 and 1845. However, there is no reference to Polly Thornton in any correspondence, nor has it been possible to determine her fate.
16. It should be noted, however, that there is no record of her ever having been married.
17. William’s elder sister, Eliza Amelia Thornton, was sent to Batavia (now Jakarta) as a missionary teacher to supervise the establishment of a Girls’ School on behalf of the London Missionary Society. She departed London in May 1835 and arrived in Batavia on 19 August 1835. According to E.J. Whately (1866: 32–34), Eliza spent eleven years living and working in Batavia. Further information on Eliza Thornton’s work for the London Missionary Society can be found in *Female Agency Among the Heathen, as Recorded in the History and Correspondence of the Society for Promoting Female Education in the East* (London 1850).
18. Edward Thornton (1799–1875), William’s elder brother, joined the East India Company on 8 June 1814 as an “extra clerk”. He served in this position for nearly two years [L/AG/30/12/]. On 8 May 1816, Edward Thornton was appointed to the position of “establishment clerk” within the Company’s Foreign Department (IOR/B/163/71ff). On 20 January, 1836, having served the Company for a period of exactly 20 years, Edward Thornton was promoted to assistant clerk in the Secretary’s Office on a salary of £1000 per annum. For further details, see Donoghue (2008 n.13 528).
19. Another interesting snippet in these letters is the story of the resumption in the friendship between George Liddell and Sir Edward Thornton. The Thorntons and Liddells maintained close family links as well as business ties spanning many decades. George Liddell admits as much in the same letter quoted from above in which he states, “Strange indeed was the influence of you Thornton’s on my former life”. See Donoghue (2008 n.14 529) for further details.
20. Elizabeth Moore’s death was recorded in the *Annual Register* (1861: 463).

21. In 1863, George Liddell was past his ninety-third year when he died at his home in the English town of Winchester.
22. For further information on the establishment of the Moravian Church in England, on Moravian church schools and on Moravian beliefs and practises, see MacCulloch (2009), Mason (2001) and Podmore (1998).
23. Following the completion of his studies, John Paul Thornton (1810–1854) left for Tobago, where he rose to become Colonial Secretary in Tobago during the second half of the 1840s. On May 25 1846, at Scarborough, Tobago, John Thornton married Sarah Frances Graeme (1829–1888), eldest daughter of Major Lawrence Graeme, then Lieutenant Governor of Tobago (see *Annual Register* 1846 vol. 26 196). The couple's eldest son, Martin Laurence Edward Thornton was born at Sans Souci, Tobago, on 8 September 1851 (see L/PWD/8/6ff.113). Soon after, the Thorntons left the West Indies and journeyed to Calcutta, where John Thornton obtained a position as Superintendent of the General Screw Steam Ship Company. His wife gave birth to a second son, John Zohrab Thornton, on 8 February 1854 in Calcutta (see Bengal Baptisms 1713–1948 N/1/85 p. 23). Less than two months later, John Thornton, aged 44, died in Calcutta and was buried at the Christian cemetery on Circular Road on 1 April 1854 (see Bengal Burials 1713–1948 N/1/85 p. 426). Short obituaries appeared in the *Times* on May 25 1854 and *Gentleman's Magazine* (July 1854: 90).
24. Unfortunately, the records from the period when William and his brother attended the Moravian school are no longer extant.
25. Sir William Henry Thornton wrote a biographical memoir of his experience in Malta, *Memoir of the Finances of Malta* (1836). He was a member of the Council of Government for thirty years. He passed away on 27 January 1859 and is buried at the Msida Cemetery in Malta. There is an obituary in the *Gentleman's Magazine* (1859, 6: 438).
26. In 1819, John Cartwright was appointed British consul general in the dominions of the Ottoman Porte, where he spent much of his working life. He died in London on 19 August 1848 (Wilson 2011: 10).
27. It appears that in Trebizond, in 1830, Peter Paul Zohrab was appointed a *dragoman* in the service of the Levant Company through the recommendation of John Cartwright, his brother's former business partner (Wilson 2011: 19).
28. Mary Thornton (1787–1856), the only sister of Sir William Henry Thornton, died at Valetta on 14 August 1856.
29. The connection between the Thorntons and Sandisons came through Constantine Zohrab whose daughter, Mary Zohrab, married Donald Sandison, who held a consular post at Brussa (Wilson 2011: 13).
30. This attachment found expression in Thornton's *The Siege of Silistria: A Poem* (1854b).

31. It is possible that William's clerkship was arranged by a close friend of the Thornton family, George Liddell, who was secretary to the Levant Company in the 1820s and an intimate of John Cartwright (see Dickie 2007: 61, for further details).
32. For a detailed history of the Danvers family, see MacNamara (1895).
33. From 1839, Thornton contributed annually to the East India Company's and India Office's Widows' Fund. When Elizabeth Thornton died in 1903, the balance of her fund was paid to Edward Zohrab Thornton, the surviving son.
34. In mid-Victorian England, there was no "typical" complement of children, yet any fewer than seven children born alive would have been considered a small family (Hoppen 1998: 317).
35. Ellen Aird Thornton was laid to rest in Kensal Green Cemetery, the final resting place of many prominent Victorians.
36. The quotes in this passage are taken from, respectively, reviews in the *Athenaeum* (1854 March 4 274) and the *Calcutta Review* (1854 January–June xxiii).
37. Stanhope's classmate at Repton, Thomas William Carmalt Jones, later married his younger sister, Evelyn Danvers Thornton.
38. The 2nd Bengal European Fusiliers served during the Indian Mutiny. When the regiment was redesignated the 104th Bengal Fusiliers, it continued serving in India until 1871, before returning to England. Further particulars concerning the military career of Edward Zohrab Thornton can be obtained from the India Office Collection [L/MIL/9/251/543–53].
39. Edward Evelyn Thornton was born on 14 July 1867 in northwest India. Following his father, he joined the army and rose to become a captain in the Royal Munster Fusiliers. In 1895, he received a commendation for military service in Ashanti (Ghana). He fought in the Boer War and died of enteric fever at Wynberg (South Africa) on 10 March 1900, aged 32. Edward Zohrab's second son, Stanhope Evelyn Thornton, born on 28 June 1868, was named after his uncle who died in childhood. He trained as a civil engineer and established a reputation as a "considerable amateur artist and connoisseur". Neither of Edward Zohrab's sons ever married. Edward Zohrab's daughter, Evelyn Thornton, died in England at a young age.
40. There are discrepancies in the rank attributed to Edward Thornton in three sources. At the time of his father's death, the *Times* (23 July 1880) named "Captain Edward Zohrab Thornton, the son, and Thomas C. W. Jones, the executors" of William Thornton's personal estate. The Army List for January 1903 contains a brief entry on Edward Zohrab Thornton and records his rank at the time of his retirement in May 1872 as Major.

Another source says that Edward Zohrab “retired as Lieutenant Colonel and was afterwards Secretary of an Indian Railway” (Barraclough 2009: 4).

41. Now known as pulmonary tuberculosis, this disease was a major cause of death in the mid-nineteenth century. It “consumed” lung tissue at an alarming rate, hence the name.
42. The quotations in this paragraph come from correspondence between Helen Taylor and William Thornton held in the Mill-Taylor Collection.
43. In 1840, before he had married, William Thornton lived at 26 Burton Crescent, St Pancras, behind Cartwright Gardens.

## “Your *Plea* Will Not Be in Vain”

*Ebenezer Scrooge: The Treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigour, then?*

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (1843)

### INTRODUCTION

In early 1841, William Thornton accepted an invitation to address the members of the Travellers’ Club on the divisive issue of the repeal of the Corn Laws.<sup>1</sup> Published later that year as *The True Consequences of the Repeal of the Corn Laws* (1841), Thornton’s pamphlet was part of a wider economic debate on agricultural protection, triggered by the publication of John R. McCulloch’s *Statements Illustrative of the Policy and Probable Consequence of the Proposed Repeal of the Existing Corn Law* (1841).<sup>2</sup> There, McCulloch (1841: 16, 7), a free trader, had advanced the view that British agriculturalists had “nothing to fear ... from the total and unconditional repeal of the Corn Laws” because corn prices “would [not] sink ... to the level of those on the continent” owing to the “considerable cost ... of conveying a quarter of corn from Dantzic ... to London”.<sup>3</sup> Free trader or not, Thornton had reckoned that McCulloch’s pamphlet was being deployed in the service of the political interests of a disproportionately powerful landed (i.e. aristocratic) order who feared that the abolition of an import tax on grain would increase foreign grain imports, lower the domestic price of grain, and so, reduce their income from agriculture.

Thornton did not believe, however, that this situation would obtain and took aim at McCulloch's estimates of the market price of grain across Europe, the effects of a free trade in grain and the cost of its "conveyance" to England: "Happily", Thornton noted, "Mr. McCulloch's opinion is not only utterly erroneous, but is founded on a sophism so gross and palpable, that one can only wonder how a reasoner, generally so acute and clear-sighted, has suffered it to mislead him" (Thornton 1841: 6). Even at this point, the first-time pamphleteer is prepared to make firm judgements about the views of seasoned economic commentators.

Thornton's earliest efforts as economics writer anticipate a number of topics canvassed more thoroughly in his *Over-population and Its Remedy; or, An Enquiry into the Extent and Causes of the Distress Prevailing Among the Labouring Classes of the British Islands, and into the Means of Remedying it* (1846) and *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors; with the Outlines of a Plan for their Establishment in Ireland* (1848), both of which received handsome notices in the leading Victorian periodicals of the day. From this perspective, Thornton's pamphlet provides a distillation of views he developed more carefully in works that announced his arrival as both an important and a new economic voice during the late 1840s. At this stage, Thornton has not yet been absorbed into John Stuart Mill's dominion, allowing him to present his prentice work with a conviction and candour that would eventually endear him to Mill and his retinue of social reformers. This bluntness became, as it were, his authorial trademark, as shown in the terse comments, sharp wit and extravagant rhetoric sprinkled throughout this pamphlet—a brave move for a fledgling writer carving out a reputation within London's highly stratified literary enclave. All the same, Thornton's literary career had been launched.

### LITERARY DEBUT

The pattern of Thornton's life changed direction sharply from the mid-1840s, when he struck a famous friendship with John Stuart Mill. It did not come by chance, however. It had been initiated by Thornton, who had taken the liberty of sending Mill a complimentary copy of his first book on "philanthropic political economy", *Over-population and Its Remedy; or, an enquiry into the extent and causes of the distress prevailing among the labouring classes of the British Isles* (Thornton 1846).<sup>4</sup> Thornton thought it a subject that might interest Mill, who was deeply committed to tackling the problem of rural poverty throughout the British Isles, though

especially, in Ireland (Kawana 2010: 131–132). During the 1840s, the issue of rural poverty galvanised British public and moral opinion. Like Mill and other mid-nineteenth-century reformers, Thornton had taken up the study of political economy after witnessing the economic distress across rural Ireland following the calamitous failure of the potato harvests during the 1830s and 1840s. Mill, who had very likely never heard of Thornton, with characteristic generosity, agreed to see him, read his work and comment upon it. After reading it, Mill sensed his intellectual kinship and approached the younger man with an offer to read some of his other writings.<sup>5</sup>

When Thornton’s *Over-population and Its Remedy* appeared, it was generally well received by the Victorian literary press. By one account, the book was described as “an inquiry into many circumstances connected with the ‘condition-of-England-question,’—particularly as regards the agricultural classes”. The anonymous reviewer in the *Edinburgh Review* (1847 85.176: 161) found in Thornton’s work “much to instruct us, and not a little to praise, even where we are forced to disagree” (ibid). Another anonymous critic in the *British Quarterly Review* (1846, 4: 115–142) took Thornton to task for the “vague” and “defective” definition of “overpopulation” in the first section of the book, based as it was on a rigid form of the wage fund doctrine. This critic, nevertheless, opined that Thornton’s book displayed “not only a diligence of research highly praiseworthy, but a candour of admission still more eminently laudable”. According to this reviewer, “Mr. Thornton’s accounts [of overpopulation and poverty in the British Isles] are really heartrending, and are given with a feeling, and uncontrollable expression of that feeling, honourable at once to his head and to his heart” (131). “Its publication”, the reviewer added, “cannot fail to be a public benefit” (140).

The significance of Thornton’s early economic writings is underlined by its role in consolidating Mill’s own views on the dual problem of overpopulation and poverty in the British Isles. “These neglected early studies”, as Ekelund and Thornton (2001: 513) remark, “contain far more than merely a kernel of brilliance, a point that was not missed by J.S. Mill”. Indeed, Mill absorbed the book, seizing upon its various themes, which he then incorporated into his own work. These revolved around controversial issues such as Poor Law reform, protection of “child labour”, the enclosure movement and the “rights” of the poor, and the so-called Irish land question. At the time, Mill himself was busy addressing, through a series of articles for the *Morning Chronicle*, the shocking consequences

of the failure in the 1840s of the potato harvest in Ireland. It was during this formative period, moreover, that he exhorted Thornton to redouble his efforts at expounding on his treatment of Irish land tenure reform. This culminated in the publication, two years later, of *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors* (1848), in which Thornton documented the depressing vistas of squalor in rural Ireland. The work was an authoritative and comprehensive resolution to these problems that proved decisive in establishing Thornton's literary reputation among the intellectual and political elite of Victorian England.

The immediate catalyst for Thornton's economic and social reform agenda was provided by the latent impoverishment he observed throughout rural Britain. His poignant accounts of the drudgery innate to agricultural life in mid-Victorian Britain bear a striking resemblance to the sombre dystopias of Thomas Hardy depicting rural squalor in England. To better appreciate the underlying economic problems gripping rural Britain, Thornton pored over government-commissioned reports as well as comparatively recent legislation bearing on the economic and social conditions of the labouring classes.<sup>6</sup> He also drew upon the classical writings of Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, Nassau Senior, John McCulloch and John Stuart Mill, either as buttresses to arguments he particularly espoused or in refuting proposals contrary to his thought.<sup>7</sup> At this stage, Thornton believed that the machinery of classical political economy was capable of yielding practical lessons and positive outcomes (see Black 1960: 245, for further comment).<sup>8</sup>

Most classical economists in the Victorian Age advocated legislative action purported to relieve rural and urban "destitution" (see Crouch 1967; Gordon 1971; Robbins 1978). Thornton was no exception. He supported emigration programmes intended to ameliorate "population pressures" and sanctioned statutory poor relief as a device to alleviate the suffering of the aged and infirm as well as the young and able-bodied. Yet these measures were never considered anything other than *temporary* expedients. He was always particularly active in supporting those statutory measures intended to *permanently* alleviate overpopulation and poverty—notably, land tenure reform and national education. He especially recommended government legislation that attempted to raise *both* the moral *and* economic aspirations of society's less-advantaged members. Indeed, "it was now thought to be the duty", he remarked, "of a community to maintain all its [responsible] members in comfort" (Thornton 1846: 213). He also remained amenable to the notion of the *noblesse*

*oblige* discharging their customary civic duties as traditional guardians of the common people, all the while chastising the aristocratic landowning classes for neglecting their wider obligations.

In *Over-population and Its Remedy*, Thornton (1846: 3) laid the groundwork by defining rural Britain’s main economic problem as a situation in which “persons able to work are unable to procure employment”. The resulting unemployment, he hypothesized, was attributable to the lack of “the [wage] fund for the ... comfortable maintenance of the whole body of labourers” (284). The implication, he further explained, was that the wage fund—a fund of wage goods destined for the maintenance of labour over the period of production—was insufficient for maintaining full employment. This deliberate reference to the wage fund doctrine in explaining rural unemployment, coupled with the remedies Thornton proposed for alleviating the situation, bear the hallmarks of a *classical* training in economics. Thus, he wrote: “In every place there is only a certain amount of work to be done, and only a certain amount of capital to pay for it; and, if the number of workmen be more than proportionate to the work, employment can only be given to those who want it by taking it from those who have it” (205).

The signal importance of this passage lies in its candid acceptance of the classical wage fund doctrine as the organizing principle around which to explore the causes of and remedies for rural overpopulation in Britain.<sup>9</sup> Orthodox nineteenth-century classical economists, such as John McCulloch and Nassau Senior, embraced this doctrine inasmuch as it succeeded in explaining rural overpopulation in terms of the underlying structural imbalances between capital and labour within the agrarian economy.<sup>10</sup> This situation had deteriorated throughout the first half of the nineteenth century due to the changing structure of the British economy; rapidly industrializing yet predominantly agrarian, it witnessed the decline of its handicraft industry while its dependence on agriculture gradually diminished, and as its dependence on industry subsequently rose. These circumstances succeeded in applying downward pressure on the wages of rural workers. The consequence was a lower general standard of living in agricultural households, precipitating large-scale migrations that relocated rural workers in search of jobs into urban areas.<sup>11</sup>

Thornton (1846: 29) pinpointed another factor responsible for rural impoverishment in the tendency of agricultural workers to marry early, and subsequently, raise large families: “early marriages”, he opined, “are very prevalent amongst them, and in most cottages children are more numerous

than the adult inmates.”<sup>12</sup> He believed, moreover, that the resulting spiritual and economic deprivation under which these children were raised resulted in an aversion to hard work and a lack of social responsibility (“vicious habits, inherited from a long line of ancestors” [Thornton 1848: 241]), cementing his view that the poor should practise abstinence and refrain from marrying “until they can do so without imprudence” (Thornton 1846: 385). By this time, the Malthusian argument intended to rouse the lower classes to exercise “moral restraint” had largely been discredited (see Blaug 1956: 44–49, for further discussion). Thornton (1846: 117–18), however, evaluated the “first principles of Malthus’s theory” as being “so self-evident, that notwithstanding the prevalent fashion to oppose every opinion maintained by that writer, it seems sufficient to state them simply without adding a syllable in their support”. Specifically, Thornton interpreted Malthus as having argued that “people ought not to marry until they are able to maintain [financially and morally] the children they are likely to have” (270). If necessary, this meant “restraining people from marrying until they can bear the expenses of a family” (268). This, in Thornton’s view, constituted “the very essence of Malthusianism, in all [its] naked simplicity” (268). In the heat of such expoundings, Thornton appeared not to entertain the possibility of subsistence actually increasing at a greater rate than population. Nor could he conceive of the profound role of contraceptives in fundamentally reshaping the demographic.

By mid-century, it had generally been acknowledged that the fears of Malthusians were greatly exaggerated. In fact, the “total eclipse” of the Malthusian principle of population had largely been achieved by the early 1830s, when several leading classical economists (among them, Nassau Senior and Robert Torrens) and numerous popular economic scribblers, upon investigating its empirical content, found it wanting and summarily abandoned it. While Thornton (1846: 268) seemed reconciled to the fact that “few are now found bold enough to avow them [the Malthusian principles]”, they remained, in his opinion, “as undeniable, as the sun at mid-day”. He also seemed innately aware of the harsh social implications of the Malthusian argument that “deprive[d] the poor of the privilege of matrimony”, yet nevertheless maintained that a limited family size would typically presage a higher standard of living. Once the poorer classes began to occupy “their leisure time agreeably and profitably”, he wrote, they would develop a taste for these additional comforts and begin to desire smaller families (372). It should be remembered that, while many economic commentators confidently predicted that the population principle

had ceased “to play a part in a theory of distribution” by the early 1830s (Fetter 1969: 74), it was, nevertheless, widely recognized by contemporaries as both a real and potent force, not least due to its patronage by John Stuart Mill as the fulcrum in his own programme of land tenure reform and income distribution (Blaug 1956: 48, 58).

Another central purpose of Thornton’s first book involved prescribing several methods for alleviating rural overpopulation. It advocated, in the first instance, the migration of workers from impoverished rural districts to larger industrial towns where employment was available. While acknowledging that this measure might help in reducing the level of rural unemployment, he also conceded that “various causes [might] ... prevent labour from flowing freely in every direction” (Thornton 1846: 10, 29–30, 286–90). He never considered this solution, however, as anything but a short-term remedy to the problem of chronic rural poverty. The reason was that “any durable results” would require an emigration programme “on a gigantic scale” whose cost would ultimately render “such a scheme ... purely chimerical” (287). Among the likes of classical economists such as Robert Torrens, Nassau Senior, Edward Wakefield and John McCulloch, both state-financed schemes of wholesale emigration and self-financing and self-supporting emigration schemes were looked upon with favour. Thornton, on the contrary, never specifically delineated the ambitious (presumably, government-sponsored) emigration programme he had in mind. As the mid-Victorian era was notable for the vast number of individuals migrating in search of new employment, typically to urban centres in the UK, or alternatively, to distant lands in search of new lives, this proposal would have been superfluous. In fact, never were so many Britons on the move as in the nineteenth century (Hoppen 1998: 522–27). As compared with the writings of the principal exponents of emigration and colonization schemes, Thornton’s views on emigration were lacking in an important analytical dimension.

Another crucial element in the campaign to alleviate rural poverty was the extension of compulsory public education. Thornton (1846: 383) brought home this fact by stressing the longer-term “advantages of education” as a means of achieving “social and moral regeneration”. Indeed, a defining feature of Thornton’s early economic work consisted of the repeated invocation of character and moral conduct, and their tendency to nurture public education. Thornton’s views call attention to the importance of education as a causal agent in character formation.<sup>13</sup> In doing so, Thornton hoped to demonstrate the effect of compulsory national

education “as a powerful incentive to good conduct”. Moral and social developments, such as the voluntary decision to defer marriage, were to be expected in a society where public education was accessible to all. By changing their aspirations, it was hoped that the labouring classes would eventually alter their habits and raise their living standards, thus limiting “the progress of population”. In an illuminating passage, Thornton (1846: 372) admitted that “in the largest sense of the word, every one of the measures already recommended in these pages for the advancement of the laboring class, may be regarded as contributing to education; for it is only by its influence on the mind, that an accession of comfort can tend to dissuade people from premature marriages.” Extension of primary and higher education to the working classes would unlock improvements in labour productivity, lift material living standards and raise their cultural position.

In spite of stressing “the advantages of education ... for social and moral regeneration”, Thornton freely admitted that, in the short term, implementation was “very apt to be over-rated” (383). He conceded the existence of situations wherein a temporary palliative, such as public relief, was preferable, particularly “when persons able to work” were “unable to procure employment” (284, 383). In Thornton’s day, the responsibility of rehabilitating the sections of society trapped in such situations of dire poverty was borne by the English Poor Law system. It was in view of these circumstances that Thornton resolved to make a thorough study of the history and practice of public relief in the British Isles and to evaluate its impact on a wide range of economic and social factors. Before turning to that discussion, however, it seems appropriate to point out that while Thornton upheld the view that Poor Law relief brought *temporary* relief to the rural distress, more *permanent* improvements in the economic and social conditions of the rural populace could be accomplished only by extensive reform of the land tenure system, based upon small-scale Continental agricultural practices rather than large-scale English methods of farming.<sup>14</sup>

### POOR LAW REFORM

According to Joseph Persky (1997: 182), “Classical economists from Adam Smith to John Stuart Mill approached the poor laws with an almost reflexive hostility.” While it is fair to say that the classical economists were generally antagonistic towards the principle of public assistance to the

poor, the reality was that, driven by the fear of social unrest, nearly all classical economists advocated some form of remedial aid as a means to avert political and economic instability. Thornton also averred. From the vantage point of the mid-1840s, Thornton had ample time to absorb the various amendments to the English Poor Laws as well as to reflect upon their economic and social impact.<sup>15</sup> Applying the benefits of hindsight, he presented a detailed overview of the historical background underlying the emergence of public relief in England. In doing so, he displayed hostility towards legislation sanctioning relief for able-bodied paupers without the prerequisite of employment within a parish workhouse.

The so-called Speenhamland system, ratified in 1796, was a case in point. The Speenhamland policy required the supplementing of the earned income of the “industrious poor” to ensure a “minimum standard” of living. As Thornton (1846: 219) narrates, the able-bodied “heads of families were assumed to be entitled to certain incomes, varying with the number of mouths they had to feed; and if anyone’s wages were unequal to the amount considered to be his due, the parish readily made up the deficiency”. A wage supplement based on the difference between a worker’s earned income and an established minimum-of-existence level ensured that *real income* remained unchanged in the presence of fluctuations in the price of wheat, the staple food item of the poor. However, the “old poor law”, as Thornton called it, had the effect of distorting economic incentives through its impact on labour market earnings, labour force participation, worker productivity and output. Thornton summarized these interactions between economic (dis)incentives and work initiative as follows:

When idleness was so liberally rewarded, and when the poor might obtain a more comfortable subsistence from the parish than they could possibly earn by their own exertions, their desire for employment must have greatly abated. They had no inducement to compete with their neighbours, or to offer to work for lower wages than were commonly paid. If they could not obtain the usual wages, they had recourse at once to the parish; and all of the very numerous class that prefer ease to independence were glad of an excuse for doing so. (206)

A common argument among Poor Law critics in the period before 1834 was that the Speenhamland practice of supplementing the wages of able-bodied workers stifled worker effort, producing a fall in agricultural output, lower agricultural wages and a rise in relief expenditures in

practising districts.<sup>16</sup> The old Poor Law system was said to resemble an unemployment insurance scheme. Residents of small local parishes had a good idea of the sort of relief assistance they might receive in a number of reasonably well-defined situations, and these perceptions could influence behaviour even among those who did not, in fact, claim relief. A commonplace grievance in the early nineteenth century, as public opposition to the Poor Laws intensified, was that “English men and women ... believed they had a right to relief” (Solar 1995: 6).

Thornton also displayed strong interest in the social consequences of the old Poor Laws. Specifically, he argued that the problem of rural overpopulation stemmed from the “prodigal liberality with which the poor were treated” under the old Poor Laws. The availability of allowances for families with three or more children had encouraged early marriage and family formation, particularly among rural paupers, which stimulated the growth of population.<sup>17</sup> The problem of rural overpopulation grew acute under the Speenhamland system, wherein “profusion became the distinguishing characteristic of poor law administration, and offered direct encouragement to the marriages of the poor; and this was, probably, the sole cause of the excessive speed with which population proceeded from that date to the commencement of the wars of the French Revolution” (Thornton 1846: 244).<sup>18</sup>

Thornton drew a sharp distinction between the provision of assistance to those whose circumstances left them unable to fend for themselves and the provision of assistance that led to a change in the “moral conduct” of the labouring class. Thornton was prepared to accept a Poor Law regime embodying the principle of limited state action in support of those who were purely victims of circumstance. At the same time, however, he attempted to inculcate within the poor a reliance “on their own resources” and provided a framework of economic incentives that directed the social behaviour and attitudes of the poor towards independence and self-reliance. He advised, in particular, that welfare reforms should destroy the incentive to early family formation to relieve population pressures, raise living standards, check the rise in poor relief expenditures, and reduce the burden on ratepayers, all of which prominently figured in the Speenhamland system:

Thenceforward a poor man might lay aside all thought for tomorrow, and solace himself with the belief, that whatever family he might bring around him, he should be maintained in the position which he actually occupied;

nay, it might almost be said that a positive bounty was placed on procreation, for as the more children a man had, the more money he received, a large family might be regarded as a source of wealth. (Thornton 1846, 219–20)<sup>19</sup>

English critics of the Poor Law system, like Thornton, found most harmful that part of the system that provided for the outdoor relief of able-bodied persons. However, it would be misleading to suggest that Thornton disavowed the principle of public assistance *per se*. He referred disapprovingly to the “generosity and liberality” of the old Poor Laws, but he never supported their abolition. He believed that “a poor law of some sort” was “essential to the well-being of every community” (271). He further believed that in cases of destitution “arising from physical infirmity ... there ought to be a public provision, to which the sufferers may have access” (272). Nor should public assistance, he added, be limited exclusively to the aged, the sick and infirm, and the very young, but also to able-bodied workers who should be eligible for relief, as “a variety of cases, too, may deprive [them] of their accustomed occupation” (272). Overall, the conclusion was that “a poor law of some sort is essential to the well-being of every community” (271). However, the conditions covering eligibility needed to be carefully circumscribed in order to prevent abuses of the system: “If it [poor relief] be granted to the able-bodied, unless very sparingly, or coupled with very stringent conditions, it fosters idleness and discourages independent industry” (272).

Public disenchantment with the existing system of poor relief intensified during the early nineteenth century. These shifts in public attitudes were driven by overwhelming support in favour of reforming a system that paid able-bodied workers a guaranteed subsidy, inadvertently encouraging the drastic reduction in agricultural wages, as it was taken for granted that parish authorities would provide a supplement to those in need of it. The status quo was finally broken with the passage of the Poor Laws Amendment Acts of 1834. The so-called New Poor Laws were based upon the recommendations contained in a report prepared by the Royal Commission of Inquiry established to investigate and recommend changes to the English Poor Laws.<sup>20</sup> While the welfare reforms gave the impression that a better balance had been struck between poor relief and economic incentives, the reality was very different: the New Poor Laws, while marking “a revolution in British social administration”, essentially left the structure of public relief substantially unchanged (see Blaug 1958b: 201–2, for further comment).

## NEW POOR LAWS

Thornton was genuinely pleased with the advent of the New Poor Laws, focused as they were on centralizing the structure and administration of public relief, making access to public relief more stringent by strengthening eligibility criteria and prohibiting outdoor relief for able-bodied persons.<sup>21</sup> The “change produced by its introduction”, he pronounced triumphantly, “was almost magical” (Thornton 1846: 230–31). Thornton’s analysis weighed up the advantages and disadvantages of indoor and outdoor relief as follows:

Besides being a ready and effectual mode of testing want, [indoor relief] offers the cheapest means of relieving it, and admits of a greater portion of relief being afforded with safety. When paupers are allowed to remain at home, it is often difficult to ascertain whether their distress is real or feigned; the cost of maintaining them is greater than it would be in a large establishment, where the most methodical arrangements could be practised; and, as no restraints can be imposed on their personal liberty, the only means of making them dissatisfied with their dependent condition is to abridge the assistance afforded to them. (273–74)

By restricting public aid and confining it to the rigours of the poorhouse, the New Poor Law, he argued, would help to restore work incentives, discourage early family formation among the poor and reduce their welfare dependence. He noted further that the central objective of the new legislation was to force the pauper into a state of “less eligibility” by “making the situation of the dependent pauper less desirable than that of the independent labourer” (272). The principal means of achieving this outcome lay in “the refusal of parochial relief to the able-bodied elsewhere than within the walls of a workhouse” (230). Such able-bodied workers must “either submit to the confinement and discipline of the workhouse”, he opined, “or earn a livelihood by their own labour” (231). Thornton remained committed to indoor relief, as this ensured that “relief should not much exceed what is strictly necessary” (285, 286). The most obvious advantage, in his estimate, of the New Poor Law was “the comparative cheapness with which ... inmates may be maintained” upon entering the parish workhouse (283). Each relief recipient was means-tested, a process which would be simplified by residence in a workhouse. In addition, the bulk purchase of goods and services such as food, clothing and healthcare for those in the workhouse could also generate significant cost savings.

Two or three hundred persons, living together, may be supplied abundantly with every requisite for a sum which, if they were separated, would scarcely keep them alive. With the most skilful management, the expenditure on account of the poor must be very large, but certainly no means should be neglected of keeping it as low as may be consistent with the perfect attainment of its legitimate objects. (283)

A number of other benefits could be accrued by the pauper upon entering a parish workhouse. In the first place, he could expect to be “well lodged, clothed, and fed”. Indeed, as Thornton elaborated, “more abundant diet and greater accommodation of the workhouse are offered to all who need them” (279, 283). The argument that indoor relief would eventually repair nutritional deficiencies is an interesting facet of the general support for the new system. In terms of the economy as a whole, the improved diet of the worker would, ultimately, translate into higher labour productivity and earnings.

According to Thornton, the work performed in the parish poorhouse was “not worse than work elsewhere, and is often better remunerated”. Moreover, he claimed that “agricultural labourers live much better in the workhouse than they do in their own homes” (276). Nevertheless, the living conditions of the workhouse, particularly for the able-bodied, “should undoubtedly be made sufficiently irksome to make them impatient to get out of it” (282). As Thornton maintained, “relief should not much exceed what is strictly necessary” in order to “avoid giving direct encouragement to improvidence”; to “improve the condition of the able-bodied”, it was important to establish a framework of economic incentives that threw “them entirely on their own resources, but at the same time to augment those resources to the utmost” (285, 282–83, 286).

Some critics attacked the principle of indoor relief as responsible for “the demoralization of the industrious classes”, while others argued that the workhouse was little more than “a prison designed for the punishment of poverty” (278–79). Thornton, though apparently sympathetic to these views, refused to completely accept the former, while simultaneously refuting the latter with the argument that “residence in the workhouse would be much more anxiously desiderated than it is now eschewed”.

Despite being well aware that only a small fraction of the total number of relief applicants entered the workhouse due to a shortage of workhouses in Britain (see Hoppen 1998: 98), he believed, nevertheless, that the “workhouse should be the only certain dependence in distress” for the

majority of relief applicants. For the remainder, he outlined an alternative line of action:

From the operation of this rule, entire families, capable in ordinary times of supporting themselves, but whose means of livelihood were temporarily curtailed or withdrawn, might very properly be exempted. A little assistance afforded to these at their own homes, might enable them to struggle through their temporary difficulties, and to regain in a short time their independence. (Thornton 1846: 281)

He continued, “the discipline of the workhouse, so far as regarded the old or very young, might probably be somewhat relaxed without any bad consequences” (281). This view was fuelled partly by Thornton’s desire to avert any further erosion of the traditional family unit. He conceded that there had been cases of families who, “by taking up [their] abode in a workhouse”, had subsequently experienced difficulty in “regaining an independent position”. But these, he added, were “still only exceptions” (278). In response to criticism that “the separation of the sexes” in the workhouse was “inhuman and unnatural”, he offered the astonishing retort that “the separation which takes place [between husband and wife] in the workhouse is a spontaneous arrangement” and “no one will dispute that they have a right to part of their own accord” (277). Thus indoor relief should not be disparaged as an “invasion of their just privileges” because no “compulsion is used” (278). In any event, Thornton felt that the positive features of the workhouse system outweighed the loss of privacy, namely, being required “to observe regular hours, to practice habits of cleanliness, and to perform stated tasks when able to work” (276, 277). In the end, the New Poor Law proved inflexible and required modifications that made the adoption of an exclusively indoor system of relief impracticable.

### ENGLISH FACTORY ACTS

Another notable aspect of Thornton’s *Over-population and Its Remedy* is the discussion of the economic predicament of the English factory workers amid rapid industrialization of industry. His discussion of the economic conditions faced by the urban disenfranchised was heralded as a vast improvement in the quality of economic and social policy pronouncements made by classical economists in the first half of the nineteenth

century. Thornton’s analysis of the Factory Acts rested firmly upon two distinct lines of thought. The first, common to the majority of classical economists, was motivated primarily by the humanitarian need to regulate the working conditions of women and children within the factory system. The second, based on economic considerations, encompassed such issues as the impact of factory reform on labour productivity, wages and output. At mid-century, this highly innovative and controversial argument failed to achieve the prominence and recognition it deserved from political economists.

The views of the classical economists on the Factory Acts in the first half of the nineteenth century have been examined in several important studies (Walker 1941; Sorenson 1952; Blaug 1958a). Of the classical economists who published on the economic and social consequences of the factory legislation, the overwhelming majority supported the principle of legislation to protect children from the harsh and unsanitary conditions of the factory system (see Hoppen 1998: 96–97). In short, classical writers recommended factory legislation on humanitarian grounds (141). They believed in regulating the working conditions of young people until the proper age of consent; opinions differed only in *what* constituted the proper age of consent and in the role of parents as “natural protectors” of their children. Reflecting upon the Factory Acts of 1833 and 1844, John McCulloch, one of the most orthodox classical economists, said that he was inclined.

to approve of the policy of the Act which limits and restricts the labour of young people in factories. It is right that the state should interfere to protect those who are unable to protect themselves. And in emancipating them from the slavery in which they were frequently involved through the selfish and vicious conduct of their parents, we are really contributing to improve the habits and condition of the latter. (quoted in Sorenson 1952: 258–59)<sup>22</sup>

Yet, many of the very same economists who approved the principle of protecting children were also hostile to the factory regulation that undermined the principle of “free labour”, thus infringing upon the concept of “freedom of contract”, despite *that* argument having lost much of its potency by the mid-1830s (Walker 1941: 177).<sup>23</sup> The underlying motive lay in preventing interference with the free employment of adult labour; a reduction in the working day for adult workers would lead to subsequent loss of production and reduced money wages. This refrain was continually

put forward in the factory reform debates in the period up to the 1840s. Mark Blaug (1958a: 212) put it vividly when he wrote: “Although the classical economists supported the *principle* of granting protection to children, they were aware that the unavoidable consequence was a shorter working day for adult operatives; rather than to countenance that they preferred to dispense with the benefits of regulated child labour.”

This was the main objection classical economists made to Lord Ashley’s motion of the Ten Hours Bill, proposing a limit on the working hours of women and children.<sup>24</sup> As Blaug (1958a: 223–25) argues, the majority of the classical economists who wrote on the issue of factory reform should not be considered as ardent supporters of the Factory Acts, because they appeared unwilling to approve legislation reducing the working hours of adult labour. For some leading classical economists, such as John Stuart Mill and Henry Fawcett, the issue of factory reform was further complicated by their association with the women’s suffrage movement: “They feared that the Ten Hours Bill would encourage the substitution of unprotected adult males for protected female workers. Since the emancipation of women was held to be dependent upon unlimited access to factory employment, they thought it necessary to condemn the Factory Acts in so far as these involved restrictions upon the hours of women workers” (Blaug 1958a: 224). Most classical economists at mid-century supported limiting the working hours of young people, but very few gave unqualified encouragement to factory reform. Thornton (1846: 399), however, was an important exception, in that he not only supported Lord Ashley’s plan to restrict the working hours of women and children to ten a day, but showed a willingness to endorse a wider programme of factory reform “still bolder” than that advanced by Ashley.

As already mentioned, Thornton’s views on the issue of factory reform were primarily motivated by the desire “to relieve women and young persons from the obligations of excessive labour” (395). In his estimate, about one quarter of all those working in “textile manufactures” in Britain were females “under sixteen years of age”, and they “commonly work for twelve hours out of the twenty four, at occupations requiring for the most part a good deal of bodily exertion” (395–96).

The treatment of child labour within the factory system was a particularly serious problem because of the lack of effective parental supervision in the factory environment. Young children could not become responsible, disciplined and sober adults if they were “not only excessively over-tasked, but ill fed, and otherwise cruelly treated”. “From such discipline”,

Thornton opined, “only the worst consequences can proceed. The children who survive it grow up more brutal, if possible, than their oppressors” (396). He continued, “[t]hese evils cannot perhaps be corrected, except by legislative interference” (396). It should be emphasized that Thornton nearly always sanctioned government legislation promoting community welfare, as when he supported the public provision of hygienic drainage and sanitation systems in both rural and urban areas (384, 396).

By the mid-1840s, considerable debate had taken place on the plan proposed by Lord Ashley to limit the daily working hours of women and children to ten. Some classical economists were, as previously discussed, opposed to legislation impeding the inalienable right of individuals to decide the number of hours they should work each day. However, Thornton referred approvingly to Ashley’s proposal; he took the view that “the adoption of Lord Ashley’s plan, or even of one still bolder, would be an experiment of little hazard, which, if successful, would ... contribute more than any other single means to the welfare of the labouring population of large towns” (399).

Unfortunately, Thornton never outlined the “still bolder” plan he had in mind. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to suppose that it included the “expediency of resorting to compulsion” to further restrict the working hours of women and children in the factory system. The motive for the view lay in the desire to arrest the breakdown of the traditional family unit. It was “shocking”, he remarked, “that children should be deprived, almost from their birth, of a mother’s care” and that “women should abjure the duties and gentleness of their sex, and be distinguishable chiefly by their greater coarseness and shamelessness” (397). These patriarchal views were, as will presently be revealed, intrinsically bound to a sentimental vision of a distinctive English patriarchal family built around strong community ties.

Another important aspect of factory reform Thornton addressed concerned the decline predicted in labour earnings and output if the working hours of British factory workers were reduced to ten. He concluded that the Ten Hours Bill would not necessarily check production or reduce wages. Although he did not refer explicitly to the contributions of other classical writers, the writings of Nassau Senior and Robert Torrens—both of whom had already published influential tracts on the economic impact of the reform of the factory system—almost certainly shaped his line of thought. Briefly, Senior published in 1837 his *Letters on the Factory Acts*, a document that inaugurated certain key ideas that eventually “became an essential feature of the classical analysis of factory legislation” (Blaug

1958a: 217). In his work, Senior argued that the reduction of work hours and the corresponding fall in output would spell the ruin of British textile manufactures. This argument was made on the grounds that the profit margins of the textile manufacturer would decline, as it was in the work of the last hour of the day that the profits of the manufacturers were made (see Sorenson 1952: 259–61, for further comment). Thornton refused to accept Senior's implicit assumption that output per man-hour was constant, although it was accepted by most economists of the day. Robert Torrens, in his *Letter to Lord Ashley* (1844), struck a familiar cord in outlining his case against the Ten Hours Bill when concluding that the legislation would also check output and reduce wages: "Enact your Ten Hours Bill and one of two events must inevitably ensue: —the manufactures of England will be transferred to foreign lands, or else the operatives must submit to a reduction of wages to the extent of 25 percent" (quoted in Blaug 1958a: 218).

Here, Thornton (1846: 398) presented a new argument. He admitted, in the first instance, that if "the daily labour of British operatives were shortened", it was "very possible that their [nominal] wages would fall". However, he added, once the Corn Laws had been repealed, lower food prices might leave real wages unchanged, or even raise them, despite the fall in nominal wages owing to the Ten Hours Bill.

A fall of wages would be of no consequence if the price of provisions and other necessaries fell at the same time, so as to enable the operative, notwithstanding the decrease of his earnings, to purchase as much as before of every article required. It has been shown that free trade would reduce the prices one-third. Suppose then that wages should fall one quarter, the operative would, notwithstanding, be really better off than before. (398)

He refused to accept the argument, moreover, that it necessarily followed that production must fall in the event of a decline in working hours.<sup>25</sup>

It is not quite certain, that a diminution of produce would result from shortening the duration of labour. Persons who are not obliged to work so long, may work harder than before, and may get through the same quantity of work in a short time as formerly occupied them for a longer period.... If so, the limitation of labour to ten hours daily would not in any circumstances reduce wages, and at all events the reduction might be either prevented or neutralised by the establishment of free trade in food. (399)

Thornton’s analysis implied that hourly output per worker would rise with each reduction of the working day, a view that ran against orthodox classical thought (see Blaug 1958a: 225). Thus, he claimed the Ten Hours Bill did not necessarily spell the end of British industry; rather, there was a possibility of increasing overall output as well as the prospect for material improvements in standards of living. “Unhappily”, says Blaug (1958a: 219), the merits of Thornton’s carefully stated analysis “made no impression on his contemporaries”.

Overall, Thornton’s analysis of the economic and social impact of factory legislation contained some differences as well as similarities to classical analyses. The majority of classical economists agreed that some form of factory legislation protecting the interests of children was crucial. Thornton agreed that minors should be protected by law, but differed from other classical writers in his views concerning the economic impact of such legislation. The prevailing view was that further measures to restrict work hours would lead to a decrease in production, money wages and profits. In contrast, Thornton, whose analysis went largely unnoticed by his contemporaries, maintained that factory legislation might be extended without any such accompanying loss.

## ENCOUNTERS WITH IRELAND

The Irish land question was a dominant issue of Victorian public life. The calamitous failure of the Irish potato crop in the 1840s was reported at length in the Victorian newspapers and considerable parliamentary time was devoted to preventing repeat occurrences. The issues involved were complex and highly contentious. Few critics found common ground on the best way forward. Some critics agitated for the introduction of large-scale English farming, while others advanced reforms promoting small-scale farming (see Black 1960: 28–44, for further discussion). In 1848, Thornton published *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors*, in which he proposed a limited scheme for resettling Irish cottiers on wasteland, with ownership passing to them after reclamation. Irish land reform remained Thornton’s most consistent commitment and the most durable part of his *oeuvre*.

R.D. Collison Black (1960: 28–32) has ably demonstrated that the proposals Thornton advanced at this time were strikingly at variance with orthodox classical ideas on the subject of Irish land tenure reform. The “orthodox view” held that small-scale cultivation “was hopelessly inefficient and unproductive by comparison with large farms”. To this end,

leading classical economists Robert Torrens and Nassau Senior agitated for “the improvement of the condition of the existing population through emigration, consolidation of holdings and the introduction of new capital”. In stark relief, a smaller—though no less vocal—group of individuals called for more radical action on the land question.<sup>26</sup> Thornton was among the first writers in England to defend on social, moral *and* economic grounds the rights of the small tenant farmer to own the land he tilled. Harnessing an array of arguments favouring small farms, particularly those under peasant proprietorship, Thornton drew on new writings published by Samuel Laing and H.D. Inglis, providing compelling evidence of (comparatively) higher productivity among small land holders in continental Europe. This new evidence ultimately convinced economists such as G. Poulett Scrope and John Stuart Mill of the feasibility of a small farm system in Ireland modelled on Continental Europe. While details of the peasant proprietorship system differ from one writer to another, there seems to be a general consensus among them of the small tenant’s right to own and occupy land. Not surprisingly, these proposals attracted considerable criticism from orthodox adherents of the view that the consolidation of holdings, together with emigration, provided the only viable solution to the predicament of the impoverished agricultural labourer. Nassau Senior (1849: 262–63), while generally in favour of the principle of owner occupation, held, nevertheless, that the implementation of the scheme adumbrated by Thornton and Mill was not feasible in Ireland precisely due to the considerably greater cost of resettling pauper families on wastelands as compared to that of assisting them to emigrate (see Black 1960: 32, for further comment).

Thornton commenced his investigation of “rural pauperism” by establishing an historical reference point from which to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of various forms of agricultural tenantry. Drawing on pastoral traditions dating to the Middle Ages, Thornton (1846: 123, 194, 350) described “a golden era” in which people lived harmoniously in rural felicity. These pastoral communities were dominated by the “noble yeomanry”, celebrated as “the honour and strength of England”. Thornton evoked a picturesque social landscape in which the “industrious” and “independent” yeoman and his dependent family were made the basis of the nation—the fundamental social unit and the focal point of moral reformation. The importance attached by Thornton to the concept of the independent proprietor continued a great Victorian tradition of idealizing the Middle Ages. The patent utopianism of this vision was based

upon pastoral communities that rarely experienced misery, poverty, crime or overpopulation, a sentiment Thornton conveyed when he wrote that “overpopulation [is] an evil unknown to pastoral economies”. The yeoman became a reassuring, nationalist symbol of duty, social stability and hierarchy (Dewey 1974a: 17). This “state of tranquility”, however, was not to last.

In the sixteenth century, the quality of rural life began deteriorating. This decline Thornton attributed to the gradual consolidation of small farms into large agricultural estates. The emergence of large-scale farming had, in turn, contributed directly to the inevitable “breaking up and destruction of the noble yeomanry” (193). This loss, he underlined, was reinforced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by the passage of parliamentary acts legalizing “the inclosure and partition of common land” (210), a situation once colourfully described as a “plain enough case of class robbery” (see Moselle 1995: 482).<sup>27</sup> These statutes brought “a vast extent of territory ... under cultivation”, leading Thornton (1846: 211) to declare, “the agricultural labourer has been deprived of the right of pasture, and with it of one of his chief sources of wealth.” The “noble yeomanry”, he lamented, “were being degraded into common day labourers and mendicants” (194). Thornton’s disdain for the abuses of aristocratic power and the accumulation of undeserved wealth was magnified by the realities of the immiserating effects of the enclosure movement. His sympathies were always with workers, the poor and the otherwise disenfranchised. Thornton’s disenchantment with the uneven structure of the agricultural economy led him to evaluate several alternative schemes establishing small-scale farming as “favourable instead of injurious to agriculture” (332).

Thornton referred approvingly to late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century discussions recommending the expansion of the cottage allotment system that allowed for the distribution of small parcels of arable land among agricultural labourers. The system was, in his opinion, one of the few viable employment alternatives available to landless wage labourers. His means of justifying the motives underlying this proposal were numerous. The first required the gradual restoration of communal values inherent in institutions of common property rights that had been eroded over time by the consolidation of small farms into large-scale agricultural estates by acquisitive landlords (see Hoppen 1998: 28). Yet, for Thornton, cottage allotments seemed to resolve problems beyond the immediate consequences of enclosure and loss of common rights. It was now feasible for

the farmer and his family to be engaged in producing potatoes and other vegetables for most of the year, effectively reducing the need for parochial dependence and poor relief. Indeed, there was growing awareness of the allotment system as encouraging self-reliance and resourcefulness. “The possession of a small piece of ground”, opined Thornton (1846: 340–41), “gives a feeling of independence to a poor man that he cannot otherwise experience”.<sup>28</sup> However, “an accession of comfort”, he added, “is only one of many advantages which the possession of an allotment affords”:

Its moral effects are no less important. It gives the labourer a feeling of independence and self-respect, and at the same time the strongest incentives to diligence. It makes him prudent and thrifty, and assists him in instilling similar habits into his children, and in training them for the particular calling for which they are destined. Thus, while it raises the labourer’s social position, it endows him with the very qualities most requisite to keep him in his new station. (347)

Cottage allotments were viewed by Thornton as a viable solution to the problem of rural poverty. The key to this solution he located in the labourer’s capacity to alter completely both work and moral practices in response to economic incentives. This stimulus to action could be accomplished only if the labourer enjoyed security of land tenure as well as the right to retain a fair share of the produce of the land. The implementation of the allotment system would, in time, raise aspirations; an allotment endowed its owner with both respectability and social status. The reasoning that allotment holders would “seldom sacrifice these advantages” once they began enjoying the status of “a contented, upright, and useful member of society” subsequently formed the basis of the plan for rejuvenating Ireland’s agrarian economy (342, 348).<sup>29</sup>

Thornton’s best-known contribution to the subject of land tenure reform was his proposal for the resettlement of Irish pauper families as peasant proprietors on reclaimed wastelands (see Black 1960: 30–32). The plan further attempted to achieve the introduction of fixed rents for Irish cottiers, and, ultimately, security of tenure. He painted a particularly grim picture of rural Ireland, where a large proportion of the cottar population lived in a “deplorable” state. Their “debasement and misery”, he wrote, “are at once the wonder and scandal of the age” (Thornton 1848: 4). Following an exhaustive study of the social *and* moral effects of peasant proprietorship in several European countries as

well as the Channel Islands, Thornton arrived at the conclusion that an agrarian model native to Ulster could be successfully modified for implementation in the rest of Ireland: “The beneficial effect which will result from its extension”, he noted, “will scarcely be denied by an advocate of peasant proprietorship” (215).

Successfully implementing these grandiose plans, however, required the existence of an agricultural economy based on a secure system of private property rights. These, it was hoped, would neutralize the acquisitive behaviour of predatory landowners. It was imperative, noted Thornton, for peasant proprietors to “possess a proprietary right which limits that of the landlord, and restrains his power of raising rent, or ejecting the actual occupant” (202). In the event of the “power of the nobles” forming an obstacle to the implementation of the plan, Thornton envisaged a situation where “the actual occupiers of the soil, far from being landowners, are not even leaseholders, but are rackrented tenants at will”, constantly at the mercy of the rapacious landowner (187).<sup>30</sup>

In Thornton’s estimate, 950,000 agricultural families resided in Ireland at the time. Of these, he claimed, “about 750,000 might obtain a competent livelihood from the land actually under cultivation” (216). The remaining 200,000 families constituted, in his words, “a redundant population” requiring “adequate employment”, though “not on the land already under cultivation” (216–17). What was to be done with them? The resolution lay in transferring them “to the waste lands”—a plan that served to attract heavy criticism centring on the prohibitive costs involved. The estimated total cost of £24,000,000 covered the costs of maintaining “two hundred thousand families for many months, to purchase land for their occupation, and to supply them with materials for building, and with farming implements and stock” (219).<sup>31</sup> The scale of the proposed project would dwarf comparable reclamation schemes successfully undertaken “by private persons” in the “maritime provinces of Belgium” and parts of Ireland (227–30, 252).<sup>32</sup> However, there “would be little cause to regret the outlay”, as the expected gain from this “great social experiment” entailed the “profitable employment” of the 200,000 families “in draining and sub-soiling the wastes selected for reclamation” (218). Working with spade and hoe, the peasant proprietor who came to live on this reclaimed land would be able to grow potatoes and other crops, tend an orchard, pay a “very moderate rent”, possibly supply local markets, eventually repaying the loan with interest. At this point, however, the plan deviated from the realm of economic calculation into moral and social considerations.

Tenant farmers were required to sign a lease containing certain conditional clauses (221).<sup>33</sup> While some of the clauses were commonplace, such as the terms of the lease and the amount of rent to be paid, other conditions served as important control functions aimed at raising “the social condition of the people”. Thornton noted, for example, that “one object of every scheme” as well as “one sign of its success, must be the adoption of better kinds of food by the labouring classes” (232). Another clause stipulated that the land must be cultivated by spade and not by horse. “The head of such a family”, said Thornton, “would not be able to procure either a horse or a plough, and would be obliged to use a spade” (233). His capacity is essentially a function of the energy at his command. The motive was both practical and moral: few labourers were in a position to adopt equine pursuits; more importantly, spade husbandry inculcated the celebrated virtues of industriousness and sobriety, leaving little leisure time to pursue immoral activities (see Archer 1997: 28, for further discussion). Other conditions stipulated that the land was expected to be “brought into cultivation within a specified time”, while the lease was framed to permit tenant farmers to enjoy “permanence of their tenure”, a situation made “contingent on their behaviour”. Potential breaches of these conditions were prevented by a proposal stating the following: “The whole number of colonies might be arranged in districts, to each of which should be appointed a scientific agriculturalist, whose duty it would be to visit periodically every farm placed under his superintendence, and to instruct the owner in the principles of husbandry” (Thornton 1848: 240).

In advocating peasant proprietorship as an instrument of agrarian reform, Thornton made several references to the concept of “independence”, a virtue that connoted moral qualities that encouraged the support of self and dependents. Cottager families could be expected to lead simple, wholesome and affectionate lives conforming to certain subjective standards of industriousness, self-sufficiency and responsibility. Their daily routine was to be strictly regimented, involving physical work as a means to instil the celebrated twin virtues of honesty and sobriety. “Every householder” would be required, added Thornton, “by the conditions of his tenure to send his children, between certain ages, to attend lessons” in husbandry (242). Once again, the motive lay in encouraging self-reliance, rewarding hard work and eradicating “vicious habits, inherited from a long line of ancestors” (241). A well-ordered family life, attention to neatness and cleanliness and general domestic concerns were seen as a bulwark against poverty. Sunday was reserved as a day of rest from physical exertion,

but not from spiritual and moral uplift: “The spiritual instruction of the community might be provided for”, noted Thornton, in weekly church attendance (242). “With these precautions”, he announced, “there can be little doubt that the experiment would succeed” (243). “Thus”, he says in summary, “in the colonization of the waste lands is offered a means of speedily raising the most destitute portion of the Irish people to independence and comfort, and of permanently securing those blessings to their descendants” (250).

### COMPLIMENTS TO MR. THORNTON

Quite early in his authorial career, Thornton established the practice of forwarding his work to leading intellectual and political figures of the day who he thought would be in a position to carry out or influence public policy reform. In one instance, he sent his work *Over-population and Its Remedy* to Richard Cobden, a founding member of the Anti-Corn Law League, who emphatically conveyed his support for Thornton’s views (on the removal of all unnecessary barriers to free trade) in a hastily penned courtesy note, thanking him “for the valuable work on over-population which he [had] been good enough to send”.<sup>34</sup> Thornton had also forwarded his first publication to the conservative politician Benjamin Disraeli, whose innate Tory radicalism would almost certainly have appealed to Thornton. This connection is evidenced by a handwritten courtesy note from Disraeli, dated 6 April 1848, in which he “presents his compliments to Mr. Thornton” for having sent him “the copy of his interesting work on Population”. Leslie Stephen, who met Thornton in his “radical” Cambridge days in the late 1850s and early 1860s, commented that Mill’s “friend and colleague in the India House, W.T. Thornton, was writing about the same time his *Plea for Peasant Proprietors*” (Stephen 1900, 3:52). He then noted with wry amusement that Thornton, while generally “quite ignorant” of agriculture, contrived nevertheless to write an authoritative treatise on the subject of peasant proprietorship, largely through the application of industrious research. Despite any “first-hand knowledge of agriculture”, Stephen continued, the “excellent W. T. Thornton” had published “the standard treatise” on peasant proprietorship, which presumed to forcibly attack “the assumptions then prevalent among English agriculturalists” (Stephen 1900, 3:187–94).<sup>35</sup> Sir Charles Gavan Duffy (1898, 2:17) also recollected that “Mr Thornton had written successfully on Peasant Proprietary.”<sup>36</sup>

Thornton's legitimacy was furthered by his ideas gaining acceptance from John Stuart Mill, whose vindication of peasant proprietorship as a legitimate, if not preferable, alternative to large-scale English cultivation rested heavily upon Thornton's "empirical evidence" (Dewey 1974a: 22–23, 34–35). Between October 1846 and January 1847, Mill published a series of *Morning Chronicle* articles on the "Irish Land Question", in which he acknowledged that his plan for Ireland had been "anticipated ... in the excellent work of Mr. William Thornton" (see Kinzer 2001: 55).<sup>37</sup> Having quoted extensively from Thornton's book in one article, Mill (1986, 24: 898–99) evaluated it as follows:

This passage is from the work of Mr. William Thornton, *Over-population and its Remedy*, a book honourably distinguished from most others of recent date, by the union of philanthropic feelings with sound knowledge and good sense. We recommend the whole work, and particularly its opinions and recommendations on Irish affairs, to the consideration of those who have any power over the critical turning point in the destinies of that ill-treated country.

Thornton continued the practice of sending his writings to political luminaries of the day. When his *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors* appeared in 1848, he sent it to the prime minister, Lord John Russell, who, in a brief note, dated 10 February 1848, thanked "him for a copy of his work entitled 'A Plea for Peasant Proprietors'".<sup>38</sup> Another letter dated 4 June 1848, from the Duke of Rutland, the owner of substantial landholdings in North Derbyshire, thanks Thornton "for [his] most welcome present of a copy of the 'Plea for Peasant Proprietors'". Rutland further notes that he has "seldom read any work which interested [him] more, or one which satisfied so completely alike [his] feelings and [his] reason", adding, "I will hope your plea will not be in vain, but that many will carefully study its arguments and studying be convinced of its truth." While completely endorsing Thornton's critical disclosures in relation to peasant properties in the Channel Islands, Continental Europe and Ireland, the duke discreetly draws Thornton's attention to the prosperity enjoyed by small tenant holders on the duke's own estate, commenting thus: "Though but little corn is grown in them, and peasant proprietors are few, the small holdings—which are very numerous, show a comfort and social independence most delightful to witness. Not a peasant who has not a cow or two in his croft, a good garden, or orchard, often both, about his house, and a sofa or two within."

In 1874, a second edition of *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors* appeared in a format containing an expanded treatment of the original proposal to resettle Irish pauper families on reclaimed wastelands.<sup>39</sup> Thornton forwarded this revised version to William Gladstone, whose Liberal administration had swept to power in the general election of 1868. Notably, it was during Gladstone’s first term as prime minister that the first Irish Land Act (1870) was passed, as were several other key reforms whose stated purpose was “to pacify Ireland”. In a letter dated 2 April 1874, Gladstone generously acknowledged Thornton’s “kindness in sending me your work on Peasant Proprietors, which I am reading with great interest”. Gladstone went on to say that he hoped the book would “aid in dispelling the mass of prejudices, which prevail in this country on the important subject of this work”.<sup>40</sup>

An important member of Gladstone’s Liberal administration between 1868 and 1874, with whom Thornton formed a close alliance, was George Douglas Campbell, the eighth Duke of Argyll, holder of the Cabinet Office of Secretary of State for India. In a letter dated 13 March 1874, Argyll courteously thanked Thornton for sending him a complimentary copy of *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors*, a book he anticipated reading “with much interest”. A letter written a few months later on board his yacht, however, reveals a marked change in the duke’s friendly attitude; having read parts of Thornton’s book concerning land tenure, Argyll felt obliged to mention that the book’s “whole reasoning and the fundamental conclusion” seemed “to involve bad political economy, and to point to a system of policy destructive of progress and injurious to the greatest scheme of national wealth”. The duke was particularly incensed by Thornton’s uncritical adoption of “Mill’s doctrine of the ‘unearned increment’”, together with his recommendation to impose a tax on the unimproved value of land. Argyll, being a landowner of substantial means, was always alert to the general concordance between sound economic judgement and the need to protect his vested interests. He complained to Thornton about the latter’s adopting, “for the purpose of teaching”, the “extremist form” of “Mill’s doctrine”, which seemed to him “most pernicious”. The duke, however, being unable to “pursue the subject ... in a note in the cabin of a yacht”, nor wishing to strain otherwise congenial relations with a valuable subordinate, concludes the letter on a warm note by inviting his India House colleague to “visit a Scotch zemindar ... in October” where he “could discuss the matter in conversation”. Despite the general feeling of empathy between the two men, Argyll, as a wealthy country squire

in his time away from Whitehall's political foment, seldom found himself in agreement with his trusted lieutenant as far as agrarian matters were concerned.

T.E. Cliffe-Leslie, a fellow Millite who also devoted his time to the issue of peasant proprietors, gave the second, 1874, edition of *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors* an overall favourable review in the *Academy*. Cliffe-Leslie (1874: 419) reminded readers that the first (1848) edition of Thornton's *Plea* had appeared at about the same time as Mill's *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive* (1843) and *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), both of which "had begun to arouse a questioning spirit". "Mr. Thornton", he continued, "found it necessary to combat" dubious "arguments against ownership of the soil by the peasantry"—a view with which Cliffe-Leslie fully concurred, adding: "The question of the productiveness of small farms is, of course, closely connected with the question of the effects of peasant proprietorship, and Mr. Thornton's first chapter shows that a comparison in that respect between large and small farms is not to the disadvantage of the latter."

According to Cliffe-Leslie, Thornton was "the first economist in England to draw attention to the relative affluence of the English peasantry at a time when small freeholds, copyholds, leaseholds, and cottage farms were numerous, and the labourer had commonly a few acres and some stock of his own in addition to his wages" (419). Cliffe-Leslie was, of course, referring to the romantic, bucolic vision of the yeoman class as well as the "advantages of mediaeval rural economy" where "the humblest rank of the rural population had three cows, three large sows, a sheep, a cock and seven hens" and whose "ordinary diet" consisted of "milk and brown bread ... with bacon, and sometimes an egg or two". Only one aspect of Thornton's otherwise authoritative account bothered Cliffe-Leslie, which was the unsubstantiated assertion that "the number of landed proprietors in France had long remained stationary". Here, Cliffe-Leslie was revealing his own research interests; however, on the main substantive issue of "the superior profit of *la petite culture*", he felt compelled to say that Thornton's "opponents will not easily find a frail link" (420).

In preparing a second edition of *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors*, Thornton had reacquainted himself with the literature consulted in preparing the original manuscript. He supplemented this with more recent material expounding on the subject of Irish land tenure reform. In a letter dated 29 June 1873 to the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava (in response to Dufferin's note congratulating Thornton on being presented with the

title of Companion of the Bath), Thornton mentions the marquis’ own “two volumes on Irish affairs” as invaluable background reading material. The letter continues: “When I first read these I found a number of points on which I intended some time or other to ask you for some additional details and in all probability I shall find the same desire recurring in the second perusal.” Not wanting to “trespass” on Dufferin’s “good nature”, Thornton politely inquires as to the possibility of being permitted “to send you over a string of queries”, adding, “I know you would not object to this if you were more at leisure but it is likely enough, now, that you may have too many other things to attend to, to be able to spare time for satisfying my curiosity even on a subject in which you take so special an interest as Irish Land Tenure.”<sup>41</sup>

*A Plea for Peasant Proprietors* had a successful run in terms of the influential people whom its message reached. This was driven largely by Mill, who, having read the proofs of the first edition, incorporated factual evidence on peasant reclamation of wastelands into both the first and the second editions of his *Principles of Political Economy*, thereby increasing the book’s public exposure (Stephen 1900, 3:52 n.2). He was particularly excited by Thornton’s study of peasant properties in the Channel Islands and Continental Europe.<sup>42</sup> He made the following attribution to “Mr. William Thornton, in his Plea for Peasant Proprietors, a book which, by the excellence both of its materials and of its execution deserves to be regarded as the standard work on that side of the question” (Mill 1965, 2: 272). Indeed, as Kinzer (2001: 53–55) has argued, there can be little doubt that “Mill was heavily indebted to ... Thornton ... [for] much of the factual evidence concerning peasant proprietors which bolstered Mill’s policy prescriptions.” In short, with the publication of *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors*, Thornton was counted among a small group of reform-minded economists whose work had granted a measure of “respectability ... to the ideas of peasant proprietorship” (Gray 1999: 336). In a review of *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors* in the *Dublin Review*, Patrick McMahon (1848, 25: 331–332) applauded Thornton’s *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors* for its “cool and unimpassioned” land reform proposals. He also observed that Thornton’s “convincing, temperate, and satisfactory” account of “the great social and moral advantages of peasant proprietorships” had been “quoted and adopted by Mr. Mill” (McMahon 1848: 319).

only a study of the writings of Scrope, Thornton and Mill ... removed all doubt from our minds. They were not enthusiasts or visionaries, or

foreigners, not knowing our laws or surplus natives ... but cool and unimpassioned Englishmen, proficient in the only science which exterminating landlords affect to value, and who regard their own suggestions for our relief, as a means of promoting the best interests.

Mill and Thornton continued discussing the topic of peasant proprietorship until Mill's death in 1873. Thornton often spent his working holidays or extended periods of convalescence visiting small farms in Belgium and France. On occasion, he would communicate what he had seen in letters to Mill, in which he elaborated "on this pet subject of yours and mine". Here, in private letters, Thornton gave lucid accounts of agricultural ventures in Holland, Germany and Belgium. For example, in a letter dated 10 October 1869, he wrote to his friend in the south of France, describing the peasant properties he had visited during the course of one of his walking tours in Europe. He explained that the peasant properties in Europe were not comparable to those found in Britain, adding:

I took the railway to St Nicolas ... and then walked back for six miles through the thick of its peasant properties—I am sorry to say the reality did not in all respects come up to my expectations. ... They are not to be compared with those which one sees either on well-tilled English farms, nor in other parts of Belgium. (Donoghue 2000: 336)

All the same, he maintained, "the district must be exceedingly productive in order to be able to maintain with so much apparent comfort the very large agricultural population imposed upon it" (336). In the same letter, Thornton referred favourably to "the proverbial industry of peasant proprietors" and adds that while he was on "an excursion into the Adewald" (in Holland), he approvingly inspected "half a dozen farms ... averaging perhaps not less than 70 acres and the fields all ... fairly tilled". All this, he summarized for Mill's benefit, thinking that what he had seen on his "rambles" was sufficient for both men "to cite in confirmation of our theories" (Donoghue 2000: 332, 336–337).

## CONCLUSION

Ekelund and Thornton (2001) have labelled Thornton an orthodox classical political economist, based on his use of the principles underlying the fundamental classical orthodoxy of the day in resolving the twin problems of rural poverty and overpopulation in the British Isles. All of Thornton's

early economic works are held together by a commitment to the social and economic betterment of the most vulnerable members of society. To this end, he advocated statutory poor relief, public education, better sanitation schemes, government-led land reform programmes and legislation preventing children from enduring the anguish of manual labour. His policy prescriptions acted as forces that brought his work to the attention of notable Victorian public figures.

Although Thornton set about delineating the parlous standards of living among rural and urban workers throughout Britain by applying the machinery of classical economics to the most pressing public policy questions of the day, namely, the repeal of the Corn Laws, the reform of the Poor Laws, the protection of child labourers and the so-called Irish land question, his early economic writings contain occasional departures from classical prescriptions. Thus, while some commentators explained the increasing misery of the poor by the rise of manufacturing, Thornton viewed the problem from a different perspective. He laid stress upon the encroachments of the predatory landowning elite as being largely responsible for the distress experienced within rural communities throughout the British Isles. He also showed a willingness to deviate from the path charted by leading classicists such as Robert Torrens, John McCulloch and Nassau Senior in relation to large-scale emigration programmes (from the countryside to large industrial towns) as potential remedies for rural unemployment. Thornton never really believed that the precariousness of rural employment could be resolved through emigration, although he tentatively conceded that pressing concerns often forced its application. The classical economists defended, by and large, the New Poor Law with its carefully circumscribed regulations governing mobility and eligibility. Thornton readily accepted the principle of public assistance for the needy, young and aged, realizing all the while that the New Poor Law would be little more successful in solving the long-term problem of overpopulation and poverty in Britain than had been its predecessor.

Thornton remained convinced, however, that the key to improving the condition of the poor and resolving economic and social imbalances prevalent within rural districts ultimately rested upon a programme of extensive land reform, namely, the introduction of peasant proprietorship. This led him to create rustic montages depicting sober, hardworking and self-reliant yeomen co-existing harmoniously in rural enclaves. The underlying purpose here was the resolution of a crisis of poverty and overpopulation, simultaneously evoking an aesthetic quality that appealed

to mid-Victorian ideals of duty, fortitude and independence. The inspiration was the concept of morality with which Thornton appealed to the Victorian public; his proposals were entirely consistent with the ideology of Victorian social and moral reforms in emphasizing the active shaping of character and virtuous habits of conduct. It expressed concern for the common good as an object of moral action, all the while placing due emphasis on altruistic behaviour.

No study of Thornton, however, is complete without including an evaluation of John Stuart Mill's use of his younger friend's early ideas to kindle his own passion for Irish land reform. Mill's conversion, from favouring the adoption of a large-scale model of English farming to advocating eventual resettlement on reclaimed wastelands, owed much to Thornton's project entailing the colonization of Irish wastelands by Irish peasants (see Martin 1976: 301; Black 1982: 38; Kinzer 2001: 53–55). Indeed, Mill's biographer and close friend, Alexander Bain (1882: 86), later commented that William Thornton "first awakened him to the question of peasant properties". From an economic viewpoint, Thornton's discussion of the role of economic incentives in moulding the behaviour of small farmers would certainly have appealed to Mill, who was the "first front-rank economist to ... campaign for peasant proprietorship" which, in later life, "came to absorb almost his whole intellectual and political life" (Dewey 1974a: 29). In the 1840s, Thornton's study of peasant properties was the epitome, as Dewey (1974a: 22–23) explains, of a "dissentient tradition" that championed "the superiority of the peasant proprietor to the English agricultural labourer". By the 1870s, due primarily to Thornton and Mill's combined efforts, the case for entertaining peasant proprietorship as a viable alternative to English farming had become far more plausible. Together, the two men were largely responsible for the rehabilitation of peasant proprietorship in the nineteenth century.

## NOTES

1. The Travellers' Club was founded by Lord Castlereagh after the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars.
2. The pamphlet has been republished in Donoghue (2010) with an introduction and annotations.
3. Dantzig (Danzig), a seaport on Poland's Baltic coast, was the chief source of British corn supplies (Fairlie 1965: 563).
4. The term "philanthropic political economy" is from a review of *Overpopulation and Its Remedies* (1846) in *Fraser's Magazine* (1855, 51: 171).

5. Thornton's *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors* (1848) influenced Mill who praised it in his *Principles of Political Economy* (1848).
6. These reports included the Poor Inquiry Commissioners' Report (1834); the report of the Committee on Combinations of Workmen (1838); the report of the Highland Emigration Committee (1841); the Census of Ireland (1841); the reports on employment of women and children in agriculture (1843); and several others. Thornton also cited letters to the *Times* and parliamentary debates in *Hansard*.
7. Gray (1999: 13) contends that Thornton drew “on the pioneering anti-Ricardian work of Richard Jones” in his early economic writings. However, Gray also argues that Thornton subscribed to the Malthusian population principle and the wage fund theory, both key tenets of the prevailing Ricardian orthodoxy (Gray 1999: 155 and n.68).
8. This state of affairs belies the “wholesale rejection of classical economics” that he came to be associated with later in life (Lipkes 1999: 110).
9. Thornton's use of the classical wage fund concept is ironical, considering the notoriety of his later critique of it. At mid-century, however, there was no sign of the renunciation of the doctrine later associated with him (see Lipkes 1996: 116, 119–122; and Donoghue 1997).
10. Rural overpopulation has thus been described as a classic problem of structural unemployment in a rapidly industrializing but still predominantly agricultural economy (see Blaug 1963: 154–55; 1964: 229).
11. Hoppen (1998: 19–21) observes that the “bad experiences of [agricultural] labourers during the decades immediately after 1815” resulted in the number of agricultural laborers falling “by two-fifths between 1851 and 1891,” at a time “when the overall population of England and Wales rose by more than three-fifths.” “In absolute terms,” he further argues, “the farm workers' lot remained miserable.”
12. Thornton recognized the role of rural migration in mitigating the increase in marriage and birth rates; empirical evidence supports this view, detailing an increase in the birth rate in the 1840s, with a corresponding decrease in the death rate (see Blaug 1956: 45).
13. For a critical survey of the “idea of character” as an instrument of moral conduct and social control in Victorian political discourse, see Collini (1991).
14. “By continental standards”, observes Hoppen (1998: 17), “English farms were large.”
15. Thornton also reviewed the administration of the Poor Laws in Scotland and Ireland. He approved of the operation of the Poor Law and the assessment of the poor rates in the Scottish Lowlands, but expressed concern about the lack of provision in the Scottish Highlands, where “compulsory assessments have never been adopted” (Thornton 1846, 402–3). This led

- to his recommending “a thorough reform of poor-law administration” as a “first step towards a cure of Highland destitution” (407). He noted that the “recent establishment of the poor law” in Ireland had been “applied with success”, but emphasized that it “can only relieve distress, and cannot cure poverty” (416).
16. For evidence of rural overpopulation in Britain between 1795 and 1850, see Blaug (1963: 163). However, the data reveals little about the composition of relief expenditures (see Blaug 1963: 163, 172).
  17. There is some evidence to support Thornton on this score. Blaug (1963: 173), for example, notes that “between 1780 and 1820, it was the rising birth rate which enlarged the size of families, and this was due in part to the Old Poor Law”.
  18. Elsewhere, he wrote, “the impulse which population receives from poverty had consequently lost little, if anything, of its force, and the encouragement afforded by the poor laws was likewise still as strong as ever” (Thornton 1846: 227–28).
  19. Thornton’s criticism here might be overdone. As Blaug (1963: 161) argues, the Speenhamland scale was “so modest” that it “was hardly a temptation to marry and breed recklessly”. Williams (1981: 38–39) explained that “the weekly dole per pauper works out as just under one and a quarter shillings a week in an era when even an underpaid agricultural laborer could expect to earn the better part of ten shillings a week.”
  20. The commission’s report, written by Nassau Senior and Edwin Chadwick, has been described as a “brilliant, influential, and wildly unhistorical document”, which has “seriously distorted the history of the Industrial Revolution in Britain” (Blaug 1963: 152).
  21. The New Poor Law, Blaug (1958b: 201) observed, “never succeeded in abolishing outdoor relief to the able-bodied, particularly in the industrial centres of the North [of England]”.
  22. Sorenson (1952: 249–54) interpreted Robert Torrens as having supported the Factory Acts, including Lord Ashley’s Ten Hours Bill. See Blaug (1958a: 218–19) for an alternative view of Torrens’s part in the factory reform controversy.
  23. Walker (1941: 172) writes that “reputable and orthodox economists like Colonel Robert Torrens, Joseph Hume, Thomas Tooke, Edwin Chadwick, and Leonard Horner, were all favorable to factory legislation as long as it was limited to children.”
  24. The passage of the bill known as Althorp’s Act, in 1847, “limited the working day of persons between thirteen and eighteen to twelve hours a day and of those between nine and thirteen to nine hours a day” (Blaug 1958a: 213).

25. Later, Alfred Marshall “rediscovered” Thornton’s neglected argument concerning the possible productivity effects of a shorter working day (see Marshall 1920: 695–96; Blaug 1958a: 222 n.6).
26. Indeed, even in late Victorian times, as Winch (2000) has argued, those who continued to agitate for land reform still cut a radical figure.
27. The so-called enclosure movement reached “its climax in the sixty years of intense parliamentary activity after 1760” (McCloskey 1972: 15–16).
28. The word *independence* was employed as meaning freedom from poor relief, which would, to Thornton’s mind, promote the development of the labourer’s self-reliance.
29. On 3 February 1848, at a meeting of the Political Economy Club, Thornton proposed the following question on cottage allotments: “Is the system of letting small pieces of land to agricultural labourers, commonly called the allotment system, open to any valid objection, as a means of improving the condition of the labourers?” (quoted in Mirowski and Tradewell 1999: 34).
30. A tenant-at-will could, at the landlord’s whim, be removed from occupied land, either by the farmer or landlord, because security of land tenure was not enforced. A “rack rent” was paid by the tenant to the farmer or landlord for the use of farmland. This was above the “fair rent” paid by the farmers themselves to landlords. The imposition of rack rents was widely regarded as immoral (see Moselle 1995: 497).
31. Thornton (1848: 214, 216) estimated that “eight acres are quite enough to enable a tenant family, paying a fair rent, to obtain a competent maintenance” and recommended that those farms larger than eight acres be consolidated and “redistributed into ... farms of eight acres”.
32. Thornton’s (1848) interpretation of Irish agricultural history is derived from the work of Arthur Young (1741–1820).
33. Thornton used the term *honesty* to mean the sense of pride in and respect for the institution of private property a landholder derived from his occupancy of the land (see Thornton 1848: 167–68).
34. Thornton would, in turn, have fully endorsed Cobden’s views favouring the abolishment of primogeniture and entail.
35. Stephen (1900, 3: 188) also observed that Thornton “could refer to experience on a much larger scale throughout wide districts on the Continent”.
36. Duffy (1898, 2:17–18) recorded a favourable remark by Thornton, referring to Duffy’s own proposal for creating a “prosperous Yeomanry in Ireland”: “It has interested me (said Mr. Thornton) more than any paper I have read for some time, for it seems to me to present the most feasible scheme that has yet been proposed for affecting the social regeneration of Ireland. God speed you I say most heartily, and if at any time I see any

- way of aiding the good work depend upon my co-operation as well as my good wishes”.
37. In the preface to *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors*, Thornton referred approvingly to Mill’s series of articles in the *Morning Chronicle*, acknowledging “the advantage of his support”.
  38. Facing stern opposition in the House of Lords, Russell decided not to implement the reclamation experiment as proposed by Mill and Thornton (see Black 1960: 178–89).
  39. Mill put the idea to Thornton in the mid-1860s. In a letter dated March 28 1864, Mill informed Cairnes that “Thornton’s book is out of print. In consequence of the popular attention now, for the first time in England, raised on the subject I have urged the author to reprint it, which he will probably do” (Mill 1972, 15: 930).
  40. Although the extensive land reforms Thornton envisioned were never fully implemented, certain aspects of his ambitious programme (e.g. legal control of rents) were eventually enshrined in the Irish land tenure legislation of the 1880s.
  41. For Dufferin’s contribution to Irish land tenure issues, see Donoghue (2007, 243 n.36).
  42. Mill praised *A Plea for Peasant Proprietorship* in a letter to John Elliot Cairnes. “I hope Thornton’s book arrived duly”, wrote Mill, “[k]eep it for as long as you like; I have no prospect of wanting it for the present. I expect to derive much instruction from what you propose writing on that question in reference to Ireland” (Mill 1972, 15: 948–949).

## The Best, Truest, Noblest of Friends

*In candour, sincerity, and singleness of mind, few men come near him.*

J.S. Mill on W.T. Thornton

*[W]hom of all living men he most respects and admires.*

W.T. Thornton on J.S. Mill

### INTRODUCTION

Strolling across Hyde Park on his way to work in Leadenhall Street, William Thornton was deep in thought, contemplating the imminent publication of his first book, *Over-population and Its Remedy* (1846), a political tract dealing with the dual problem of overpopulation and poverty across the British Isles. Like many other self-styled middle-class reformers who had witnessed the widespread distress being experienced in rural communities and urban centres, Thornton felt compelled to devise solutions that would improve the material lot of the poorest and most vulnerable members of society. This became a persistent and leading theme in his poetical and prose works.

As a virtual unknown within London's literary world, Thornton had devoted considerable time devising strategies to ensure his first book met with a wide and sympathetic audience. At this stage, Thornton still occupied a relatively minor clerical position within the vast administrative machinery of the East India Company in its London headquarters in

Leadenhall Street. As good fortune would have it, though, several leading literary figures happened to work at India House. Thornton decided that he would send his book to one of those individuals in the hope that they might express an interest in what he had written, and, moreover, agree to promote the work within London literary circles. The person he chose was none other than John Stuart Mill. Thornton must have spent several nervous days pacing in his office, wondering whether his gambit would backfire. It did not, however. For, a few days later, Mill called on Thornton in person to thank him for sending the book, which he had read with particular interest and considerable edification, for it set out opinions and arguments that helped Mill to crystallize his own views on Irish affairs. This was no faint praise, for Mill would subsequently single out Thornton for especial praise in his seminal *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), released in the immediate aftermath of the shocking famine that had ruptured Ireland. Mill's fulsome praise of Thornton's work acted as the catalyst for Thornton to embark upon new literary ventures. Thornton's hunger for literary success, combined with Mill's reservoir of goodwill, ensured that the horizons of Thornton's literary ambition were extended to the point where he would, in time, carve out a unique reputation for himself as an economic writer committed to the social and economic betterment of society's most vulnerable members.

The rapport established between Thornton and Mill at their first meeting marked the beginning of an ardent friendship and intellectual collaboration equally important to both men. The generosity that Mill displayed towards his young friend rarely diminished. Indeed, within a short space of time, Thornton became a small but necessary cog in the machinery of Mill's personal life. For Thornton, catching the reflected glory of Mill's fame was certainly beneficial, even as there remained a danger of being obscured by the more famous man. Over time, Mill, who acted as a sort of intellectual patron to the younger man, gradually introduced Thornton to some of the leading intellectual figures of the age, all of which suggests that he entertained a high opinion of Thornton's intellectual capabilities. Through this association, Thornton was able to insinuate himself into the upper reaches of London's close-knit literary fraternity. Thornton, perhaps at Mill's behest, made the decision early in his authorial career to send his work to several leading Victorian figures. This was a common practice at the time. Through Mill's representations, Thornton became personally acquainted with Alexander Bain, Henry Fawcett, John Elliot Cairnes and George Grote. Indeed, as his literary and professional careers

gained traction, Thornton certainly benefitted from a network of intellectual alliances and well-disposed friends. Mill also played a key role in promoting Thornton's career at India House, investing the younger man with a certain authority not unimportant in Victorian social circles.

Over time, Thornton became an important figure in Mill's life. Mill appreciated the personal qualities and intellectual abilities of the younger man and never expected Thornton to subordinate his own reputation and interests by acting as keeper of his intellectual flame. In fact, Thornton not only helped crystallize Mill's developing ideas in several areas, but also influenced the direction of his thinking. Thornton's novel ideas on political economy, peasant proprietorship and industrial relations helped to shape Mill's developing views on these subjects—contributions that underline the reciprocal nature of their intellectual partnership. No less important was Thornton's central role in Mill's personal life during the period following Harriet Taylor's death in 1858. In a sense, Thornton came to fill the void left by her death and Mill often turned to him for emotional support. Following Mill's re-emergence from semi-seclusion following his wife's death, Thornton came to be firmly associated with the group of scholars dedicated to extending Mill's reform agenda, known as the Blackheath Park circle. Although members of the Mill circle espoused varied religious beliefs and political convictions, they were all social critics and reformers dedicated to a radical reform agenda. This did not mean the two friends always agreed with each other's views and opinions. Sometimes, they found themselves in opposite camps. A prime example is when Thornton took an opposing posture to that of Mill and his circle in the often heated and acrimonious public stoushes over which side, North or South, held the moral high ground in the American Civil War. Such differences were uncommon, however, and they always remained on friendly terms. Their camaraderie, once kindled, never waned.

### LEADENHALL STREET DAYS

On a late summer's day in August 1836, young William Thomas Thornton "entered a service which was to be the work of his life by obtaining a clerkship in the East India House".<sup>1</sup> He joined the "Honourable Company" during its heyday. Its prestige in the Far East was unrivalled (although in a little more than two decades, it would be fighting for its survival). Family connections had secured his appointment to the East India Company, although the vacancy itself had been created by the death of James Mill,

the head of the Examiner's Office and the father of John Stuart Mill. At the time, of course, Thornton could not have been aware of the way James Mill was unwittingly shaping his future by bringing him into direct contact with his son, John Stuart Mill, who joined the East India Company as a clerk in 1823.<sup>2</sup> The two men's lives were destined to become intertwined, both professionally and personally, although their friendship did not commence, on Thornton's account, until early 1846.

When Thornton joined the Company as a junior clerk in August 1836, Mill held the position of first assistant examiner in the Correspondence Department. Thornton was very much junior. Although the two men were now working at the same establishment in Leadenhall Street, the social rigidities of Victorian England and their mutual shyness meant that, for a decade, the two men "seldom [came] into contact, scarcely ever spoke, and generally passed each other without any mark of recognition when [they] happened to meet in or out of doors" (Thornton 1873b: 34).

Thornton held the position of junior clerk for the next decade and might have remained in it throughout his Company career if, in the winter of 1846, he had not taken the initiative of sending Mill a copy of his recently published book, titled *Over-population and its Remedy: or, an enquiry into the extent and causes of the distress prevailing among the labouring classes of the British Islands* (Thornton 1846). Thornton bristled in anticipation. He knew that if he gained Mill's patronage, it would, above all else, add greatly to the lustre of his achievement.

Thornton never forgot the significance of what followed. As he recalled some years later, Mill approached him "a day or two afterwards [and] came into my room to thank me for [the book]". There ensued a "half-hour conversation", which marked the beginning of an "intimate friendship, of which I feel that I am not unduly boasting in declaring it to have been equally sincere and fervent on both sides" (Thornton 1873b: 34–35). From that time, he wrote.

A day seldom passed for the next ten or twelve years, without, if I did not go into his room, his coming into mine, often telling me as he entered, that he had nothing particular to say; but that, having a few minutes to spare he thought we might as well have a little talk. And what talks we have had on such occasions, and on what various subjects! And not infrequently, too, when the room was Mill's, Grote, the historian, would join us, first announcing his advent by a peculiar and ever welcome rat-tat with his walking-stick on the door. (Thornton 1873b: 35)

Unfortunately, further details of Thornton's and Mill's workplace conversations have not survived. Their subsequent correspondence, however, does contain useful information on a range of topics of mutual interest—namely, political economy, continental travel, utilitarianism, peasant proprietorship and poetry. From the beginning, their friendship was based on a mutual respect for each other's intellectual qualities, although on appropriate occasions, Thornton deferred to his more famous friend. The two men's lives were bound together in an intense camaraderie, which was only severed when Mill died in 1873.

Mill was instrumental in advancing Thornton's career at the East India Company. At mid-century, Thornton was still serving as a junior clerk with little prospect of promotion. In fact, clerical staff often ended their working lives where they commenced as higher positions were generally only available when a more senior colleague either died or retired (Bowen 2006: 141–142). At the beginning of 1856, however, Mill recommended Thornton for the position of assistant examiner in the newly created Public Works Department (Mill 1991: 97). Some years later, Thornton recorded the part Mill played in securing his promotion:

When, in 1856, [Mill] became examiner, he had made it, as I have been since assured by the then Chairman of the East India Company, a condition of his acceptance of the post [of Chief Examiner of Indian Correspondence] that I, whose name very likely the Chairman had never before heard, should be associated with him as one of his assistant examiners; and I was placed, in consequence, in charge of the Public Works Department. (Thornton 1873b: 35)

Mill's championing of the younger man was a measure of his confidence in Thornton's intellectual abilities and suitability for the demands of the new post. Under Mill's general supervision, Thornton was responsible for the daily operation of the Public Works Department and for the preparation of public works dispatches. In the mid-1850s, however, Thornton "was unable to discharge his official duties because a mysterious illness, he later recalled, "for nearly a year absolutely incapacitated me from mental labour". With the lapse of time, it is difficult to give a precise diagnosis of Thornton's malady. Maybe he found it difficult to come to terms with the heightened expectations sometimes associated with a new, more stressful appointment. Whatever the reason might be, Thornton faced the prospect of an early and unscheduled retirement when Mill came to

his rescue and quietly discharged “the whole of my official duties ... for the space of twelve months, in addition to his own” (Thornton 1873b: 35; Capaldi 2004: 241). In practical terms, this kindness involved Mill’s preparing “some forty-eight Public Works drafts between May 1857 and April 1858, after which Thornton recovered his health and gradually resumed his regular duties” (Moir 1990: xxxii).<sup>3</sup> Mill’s act of kindness secured Thornton’s career in the Indian civil service.

Mill gave Thornton further help in 1858, when he was promoted to the senior administrative position of secretary of the India Office’s Department of Public Works, which offered him “the modest prosperity of a colonial bureaucrat of a middling rank” (Mirowski and Tradewell 1999: 43). Again, the appointment might not have materialized had it not been for Mill’s personal kindness and his generous endorsement of the younger man.

Over time, Mill became, in a sense, a substitute father to Thornton. Robson (1989: 10) explains this relationship in terms of the “Oedipal desire to take over from one’s father”. Supporting such an interpretation is what Moir calls Mill’s own “paternal position towards his younger brother”, George Grote Mill, who obtained a junior clerkship in the Examiner’s Office in April 1844, largely on the strength of a testimonial given by Mill (Bain 1882: 94–95). In 1848, however, Grote was “obliged to take a long period of sick leave and eventually retire altogether in March 1850” (Moir 1990: xix).<sup>4</sup>

What is particularly striking about George Grote’s appointment and short career, according to Moir, is that it bears such a “close resemblance to J.S. Mill’s own early career with the Company ... even to the extent of employing phrases of recommendation in his testimonial which almost seem to mimic what James Mill had told the Company directors about his own qualities and attainments some twenty years earlier” (ibid.). Despite the obvious dangers in claiming that Thornton came to occupy the place of Mill’s younger brother after his retirement and untimely death, the curious resonances seem to reinforce the picture of Thornton serving an experimental apprenticeship under Mill’s tutelage, receiving instruction and gaining experience in the drafting of dispatches until he could handle such heavier responsibilities himself.

During the formative period of the late 1840s and early 1850s, Mill and Thornton would often while away each other’s company, either in Thornton’s office or in Mill’s (Capaldi 2004: 303). So impressed was Mill with Thornton’s sharpness of mind that he went to unusual lengths to

secure for the younger man a key position within the upper administrative echelon of the India Office (Foster 1924: 224–225). Even in the best of circumstances, had it not been for Mill’s support, Thornton almost certainly would have languished as an unknown junior clerk for the duration of his Company career, never able to display those talents that Mill had early on identified as both unique and worthy. Thornton never underestimated the rare privilege of being one of Mill’s friends. Later in life, in a conversation with Theodor Gomperz, Thornton conveyed to him the good fortune of being Mill’s friend:

Few enjoyed it, but those who did, knew how to value it. Of the immeasurable goodness of this man he could not as yet have any idea. He himself [Thornton] had many friends, but he rated Mill higher than all of them taken together. The three weeks he had spent with him at Avignon the previous autumn had been the happiest in his life. (Weinberg 1963: 32–33)

Mill rarely hosted guests at Saint Véran, his Provençal retreat. Thornton was an exception. There, he interspersed his own reading and writing with occasional excursions to local places of interest. At one stage, Thornton wrote to Fawcett of his delight in the place as Mill “is now laying himself out to entertain me ... and almost every other day we make a long carriage excursion, starting directly after breakfast, and driving twenty or thirty miles on end and not returning till sunset or later”. “You may imagine”, he added, “how much I am enjoying myself”, and

no small part of my pleasure consists in seeing how cheerfully and contentedly, if I may not say how happily, Mill is living. I feel convinced that he will never be persuaded permanently to abandon this retreat, for here, besides the seclusion, in which he takes an almost morbid delight, and a neighbourhood both very interesting and in its own peculiar way very beautiful, he has also close at hand the resting-place of his wife, which he visits daily, while in his stepdaughter he has a companion in all respects worthy of him. (Elliot 1910, 1: 262)

### POLITICAL ECONOMY CLUB

From the late 1840s onwards, Mill assisted in advancing Thornton as a student of and writer on political economy. With Mill’s practical help, Thornton began to make modest inroads into London literary circles.

On 12 February 1850, for example, Mill wrote to William Hickson, the editor of the *Westminster Review*, recommending Thornton as a potential contributor to the journal, sending him a copy of a recent paper (Mill 1972, 14: 46–47). Impressed with its content, Hickson agreed to publish it under the title, “Equity Reform; the Probate Courts”. It was Thornton’s first publication in a Victorian periodical. About the same time, Mill also nominated Thornton for membership in the Political Economy Club.

From the late 1840s, Thornton became a member of the Political Economy Club, formed in 1821 by David Ricardo to promote the fledgling science of political economy. The Political Economy Club was an enclave of influential scholars and business leaders who would convene at irregular gatherings, held seven or eight times a year. When Thornton was elected to membership of the Political Economy Club, he was a relative unknown in London literary circles. But it was here that Thornton could sharpen his debating skills by discussing the great public policy questions of the day, form close intellectual and political friendships that stayed with him throughout life, and so, aspire to social heights as yet unattainable through any other medium. Unlike most Victorian clubs, however, the Political Economy Club did not satisfy the requisites of a Victorian club in one key sense—it did not have a permanent home like the Athenaeum or Travellers’. Instead, when Thornton joined it, meetings were held “at the houses of different members of the Club and in private rooms of eligible hotels”. These “severe *réunions*” were always accompanied by an evening meal and convivial chit-chat. After the evening dinner had been served, by one account,

[a] gentleman of burly form, bearded like the pard, full of very vigorous expressions and eccentric notions on the subject of the currency, immediately the claret and olives are on the table, propounds in the voice of a Stentor some abstruse theme of controversy, enunciating his own opinions—sufficiently strong ones by-the-by—as a species of introduction. That is Professor Podger. Or, perhaps, the ball may be opened by the present Chancellor of the Exchequer, who, in a few terse and telling sentences moots some astounding scheme for the conversion of a deficit into a surplus. Not impossibly Mr. J. Stuart Mill—for Mr. Mill is a very regular attendant at the monthly dinners of the Political Economy Club—starts an idea diametrically antagonistic, and the tournament begins. (Hay 1870: 274)

As a long-serving club member, Thornton formally proposed fifteen questions for discussion.<sup>5</sup> Not surprisingly, he used this forum as a vehicle to publicize his current research interests as well as solicit comments and feedback. The first series of questions he proposed in the late 1840s and early-to-mid-1850s revolved, as might be expected, around agricultural issues and public finance—topics in which he had, throughout the 1840s, been deeply immersed. From the beginning of 1855 until early 1862, Thornton does not appear to have attended any meetings of the Club: perhaps his rapid promotion at India House, coupled with a lengthy period of convalescence, kept him away.

In the early 1860s, Thornton returned to the fold, presenting questions on intellectual property rights, income taxation and the laws of supply and demand; his treatment of the last was greeted with mixed feelings. This was followed by another hiatus, from 1866 to 1874, lasting eight years. This absence resulted most likely from his involvement with a fraternity known as the Blackheath Park Circle—the Political Economy Club in exile—who met for Sunday dinners at John Stuart Mill’s Blackheath Park residence at the “uncanonical hour of five” (Morley 1921: 48). Thornton was a regular guest “at these ideal symposia”, which included many of his closest friends, namely, Alexander Bain, John Morley, John Elliot Cairnes, Louis Blanc, Henry Fawcett, Leonard Courtney, Herbert Spencer, George Grote and Sir Charles Lyell, to name a few. Their commonly professed genuine admiration for Mill’s moral and intellectual outlook unified this diverse group of intellectuals. Through this small network of trusted friends Mill continued to promote his programme of civil and moral improvement.

After Mill’s death in 1873, however, the Circle’s eventual dissolution seemed inevitable. The economists, in need of a venue to disseminate their views and opinions, reconvened at the Political Economy Club. By early 1874, Thornton had also returned to its meetings, becoming actively involved in its deliberations up until his death six years later. The questions he now presented related to the nature and classification of economic laws as well as the Indian monetary system—the latter, a subject he pursued zealously in published writings in his final decade.

While contemporary portraits of Thornton’s character remain sadly lacking, several club members did leave behind character sketches. These reveal a personality occasionally difficult to understand and somewhat trying. His tone and manner were generally disarming, dogged and disruptive.

His unfailing tenacity in debate could be a deadly weapon, as it was in his encounters with Leslie Stephen. Mirowski and Tradewell (1999: 34) argue that Thornton had a “deficiency in the civilities associated with a certain strata of the leisure classes in Victorian Britain”. “It is difficult to imagine”, Mirowski and Tradewell (1999: 36) continue, “that such a cantankerous fellow with his unseemly enthusiasms would have been suffered so stoically by the members of the Club without the obvious and repeated endorsement of Mill”. To support their claims, the authors put forward several personal testimonies as “primary evidence” of the full force of Thornton’s tenaciousness in argument. For example, Leonard Courtney, in a letter to Sir Louis Mallet, Thornton’s India House colleague who had, on another occasion, a sharp exchange of views with Thornton in the *Times* on the question of Indian bimetallism, once remarked:

I share your regrets at the apparent decline of decorum at the Political Economy Club. Last Friday the breaches of manners were sadly conspicuous. One officer must not find fault with another, but the truth is that our treasurer [Thornton] is habitually too contemptuous of views other than his own—not infrequently wider than his own—and this characteristic does not abate as the years pass. (Quoted in Mirowski and Tradewell 1999: 36)<sup>6</sup>

The impression of Thornton as a maverick who seemed oblivious to how his actions affected others was echoed by a fellow club member, Sir J. Macdonnel, who once branded Thornton a “disruptive revolutionary influence”, but nonetheless, a “useful solvent [who] had the art of putting questions disconcerting to the dogmatic spirit, and he had a vision, temperate of a world that was to come—more questions than he himself could answer” (quoted in Mirowski and Tradewell 1999: 36). Leslie Stephen, another club member, presented a number of revealing character sketches that underline Thornton’s ability to nudge the limits of acceptable middle-class etiquette at club meetings. His persistence in debate was a natural part of his character, according to Leslie Stephen:

a man of singular amiability, of calm, slow-working intellect, who would go on cross-examining any acquaintance who had thrown out a remark not perfectly intelligible with an amusing persistency. His favourite virtue was candour, and it was not the less genuine because, like other very candid people, he had a certain mild obstinacy which secured him from the risk of conversion, however benevolently he could listen to arguments. (Stephen 1886: 197)

On another occasion, Leslie Stephen recounted his frustration in his personal dealings with Thornton in a private letter to C.E. Norgate. Not for the first time, Stephen seized the opportunity to mock his friend's intellect and personality.

I have just received a note from W.T. Thornton in which he says that he hopes for my sake I did not write a review of him in the PMG [*Pall Mall Gazette*]. If I did, he says, I show that a long practice of reviewing has made me incapable of fairness even when I mean to be fair. That is ... courteous as he obviously thinks that I did write the review. As it happens, I did not but I half wish that I had. My unfairness in regard to him is that I have never told the public what a fool he is, but I shant tell him so. (Quoted in Bicknell 1996: 136)<sup>7</sup>

When Leslie Stephen made these remarks, he was embroiled in argument with Thornton over the laws of supply and demand. These comments reveal a trait of Thornton's character that, at times, hamper his professional and personal relationships: a social brusqueness that made him oblivious to how his actions affected others. For Stephen, clearly exasperated by the persistent cross-examination, such behaviour constituted a striking breach of the decorum governing polite Victorian society, and perhaps, influenced his decision to unveil several unflattering biographical vignettes. In a letter to his fiancée, Minnie Thackeray, Stephen wrote:

I am suffering the torments of the damned from that god-forgotten Thornton, who is boring on about supply and demand, when I would give anything to be with you. He is not a bad fellow, but just now I hate him like poison. (Quoted in Maitland 1906: 189)<sup>8</sup>

The tension between the two men almost certainly came from Thornton's inelastic views on the laws of supply and demand, a subject with which Stephen had also been preoccupied during the early 1860s and in which he had even harboured ambitions of making a name for himself (Moore 2006: 597).<sup>9</sup> Although Leslie Stephen had, by now, clearly wearied of Thornton, it is worth recalling that Stephen counted Thornton among his closest friends from his "radical" Cambridge days of the early 1860s (Moore 2006: 580). Having met Thornton through a mutual friend, Henry Fawcett, the two men occasionally dined together at Cambridge following meetings of Stephen's discussion group. For a time, in fact, Thornton became a popular member of the Fawcett-Clarke-Stephen circle

at Cambridge. Even though Thornton remained prone to issuing what, at least to Leslie Stephen, were seen as slightly “boring” remarks on political economy, the two men remained firm friends.

In fact, two decades after Thornton’s death, Stephen penned a generous character portrait of his friend, partly attributable to the mellowing properties of age. “I will venture to say that, as a young man, I used often to see him [Thornton], when he visited Fawcett and Fawcett’s great friend, Mr. C.B. Clarke, at Cambridge. Thornton’s extreme amiability, his placid and candid, if slightly long-winded, discussions of his favourite topics, won the affection of his young hearers, and has left a charming impression upon his survivors” (Stephen 1900, 3: 187). Thornton, by nature, argumentative, enjoyed the rough and tumble of intellectual sparring, a disposition that did not always endear him to his fellow economists. His combative approach and inquisitive style was not to everyone’s taste and often invited antagonism. All this was hardly surprising in London’s rarefied clubbish world, where standards of acceptable discourse were still set by gentlemanly or genteel rules of behaviour. Yet, despite the remarkably consistent tenor of these character references, there is ample evidence to support the view of Thornton as a generally popular and likeable individual who relished his place in the social whirl that accompanied such club gatherings.

Aside from Mill, Thornton was becoming better acquainted with several leading economists. These connections reflected, once more, the resources Mill happily invested in Thornton’s literary ambitions. Under his watchful eye, Mill carefully orchestrated his protégé’s friendship with Henry Fawcett, then Professor of Political Economy at Cambridge, the politician Leonard Courtney and the Irish economist John Elliot Cairnes, who remained an important figure in Thornton’s life until Cairnes’s death in 1875.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, in the preface to *Some Leading Principles of Political Economy, Newly Expounded*, Cairnes (1874: vi) acknowledged his friendship with Thornton, and a few years after Cairnes’s death, Thornton (1879b: 293) also wrote that “during the latter years of [Cairnes’s] life a close intimacy subsisted [between us]”. Although Cairnes often found himself quarrelling with Thornton on economic topics, he admired his intellectual qualities and enjoyed his friendship. However, it is apparent from their early letters that Cairnes and Thornton did not immediately establish a close and spontaneous rapport. In a letter to Cairnes on 3 October 1864, Mill provided an assessment of Thornton’s character: “Thornton will be much pleased by your feeling towards him, and will, I am sure, fully

reciprocate it. He is a person I particularly respect and like. In candour, sincerity, and singleness of mind, few men come near him" (Mill 1972, 15: 958). Mill was clearly trying to stage manage their relationship. The formal tone of the two letters that Thornton wrote to Cairnes, dated 16 and 23 August 1866, suggests that they had continued to "keep each other at arm's length" after their first meeting (see Donoghue 2000: 327). Over time, however, the two men gradually warmed to one another. By late 1866, Thornton had seized the initiative and dispensed with the "ceremonious prefix ... Mr." when addressing Cairnes in his letters. The tenor of subsequent letters was more convivial.

As their friendship matured, Thornton entered into a principled and friendly correspondence with Cairnes, centred on their common interest in economic affairs and mutual friendship with Mill. Thornton's letters capture his cautious personal reaction to the public reception of his *Fortnightly Review* articles on value and distribution theory and contain an exchange of views on economic methodology and the scientific claims of political economy.<sup>11</sup> He also took an interest in the welfare of the Cairnes family. Cairnes himself was in his late forties when his health began to deteriorate. In a letter to Mill on 22 September 1872, Thornton expressed deep concern at the deterioration in Cairnes's physical state: "I dined with Cairnes a few days ago. Every time I see him I find him more helpless. Mrs Cairnes is obliged now to lift the food to his mouth" (Donoghue 2000: 339).<sup>12</sup>

The more serious atmosphere of the Thornton–Cairnes letters contrasts with the light-hearted banter of the letters between Mill and Thornton that bristle with news about travel, mutual friends, new books, India House gossip and social outings. Perhaps the subject most frequently discussed in Thornton's letters to Mill was travel. Later in life, Thornton often embarked upon solitary holidays. He loved physical activity and exertion, setting off on walking and climbing tours in Europe by himself—more often than not, to restore his fragile health. Along the way, he provided detailed accounts of his "rambles" and suggested places for Mill and Helen Taylor to visit in Europe.<sup>13</sup> In a letter dated 23 October 1869, Mill wrote to Thornton to say that he and Helen Taylor were "pleased to hear that you have had such an interesting holiday & that both the weather & your health and spirits were so favourable to enjoyment" (Mill 1972, 17: 1656). During these extended periods abroad, alone, restoring his health at favourite spa towns, Thornton would catch up on his reading. Carlyle's *History of the French Revolution* was a personal favourite. Reading

it made him “burst out laughing wherever and in whatever company [he] might be”, as he found Carlyle’s “grim humour ... perfectly irresistible” (Donoghue 2000: 337–338). “Some time ago”, Thornton added,

I heard [Frank Harrison] Hill of the Daily News say that Carlyle was to be read at one period of every one’s life, but that as one matured, that period passed and did not return. If this be correct I am myself very far from maturity, for I think I enjoy Carlyle—his French Revolution, that is—more if possible than ever. He irritates me every now and then by his perversity ... but I think him almost without an equal for his specialty of placing in the strongest light the hidden meaning of familiar truths.<sup>14</sup> (ibid.)

### SOME VEXATIONS

Thornton recalled later in life that his “own friendship with [Mill] was, from first to last, never once ruffled by difference or misunderstanding of any kind” (Thornton 1873b: 36). This statement was an exaggeration. From time to time, tensions arose between the two men. But affection, support and respect were more often evident.

In early 1854, Mill returned from Europe, where he had accompanied his ailing wife, Harriet Taylor, “in search of health cures” (Reeves 2007: 245).<sup>15</sup> On 14 January 1854, Mill wrote to Harriet, informing her that Thornton, “during our absence”, had “published a volume of poems”, *Zohráb; or, A Midsummer Day’s Dream: and Other Poems*, in which he carelessly “[took] the liberty of addressing one [poem] to [Mill] by name” (Mill 1972, 14: 132).<sup>16</sup> Thornton’s decision to include this poem was, quite simply, to thank his close friend for all he had done to “change the whole tenor of my former life” (Thornton 1854a: 146). On this occasion, his decision to acknowledge, in public, his personal and professional debt to Mill backfired. Mill, who was never deceived by flattery or stratagems of this kind, felt slighted by the cavalier reference. He confronted his friend, sought an explanation and an apology, both of which he received (though Mill deemed the apology “very insufficient”). Mill’s anger stemmed, in part, from his low opinion of the work, which he saw as little more than “better than common”, although he conceded that “in the thing itself there is little about me, & that little neither good nor harm” (Mill 1972, 14: 132). Then, having discussed the matter with Harriet Taylor, who had already admonished Thornton, Mill took up the cudgels again. The tone of his letter to Harriet Taylor suggests the depth of his umbrage.

With regard to Thornton I do not think what you say too severe—he has suddenly plumped down to the place of a quite common person in my estimation, when I thought he was a good deal better. There are in the book itself many proofs of excessive, even ridiculous vanity, not much the better for being, as in his case it is, *disappointed* vanity. He is far from the first instance I have known of inordinate vanity under very modest externals. His misjudgment of me is so less than you supposed, as he has not put in any flattery *proprement dit*, but the fact itself is a piece of flattery which he must have thought would be agreeable or he would not have taken so impertinent a liberty. There are so few people of whom one can think even as well as I did of him, that I feel this a loss, & am like you angry with him for it. (Mill 1972, 14: 139–40)

Clearly, Harriet Taylor, highly jealous of Mill's friends and determined to isolate him from them, had orchestrated Mill's stinging and self-righteous reply.<sup>17</sup> Yet, moments of mutual dissatisfaction sometimes arise between close friends. Mill and Thornton had occasional quarrels too. But Mill was not the sort of person to harbour a grudge and, having administered the rebuke, he forgave his friend and let the matter rest. Their friendship managed to survive several such contretemps through the years. If anything, their attachment seemed to grow stronger over time, particularly in Mill's final decade.<sup>18</sup>

On another occasion, in the early 1860s, the two men had a mild difference of opinion on Thornton's exploration of the ether. Following the death of his two children, Ellen Aird and Stanhope William, during the 1850s, Thornton had turned to his faith to fill the spiritual void left by the deaths of his children. Although religion continued to minister to his moral and emotional needs, Thornton had been so deeply affected by their deaths that he looked to other sources for spiritual support and reassurance, including seeking out and experimenting with the world of the supernatural, much to Mill's dismay.

Around the time of the tragic loss of his first two children, Thornton began to develop a morbid fascination with the verities of spiritualism in hopes that it might offer solid evidence of the survival of the human spirit after death. Although it is unclear when Thornton's interest in spiritualism began, his zeal was grounded in and entirely consistent with the need to dispel doubt that the brief period Ellen Aird and Stanhope William had spent on earth had not been in vain. His quest for proof of life after death, although entirely consistent with his religious outlook, remained morally fraught. Despite the fact that spiritualism was gaining adherents

from all walks of life, for many contemporaries, the claim that contact with the spirit world could be made remained not only highly dubious, but constituted a form of intellectual and moral heresy no less dangerous than the Darwinian theories embraced by many within the scientific fraternity as a new kind of religion. Paranormal phenomena was a subject of intense interest to Thornton and while there is no evidence linking him to a Victorian spiritual group, he nevertheless braved derision for spending time and energy pursuing inexplicable paranormal causes and seeking concrete proof of an afterlife.

Thornton's inquisitiveness about the world of the supernatural drew derisive comment from Mill, who was alarmed by his friend's interest in the promise of direct communication with the dead. Mill, as the senior, earnestly counselled his friend on the tricks and underhanded methods of so-called mediums and spiritualists, doubtless describing the creative methods used by the fraudsters and disreputable practitioners who prayed on the most vulnerable. In a revealing letter, dated 14 June 1862, Mill expressed his "total disbelief in clairvoyance" and warned his friend against falling for the clever tricks of those who claim to be "communicators with spirits" (see Lipkes 1999: 120). Mill wrote:

I confess I am surprised that you attach any importance to Forster's or any other exhibitions of what they call spiritualism. Since in all that relates to the communicators with spirits, the men are manifestly impostors, why should one feel any difficulty in believing them to be so altogether, & their apparent marvels to be juggling or other tricks? Their exploits certainly would never do anything to shake my total disbelief in clairvoyance, of which apart from its extreme antecedent improbability, I have never read of any case the evidence of which did not leave the most obvious loopholes for fraud. That so many people should have believed in it is to me one of the many proofs that honest people do not in general at all appreciate either the facility of being cheated or the frequency of the disposition to cheat. (Mill 1972, 15: 782)

Despite the fraternal advice Mill dispensed, Thornton was not distracted from exploring the world of the supernatural. This would not be the last time that Mill, the "Saint of Rationalism", would be called upon to reproach a protégé who lived up to his billing as Mill's most wayward disciple.

In the following year, 1863, in the midst of the American Civil War, Mill and Thornton were again at loggerheads. On this occasion, the differences

arose over Thornton's support of the slave-holding South as against Mill's (and most of his circle's) unqualified defence of the abolitionist North (Lipkes 1999: 33, 120). Thornton's stance would certainly have tested Mill's patience, especially coming at a time when Mill's campaign against the South constituted one of his main political crochets, closely linked as it was to the Governor Eyre case, which ultimately cut short his Westminster career. Mill and his circle believed in the Union and the abolition of slavery just as they believed in their own freedom and privilege. They knew that abolition was a noble cause, and they vociferously confronted the presence of a stultifying system of morals that presumed that somehow the Confederate cause was worth fighting for. Thornton's support for the South had certainly angered the older man. Yet, however disappointing, Mill was tolerant of the differences of opinion among his adherents, conscious that his exertions on behalf of the public good should never be allowed to dampen the crusading zeal of even his most rebellious follower. When the immediate scandal surrounding Thornton's sympathy for the Confederate cause had died down, his relationship with Mill returned to what it had been, as Mill himself underwent a restoration of his old self.<sup>19</sup>

Like many other middle-class reformers, Thornton had taken a deep interest in the debates arising from the American Civil War. When Mill learned of Thornton's interest, he wrote to him from his Provençal retreat, requesting as many articles as possible in the English press "on the American question".

I have been writing a paper on the American question which will come out in the February Fraser & which if noticed at all is likely to be much attacked, as it is in complete opposition to the tone of the press & of English opinion, a tone which has caused me more disgust than anything has done for a long time. I shall therefore be glad to know what is thought of the article by people who have not got pens in their hands & shall be obliged to you for any information of that sort which you may be able to communicate. (Mill 1972, 15: 774)

Here, Mill reiterated the claim that support in Britain for the slave-holding South constituted further evidence of Britain's degraded moral character. At this stage, however, Mill had not fully realised that Thornton did not support the North. Within a few months, though, he had received a letter from Henry Fawcett informing him of Thornton's recognition of and support for southern sovereignty. Mill was, of course, disappointed

and annoyed by his friend's lack of attention to the moral dimension. "I am not surprised that Thornton is not with us on the American question." "Though a superior man on many points", Mill continued, "on others he feels with the herd, and one never knows which these last may be" (Mill 1972, 15: 777). Although Thornton never said so explicitly, he was probably inclined to offer his support to the South because he believed that the Southern states had the right to secede to form a new nation and because the free trade sentiments of the landowning Southerners appealed to him. Mill, as mentioned above, steadfastly refused to accept these arguments on the grounds that the northern and southern states were engaged, first and foremost, in a moral war over slavery, not a war of independence to establish a new nation. On this occasion, however, the disagreement between the two friends did not unduly strain their relationship (Packe 1954: 425). In fact, on 14 June 1862, Mill, who was visiting Athens with Helen Taylor at the time, wrote to invite Thornton to visit them "in our little hermitage" in Saint Véran in the autumn when "the weather will ... probably be cooler for walks & other excursions" (Mill 1972, 15: 782). Although Thornton left a delightful account of the three weeks he spent in Avignon with Mill and Helen Taylor in a letter to Henry Fawcett (already cited above), he never revealed whether he discussed "the American question" with his hosts. But if they did raise the topic in conversation—and it seems highly likely that they would have—Mill's views clearly failed to make an impression because a letter that Mill wrote to Thornton in October 1863 reveals his ongoing strategy to ensnare Thornton in his own framework.

As for the American question, if you had time to read one or two books I could recommend to you, & if you were reading the Daily News every day (as I am whenever L[ouis] N[apoleon]'s post office lets it pass, which it does nearly four times in every week), I think you would soon come over to my opinion. In the pro-Southern English papers which I see the facts favourable to the Northern side of the question are *always* suppressed, & in the Times and Saturday Review the grossest lies told, in simple recklessness of assertion without knowledge: The D[aily] N[ews] is the only daily paper of which I can say (though the Star which I know less of may deserve the same praise) that what I think the just view is supported with adequate knowledge, & without prejudice, & the facts favourable to it fairly presented. The American correspondent of that paper is an intelligent man, not like that poor gobe-mouche MacKay, in the Times, who simply retails the stuff he hears from a disreputable clique at New York, almost all of them personally interested in slavery either through commerce or politics, who used to

be held up to contempt in the English papers as the worst section of the democracy. Their following consists chiefly of the mob of Irish emigrants. It is with these & their clients in the press & town council that our journals have allied themselves. Everything high or intellectual or noble-hearted or that used to be friendly to England in the North is heart & soul with the war. But you will soon hear all this from Leslie Stephen better than from me.<sup>20</sup> (Mill 1972, 15: 892–893)

It is unlikely that Mill and Thornton ever resolved their differences over the American question. Mill believed that the pro-Southern coverage of the war in such conservative organs as the *Times* and the *Saturday Review* formed a blot on the moral conscience of the nation.<sup>21</sup> As a result, Mill would accept nothing less than the total defeat of the South in the war. He even argued that war, “in a good cause”, was morally legitimate. Such partisan activities left readers in little doubt that the North must wage war until the final victory had been achieved. By this point, however, Mill was feeling much more sanguine about the outcome of the conflict. In a letter to Theodor Gomperz, dated 14 June 1863, he wrote: “In America the pertinacity of the Free States gives me great confidence in their ultimate success, and I have always thought that this war and all its circumstances were very likely to elevate the national character, as well as to stir up thought in the more cultivated minds, in a way that there seemed little hope of before” (Mill 1991, 33: 141).<sup>22</sup> Neither Mill nor Thornton raised the American question in future correspondence. Their intellectual energies were, by now, firmly focused on economic topics such as trade unions, cooperation and the “ultimate futurity of labour”.

### THE LAST YEARS

In 1858, the East India Company lost its battle to maintain control over Indian affairs when the administration of its territories was transferred to the Crown. The Company’s dissolution was the catalyst for Mill’s decision to retire from his official position within the home establishment, although during the first six months of the year, he had been fighting for its survival on the grounds that it was a model of good government (Moir et al. 1999). In a letter to Henry Chapman on 8 July 1858, he remarked:

The East India Company has fought its last battle, and I have been in the thick of the fight. The Company is to be abolished, but we have succeeded

in getting nearly all the principles which we contended for, adopted in constituting the new government, and our original assailants feel themselves much more beaten than we do. The change though not so bad as at first seemed probable, is still, in my opinion, much for the worse. (Mill 1972, 15: 560)

Earlier, Mill had been given responsibility for preparing several petitions and position papers “that were directed at Parliament as well as the broader public and which would serve to justify Company rule” (Peers 1999: 198). The Company’s directors and senior mandarins were so pleased with Mill’s efforts in defending the Company’s role in governing the Indian territories that he was asked to draft a final defence of the Company’s position that has been described as “the sharpest introduction of any state paper in British history” (Reeves 2007: 257). One director was so pleased with Mill’s eloquent petition that he contrived to take credit for it himself, much to Thornton’s “indignation” and Mill’s wry amusement. As Thornton recollected many years later:

I could scarcely believe my ears when one of the Directors, alluding to the petition, spoke of it as having been written by a certain other official who was sitting by his side, adding, after a moment’s pause, “with the assistance, as he understood, of Mr. Mill”, likewise present. As soon as the court broke up, I burst into Mill’s room, boiling over with indignation, and exclaiming, “What an infamous shame!” and no doubt adding a good deal more that followed in natural sequence on such an exordium. “What’s the matter?” replied Mill, as soon as he could get a word in, “M—(the Director) was quite right. The petition was the joint work of—and myself.” “How can you be so perverse?” I retorted. “You know that I know you wrote every word of it.” “No,” rejoined Mill, “you are mistaken: one whole line on the second page was put in by M—.” (Thornton 1873b: 21)<sup>23</sup>

Thornton was incensed by the blatant deceit, but Mill, as tended to happen on such occasions, counselled restraint. There was nothing to be gained by pressing the issue. In any case, Mill’s efforts to preserve the Company’s central role in the administration of the Indian empire had come to nothing, as the Derby government moved swiftly to dissolve the East India Company.<sup>24</sup> When the Company’s administration of its Indian possessions had finally been transferred to the India Office, Mill was invited to become a member of its advisory council (Capaldi 2004: 245). In fact, Thornton had been “commissioned to sound him out on

the subject of the intended offer”, and “went accordingly to his house in Blackheath, but had no sooner broached the subject than I saw that my mission was hopeless” (Thornton 1873b: 34). Mill graciously declined the offer, electing instead to retire comfortably on a pension of £1500 per annum (Reeves 2007: 259–60).<sup>25</sup> Although Mill “never again sought or occupied an official position in the home government of British India”, he retained a lively interest in India House affairs (Moir 1990: xxxix). In retirement, Thornton regularly updated his friend on the latest comings and goings on Leadenhall Street.

Soon after Mill’s death in 1873, Thornton prepared a moving tribute, in which he spoke candidly of the man and his personality. In it, he also recalled another incident that had brought about a short rift (Thornton 1873b: 36–37). On Mill’s 1858 retirement from public life, a group of his India House colleagues had arranged to present him with a handsome silver inkstand, designed by the architect Digby Wyatt, as a “token of high admiration and esteem, and warm personal regard” (Mill 1972, 15: 570n). Mill, who did not feel comfortable about receiving public compliments, was upset when he learned of the plan and “quite resolved not to be made the subject of them” (Thornton 1873b: 36). “I had never before seen him quite so angry,” wrote Thornton, who had originally proposed the idea. “He hated all such demonstrations” because “he was sure they were never altogether genuine or spontaneous”. Thornton told his readers of making arrangements for the testimonial to be delivered secretly “to Mr. Mill’s house at Blackheath” and placed in the drawing room.<sup>26</sup> The “plan succeeded ... mainly due to Miss Helen Taylor’s good offices” (ibid. 37). This incident makes clear once again Mill’s determination to retire quietly and gracefully from public office. He was, “from first to last”, a private person.

A few months after his retirement, Mill’s beloved wife, Harriet Taylor, passed away. His “inexpressible grief & irreparable loss” had left him with no energy to carry on. The depth of his hurt and its consequences would not become apparent for several months. Mill soon withdrew from society. In another telling sign of the real amity that had, within a short space of time, grown up between Thornton and Mill, Thornton was the first person outside of his immediate family with whom Mill shared his grief. Mill asked Thornton to place obituaries in all the leading London newspapers—a task he would never have entrusted to other than his closest allies. From the Hotel d’Europe, Avignon, he wrote:

It is doubtful if I shall ever be fit for anything public or private, again. The spring of my life is broken. But I shall fulfill her wishes by not giving up the attempt to do something useful, and I am not quite alone. I have with me her daughter, the one person besides myself who most loved her and whom she most loved, and we help each other to bear what is inevitable. (Mill 1972, 15: 574)

It is a measure of the bond between protégé and patron and of the trust that Mill had in Thornton that he felt comfortable enough conveying so openly the depth of his hurt, especially as Mill was the sort of individual who closely guarded his personal feelings. In fact, Harriet's death was the single event that brought about this realignment in their relationship, which served to draw them closer together. In time, with Thornton's unstinting support, Mill gradually regained the will to live and he re-emerged from seclusion in the early 1860s. He "would spend the remaining fifteen years of his life attempting to repair the loss [of Harriet's demise] by promoting the opinions and ideas which he saw as their joint legacy" (Reeves 2007: 260).

The 1860s proved to be a particularly engaging decade for Mill. He entered political life and won the seat of Westminster in the general election of 1865, although he lost the seat in the next election in 1868. In November 1868, two months after his electoral defeat, Thornton received a letter from Mill, updating him on home repairs at Avignon that Helen Taylor was supervising. The letter also suggests that Mill had taken the electoral defeat in his stride.

Helen has carried out her long cherished scheme ... of a 'vibratory' for me, & has made a pleasant covered walk some 30 feet long where I can vibrate in cold or rainy weather. The terrace, you must know, as it goes round two sides of the house, has got itself dubbed the 'semi-circumgyratory'. In addition to this, Helen has built me a herbarium—a little room fitted up with closets for my plants, shelves for my botanical books, & a great table about which to manipulate them all. Thus you see with my herbarium, my vibratory, & my semi-circumgyratory I am in clover & you may imagine with what scorn I think of the H. of C., which, comfortable club as it is said to be, could offer me none of these comforts, or more properly speaking these necessaries of life. (Mill 1972, 17: 1548–1549)

Thornton saw Mill's electoral defeat as a blessing in disguise. "[Y]our last letter", he wrote in a letter to Mill on 8 January 1869,

has throughout it a ring of such genuine satisfaction at your emancipation from parliamentary drudgery that it is impossible for me to feel any further regret on your personal account in respect of the Westminster election. ... [Although] there is much work of the highest importance to be done in the House of Commons which no one can do as well as yourself if at all, there is at least equally important work for you out of the House, and work which it gives me much more pleasure to fancy you engaged upon. (Donoghue 2000: 334)

Thornton was, of course, referring to Mill's continuing work aimed at the "improvement of mankind", in which he had taken more than a passing interest.<sup>27</sup> Mill, in his final decade, gathered around him a small band of loyal followers, who showed a commitment to the dissemination of his ideas and a devotion to the progress of mankind. Thornton was a pivotal member of this group, which came to be known as the Blackheath Park Circle. He was well-liked and held in high esteem by his fellow Millites, who together, comprised a cadre of social reformers committed to refining and extending the social reform agenda initiated by Mill. His decision to forge alliances with members of the Mill circle bolstered his reformist credentials. Members of Mill's circle would meet on Sunday evenings over dinner at Mill's Blackheath Park residence to discuss "advanced topics" for the betterment of humankind (Stephen 1900: 68). The Sunday dinner became an institution whose key members comprised of "loyalists", J.E. Cairnes and Henry Fawcett, and "dissidents", William Thornton and T.E. Cliffe-Leslie.<sup>28</sup> After Harriet's death, this disparate band of followers became the principal vehicle through which Mill launched his avowedly radical platform. Mill's ability to harness and energize such a diverse group of individuals who often recoiled from their master's most deeply held convictions on economic, social and political issues says much about his authority and personal magnetism (Lipkes 1999).

In the last years, Mill's circle of friends and acquaintances steadily grew. Anthony Trollope, Louis Blanc, Elizabeth Garrett and Herbert Spencer were to be found at his Sunday evening soirées. On some occasions, Mill went out of his way to invite guests who he felt might enjoy Thornton's company. On one occasion, for example, Mill went to considerable lengths to bring John Plummer and Thornton together, knowing that both men had a deep interest in the subject of cooperation. In a letter to Thornton, dated 23 October 1863, Mill wrote that he was pleased to learn that his friend was "so earnestly engaged on the subject of cooperation" and suggested that he contact

Plummer who “might be very useful to you, & would be delighted to be so” (Mill 1972, 15: 892). Mill then fired off a letter to Plummer, dated 5 December 1863, informing him that Thornton had already “made great use of your account of Cooperation in the Companion to the Almanac, and that he means to write to you shortly” (Mill 1972, 15: 908). Mill then arranged for both men to meet over Sunday dinner at his Blackheath Park residence. Later, he wrote to John Plummer to say, “Mr. Thornton was very pleased when he heard you were coming, and disappointed at not seeing you, but I hope he may be able to meet you here the next time you come” (Mill 1972, 15: 939). On another occasion, Mill gave a Sunday lunch in honour of the exiled French socialist thinker, Louis Blanc, and invited Thornton along to meet him: “Louis Blanc is coming to dine with us on Sunday, and it would give us great pleasure if you could come and meet him. We dine at five” (Mill 1972, 15: 760).<sup>29</sup> In time, Thornton and Blanc sustained a close and principled friendship of their own (Blanc 1866: 297).<sup>30</sup>

Mill, having purchased a cottage at Mt Véran in the South of France so as to be nearer the Avignon cemetery where Harriet was buried, was spending less and less time at Blackheath Park. Thornton, by now deeply attached to Mill and Helen Taylor, Mill’s stepdaughter, was a regular guest at Avignon. At one point, Helen, who seems to have inherited her mother’s strong personality,<sup>31</sup> took it upon herself to supervise the renovation of the cottage.<sup>32</sup> From Avignon in mid-January 1869, Mill wrote to Thornton with news that “Helen says your room is not finished yet, because as she is an architect and master mason all in one, she is carrying on the improvements very slowly, not letting the attention to them interfere too much with her work” (Mill 1972, 17: 1549).<sup>33</sup> Mill died on 7 May 1873.<sup>34</sup> In a letter to Helen Taylor from his London residence two days later, Thornton described the depth of his feeling towards Mill:

Forgive me for presuming to intrude upon your affliction. From what Mr [Leonard] Courtney tells me I fear that before this reaches you, all may be over. I do not write to offer condolence. My own feeling at the idea of losing the best, truest, noblest of friends tells me only too well what a mere imperitence that would be. But possibly you may feel the need of other assistance and cooperation than any immediately at hand. If so, I desire to say, though I trust you do not require to be told, that there are no services which I can render which you may not command. May God help you to endure this fearful blow. (Thornton to Helen Taylor, 9 May 1873)<sup>35</sup>

The passage makes clear, in addition to the deep sense of loss Thornton felt after the death of his dear friend, that the two men had enjoyed a mutually warm friendship nurtured over many years. Here Thornton had succeeded in establishing those relations of trust so essential to an enduring friendship. Such a glowing tribute testifies to the devotion that Mill could inspire in those who were fortunate enough to count him as an ally and friend. For, despite their very different backgrounds, beliefs and stations in life, the two men had much in common. Both were intellectually curious, good-humoured and astute. Mill, who greatly admired Thornton's intellectual and moral disposition, always bestowed favours on those whose views accorded closely with his own. Thornton, for his part, considered Mill his closest, most cherished friend and Mill reciprocated these feelings, for he was steadfast in his support of his friend until his death. Thornton's brief, albeit sobering, tribute when Mill died attests to the enormous reservoir of feelings that Thornton had for Mill. He clearly relished this public opportunity to salute his friend's achievement, but, in concluding his memoir, admitted that "[m]ine is scarcely now the mood in which I should have been naturally disposed to relate anecdotes like this" (Thornton 1873b: 37).

Several prominent Victorians with links to both men understood the intense feelings each had for the other. The Marquis of Dufferin and Ava, for example, upon learning of Mill's death in Quebec, wrote to Thornton on 13 June 1873 to express his deepest condolences: "I fear", the Marquis writes, "you will have been dreadfully overcome by the death of Mr. Mill." From the smattering of the Mill-Thornton correspondence that still survives, they evidently relished each other's company. Their letters, which always began "My dear Mill" and "Dear Thornton", reveal the depth of their bond. They also show that Thornton, far from being a passive bystander in their intellectual discourse, often initiated a topic of discussion, providing direction and substance to it in a variety of ways. Indeed, as Mill's biographer Alexander Bain observes: "one of Mill's chief friendships in later years was with Thornton, who differed from him in a great many things, but the differences were of the kind to bring into lively exercise Mill's argumentative powers" (Bain 1882: 173–174). Stephen corroborates Bain's recollection, and adds: "The excellent W. T. Thornton had been from 1836 Mill's colleague in the India House, and was one of the few friends who communicated freely with him during his seclusion" (Stephen 1900, 3: 187). In sum, Thornton remained very close to Mill

and, to some extent, helped to fill the void left by Harriet's death (see Lipkes 1999: 118–119, 158).

In the year following Mill's death, Thornton performed one last tribute on behalf of his friend. Mill's political activities during the final decade of his life, where he revealed himself to be an ardent polemicist and avuncular reformer, coloured assessments of his place in English public life at the time of his death. In fact, Mill's immediate posthumous reputation suffered considerable damage from malign political forces that considered his partisan activities as damaging to the moral fabric of English society. Not surprisingly, assessments of Mill's life and work have ever since been tainted by these (baseless, in many cases) character evaluations. According to one recent commentator: "the success of the allegations was testimony both to the contempt in which Mill was held by certain sections of Tory 'society' and to the disorganized ineptitude of his friends" (Stack 2011: 170–171). Seeking to restore Mill's fallen star, a group of Mill's friends and admirers, led by Thornton and Arthur Arnold, clubbed together to raise funds to erect a bronze statue of Mill in the gardens along Victoria Embankment. A memorial committee was duly formed by Thornton and Arnold that was "successful in gaining generous subscriptions from wealthy donors from across the political spectrum including, to the amazement and disgust of some in the conservative press, the earl of Derby and the marquis of Salisbury" (Stack 2011: 176).<sup>36</sup> The bronze statue of Mill, still standing in the Victoria Embankment gardens, serves as a fitting tribute to an enduring Victorian friendship between Mill and Thornton.

## CONCLUSION

In early 1846, William Thornton and John Stuart Mill began what would become a close and lasting friendship. From the beginnings of their friendship and collaboration at the London branch of the East India Company in Leadenhall Street, Mill played an active part in advancing Thornton's authorial and professional careers. Apart from the occasional holiday and Thornton's twelve-month period of recuperation in the mid-1850s, during which Mill performed his friend's official duties at the East India Company, the two men met every day at work until mid-1858, when Mill retired from the Indian Civil Service. Although no correspondence between the two friends survives from this period, their published writings and Mill's private letters to others reveal the depth of their attachment. Even the redoubtable Harriet, who tried to isolate Mill from his

friends, eventually accepted Thornton as having a unique place in their lives. Helen Taylor, Harriet's daughter, doted on Thornton, and he kept up a separate correspondence with her that is notable for its warmth and spontaneity. Thornton and Mill did, of course, occasionally quarrel, even though Thornton claimed that his friendship with Mill, from beginning to end, never entailed "misunderstanding of any kind" (Thornton 1873b: 36). But such disagreements never seriously jeopardised their attachment.

Thornton's friendship with the "Victorian sage" overlapped with what has become known as "the third, mature stage" in Mill's life journey (Robson 1989: 7). This final phase of his life has, as Lipkes (1999: 3) correctly notes, "received comparatively little attention" from intellectual historians, although it saw Mill's re-emergence from seclusion following the death in 1858 of his beloved wife, Harriet Taylor, and covered his association with the last classical economists, the Blackheath Park Circle, an exclusive band of economists who met over Sunday dinner at Mill's Blackheath Park residence when he was in London. It also included the continuation and ripening of his close friendship and collaborative relationship with William Thornton.

Reinforcing the sense of the personal bond that had developed between them was the moral support each extended the other in times of family bereavement and serious illness. Illness cast a constant shadow over both the Thornton and Mill households: indeed, Mill and Thornton were prone to illness for much of their lives. In the period after Harriet's death in 1858, Thornton, in a sense, came to replace her as a stable, candid, and trustworthy presence in Mill's life (Lipkes 1999: 118–119). On other occasions, the Mill family rallied behind Thornton, lending him moral support in an hour of need. Examples include Thornton's mysterious illness in the mid-1850s, the life-threatening lung complaint of his son, Edward Zohrab, in 1860 and the death of his daughter, Evelyn Danvers, in 1876.

Mirowski and Tradewell (1999: 33) remind readers that Mill had "few friends; and fewer still whom he regarded comfortably as intellectual equals". Thornton was an exception. The warm and generous comments Mill made about his friend's scholarship and friendship attest to his high regard for Thornton. Yet, surprisingly, the bulk of Mill's biographers have not discussed his friendship with Thornton. Several prominent nineteenth-century figures did, however, leave sketches of that friendship, revealing the depth of the bond. Alexander Bain, Mill's biographer and close friend, once remarked, "One of Mill's chief friendships in later years was with [William] Thornton." Even the irascible Leslie Stephen, who had

made several uncharitable remarks about Thornton on other occasions, conceded that “the excellent W.T. Thornton ... was one of the few friends who communicated freely with [Mill] during his seclusion” (Lipkes 1999: 118–119).

Mill and Thornton influenced each other in a variety of ways. Mill became something of a father figure to Thornton, whose own father had died shortly before his first birthday. Mill assisted the younger man in establishing his credentials in London’s literary circles and helped to advance his professional career at India House. The paternalistic position Mill assumed towards his close friend resembled that of his own father towards him. Yet, as Mirowski and Tradewell correctly argue:

Thornton was no martinet, no mere stalking horse for Mill. The fact he was his own man is what endeared him to Mill—let us not forget, the author of *On Liberty* as well as *Principles of Political Economy*. The author of the former text argued that truth was not found in consensus, but derived from the process of individual dissent. (Mirowski and Tradewell 1999: 40)

Mill once described Thornton, in a letter to Henry Fawcett, as a “superior man on many points, [but] on others he feels with the herd” (Mill 1972, 15: 777). He was referring both to Thornton’s unpredictable “mental constitution” and to the quality of his thinking on a wide range of subjects of mutual interest to both men. Yet, it was his unpredictable intellectual disposition that so endeared him to Mill and to the Mill circle. To be sure, Thornton’s work never lacked criticism. John Stuart Mill, for one, remonstrated with his friend in private correspondence over Thornton’s contributions, but he never discouraged his literary endeavours nor censored his views. Given his temperament, Mill never expected Thornton to subordinate his own reputation and interests by acting as keeper of his intellectual flame. Thornton, in fact, admitted that “[d]ifferences of opinion we had in abundance; but my open avowal of them was always recognized by him as one of the strongest proofs of respect, and served to cement instead of weakening our attachment” (Thornton 1873b: 36). This is why Mill was drawn to the younger man in the first place. From the beginning of their friendship, Mill saw a kindred spirit in Thornton with his taste for controversy, his “excess receptivity for paradox”, and his tendency to “swim against the stream”. All this made Thornton the perfect vessel for Mill’s purposes because he made uncompromising, sometimes unpopular, statements without regard to public fashion.

## NOTES

1. Thornton joined the East India Company on 2 August 1836.
2. For the progress of Mill's career in the Indian civil service, see Moir (1990) and Zastoupil (1994).
3. On 13 March 1857, in a letter to Edwin Chadwick, Mill lamented that he was "too busy" to continue with his own writing, "having all Thornton's work to do in addition to his own" (Mill 1972, 15: 528).
4. Details of George Grote Mill's short Company career are preserved in the India Office Library [L/AG/30/12/352, 356ff]. He died in 1853 in Madeira.
5. For a complete schedule of questions Thornton posed at club meetings, see Mirowski and Tradewell (1999: 34–36).
6. Sir Louis Mallet did entertain a high opinion of Thornton's capabilities as secretary of the India Office's Public Works Department (see Williams 1983: 418 n.4).
7. Thornton records his own frustration at the criticism of *On Labour* in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in a letter to Cairnes dated 26 March 1869 (see Donoghue 2000: 329).
8. Thornton was well aware of the criticism he was receiving from Stephen (Moore 2006: 607–609). In a letter to Cairnes of 16 October 1866, he proposed "to have it out" with Stephen on his return from the Isle of Wight (see Donoghue 2000: 327).
9. It is highly likely that Stephen had produced a manuscript on political economy with diagrammatic representations of supply and demand curves, a work that anticipated the geometric contributions of William Stanley Jevons and Fleeming Jenkin, but was, sadly, never published (Maitland 1906: 75; Moore 2006: 597).
10. It is not known exactly when Thornton met Cairnes, but on the available evidence, it seems likely that they first met in the early-to-mid-1860s.
11. Cairnes, having published a treatise titled *Character and Logical Method of Political Economy* in 1857, had established a reputation as an expert in the field of economic methodology.
12. In some of his own letters to Cairnes, Mill refers to "very recent intelligence" reports received from Thornton containing news of Cairnes's health (see Mill 1972, 16: 1283; 17: 1547).
13. Mill, too, devoted considerable space in his letters to Thornton to giving detailed accounts of his and Helen Taylor's Continental excursions (see Mill 1972, 17: 1657, 1912–1913).
14. In his reply dated 23 October 1869, Mill wrote that, "[a]bout Carlyle, I agree both with you & with Hill. It is only at a particular stage in one's mental development that one benefits much by him (to me he was of great

- use at that stage) but one continues to read his best things with little if any diminution of pleasure after one has ceased to learn anything from him” (Mill 1972, 17: 1657).
15. Mill also informed Harriet, who had remained behind in Nice to recuperate, that no sooner had he arrived at India House than “Hill, Thornton and various others poured in one after another with their congratulations & enquiries. There seems to have been a general impression that I was so ill that there was no knowing when I might come back (or perhaps if I should ever come back at all)” (Mill 1972, 14: 122–123).
  16. The dedication reads: “To John Stuart Mill, Esq. In Imitation of an Epistle of Horace to Maecenas” (Thornton 1854a: 132–149). Here, Thornton is suggesting that his own relationship with Mill resembled that between Horace and his patron, Maecenas, who introduced Horace to his privileged circle of political and literary associates in Rome.
  17. This provides further evidence of Mill’s unusually strong attachment to Harriet, which led one contemporary reviewer to quip: “Mill had no great faith in a God. He had unbounded confidence in a goddess” (Mill 1972, 14: xxiii).
  18. Thornton’s warm relationship with Mill and his family can also be gauged by the fact that Harriet Taylor herself made him trustee of her first husband’s estate (Mill 1972, 15: 575 and cf. Reeves 2007: 255–256).
  19. Thornton never publicly aired his views on the “American Question”.
  20. In the early 1860s, Thornton was a regular and popular guest of the Cambridge Millites, Leslie Stephen and Henry Fawcett, at Trinity Hall, Cambridge. Both Stephen and Fawcett supported the North in the war, much to Mill’s delight (and relief). Although no record of the disputes between Thornton, Stephen and Fawcett survive on the American question, it is clear from their correspondence that Stephen and Fawcett had been enlisted by Mill to win Thornton over to their “cultivated” position. Stephen’s attitude to the war is discussed in Moore (2006: 599–601). Fawcett’s position is covered briefly in Stephen (1886).
  21. Mill was so incensed by the biased and inaccurate reporting of the Civil War in the *Times* that he refused to allow the paper in his house (Capaldi 2004: 306; Reeves 2007: 336).
  22. Two months later, in a letter to Thomas Bayley Potter, the founder of the Union and Emancipation Society, Mill was bristling in anticipation at the prospect of a northern victory: “All the recent American news is most cheering, and there now seems little ground of fear for the future” (Mill 1991, 33: 141–142).
  23. Thornton (1873b: 32) further notes that he was “the possessor of the original MS. of this admirable state paper”, so that there can be no doubt as to its true authorship.

24. In his *Autobiography*, Mill's described his role in the defence of the Company, thus: "I was the chief manager of the resistance which the Company made to their own political extinction" (Mill 1873: 249).
25. It is clear that Thornton had approached Mill *after* Harriet Taylor's death on 3 November, as he states that "[t]he anguish of his recent bereavement was as yet too fresh" (Thornton 1873b: 34). Mill had returned to London by late November 1858.
26. Reeves (2007: 259) claimed incorrectly that Thornton's role in arranging the leaving gift "caused the only argument he ever had with Thornton".
27. Robson (1989: 14) gives a concise summary of Mill's lifelong commitment to the "improvement of mankind". It was manifested in "selfless dedication and energy and a sense of engaging in battle against forces of evil armed with unreason and entrenched in traditional strongholds. This programme was theological in force, if agnostic in creed, and its most evident engine was moral".
28. With the exception of John Morley, who was important to "the group chiefly as editor of the *Fortnightly Review*, which served as something of a Millite organ from 1867 to 1875" (Lipkes 1999: 3), the Blackheath Park Circle comprised only economists: John Elliot Cairnes, Henry Fawcett, T.E. Cliffe-Leslie and William Thornton (see Lipkes 1996 for further discussion).
29. Thornton described Louis Blanc as "one of my most valuable friends" in the Preface to the 1869 (first) edition of *On Labour*.
30. Louis Blanc's letters to Thornton are preserved in the Thornton family papers. Sadly, Thornton's letters to Blanc do not appear to have survived. Mill's letters to Thornton contain references to Blanc's work (Mill 1972, 16: 1319; 17: 1913) as do Thornton's to Mill (Donoghue 2000: 339).
31. Lipkes (1999: 76) remarks wryly that Mill "was a Taylor-made man".
32. In a letter Thornton wrote to Mill on 8 January 1869, he mentioned having heard "great things from Mr. Hare of Miss Taylor's architectural achievements" (Donoghue 2000: 335).
33. From Avignon in October 1862, Thornton wrote Henry Fawcett a letter in which he provided a detailed description of Mill's way of life. In it, he remarked, "Two of the lower rooms are the drawing-room and sitting-room, the third is my bedroom, at the window of which, looking into the garden, I am now writing" (Elliot 1910, 1: 261–262). Thornton considered the three weeks he spent with Mill and Helen Taylor in Avignon among the happiest "in his life" (Capaldi 2004: 303).
34. In a codicil (dated 14 February 1872) to his last will, Mill appointed Thornton one of his executors and trustees, and bequeathed one thousand pounds to him (Mill 1991, 32: 328–336). The terms and conditions of Mill's final will make it clear that, in the event of Helen Taylor's death,

Thornton should publish Mill's *Autobiography* within two years of Mill's demise. Mill also stipulated that Thornton receive any profits "that may arise" from a memoir of his life.

35. The letter, in which this passage appeared, is now preserved in the Mill-Taylor collection, British Library of Economic and Political Science. Helen Taylor was fond of Thornton, and they kept up a regular correspondence with each other.
36. For further discussion of the machinations surrounding the formation and composition of the Mill memorial committee and the part played by Thornton in it, see Stack (2011: 176–178).

## Rhymes and Verses

*Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of all knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred.*

—Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry* 1821

### INTRODUCTION

In late 1853, William Thornton was putting finishing touches to his first book of verse: *Zobrab; or, A Mid-Summer Day's Dream: and other Poems* (1854a). Following the publication in the 1840s of two political economy tracts calling the public's attention to the harrowing economic distress that had accompanied the Irish potato blight of the mid-to-late 1840s, Thornton had come to be seen as an influential social reformer and economic commentator (see Thornton 1846, 1848; Donoghue 2007). What impelled Thornton to branch away from the entanglements of political and economic debate that had occupied his "leisure time" during the previous decade was the wrenching loss of his eldest daughter, Ellen Aird, who had finally succumbed to pulmonary tuberculosis.

In the preface to *Zobrab; or, A Mid-Summer Day's Dream: and other Poems* (hereafter, *Zobrab*), Thornton explained that reading and writing poetry had helped to "ease" his frayed emotions. An unidentified reviewer (possibly Francis Bowen) in the *North American Review* (1854, 78: 539) observed that the poems in "this little volume" had captured the pathos

of the bereaving parent who takes the wider world into his confidence.<sup>1</sup> “There is an air of frankness about them”, the reviewer continues, “as if the poet were disposed to make a confidant of the public, and to disclose things, which are usually hoarded away in the hearts most secret chamber”. Rather like the Victorian romanticists who he so admired, Thornton had invoked the medium of poetry to explore a range of human frailties, foibles and emotions such as absence, grief, love, solitude and death. Certainly, these elements lay behind the poignancy of Thornton’s private remembrances.

Another possible explanation for the publication of *Zohrab* lies in his lingering remorse for a mother who struggled to cope with the new, onerous responsibilities thrust upon her in the period following her husband’s death and who herself died mysteriously at a young age. Thornton alludes to this when he writes, “few of them would have been written ... unless I had had in view a much higher object ... What that object is, unless I have missed my aim, will be sufficiently obvious to any one who may think it worth while to read the earlier [biographical] pieces of this collection in the order in which they are placed” (Thornton 1854a: vi). His stated purpose was to pay tribute to his mother’s ancient Persian name, a daring act of filial piety in an era in which English middle-class families carefully guarded their lineage against eastern taint. Fragments of family history and family lore embedded within the titular first poem lend the Thornton family background a lustre not present in his other prose writings.

The ink had scarcely been allowed to settle on the pages of *Zohrab* before Thornton had dashed off another volume of poetry, *The Siege of Silistria: A Poem* (1854b). Conceived as a sort of heroic tribute to British forces about to embark upon the Crimean campaign, the publication points to his ongoing interest in, and concern for, the fragility of the Ottoman Empire in the face of persistent Russian territorial encroachment (see Lipkes 1999: 116–117). This was followed by his third and final book of verse, *Modern Manicheism, Labour’s Utopia, and other poems* (1857). Thornton’s final volume, the title of which reflected his lifelong interest in religion and pastoralism, offers a reflection on a number of themes articulated in his earlier prose and poetry, in particular, a deepening engagement with Britain’s rural heritage amid rapid industrialization and urbanization. Thornton strove to write poems that dwelt upon the changing relationship between man and nature, believing that the new commercial environment that man was in the midst of creating had hastened the erosion in social conditions across rural Britain. This loss led, naturally enough, to nostalgia for an agrarian tradition where neither man nor nature dominated.

Thornton's poetical compositions are invaluable in shedding light on his character and personality, particularly during the 1850s, which proved such a tumultuous decade for the Thornton household. Thornton's efforts as a poet reveal much about his fragile emotional state following the loss of his daughter and the importance of his religious faith in helping him overcome the trauma. Yet, this period of intense suffering was paired with creative achievement culminating in three poetical works. More than mere genealogy, however, his poetry dwelt upon subjects that caught the Victorian imagination, such as the question of God's existence, the call to duty and the loss of pastoral settlements. His poetical compositions build upon ideals and themes in his early economic writings and form "the perorations to [his] volumes on political economy and general philosophy" in the 1860s and 1870s (*Academy* 1873 August 1 285). Thus, Thornton's poetical works remain crucial in understanding the particulars of his family heritage, favourite speculations, political leanings and social commitments—matters treated cursorily in his earlier and later economic work.

### FAMILY MATTERS

The publication of *Zohrab* marked Thornton's initial foray into the world of poetry. The poems in this collection—one of which caused a short rift with John Stuart Mill—were dedicated to his cousin, Edward Zohrab, then serving as Turkish consul general in London, the same "excellent" young man, in fact, who Thornton had befriended years earlier while living and working in Constantinople (Donoghue 2008: 533 n.22).<sup>2</sup> The collection of poems in question attracted several sympathetic reviews in the literary periodicals of the age, with most reviewers concluding that Thornton's efforts as poet showed promise.<sup>3</sup> Most critics also agreed that the titular poem, in which family history looms large, had been "pleasantly and fancifully written". For Thornton, this long ambitious poem carried enormous personal significance.

In the titular first poem, Thornton presented his own romanticized adaptation of the celebrated Persian epic, *Sohrab* (Zohrab) and *Rustum*. In it, he retells the tragic narrative of a duel fought between a father (Rustum) and his son (Sohrab) for control of the Persian Empire. Thornton's purpose in re-creating the tragic story of how "Zohrab was slain" lay in paying homage to his mother's "old historic name", the solitary occasion on which Sophie Zohrab is referred to publicly by name. The young Tartar warrior, *Sohrab*, feared throughout Persia, is described as the illegitimate

child of one of Rostum's earlier romantic liaisons. Rostum, the Hercules of Persian mythology, unaware of their kinship, confronts the mighty Sohrab on the battlefield, where Sohrab, the commander of a Turkish force invading Persia, has swept aside all in his path. The two men engage in a fatal "hand-to-hand" duel with "sabre", "battle-axe" and "buckler". When all appears lost on the Persian side, Rostum, in heroic fashion, "rebounds from ruin's brink", and unleashes a mortal blow upon his "victim" and (unknown) "son". Thornton describes the final sequence as follows:

The conqueror [Rostum] kneels, and gripes his [Sohrab's] throat.  
 His shattered armour, seamed and rent,  
 In that last peril guards him not.  
 The fatal dagger, lifted high,  
 With aim, which naught may now arrest,  
 One moment hovers doubtfully,  
 The next, lies quivering in his breast.

As Sohrab lies wracked by pain following Rostum's mortal blow, a brief conversation ensues between the two warriors, where it is revealed that Rostum has slain tragically (though unwittingly) his own son. Rostum is inconsolable when he learns of this. Aside from its significance to Persian mythology, the poem in question is relevant in the fanciful claim Thornton makes in its final stanzas as being the descendant of an "antique stock of Asian kings", although no material evidence is ever presented to corroborate this assertion (see Lipkes 1999: 205–206 n.42). It was almost certainly this claim that had raised John Stuart Mill's ire, prompting him to remark in a letter to Harriet Taylor that there are "in [Thornton's] book many proofs of excessive, even ridiculous vanity, not much the better for being, as in his case it is, *disappointed* vanity" (Mill 1972, 14: 139–140).<sup>4</sup> Mill felt that his friend had been swayed by either self-delusion or self-aggrandisement, or both. Thornton almost certainly realised "the folly of ancestral pride" in claiming to be descended from "Zalzur's line" as when he refers in the poem's final stanzas to his "idle boast", "romantic vanity" and "wild imaginings" (44–45). Despite the critical reactions of Mill, Harriet Taylor and several other reviewers, the opening poem remains notable for being the only occasion on which Thornton publicly acknowledged the pride he felt in his mother's name.

*Zobrab* was not, however, the only poem in the collection to draw on personal events and experiences. When Thornton's eldest child, Ellen Aird, died in 1851 from consumption, Thornton presented an account of the tragedy in his first book of verse as a way of understanding his loss and living with memories of pain and grief. In doing so, he turned, naturally enough, to his undiminished Christian faith to contemplate the fragility of life and tragedy of early death (Thornton 1854a: 33). Moreover, these revelatory poems provide a corrective to the claim made by Lipkes (1999: 120) that Thornton's "private life nowhere intrudes upon his books and articles". In fact, these poems offer rare glimpses into his troubled state of mind amid the unfolding personal dramas of the 1850s.

"Stanzas Written in Kensal Green Cemetery" is a "very touching" piece, dedicated to the memory of his daughter, Ellen Aird.<sup>5</sup> Its composition was intended as a device of consolation capable of easing his feelings. Whenever the pain of bereavement surfaced, Thornton summoned the happy memories of playing, laughing and singing with his children, memories that formed the nurturing background between father and children. These images were part of the highly visible way Victorians fortified themselves against the dark "clouds of inward gloom" that threatened to unhinge them following the loss of their dearly departed (Thornton 1854a: 66). The following stanza strikes the note of a grieving father coping with the loss of a beloved daughter. He speaks thus:

Of my lost Ellen's greeting, when, with glee,  
 Like warbled wood-notes wildly musical,  
 She hailed my coming, tripping joyously  
 Across the lawn in answer to my call.

These lines, touching on Ellen directly, are infused with a sense of the vanished past. The loss is expressed with equal poignancy in the following:

My Ellen! in my bosom's worn recess  
 Still do affection's tendrils freshly twine  
 For still do children round their father press,  
 Claiming the share of love which once was thine.

Aside from its expression of sorrow and loss, the poem reveals that Thornton had turned to his faith for comfort and strength. For, in the midst of human sorrow, he said there was a lesson to be learned from the tragic death of a family member. Its timing and manner revealed the mysterious workings of God in the most awesome way and prepared other family members spiritually for the possibility of their own untimely departures. The following lines look upon death, not as an end, but rather as a gift of divine favour:

Thus early access to a loftier sphere,  
 And prompt enrolment in the white-robed band,  
 Who at their Sovereign's bidding speed, or near  
 His throne wait patiently their Lord's command.

The final consoling lines evoke Thornton's pilgrimage through the landscape of grief. His sombre "inward struggle" is slowly displaced by hope as the sustaining ideal of an afterlife provides the grieving father with a modicum of spiritual sustenance. Thornton never betrays signs of bitterness by the loss of his daughter, for he finds guarded hope in the prospect that she must be happier in Heaven. He envisions his daughter "asleep before heaven's opening gate" and contemplates an immutable life for a "willing soul" about to embark upon an eternal cosmic space walk. Faith in an afterlife offers a defence against decay and death (Lipkes 1999: 158).

### KEEPING THE FAITH

At the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign, few questioned the Bible's divine authorship or historical reliability (Chadwick 1970: 527). Yet, within a generation, the religious tide had turned and the foundations of revealed religion had come under threat, with startling energy, from a proliferation of sources—Darwinism, German biblical criticism, Spencerian sociology and so on—that jockeyed for status and influence within the Victorian marketplace for intellectual ideas (Brooke 1991: 193). Now, leading writers could openly profess scepticism without incurring profound suspicion—a remarkable cultural transformation over so short a historical time frame (Chadwick 1975: 37). Such religious wrangling within English society led some Victorians to abandon Christianity, while others

reaffirmed their commitment to it, while still others reinterpreted traditional Christian beliefs to serve their own purposes (Backhouse 2008).<sup>6</sup> Dissenters and believers roused each other in public and private with a host of well-rehearsed criticisms of their respective positions. The spectrum of religious belief was widened considerably during the second half of the nineteenth century (Mandler 2006: 179). For those Victorians who continued to embrace Christian doctrines, “there developed the greater earnestness in religion” that came to define the era. In Hoppen’s (1998: 427) estimate, “[n]ever was Britain more religious than in the Victorian age”, this despite the threats to Christianity posed by new scientific ideas.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the proliferation of religious doubters during the Victorian period, William Thornton remained a devout Christian who spent considerable time and energy in proving the existence of a benevolent and merciful God. During the formative stages of his literary career, the study of political economy remained firmly grounded in moral philosophy and theology (Hilton 1988). It was therefore not uncommon to find economic writers liberally weaving religious doctrines and biblical inferences into the fabric of works dealing primarily with outwardly non-religious subjects. Indeed, at this time, economic writers such as Thomas Malthus, Richard Whately, Thomas Chalmers and William Hearn fell back on what was known as an “argument for design”, which held that every aspect of nature was conclusive proof of the existence and omnipresence of the Creator.<sup>8</sup> They saw this not merely as providing an explanation of a divinely ordered world, but further believed that it held the key to unlocking the mysteries that lay behind certain contemporary economic events.

Given Thornton’s own lifelong devotion to God and Christian ideals, contemporary readers might expect to see theological statements woven into his economic writings. This was not the case, though. Although faint traces of Thornton’s religious outlook did surface occasionally in his economic writings, religious belief did not assume the same level of importance in shaping his views on political economy as it did other economists. He did, nevertheless, incorporate religious subjects into the three volumes of poetry he published during the 1850s.<sup>9</sup> Much of what Thornton wrote about religion in his poetry, however, prepared the ground for a conception of a supreme deity that was infinite in wisdom, unlimited in sympathy with mortal suffering and inseparable from humanity and nature.

Even though it became harder to believe in orthodox Christian teachings as the nineteenth century wore on, Thornton remained, throughout his entire life, deeply committed to his Christian faith and the unique

spiritual commune between God and Man. He conveyed the essence of his religious attitudes in a series of fourteen sonnets published in *Zohrab*, which embodied the twin ideas that the universe had a moral ordering and that a magnanimous God exists. As a dedicated theist who fervently believed that “Nature’s whole fabric” had been stitched together by a beneficent “Omnipresent Deity”, Thornton strove to convince his readers of a Supreme Force in the universe—not Chance—responsible for rousing “Chaos” from its “primeval trance”. The following opening stanzas elaborate:

Were this the Power mysterious, whose decree  
 Roused startled Chaos from primeval trance,  
 From kindling elemental variance  
 Evoking light and life and harmony;

And,

Were other guidance needless to direct  
 The orbs of Heaven, or more assiduous care  
 To tend the tribes of teeming earth and air,  
 Yet should we still the Atheist’s creed reject.

In the sonnets, Thornton also presented an argument for God’s existence that remained anchored to the laws of nature. Thornton set out to make a close and long-established connection between the laws of nature and “the workings of the Infinite”. It is indeed the case, as Lipkes (1999: 209 n.92) has pointed out, that the first two sonnets in the sequence are an “attempt to derive God’s existence from the laws of nature”, or, a Supreme Being whose laws had been implanted in nature. In fact, in several sonnets, the use of the word “law” or “lawgiver” is closely associated with the word “nature” in order to illustrate the conception of Providence that Thornton envisioned. In other words, the “proof” of or evidence for God’s existence could be found in nature. The union of the two, God and nature, was the fulcrum in which the truth would be reached. Reconciliation of the laws of nature with the existence of God, as Thornton had envisioned, came from the well-known idea that everything

in the universe was the inevitable result of a “set design”. Every adaptation and variation in nature, he argued, was proof of the salutary effects of a wise creator who performed benevolent deeds on behalf of humankind (Lipkes 1999: 123). What followed from this, naturally, was a description of how the whole human race had fallen under the resistless dominion of an “Omnipresent Deity”:

Desist from vain pursuit, for not on earth  
 Shall man discover happiness. Look round;  
 Try history’s light. Was ever mortal found  
 Who would not shrink from thought of second birth,  
 And of replacing life’s once-trodden ground?

For Thornton, the structure of the universe was God’s intentional design. If, however, nature was so constituted that its laws exposed large sections of the population to “life’s ceaseless evils” (86), then would this not lay down a direct challenge to God’s wisdom and goodness? Thornton did not accept this disputed point. It remained his contention that an individual must, “with patient fortitude” (92), carry out certain providential duties and obligations in this life before a “heavenly heritage” could be underwritten in the next. Displays of heavenly veneration, which implied worship and obedience to a supreme being, were a core constitutive element inhabiting every human life. For a theist like Thornton, belief in an omniscient God was consistent with a mechanistic view of a universe in which human beings were a mere reflection of “the will of God producing certain effects in a constant and uniform manner” (Thornton 1854a: 86, 87, 99). Despite a providential order in nature that seemed to consign humanity to such a gloomy fate, Thornton went to considerable lengths to construct an imaginative explanation for man’s “life-long penance” (86, 87).

This explanation began with an assertion that the true order of the universe had been created by a beneficent, mysterious God who is “present everywhere, is ever nigh,/Attentive to His meanest creature’s cry” (83). The premise that God was ubiquitous and always acting for the goodwill of humankind “on earth, e’en as in Heaven” (93) had been a feature of nineteenth-century natural theology discourse, where every aspect of human life is subject to God’s justice as well as his order. Human affairs

were ordained by a magnanimous and supreme designer who had created both physical and moral laws to govern all men. The whole basis of society rested on God's moral law, eternal, immutable and omnipresent. God expected all men to conform to these moral laws and to perform certain obligations and duties that were enforced by the expectation of rewards and punishments in an afterlife.

Even though "a kindly Providence" was the source of universal physical and moral laws that imposed an order on nature and society, this alone did not preclude some members of society from transgressing God's moral standard and being led astray by the perennial presence of evil. Thornton warned his readers to stand guard against temptation lest they fall under the sway of "Hell's malignant brood" in the cosmic "feud" between "Good and Evil . . . , truth and solace" (89). The notion that man could be coerced unwittingly into violating God's moral laws is reiterated in several sonnets, of which the following is a representative sample:

Of Good and Evil, Zoroaster taught,  
Twin sharers in omnipotence, whose feud  
Pervades a world, by either unsubdued.

At this point, Thornton appears to shift ground a little from a critical rendering of the existence and attributes of God as revealed in nature to the matter of the duties and responsibilities that each person could reasonably be expected to perform "in that great conflict . . . against the powers of darkness". This perception of divine intervention in human affairs pointed towards the need for personal abasement and humility before God. For only those who serve "the Supreme" can take comfort in the knowledge that they will "ascend to Him who reigns in glory there [Heaven]" (83, 90). For those who neglect their earthly duties, fail to satisfy the dictates of Christian behaviour or refuse to atone for past sins, the punishment was a special visitation from an angry providence.

Although Thornton's views on divine providence were more benign than that of many religious, especially evangelical, commentators, his message of retribution still offered an austere view of life in which human beings exist in a precarious state of discipline, trial and probation, with the ultimate arbiter in this trade-off between reward and punishment being the threat of divine sanction. This line of thought led, naturally enough, to a belief in the afterlife. The promise of eternal salvation—or eternal

damnation—was the force motivating people to act in a manner consistent with Christian teachings. Thornton, well aware of the self-sacrificing nature of this providential order, was eager to ease the transition from life to afterlife. In view of this, he firmly believed that those who had sacrificed earthly happiness in the cause of extending “God’s pure dominion” (90) would ultimately ascend “[t]o loftier sphere—ah! If permitted there/ [i]n service, such as angels yield, to share!” (92). God meant man to act in accordance with an immutable moral code that was enforced by holding out rewards and punishments in an afterlife. The spiritual struggle of man throughout life never goes unnoticed, however. Because those who “do God’s service”, Thornton says, are providentially rewarded with “a heavenly heritage”—“[f]or never labour in the Lord was vain” (91, 94).

One of the titular poems from Thornton’s third volume of poetry, *Modern Manicheism, Labour’s Utopia, and Other Poems*, revisited the question of God’s existence and the nature of good and evil in an era where the forces of urbanization and industrialization were profoundly altering the social fabric. Thornton was deeply attracted to a form of Manichaeism, as highlighted by an anonymous reviewer of *Zohrab* who first brought Thornton’s “Persian leanings” to the public’s notice (see *Calcutta Review* 1854, 23: xxiii).<sup>10</sup> By blending orthodox Christian beliefs with an enthusiasm for Manichaeism, Thornton was betraying his apparent inclination towards a form of theological dualism.<sup>11</sup> This dualism set the tone for *Modern Manicheism*, which tells of a visitation from an “inspiring voice” (27) bringing with it the “gospel tidings” (5) of a “Bactrian sage”. The voice or messenger informs its audience that God would reward all those who subdued those passions and pursued those duties and obligations as were consistent with “earning on earth a heavenly heritage” (10). The search for human redemption was calculated to focus attention on the “unchecked beneficence” of an “[a]ll-strengthening, all-sustaining Deity” (7), foster values common to all of humankind and embolden the resolve of the moral agent in the inner struggle between virtuous actions and “moral lethargy” (14).

Such actions were tempered, however, by the manoeuvrings of the Devil who exercised malignant power. Although, for Thornton, the question of God’s existence, like that of God’s benevolence and omniscience, remained beyond dispute, the presence of such a formidable adversary as the Devil who wielded considerable power in the cosmic struggle between good and evil presented an inescapable challenge for “creatures of a fragile race” (10). God, working alone, is not powerful enough to

“overcome evil with good labours” (21). God’s strength is wanting: he is not the “sole wielder of omnipotence” (24). But, asks the voice, will readers be disheartened by the realization that God “rules not supreme with unresisted sway?” (24). Here, the voice suggests that the prospect of foiling the desperate attempts of the Devil to spread evil throughout the world should not be cause for despair, but rather, be seen as a prospect that should impart “a thrill of joy” (24).

The voice then urges all creatures to “do God service” by engaging “in that dread feud ... which faithful angels and archangels wage against the powers of darkness” (25). Man could be freed from the clutches of “galling tyranny” (23) and led back to God again through the separation of light (good) and darkness (evil). Indeed, Thornton argued, along Manichean lines, that the present age represented but a “probationary stage” (10) in the universal struggle between the followers of good and the forces of evil for ultimate control of the cosmos. Eventually, God’s “mightier providence” will prevail in “that great conflict” and culminate in “one kingdom which shall have no end” (25), securing, in the process, the sovereignty of the earth and the heavens. *Modern Manicheism* contains the key to unlocking the religious dictates and theological affiliations of its author and concentrates the Thornton family’s long association with the mystical and alluring landscape of Persia where several generations of peripatetic Thorntons, imaginary or otherwise, left their mark.

### PASTORAL MEDITATIONS

Like others interested in the great public policy questions of the day, Thornton held the view that poetry constituted a legitimate avenue through which key economic and social reforms could be championed. During the early Victorian period, a considerable number of notable prose writers and poets began taking a more serious interest in the worsening conditions of rural communities. William Wordsworth, Benjamin Disraeli, Thomas Carlyle, Mrs. Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë and Charles Kingsley, among other literary champions, published essays, poems and novels that sought not merely to entertain their readership, but awaken them to the often harsh and brutish reality of life in the English countryside. These provocative responses highlighting the contemporary situation for small farmers and peasants were often contrasted with an earlier agrarian epoch in which the country-dweller’s lot was characterized by dignity and harmony with the world around him. Thornton was clearly influenced, in

separate ways, by the nostalgia embedded in works penned by these writers who, on the one hand, saluted Britain's new industrial order, and yet, on the other hand, lamented the demise of England's rural traditions amid the relentless march of the industrial state.<sup>12</sup>

The stamp of nostalgia that imbued Thornton's agrarian verse drew upon, but did not belong to, the Romantic tradition. He drew inspiration from the discovery of romantic illusions in William Wordsworth's rustic poems with their unabashedly sentimental evocation of provincial life and the rural mores it typified. In fact, an anonymous reviewer for the *Athenaeum* (1854 March 4 274) astutely pointed out that "there is much of Wordsworth's dryer manner and more metaphysical and less vivid thought in the following [verses] by our author." Thornton's attempt to embed his own pastoral verse within an older, Romantic tradition along Wordsworthian lines involved combining the radical ideas of his generation with the idealized vision of rural England that proved so attractive to many nineteenth-century reformers. These works combined elegiac descriptions of a vanishing way of life with idyllic rural landscapes threatened by nineteenth-century industrial progress. Village life became something of an ideal, timeless refuge where humanity survives in its unspoiled state and agrarian pursuits nourish the celebrated Victorian virtues of self-reliance, duty and perseverance that strengthen the character of individuals. This nostalgia for the simple virtues of the English countryside that Thornton (and other reformers) advocated stood in stark contrast to the atomistic and unsentimental ethos that characterized the industrial revolution in Britain (Hilton 1988: 126). Thornton's pastoral verse, then, constituted an unambiguous challenge to the idea of economic progress in early Victorian England, a challenge that aligns his poetic work with "the heterogeneous elements in English Romanticism" that reached its apogee in the poems written by William Wordsworth (Madden 1963: 70). This strain of agrarian romanticism has been summarized in the following terms:

The Romantic poets may have looked to the countryside for imitations of the sublime, and for the opportunity to discover their own souls through communion with nature, but for more and more moralists the countryside was coming to seem a mere retreat from, and an antidote to, the "real" life of the cities. (Hilton 1988: 142)

With its unmistakable resonances of imaginative lyricism and poetic myth, Thornton's pastoral verse provided a particularly rich context for

the sentimental treatment of England's displaced yeomanry whose virtues were extolled within the Romantic tradition. Thornton's admiration (like Mill's) for the small independent farmer or yeoman stemmed from his belief in small-scale farming as invaluable in promoting moral qualities, in particular, the virtuous (to his mind) habits of conduct (such as self-reliance and strengthening of character) that would ultimately raise the aspirations of the labouring classes. The yeomanry, a tiny heroic class whose "golden age" had reached its apogee in England during the Elizabethan Age, constituted the ideal social type, the custodian of a simple, practical and dignified rural morality. For Thornton, this older, unruffled tradition offered the most decisive solution for the rejuvenation of the rural economy. Thornton's use of the poetic medium to propose remedies for rural overpopulation and impoverishment represented a distinctive moral response that involved an idealization of "peasant proprietors" or "yeoman". Eulogized as "the honour and strength of England", this valedictory image of the yeomanry as the bastion of innocent happiness, living in peace and simplicity far removed from the taint of the modern machine age characterized by excess and ambition, would continue to haunt the Victorian literary imagination. As yeoman culture fell into decline, so the image of the yeomanry grew in stature. Bathed in nostalgia, the yeoman became a heroic figure embodying the virtues closely associated with the British martial tradition—duty, independence, resilience and hard work. Here, the attractions of reverting to a rural idyll centred on an independent yeomanry was united with the kind of self-improving virtues such as resilience and courage that were capable of underwriting economic prosperity and political stability. But, over time, industrialization and urbanization, seemingly relentless forces, had awakened new material needs and desires that had gradually reinforced the demise of the countryside and the splintering of rural communities.

The displacement of old agricultural England permeated both Thornton's his early prose writings and poetic compilations. In the penultimate poem in *Zohrab*, "The Cottage Allotment; an English Pastoral", Thornton utilized a well-known device in romantic poetry—the conversation—to demonstrate the precarious nature of the agrarian revolution, which altered the rural ways of life that had subsisted for centuries. The poem is a lament for a lost rural vision of "Old England". In it, two farmers—Smith and Johnson—hold a conversation about the risks and struggles of tenant farming in rural England.<sup>13</sup> Johnson, much to Smith's consternation, is fortunate enough to lease farmland from

“a good landlord”. Like many other tenant farmers, Smith has been dispossessed of his farm and is going into exile. Separation and exile was the product of an agrarian revolution in which commercial farms on large estates were rapidly displacing the traditional culture of the rural peasantry. With its overtones of alienation, Smith bemoans the fact that many farmers and their families have had little choice but to emigrate to the United States in search of a better life, while others contemplate an “escape” to “New Zealand’s lonely isles”. “We, forced from home, these much-loved fields forsake,/Soon, of Old England, too, our leave must take” (Thornton 1854a: 114). What is striking about Thornton’s pastoral verse is the preoccupation with the idea of rural simplicity at the moment when Britain was assuming the mantle as the world’s unrivalled industrial power. For many social reformers, the stark differences in living standards faced by England’s rural workers highlighted one of the failings of the new commercial expansion—it often did not filter down to the downtrodden stratum of society. In this case, the poem is cleverly employed as a device to capture, through the conversation between Smith and Johnson, the economic predicament of the tenant farmer caught between an older way of life and the spread of new commercial values.

In the final stanza, Johnson offers Smith a nourishing home-cooked meal and a night’s “shelter” before Smith resumes his aimless journey in the morning. Johnson can afford to offer Smith such hospitality because, having been allowed to retain a respectable share of the output of the land, he enjoys a comfortable living from farming.<sup>14</sup> This final act of kindness on Johnson’s part is central to Thornton’s vision of a rural community based, above all else, on cooperation and mutual respect between landlord and farmer.<sup>15</sup> He makes the contrast all the more poignant by showing what country life *could* be like if only the kindness extended by Johnson to Smith prevailed more widely throughout England’s rural regions. Thornton, for one, saw many of the values discarded by modern society embodied in the inherent goodness of country life. Its potential to transform the lives of Britain’s urban poor by ameliorating overcrowding, improving sanitation and softening the competitive, entrepreneurial factory spirit that defined the early-to-mid-Victorian period exemplified the contradictory impulses of the period. The pastoral innocence of the poem, a far cry from the commercial activities of the East India Company that absorbed Thornton’s daily attention, celebrated the special quality of life in the countryside led far from the harsher and more competitive

industrial world of mid-Victorian England. Striking a balance between the need for practical reform (to bring better housing, education and employment opportunities) and nostalgia for wholesome provincial living preoccupied Victorian reformers. The pastoral verse Thornton published in the 1850s as a literary device aimed at extolling the virtues of a bygone agrarian age unfettered by the contrivances of modernity serves to highlight, once again, the different yet impressive ways in which Victorian reformers responded to the momentous challenges of the day.

In the spring of 1856, Thornton fell seriously ill and was ordered to take an extended period of leave from India House until such time as his health had been restored (Donoghue 2004a). During this period of convalescence, Thornton utilized it wisely by composing new poems with energy and determination. This culminated, in 1857, in a third and final collection of poems: *Modern Manicheism, Labour's Utopia, and Other Poems*. This final volume of poetry offered some mature reflections on Thornton's mid-century poetic interlude that perhaps recalled his childhood in the Buckinghamshire countryside. Thornton knew, of course, that the serene and sentimental montages depicted in his poems were out of step with the reality of rural life—stark, desperate and unsentimental. So, naturally, he felt chastened when he ran afoul of Charles Kingsley, who sneered at the pastoral tradition by highlighting in his own brooding fictional accounts the stark realities of human life in many poverty-stricken rural and urban districts of the British Isles. In “To the Author of Alton Locke”, Thornton (1857: 28) consoles himself in the knowledge that his own portrayal of a fading pastoral world verges on Kingsley's own: “Rightly or Wrongly, Kingsley, I believe/ You did me evil turn,—with bitter phrase/ Pouring contempt, where not uncordial praise/ From you had seemlier been.”<sup>16</sup> In the poem, Thornton seems willing to make a number of concessions to Kingsley, even as his perspective remained firmly anchored to the sentimental montages of English rural life. Another poem in the collection returns to the narrative of nostalgia where Thornton presents an idealized pastoral society and extols the virtues of English provincial life, while frowning upon the commercial activities of the towns. The poem in question, “Labour's Utopia”, is a wistful reminiscence of a golden age when the yeoman, not the merchant, was considered the social ideal. Here again, “the noble yeomanry” is celebrated as the living embodiment of the virtues of English provincial life. The unequal economic relationship depicted between the farmer and tenant is contrasted with an earlier age in which the independent yeoman thrived, with his

family, in a beneficent and harmonious rural society (see Lipkes 1999: 118, for further comment). Revisiting themes that were central to his prose narratives, Thornton eulogized idealized rural felicity and lamented the growing importance of the town as against the province in English life. Thornton's patent utopian vision is an attempt to project his earlier proposal to resettle Irish pauper families on reclaimed wasteland onto an idealized vision of the future. Whatever the technical merits or otherwise of Thornton's pastoral verse, there is little denying that it belongs to a unique Victorian literary tradition providing a vital link between past and present forms of English rural life (Jackson 1980: 18–24).

Overall, a quiet lament informs the carefully modulated stanzas of Thornton's pastoral verse in which the focus of attention is backward in the direction of a sheltered, self-enclosed and highly ritualistic, but by his time, fading rural civilization, an image redolent with loss. There is anger and frustration percolating just beneath the surface of these stanzas, borne out of the irrevocable constriction of contemporary provincial life, itself the result of the inexorable transformation of English society that accompanied the nineteenth-century scientific and industrial revolution that transformed Britain into the first industrialized nation the world had seen. Industrialization and the development of urban centres had eroded these peaceful rural enclaves. The picture of humble rural life that Thornton envisioned was combined with a preference for a type of Christian yeoman or noble peasant farmer rather than the wealthy aristocratic scion who dominated the English farming system. This man of action embodied the virtues of Christian morality, dignity and health, both physical and spiritual which, to his mind, came from the varied, yet simple, activities and sense of community and continuity that crowned English rural life. This also explains why the increase in labour-saving farming implements and contrivances did not commend themselves to Thornton, who believed that such articles would, ultimately, undermine character-building traits such as self-reliance, physical exertion and responsibility. This allegiance to an older wisdom was a common refrain in Thornton's prose and poetry.

### MYTHS AND LEGENDS

Throughout his life, William Thornton maintained a strong interest in the romantic conception and treatment of classical, medieval and Levantine myths and legends. Many of his poems combine classical subjects with patriotic and liberal themes. It was, in fact, a favourite stratagem of

Victorians to harness mythical symbols and figures from the past to frame key public issues of the day (Blanning 2010: 158). While Thornton never made it clear, in either his published or unpublished writings, where his own passion came from, it seems reasonable to suppose that his initial interest had been aroused as a schoolboy at the Moravian establishment in Derbyshire where the curriculum would have included a solid grounding in the study of the classical authors. Afterwards, this interest might have been nurtured during his youthful sojourn in the Levant. For it is clear from a letter he wrote to his Aunt Moore from Constantinople, which referred to various aspects of Greek art, life and myth, that he had, by then, already familiarized himself with the outlines of classical civilization (see Donoghue 2008). Upon returning to London in the mid-1830s, he may have resumed his classical studies, supplementing it, of course, by reading English Romantic literature that had largely been responsible for the Hellenic revival in the early nineteenth century (Louis 2005). The other main line of influence was, of course, John Stuart Mill and George Grote, both of whom possessed vast stores of knowledge of the symbolism of classical mythology.<sup>17</sup>

Myths have always been an integral part of human consciousness. Throughout the Victorian period, their chief appeal lay in the insights they afforded into an otherwise unknowable and unreachable past. Indeed, the persistence of myths in Victorian literary narratives focused attention “more sharply than ever before upon myths as the forerunners of modern ways of thinking, and probably encouraged the belief that even the strange and often barbarous notions of primitive men might have played a part in intellectual development” (Burstein 1975: 312). In short, the study of myths helped to delineate the stages through which human language and thought had evolved. This attitude towards myth highlighted the way in which the moral, historical and cultural dimensions of ancient societies persisted in the Victorian mind, providing valuable lessons for a contemporary society in the midst of momentous shifts in social, material and spiritual practices. Even though many Victorians regarded myths as misrepresentations of authentic history, reflecting nothing more than the speculative extensions of primitive societies, the study of primitive folklore had the power to illuminate and sustain the sacred narratives of history by generating a complex and culturally rich reservoir of ideas that could act as guides to human nature and behaviour in the present. In fact, the idea that myths were capable of enlivening rather than diminishing the historical narrative remained so potent throughout the nineteenth

century that its leading “researchers recognised myth as an intellectual activity that encompassed most functions of the modern mind” (Burstein 1975: 315). “The study of mythology had become dominated by a desire to see in myths a flowering of human imagination rather than to reduce them to some primitive misconception or some primeval truth” (Kissane 1962: 13). William Thornton, for one, had nothing but praise for the insights that ancient, medieval and Near Eastern myths and legends had bequeathed to future generations.

Despite renewed interest in the study of myths and legends during the nineteenth century, particularly in the emerging professional field of anthropology, there remained considerable controversy around the use of mythical subjects in poetic works. This friction arose from the fact that myths, as creations of human imagination, were capable of distorting past events, often deliberately so. For many Victorian writers, myths were incompatible with the values and attitudes of the times because they had no basis in actual historical events (Kissane 1962: 21–22). Some commentators, however, took a more pragmatic line. Despite being concerned about the historical misrepresentations found in myths and folk tales, writers such as Shelley, Hunt and Keats felt that myths and legends were a legitimate subject for use in poetry because both were seen as art forms that drew upon imaginative feelings and impulses.<sup>18</sup> As Louis (2005: 331) observed, the “profound connection of myth with literature, and especially with poetry”, persisted throughout the nineteenth century, and beyond. Thornton also took the view that the poetic idiom was a highly suitable narrative vehicle for the subject matter of mythology. The key issue for Thornton was whether the mythic and metaphysical creations of primitive minds had enduring, pedagogical value. In its highest artistic form, a myth was but a form of literary device intended to impart important moral lessons from one civilization to another, all the while undergoing a series of modifications in response to the ongoing expansion and refinement of human knowledge. For Thornton, the attraction of myth lay in its ability to harness earlier human experiences that embodied important truths for his own society. As a result, he deeply regretted the passing of the mythic realm not least because it heralded the loss of a rich repository of human experience. John Addington Symonds (1890: 313) lent this view support when he wrote:

Our artists, whether poets, painters, or musicians, are therefore right to employ the legends of past ages for the expression of thoughts and emotions

belonging to the present. If used with true imaginative insight, there is no cause to fear lest the strain of modern adaptation should destroy the mystic beauty of the antique form. Myths, by reason of their symbolic pregnancy and spontaneity of origin, are everlastingly elastic.

*Modern Manicheism, Labour's Utopia, and Other Poems* (1857) underscores Thornton's enthusiasm for myths and legends. "Merlin's Cave" and "Lancelot Du Lac", for example, follow the exploits of two favourite Arthurian characters. Besides the element of fantasy, the central theme of these poems is national redemption through a rejuvenating patriotic spirit in which the metaphor of the fallen hero is used to awaken the British people to the threat of an invasion from France or to rally the nation behind soldiers fighting in the Crimea. The identification of such patriotic agendas with the cult of Arthurian figures such as Merlin and Lancelot was rooted in the Victorian enthusiasm for an ancient wisdom and older, stable political order. In summoning an ancient chivalric posture in the anticipated rejuvenation of Britain's contemporary political and social situation, Thornton uses the power and resonance of patriotic language to lift a sagging national spirit by recalling the exemplary lives of Arthurian characters for emulation in the present. Each struggle tested the nation's commitment to its liberal order which, in turn, helped to forge a collective identity around common liberal values. Now, as French territorial ambitions and militarism threatened once more to "ambush" this order, these national heroes were harnessed in rousing a patriotic spirit against malign forces threatening to blunt Britain's distinctive national character and liberal polity.

Likewise, Thornton uses "Ode to the Emperor Louis Napoleon" as a vehicle to stir patriotic feelings. In Thornton's time, the name Napoleon stood in common parlance for a particular kind of French political authoritarianism. When Louis Napoleon seized power, in 1851, in a *coup d'état* and became a dictator in what had seemed to be a liberal age in France, the fear of the rebirth of "Bonapartism" took a peculiar hold on the British imagination: on the one hand, venerated as "the Great Prince", but on the other, denounced as a despot for "trampling down freedom with imperial heel".<sup>19</sup> The poem's hectoring tone reflected a wider concern with the forces of French despotism seen as posing a genuine threat to the ideal of a British liberal polity. In other words, the poem characterizes French despotism as symptomatic of a moral affliction that threatened Britain if its own citizens lost sight of their basic heritage and traditional liberties.

Britain's struggle to uphold its traditional freedoms may be likened to the cosmic (Manichean) clash between good (British liberty) and evil (French autocratic habits). God was calling on Britain, as the guardian of liberal polities, to fulfil its moral charter. If, however, Britain failed to defend such liberties, it also ran the risk of being singled out for a divine punishment just as the French had been. As such, Thornton conceived of myths as unifying symbols essential in framing a collective identity that could insulate Britain from the kind of political and social tumult that, at mid-century, was buffeting its ancient nemesis, France.<sup>20</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Thornton's poems were meditations on religious, economic, political and social issues of the day. They offered simple but telling glimpses of human experience, drawn from incidents that were understood to be taken from the ebb and flow of daily life. Thornton's own brand of popular verse dwelt upon a host of problems and experiences in the real world that repeatedly brush against the commitments and convictions of the romantic poets who pioneered a different way of living and thinking about the world around them. Indeed, at first glance, it could be said that Thornton's verse remained anchored to Romantic impulses and ideals. However, his thinly veiled references to the leading romantics cannot disguise the fact that their work never had much purchase on his poetry, which lacks the sense of unattainable remoteness and loneliness of the Romantic poet whose lofty imagination takes them to a vision greater than that of society as a whole. While the Romantic poet dreads too close an involvement in society because it might rob him of his vision, the core constitutive elements in Thornton's poetry remain anchored to those cherished Victorian values such as self-reliance, duty and industry closely associated with Victorian reformers.

Even if many of Thornton's poems did catch the romantic nuances of the mid-century, their broad thrust was entirely consistent with his stance as a middle-class reformer offering a vivid, often stark, contrast between an actual (desolate) present and an ideal (but forlorn) past. For Thornton, the image that crystallized this lost tradition was the idealized vision of rural England that had been broken in the age of mechanization. Few causes stirred him more. Several of Thornton's poems exhibited an enhanced appreciation of traditions and old-fashioned customs. As such, they illustrate the shift in emphasis from being content

with urban civilization to a sentimental yearning for simple pastoral communities of the late Middle Ages. Poems such as “Labour’s Utopia” encapsulate bucolic images mourning “buried memories” or the past that can no longer be retrieved. In attempting to explain this transformation, Thornton presented these bygone rural wildernesses as a type of ideal pastoral world in which humanity survives in its unspoiled state. Underlying this vision of an idyll inheritance was a very nineteenth-century agenda that sought to preserve those celebrated Victorian virtues—duty, independence and hardwork—that epitomized human nature in its most pure and ideal form. As a result, Thornton’s pastoral narratives remain capable of interpretation only when viewed through the prism of the mid-nineteenth-century reform movement.

Another facet of Victorian intellectual life that remained a contested terrain was religion. Throughout his life, Thornton remained deeply interested in the subject of religious belief, the existence of God and the unique spiritual congress between man and nature. In an age in which spiritual certainty often fell victim to spiritual insecurity, Thornton remained a devout Christian, who found in nature, a revelation of God. Religious belief of some kind, he thought, was socially necessary or valuable. Nowhere is his devotion so tellingly revealed as in the pietistic sonnets he composed. In fact, the poetic idiom was considered an ideal vehicle through which to demonstrate the existence of a Supreme Designer as the unfailing source of the natural order. Thornton’s strong religious beliefs were understood by friends and colleagues. John Stuart Mill, who experienced a form of religious conversion in later years, commented on his protégé’s religiosity (Lipkes 1999: 152–154) in a letter to Florence Nightingale, dated 23 September 1860: “I know one man of great intelligence & high moral principle, who finds satisfaction to his devotional feelings, and support under the evils of life, in the belief of this creed” (Mill 1972, 15: 709).<sup>21</sup> Thornton envisions a supreme God who was neither detached from nor unsympathetic towards the trials and sufferings of his earthly flock. This expression of God’s benevolence marked Thornton off as an earnest preacher whose inclusive ministrations to all creatures stressed God’s redeeming and restorative qualities even as religious dissent posed so potent a challenge to Christian teachings throughout the Victorian era. Overall, Thornton’s religious faith and beliefs were grounded in optimistic and sometimes fanciful ideas about human society and the possibility of its improvement.

The defining element of Thornton's poetry is ever his own intense personal experiences as a grieving father, a husband, a friend and a political pundit on a host of pressing public questions of the day. His poetry is used to record the reaction of wrenching emotional experiences of love and loss that set in motion a quest for answers to the nature of the world around him. Of all his writings, it was only in poetry that Thornton made private allusions, and accordingly, it remains the sole literary source of information pertaining to his family and ancestry. Amid his small joys and personal tragedies, there also lurks compelling evidence of his deep sense of pride in his family name and heritage. The literary manoeuvres he made and social boundaries he pushed to render his family respectable for Victorian times further attest to the depth of his attachment to his maternal lineage. What is particularly striking, given the fraught status of interracial marriages at mid-century, is his decision to defy deeply ingrained social conventions by publicly underlining his Persian background. His decision not to conceal his Persian inheritance was intrinsic to his sense of personal identity as man, poet and reformer. His heritage served to mediate his life experiences to the point where he tried, with mixed results, to live out his ideas and ideals in his prose and poetical works. Even though readers of his poetry may cavil, as Mill did, at some of the fictional burnishing they contained, there cannot be any mistaking that they remain the nearest he ever came to the act of writing a personal memoir, and so, constitute an invaluable series of poignant biographical vignettes that admit its readers into an intimate family circle.

It cannot, for all this, be argued that Thornton belonged to the front rank of Victorian poets. Inevitably, he found himself more often than not having to read discouraging reviews. Apart from a few respectful notices of *Zohrab* and a handful of mixed reviews of *The Siege of Silistria: a Poem* and *Modern Manicheism, Labour's Utopia, and other poems* (1857), the denizens of London's highly stratified literary landscape registered little interest in Thornton's poetic compositions. Even his closest admirers who championed his work refrained from setting him down as a talented poet: John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, it will be recalled, had cause to reprimand Thornton for an inferior poetical performance that threatened to jeopardize his reputation as an emerging prose writer. Likewise, Donovan Williams (1983: 82, 417) opined that "Thornton's competence as an [India Office] Departmental Secretary, which was considerable, should not be judged by the quality of his verse." This "tall amiable Longfellow", remarked Williams with wry amusement, "dabbled in poetry" and was

counted as one among a colourful cast of “Victorian penny-in-the-slot poets” in the India Office. Thornton (1857: 1) had, in fact, realized his failure to make a breakthrough when he admitted in the preface to his final collection that “seldom would any straggler halt to listen to his song”. Even though Thornton’s poetical works never raised his profile as either a serious writer or unique literary talent, they did grasp many of the prevailing social attitudes and political nuances of the period (Lipkes 1999: 118). Like so many of his contemporaries who so stridently demanded social, political and economic reform, Thornton believed that the idiom of poetry could serve as a platform blending the real tangible world of social and political change with the creative world of imagination, dreams and phantasms. This amalgam found expression in his elegiac forewarnings of a vanishing way of life, where idyllic rural landscapes were fading away amidst nineteenth-century industrial progress. His pastoral verses, which may seem to unduly romanticize English provincial life, were a case in point. Thornton’s intention here was always to stir public opinion on the dilemmas of the day. He thus bestowed upon himself the role, customarily preserved for the middle-class reformer, of the poet-pundit who struck a nerve in the social conscience of the age. Altogether, Thornton’s poetical compositions provide arresting insights into his personal priorities and motivations—Nation, patriotism, family, marriage, friends, faith, duty, work—these being the “sacred symbols” of the “chattering classes” around which their moral and temporal world revolved.

## NOTES

1. Francis Bowen (1811–1890), Harvard Professor of Moral Philosophy and Natural Religion, once described Thornton as “the ingenious & well-informed author of *Overpopulation and Its Remedy*” (Bowen 1849: ix). Thornton (1854a: 95–99) returned the compliment in his first book of verse, including Bowen among “the very first rank of metaphysical writers”.
2. Edward Zohrab was the eldest son of Constantine Zohrab, Sophie Zohrab’s brother. Edward worked for both the Ottoman government in London and for the British government in Tblisi (in present-day Georgia).
3. Following the conventions of the day, the names of the reviewers of Thornton’s poetical works were withheld. Nor does the *Wellesley Index* identify the authors of reviews published in Victorian journals.
4. Thornton claimed that Mill had “approved my first work, and encouraged this” (Thornton 1854a: 132).

5. Ellen Aird Thornton was buried in Kensal Green Cemetery in North London.
6. Recently, Larsen (2007) has made an interesting study of another class of Victorian intellectuals who, having lost their faith, subsequently lost faith in their doubts and reconverted to one or another form of Christianity.
7. This trend, as Medema (2008: 190) correctly notes, “was merely an artefact of increasing population rather than increased religiosity”. In short, while the absolute number of Victorians attending church was rising, the total proportion of Victorians attending religious services was, in fact, declining.
8. The classic statement of argument for design is William Paley’s *Natural Theology* published in 1802. For a discussion of the significance of Paley’s argument in the writings of Chalmers and Whately, among others, see Hilton (1988: 49–55, 115–125). For a perceptive account of the way in which Whately’s economic thought was “intimately bound up with his theology”, see Vance (2000: 181–202). For the view that William Hearn integrated the argument for design into his economic narratives, see Moore (2009: 18–19).
9. Religious subjects did, however, endure in Thornton’s philosophical writings of the 1860s and 1870s (see Chap. 8).
10. Members of Thornton’s mother’s family were followers of Zoroastrianism (see Lipkes, 1999: 116–117, 208 n. 84). Zoroastrianism was the state religion of the Persian empire until the Muslim invasion in the seventh century.
11. Manichean doctrine embraces a concept of dualism in which the principles of goodness (light) and evil (darkness) battle for ultimate control of the universe. These two poles are presented in three distinct phases: past, present and future. In the first “golden” age, the forces of good and evil are separate from each other and do not co-mingle. The second “middle” stage is characterized by the forces of darkness attempting to invade and dominate the “great light”, which attempts to drive back, enter, and ultimately, drive out the darkness. The darkness, which is ubiquitous, can only be defeated by knowledge (gnosis), which in turn, leads to salvation through, once more, the separation of lightness and darkness. This separation is completed, after a lengthy and destructive struggle, in the third and final phase.
12. On the changing status of nostalgia in nineteenth-century novels and poetry, see Austin (2007).
13. The poem is in imitation of Virgil’s first eclogue.
14. In this context, the tenant farmer, who is entitled to a “fair” share of the product of the farm, acts as a bridge between the pastoral world of the displaced farm labourer and that of the yeoman or peasant proprietor farming their own land.

15. In his later writings on industrial relations, Thornton further explored the nature of cooperation in industrialized societies (see Chap. 6).
16. The nature of the slight, if any, has not been uncovered.
17. In 1873, Thornton recalled that he, Grote and Mill would meet in Mill's India House office where their talk would turn naturally enough to the subject of classical mythology and poetry. In "Lines Written during a Perusal of Grote's History of Greece", Thornton (1857) acknowledged his intellectual debt to the "great historian's potent tones".
18. This transition had much to do with the development of human language and mental habits as these, over time, tended to alter man's perception of the surrounding world in important ways (see Burstein 1975: 319).
19. It is interesting to contrast the prevailing (and hence, orthodox) view of Thornton with that of his contemporary, Walter Bagehot, the "practical economist", who "excused Napoleon's dictatorial excesses ... by expounding the belief that parliamentary government and liberty are secondary to the preservation of the social fabric of society" (Moore 1996: 237).
20. Another striking feature of Thornton's poetic language, particularly in relation to his patriotic verses, is the plasticity of its language. It was not unusual, as Colley (2009: xxv) notes, to observe that, "in periods of crisis and strain, references and appeals to things British [rather than English] quickly resurfaced". "This was the case for instance during the French invasion scare of 1852" (ibid).
21. It has even been suggested that Mill's "last forays into theology" were inspired by "the salutary effect of a belief in (Thorntonian) Manicheism" which, in turn, "seems to have drawn Mill to his rosy [i.e. optimistic] beliefs after Harriet Taylor's death" (Lipkes 1999: 153-154, 158).

## An Awkward Equilibrium

*The one living writer whose abilities and acquirements I feel high respect.*

—J. E. Cairnes on W. T. Thornton (1874)

### INTRODUCTION

Jessie Fothergill's novel, *Healey, a Romance* (1875), is set against a background of "strikes and industrial action" in a small fictional mill community in the north of England. In it, Fothergill explores "some of the moral, social and literary dilemmas of her time" (Debenham 2004: 68). Chief among the social problems Fothergill identified was the encroachment of the new industrial order on English provincial life. Indeed, her interest in and understanding of industrialism was strongly motivated by the transformation of northern England from a patriarchal-agrarian order into a society shaped by the commercial ethos of the city. In framing her account of the new economic and social order that would emerge from the clash between "city and country", Fothergill consulted a number of key works on the harshness of the machine age, foremost among which was William Thornton's (1869b) book, *On Labour: Its Wrongful Claims and Rightful Dues, Its Actual Present and Possible Future*, a testament to its popularity and influence at the time.<sup>1</sup>

The publication of *On Labour* stamped Thornton's credentials as "an authority in economics" (quoted in Mirowski 2004: 312). In it, he proposed a remedy for resolving class disputes between capital and labour in

Britain's industrial economy and a vision of a future industrial society that harked back to the simple pastoral communities that Thornton had championed in earlier works—a reimagining of a golden past where relations between capital and labour were mutually beneficial and harmonious. *On Labour* is now rightly regarded as a key transitional text in the emergence of neoclassical economics, due mainly to its uncompromising attack on the classical theories of value and wages. However, its contemporary impact reached far beyond the immediate context of the critique of the classical doctrines. In fact, the most significant outcome Thornton was hoping to achieve via *On Labour* was to stimulate contemporary debate around the reform of the Victorian labour market by offering an alternative vision to the harsher competitive elements of the Victorian economy, based on profit-sharing arrangements and industrial co-partnership.

Thornton's *On Labour* was published around the time he became firmly enmeshed within the coterie of reform-minded thinkers known as the Blackheath Park Circle. At their home in Blackheath, Mill and Helen Taylor welcomed guests from among London's political, literary and intellectual set to their Sunday roast. Over time, Thornton came to be personally acquainted with many accomplished figures, won over by his genial company and powers of persuasion. By the late 1860s, therefore, Thornton had reached that point of enjoying an established reputation. He moved among the scions of the India Office and enjoyed a substantial “gentlemanly” income as secretary of its Public Works Department. The period of intense political and administrative upheaval, in 1857 and 1858, that had accompanied the demise of Company rule in India which had so absorbed Thornton's professional attention had already eased, leaving him ample time to pursue his own research, particularly those relating to the foundations of economic science as well as “the futurity of the laboring classes”, which had largely been put on hold during the 1850s.

### ON LABOUR: ITS RIGHTFUL DUES AND WRONGFUL CLAIMS

In January 1869, Thornton wrote to Mill, saying that he “had the delight of being able to write ‘The End’ on the last page of my M.S. [manuscript]” (Donoghue 2000: 334).<sup>2</sup> “I feel in consequence as Bunyan's Christian may be supposed to have done”, Thornton added, “when he got rid of his hump” (ibid). The manuscript Thornton was referring to was, of course, *On Labour: its wrongful claims and rightful dues; its actual present and pos-*

*sible future*, which has been described as marking a turning point in the history of nineteenth-century economics because it ushered in the academic challenge to the premises of classical political economy posed by the likes of Alfred Marshall, Francis Edgeworth and William Stanley Jevons, the first-generation neoclassical economists who offered a more formal economic narrative grounded in marginalist principles (Mandler 2006: 48).

Published in instalments in the *Westminster Review* and the *Fortnightly Review* between 1864 and 1868, Thornton's *On Labour* eventually appeared in February 1869 and immediately aroused a storm of protest in political economy circles. Few works in the history of economics have elicited as much derision, and, at the same time, as much praise as Thornton's *On Labour*. However, its controversial subject matter was defined from the moment it began to appear in serialized form in the *Fortnightly Review* between 1866 and 1868.<sup>3</sup> In fact, in a letter to John Elliot Cairnes of 16 August 1866, Thornton acknowledged that "the conclusions" he had reached in those essays were "so different from those in vogue that I could not help feeling some misgiving about them" (Donoghue 2000: 325).<sup>4</sup>

With considerable relief, Thornton learned of Mill's intention to review the book for the *Edinburgh Review*. In early October 1867, Mill, having read the instalments of *On Labour* as they appeared in the *Fortnightly Review*, had written Thornton to say he liked it (Mill 1972 16: 1518). Later that month, after returning from a "delightful" summer trip to Europe, Thornton acknowledged Mill's letter and thanked him for his careful and favourable reading of the *Fortnightly Review* articles:

Whenever I write I always have the fear of you before my eyes, for of course there is no opinion of what I do that I value half as much as I do yours, and to find this time so much hearty sympathy and commendation mingled with your adverse criticism is all the more gratifying from having been little expected.<sup>5</sup> (Donoghue 2000: 332–333)

Thornton was well aware the publication of *On Labour* would court public controversy and perhaps deliberately exaggerated the extent of the criticism in order to cushion the impact of any subsequent opposition to his work and to himself. In a letter to Cairnes dated 26 March 1869, Thornton fretted about the likely frosty public reception *On Labour* would receive in the coveted Victorian periodicals of the day. Indeed, Thornton remained in a highly agitated frame of mind as even the better reviews were grudging in their praise. To Cairnes, by now his close friend, he wrote:

As yet the only fair notice of the [book], besides one entirely commendatory in the *Star*, has been in the *London Review*—a journal I am afraid with too little circulation to do me any good. I am a little nervous about the treatment I shall get from the *Saturday [Review]*. If my critics would only not misrepresent me I should not care what they said. They could not be more severe than I should like them to be upon my errors, but to have your critics' inventions ascribed to you and then to be condemned for them is a little trying, and after having received that treatment from the *Pall Mall*, I feel scarcely safe in any quarter. (Donoghue 2000: 328–330)

He had reason for cautious optimism, though, when he learned of Leonard Courtney's intention to review *On Labour* for the *Times*. In a postscript dated 27 March 1869 to a letter to Cairnes written a day earlier, Thornton wrote: "I am not a little pleased with what you tell me of Courtney. I do not expect him to be at all laudatory, but I think I may rely on his being both courteous and just, and if so his notice of me in the *Times* cannot fail to be most useful" (Donoghue 2000: 330).

In early 1869, Mill approached Henry Reeve, the editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, about the possibility of reviewing *On Labour*.

Would it suit the 'Edinburgh Review' to take an article from me on Mr. Thornton's book on Labour? The book is of great ability; and, though there is much of it with which I do not agree, I think it is a really important contribution to political economy, as well as to the particular subject of which it treats. My object would be to recommend the book to the consideration of thinkers, pointing out at the same time how far, and in what, I think it erroneous. (Mill 1972, 17: 1574–75)

Mill's correspondence makes it clear that he went to great lengths to "puff" a book he believed merited "success with the public", even though he remained unconvinced by Thornton's logical or empirical demonstration of error in his own work. In a letter to Thornton dated 16 January 1869, Mill conveyed that he hoped to have read it by the "1st of March", presumably to meet a deadline agreed with the *Edinburgh Review* editor (Mill 1972, 17: 1547). In the event, however, Mill withdrew his offer to the *Edinburgh Review*.<sup>6</sup> In a letter to Cairnes on 26 March 1869, Thornton expressed relief at Mill's decision "to review me in the *Fortnightly* instead of the *Edinburgh*, [of] which on the whole I am glad" (Donoghue 2000: 329).

What is equally apparent is that Thornton's initial fears concerning the public reception of *On Labour* proved to be mostly unfounded. The new

work met with a generally favourable critical reception. True, there were some unfavourable reviews. An anonymous critic for the *Spectator* complained that he was “at a loss to know ... the exact aim of the book” (March 27 1869: 393–394). Likewise, there was the usual carping from the *Saturday Review*, whose unidentified reviewer reproached “Mr. Thornton’s discussions of the moral principles involved” in his study (December 17 1870: 782–784). Meanwhile, Leonard Courtney, writing in the *Times*, questioned “the adequacy of Mr. Thornton’s investigation compared with the problem to which he has addressed himself” (October 16 1869: 4). Thornton was certainly rankled by these unflattering remarks from reviewers. But in the main, other voices prevailed.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, most reviewers lavished a good deal of praise on “Mr. Thornton’s earnest and, in many respects, original book” (*British Quarterly Review* 1869 March 1 49: 565–566). For example, John Shadwell (1872: 184) argued that Thornton had rendered a “great service” to political economy “by his attack on the theory of supply and demand”. Even those who criticized his work more often than not described it as “one of those books of which it is impossible for a critic to speak otherwise than with respect and even something akin to gratitude”.<sup>8</sup>

Although *On Labour* attracted a wide range of critical commentary, nearly all the reviewers correctly understood that its main contribution lay in its fundamental challenge to the classical theory of value by outlining an alternative model of price determination, which was applied to the labour market to describe a pattern of events occurring in labour relations during the third quarter of the nineteenth century. To that end, Thornton put forward a lucid, and, for the most part, well-reasoned argument of the forces likely to determine prices in situations where there are a small number of traders. Moreover, Thornton seemed to be aware of the issues associated with the price adjustment process when one of the traders is assumed to take the initiative in varying prices, even when the usual conditions for monopoly are not present.<sup>9</sup>

### THORNTON’S ATTACK ON THE CLASSICAL THEORY OF VALUE

In 1866, Thornton published a paper entitled “New Theory of Supply and Demand” in the *Fortnightly Review*, in which he expressed doubts about the validity of Mill’s theory of value, in particular the notion that “price depends on supply and demand”, refuted many of the “popu-

lar fallacies respecting supply and demand” and offered a number of counter-examples where the theory of supply and demand did not hold.<sup>10</sup> Thornton extended this criticism to the theory of wage determination in a paper published in 1867, entitled “What Determines the Price of Labour or Rate of Wages”.<sup>11</sup> In it, he offered a critique of the classical wage fund doctrine along similar lines to that presented two years later in *On Labour* (1869).

Thornton prefaced his assault on the wage fund doctrine with a set of objections to the more general proposition that prices are determined by the “equation of supply and demand”.<sup>12</sup> Thornton believed that Mill’s theory of value could be rejected by showing examples where supply and demand did not determine price; in which, though demand exceeded supply, price did not rise; or an equilibrium where the quantity offered and quantity demanded were not equal.<sup>13</sup> In order to refute the “law of supply and demand”, he thought he had only to show a single exception: for “a scientific law admits of no exception whatever; one single exception suffices to deprive it of all legal character. If one single instance could be found or conceived in which water failed to seek its own level, that water seeks its own level would cease to be a scientific law” (Thornton 1870a: 66–67). Thornton’s case against the law of supply and demand rested on three points.

First, that *with a given quantity demanded and supplied, price nevertheless may vary*. Using the example of a sale of fish under the Dutch and English auction systems, he demonstrated that as price was lowered (the Dutch system) a buyer may be prepared to offer eight shillings (for one hundred herring) rather than risk losing his purchase. Under the English system, however, a bid of six shillings might have sufficed to secure him the fish (Thornton 1870a: 56–57).<sup>14</sup> In his reply, Mill conceded a limited validity to Thornton on this point. What was really shown by the example of the two types of auction, Mill explained, “is that the law is, in this particular case, consistent with two different prices, and is equally and completely fulfilled by either of them”. According to Mill, Thornton’s most valuable contribution was the application of this case to the price of labour, showing that there is, in practice, a range of indeterminacy, not admitted by the (fixed) wage fund approach. Within this range, wages are determined by the relative bargaining strength of workers and employers (Mill 1967, 5: 637, 642 and Thornton 1870a: 92, 94–97, 101).

Second, Thornton argued, *supply and demand may vary, or be unequal, but price remains unchanged*. If two sellers offer a horse for sale at different

times and places, there being in the one case, two buyers, and in the other, three, none of whom is prepared to offer more than fifty pounds, then that will be the price at which each of the horses is sold, although the strength of demand relative to supply is different in each case (Thornton 1870a: 59, 63). Mill argued that Thornton's second criticism, and his example involving the sale of the two horses, contained the same misconception about demand and supply. Mill replied as follows: "At £50 there is a demand for twice or three times the supply; at £50.0s.01/4d there is no demand at all. When the scale of the demand for the commodity is broken by so extraordinary a jump, the law fails of its applications; not, I venture to say, from any fault in the law, but because the conditions on which its applicability depends do not exist" (Mill 1963, 5: 638).<sup>15</sup>

Third, *goods are not offered unreservedly for sale*; price is lowered only under necessity, so that when a given stock is finally cleared (supply is equal to demand), it is normally found that only a small part of the total has been sold at the final price. A glover, for example, has 1000 pairs of gloves to sell. Although gloves of this sort are usually priced at four shillings per pair, he offers the whole stock at two shillings six pence, at which price he sells 300 pairs. He further reduces his price to one shilling six pence, and then again, to one shilling at which he sells 400 and 200 pairs, respectively. The last 100 pairs are cleared at six pence. Supply and demand, then, are equated at the competitive price of six pence, yet only one-tenth of the total supply is sold at that price. This, explained Thornton, undermines one of the key assumptions of the theory that price is determined by the "equality of supply and demand" (Thornton 1870a: 64–65). Mill's reply to Thornton's criticism involved a misunderstanding on the latter's part over Mill's meaning of supply: Mill said "reserving a price is, to all intents and purposes, withdrawing supply".<sup>16</sup> He saw "supply" as a continuous series of offers—quantities which those who hold the available stocks are willing to release onto the market, at different prices. Sellers are not so ill-informed or unrealistic as to offer their whole stock at an unattainable price, nor "for an old song". If the price for a given quantity falls below the sellers' prior estimates of what is appropriate to the conditions of the market, they will withhold a part of their stock. All this implies—Mill did not say as much—a series of points, the locus of which shows that increasing amounts will be supplied as price increases. Thornton's conception of supply was quite different. In the example of the glover, supply was 1000 pairs at four shillings a pair. At this price, supply, according to Thornton, is not equal to demand (Mill 1967, 5: 640–641 and cf. Mill 1965, 3: 466–468).

In the final analysis, Mill was not prepared to concede that the laws of supply and demand were irrelevant, as Thornton had argued. In Part I of his *Fortnightly Review* article, he maintained that Thornton had reduced all the arguments in *On Labour* to a series of anomalous or “exceptional” cases, which the “current theory” had either ignored or failed to explain clearly (Mill 1967, 5: 641).<sup>17</sup> In a letter to Cairnes on 23 June 1869, Mill reiterated this point when he explained that his “object in the *Fortnightly* was to shew that the cases supposed by Thornton do not contradict and invalidate, as he thinks they do, the equation of supply and demand” (Mill 1972, 17: 1616). In sum, Mill believed that Thornton had not subverted the “law of supply and demand”, rather, he had qualified it.<sup>18</sup>

For all this, Mill remained enthusiastic about many aspects of Thornton’s book, particularly his views on the Victorian labour market, which captured the essence of his own ideas on unionism and cooperation and crystallized much of his own thinking on the subject. In the final, 1871, edition of the *Principles*, Mill (1965, 2: xciv) referred readers to Thornton’s *On Labour* for “some instructive discussion ... on the influence of strikes and trade unions on wages, by which additional light has been thrown on these subjects”. He then refers readers to his 1869 *Fortnightly Review* article on Thornton’s book and to Thornton’s reply in the second (1870) edition of *On Labour* for a view “of the present state of discussion”.

### THORNTON’S ASSAULT ON THE CLASSICAL WAGE FUND DOCTRINE

Thornton is best remembered now for his uncompromising assault on the classical wage fund doctrine that elicited a famous “recantation” from Mill. While the details of Mill’s “dramatic surrender” remain, to this day, a subject of controversy, few critics dispute its significance for developments in economic analysis in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Indeed, Bharadwaj (1978: 255) has argued that Thornton’s attack, and Mill’s subsequent capitulation, may have “provided the basis for [Alfred] Marshall’s virtual transformation of the classical ideas” (1978: 255).<sup>19</sup> In 1876, Alfred Marshall himself described the pivotal influence of Thornton in the following way:

The theory of market values was considered by economists as of slight importance, until Mr. Thornton’s book *On Labour* appeared. Mr. Thornton’s work

is not free from faults; but he has not received his due meed of gratitude for having led men to a point of view from which the practical importance of the theory of market values is clearly seen. (Marshall 1975, 2: 262–263)<sup>20</sup>

Early in the nineteenth century, some classical economists began expressing the view that trade unions were incapable of permanently raising the level of wages. This provided the basis for acceptance of a fixed wage fund, where wages are determined by the ratio of the stock of circulating capital available for paying wages, or “wage fund”, to the number of employees. Wages would only increase if the size of the wage fund increased, or if the number of employees who shared in it fell. If a union attempted to increase the wages of one group of workers, this would result in unemployment, which would bring wages back down. Thus, any wage increase won by a union could only be temporary.

This “static” or “vulgar” version of the doctrine, as it became known, is found in most classical texts of the nineteenth century, including Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy* (1848). Mill, it should be noted, never attached much weight to the “static” version of the doctrine. Indeed, he warned readers assiduously in each edition of the *Principles* to consider it as “elliptical, and not as a literal statement of the entire truth” (Mill 1965, 2: 337–338). At the same time, however, he set forth a more sophisticated version of the doctrine in Books IV and V of the *Principles*, which had significant implications for his social, economic and political reform agenda.

In his review of *On Labour*, Mill devoted little space to the classical wage fund doctrine. It played a subordinate role to his discussion of the theory of value and of trade unionism and cooperation as agencies of working-class improvement. Still, Mill made several “qualifications” to the “accepted ... theory [that] supply and demand ... govern the price of labour”. In Mill’s Book I and II version of the wage fund doctrine, the period of production, labour force and wage fund are given and there is no “involuntary” unemployment of factors of production. Mill was aware of the importance of the “full-employment” assumption: “If the labourers are all employed, and ... [t]here is supposed to be, at any given instant, a sum of wealth, which is unconditionally devoted to the payment of the wages of labour”, the average wage rate is calculated by dividing wage fund by labour force (Mill 1967, 5: 643).<sup>21</sup> In this version of the doctrine, usually associated with a simple agrarian economy, the capitalist’s income is not forthcoming “until the end of the year, or until the round of operations is completed” (i.e. the sale of the annual harvest). Mill describes this

version of the doctrine as “wholly imaginary” because a capitalist receives income “day by day ... not at Christmas or Midsummer when he balances his books. His own income, then, so far as it is used and expended, is advanced from his capital and replaced from the returns, *pari passu* with the wages he pays” (Mill 1967, 5: 645). In reality, the wage fund “is not ... a fixed amount”. It can be “augmented by saving” and tends to increase “with the progress of wealth”. Mill also allowed for the possibility that the size of the wage fund could vary at the discretion of the employer (within limits)<sup>22</sup>:

Does the employer require more labour, or do fresh employers of labour make their appearance, merely because it can be brought cheaper? Assuredly, no. Consumers desire more of an article, or fresh consumers are called forth, when the price has fallen: but the employer does not buy labour for the pleasure of consuming it; he buys it [so] that he may profit by its productive powers, and he buys as much labour and no more as suffices to produce the quantity of his goods which he thinks he can sell to advantage. A fall of wages does not necessarily make him expect a larger sale for his commodity, nor, therefore, does it necessarily increase his demand for labour. (Mill 1967, 5: 644)

There is little doubt Mill abandoned the “vulgar” or static wage fund doctrine in his Thornton article. He did not, however, abandon the doctrine *per se*. In both the *Principles* (Books IV and V) and the 1869 article, Mill retained a more flexible version of it. This modification removed an important economic argument from the arsenal of those who believed that the labouring classes were unable to raise their wages through collective bargaining. As such, it enabled Mill to attack popular anti-union slogans, which ruled out union-induced wage increases on the basis that the wage fund was fixed.

Mill’s growing antipathy towards the wage fund doctrine has been chronicled by several historians who rest their case mainly on a letter Mill wrote Henry Fawcett on 1 January 1866. In that letter, Mill expressed doubts over the validity of the wage fund doctrine as an adequate explanation of wage determination in the context of praising Fawcett’s treatment of trade unions and cooperation in the *Manual of Political Economy*.<sup>23</sup> Mill appears to realize that his own Book II version of the doctrine (i.e. the static wage fund doctrine) could be an obstacle to the social and political reforms he envisaged:

I need hardly say how highly I approve your chapter on cooperation ... The chapter which on the whole I *least* like is the one on wages, though it will be more praised than any of the rest: but I think I could shew that an increase of wages at the expense of profits would not be an impracticability on the true principles of political economy. (Mill 1972, 16: 1130)

Eighteen months later, Thornton published an article in the *Fortnightly Review* (May 1867) in which he challenged Henry Fawcett's version of the wage fund doctrine (and implicitly, Mill's static wages theory).<sup>24</sup> This material was incorporated, ostensibly unchanged, into Thornton's *On Labour* (1869). Mill, who relished the prospect of having his views challenged, publicly and privately, wrote to Thornton and praised his *Fortnightly Review* articles (published between 1866 and 1868). He saw their content as "excellent", with the public success of *On Labour* assured, not least because of the "important practical recommendations" it contained (Mill 1972, 16: 1318). Indeed, in a letter to Thornton in October 1867, Mill (1972, 16: 1318–1320) appraised his friend's forthcoming book as a "systematic treatise", which will

be very serviceable in carrying on what may be called the emancipation of pol[itical] economy—its liberation from the kind of doctrines of the old school (now taken up by well to do people) which treat what they call economical laws, demand & supply for instance, as if they were laws of inanimate matter, not amenable to the will of the human beings from whose feelings, interests, & principles of action they proceed. This is one of the queer mental confusions which will be wondered at by & by & you are helping very much in the good work of clearing it up.

As is evident from the rapid exchange of letters between Mill, Cairnes and Thornton in October 1869, the publication of *On Labour* had been successful in terms of the critical reactions it had provoked among leading economic thinkers. According to the account, Mill provided in a letter to John Elliot Cairnes in April 1869, which mentions his forthcoming *Fortnightly Review* article on Thornton's *On Labour*, Mill appears to accept Thornton's criticism of the wage fund doctrine:

I shall be very desirous of knowing whether you agree with my judgment of the book from the purely scientific point of view. I feel pretty sure you will concur in what I have written on the so-called wage fund, a subject on which I expressed myself in political economy as inaccurately as other

people, and which I have only within the last two or three years seen in its proper light. On the subject on which you think Thornton vulnerable, the losing sight of the population principle, it would have been better, perhaps, if he had added a few pages on the relation of that question to his doctrine. (Mill 1972, 17: 1587–8)

This passage clarifies two points. First, Mill took considerable trouble with a review of a book he thought deserving of attention, even though he disagreed with “much of it”. Second, he appears to accept Thornton’s criticism of the wage fund doctrine, foreshadowing his so-called recantation of that doctrine, in his 1869 *Fortnightly Review* article on Thornton’s book. This forms the basis of Mill’s abandonment of the doctrine. However, any influence Thornton may have exercised over Mill cannot be treated in such a cavalier fashion. What becomes apparent upon closer inspection of the relevant literature is that Thornton was never as successful as some commentators suggest in dislodging the wage fund doctrine from Mill’s *Principles*. For while Mill appears in his *Fortnightly Review* article to back away from the doctrine, in the last edition of the *Principles of Political Economy* (1871) published during his lifetime, he refrained from altering it. Indeed, Robbins (1974: 388) correctly observed that Mill’s correspondence with Thornton showed “less discontinuity of thought regarding wage theory than might have been supposed from the sensation caused by the famous [1869] review” (emphasis added).<sup>25</sup> Nor can it be confidently concluded that Mill rejected the wage fund doctrine after expressing doubts over it in correspondence with Fawcett in 1866 and Cairnes in 1869. In fact, Mill wrote to Cairnes on 23 June 1869 to say “how gratifying it is ... that you give so complete an adherence to the view I take of the wages fund” (Mill 1972, 17: 1616). Mill’s doubts were not, in fact, manifested in abandonment of the wage fund doctrine. Rather than jettison classical analysis, Mill was impelled to recast classical wages theory by linking the wage-raising effects of unions with population restraint among the working class.<sup>26</sup> This explains why Thornton’s work on trade unionism and social reform was considered “useful and indispensable” by Mill. Indeed, careful inspection of Mill’s correspondence with Cairnes reveals that he used Thornton’s analysis of trade unions to buttress the case for self-restraint among the working class. In view of this, Forget (1992) has correctly argued that Mill expected Thornton’s *On Labour* to make an important contribution to the social policy debate of the 1860s. Mill

clearly anticipates the importance of Thornton's *On Labour* in stimulating debate on labour market issues and refers approvingly to its "practical recommendations", which will "permanently distinguish [it] from other writings on the subject" (Mill 1972, 17: 1547).

It was Thornton's firm belief that the "exceptional" cases had destroyed the foundation of supply and demand theory, and therefore, the wage fund doctrine, as a special application of that theory to the labour market, had also been undermined.<sup>27</sup> After quoting from Mill and Fawcett for the classical statement of the doctrine, Thornton was led, in the first instance, to "utterly deny" the existence of a predetermined amount of capital to be advanced as wages (Thornton 1870a: 83, 85).<sup>28</sup> He agreed that "every employer possesses a certain amount of money ... out of which all his expenses must be met", but denied that "individual employers" possessed a "definite or definable portion of their capitals which ... they must severally apply to the hiring of labour". Therefore, any individual employer at his discretion may spend more on himself, and invest less, or vice versa. If one prospective employer can do this, they all can; if the fund is so indefinite, it cannot form the numerator for which labourers are the denominator. The wages fund can be greater or less within wide limits, and hence, being indeterminate, cannot yield the average rate of wages:

The idea of a wages fund, the whole of which needs must, and more or less than which cannot be expended upon labour, may be a manifest absurdity. Without presuming myself so to style it, I readily acquiesce in the designation. But absurd as the idea may be, still no other idea of a wages fund is conceivable consistently with which division of the fund by the number of wage-seekers can determine the average rate of wages which the latter are about to obtain. (Thornton 1870a: 88).<sup>29</sup>

If "the price of labour is determined not by supply and demand"—a view Thornton claimed ran "completely counter to everyday experience"—what then determines the average wage? Thornton clearly had in mind a model in which wages were determined by bargains between unions and employers, with the wage outcome depending on relative bargaining strength (Thornton 1870a: 108, 279, 305–306). Indeed, Mandler (2006: 216) has argued that the late Victorian labour market was increasingly based on relationships that involved bargaining and compromise between different vested interests, and the result frequently reflected the relative power base of these groups.

## THORNTON'S WAGE BARGAINING MODEL

In *On Labour*, Thornton endeavoured to explain that trade unions had, in a number of instances, secured an apparently permanent increase in wages, without any of the ill effects predicted by the wage fund doctrine. In doing so, he devised a model of trade union bargaining to describe a pattern of contemporary events occurring in labour relations during the third quarter of the nineteenth century—a contribution which has gone largely unnoticed.<sup>30</sup> The emergence of “new model” craft unions during the early 1860s brought a more “respectable image” to the labour movement, and marked the birth of modern trade unionism.<sup>31</sup> The immense changes the labour movement underwent during this period prompted Thornton to comment that “unionism may well be recognized as one of the social necessities of our time” (Thornton 1870a: 328). As a social reformer who sought to “reform the condition of the poor in England”, Thornton saw trade unions as agencies of economic and social progress (Thornton 1870a: ix). In forming this conclusion, he drew upon his observations of current affairs, interviews with unionists and “men of affairs”, as well as upon his reading of evidence submitted to government inquiries on labour relations. One of his objectives in writing *On Labour* was to explain the mechanism through which unions could raise their members’ wages, influence the terms of employment and, thereby, promote character-building habits among workers.<sup>32</sup> Additional benefits also accrued to union members and their families. Industrial schools were established to raise the aspirations of workers and enhance their productive capacities.<sup>33</sup> Education for workers, once associated with population restraint, could now be justified in terms of the importance of human capital formation for social and economic progress and harmonious class relations (Thornton 1870a: 356). The availability of education for workers would tend to “mollify ... antagonism between classes” (Thornton 1870a: 363).

A number of popular contemporary writers had argued that unions were incapable of either increasing wages or improving working conditions, because “the amount of labours’ remuneration is ... determined by Nature herself, and [is] ... incapable of being changed, except very temporarily, by art” (Thornton 1870a: 277).<sup>34</sup> The expression “Nature” referred to wages being determined through the equality of supply and demand for labour. The claim that any wage increase that occurred in the presence of a union would have occurred in their absence, he dismissed by

noting that “instances of masters spontaneously raising wages to be about as numerous as those of workmen conscientiously believing themselves to be overpaid and coming forward to insist that their wages be reduced” (Thornton 1870a: 257–258). Even in cases where an employer was prepared to pay a higher wage, Thornton argued that “working men could not get this or any similar rise without demanding it” (Thornton 1870a: 285). Therefore, an “essential part of the business of trades’ unions [was] to keep up the practise of bargaining” over wages and employment conditions (Thornton 1870a: 357). In most cases, this meant no more than making “respectful representations” or presenting “simple argumentation” to employers (Thornton 1870a: 318). However, in the event that diplomacy failed, unions could organize industrial action where they would “drive, on behalf of the employed, quite as hard bargains with employers as ever were driven by employers and employed” (Thornton 1870a: 193 and cf. 202, 254). Occasionally, the relative bargaining power of the parties was settled through strikes. Thornton wrote enthusiastically about the widespread success of strikes during his day, as measured by the growth of average wage rates secured by unions that were strong in certain trades and certain regions (Thornton, 1870a: 254, cf. 235–237, 296–299).

Thornton’s discussion of strikes was prefaced by the following question: who holds the strategic advantage during a strike? According to Thornton, during a protracted strike, employers “invariably come off conquerors”, although such “victories” were usually followed by employers “tamely retreating without waiting for a renewed attack” (Thornton 1870a: 252–253, 260, 275). In the aftermath of industrial action, “masters have had most of the honour: all the more extraordinary is it therefore, though equally certain, that [working] men have had all the profit.” Typically, employers command an economic advantage over workers during strikes because they have, “in the savings of themselves or others, reserve funds whereupon to subsist while waiting” (Thornton 1870a: 176). However, growth in union membership also provided workers with greater bargaining power: “labourers [collect] similar reserves” through union subscriptions, allowing them to “meet combination with combination”. The power of unions extended far beyond that of merely obtaining wage increases. They fought for reduced hours, established minimum wage standards, attacked piecework and tended to restrict entry into a trade to those of a certain standard of education and ability. In addition, Thornton emphasized increased welfare benefits for workers arising from strikes and rejected the popular notion that strikes impaired the operation

of the labour market—an argument he described as a “delusion and a snare” (Thornton 1870a: 277–278).

Thornton further developed his justification for strikes by analysing the probability of a successful strike. He noted that there was a higher probability of success during periods of economic prosperity. In this context, fewer union members were unemployed and union reserve funds swelled, enabling a protracted period of industrial strife if warranted. High wage claims during economic slumps were likely to fail because firms suffered a reduction in profits and were forced to shed labour, which tended to depress wages (Thornton 1870a: 305).<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Thornton suggests that increased union membership and frequency of strike activity were sharply correlated with successful strikes. Therefore employers, although better equipped to hold out against a strike because of their “superiority of wealth”, prefer “like easy going husbands ... to put up with a good deal for a quiet life” since the “loss they risk is much more than the temporary loss of their ordinary profits” (Thornton 1870a: 260, 264, 269, 270–271, 276).

Although employers preferred “peace and quiet” and were prepared to “content themselves with the very lowest compensating rates of profit”, overzealous union wage claims incited retaliatory measures from employers, such as lockouts. However, such retaliation had greater longer-term consequences for employer than worker: “if the strike be much prolonged ... [the employer] sees his capital draining away, and capital is to him as his life-blood; when it leaves him it becomes industrially defunct; whereas the labourer who is trying conclusions with him, provided only that his health be not permanently impaired by the privations he is meanwhile enduring, in preserving his thews and sinews, preserves also his stock in trade and industrial vitality intact” (Thornton 1870a: 260, 264, 275–276).

Unions pursued strategies aimed at making “the total sum divisible as wages among the workmen ... proportionately greater. In whatever manner, then, this greater sum was divided among the men, the whole body of them taken collectively, could not fail to be benefited” (Thornton 1870a: 291 and cf. 295). The outcome of a wage negotiation had to at least provide for the “decent maintenance” of an employee for if “wages were lower than it suited [employees] to accept, instead of accepting they would cease working” (Thornton 1870a: 324, 334). Employers aim “to get the utmost profit out of their capital” and bargain with unions “to get labour at the lowest possible rate” (Thornton 1870a: 194). The maximum level of wages acceptable to an employer is one consistent with a

reservation level of profit, which amounts to “compensation to the capitalist for the trouble he takes, the inconvenience he incurs and the risk he runs” (Thornton 1870a: 282). No firm will “consent to rates of wages incompatible with rates of profit sufficient to compensate them for the toils and cares of business” (Thornton 1870a: 276). In “free and unmonopolised trades”, this “usual rate” of profit tends to be equalized to a point at which any “differences between them ... are proportionate to differences in the trades themselves” (Thornton 1870a: 282, 283).<sup>36</sup> For,

if the extra profitableness were to become more than proportionate to the extra objectionableness, we should be sure to see bakers turning butchers, in sufficient number to restore the former proportion of profit between the two trades. (Thornton 1870a: 282–283)<sup>37</sup>

According to Thornton, the wage negotiated could vary between a minimum level, equal to the employee’s “subsistence” wage, and a maximum, defined as that wage consistent with the firm making no more than “usual” or normal profits. The actual wage negotiated depends on the “relative force of the contracting parties” (Thornton 1870a: 277 and cf. pp. 302–303). This meant that, “in a state ... in which labourers are too poor to combine” to increase their bargaining power, firms will be able to secure a wage close to the subsistence level:

They cannot of course force the men to take less than they can live upon, but they both can and do force them to take as little more than the bare means of subsistence as it pleases them to offer. (Thornton 1870a: 108)

Alternatively, if union power was greater:

It is not inconceivable that the men, by striking or threatening to strike, might eventually get the maximum of wages which masters could afford to give and still go on employing. (Thornton 1870a: 276)

The development of unions possessing “reserve” or strike funds, together with the ability of Amalgamated Societies to draw funds from members in one area to support strikers in another, had bolstered employee bargaining power. However, strikes were considered a last resort by employer and employee alike. Unionists, who suffered short-term loss of wages during a strike, were reluctant to embark upon a course of industrial action because of a fear that “reckless rapacity will infallibly overreach

itself by raising up in opposition to them a combination still stronger than their own” (Thornton 1870a: 276). Provided unions restrain wage demands and “conduct themselves with prudent moderation”, they are likely to preserve any increase already gained (Thornton 1870a: 277). Moderation implied a wage which was mutually agreed upon between employer and worker with no coercion. Such a wage was deemed “fair” or “just” (Thornton 1870a: 143 and cf. 160–161, 191–194, 357).<sup>38</sup>

Many people ... think that there are certain limits of remuneration which it would be unbecoming for manual labour to overstep. This rate of wages they style reasonable and suitable, that, disproportionate and extravagant. (Thornton 1870a: 196)

In sum, Thornton’s economic study of unions, in the period which marked the birth of modern trade unionism, provided valuable insights into labour relations during that period. Having rejected the popular notion that “the price of labour is determined by supply and demand”, Thornton sought to explain the mechanism through which unions could raise their members’ wages and influence the terms of employment. Indeed, the possibility of their securing wage advances and better working conditions was deemed a more than adequate justification for unions (Thornton: 1870a: 302, 310–319, 322, 355). Provided union wage demands were moderate, Thornton encouraged unionists, who generally stood at a disadvantage in bargaining with employers over wages since they usually lacked sufficient “reserve funds” to support themselves during a protracted period of “industrial strife”, to agitate for wage increases, particularly during periods of economic prosperity.<sup>39</sup> As Thornton (1870a: 199) candidly explained: “Any lasting enhancement of wages ... must be for the greatest happiness of the greatest number.”<sup>40</sup>

### MILL’S RESPONSE TO THORNTON AND REAFFIRMATION OF THE WAGE FUND DOCTRINE

Mill’s growing sympathy towards trade unionism during the last decade of his life spurred him to reassess his position on the wage fund doctrine. In the much celebrated 1869 *Fortnightly Review* article on Thornton’s book, *On Labour* (1869), he agreed with Thornton that “the aggregate means of the employing classes” was not fixed. However, he did not completely abandon this doctrine nor did he see a more flexible form of it as incom-

patible with his support for trade unions (cf. Mill 1967, 5: 644, 645). While refusing to accept the notion that the efforts of trade unions were doomed to failure by the operation of economic laws governing wages, Mill did make use of a form of the wage fund doctrine to buttress the case for self-restraint among the working classes and to urge that capitalists should devote an increasing proportion of their capital in advances to workers (cf. West and Hafer 1978, 1981). It must be emphasized that the problem of unrestrained population growth played an important part in Mill's thinking about wages. He regarded the tendency of population to outrun the supply of provisions as particularly serious in developed countries and argued that the only "long-run avenue for increasing wages was through population control. Ultimately, therefore, Mill was affirming the argument that unions could not raise wages in the long-run by their effects on the *supply* of labour (the wages fund still explaining the demand side)" (West and Hafer 1978: 605; cf. Mill 1967, 5: 646 and Mill 1965, 2: 174, 187–188).<sup>41</sup>

In his review of Thornton's *On Labour*, Mill drew attention to both the moral and the economic function of trade unions. He believed that Thornton's "theory of justice" and "ethical foundation" provided a legitimate basis for the "principal claims of the labouring classes". If a wage contract was made voluntarily—that is, without coercion by either worker or employer—the outcome was perceived as "fair" and such a contract would constitute the "sole rule of justice between them" (Mill 1967, 5: 647, cf. 657 and Thornton 1870a: 111). Although Mill defended the constitutional *right* of workers to organize as long as the association is voluntary and there is no *exclusion*, and welcomed unions as a countervailing force to "raise or keep up the general rate of wages", he attacked those unions that sought wage increases for their members at the expense of other trades (Mill 1965, 3: 929, 931). He made this point forcefully in a passage inserted into the third edition of the *Principles* (1852):

If, therefore, no improvement were to be hoped for in the general circumstance of the working classes, the success of a portion of them, however small, in keeping their wages by combination above the market rate, would be wholly a matter of satisfaction. But when the elevation of the character and condition of the entire body has at last become a thing not beyond the reach of rational effort, it is time that the better paid classes of skilled artisans should seek their own advantage in common with, and not by the exclusion of, their fellow labourers. While they continue to fix their hopes on hedging themselves in against competition, and protecting their own

wages by shutting out others from access to their employment, nothing better can be expected from them than total absence of any large and generous aims, that almost open disregard of all other objects than high wages and little work for their own small body, which were so deplorably evident in the proceedings and manifestos of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers during their late quarrel with their employers. Success, even if attainable, in raising up a protected class of working people, would be a hindrance, instead of a help, to the emancipation of the working classes at large. (Mill 1965, 3: 931–932)<sup>42</sup>

As a means of redressing income inequality between union and non-union labour, Mill encouraged universal membership of unions because it best served the interests of all workers.<sup>43</sup> The recently established Amalgamated Societies marked an important first step in that direction (Mill 1967, 5: 659–660, 663–664). Similarly, Mill believed that unions had a “moral duty to society at large” to ensure that better-educated workmen infused a stronger work ethic among the more ignorant and untrained members of the poorer classes (Mill 1967, 5: 664–665). He believed trade unionists had a moral obligation to restrain divisive activities such as “restrictions on the employment of machinery, or on arrangements for economising labour, contrived for the express purpose of making work inefficient” (Mill 1967, 5: 665 and Thornton 1870a: 322). For employers equally, the question of trade unions was a moral one: “Whoever does not wish that the labourers may prevail [in obtaining higher wages] must have a standard of morals, and a conception of the most desirable state of society, widely different from those of either Mr. Thornton or the present writer” (Mill 1967, 5: 658).

Mill also had a very high regard for Thornton’s economic analysis of trade unions. In a letter to Henry Reeve in early 1869, Mill described Thornton’s *On Labour* as a book “of great ability” and singled out Thornton’s work on “trade unions, co-operation, and the ultimate future of labour” for special praise (Mill 1972, 17: 1574–1575). In the preface to the last edition of the *Principles* (1871), he referred readers to Thornton’s *On Labour* for “some instructive discussion on the influence of Strikes and Trade Unions on wages, by which additional light has been thrown on these subjects” (Mill 1965, 2: xciv). In his famous chapter “On the Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes”, Mill did make an important textual change in which he set about clarifying the mechanism by which trade unions could raise the wages of their members. In the last edition of the *Principles*, the passage reads as follows:

If they could [combine effectively], they might doubtless succeed in diminishing the hours of labour, and obtaining the same wages for less work. *They would also have a limited power of obtaining by combination an increase of general wages at the expense of profits. But the limits of this power are narrow; and were they to attempt to strain it beyond those limits, this could only be accomplished by keeping a part of their number permanently out of employment.* As support from public charity would of course be refused to those who could get work and would not accept it, they would be thrown for support upon the trades union of which they were members; and the work-people collectively would be no better off than before, having to support the same numbers out of the same aggregate wages. In this way, however, the class would have its attention forcibly drawn to the fact of a superfluity of numbers, and to the necessity, if they would have higher wages, of proportioning the supply of labour to the demand. (Mill 1965, 3: 929–930)<sup>44</sup>

This passage clarifies a number of things. First, this change softens the impact of the “inexorable laws of supply and demand” and confidently predicts successful wage outcomes by way of labour combination—a view Mill had earlier attributed to Thornton in his *Fortnightly Review* article (Mill 1967, 5: 644). Second, it is evident that the size of the firm’s wage fund is not fixed, although the aggregate fund does appear to be ultimately rigid in this example. Third, this passage illustrates Mill’s habitual emphasis on long-run supply, playing down the short-term or “static” wage fund effects (see Forget 1992: 38, 44 and West and Hafer 1978: 614). Last, the wage negotiated is determined as the outcome of a bargain between unions and employers, which settles “the division of proceeds between employer and the labourers”, an idea that Mill had courted since 1862 (Donoghue 1997: 93). Rather than being determined by “the proportion between population and the means of subsistence”, Mill agreed that “there is a certain range ... within which the price of labour is decided by a conflict of wills between employers and labourers” (Mill 1967, 5: 645, 647). Nevertheless, he recommended an upper limit to wage claims because “wages might be so high as to leave no profit to the capitalist, or not enough to compensate him for the anxieties and risks of trade; and in that case labourers would be killing the goose to get at the eggs” (Mill 1967, 5: 645, 657). On the contrary, wage outcomes should not “be so low as to diminish the numbers or impair the working powers of the labourers”. Typically, “wages will range higher or lower” than the subsistence wage and zero profit level, respectively, according to the relative bargaining strength of market contestants (Mill 1967, 5: 657). In a letter to

Henry Reeve in March 1869, Mill made a direct reference to Thornton's discussion of the latter point:

On these points, I think Mr Thornton has fully made out his case. [H]e condemns some of the aims and rules of trades-unions; and is quite alive to their liability to carry their legitimate aims (rise of wages and diminished hours of work) to a length which may injure both themselves and their employers by driving the trade elsewhere. For the correction of evil he looks to the lessons of experience and increased intelligence; and to amicable discussion between the parties. In these various opinions I entirely agree, and I should feel bound to express them in anything I write on the subject. (Mill 1972, 17: 1576)

Significantly, in his *Fortnightly Review* article published two months later, Mill recommended unions moderate their wage claims lest they “produce a fall in wages, or a loss of employment, to other labourers, their fellow countrymen” or drive wages “so high as to leave no profit to the capitalist, or not enough to compensate him for the anxieties and risks of trade”. Such a course of action “would destroy, or drive elsewhere, the particular branch of industry in which the [wage] rise takes place” (Mill 1967, 5: 657–658, 662). Thornton's economic analysis of trade unions certainly had a telling effect on Mill. It had become clear to him that trade unions, in certain circumstances, could act as a countervailing force making the operation of the labour market both more efficient and more equitable by promoting more aggressive bargaining over wages between labour market contestants. Mill observed that higher wages and shorter hours were being secured by labour combinations and he was anxious for them to entrench those gains. He proposed that unions also counsel their members on the economic advantages of family limitation. This could be accomplished by establishing industrial schools and through the wide circulation of trade union newspapers. Hence, their task was both economic and moral. Ultimately, he anticipated further gains—material and moral—accruing to society from full-blown industrial cooperation. Mill was indebted to Thornton for this insight.

Mill's support for trade unionism grew out of an evolving sympathy for the British labour movement of the 1860s amid a rapidly changing industrial relations landscape. In all seven editions of the *Principles*, Mill maintained that the only long-term avenue for increasing wages among the working classes was through population control (West and Hafer 1978: 605, 613–614). Following Malthusian theory, he feared that a too rapid

dissolution of the impediments to upward mobility would simply lead to increased population and a lower average wage rate (Hollander 1968: 523). This explains his refusal to condemn out of hand the restrictive practices of unions in skilled trades, despite his acceptance that movement out of depressed trades was severely impeded by union activity (Mill 1965, 2: 388, 397–398; 3: 931). It also partly explains why Mill advocated the replacement of collective bargaining with a form of voluntary association which “would be the nearest approach to social justice, and the most beneficial ordering of industrial affairs for the universal good, which it is possible at present to foresee” (Mill 1965, 3: 794 and cf. West and Hafer 1978: 614–615).

Mill’s sympathetic interest in the labour movement is evident throughout the *Principles* and is summarized in his 1869 *Fortnightly Review* article on Thornton’s book, *On Labour*. Although Mill’s footing was often insecure when he was assessing whether trade unions best served the economic and moral interests of their members or of society at large, the broad thrust of his thinking on this subject is clear enough: an attempt to explain the connection between union wage bargaining and population control as forces making for working-class improvement. In such a context, Mill rejected the static wage fund doctrine because of its incompatibility with new ideas on unions and wages. At the same time, however, the crucial position of the wage fund was retained in Books IV and V of the *Principles* and confirmed in Part II of Mill’s *Fortnightly Review* article (1869). Indeed, it would seem hardly credible that Mill should suddenly announce the demise of one of the central pillars of classical political economy. This explains why Mill never incorporated the so-called recantation into the seventh and final edition of the *Principles* (1871).<sup>45</sup> His opinion there was that revisions in the wages fund were “not yet ripe for incorporation in a general treatise in Political Economy” (Mill 1965, 2: xciv).

Although Thornton and Mill were impressed with the ability of unions to raise the living standards of the working class, they looked towards the gradual supplanting of the system of collective bargaining by profit-sharing arrangements between employer and employed (Lipkes 1999: 67).<sup>46</sup> Unions were necessary, but transitional, institutions (Reeves 2007: 453). The ultimate goal of society was the establishment of “higher” cooperatives, which would form the basis for an alliance between labour and capital (Thornton 1870a: 358).<sup>47</sup> These more refined institutions were an end in themselves as well as a means of curbing population growth among the working classes (West and Hafer 1978: 614). Mill’s

views on cooperation and industrial partnership as well as his interest in the possibility of working-class improvement through such institutions were undoubtedly shaped by Thornton's writings on labour relations. Towards the end of October 1863, Mill wrote to Thornton and praised him for working "on the subject of cooperation" (Mill 1972, 15: 891–893) and described his article, "Strikes and Industrial Cooperation", in the *Westminster Review* (April, 1864: 349–383) as "one of the best" on the subject.<sup>48</sup> When *On Labour* was finally published, Mill once more appraised Thornton's account of various forms of industrial cooperation as simply the most "compact and comprehensive" exposition available at that time (Mill 1967, 5: 666).<sup>49</sup> In fact, Thornton's writings on the cooperative movement as an instrument of self-improvement promising both material and moral gains particularly appealed to Mill and he accordingly dedicated the bulk of his 1869 review article to it.<sup>50</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The reaction to William Thornton's critique of the classical theories of value and wages reveals some division among those unwilling, on the one hand, to accept classical prescriptions of price determination, yet unable, on the other, to agree on a new way forward. In particular, the English debate on wages in the period 1865–1890 must be seen as a significant disjuncture in the development of economic theory. It represented, as Hutchison (1953: 13) observed, "one of the more overt signs of the crumbling of the classical system". In the subsequent evolution of economic theory, the wage fund doctrine was spurned by most economists. Nevertheless, the claim that the doctrine "sank without a trace", as Pigou (1949: 177) suggested, is exaggerated. For some economists, the theoretical vacuum this created was filled by a more flexible version of the doctrine which allowed the size of the wage fund to vary. Its vitality arose largely because Mill and Cairnes continued to wield considerable authority, especially over English economics, until the mid-1870s. In a sense, they were largely dying gasps. Yet, there were few among those who felt compelled to abandon the wage fund doctrine able to replace the orthodox theories. Although most economists subscribed to the marginal productivity of distribution approach outlined by William Stanley Jevons, only Alfred Marshall in England was able to bring to completion a coherent theory of wages along marginalist lines. And even Marshall, the so-called doyen of the English neoclassical school, was deeply influenced by classical thinking

and drew on elements of the classical framework in his own early work on distribution theory (Donoghue 1995). Indeed, throughout the first half of the 1870s, Marshall's theory of wages was still tied to the wage fund approach to the extent that he still regarded wages as being advanced to workers from wage capital. His work on a more extensive marginal productivity theory of distribution only gradually materialized throughout the 1880s once he had broken free from the straightjacket of the wage fund doctrine (Whitaker 1975). In doing so, he provided a new broad base on which a growing number of specialist practitioners in the science could build.

In *On Labour*, Thornton linked his criticism of the classical wage fund doctrine to a general attack on supply and demand theories of price determination, including all explanations of wages expressed in terms of supply and demand. He denied outright the existence of a predetermined wage fund, advanced by employers to put labour to work—a view he claimed ran completely counter to everyday experience (Thornton 1870a: 279). In contrast, Thornton explained that wages were determined by bargains between union and employer, with the negotiated wage depending on relative bargaining strength. In essence, Thornton had conducted a valuable economic study of unions in a period that marked the birth of modern trade unionism.<sup>51</sup>

Another important aspect of *On Labour* that has only recently been interpreted is Thornton's contribution to economic policy, particularly his study of the relationship between trade unions and industrial cooperatives during a period in which the labour movement underwent immense change. Indeed, *On Labour* is of major significance for developments in labour economics during the late nineteenth century, not least because Thornton was one of the first economists to include analysis of trade unions within the scope of political economy.<sup>52</sup> He believed that the primary function of a "staid treatise on economics" was to shed light on economic, social and political problems of the day, particularly those connected with working-class improvement. The best hope of improving the social and economic position of workers lay in promoting profit-sharing schemes or industrial co-partnership, initially through successful trade union agitation. Partial cooperation would evolve into full cooperation as long as it succeeded in gradually raising levels of self-help and self-cultivation among the working class. Mill, too, predicted that the system of collective bargaining between employee and employer would evolve into a form of voluntary association which "would be the nearest approach to social justice, and the most

beneficial ordering of industrial affairs for the universal good, which it is possible at present to foresee” (Mill 1965, 3: 794). For the development of this, and other insights, Mill was indebted to Thornton.

## NOTES

1. In reviewing *Healey, a Romance*, George Saintsbury (1875, 8: 245) acknowledged that Fothergill “has read all the best books, and has them at her fingers”, in particular, “*The Martyrdom of Man*, and *The Book of Orm*, Thornton on Labour, and *My Beautiful Lady*, are all familiar to her.”
2. Mill, who had closely followed its serialization in the *Fortnightly Review*, wrote back to congratulate Thornton on bringing his book “to a happy termination” (Mill 1972, 17: 1547).
3. In the first edition of *On Labour* Thornton (1869b: 57) remarked that his *Fortnightly Review* articles “incurred a good deal of criticism, both public and private.” The most damning attack came from John Wilson (1871: 236), in the *Quarterly Review*, who accused Thornton of plagiarizing Francis Longe’s critique of the wage fund doctrine: “Mr. Thornton, in the first edition of his above cited work ‘On Labour’, adopted without acknowledgment Mr. Longe’s [1866] previously published refutation of that theory”. For a detailed account of Wilson’s allegation and Thornton’s rebuttal, see Donoghue (1999a).
4. Thornton’s *Fortnightly Review* articles drew a response from J.E. Cairnes and T.E. Cliffe Leslie in the *Economist* (October 20, 1866: 1221–1222; November 3, 1866: 1279–1281; and December 1, 1866: 1395–1396). Leslie Stephen anonymously reviewed Thornton’s (1866) article on supply and demand for the *Saturday Review* (October 13, 1866: 452–453).
5. Later, Thornton declared he felt “a little as Saul of Tarsus might have felt if, while sitting at the feet of Gamaliel, he had suddenly found himself compelled by a sense of duty to contradict the master” (Thornton 1870a: 62).
6. Thornton explained Mill’s decision to withdraw his offer in a letter to Cairnes dated 26 March 1869 (see Donoghue 2000: 329–330).
7. For a comprehensive discussion of the reviews of *On Labour*, see White (1994).
8. This quote is from the review of *On Labour* in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (March 5, 1869: 11).
9. Recent judgements of *On Labour* are less favourable. For example, Stigler (1965) labelled Thornton’s alternative theory of price determination “absurd”, Uemiya (1981) called it “bizarre”, Breit (1967) referred to his “flimsy” and “weak” criticisms, while Ekelund and Thommessen (1989) argue that Thornton had “little or no understanding of supply and demand

- [theory].” More recently, Ekelund (1997) has suggested that Thornton’s economic contributions deserve no better than an F, with “strongly worded advice to return to the study of sociology or poetry.” In contrast, Mirowski (1989, 1990) and White (1994) maintain that, while Thornton’s arguments may contain inconsistencies, they do not justify the claim that he had no understanding of supply and demand theory.
10. Thornton’s three cases were his famous Dutch and English auction examples of price determination (Thornton 1870a: 56–58, 63), the sale of a single horse where more than one buyer is prepared to pay fifty pounds, but no one will pay more (Thornton 1870a: 59, 63, 70), and the case of a glover in a country town on the eve of an assize ball who has many unsatisfied customers at ten shillings a pair, not one of whom would be prepared to pay more than ten shillings (Thornton 1870a: 61–64, 71).
  11. In the first, 1869, edition of *On Labour*, the wage fund doctrine received only a lengthy footnote (Thornton 1869b: 84–85n.). However, this footnote’s significance was magnified by the completeness with which Mill publicly accepted Thornton’s criticism. As a result, in the second edition, Thornton widened the analysis (Thornton 1870a: esp. 83–89 and cf. 280–281, 313–321).
  12. Recent commentary on Thornton has polarized around whether he can be accurately described as a prototype disequilibrium theorist. Negishi (1986, 1989) favours such an interpretation. However, Ekelund and Thommesen (1989) and Forget (1991) argue that Thornton’s approach lacked the sophistication of contemporary disequilibrium analysis.
  13. By the mid-1860s, Mill and Thornton were deeply engaged in discussions concerning the theory of value. For instance, in the preface to the sixth (1865) edition of the *Principles of Political Economy*, Mill remarked that the “friendly criticisms” of the theory of international values in his *Principles* were “chiefly those of my friend Mr. William Thornton”.
  14. Negishi (1986) has interpreted this passage as suggesting that a section of the demand schedule is perfectly inelastic; within this range, price is indeterminate.
  15. Here, Thornton had constructed a demand schedule consisting of a single point. Breit (1967: 519) argues that he “does not make it possible for supply and demand to equalize at equilibrium ... [since] he has not allowed price to fulfil the [equilibrium] condition by enforcing a kind of price control in which no one bids the price up even though demand exceeds supply”.
  16. See White (1994: 159–165) for further discussion of Mill’s reply to Thornton’s criticism.
  17. de Marchi (1970: 144, 145, 148–149, 226–227) argues that the success of *On Labour* was a result of Thornton’s writing as an “insider” where he

- gained the attention not only of Mill, but other members of “Mill’s Circle”, namely, John Elliot Cairnes and Henry Fawcett (cf. Taussig 1896: 246; Breit 1967: 517, 522; Biagini 1987: 821).
18. Simon Newcomb (1875) caught the mood of the debate, thus: “It is but a few years since our whole science seemed to shake from an attack by Mr. Thornton upon some of its fundamental principles, and especially upon that best-grounded one of all, the law that supply and demand govern price. He instanced the Dutch auction of fish on the shores of the British Islands, and the sale of a horse or a house under hypothetical conditions, thereby proving that supply and demand would not control price in every possible case. But this looking up of cases in which the law did not operate was really no more a disproof of the law, than the discovery of a mountain would be a disproof of the rotundity of the earth”.
  19. See Taussig (1896: 246), Mirowski (1990: 74–81), White (1994) and Lipkes (1999) for similar views.
  20. Mirowski (1990: 75) believes Thornton’s book marked a turning point in the history of economics, partly because it received critical acclaim from Mill, and partly because its conclusions led to further developments in the theory of value.
  21. The demand for labour was given by the “whole circulating capital of the country”. The labour force was simply defined as the “whole labouring population” (Mill 1967, 5: 643).
  22. Qualifications to the rigidity of the wages fund are scattered throughout the *Principles*. For example, Mill’s second “fundamental proposition respecting capital” allows for a qualification to the supposed rigidity of the aggregate wage fund; there is no indication that the whole wage fund need be expended in a given year (Mill 1965, 2: 65).
  23. Fawcett’s 1860 *Westminster Review* article “On Strikes” elicited Mill’s first reaction (see Mill 1965, 3: 932 and Forget 1992: 45).
  24. From 1874 onwards, Fawcett explicitly referred to the debate on the Mill recantation thus: “We cannot help thinking . . ., in spite of the high authority deservedly attributed to Mr. Mill and Mr. Thornton, that too much importance has been given to the controversy”.
  25. Lionel Robbins’ perceptive (1964) review of the *Later Letters of John Stuart Mill* drew attention to a feature of Mill’s correspondence with J.E. Cairnes that has largely been overlooked by historians of economics—namely, the sympathetic treatment of the doctrine by Mill in the final edition of his *Principles*. For similar views, see Breit (1967: 522–523), de Marchi (1974, 1988) and Donoghue (1997).
  26. For example, Mill affirms his support for the “population principle” in a letter to Cairnes (Mill 1972, 17: 1587–1588).

27. Thornton complained that the price of labour is scarcely ever mentioned without provoking a reference to the “inexorable”, the “immutable”, or the “eternal” laws of supply and demand (Thornton 1870a: 66–72, 82).
28. Thornton (1870a: 83–85, 280–281, 313–321) erred in understanding the doctrine to refer to a predetermined money fund from which individual employers advanced wages to their workers. Mill assiduously warned his readers against confusing money with the wages fund (Mill 1965, 2: 55).
29. Thornton argued that no employer is bound to spend as much as he can afford; rather, “the quantity of labour which an employer needs depends upon the work he wants to have done” (see Thornton 1870a: 87).
30. Labour relations reached a climax in 1867 with the so-called “Sheffield Outrages”, which resulted in a *Royal Commission on Trade Unions* (1867–1869) to “inquire into the organisation and rules of trade unions and other associations”. For details of the pre-Commission climate between unions, government and employers, see Beesley (1867), McCready (1954–55), Pelling (1963: 50–58), Checkland (1985: 132–133), and Biagini (1987: 814).
31. Thornton cites the Amalgamated Engineers Union and the Amalgamated Carpenters union as two “model societies, whose excellence of organisation none of the others have yet reached” (Thornton 1870a: 217).
32. According to Thornton, unions did not confine themselves solely to increasing wages, but were also concerned with employment levels and other working conditions (Thornton 1870a: 200–201, 202, 253–254).
33. Mill emphasised the importance of human capital formation for social and economic progress and harmonious class relations (Mill 1965, 2: 380–381).
34. The view that trade unions could only anticipate or postpone the normal workings of the law of supply and demand was still popular among political and economic commentators during this period (Biagini 1987: 819).
35. Thornton explained how the Amalgamated Society of Engineers had successfully prevented wages from falling during a trade depression. Typically, unions tried to stabilize fluctuations in wages around an upward trend since economic upturns were more frequent than trade depressions (Thornton 1870a: 190).
36. Thornton drew a distinction between the minimum rate a firm will accept at all, and the usual or “normal” rate which determines whether the capitalist will move capital between industries. For example, Thornton considers a case in which unions could reduce profit levels in all industries without stopping firms from operating: that is, they could reduce the usual rate (Thornton 1870a: 301).

37. Thornton cited unions in the silk industry at Spitalfields and Coventry who, in their “foolish rapacity”, had driven wages too high and forced firms out of business (Thornton 1870a: 286, 302).
38. However, Thornton rejected the idea that any level of wages or any wage demand could be unfair, because “their asking will not cause it to be granted, unless the employer perceived more advantage for himself in granting than in refusing” (Thornton 1870a: 354).
39. Thornton (1870a: 264–266, 267–276) argued that employers were not beholden to one another like workers, whose sense of duty or loyalty to one another was stronger. Employers “care very little” about “the progress of his fellow-employers”, and rather, “plumes himself ... on cutting out his rivals”. However, employer combinations became more visible after the 1860s in “defense of their common interests”.
40. Potential for productivity gains also needed to accompany higher wages (Thornton 1870a: 286, 297–298).
41. Hollander (1968, esp. 523–524) argues that Mill took a much more serious view of the “population problem” than did other classical economists after the mid-1830s and feared that too “rapid a dissolution of the impediments to upward mobility would simply lead to increased population and a lower average wage rate” (cf. Mill 1965, 2: 388, 397–398 and 3: 931).
42. Consider the following passage from Mill on the moral dilemma of unionists who raise the wages of their members at the expense of non-union labour: “For (as Mr. Thornton recognises) there is no keeping up wages without limiting the number of competitors for employment. And all such limitation inflicts distinct evil upon those whom it excludes—upon that great mass of labouring population which is outside the Unions” (Mill 1967, 5: 662–663).
43. Universal membership was also recommended by Thornton (1870a: 310–311).
44. In the first six editions the italicized passage read: “But if they aimed at obtaining actually higher wages than the rate fixed by demand and supply—the rate which distributed the whole circulating capital of the country among the entire working population ...”.
45. de Marchi (1988: 156) also cast doubt over the recantation interpretation.
46. Mill explained in a letter to Frederick J. Furnivall on 13 February 1854, that “whatever helps to make them [the working class] connect their hopes with cooperation, and with the moral qualities necessary to make cooperation succeed, rather than with strikes to impose bad restrictions on employers, or simply to extort more money, will do for them what they are greatly in need of” (Mill 1972, 14: 157).
47. In this respect, Thornton’s endorsement of cooperative societies conforms to the “progressive” view held by many eminent Victorians who

- also advocated a reorganization of society along cooperative lines (cf. Hollander 1985; Kurer 1992).
48. Mill's concern with the growing tension between "labourers & employers of labour in England" led him to collate information on cooperative ventures in France (cf. Mill 1972, 16: 1103, 1389, 1439 and 17: 1671–1672).
  49. In a letter to Gustav Cohn of 22 February 1868, Mill recommended Thornton's work on the "cooperative system both in this country and others", because it contained "the most general information on the subject" available (Mill 1991, 32: 188).
  50. Ultimately, Thornton envisaged an industrial relations system based upon profit-sharing arrangements where employers would resolve to "distribute among [such workers] as should in his judgment prove themselves worthy, a portion of any increased profits that might result from their increased or improved labour" (Thornton 1870a: 396, 415).
  51. See Donoghue and Wright (2002) for further comment.
  52. Marshall benefited from studying *On Labour* before the publication of *Economics of Industry* in 1879 (see Petridis 1973: 188 n.68). At Bristol University College (1877–1881 and 1882–1883), Marshall recommended that his students study *On Labour* to better appreciate labor issues at that time (Groenewegen 1995: 288; Cook 2009: 157–159).

## Servant of the Raj

*Reform the world by example, you act generously and wisely: reform the world by force, you might as well reform the moon, and the design is fit only for lunatics.*

Jeremy Bentham *Emancipate Your Colonies* (1830)

### INTRODUCTION

When William Thornton joined the East India Company in 1836, its once sprawling and lucrative Eastern trade had all but ceased to exist while its management and administration of a large territorial empire was still expanding.<sup>1</sup> The Company had gradually evolved into an imperial ruler, responsible for the “day-to-day” governance of a vast, often unwieldy, collection of overseas territories and settlements. In the late eighteenth century, the Company responded to the increasing volume of commercial and administrative business by creating an imperial bureaucracy “located at the very heart of the Company in London”, including the appointment, in 1769, of an Examiner of Indian correspondence, who “became the voice of the Company as it was heard in India” (Bowen 2006: 184, 190).<sup>2</sup> The administrative structure unveiled at this time remained in place, with occasional reorganization, until the Company’s dissolution in 1858 (Bowen 2006: 187).

Thornton’s appointment as a clerk within the Company’s “Home Establishment” was secured through family connections. At that time,

the patronage system offered those with connections a more direct passage into positions as clerks, soldiers, writers, cadets and so forth (Bowen 2006: 123, 194). Thornton's recruitment serves, therefore, as an example of the way in which a tradition of family service that developed during the late eighteenth century had endured well into the nineteenth. Indeed, by the mid-nineteenth century, several members of the Thornton-Danvers family were tightly woven into the fabric of the Company's civil service. From 1836, Thornton served the East India Company at its Leadenhall Street headquarters in London. In 1858, when the Crown assumed administration of the Company's territories, he became secretary of the India Office's Department of Public Works. He was an active, dependable and enlightened secretary who took a warm interest in Indian affairs (Williams 1983: 83). In 1873, as a mark of his unbroken service to the India Office, Thornton was created Companion of the Bath on the recommendation of the Duke of Argyll. He held the position of secretary of the Department of Public Works, which bestowed upon its holder considerable status and generous financial benefits, until his death in 1880. Thus, William Thornton entered East India House just as its tumultuous transformation from merchant trader to sovereign power had been completed. His career provides, therefore, invaluable insights into the inner workings of a unique administrative regime devoted exclusively to the governance of the Indian empire on behalf of the nation at large.

### ENTERING EAST INDIA HOUSE

On 2 August 1836, William Thornton "entered a service which was to be the work of his life by obtaining a [junior] clerkship in the East India House",<sup>3</sup> a vacancy created by the death of John Stuart Mill's father, James Mill.<sup>4</sup> In the obituary he wrote for his close friend Mill, Thornton (1873b: 34) recalled the circumstances surrounding his appointment: "The death of Mr. Mill senior, in 1836, had occasioned a vacancy at the bottom of the examiner's office, to which I was appointed through the kindness of Sir James Carnac, then Chairman of the Company, in whose gift it was. Within a few months, however, I was transferred to a newly-created [marine] branch of the secretary's office."<sup>5</sup> The position of junior clerk was the lowest rung in the clerical establishment of the Examiner's Office. In accordance with the East India Company's policy of the day, junior clerks served a three-year probationary period without salary, although they did receive a modest annual stipend of £80. After the three-year unsalaried

probation, junior clerks normally remained in the department to which they were originally appointed (Bowen 2006: 141). It would seem that this was Thornton's experience, as well.

Thornton left no personal record of the duties he performed as a company clerk during the course of a working day. However, in the obituary he wrote for Mill, Thornton (1873b: 31) compared the terms and conditions of Mill's employment at the East India Company with those of its other junior clerks:

According to the ordinary course of things in those days, the newly appointed junior would have had nothing to do, except a little abstracting, indexing, and searching, or pretending to search, into records; but young Mill was almost immediately set to indite despatches to the governments of the three Indian Presidencies, on what, in India House phraseology, were distinguished as "political" subjects—subjects, that is, for the most part growing out of the relations of the said governments with "native" states or foreign potentates. This continued to be his business almost to the last.<sup>6</sup>

An examination of the dispatch books preserved in the India Office Library suggests that Thornton did not draft any dispatches in the early stage of his career. (At least, he did not sign off on any.) It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that his daily routine revolved around more mundane clerical and administrative tasks, such as filing documents, retrieving correspondence and writing *précis*. In fact, it was not unusual for Company employees to remain in the same department, performing the same routine tasks for the duration of their Company career, which meant that some employees became exceedingly familiar with the inner workings of a particular branch of the Company's activities even though very few clerks ever gained a fuller understanding of how their daily duties related to the Company's extensive overseas operations (Bowen 2006: 141).

In any case, Thornton was transferred, in December 1837, to the newly created Marine Branch of the Secretary's Office (Moir 1988: 34). The move rapidly improved Thornton's financial position, and, following the mandatory unsalaried probation period, his annual income rose to a very respectable £500. Such generous remuneration made the Company's home establishment an attractive proposition for professional employment. Indeed, as Bowen (2006: 140) notes, "[t]he earnings of the Company's established clerks were comparable to those of men who occupied similar positions in the offices of state." As a result, there was fierce competition for the limited positions available within the permanent home clerical establishment, which explains the need for a family connection to secure

a nomination for a vacant post. By 1839, Thornton was making enough to be required to make compulsory contributions to the Widows' Fund (a type of pension scheme for surviving widows of Company officers),<sup>7</sup> and in 1842, he began paying income taxes. In 1856, he was appointed assistant examiner in the Examiner's Office and, in 1858, to the senior administrative position of secretary of the India Office's Department of Public Works. Both promotions brought him substantial salary increases: the first, from £600 to £900 per annum, and the latter, £1,200 annually. From 1859 to the end of his career, Thornton's net salary rose slightly every few years, from £1,132 to £1,344, which afforded him "the modest prosperity of a colonial bureaucrat of a middling rank" (Mirowski and Tradewell 1999: 43).

Both promotions also brought Thornton increased responsibility and were linked to changes within the bureaucracy governing British India. It has sometimes been remarked that the daily clerical duties never really "offered any intellectual challenge to the vast majority of ordinary officers who worked outside the Examiner's Office" (Bowen 2006: 146). Thomas Love Peacock, who occupied the post of chief examiner when Thornton joined the Company, once lampooned the dull and repetitive nature of the work performed by many Company servants:

From ten to eleven, ate breakfast for seven,  
 From eleven to noon, to begin was too soon;  
 From twelve to one, asked, "What's to be done?"  
 From one to two, found nothing to do;  
 From two or three, began to foresee  
 That from three to four would be a damned bore.<sup>8</sup>

While the mundane administrative tasks carried out by many civil servants might have produced, as one contemporary put it, "an intellectual torpor bordering on the dull serenity of a monk" (quoted in Bowen 2006: 146), the Company employed many individuals who found their work both stimulating and challenging. In fact, some Company officers found the strain of work so demanding at times that they bitterly complained about the exacting environment in which they worked (Bowen 2006: 148–149).<sup>9</sup> The extended period of leave that Thornton was forced to take in 1856–1857 owing to depressive illness might well have been

caused by work-related pressures associated with his Company promotion.<sup>10</sup> For all this, however, it seems that the vast majority of Company officials “displayed a satisfactory level of commitment to their duties, and they were generally professional and serious-minded in their approach to work” (Bowen 2006: 147–148). It appears that Thornton, by and large, matched this profile.

Between 1848 and 1856, Lord Dalhousie served as governor general of India. He came to India with an ambitious programme to modernize and improve India’s public works infrastructure. The railway, in particular, he thought an important tool of economic progress. Other key components of Dalhousie’s economic and social reform agenda included postal improvements, telegraph and cable services and the introduction of scientific education programmes that would allow individuals to better appreciate the technological advances underway in other parts of the world (Zastoupil 1994: 140).<sup>11</sup> Dalhousie’s enthusiasm for the expansion of public works and the imposition of Western culture in India was matched only by his zeal for a policy of vigorous annexation of territories that were either conquered or deemed to have “lapsed”.<sup>12</sup>

Dalhousie’s term as governor general of India marked a crucial watershed for British India—and for Thornton. Owing to the scale and success of the modernizing programme, the Home Establishment created a separate Correspondence Department to handle the increased volume of official correspondence arising from Dalhousie’s programme of public works and to ensure that public works projects initiated in India were delivered in a manner consistent with an efficient and enlightened colonial administration. To this end, John Stuart Mill insisted on Thornton’s appointment to the position of assistant examiner of public works.<sup>13</sup> As a result of this appointment, Thornton was now in a position to play an increasingly important role in expressing the views of the Home Establishment as they were articulated—first, to the Board of Control, and then, to senior officials in the three Indian presidencies. Although it is difficult to judge the extent of his influence in shaping Indian policy, it is fair to say that he had some input into the framing of policy documents or dispatches.<sup>14</sup>

As the assistant examiner, Thornton was responsible for preparing draft dispatches and other policy documents relating to the company’s public works activities. On a normal working day, these dispatches were generally prepared during the morning office hours, with his afternoons dedicated to other intellectual pursuits. This routine only varied when more pressing Company matters had to be dealt with. These documents, which dealt

mainly with the construction of railways and roads, bridges, canals and irrigation schemes in India, Burma and the Straits Settlement, were then circulated for discussion within the India Office before being sent to the central administration in India. The chief examiner and his senior assistants exerted considerable influence in determining the substance of the dispatches, but before any could be sent to India, they had to be approved by the Court of Directors of the Company, and then, by the Board of Control, representing the authority of Parliament (Harris 1964: 186).<sup>15</sup>

Inspection of original draft dispatches and minute papers now preserved in the India Office Library makes it possible to quantify the dispatches a correspondence writer prepared in any given year (Donoghue 2004a).<sup>16</sup> The bulk of Thornton's drafting of public works dispatches between 1856 and 1880 centred on public works activities in the Bengal presidency. Most of Thornton's dispatches and minute papers were written during 1856–1861 and 1870–1872. The years 1860 and 1861 were particularly busy: he wrote eighty-eight and seventy in those two years, totals that reflect his increased responsibilities as the secretary of the India Office's Department of Public Works (see Donoghue 2004: 302). In a more typical year, he would write fewer than ten. The length of the dispatches varied greatly: some were only a page or two in length, and generally, these dealt with administrative matters of a peripheral nature, such as the confirmation of the delivery of stores in the Indian presidencies, or the extension of the appointment of a civil servant, or perhaps, simply a letter of acknowledgement; others were longer, sometimes amounting to more than fifty handwritten pages, often addressing more serious policy issues, such as defence, trade and public infrastructure. A great deal of the work undertaken by Thornton and his colleagues in the Examiner's Office was retrospective in nature, with officials in London often placed in the challenging situation of forming an opinion of the Crown's position in India, based on material sent home from its overseas officials. Over time, the India Office's administrative remit expanded considerably, which meant that its officials had to be able to respond to queries on a whole host of complex issues.

Thornton's drafting at India House also reflected the scope of the Company's and the India Office's economic and political interests elsewhere. For example, Thornton prepared draft dispatches on the construction of the Rangoon–Prome trunk road, which still exists to this day, and on the construction of Singapore's defences to protect the British garrison in those pivotal water lanes. Of course, he also dealt with a host of public

works proposals in the Bombay, Bengal and Madras presidencies, such as the construction of the grand trunk road from Lahore to Calcutta, the raising of the Godavery and Kistna annicuts, the building of the Ganges canal and the improvement of the Sedashegur pier and harbour in North Kanara as an outlet for the cotton from its hinterland, either supervising the drafting of dispatches or preparing them himself, while he attended to more tedious matters of administration, such as departmental budgeting. These dispatches, memoranda, letters and other policy documents highlight the fact that the governance of the Indian empire was primarily conducted via written communication to senior administrators in the three Indian presidencies. Indeed, as Bowen (2006: 151) notes, “[t]he significance of this cannot be overstated because exchanges of dispatches between Britain and Asia formed the basis of long-distance working relationships between men who sometimes had never set eyes on one another.” This exchange of dispatches or policy documents enabled India House officers to form a view of events and developments in India, although the slow lines of communication in the era before cable meant that “those at East India House could never be in possession of up-to-date news about their overseas territories and settlements” (ibid). It was this desire to collect, analyse and interpret each and every piece of information emanating from India that enabled India House servants such as Thornton who never set foot on the subcontinent to amass a fund of specialized knowledge and produce detailed studies of certain aspects of the Indian economy and to become, in time, a recognized authority on Indian public works and Anglo-Indian politics.<sup>17</sup>

### MOVING UPWARD AND ONWARD

Thornton’s responsibilities were soon to grow. Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, the British government had been working to transfer to itself the East India Company’s responsibility for the governance of India.<sup>18</sup> Factions in Britain had long resented the power of the East India Company and questioned its fitness to govern such a large and complex territory. These detractors maintained that the Company’s administrative responsibilities should be handed over to the British Crown. Standing in the way of the proposed reforms was, of course, the entire administrative machinery of the Company, led so admirably by J.S. Mill himself as its Chief Examiner of Indian correspondence.<sup>19</sup> At first, the Company had been successful in casting doubt on the wisdom of such a change by highlighting its positive achievements in the area of government administration,

including the efficiency of its civil service, the tolerant attitude it displayed towards Indian culture and religion, the uniform and incorruptible legal code and the relatively untroubled political landscape after the defeat, in 1818, of the Maratha Confederacy. In reality, however, this rosy picture of Company administration had long been fading as autocratic officials in India became increasingly intolerant, arrogant and dismissive of Indian culture and aspirations. But its fate was sealed in 1857, when a group of indigenous soldiers in its army rebelled. This momentous event confirmed the suspicions that many felt about a private enterprise driven by narrow commercial self-interest ruling such a distant and complex territory. The Sepoy Rebellion was eventually suppressed, but the political consequences were far-reaching as the two principal political forces that had shaped the destiny of the Indian subcontinent for over three centuries—the Mughals and the English East India Company—were abruptly and comprehensively displaced. In September 1858, the British government transferred the administration of the Company's territories to the Crown. This turn of events presented India House with a unique challenge that required the attention and energy of experienced hands capable of sifting the vast ocean of information that beat against the India Office for the better administration of an expanding empire thousands of miles away (Bowen 2006: 152, 171).

The dissolution of the East India Company had a pronounced effect on Thornton's professional career. The general reorganization of the Home Establishment brought mounting pressure to abolish the Public Works Department. Thornton was asked to navigate these difficult political waters and prepare an appropriate response. In late 1858, he wrote a minute paper making a persuasive case for retaining a separate public works department within the new administrative structure on the grounds that there had been a "great addition of business" in recent times, arising from "the undertaking of great [public] works in India". Moreover, he also said the Board of Control lacked "the requisite knowledge and experience required for dealing satisfactorily with subjects of a scientific, as well as practical nature" (quoted in Williams 1983: 78). Thornton's point, here and afterwards, was that as the Indian empire continued to expand, it would have to devote more resources, human and financial, to new public works initiatives to match the increasing volume of business. Failure to adjust to these new circumstances amounted to an abdication of its stated duty to "improve" Indian society. In the event, Thornton's argument proved decisive. The Department of Public Works was preserved

within the new Home Establishment, and Thornton, who could now take some satisfaction from the knowledge that his future—and that of his family—was secure, was appointed its first secretary.

For Thornton, the promotion was accompanied by an increase in salary and a widening of the range of his responsibilities.<sup>20</sup> The Sepoy Rebellion, the major turning point of British rule in India, hastened the construction of roads, railways and other public works seen as essential in preserving order and rule throughout the Indian territories. As a result, Thornton's drafting of dispatches and minute papers increased noticeably between 1858 and 1861 (Donoghue 2004: 300–302). After that period, he was aided by the several newly recruited correspondence writers, capable of training their minds on complex public works proposals (see Williams 1983: 96). Their arrival largely freed Thornton from having to draft the bulk of the public works dispatches, although he remained responsible for reading, editing and commenting upon all policy documents emanating from the department. In the 1860s and 1870s, Thornton worked alongside a highly competent Public Works Committee. Although the committee occasionally disregarded Thornton's policy advice, his strength was that he "was [not] unduly troubled by decisions of the Public Works Committee which ran counter to [his] own convictions" (Williams 1983: 89). In any case, the decision to pursue a particular line of policy was often made *in situ* without either the knowledge or support of London-based officials who duly recognized that they could seldom do much to alter the course of events in India and "could not reverse decisions of the Supreme and Subordinate Governments in India once foundations were down and brick and mortar rising" (Bowen 2006: 183, 194). This situation "bred a philosophical outlook at home" about the "the very nature of public works in India" (Williams 1983: 89). As a result, Thornton "did not press his point of view strongly or feel badly about a rejection of it" as he knew his scope for intervention was limited.

### KEEPING IN TOUCH

After John Stuart Mill retired in 1858, Thornton routinely kept his friend informed of news, personal views and other snippets of information on the India Office. This information often came in the form of the latest "gossip" on the personality, administrative and political skills, and leadership of the Secretary of State for India, where Thornton's tone is often apprehensive. An exchange of letters between Mill and Thornton in September

1860 indicates that Thornton was growing increasingly concerned about proposed changes to the governance of India that sought to block or limit the independence of senior government officials. “I shall be greatly interested by hearing more of these changes”, Mill wrote, “since, as you are aware, I think that the practical goodness of a government depends, much more than is generally supposed, on the forms of business ... The difficulties of governing India have so much increased, while there is less and less wisdom employed in doing it, that I begin to despair of the whole subject, and almost believe that we are at the beginning of the end” (Mill 1972 15: 708). Other letters contain interesting views on the capabilities of the Secretaries of State for India. In a letter dated 28 January 1862, Mill, who was about to leave for Athens, conveyed his general agreement with Thornton concerning Lord Canning’s reorganization of the Indian government. Canning, India’s first Viceroy, wanted to provide incentives that would encourage European settlement in India. The majority of prospective European settlers, however, wanted to be exempted from land taxation, which was the government’s chief source of revenue. As a compromise, Canning had proposed that a lump-sum payment of twenty times the annual assessment should be accepted in lieu of the annual payment. Neither Thornton nor Mill supported the measure, which was adopted in October 1862, because it systematically underestimated the land revenue that could be raised from European settlers, thereby narrowing the government’s income tax base. On another occasion, Thornton reflected upon the abilities of Sir Stafford Northcote as Secretary of State for India. For Thornton, and other senior India Office servants, the Secretary of State must be “a practical statesman” in his dealings with the council (Donoghue 2000: 335). In a letter Thornton wrote to Mill on 8 January 1869, he characterized Sir Stafford Northcote as timid for having failed to produce the kind of practical leadership and policy vision many India Office personnel had expected in the transition era from Company to Crown rule. Sir Stafford’s stewardship had instead been marred by indecision that threatened the smooth running of the Indian Civil Service. At the same time, he referred approvingly to the recent appointment of the Duke of Argyll as Secretary of State for India and hoped that the duke would stamp his mark on the India Office:

Here, at the India Office as far as I can yet judge, we seem to have made a good exchange of Sir S. Northcote for the Duke of Argyll. It is impossible to be much in contact with the former without liking him, but I never before

met with a man of so much capacity joined with so little force of character. Over and over again, he would, on discussion with members of his council, chalk out an excellent course, assigning at the same time excellent reasons for it, and then giving up his own judgment in deference to the noisy opposition of men as incapable of judging of anything as Mills or Macnaughten.<sup>21</sup> Now the Duke of Argyll looks and speaks as if he had a will as well as an opinion of his own—In truth his demeanour will not belie these appearances, for what we, office men, desire above all things in a Secretary of State is that he should preside over this council instead of letting them rule over him. (quoted in Donoghue 2000: 335)

In his reply of 16 January 1869, Mill concurred with Thornton's assessment of Northcote but refrained from passing judgement on the suitability of the Duke of Argyll: "What you say of Sir S. Northcote's weakness of character, giving up good reasons of his own to bad ones of other people, explains to me much of his political life ... I do not know what sort of a minister the D. of Argyll will turn out but I am glad you have not got Bright who would have had too much to unlearn, & very little disposition to unlearn it" (Mill 1972 17: 1548). During his term as viceroy, the Duke of Argyll formed a close and mutually beneficial working partnership with Thornton. Indeed, the duke acknowledged Thornton's support in connection with the establishment of a new railway network in the state of Punjab, in northwest India (see Campbell 1906: 274). Thornton later dedicated his *Indian Public Works and Cognate Indian Topics* (1875) to Argyll, and, as acknowledgment of loyal service to the India Office, the duke recommended Thornton for the Companion of the Order of the Bath (CB). When the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava, who had followed Thornton's India Office career with particular interest, learned of his investiture, he wrote to congratulate him on the CB, adding, "I must write you one line to congratulate you on your well deserved honours. I was delighted to see that your patient industry and faithful services had received this much recognition." In his reply, dated 29 June 1873, Thornton thanked the marquis for his "kind congratulations".<sup>22</sup> Loyalty and proven competence had earned Thornton a position of trust and responsibility within the India Office hierarchy. In time, this track record earned him additional honours.

For example, Thornton received recognition for his role in the establishment of the Royal Indian Engineering College, the "first dedicated civil engineering college in England" (Black 2009: 237). Thornton's role in the College's establishment stemmed from the lamentable

state of engineering, scientific and technical training in Britain vis-à-vis Continental Europe. In a series of “warning notes ... testifying to the manifold symptoms of England’s industrial declension”, Thornton (1871c: 329) argued that European nations had, for years, been investing heavily in technical universities, scientific laboratories and industrial seminaries, and, as a result, Britain’s chief European rivals—France, Germany and Switzerland—had stolen a “twenty years’ start” in the race towards “industrial supremacy”. The opening of the Cooper’s Hill facility was intended, therefore, to redress the situation by offering “didactic instruction” in Britain in the “industrial arts”. Situated on the slopes of Cooper’s Hill with views over Windsor Castle and the River Thames, the institute was formally opened on 5 August 1873 by the Duke of Argyll. The College occupied an important place in the training of engineering students for service in India, and elsewhere (Thornton 1871c: 340).<sup>23</sup> It eventually included four classrooms, library, lecture theatre, model room, dining hall, laboratory and separate accommodation for every student; 100 at first, 150 later. Typically, students received instruction in military and civil engineering from sapper (i.e. military) officers seconded from the Royal Engineers (or their Indian Army counterpart), who had completed their training at Addiscombe, Chatham or Woolwich, Britain’s leading military academies. Having completed their training, the students entered the service of the Government of India, mostly as civil engineers, at an annual salary of £420. The College’s first president, Sir George Chesney (1830–1895), who held several important administrative posts within the Indian government (including the Public Works Department) and was instrumental in the establishment of the College, worked closely with Thornton in formulating the course curriculum as well as developing the college prospectus (Thornton 1875a: 164).<sup>24</sup> Their connection in this context is detailed in a letter Thornton wrote to the Marquis of Salisbury, dated 30 September 1875, on behalf of “Colonel Chesney [who] wishes me to ask you to permit the College Prospectus for 1876 to stand over until your return. He is very anxious that the practical course question should be settled without another twelve months’ delay, and he says that for the sake of getting that done, it would be well worth while to keep the Prospectus back for a month or six weeks.”<sup>25</sup>

On the available evidence, Thornton enjoyed a generally comfortable working relationship, both with his superiors and his subordinates. Donovan Williams suggests that Thornton “had the right dash of dedication to give drive to his calling to improve India”. He elaborates on his

punctilious character and on his strengths and weaknesses as secretary of the Public Works Department.

His combination of high idealism and practical administration contained certain contradictions, but these were inherent in the way people thought about the Indian Empire in the [eighteen] sixties. They can also be explained by Thornton's rather lethargic, even undisciplined approach towards the problems of colonial administration. He meant very well but could have done a lot better. His tardiness in dispensing praise perhaps reflected a lack of certainty in evaluating achievements. This tendency to understate-ment did not sit well with those who had been to India and thoroughly understood the situation.... Nevertheless, this tall, amiable Longfellow was respected in the East India House.

(Williams 1983: 417)<sup>26</sup>

Thornton was reliable and hardworking (if somewhat inefficient), and had an affable personality that made friends easily and enemies rarely. The reference to "high idealism" by Williams reflected Britain's larger purpose in India, which was to civilize India through the introduction and inculcation of Western education, institutions, legal reforms and Christian teachings. These efforts were based on the tacit assumption of the superiority of Western methods and teachings. To some extent, Thornton observed the convention that there was a job to be done in India and Britain could not stand back until it had been completed. Yet, whatever the qualities of British rule, Thornton was aware of the uniqueness of India's peoples, institutions, religions and customs and dared to believe that Britain had something to learn from its encounter with India (Thornton 1875a: 276–277). His published writings reveal an Indian dimension to his thought: his views on and abiding interest in peasant proprietorship arises partly from a familiarity with the spectrum of traditional land tenure systems in pre-colonial India. He thus pointed out, unfashionably at the time, that special attention should be paid to the preservation and promotion of existing forms of indigenous language, custom and belief. Like Mill, Thornton believed that Indians should be gradually drawn into the civil service to learn and practice the arts of government in readiness for the day when they would govern themselves.<sup>27</sup> In these very different perceptions of Indian rule lay the seeds of much future disagreement between those, on the one hand, who felt comfortable with Britain's mission intended "to improve India" through Western education and religious reform and those, on the other, who envisaged a time when India would

be granted independence even as they justified the ongoing presence of a colonial administration until such time as self-rule had been achieved (Thornton 1875a: 25–26). Thus, even more striking than Thornton’s sense of commitment to India is his premonition, probably quite controversial at the time, that the presence of the British in India would come to an end once its duty had been carried out.<sup>28</sup>

### THORNTON AND THE PUBLIC WORKS EXPERIMENT IN INDIA, 1858–1880

William Thornton never visited India (Williams 1983: 83). However, as a long-serving, high-ranking India Office mandarin, it is hardly surprising that he devoted several publications to economic, social and political reform in India.<sup>29</sup> Unlike his friend Mill, who refrained from setting forth his views on the Indian empire in print,<sup>30</sup> Thornton wanted to give voice to his career as an Indian civil servant. To this end, he drew upon his long experience and considerable knowledge of Indian affairs to produce a variety of writings that appeared in many leading periodicals of the day, in the letter columns to the *Times*, in papers presented to either members of the Society of Arts or Institute of Engineers and as evidence before a parliamentary committee of inquiry on “East India Finance” in 1871. This sort of literary activity was not, of course, uncommon within the India Office, which had a long tradition of employees with respectable literary reputations (Bowen 2006: 145). This interest found expression in his 1875 book, *Indian Public Works and Cognate Indian Topics*, a work that brings home the scale of human, technical and financial effort required to tame the harsh Indian landscape.<sup>31</sup> It was a subject that raised his profile in the field by putting “on display the economic specifics which had absorbed much of his working life” (Mirowski 2004: 316). Indeed, after his appointment as secretary of the India Office’s public works, he was obliged to devote ever greater amounts of time and energy to the implementation of often complex and costly public works programmes there.

Thornton opened his book by extolling the potential economic advantages of a large-scale public works programme in India: “Not only are old markets made more cheaply accessible, access to new markets afforded, and production stimulated by enlarged demand for its fruits, but capital in search of investment discovers fresh fields, and producers are placed in possession of better implements and made better acquainted with better

processes” (49). Thornton also thought that the Government of India had a “national duty” to undertake “great public works” without always closely considering whether or not they would be profitable (Ambirajan 1978: 247–248). This view reflected Britain’s moral and providential obligation to improve and civilize through public works:

India never has been, nor, apart from some tremendous visitation against which human foresight would be of no avail, is never likely to be, without sufficient food for all its inhabitants, provided only the means exist of transporting food from districts from which it can be spared to those in which it is lacking. Such means of distribution would be afforded by a complete network of railways, adequately supplemented by common roads; and this consideration will fully justify Government in extending the iron reticulation into many tracts in which such costly undertakings might otherwise be indefensible.

(Thornton 1875a: 57)

For many high-ranking India Office officials, the purpose of Indian public works was to bring order, structure and routine to an otherwise disorganized and undisciplined society (see Ambirajan 1978: 247–266). India was viewed as a large blank canvas that an enlightened colonial administration could transform from a “wild and barbarian space” into a modern civilization through public infrastructure investment (Ahuja 2009: 28–29).

One of the chief examples of British technological achievement in India that marked a “turning point in Indian political and economic history” was the development of a national railway system (Alam 1970: 367). As a result, Thornton allowed himself to devote considerable space to its strategic and political importance in both his policy work at India House and in published writings on the subject. He bestowed particular attention on the Indian railway guarantee, where he pinpointed several “defects” in “Lord Dalhousie’s railway policy”—notably, the Government of India’s mistake in granting to privately owned British railway companies an iron-clad assurance of a 5% rate of return on railway investment coupled with other generous concessions, such as the provision of land at no cost to the railway companies.<sup>32</sup> Under government sponsorship, Indian railway companies incurred negligible commercial risk because they knew the government would not let the venture fail.<sup>33</sup> Thornton was, in particular, frustrated by the open-ended nature of the state guarantee, a com-

mitment which had contributed to the high early costs of construction, and therefore, disappointing commercial returns. The state and railway companies had, Thornton argued, agreed upon a contract that was “practically unlimited”, which meant that “if the first estimate for a railway should subsequently prove insufficient, it might be doubled or trebled, little choice being reserved to government but that of guaranteeing whatever amounts might successively be demanded for the completion of the undertaking, for any period, however protracted, over which its construction might be extended” (Thornton 1875a: 32). In fact, the guarantee contracts were likened by Thornton to a “heads you win, tails I lose” arrangement under which the Government of India forfeited “any possibility of gain” (Thornton 1875a: 34) since it shouldered all the risk associated with railway construction due to the terms of the guarantee. Despite having an ideological aversion to the guarantee system, Thornton had a strong attachment to Indian railways and well understood the advantages to India of an extensive railway system on strategic, administrative and commercial grounds.<sup>34</sup> He remained vigilant, however, in safeguarding the interests of the India Office and circumscribing the open-ended nature of the government’s financial liability under the guarantee scheme because it had the ability to hamper Indian railway development in the long term (Derbyshire 2007: 280).<sup>35</sup> In March 1872, Thornton was called as an expert witness to give evidence to a Parliamentary Committee established to evaluate the entire spectrum of Indian railways (Dutt 1950: 353). There, he attacked the generous terms and conditions of the guarantee system in the following testimony:

The guarantee system has not served any purpose whatsoever which might not have been served without it. I think that the contracts are a perfect disgrace to whosoever drew them up ... the undertakers of the railway, the Company, are deprived of one of the great inducements to economy; they know that whatever blunders they make, those blunders will not prevent their getting full current interest on their expenditure

(quoted in Verma 1998: 34).<sup>36</sup>

By the early 1860s, however, the Government of India had taken steps to revise the discredited guarantee system in response to what Thorner (1951) termed “private enterprise at public risk”. Again, in the late 1860s, further initiatives were undertaken, which involved the Government of India exerting tighter control over the building, financing, scheduling and management of the Indian railways, a decision largely driven by recog-

nized specialists on public works such as Thornton, Sir George Chesney (1830–1895) and Sir Richard Strachey (1817–1908), among others. At issue was the prohibitive cost of private capital. As a result, there arose a view within the India Office that the government could build and operate railway lines more cheaply and efficiently than the private railway companies, and improve commercial performance as well (Thornton 1875a: 43, 44). Indeed, Thornton argued that “substantial financial savings would be achieved from paying 4–4.5 per cent annuities instead of a 5 per cent guarantee” (Derbyshire 2007: 289). His suggestion was eventually adopted as the old guarantee contracts came up for renewal from the late 1870s (*ibid.*). Although Thornton, in his Indian writings, never seemed to inflate the importance of his own role in policymaking, it would be wrong to understate his valuable input into framing dispatches on Indian railways that were subsequently adopted as India Office policy. Like other Indian civil servants who were philosophically opposed to the guarantee scheme, Thornton displayed considerable adroitness in limiting the incursions of private railway syndicates who often wielded considerable power along the corridors of India House.

Another aspect of Lord Dalhousie’s programme that Thornton condemned was the choice of the wider gauge on a “national network of railways”. The selection of a broad gauge measuring 5 ft. 6 in. had, in Thornton’s view, imposed an unnecessary financial burden on the Indian government. “The first 5,000 miles of railway constructed in India”, argued Thornton, “must have cost five millions more than they would have done if made on the [French] metre instead of the 5 ft. 6 in. gauge” (Thornton 1875a: 40). Thornton put forward two conditions for determining the size of the gauge: “The first condition to be regarded is the maximum of prospective traffic, and this having been duly calculated, the next is the size of vehicle by which stowage for the expected traffic can be most conveniently afforded.” Given the fact that the metre gauge used on lines in Europe and North America could accommodate vehicles 6½ ft. wide, it followed that “a 3 ft. 6 in. gauge would have sufficed for India, and the whole difference of cost between that gauge and 5 ft. 6 in. had consequently been at best utterly thrown away” (Thornton 1875a: 38). In some quarters, considerable doubt was cast over the advantages of the narrow gauge. Thornton, however, was able to demonstrate, using economic arguments, that the metre gauge was far more cost effective than the broad gauge. Indeed, in an address to the Institute of Civil Engineers, he once remarked: “the one solitary reason for the Indian Government

adopting a narrow gauge was belief in its superior economy” (quoted in Kerr 2007: 74). In the ensuing debate, Thornton played a key role in ensuring that the metre gauge was accepted as India Office policy (Kerr 2007: 74–75).<sup>37</sup>In fact, as Kerr (2007: 177–178) convincingly argues, Thornton “certainly channeled the subsequent debate” on the width of the Indian railway gauge and was “deeply involved in the decision to introduce meter gauge railroads”. As a result, when the Government of India embarked upon an aggressive railways construction programme of its own in the 1870s, more than 50 % of the lines laid adopted the narrow (metre) gauge (Kerr 2007: 74).<sup>38</sup>

Thornton was also much interested in the development of internal waterways such as canals and irrigation as vehicles of economic progress.<sup>39</sup> In addition to the railway network and arterial roads that the British constructed in India to promote commerce, the major conduit of inland trade was the system of navigable canals, dykes and drainage systems (Ahuja 2009: 96). These pivotal navigable waterways were the primary means of transporting cotton from the interior to the seaports, bound for the great mills of Britain. India’s traditional irrigation system was based upon small-scale wells and inundation canals. It was not designed to accommodate a significant increase in the volume of inland cotton trade. Since India lacked enough indigenous capital and technical skill to support the construction of large-scale irrigation schemes throughout the land, Thornton proposed that the Public Works Department embark upon an extensive programme of irrigation works primarily to aid transportation of goods throughout the country.

This proposal rested on four considerations. First, irrigation works, coupled with an extensive railway and road network, would alleviate the distress caused by famines.<sup>40</sup> Second, the construction of irrigation canals and modern drainage systems would bring under cultivation previously unirrigated parched land, increasing agricultural productivity, the volume of inland freight moving along the waterways and the “annual profits of the agricultural community”.<sup>41</sup> Third, while the inland canals opened up for cultivation vast tracts of previously arid and uninhabitable terrain, they would also expose the inaccessible interior of India and provide an outlet for its raw materials, particularly cotton. Fourth, the widespread propagation of irrigation and drainage systems would improve “the sanitary condition of villages and towns”, providing new settlers with “the means of supporting themselves with some comfort” (Thornton 1875a: 118).

The first and last considerations seem to have been strongly motivated by Thornton's conception of the "civilising mission", which was to establish a connection between the economic importance of public works schemes and the "moral obligations of a Government to its subjects to see that all *necessary* public works are provided" (6; emphasis added).<sup>42</sup> Major irrigation works were seen as an essential agricultural input, and therefore, as instruments of economic and human progress. The object was to banish forever the unpredictable monsoon that, when it failed, unleashed untold misery on a rural population heavily dependent upon agriculture for its livelihood.<sup>43</sup> Now, with the construction of canals, dykes and drains, the parched landscape could be turned over to agriculture, and so, secure human mastery over natural forces. This was certainly the way that many India Office officials, such as Sir Arthur Cotton, saw it. They wrote in triumphal tones of navigation and irrigation canals as more effective forms of transport and famine protection than railways (Stone 1984: 25). Thornton also laid considerable emphasis on extensive irrigation works as agents capable of relieving the acute shortages that accompanied famine, so fostering the welfare of Indian society. In other words, he recognized the protective role of irrigation works in a primarily agricultural economy heavily exposed to (unpredictable) climactic disruptions. When, in 1871, Thornton gave evidence to the Government Select Committee on East India Finance, he reported on the series of irrigation and navigation works (known as the Orissa Project) that were built to avert a severe famine that had gripped Orissa in 1865–1866. The Orissa famine prompted Thornton to criticize the way the government had implemented its famine policy and urge them to "extend irrigation to the utmost" and "at whatever financial risk" to ensure that "the horrors undergone by Orissa" were never again repeated (Thornton 1875a: 56, 117). Irrigation canals were, therefore, a keystone in the colonial government's food security policy. Although Thornton well understood the economic significance of canals and irrigation projects, he admonished those who developed or endorsed particular projects that failed to meet stringent financial targets (Stone 1984: 24).

Experience had shown that there was often a high financial price to pay for major irrigation works that went awry. The Godavery navigation scheme was a classic case in point. Thornton, who had come to take a very pessimistic view of the project by the mid-1860s because it was proving a financial drain on the government, was unable to dissuade Sir Charles Wood, then Secretary of State for India, from abandoning the undertaking, which one historian has described as "a wild scheme from the begin-

ning” (Harnetty 1965: 729).<sup>44</sup> Sir Stafford Northcote summed up the nature of the problem, thus: “We seem to be spending money with very little certainty of obtaining a return for it” (quoted in Williams 1983: 438). As so often happened, the rashness with which British administrators continued a bad project once initiated assumed a life of its own even when the prudent course of action was to abandon it. Not until 1871, in the case of the Godavery works, however, more than seventeen years after its commencement, did the Home Establishment finally cut its losses and quash the “hopeless scheme” (Williams 1983: 440). All this might conceivably have been a price worth paying if these (often scandalously) costly irrigation (and railway) projects had banished forever the perennial menace of catastrophic famine that engulfed large swathes of the subcontinent when the monsoon failed, resulting in horrific loss of human life and destruction of local communities. Yet, this was rarely the case, even though it was often remarked that the “moral obligation” of irrigation works was to secure the Indian people “from the greatest physical calamity to which all mankind is liable—the curse of famine and starvation”. In fact, Thornton’s tenure as secretary to the India Office’s Public Works Department coincided, unfortunately, with severe famines in North India in 1868–1869 and 1874, but the most catastrophic was the 1876–1878 famine that “spread from the Madras Presidency through Mysore, the Bombay Deccan and eventually into the North Western Provinces” (Davis 2001: 33). At times, therefore, the desire to “promote good works in India” jarred with the harsh commercial realities of the British Raj in ways that underline the inherent contradiction between the commitment to its stated commercial objectives and the desire to fulfil its humane and enlightened duties.<sup>45</sup>

Another important element in Thornton’s plan to improve India was his proposal to reform the land tenure system. His tenancy reform programme had two primary objectives: first, to offer security of tenure to peasant farmers, and second, to regulate the share of output paid as rent on farm productivity. An interesting feature of Thornton’s views on land tenure reform in India was the way that he looked to his earlier writings on peasant proprietorship in Britain and in Continental Europe to guide his thinking and how, in turn, the example of India shaped his opinions on the system of tenure and taxation most appropriate to rural Ireland. Now, however, he tempered his views to match a different set of indigenous customs, laws, and institutions. An important example of this synthesis is found in his discussion of how peasant property

rights were established and land rents were collected in the subcontinent.<sup>46</sup> Thus, Thornton revealed a preference for a land tenure system derived from Thomas Munro's *ryotwari* model as against the alternative "Bengal" system of Lord Cornwallis, based on large landholders known as *zemindars*.<sup>47</sup>

Prior to British rule, a system of traditional property rights had made secure the land tenure of small-scale farmers, with landownership shared between co-proprietors. In the north-west provinces, for instance, the property rights governing the plots of land cultivated by the ryots (peasant farmers) were "decidedly democratic". Here, moreover, there were customary limits to the rents that could be collected from the tenant, the rent was assessed on an individual basis and was "moderate" and was "fixed for a period of thirty years" (Thornton 1875a: 205, 214). Under the reforms of Lord Cornwallis in the 1790s, however, the economic position of small-scale tenant farmers in eastern India deteriorated markedly. There were, moreover, notable instances where the state had failed to protect the livelihoods and interests of the most vulnerable members of society. This situation was particularly acute in the Bengal Presidency, where the Cornwallis reforms implemented during the late eighteenth century had reduced the majority of Bengali peasants to destitution.<sup>48</sup> In the Bengal Presidency, wrote Thornton (1875: 200), the land tenure system had "fallen greatly into decay", creating the conditions in which "different kinds of *zemindars* [landed elites] came into being"; their main activity was "keeping to themselves whatever surplus they could screw out of the peasantry". "The zemindars of Bengal", he wrote, were the "close counterparts ... of Irish landlords" and were "practically at liberty to extort whatever the *ryots* can, by threats of eviction or otherwise, be induced to pay" (204).<sup>49</sup> Indian ryots had, in short, been stripped of their property rights by a new class of large-scale land holders, zemindars, created by the British colonial administration. The motive, of course, was economic—namely, the need for revenue collection to be maximized. The resemblance between the zemindars and British landed aristocracy was not lost on Thornton, who held a life-long contempt for "landlordism" and the English aristocracy. The heart of the problem, which was largely the making of the British administration, was that the ryots were increasingly losing their occupancy rights because of the lawless activities of the zemindars.<sup>50</sup> Without recourse to the political or legal system, the peasant farmers received little protection from the exploitation and appropriation of the landed and political elite. As a result, they were "entitled to an indefinite, or at all events very ill-defined, share

of the gross produce of the land within [their] jurisdiction” and had little incentive to work hard (197).

Thornton saw the zemindari land tenure system as a barrier to social progress and economic development. What was required, he declared, was a credible set of rules that regulated rents, neutralized the intrusions of the predatory elites and ensured that the cultivators were secure in their property rights. As an ardent supporter of peasant proprietorship in Ireland, Thornton lamented these state-led changes to landownership on the subcontinent, especially in light of the fact that the Government of India, as the paramount power, was in a position to determine the pace and scope of land tenure reform in India. The government should exercise its power to make whatever arrangements were necessary to ensure the wider public benefit. His assessment of the existing property system was that it had spelled disaster for a large number of peasant farmers who were charged exorbitant rents and possessed no property rights to the land they tilled. In contrast, the land tenure arrangements in place in India before British rule were far superior to the Cornwallis reforms. Indeed, Thornton believed that India and Ireland suffered from the common fate of being ruled and exploited by a colonial power whose priority was still to protect the economic interests of the imperial metropole.<sup>51</sup> Thornton was, in fact, a staunch advocate of appropriating to Ireland the paradigm of peasant proprietorship which had prevailed in India during pre-colonial times—further evidence of the way in which his views on landownership, in general, and the Irish land system, in particular, relied heavily on his Indian experience (see Dewey 1974b: 56–57 and Gray 1999: 155 for further comment).

To this end, he identified an alternative system of land tenure known as the “ryotwari system” and adopted in other parts of India, under which the ryots were secure in their landholdings. This system, which Thornton saw as “an immense improvement” on the revenue system administered by middlemen, featured customary limits to the rents that could be collected from rural cultivators. The government made direct revenue settlements with the ryots, the assessment was generally “moderate” and the rent was “fixed for a period of thirty years” (205, 214). In addition, the ryots were protected from intermediaries, such as the zemindars, in the revenue settlement and enjoyed the benefits of their hard work and initiative.<sup>52</sup>

Once predatory landlordism had been restrained, Thornton wrote, “the ryots would participate abundantly in the good done by canals of irrigation in increasing the fertility of the soil, and by railways in facilitating

access to market. Their fair share in returns from these investments of public money would no longer be, as at present, almost entirely intercepted by the zemindars" (243). Although Thornton said that the ryotwari system was an improvement over the Cornwallis reforms, he thought it too had shortcomings; most particularly, it did not extend to rural cultivators "any species of beneficial ownership", as did peasant proprietorship (206). He conceded, nevertheless, that the "Bombay plan" represented "the next best position, that, viz. of perpetual lessees", because the revenue settlement between the government and the farmer was "always equally light though not stationary", the property rights of the tenants were well-established, and the intrusions of the landed elite were curbed (208).

### HOME RULE

Thornton's call for land tenure reform also stressed the need to preserve India's rich cultural and political heritage. Although Thornton acknowledged the benefits to be derived from the introduction of Western legal, educational and democratic principles, he felt it was best to move slowly and cautiously until more was known of India's people, languages, customs and institutions (see Williams 1983: 421–423, for further discussion). To this end, his Indian writings point to the benefits of introducing Western educational practices into India by establishing Western schools providing tuition in science and literature. The adoption of such institutions, initially introduced in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was driven by the assumption of the benefits to be derived from "anglicizing" Indian society, a process of acculturation increasingly fed by evangelical opinion from the early nineteenth century. There remained, of course, considerable controversy concerning how much Western knowledge to include in government-sponsored education programmes. Thornton himself was at pains to point out "the short-comings of Asiatic learning in respect of science, philosophy, and all modern discoveries and improvements" (259). These considerations led Thornton, in turn, to chastise the Indian government for devoting considerable energy and resources to improving educational facilities in India without also privileging the English language as the chief medium of instruction in local schools and colleges. Support for such enterprises enabled "increasing numbers of native young gentlemen to shine forth as literary and scientific lights". Once this group of educated cadres had received their Western training, they would constitute the clerisy or "higher strata of society" responsible, in turn, for passing on

to their “social inferiors” those intellectual and moral habits appropriate to “the diffusion of civilization and the attainment of liberty” (265, 272, 277). Such views, which can make for uncomfortable reading today, are a sharp reminder of the limitations of Thornton’s sympathies in certain respects. It should be noted, however, that Thornton never advocated the wholesale replacement of the institutions of traditional Indian learning, where the “vernacular dialects” had long been taught, with Western-style government-funded schools; for Thornton, although convinced of the superiority of Western knowledge, was well aware of the high value that the Indian people placed on their own learning.<sup>53</sup> Here, Thornton upheld the ancient Indian custom of the state setting aside funds to support institutions of *both* Hindu *and* Muslim instruction (Zastoupil 1999: 130–131; Frykenberg 2006: 474).

Thornton reassured readers that the plan was not to displace India’s traditional way of life so much as to supplement it, where the legitimate interests of Indian society were guarded by the same legal principles and standards that applied at home or wherever Britain possessed authority. The principle of “equality of privileges” (275) hinged, of course, on its being flexible enough to accommodate the customs, traits and biases of local constituents. Thornton seems to envision the development of the Indians tastes, judgement and capabilities—that is to say, their enlightenment—coming from an amalgam of India’s own ancient beliefs and practices that were innate to its people tempered by British ideas and ideals that were adaptable to indigenous society. Such actions fed, in turn, the perception that elements within the Indian Civil Service were concerned with looking after, and capable of judging, the interests of indigenous peoples.

The motive for the view was partly imperial pragmatism, stemming from fear of unrest, but it also grew out of a genuine desire to preserve, not overturn, India’s traditional political and cultural institutions. Thornton had inherited a vision of empire from the East India Company and believed that Britain possessed inherently superior legal and political institutions. Less advanced colonies such as India were not yet ready for self-rule. For the moment, then, the metropolitan nation must retain ultimate political control in India, and continue to direct its economic, social and political reform agenda. But eventually, the Indian empire would have to be abandoned in favour of home rule. The first step in this process was to draw Indian people into the civil administration, permitting them to accomplish on their own what the British thought needed to be done (see

Zastoupil 1994: 197–198).<sup>54</sup> In short, India should be administered by Indians and in accordance with their own customs, a view premised on the notion that the time would come when India would be self-governing:

If British rule in India is to be permanent, it must become popular with the natives, which it plainly cannot be while continuing to seethe them, as it were, in their mother's milk, shutting them off from advancement in their own land, avowedly because they were born and bred there. We need not hope to reconcile the children of the soil to the presence amongst them of us strangers, unless we admit them to equality of privileges, and afford them equal facilities of access to, and equal chances of success in, every honourable career; unless every branch of the public service, covenanted or uncovenanted, be thrown open to them, and native birth and parentage cease to be disqualifications for any local dignity whatever, even for that of Governor-General or of Commander-in-Chief.

(Thornton 1875a: 274–275)

Even though greater Indian representation in the Anglo-Indian bureaucracy was the ultimate goal, Thornton (like most British officials) thought India should be kept within the benevolent fold of the British Empire because it was still capable of doing more for the Indians than they could do for themselves. Unless the rulers strive for this ennobling ideal, that is,

unless ours be a mission of civilisation, there is no warrant for our continued presence in India as rulers. As long as we retain that position, we are bound to accept all its responsibilities, on condition, too, of abdicating if we find ourselves unequal to them. (246)

And he wrote:

The sole way in which England can justify her retention of India is by availing herself of it for the benefit of the people, and doing more for them than they are capable of doing for themselves. But of the obligation thus incumbent on her, she can acquit herself only in proportion as she renders India worthy of independence, and she will not have acquitted herself of it completely unless, whenever India shows herself worthy and desirous of political freedom, she consents to set India free. (273)

For Thornton, the eclipse of the authority of the British Raj was both inevitable and an essential component of lasting improvement in the sub-continent. However, he did not foresee Britain's eventual withdrawal as a

sign of failure; rather, it would herald Britain's finest hour in India. The following passage nicely encapsulates his thinking and that of a certain section of his generation.

Neither, if fate otherwise decree, and if by spontaneous movement, originating in an impulse communicated by England herself, the most lustrous of oriental jewels be severed from the British crown, will this be any detraction from—nay, rather will it be a brilliant addition to, our country's glory. As to every individual, so to every nation, its appointed task in life; its own proper share in the great work of promoting God's kingdom on earth; and to none has been vouchsafed so grand a share as to ourselves. (277)

What is striking about this passage is that, having spent so much of his career immersed in the cause of empire, Thornton pressed forth such arguments far in advance of British imperial policies. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, "no economist of standing had urged the political separation of India from Britain" (Ambirajan 1978: 58). Thornton, in contrast, came to realize that for Britain to hold its Indian subjects to a political standard different from that enjoyed by British subjects at home was untenable because it undermined Britain's own moral claim to be ruling India for its own benefit—a view that was exceptional at the time (see Ambirajan 1978: 48–58, for further discussion). It should be remembered that, although Thornton held many of the same crude judgements and prejudices about India and its peoples that his contemporaries did, he also took the stance of certain members of his generation of Indian officials who believed that Indian institutions, languages and customs were worth preserving as far as possible. Given the deeply ingrained cultural prejudices of the period and the highly stratified environment in which he lived and worked, it is astonishing that Thornton would dare to contemplate the notion that Britain's destiny was to dismantle its imperial enterprise and quit India permanently once its task had been fulfilled. It need hardly be stressed how progressive such views were at the time.<sup>55</sup>

## CONCLUSION

William Thornton's India Office career was one of the defining experiences of his life. Having joined the East India Company during its heyday, Thornton progressed steadily through the ranks—due, in large measure, to the patronage of John Stuart Mill. In time, with Mill's assistance, he became responsible for the daily operation of the Public Works

Department and for the preparation of its dispatches. However, only a few months after assuming this new position, Thornton fell seriously ill and was forced to take an extended period of leave in order to recover his delicate health. It is hard now to fathom what brought on this mysterious illness which, he later recalled, “for nearly a year absolutely incapacitated me from mental labour”. Perhaps he did not relish the new role within the higher echelons of the Company’s administrative structure or maybe he found his sudden elevation in the Company hierarchy more onerous than he had anticipated. Whatever the reason, Thornton was unable to give his full attention to the details of his day-to-day duties. He faced the unenviable prospect of an early retirement when Mill, with characteristic kindness, agreed to take on “for the space of twelve months ... the whole of my official duties, in addition to his own”, actions that almost certainly extended Thornton’s budding career at India House and speak volumes about Mill’s own generous nature (Thornton 1873: 35). In practical terms, that assistance meant Mill prepared “some forty-eight Public Works drafts between May 1857 and April 1858, after which Thornton recovered his health and gradually was able to resume his regular duties” (Moir 1990: xxxii). Naturally, part of Mill’s anxiety on his friend’s behalf stemmed from a desire for Thornton to resume his official duties, so that Mill could resume his own unfinished literary projects.

After the administrative responsibilities of the East India Company were passed to the India Office and Thornton became secretary of its Department of Public Works in 1858, he came to realize that public works could play a crucial role in revitalizing Indian society, acting as a stabilizing and civilizing force, even as he pinpointed a host of defects in Lord Dalhousie’s original policy programmes. Equally, Thornton exerted himself in promoting Indian education and saw the potential value of gradually building upon what was best in India’s traditional practices and institutions. Despite these beliefs and this idealism, the daily experience of dealing with Indian administration inculcated Thornton with a degree of pragmatism and flexibility that shielded him from narrow ideological prejudices. He knew that if British rule was to be legitimate that the political and social foundations of its rule must be regulated by tolerance, respect and justice for all members of Indian society. He adopted the stance of the few who pronounced it a breach of the mandate of empire and a gross dereliction of its moral duty to pursue any other course of action.

Although Thornton was, in many respects, a conventional civil servant, his economic and philosophical beliefs placed him among the vanguard

of reformers in the India Office, even if he was not really in a position to do much to implement major reforms. The British had been taught to think of Indian people (and other colonial subjects) as brutish, backward and uncivilized, and to view their imperial mission as bringing Western development and modernity to peoples and places that had always lacked them. While most British officials still tended to adhere to the assumption of British paramountcy, Thornton's writings make it clear that he remained deeply sceptical of the assumption that the British Raj was rescuing India from the economic ravages of despotic rulers and backward social and political practices and institutions. There is, in fact, a persistent ambivalence in Thornton's arguments about the whole British enterprise in India. Even so, Thornton (1875a: 219) thought Britain had a moral obligation to "watch, protect, and foster the interests of the peasantry, as being at once the most numerous and most defenceless portion of the rural population". Failure to honour this commitment rendered dubious Britain's moral claim to rule in India. The sympathy he displayed, moreover, towards developing an understanding of Indian culture (including the retention of indigenous institutions), coupled with his open-minded ideas on home rule and land tenure reform, seem in advance of his contemporaries at the India Office.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the British government grew increasingly anxious about the emergence of a nascent Indian nationalist movement. While the Indian National Congress was not formally established until 1885, there arose a movement in both Britain and India dedicated to rousing the kind of support for political reform that ultimately led to the creation of a coherent, more formal nationalist agenda. Until the end of his life, and despite his official obligations, Thornton's zeal for social and political reform in India remained largely undiminished. His sympathy for the cause of Indian self-determination and political independence persisted in the Indian writings he penned during his last years. Thornton, if anything, became even more committed to this cause over time prompting some astute observers to interpret his writings as marking a gradual transition in colonial attitudes to the Indian nationalist cause. For example, the outstanding South Indian nationalist, G. Subramania Iyer, made a case for Indian home rule based on Thornton's earlier diagnosis of the Indian situation (Chandra 2006: 88–89 n.35). It is possible, therefore, to venture the argument that Indian nationalists could draw inspiration from an India Office official whose Indian writings were helpful

in kindling the aspirations of an emerging Indian nationalist programme—evidence enough of their being in advance of the time.

## NOTES

1. The East India Company had lost its monopoly privileges or charter with India in 1813 and with China (the last of its commercial privileges) in 1833 (Bowen 2006: 157, 220).
2. The importance of the Chief Examiner in the policymaking process cannot be underestimated. As Bowen (2006: 192) explains, “the influence of the Chief Examiner and his assistants was strongly exerted within the whole process through which policy for British India was developed and expressed in London”.
3. The quotation is from the *Times* obituary notice that appeared on Friday, 18 June 1880.
4. James Mill joined the East India Company in 1819 as one of three assistants to the Chief Examiner, William McCulloch, whom he succeeded in 1830 (Reeves 2007: 41). Meanwhile, in 1823, he had appointed his son, John Stuart Mill as a junior clerk in the Examiner’s Office. The controversial nature of both James Mill’s promotion and his son’s appointment is discussed in Moir (1990: xiii–xiv).
5. The official record of Thornton’s appointment is as follows: “Resolved with reference to the Courts’ Resolution of the 27 *ulto*, that Mr. William Thomas Thornton be appointed Junior Clerk in the Established branch of the Examiner’s Office on probation for one year, under the Regulations of the 9 March 1831” (India Office Library, L/AG/30/12).
6. The court minutes explain that it proved possible to employ Mill “in preparing drafts of despatches, instead of performing the duties usually assigned to persons of his standing”, because of “the great pains bestowed on his education”, coupled with his own “acquirements which are far in advance of his age” (quoted in Moir 1990: xiii).
7. On Thornton’s death, his wife, Elizabeth Evelyn (1818–1903), received an annual pension of £400, commencing 25 June 1880.
8. The quote is from Bowen (2006: 144).
9. John Stuart Mill sometimes referred to the “endless drudgery”, “oppressive weight of business” and “mechanical drudge” associated with his East India House duties. Mill’s post did, however, afford him “intervals of leisure” to pursue his own intellectual projects (see Ambirajan 1999: 224).
10. Thornton complained about the burdens of India Office work. For example, in a letter to Mill, dated 26 October 1867, he revealed that, “[t]hough I am generally fresh enough ... in the morning, I soon get fagged by the day’s dwindling, and I believe that the [obvious] thing would be at

once to retire on a pension. But the sacrifice of income which this would involve is greater than I could at present make without a good deal of embarrassment. So I mean to try to hold on for another year or eighteen months. After that if I can only get free with strength remaining to carry out some of my long cherished plans. But the dream is too pleasant ever to come true, I feel" (Donoghue 2000: 333).

11. H.J. Habakkuk (1940: 788–789) notes that, before 1850, expenditures on public works in India amounted to a paltry £250,000, but by 1854, they had grown to an impressive £4,000,000, largely due to the public works schemes initiated under Dalhousie's administration.
12. The doctrine of "lapse" was a situation where rulers of dependent Indian states died without a legitimate heir or successor and the administration of the relevant territory would automatically lapse to the Company or paramount power (Hoppen 1998: 157).
13. At the same time, three separate public works departments were established in each of the Indian presidencies of Bengal, Madras and Bombay.
14. On the role of the chief examiner and his assistants in the process through which policy for British India was developed and expressed in London, see Bowen (2006: 193).
15. For a detailed account of the procedure by which drafts prepared in the Examiner's Office were submitted at various points to the Company chairman, the appropriate committee of the Court of Directors, the Board of Control, and the Court of Directors as a whole, see Moir (1986: 140–50).
16. Dispatches prepared by Thornton are easily identifiable by his signature appearing on the inside page of an original dispatch, and by his handwriting in the case of minute papers, which replaced the dispatches in 1860 as policy documents.
17. Thornton (1875a: 172) once likened the administration of Indian public works to "coils of red tape".
18. From the eighteenth century, senior British political figures, including Lord Clive, began questioning the Company's fitness to govern an empire (see Bowen 2006: 188).
19. Mill, casting his mind back over three decades of Company service, believed that one of the great strengths of the Indian government was that it had been "carried out in writing", which acted as excellent insurance against corruption and inefficiency (quoted in Moir 1990: 30, 33).
20. In 1861, and again, in 1870, Thornton received a personal allowance of £100 as a director of the Madras Irrigation and Canal Company (see the India Office Salary Records series L/AG/30/17/1 and L/AG/30/17/2).
21. Sir Charles Mills (1972–1872) and Elliot Macnaughten (1807–1888) were original members of the Council of India (Williams 1983: 418). They also served on the Public Works Committee when Thornton was

- secretary of the India Office Public Works Department (Williams 1983: 429–430).
22. The Marquis' letter is preserved in the Thornton family papers. Thornton's reply to the Marquis is preserved in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland.
  23. Black (2009: 235–237) has argued that the College's brief and precarious existence (from 1871 to 1906) "probably delayed the development of state-subsidised university engineering faculties in Britain".
  24. For the curriculum at the Indian colleges and the connection between military and civil engineering in Britain and India during the nineteenth century, see Black (2009: 212, 215).
  25. The Duke of Argyll acknowledged Thornton's role in the establishment of the College in a letter to Grant Duff dated 14 August 1869: "Thornton was in favour of the plan [to make salaries depend on success]—I suppose it is novel—But I see no reason why it should not work. I do not think however that it can be essential to good working" (Grant Duff Collection Mss Eur F234/50.51).
  26. Foster (1924: 239 n.1) explains how Thornton acquired his India House nickname as follows: "William Thomas Thornton, already mentioned as another friend of Mill, who thought highly of him and his works ... not only wrote on such subjects as over-population, peasant proprietors, and Indian public works, but also published three volumes of poetry of mediocre quality ... The appearance of one of these was the occasion of a happy jest, for the due comprehension of which it must be premised that Thornton was about the tallest man in the building. 'Did you know that Thornton was a poet?' one of the staff asked a colleague. 'H'm,' was the reply, 'I always knew he was a long fellow' "
  27. Efforts to recruit Indians into the civil service in the 1860s and 1870s were "very slow". The "Indianization of the officer class was never seriously considered until the twentieth century" (Hogben 1981: 752–753).
  28. Mill believed Britain would be better off without its Indian empire (see Capaldi 2004: 241–245). In fact, it has sometimes been suggested that the middle third of the nineteenth century was marked by a "retreat from empire" frame of mind (Hoppen 1998: 157). Despite pockets of support for the idea, no leading political figure of the nineteenth century ever seriously entertained it.
  29. On occasions, Mill, who acknowledged Thornton's expertise in relation to Indian public works, advised correspondents to contact Thornton, who "knows everything that is doing in India in the way of public works" (Mill 1991: 197–98). Leslie Stephen (1886: 197–98) observed that Henry Fawcett benefited from Thornton's knowledge of Indian public works and used "some statistical information about Indian products and railways" in

- his *Manual of Political Economy* (1883) that Thornton had supplied. Sir Leslie recalled that Fawcett “often discussed Indian questions with [Thornton]” (342).
30. Ryan (1999: 5) points out that Mill’s writings on Ireland relied “on India for examples of land tenure systems that frustrate the advance of peasants and rural populations generally”. Zastoupil (1999: 111–112) argues that Mill’s “intellectual debt to India House ideas” should not be minimized.
  31. Thornton’s book received favourable reviews in the *Academy* (by James Minchin), the *Athenaeum* (1875: 815–816) and the *British Quarterly Review* (1875 62: 540–541). In 1877, F.R. Conder (1877 65: 394) critically appraised Thornton’s book in the *British Quarterly Review* as part of a longer review of recent publications on Indian public works.
  32. Thornton commented on the Indian railway guarantee in minute papers prepared for the India Office in 1869. For example, Thornton wrote two minute papers, “Extract from Memorandum on Indian Railways” (India Office Library Box 323) and “Further Memorandum on Indian Railways”. At the time, Thornton was heavily engaged in evaluating the purchase of the guaranteed railways from private railway companies (see IOR/C/139 ff. 41–44). In October 1876, he wrote a further minute, arguing that the Secretary of State for India should look to purchase the “Main Line” from the East Indian Railway (IOR/C/139 ff. 123–125).
  33. Derbyshire (2007: 279) notes that “India’s guaranteed railways absorbed between 13 and 17 % of British portfolio foreign investment between 1850 and 1870.
  34. From the perspective of the Government of India, strategic and administrative motives prevailed as the national railway system enabled vital military personnel and stores to be moved more efficiently to either famine-prone districts or key military outposts.
  35. Bhattacharya (2005: 185–186) refers approvingly to Thornton’s work critically appraising the “unusually high” cost of construction of railways in India.
  36. Thornton was called to give evidence together with his wife’s cousin, Sir Juland Danvers, who was Government Director of Indian Railways. Dutt (1950: 353–354) considered Danvers and Thornton “the most important witnesses on the subject of Indian railways”.
  37. Thornton’s efforts to convince the Government of India to sanction the cheaper and lighter metre gauge were partly successful (Derbyshire 2007: 285).
  38. In 1873, in recognition of his work on Indian railways, Thornton was awarded the Telford Premium, a prestigious engineering prize, by the Institute of Civil Engineers. This award “gave him particular satisfaction since he always used to say that he did not know the difference between a rail and sleeper”.

39. Thornton's two papers on the construction of irrigation schemes as bulwarks against famine were awarded the Society of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce Medal: the first, on 6 May 1876, for his paper on "Irrigation Works in India with especial reference to their remunerativeness"; the second in 1878 for a paper titled "Irrigation regarded as a preventative of Indian Famines".
40. Thornton's (1841) observation that famines were less the result of inadequate food supply and more the product of certain groups in society, particularly landless and penurious tenant farmers, lacking the financial means to acquire staple food items such as bread at the prevailing market price, bears a resemblance to Sen's (1981) "entitlements argument" for famine relief (see Donoghue 2010: 118, 124 n.17).
41. In contrast to the railways, the major irrigation works undertaken by the Indian government generated, in many instances, an attractive rate of return on capital. "Thus," wrote Thornton (1875a: 116), "the Cauvery canals are reported to pay 23½ per cent. on their cost. The Godavery and Kistnah works are credited, somewhat extravagantly, perhaps, with 45 and 16 per cent respectively; and the Western Jumma canal probably pays quite 30 per cent."
42. Thornton (1875a: 22) included under "necessary public works" the provision of "roads, railways, bridges, canals of irrigation or navigation, embankments, harbours, docks, lighthouses, law courts, barracks, and a variety of other edifices subservient to purposes of general administration, civil or military." It did not include "monuments of personal ostentation," although he admitted that the "Anglo-Indian Government [had] not been particularly remiss in providing palatial residences for its presidents."
43. In a letter to the Marquis of Salisbury, dated 4 October 1877, Thornton referred to "the dismal famine pictures which your own mind had formed independently".
44. Thornton's role in this extraordinary example of British folly is reviewed in Harnetty (1965: 720–21 n.63, 723 n.70) and Williams (1983: 431–42). Thornton grew wary of Charles Wood's ability to make sound decisions in relation to Indian public works, as recorded in a letter by Mill to Helen Taylor, dated 28 January 1860: "He [Thornton] told me some instances of the ignorance & presumption of Wood which startled even me" (Mill 1972 15: 660–661).
45. Ambirajan (1978: 64–65, 70–80) argues that at the time there was little support within the Indian Civil Service for the view that the government had a responsibility to try and save people from distress in periods of famine, nor for increasing public expenditures on famine relief. Thornton was an exception.

46. Thornton (1875a: 196) was aware that “customary rights” to land tenure exhibited “very different degrees of vigour in different parts of India”.
47. For a neat summary of the dichotomy between the zemindari and the ryotwari land systems prevailing in British India, either at different times or at the same time in different places, see Englehart (2011: 765–766).
48. Thornton was ferocious in his condemnation of the Permanent Settlement of 1793 (see Thornton 1875a: 201–204, 220–223).
49. Thornton’s comparison here mirrored the mature view of Mill in his *Principles of Political Economy*, which compared Irish land reform with land tenure reform in India under British rule (see Thornton 1875a: 194–204; and Mill 1965 2: 319–20).
50. Thornton (1875a, 199–200) described Zemindars as local agents “whose remuneration consisted of a fixed proportion of the gross receipts”; “native princes,” who retained the “management of their ancestral domains”; and the descendants of “military leaders and robber chiefs”.
51. Nagai (2006: 3–9) argues that interest in the “Irish Question” was keenly felt among the Bengali intelligentsia.
52. Thornton identified different types of “ryotwara settlements” throughout India, but saw “the prevailing settlement” in the Bombay presidency as “one of a far better pattern” to most others (Thornton 1875a: 207).
53. Thornton (1875a: 264) refers approvingly to the language proficiency of children “in many Levantine cities... talking Greek, Turkish, French, and Italian”. His own father, Thomas Thornton, spoke all these languages as well as English.
54. Mill’s influence on Thornton looms large here. In the period after James Mill’s death, the younger Mill developed a more sophisticated vision of his father’s “direct rule” project for improving India. He came to realize that permanent improvements could never be imposed on India, but had to be crafted by Indians (Dube 1999: 47).
55. Bell (2006: 289) has convincingly argued that the waning of interest in the “civilising mission” during the late nineteenth century was mitigated, in part, by the notion that duty had “compelled the British to remain in India, to accomplish the mission, and to uphold the honour of queen and country”.

## Burning Words

*What other people may think of the rightness or wrongness is nothing in comparison to my own deep knowledge, my innate conviction that it is wrong.*

—Mrs. Gaskell (1855)

### INTRODUCTION

After the critical success of *On Labour* (1869), Thornton needed another distraction and found it in the study of metaphysical and ethical subjects at a time when new scientific knowledge was posing serious challenges to Christian doctrine.<sup>1</sup> Two landmark publishing events particularly caught Thornton's attention. The first, in 1857, was the publication of Henry Buckle's *History of Civilization in England*, which proposed a scientific treatment of human behaviour in the tradition of Auguste Comte, the French social thinker whose positivist doctrines were still in vogue in English intellectual circles (Burrow 1966: 80; Collini 1991: 70–71). Then, in 1859, Charles Darwin finally unveiled his path-breaking account of the evolution of the organic world via natural selection, *The Origin of Species*, which dealt a decisive blow to William Paley's argument from design. "The effect on the educated in Britain was immediate and drastic" (Waterman 2008: 134).<sup>2</sup> Now, it was much harder to believe in a world designed by a supernatural being as events in nature were being categorized and ordered by scientific laws without recourse to theology. The claims of "scientific naturalists" played a central role in hastening the process of secularization within Victorian society.

At a time when belief in the God of Christianity was being weakened by the “professional turn in science”, Thornton never wavered in his belief in the existence of a God who had revealed himself in a remarkable array of contrivances in nature designed to make man’s life easier and happier. These ample proofs of God’s existence provided Thornton with a measure of scientific support for religious belief. His response to modern scientific developments was to conceive of a unified “rational religion” where “arguments from design” and “Darwinian ideas” were seen as compatible realms. The resulting amalgam of science and religion found expression in the publication of *Old-Fashioned Ethics and Common-Sense Metaphysics with some of their applications* (Thornton 1873a).<sup>3</sup>

Thornton’s adherence to certain philosophical and religious doctrines points to the growing schism between modern (professional) scientists and older (amateur) science writers (Lipkes 1999: 110).<sup>4</sup> Thornton (1873a: 267) conceded that, as scientific knowledge advanced, “unbelief in a God ... advanced equally, quickening its pace, too, as the particular branch of knowledge styled ‘physics’ spread”—the decline of religion was inevitable unless scientific findings were harmonized with religious belief. In his view, however, the operation of the laws of nature—Newton’s laws of gravity, Darwin’s and Spencer’s evolutionary theories—were living proof of God’s existence: “We observe”, he said, “the most perfect harmony between structure and law, law moulding structure and structure utilizing law” (200). Moreover, the existence of a creator could be demonstrated from examples in the natural world—the genesis of the eye, sand upon the seashore and the mathematical precision of the beehive. The “universe must have an author”, he urged repeatedly, “fully equal to its original construction, its subsequent development, and its continued maintenance” (268). As a self-confessed theist, Thornton believed that God intended the laws of nature to sustain life on earth, to create new life and to modify the existing “conditions of life” (210, 223). Although his efforts to prove God’s existence using scientific reasoning largely missed their mark, his metaphysical writings provide but one instance of the efforts being made to harmonize the argument from design with recent advances in scientific knowledge.

### HISTORY NEVER REPEATS

In 1863, Thornton published a review of Henry Buckle’s *History of Civilization in England* in *Macmillan’s Magazine*, subsequently republished in *Old-Fashioned Ethics and Common-Sense Metaphysics with some*

*of their applications.* Thornton disagreed with Buckle, but found his work both a stimulus and a target for his thought. A self-taught man of independent means, Buckle's reputation rests entirely on his *History of Civilization in England*, published in two volumes in 1857 and 1861. In it, he set out to prove that the progress of human society was subject to the same laws of motion as the natural sciences. Buckle asked: "Are the actions of men and therefore of societies, governed by fixed laws, or are they the result either of chance or of supernatural interference?" (Buckle 1857, 1: 8). In this, he was influenced by the work of Auguste Comte, and some English critics considered him a disciple, but in fact, Buckle inveighed against Comte's positivist doctrines, even as he accepted the basic Comtean premise that the regularity of human behaviour corresponded with scientific laws of motion.<sup>5</sup> Armed with new statistical methods, Buckle attempted to show that murders, suicides, marriages, and so on, all conformed to laws akin to those in physics and astronomy. "The great truth", Buckle remarked, "is that the actions of men ... are in reality never inconsistent, but however capricious they may appear only form part of one vast system of universal order" (quoted in Ball 2002: 371). His intention was to establish, in short, a genuine science of history. Buckle's idea that human behaviour is governed by uniform laws as precise as those of physics caused a great stir when it was published in 1857 (Semmel 1976: 373). While some hailed his boldness in emulating the precision of the physical sciences in his study of human society, most reviewers dismissed his efforts to apply scientific laws to human affairs (Semmel 1976: 379–380). The most common complaint was that human actions were not governed by immutable laws, but instead, by the dictates of free will. Thornton also took offence at his deterministic denial of individual freedom and considered as invalid the notion that historical events occurred in a regular and predictable pattern.

Buckle's *History of Civilization in England* chronicles an attempt to formulate a concept of history as a developed science capable of imparting important practical lessons about human behaviour (Burrow 1966: 106, 111). In *History*, Buckle presents an argument (supported by statistics) suggesting that despite the essentially unpredictable behaviour of human beings, there exists a self-regulating mechanism or principle in human affairs. Towards this end, four hypotheses are ventured aimed at elucidating "the laws of European history" and English civilization. The first proposes human progress as dependent on scientific progress, the second presents science as dependent upon "a spirit of skepticism" and the third recognizes scientific discoveries in aid of intellectual truths

as having surpassed moral claims. Finally, the movement towards civilization was impeded by “the protective spirit ... the notion that society cannot prosper, unless the affairs of life are watched over and protected at nearly every turn by the state and the church” (Buckle 1861, 2: 1). These hypotheses were then to be evaluated against historical facts in certain European countries and North America, laying the groundwork for the commencement of the central treatment of civilization in England (Collini et al. 1983: 193). Buckle’s exegesis of English civilization, though incomplete, succeeded (via the first two volumes) in exciting considerable comment and criticism by positing that all human life had its basis in the “glorious principle of universal and undeviating regularity”.

The “pending controversy” over “the possibility of constructing a Science of History” drew a sharp riposte from Thornton (1863b: 25), who based an immediate rebuttal upon the fundamental premise that, “in human affairs, there can be no reoccurrence either of antecedents or of consequences”. While Thornton conceded that “from an extensive historical survey may be drawn large general deductions on which reasonable expectations may be founded”, he denied, nevertheless, the possibility of a science of history as being able to “bear the same relation to political events as Optics and Astronomy do to the phenomena of light and of the solar and sidereal systems”. In such a system, he postulated, a science of history would need to “consist of a collection of ‘social laws’, duly systematized and codified, by the application of which to given states of society the historical student might predict the future course of political events, with a confidence similar to that with which he could foretell the results of familiar chemical combinations, or the movements of the planets” (Thornton 1863b: 26). This approach carried an explicit denunciation of the theory supporting some measure of determinism in the lessons of history. In refuting the proposition that “the actions of men are governed by eternal and immutable laws”, Thornton bolstered his argument upon the definition of *scientific law*.<sup>6</sup> Thornton held to the idea that for “the existence of a scientific law ... there should be uniformity of phenomena”, proclaiming further, that “in human affairs, uniformity is impossible”. Thus, he concluded, “it follows that in human affairs there can be no scientific laws”. Thornton appealed to the historian who had to be sensitive to the various dimensions of the thought and feeling of the past. Historical events could not involve a particular kind of ordered knowledge about civic life; nor could their lessons be treated as maxims derived from the observation of repeated historical circumstances. Above

all, however, modern experiences could not arise as the intelligible consequence of past life. Thus, Buckle's mechanistic approach lacked those qualities of historical insight and analytical discrimination essential in deriving a comprehensive evaluation and understanding of past events. As Thornton argued in the following passage:

For, as cannot be too often repeated, a law is merely a record of recurrences; and in human affairs there can be no recurrences of the same aggregate either of causes or results. There being then no historic laws, there can be no Science of History, for science cannot exist without laws. (Thornton 1863b: 31)<sup>7</sup>

Thornton's scepticism of a positivist science of history was based, in large part, upon the way in which historical propositions or adages were then being deployed as vessels of political or historical wisdom. In this regard, he had reason to charge Mill with having made "use of some expressions which may be construed into a qualified approval of [Buckle's] general views".<sup>8</sup> Thornton refers to certain passages in Mill's *System of Logic* implying that "circumstances from which human motives and, consequently, human actions result are continually recurring with a certain regularity" (Thornton 1863b: 33). Particular exception is taken to the phrase, "conditional predictions", on the grounds that the phrase infers nothing more than conjectures, "and conjectures, however ingenious and reasonable, cannot be admitted within the pale of science" (Thornton 1863b: 34). Thornton concludes this mild rebuke (as he often did when criticizing Mill) on a cautious note, explaining to the reader that any differences between himself and Mill revolved around more than the mere adoption of a "new appellation". "The language used by [Mill] on this as on all other occasions", surmises Thornton, "is too clear and precise to admit of its being supposed that he has used a new phrase without attaching to it a new signification, or to permit the writer of this article to believe, as he fain would do, that a point of nomenclature is the only point of difference between himself and one from whom it is impossible to differ without diffidence and self-distrust, and whom of all living men he most respects and admires" (Thornton 1863b: 35).

Like many others, Thornton dismissed the scientific claims of history as sacrificing belief in those qualities that made man fully human—free will and moral law. In doing so, Thornton foreshadowed the kind of criticism he subsequently levelled against the abstract principles of classical

political economy where the belief in the definition of scientific law (which implied “foreknowledge”) could not be reconciled with the view that human conduct was “susceptible of variation in the same society” (and, hence, “human volitions are free”). He also held that “the true nature of a scientific law ... simply professes to describe the order in which certain phenomena have been observed uniformly to recur”, explaining that a scientific law, as he understood it, “would cease to be a law if one single exception to its statement could be pointed out”, a comment intended as much for Mill and Cairnes as for Buckle (Thornton 1863b: 28).<sup>9</sup>

### ANTI-UTILITARIANISM

Some of the sharpest attacks in Thornton’s book focused on utilitarianism as an ethical principle. His underlying concern was laid out in an article published in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1870, entitled “Anti-Utilitarianism”. Thornton was well aware that his intention “to be partly controversial” in the article would meet with considerable opposition (Thornton 1870b: 314). Events would prove him correct. Thornton had, in fact, been labouring for many years on “the subject of Utilitarianism”, initially raising concerns about it in correspondence with Mill in the early 1860s while holidaying in Marlow, Buckinghamshire (Donoghue 2000: 333). Indeed, the question of the connection, if any, between justice and utility was first broached by Thornton in a *Fortnightly Review* article in October 1867.<sup>10</sup> The matter resurfaces in several letters between Mill and Thornton during the 1860s, in which Mill remains largely unconvinced “by the principles of justice” that Thornton subscribes to (Mill 1972, 16: 1319). Indeed, in a letter to his friend, dated 19 October 1867, Mill pointed out that “the whole question of the rights of the poor & obligations of the rich” that Thornton had laid down would “lead to consequences very different from those which you draw from your theory of justice” (Mill 1972, 16: 1320).<sup>11</sup>

In “Anti-Utilitarianism”, Thornton railed against the principles of utilitarianism, labelling them as wrong. Thornton’s key objections to utilitarianism can be summarized briefly as follows. First of all, he denied its principal “moral rule” that “whatever adds to the general happiness must be right” and “that whatever diminishes the general happiness or prevents its increasing must be wrong” (321). Such a criticism of utilitarianism was, as several reviewers remarked, a misapprehension of the essence of the utilitarian system made by someone not overly endowed

with philosophical learning. It certainly damned him in the eyes of George Simcox (1873: 192), who argued that “the account of utilitarianism ... might pass muster as long as the writer keeps to exposition, but when he comes to criticism it is plain that he does not understand the body of postulates which lie behind what he describes and criticises”.<sup>12</sup>

Next, Thornton rejected the utilitarian view that “the morality of actions depends wholly and solely on their consequences [and] that the motive has nothing to do with the morality of an action”. According to Thornton, calculating the consequences of an action in order to determine its morality is impossible because “we can seldom, if ever, be quite sure what will be the result of our conduct”. “Meaning to cure, we may only too probably kill; meaning to kill, we may not impossibly cure” (ibid: 329). In short, he attempted to demonstrate, using a series of “extreme and imaginary cases”, that utilitarianism would justify what existing morality condemned and condemn what existing morality recognized as virtuous (see Lipkes 1999: 124–126). Here, Thornton appears to confound the worth of a particular act with the worth of the agent, while Mill made it clear in *Utilitarianism* that “a right action does not necessarily indicate a virtuous character, and that actions which are blameable often proceed from qualities entitled to praise” (Mill 1969, 10: 221). In other words, the consideration of motives was relevant in evaluating the worth of agents, but not actions.

Finally, Thornton repudiated the utilitarian principle involving the sacrifice or “prescribed subordination of one’s own [interests] to the general good” (334). He then outlines examples where “sacrifices to ourselves” could conceivably lead to situations where “the total sum of happiness” diminishes. The *British Quarterly Review* (276) reviewer politely pointed out that “enlightened selfishness secures the greatest amount of happiness, that the interests of the individual and of the mass are not at variance, that happiness is best secured by each attending to his own, and that such conduct is therefore best”. Recall, though, that Mill repeatedly emphasized that “the great majority of good actions are intended, not for the benefit of the world, but for that of individuals, of which the good of the world is made up” (Mill 1969, 10: 220). For Mill, the pursuit of personal autonomy or individual freedom was considered the highest or most fundamental good, the cultivation of which enhanced prospects for others to follow—all of which conduces to the common good (Capaldi 2004: 41). Mill, in fact, offered an equivalent of a proof of this proposition, as follows: “happiness is a good: that each person’s happiness is a good to that

person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons” (Mill 1969, 10: 234).

This frontal attack on one of the central tenets of Mill’s system of philosophy did not tempt Mill himself to enter this controversy publicly (Everett 1939: 222–223). Instead, Mill’s response was conveyed in private to Thornton in a letter dated 21 November 1870:

With regard to Utilitarianism, you have not said anything yet which would give to the most irrational or most irritable person living anything to ‘forgive’. But were you to attack my book or my arguments with any amount of severity I shd only see in the attack, coming from one of whose friendship I am so certain, an additional proof of friendship. Of course one is more glad when a friend agrees with one in opinion than when he differs, unless he brings one over to his opinion. This you have not done, as yet. (Mill 1972, 17: 1781–1782)

However, J.E. Cairnes, Mill’s leading disciple, did mention the matter in a private letter to Mill on 10 September 1870, dismissing Thornton’s article as “the weakest thing of his, I think, that I have ever read. He might at least have mastered the distinction between ‘intention’ and ‘motive’ before undertaking to refute utilitarianism” (Lipkes 1999: 210). Mill’s indictment of Thornton’s essay was contained in a reply to John Elliot Cairnes on 15 September 1870, where he agreed with Cairnes’s opinion and evaluated “Anti-Utilitarianism” in the following way:

Thornton’s article is, as you say, very weak; but metaphysical subjects are not among his strong points. You have laid your finger very precisely upon one of the principal of his many fallacies. All he says is answered by anticipation in Bentham’s Introduction to *Morals and Legislation*, and in my father’s *Fragment on MacKintosh*. (Mill 1972, 17: 1765)

In fact, some of the passages in Thornton’s article must have made Mill wince to read. Thornton braced himself for what he felt would be a savage rebuttal to his critique of utilitarianism. Yet, in an otherwise supportive commentary, Mill tactfully suggested that his protégé had failed to take sufficient account of the salient passage in “Bentham’s Introduction to the Principles of *Morals & Legislation* or in my father’s *Fragment on Mackintosh*”, where “you will find all your arguments answered” (Mill 1972, 17: 1782). While awaiting Mill’s likely chilly reaction to his next article, Thornton, who was holidaying outside London at the time with his wife and daughter, wrote to his close friend on 22 September 1872:

[My] own immediate literary labour is, I am rejoiced to say, very nearly completed. I am in the last chapter and have not I believe more than a dozen pages to write. ... One instalment of the book, the chapter on Huxleyism is to appear in October's Contemporary [Review]. I shall be rather nervously anxious for your and Miss Taylor's judgement upon it. (Donoghue 2000: 339–340)<sup>13</sup>

In the last letter Mill wrote to his friend before his death, he congratulated Thornton “on so nearly having finished your book. It is sure to interest me whether I agree with it or not” (Mill 1972, 17: 1913). Mill, as mentioned already, had a considerable tolerance for the philosophical deviations of those with whom he shared political and social sympathies.

In November 1871, with the Franco-Prussian War nearing its climax, Thornton briefly stepped away from his philosophical studies to write an article on the divisive issue of “prohibiting the export by neutrals [i.e. non-belligerents] to belligerents of arms and other munitions of war” (Thornton 1871a: 489). The article was in response to a leader in the *Times* adopting what Thornton considered to be an erroneous and contradictory approach to international maritime relations. His work in this area was not a passing fad. In 1863, Thornton had occasion to address this very issue in a short piece penned in the midst of the American Civil war, where he had argued that “a neutral ship navigating the high seas is, *de jure*, neutral territory” (232). In war, however, it was perfectly justifiable for “the Federals on the one hand, or of the Confederates on the other, to prevent, if they can, the delivery of the cargo at Charleston or Baltimore” (232). In addition, the rules of international relations stipulated that, when two nations were engaged in war, “a belligerent has ... a perfect right to blockade any town” (Thornton 1863a: 234). Even the Confederate sympathies that Thornton harboured did not unseat his conviction that in a state of war, it was perfectly legitimate for “Federal squadrons, patrolling their [i.e. Confederate] coasts, [to] prevent them from sending their cotton and tobacco to market” (Thornton 1863a: 237). The doctrine that blockades should be effectively maintained was an important maxim of international maritime law that Thornton accepted, in strict accordance with “the universal and immemorial practice which as yet constitutes the sole international law on the subject” (Thornton 1871a: 500).

### DARWIN'S BULLDOG

On 22 September 1872, while recuperating in Richmond, Thornton wrote to Mill, informing him that, during his most recent European sojourn, he

had been “filling up the intervals ... with reading, writing and rambling, and getting on with my book like a house on fire” (Donoghue 2000: 338). In the same letter, Thornton also informed Mill that his article criticizing Thomas Huxley’s doctrine of idealism would appear in the October 1872 issue of the *Contemporary Review*. Although there is no record of Mill ever having conveyed to Thornton his opinion of the essay, H.R. Fox Bourne (1837–1909), the owner of the *Examiner* in the early 1870s, did recollect a conversation with Mill from which it can be inferred that Mill had not been carried by Thornton’s philosophical opinions. Fox Bourne wrote: “I may be permitted here, without Mr. Thornton’s knowledge, to recall a remark made by Mr. Mill only a few weeks ago. We were speaking of Mr. Thornton’s recently published *Old-Fashioned Ethics and Common-Sense Metaphysics*, when I remarked on Mr. Mill’s wide divergence from most of the views contained in it. ‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘it is pleasant to find *something* on which to differ from Thornton’ ” (quoted in Thornton 1873b: 36, n.1).<sup>14</sup>

Thornton’s essay had been prompted by Huxley’s November 1868 address in Edinburgh, “On the Physical Basis of Life”, later published in the *Fortnightly Review* (February 1869). In both, Huxley had declared that human beings were merely “thinking machines”. Their mental processes or thoughts could be wholly explained by the physical operation of the brain.<sup>15</sup> If the mind and its operations (including volition) can be resolved into brain function or “molecular changes”, Huxley argued, then the divide between mind (internal world) and matter (external world) disappears. By this time, Huxley had already acquired a reputation “as the leading Victorian symbol of religion and science in opposition”.<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, when his *Fortnightly Review* article appeared, Thornton snapped up a copy and eagerly absorbed its contentious subject matter. It is safe to say that Thornton’s “Huxleyism: a fragment”,<sup>17</sup> together with the final three articles published in *Old-Fashioned Ethics and Common-Sense Metaphysics*, constitute his “modest contribution” to what became known as the “war between science and religion” during the mid-Victorian decades. In a postscript to a letter to J.E. Cairnes dated 27 March 1869, Thornton evaluated Huxley’s piece in the following way: “I like Huxley’s article and admire it as much as you do, or should do but for the conclusion which in spite of his explanations I cannot but regard as materialism, a thing of all others I most abhor” (Donoghue 2000: 330). Indeed, it was Huxley’s materialist conception of the mind, itself part of a wider effort to expel theology from science, that Thornton particularly

objected to. But it was the appearance in 1859 of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, followed closely in 1862 by Herbert Spencer's *First Principles*, that fundamentally altered the whole tenor of the science and religion debate (Waterman 2008: 134). "Science, which for nearly two centuries had taught the learned that religious belief rested on sure foundations, suddenly changed its tune" (Waterman 2008: 134). Now "scientific naturalists" such as Huxley were calling for nothing less than the complete separation of science from theology, manoeuvres deeply troubling to theists such as Thornton, who believed that religion should illuminate rather than be separated from science.

During the late 1860s and early 1870s, Huxley presented his "mechanistic" explanation of mental processes to Victorian readers in a series of papers—namely, "On the Physical Basis of Life" and "Bishop Berkeley on the Metaphysics of Sensation". When "On the Physical Basis of Life" appeared in 1869 in the *Fortnightly Review*, it created a furore, even though its key arguments in relation to "matter, force and law" had already been anticipated by several prominent Victorian scientists, including Alexander Bain. While the main thrust of "On the Physical Basis of Life" lay in a direction other than the relation of brain function to thought, the paper did infer that the "mind and its operations, including volition, were explicable in terms of brain function, 'molecular changes', or what we might call mechanistic causes" (Block 1986: 378). Critics, like Thornton, argued that man—and particularly, his will—were unique, and so, repudiated Huxley's "mechanistic" or "materialistic" interpretation of the human mind. Huxley, in response, further developed the implications of "On the Physical Basis of Life" in another article titled "Bishop Berkeley on the Metaphysics of Sensation", where he "poses the hypothetical case of a human being deprived of all senses except those in the palm of his hand. This supposed case helps him to argue that the sense of self depends upon—if it is not actually constituted by—physical sensation and brain function" (Block 1986: 381). Thornton's own examination of Huxley's hypothetical arguments led him to dispute the inferences that Huxley had drawn as instances or proofs of an exclusively "mechanical equivalent to consciousness".

Throughout his life, Thornton had retained a lively interest in metaphysical questions even if, on Mill's account, they were never really his strong point. Huxley's "On the Physical Basis of Life" and "Bishop Berkeley on the Metaphysics of Sensation" prompted Thornton to formulate an appropriate response. His narrative in "Huxleyism: a fragment"

is primarily concerned with providing an estimate of the status of matter and the status of mind in Huxley's philosophical system. To begin with, Thornton refuted Huxley's statement "that matter and life are inseparably connected, and that there is one kind of matter which is common to all living things" (666).<sup>18</sup> At several points, he challenges Huxley's view as denying "that there is any intrinsic difference between matter and spirit" because such a view amounts to "a mechanical equivalent of consciousness" (673). "He knows perfectly well that he has here been talking materialism", Thornton remarks, "but he insists that his materialism is only another form of idealism" (*ibid.*). For Thornton, the external physical world is a construct of consciousness, while the human mind is not a construct of consciousness, since it is the human mind that constructs the external world, based on sensations and memory (675). In order to prove that Huxley's doctrine of materialism is false, Thornton sets up a series of thought experiments intended to show that mind and matter or materialism and idealism "are utterly incapable of amalgamation, or indeed of even being harmoniously approximated without being first deprived of all the characteristic traits which at present entitle them to their distinguishing appellations" (682). At the same time, Thornton disputed the relevance of the hypothetical constructs or examples that Huxley had adopted in the mind-matter debate that were "meant to provide unconventional thinking about alternative consequences of certain kinds of reasoning" (Block 1986: 384). Having refuted Huxley's key hypothesis to his own satisfaction, Thornton then proceeded "to prove ... that life is, in no sense, either a product or a property of matter" (670). These efforts to dislodge Huxley's "materialistic creed" were based primarily upon a number of rhetorical devices deployed to press home his polemical point. Most notable is the use of metaphor in attempting to show how the application of common sense and common logic reinforces the scientific facts he presents (687-689).

Thornton's underlying purpose in participating in the scientific debates raging around him was to confirm a belief in "the existence of a thinking self" (internal world) and in "the existence of a non-self or external universe" (external world). The two elements of this doctrine, then, are the hypothesized existence of the mind (internal world) and the "infinitely extended space ... composed of various kinds of matter" (external world). "Of this external universe", he says "we know scarcely anything beyond the bare fact that it exists" (688). Outside the "thinking self" (mind), he continues, "there are potentialities capable of somehow

or other communicating sensations to the thinking self; but of the nature of these potentialities our senses teach us absolutely nothing” (ibid). After weighing the competing explanations of Huxley and Berkeley as to whether anything is known of the “qualities” of the “external world”, Thornton explains, after rigorous argument, that “what we fancy we see in matter, we do not see; that what we seem to feel we do not feel; that the apparent structure and composition of matter cannot therefore possibly be read” (688). An external object or “portion of matter”, Thornton defined as something that is believed to exist even when an individual is neither perceiving nor thinking about it. The only grounds for the belief in the existence of material objects, then, are the sensations of the qualities of the object that the mind knows and validates. From all this, Thornton appears to arrive at an automatic or intuitive belief in the external world. Nature or the external world is a construct of the mind; it “cannot be conceived otherwise than as some species of spirit or mind”, but the question “[u]nder what head the mind ... ought to be classed, and whether it emanates directly from the mind of Omnipresent Deity, are questions which the imperfection of human faculties had better be content to leave unanswered” (690). In the end, Thornton had formulated to his own satisfaction a connection between the internal world and the external world, but had failed to account for the inner workings of the human mind (cf. Thornton 1873a: 134).

### NEMESIS OF FAITH

In a letter to J.E. Cairnes, dated 26 March 1869, Thornton informs him that Mill had sent him a copy of “the new edition of his father’s *Analysis of the [Phenomena of the] Human Mind*”. “My copy has reached me”, Thornton continues, “just at the time when I am better prepared for reading it than I was ever before in my life. I mean to begin it next week, and expect to be greatly interested by it”. He also mentions having recently read “Mill’s article on Bain’s *Psychology*, which has given me rather a longing for some more of the same kind of reading” (Donoghue 2000: 329). Thornton duly read James Mill’s *Analysis*, but found the idea of association that it sanctions wanting as a scientific law because it incorrectly “assumed regularity in the succession of ideas” where no such “regularity of occurrence” is necessarily obeyed (123). Mill senior’s *Analysis* was but one among many books Thornton had recently been reading to bone up on the latest scientific research and debates. At this time, Thornton also

acquainted himself with David Hume's classic *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748).<sup>19</sup> Thornton felt sufficiently humbled by the task of "pointing to holes" in the "metaphysical coat" of " 'by far the greatest philosopher' and 'acutest thinker' of his own age" (1873a: 113), that he portrayed himself as merely "an annotator on Hume". Thornton had made a preliminary study of the key "philosophical sentiments and principles" that Hume had formulated in the *Enquiry*, such as the "Origin of Ideas" and the "Association of Ideas". But it was Hume's doctrine of cause and effect, which supposes that the causal power constraining one phenomenon to follow another were effects of either "custom or habit", that Thornton chose to examine in some detail (127).

In Hume's opinion, human behaviour is determined or conditioned by inherited knowledge, habits and customs. The human mind had, through habit, been conditioned to expect certain causes to precede certain effects.<sup>20</sup> Thornton flatly rejected this Humean proposition because it failed to take sufficient account of "intuition and ratiocination" as factors that assist in revealing the relation between cause and effect: "Habit plainly cannot be its own parent", Thornton observed, "[i]t enables us to repeat more easily what we have already repeatedly done, but it cannot be the cause of our doing or being able to do anything for the first time" (ibid). There were, of course, instances where causal connections were formed by prior experience: "No one needs to be told that inferences ... are drawn with increased confidence from observation of habit" (127). For Thornton, however, this was merely a partial solution to a problem that warranted a more thorough examination, in particular, the notion of the "power attached to the [human] will": "I hold that between cause and effect", *contra* Hume, "there is a binding power" (140). Where, he then asked, had "that [causal] power ... been derived" (141). Now, it would be reasonable to expect a discussion of the usefulness of knowledge of "molecular" and other "forces" at work in different physical, biological and even mental processes. But, instead, there is a sudden but rather predictable shift in the narrative where Thornton confesses that "we believe in a God", and accordingly surmises "that the power ... may possibly be directly from God".<sup>21</sup> He continues: "Far from there being any difficulty in conceiving Omnipresent Deity to be exhibiting its might in every speck of universal space in every instant of never-ending time, it is, on the contrary, impossible to conceive otherwise" (141). Having resolved to his own satisfaction that the notion of the "connecting power" comes from a "Supreme Being", he immediately shifted his attention to

the equally important task of formulating the right sense of providence. Here, Thornton received the decisive impulse from the argument from design which implied a shaping force behind nature (*ibid.*).

The conception of “a Supreme Being” presented in “David Hume as a Metaphysician” incorporated many of the features of divine providence found in Thornton’s (1854a) poetical work. First of all, he addresses the thorny issue of the so-called freedom of the will. If God is all-knowing and all-powerful, then everything is predetermined and human beings are denied free will. Thornton did not believe, however, that God is all-powerful, but rather, “is capable of forming most exalted conceptions of justice, benevolence, and goodness in general, and of feeling the most eager desire to act up to his own ideal” (154). Recall the argument immediately above where Thornton disputed the Humean proposition that causation or the sequence of cause and effect was revealed from prior experience, custom or habit. Such chains of reasoning do not reveal anything about the *relationship* between a cause and its effect. Of course, Thornton accepted instances where causal connections were drawn from repeated experience. But Thornton was more interested in another aspect of causation that, he thought, Hume had failed to heed. He wanted to know the answer to the following question: what kind of power, if any, binds effects to their causes? By intricate and difficult reasoning, Thornton concluded that “the power ... may possibly be directly from God”. For some, however, the notion that individual actions were constrained by “the immediate control of divine nature” seemed to rule out the principle of free will. Thornton disagreed. Indeed, at several points, he stressed that it made little sense to believe in the “impossibility of any liberty of human will” because “human volitions” were “as thoroughly free as our own feelings assure us they are” (142–143). As shown below, Thornton found it possible to integrate a genuine sense of human free will into metaphysical discussions, according to the religious sacraments and precepts that he espoused.

Next, Thornton embarked upon the perilous enterprise of unpacking the “religious hypothesis” in Hume’s provocatively titled “Of a Particular Providence and a Future State”, a deeply ironical but highly effective refutation “of the then most widely accepted argument for the being of a God, the argument from design” (Mossner 1978: 656).<sup>22</sup> There is little need to rehearse the particulars of Hume’s refutation here, suffice it to say that Thornton believed that he understood the nature of “the fallacy involved in it” and took it upon himself to correct it. Ultimately, Thornton

was presented with the task of justifying the connection between the laws of nature and the existence of God's providence.<sup>23</sup> After careful extended argumentation, Thornton concluded that "God is good and just in the very highest degree", "that the creator is [superior] to the creature [man] in virtues which the creature derives from Him [God] alone", that "the universe is the work of His hands" and that "faith in such a providence [is] not simply not irrational, but the direct result of a strictly inductive process" (154). It is noteworthy that Thornton's acceptance of God's benevolence and omnipotence as articles of faith anticipated lines of thought more vigorously pursued in the two remaining articles in his collection. In these, Thornton's more thorough inquest into the existence and attributes of God and of the unique spiritual compact between God and Man were expressions of his deeply held Christian faith.

In "Recent Phases of Scientific Atheism", Thornton presents his most explicit statement in favour of the argument from design that contains within it "the only absolute certainties legitimately deducible from it" (201). The relevant passage is worth quoting in full:

Where so much aptness is, adaptation surely must have been: where arrangement is so plainly conducive to ends, the ends must surely have been foreseen, and the arrangement effected by design and according to preconceived plan. And there cannot have been design without a designer or designers: the plan cannot but have had its author or authors: nor could the plan have been executed without an artificer or artificers. Author or authors, too, artificer or artificers, be the same singular or plural, must have possessed, individually or collectively, not less of wisdom, power, and goodness than are displayed by the finished work. (Thornton 1873a: 200)

In another passage, which continues the same line of thought, the core of the argument from design, as Thornton understood and imparted it, is made:

Such is the argument from design, and such, to my thinking, the only absolute certainties legitimately deducible from it; and although these, in comparison with the numerous probabilities ordinarily associated with them, may appear somewhat meagre, yet are they intrinsically of exceeding moment. They constitute the only basis on which any rational religion, any that appeals to the intellect as well as to the feelings, can rest securely. Whoever accepts them, by whatever other name he prefer to call himself, is essentially a theist. (Thornton 1873a: 201)

The first quotation, with its emphasis upon aptness, design and arrangement, is weighted towards the argument from design. It proceeds from the “perfect harmony between structure and law”, to infer that there must be an intelligent cause responsible for the order and symmetry of the universe. By means of such inference, not only the existence, but one of the attributes—intelligence—of God is proved. “It might be said”, argued Thornton, “that while the chances against Nature’s habitual action being *unintentional*, or the result as it were of mere fidgetiness or restlessness, are an indefinite multiple of infinity, the chances against its being *purposeless* and *undesigned*, without view to end or object, is the same multiple doubled” (Thornton 1873a: 211, original emphasis).

What becomes apparent from these two passages, and others like them, is that Thornton built the foundations of his theism on the argument from design.<sup>24</sup> As such, it is possible to enumerate those features with an identifiable “design” pedigree. The first, and most obvious, is the term “design” that, in this context, means “order”. “Order” here refers to the processes of nature functioning according to laws of nature. “[I]n this respect”, says Thornton, “all invariable sequences of phenomena, otherwise termed laws of nature, stand plainly in the same category” (209). The second is simply that order is always correlated with intelligence. “Since numerous embodied intelligences exist”, says Thornton, “they must have been preceded by intelligence capable of creating them and all other existing intelligences that have not eternally existed” (268). Third is the intention on the part of a creator, because only a creating mind can have intentions.<sup>25</sup> Thus, it is inferred, there must be some creator responsible for relating things according to such means–ends relationships. “To say that the creative agency denominated Nature”, remarked Thornton, “neither had any ends in view when originally adopting certain sequences of action, and originally fabricating innumerable organisms exactly suitable for the performance, in concert with those sequences, of innumerable useful functions; nor, although ever since repeating the sequences, and maintaining or reproducing the organisms, has so done with any reference to the purposes which the sequences and organisms serve, is equivalent to saying that the agency in question is not even aware that any purposes are served” (213). The second quotation contributes a definition of theism that can be derived, not from faith in providence alone, but from “a strictly inductive process” capable of weighing the probabilities associated with arguments from design. For a theist, such as Thornton, who knew that recent scientific discoveries posed a grave threat to arguments from design, it

was imperative that recent scientific discoveries be subsumed under the concept of argument from design. As a result, Thornton refrained from registering his outright opposition to new scientific knowledge, especially evolutionary ideas but, instead, attempted to portray evolution as but another manifestation of God's design.

For Thornton, the appearance of Darwin's *Origin of Species* and Spencer's *First Principles* did not disturb arguments for intelligent design, but rather, confirmed his attachment to scientific theories with a theological and metaphysical foundation.<sup>26</sup> For Thornton, the design argument gained strength with advances in scientific knowledge, as exemplified by Darwin's evolutionary theories. Darwinism had become, in Thornton's view, the handmaiden of natural theology. For all this, Darwinism, as a cause of religious doubt, still posed a potent secular threat to Thornton's core set of religious convictions and beliefs. Although he accepted Charles Darwin's basic premise of the origin of species by natural selection and Herbert Spencer's doctrine of the survival of the fittest (219), Thornton never fully accepted Darwin's way of thinking about nature because he thought that his hypothesis was inferior to theological philosophies of nature that expounded the sciences as a branch of natural theology, a testament to the purposes of God, a proof of his existence and a demonstration of the Christian attributes of benevolence and wisdom in creation. "But I do firmly believe", Thornton argued,

and am quite unable to substitute any plausible substitute for the belief, that when the crust of the earth had sufficiently cooled, and when other physical conditions had become such as to admit of the manifestation of that life which we are accustomed to distinguish by attaching to it the epithet "organic," certain of those forces which, in my opinion, constitute matter, did, either of their own accord or under superior direction ... slowly elaborate themselves into organic structures of some exceedingly simple type; that in the course of ages these simple structures either developed themselves or were developed into structures rendered by slow degrees more and more complex, until the degree of complexity attained, being such as to fit them for being inhabited by spirit previously unembodied, they were, by individualized portions of such spirit, appropriated and inhabited accordingly. Beyond all doubt, at some period or other, what had previously been unorganized matter must have become organized. ... Either this matter must, whether, under superior direction or not, have organized itself, or it must have been organized by some other agency. (Thornton 1873a: 226)

Thornton then describes the Creator of nature, who possesses faculties superior to man, as the only force capable of presiding over the grandeur of the scheme he has executed.

Mr. Darwin, together with all thorough-going Darwinians, inclines, I suspect, to the opinion that matter organized itself; but if so, it cannot possibly have been inert or lifeless, but must have been active and animate, and capable of volition; and on that condition, there is no great stretch of fancy in imagining it to have spontaneously adopted the series of arrangements indicated. If, on the other hand, we are content to admit that some external superior intelligence may have performed, or conducted, or presided over operations, all room for wonder vanishes. (Thornton 1873a: 226)

At a time when the “rational” affirmation of God’s existence was being threatened by new scientific knowledge, Thornton never tried to dissociate himself from “a mode of thought so obsolete in the treatment of scientific subjects as the theological” (228). Instead, he was at pains to reconcile the intelligent design of God with Darwin’s theory of natural selection. God, according to Thornton, guided the available variation, and so, controlled the evolutionary process. Thornton holds that this argument, since it is based upon inductive reasoning, is consistent with the scientific method. Further, he holds that it is only upon this scientific basis that belief in the existence and attributes of God is justifiable. Here, then, are the two main bases for the view that theism is like science. First, it proceeds in accordance with scientifically established propositions. This is the machine analogy based directly upon “Newtonian principles”, imagining “the great world-maelstrom widening the margin of its prodigious eddy in the slow progress of million of ages, gradually reclaiming more and more of the molecular waste”,<sup>27</sup> moved and ordered and adjusted in accordance with forces described by means of the law of gravity and other scientific laws of nature (248–249). Second, the design argument is akin to the scientific method in that it proceeds via induction, and is based on observation (209–213). Like every field of intellectual inquiry, Thornton began with a statement of theoretical principles, deduces consequences from those principles, and then, by examination of actual cases, tests those principles and corrects them accordingly.

Analogies “of endless varieties of mechanism, most of them of marvelously intricate and complex structure”, were commonly invoked by Thornton as proof of God’s existence and to demonstrate that God

“intended what he was enacting” (206, 211). Emphasis was repeatedly laid upon the “wondrously complex and varied mechanisms of which most organisms are composed” as evidence of divine prescience (209).<sup>28</sup> Under this mechanistic analogy, the order tends to be identified as purposive order, where the teleological arrangement of organic parts serves a God-given purpose. This occurs particularly in the example of the human eye, “the most perfect of organic structures”, whose complex mechanical structure is likened “to the finest of telescopes” (236, 239). In fact, this “contrivance” was a favourite of theists who commonly used it to demonstrate the principle of analogy and the purposive order in nature—both in the whole and in the individual things which exist as parts.<sup>29</sup> Thornton argued that the human eye, like “Mr. Newell’s telescope”, were “contrivances” intentionally designed for a specific purpose (236, 238). He further argued that as the mechanism of the human eye was “capable of exact self-adjustment to all degrees of light, all gradations of distance, all varieties of refrangibility”, it was preposterous to contend that “the blindest and densest ignorance may have presided over the whole operation” (212). Notice, moreover, that Thornton insisted upon the mechanical analogy in emphasizing the deliberate purpose or intention lying behind both human and divine contrivances. Both the human eye and the telescope conform to “minutely accurate knowledge of the ... laws of optics”. As such, the “formation of a perfect and complex eye by natural selection can be little else than a prejudice of the imagination”, a remark that suggests he had resolved to his own mind the problem of intelligent design in adaptations (229, cf. 232–240).<sup>30</sup>

Until he died, Thornton retained a lively interest in scientific and philosophical debates and research, although he never felt inclined to write on these subjects again, preferring, instead, to focus on issues that take their point of departure from propositions that were more familiar to him. It is fair to say that Thornton’s philosophical studies were of limited appeal as theoretical contributions to broader metaphysical disputes. Flaws and weaknesses in his arguments marred the final product, but his philosophical essays nonetheless assist in clarifying his thinking on some of the burning issues of the age. In fact, his metaphysical writings identified some of the main issues in the long-standing disputes between exponents of science (especially scientific naturalists) and defenders of (Christian) religion in the period following the appearance of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* in 1859. Scientific discoveries created new theological challenges to natural theological design for theists aware that science was rapidly gaining new

adherents from all walks of Victorian society (267). To accommodate the rising power of science, Thornton proposed that evolutionary ideas be harmonized with religion as proof of God's intentional design—a tactic common among theists in the 1860s and 1870s. “[T]he worse and still less excusable”, added Thornton, “is it for science to declare herself irreconcilable with religion” (267). In other words, he made no attempt to separate science and religion, but instead, saw them as complementary rather than contending forces. Yet, at some level, he was frustrated with the evolutionary ideas taking hold around him and he made known his displeasure in the form of sharp rebukes to those “[u]nphilosophic people” who performed “irreligious” philosophy which, in 1873, left him to do “battle ... with a strong current of opinion” that saw science and religion as two independent and autonomous enterprises, each answering a separate set of human needs and using different methods and languages (247).

## CONCLUSION

Thornton was apprehensive about the claims of scientists who flouted new scientific knowledge as incontrovertible proof of adaptive organic evolution. Advances in science need not affect the plausibility of arguments from design because religious beliefs were subject to the same critical scientific scrutiny as everything else. Science and religion need not be treated as separate realms as many were insisting. To collect evidences of God from the temporal world, Thornton turned to the objects in nature or the physical world, “all and each of them of structure marvelously suitable for performing, in co-operation with Nature’s laws, functions of an utility as varied as their structure” (Thornton 1873a: 206).

First of all, Thornton took aim at Henry Buckle’s views on science and progress. While he accepted the argument that history provided a guide to action in the present and future, he strongly resisted the scientific claims of history. Crucially, he did not accept Buckle’s causal law of history because it implied that human behaviour was predictable and regular across historical time. The scientific alternative to Christianity that Buckle champions as an explanation of the progress of human society deeply offended Thornton, who adhered to a providential view of human behaviour. He took offence not only at Buckle’s irreligious displays, but at his deterministic denial of individual freedom. Unlike Buckle, however, who saw moral ideas and laws as remaining essentially the same, Thornton saw Christianity as a force for moral progress.

Nor, for this reason, could Thornton accept the “mechanical” approach to consciousness that Huxley unveiled and subsequently refined during the course of the mind–matter controversies of the 1870s. He adhered to the view, commonly accepted in philosophical circles at the time, that the human mind or consciousness was something separate or apart from nature. Individuals can control their own emotions and thoughts and assert their own beliefs and desires. He, therefore, believed in a conception of free will or free moral choice; his numerous references to character-building and self-reliance in his political and economic writings are compatible with this position, but as his views on the conception of free will never were fully spelt out, it is difficult to discern the precise shape of his thinking on the subject; suffice it to say, that his belief in a God who was very nearly all-knowing and all-powerful is suggestive of a contradiction because a belief in God’s “immediate control of divine nature” would seem to rule out the principle of free will. Thornton demurred. True, the substance of Thornton’s understanding of God’s providential oversight encompasses the argument that God dispenses his favour on those who obey his moral laws: this, again, because individuals match heavenly rewards with their own moral conduct. But God had also invested human beings with “feelings” and “volitions of will” that qualified them, within limits, to make their own decisions, shape their own destiny and attain their own goals. Knowledge of God’s moral laws thus assisted in moulding human decisions and promoting better conduct. All of this implies, of course, that human beings were endowed with sufficient mental capacities to discern God’s moral purpose and to know that God was always working to extend and improve their spiritual domain. Throughout his life, Thornton remained a devout and sincere Christian who neither questioned the existence and beneficence of God nor the destiny and duty of man to serve him (261–262). For Thornton, these beliefs remained as imperative and absolute as ever.

Thornton’s participation in the science and religion debate offered a religious interpretation of the evolutionary process. Thornton maintained that science and religion, rightly conceived, were complementary because each realm made use of similar mechanical or scientific analogies to establish their authority and legitimate sphere of interest. “It is the untheological ... mode of treatment”, argued Thornton, “which is here utterly out of place and flagrantly unscientific” (229). Rather than eschew the mechanical analogies derived from Newtonian physics, Thornton accepted its precepts and laws, the “grandeur of which I thoroughly appreciate so far as my

scant mathematics enable me to follow them". He felt, nevertheless, the remark warranted qualification because, "if the most powerful of human intellects could ... catch only a faint hazy inkling" of the Newtonian system, then it followed that its complex principles cannot have been "perfected without the intervention of any intellect at all" (250). The resulting amalgam of science and religion allowed him to conceive of a "rational religion" that incorporated the belief or set of beliefs that "the universe must have an author or authors fully equal to its original construction, its subsequent development, and its continued maintenance" (268). The focus on the human eye as an organ of perfection is a case in point. His intention here was to conflate a man-made artefact or "contrivance" such as the telescope and its inventor, Newell, with an object or contrivance in nature, such as the eye and its maker, God. Design, in each case, implied the will and purpose of the designer. Thornton pressed the reader to recognize that just as the existence of a telescope demanded the existence of a human contriver, the "endless varieties of mechanism" in nature proved the existence of a divine creator.

In the case of his objections to Darwin's theory of natural selection, Thornton believed that Darwin had raised legitimate concerns, but nevertheless felt that the "hypothesis offered by Mr. Darwin in explanation of the most perfect organic structures" was incomplete (239). Thornton made it clear that Darwin had marred his "great intellectual achievement" by "needlessly overstrain[ing] his principles" even when a logical explanation was near at hand. The problem as Thornton saw it was that Darwin had often failed to marshal his thoughts in a consistent and logical fashion to avoid slipping into confusion and error. Thornton, in turn, had come to identify Darwin's work as but part of the religious realm. "By what perversity then", argues Thornton, "is it that Mr. Darwin takes such pains, if not to render his theory irreligious, at least to exclude from it the assistance which religion alone can afford, and which it so greatly needs" (228). Thornton perceived the hand of God in the creation of the most remarkable range of geological, anatomical and astronomical phenomena—the "arrangement of bones in the hand of man, the wing of the bat, the fin of the porpoise, the leg of the horse, the neck of the giraffe" (220), the "cellmaking faculty of the hive bee" (241) or "the relation between the masses and densities of the planets and their distances from the sun" (248)—all revealing a divinely designed universe full of complexity. Always attentive to the incursions of science into religious life, Thornton did not attempt to resist it, but instead, to capitalize upon it by folding it into a wider sphere of "rational religion" that had taken

its shape from the cognitive content of scientific theory and the realization that any thinker on religious matters had to further engage with Darwin's "evolutionary hypothesis" because "to appeal to her only other resource—revelation—is to beg the whole subject in dispute" (267).

## NOTES

1. Gilley and Loades (1981: 289) explain that Darwinism had "intruded upon a complex debate within Christendom itself between liberal and conservative theologies".
2. Waterman (2008: 134–135) explains that William Paley's natural theology tradition, which had "remained dominant in Britain and America for seventy-five years", had acquired such a stable and consistent meaning by mid-century that the "entire intellectual structure of Victorian Christianity" rested upon it.
3. Thornton's *Old Fashioned Ethics* was reviewed in the *British Quarterly Review*, the *London Quarterly Review*, the *Quarterly Review*, the *Academy* (by George Simcox) and the *Westminster Review*.
4. Thornton's Moravian schooling, which imbued in him "a sceptical attitude toward religious authority", may have provided "the basis for his scepticism about Ricardian political economy, ... Calvinism, ... [and] Huxleyism" (Lipkes 1999: 122, 124).
5. Thornton (1873a: 259–261) argued that Comte's attempt to bring to fruition a science of sociology was flawed: "Wherefore, as there never can be a repetition of either men or of circumstances precisely the same, it is manifestly impossible for any habits of feeling and thinking, in given modes in given circumstances, to be common to any two generations of men, still less to universal mankind."
6. Thornton thought Buckle's vague definitions had led to his failure to grasp the full import of his own scientific project (Thornton 1863b: 30).
7. For Thornton, who believed that individuals were accountable for their moral conduct, the notion that human behaviour was determined by external forces or uniform scientific laws threatened the whole Christian foundation of human (i.e. European) society.
8. Mill publicly praised Buckle for his new historical approach entailing the application of "general principles to the explanation and prediction of social facts" (see Collini et al. 1983: 145).
9. Thornton's "test" of the veracity of the laws of economic science was based on the definition of a scientific law, as delineated in his (1863b) article.
10. Thornton's (1867) article, "Stray Chapters from a forthcoming work on Labour. I. The Claims of Labour and Its Rights", was published as Chapter 1 of *On Labour* (1869).

11. In a reply dated 26 October 1867, Thornton asks Mill to “suspend your final judgement until you have read a chapter or two more”. In closing, Thornton admits to “a sort of peculiarity in my mental constitution which compels me to form a different idea of the nature and obligations of justice from those which you adopt” (Donoghue 2000: 332–333).
12. “What is really interesting and important, if not exactly satisfactory,” Simcox concluded, “is that an undeniably able man with a shrewd, robust, and candid intellect should have come to hold such opinions, and that there should be no recognised authority capable of setting him right” (Simcox 1873: 193).
13. In “Natural Rights and Abstract Justice”, Thornton remarked, “I feel that I must have incurred in philosophic quarters a sort of civil contempt, which I am very desirous of removing, and which will, I trust, be somewhat diminished on my proceeding to explain how few and elementary are the rights that I propose for naturalisation” (Thornton 1871d: 359).
14. J. Allanson Picton (1873: xi–xii) also commented on Thornton’s essay on Huxley: “Indeed, one or two coincidences in illustration are so remarkable, that I am only sorry I cannot honestly acknowledge indebtedness to Mr. Thornton, whose clock, in his essay on ‘Huxleyism’, seems to keep the same time with my own in the ‘Mystery of Matter’ ”.
15. Huxley (1896: 191) argued, “We shall sooner or later arrive at a mechanical equivalent to consciousness, just as we have arrived at a mechanical equivalent of heat.”
16. The quote is from Gilley and Loades (1981: 294).
17. Thornton’s “Huxleyism: a fragment” was originally published in 1872 in the *Contemporary Review*.
18. Thornton correctly identified the origins of Huxley’s proposition in Descartes who observed that Cartesian universal doubt proceeds to the certain knowledge of man’s own thoughts, so that matter can be reduced to man’s consciousness of it; all matter can be reduced to mind (674).
19. Hume’s aim was to formulate laws of human understanding in accordance with the Newtonian mechanical principles of nature.
20. The classic example of Humean causation is given by Ivan Pavlov’s famous experiment performed in 1905, where Pavlov rang a bell just as he was feeding his dogs. Pavlov repeated this process several times before ringing the bell without feeding his dogs. The dogs salivated when the bell rang, showing clearly that they expected food.
21. Critics pounced on Thornton’s “unphilosophical assumption” as “putting a power or force into external bodies” (*Westminster Review* 1873a, 43: 571–572).
22. Thornton saw Hume’s “Of a Particular Providence and a Future State” as “a masterpiece of false reasoning” (153).

23. Thornton regarded Hume's "attack on the miraculous foundations of Christianity" as "compounded in about equal moieties of transparent sophism and baseless assumption" (147). Thornton failed to realize the irony in Hume's chapter, "Of Miracles" (Mossner 1978: 656).
24. There is also ample evidence of arguments from design in Thornton's poetical writings (see Chap. 5).
25. Thornton (1873a: 209) noted that "[i]ntention, however, is not quite the same thing as design. ... [W]hatever be the certainty that the laws of nature have been intentionally established, there is in that certainty no proof of their having been established for any purpose beyond that of gratifying some whim or humour of the lawgiver. For indications of design in the universe we must look rather to organic than to inorganic nature" (cf. Capaldi 2004: 346).
26. Thornton (1873a: 221) remarked of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* that it was so avidly read that it could "without much exaggeration be said to be in everybody's hands".
27. Thornton reproduced this passage from Thomas Huxley's *Lay Sermons*.
28. In "David Hume as a Metaphysician", Thornton wrote: "If the divine notions of goodness in its several varieties be not identical with the human, it can only be because they are superior" (154).
29. Thornton (1873a: 202, 213) uses the human eye and ear in his refutation of atheism.
30. Thornton (1873a: 232–233, 238) detected Darwin's hesitancy in relation to the "genesis of the eye ... by natural selection". Mill also supported his claim for design by reference to the human eye (Capaldi 2004: 411, n.61).

## Final Works

*Assuredly, then, Mr. Mill and I were not fighting with our own shadows.*

—W. T. Thornton (1879b)

*Miss Prism: Cecily, you will read your Political Economy in my absence. The chapter on the Fall of the Rupee you may omit. It is somewhat too sensational. Even these metallic problems have their dramatic side.*

—Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Act 2, Part 1

### INTRODUCTION

In early 1876, the Thornton family was struck again by tragedy when William's youngest daughter, Evelyn Danvers, died of tuberculosis after a short illness. Evelyn's death, as poignantly conveyed in a letter Thornton wrote to Helen Taylor, sapped him of any remaining inner confidence. He had, in the 1850s, buried two children, but now, he and his wife found the sudden loss of their youngest daughter, "in whom all our joy and hopes were centred", all but impossible to accept. The emotional toll of Evelyn's death left him resentful of his changed life: "How impossible for us must be any approach to happiness in this world, now that she ... has passed away". Thornton stumbled forward as best he could and, as an "anodyne for grief", buried himself in several new literary projects, including an ambitious literal translation of Horace's lyrical poems—the Odes.

In fact, the final decade of his life proved to be remarkably productive in terms of professional and literary achievement, perhaps helping him to cope better with the loss of his youngest daughter, Evelyn Danvers, and his best friend, John Stuart Mill.

In his final decade, Thornton unveiled a range of works on economics, metaphysics, classical literature, Irish land reform and Indian public works and finance, which epitomized “the spirit of amateurism” that came to define the Victorian man of letters. His distillations on the subject of political economy now carried less weight and involved him in less controversy than had once been the case. In fact, in two separate publications, in 1876 and 1879, Thornton adopted a more accommodative posture than he had taken in the hotly contested theoretical debates a decade earlier. Now, towards the end of his life, he seems more concerned with securing an intellectual rapprochement with former close associates such as John Elliot Cairnes. Yet, even if the passage of time had dulled his perception of the sting in those earlier debates, his recollections remain a valuable historical source for contemporary understanding of those crucial intellectual exchanges. Neither publication involved the derivation of new insights on the theories of value and wages, but they did contain the kernel, as Alfred Marshall noted, of a theory of price determination, based on supply and demand analysis.

By now, Thornton’s reputation as an authority on Irish land reform had been cemented. As a result, he began receiving invitations to participate in public forums and debates on the issue. This culminated in his election, along with John Bright, to membership of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland in December 1874. Earlier that year, Thornton had “republished his excellent little work, *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors*” (*Athenaeum* March 28 1874 n. 2422: 424). His ongoing interest in Irish land reform found further expression in his 1879 *Fortnightly Review* article, “The Bright Clauses of the Irish Land Act”, where he evaluates the “cautious steps” taken by Gladstone’s ministry to promote landownership among small Irish farmers as “a nearly complete failure” (Thornton 1879a: 609). The problem was the existence of a large population of indigent cultivators with little incentive to improve the land they farmed because they possessed no title to it. For Thornton, the solution lay in creating a nation of small farmers or peasant proprietors possessing a right to private property in land. To this end, he reiterates his “plea” for settling “peasant proprietors” on reclaimed “wastelands”.

In his last book, Thornton returned to one of his first loves: classical literature. It will be recalled that Thornton’s poetical works of the 1850s

were peppered with classical illusions, images and symbols drawn from the works of Horace, Virgil and other classical authors. In 1878, he published a literal translation of the lyrical odes of the Latin poet and satirist, Horace, under the title, *Horatius Flaccus, Word for Word from Horace. The Odes literally versified* (1878).<sup>1</sup> This work had its genesis in a conversation two decades earlier between Thornton and a Cambridge classicist who had remarked that “really to translate Horace was impossible” (Thornton 1878a: vii). Thornton, always willing to take up the gauntlet in a good cause, immediately set to work on a translation of some of the “finest Odes” that Horace had written. These, he showed to Under-Secretary of State for India, Herman Merivale, an “accomplished scholar and fastidious critic”, who “spoke benignly enough of my first attempt to encourage me to repeat it” (viii). Thornton was unable, however, to find a publisher, so he “laid them all by, and scarcely looked at them again” until 1877, when Macmillans agreed to publish them.

During the second half of the 1870s, Thornton published ten works in various fields, making it the most productive phase of his authorial career. Half the publications were devoted to economic and social issues in India—in particular, the debate around the Indian silver question, in which he had taken a keen interest as a high-ranking India Office official. The issues that Thornton addressed in relation to the Indian monetary system saw publication in various outlets. Thornton had also come to be seen as an expert on Indian public works. On several occasions, he was invited to deliver a paper or speech to a literary society or learned body on some aspect of Indian public works or monetary conditions. These events invariably received coverage in the *Times* or elsewhere. On such occasions, Thornton seldom retreated from either public controversy or criticism of his employer, the India Office, pointing out avoidable policy mistakes, such as the width of the Indian railway gauge, the utility of Indian irrigation schemes and the economic impact of the depreciation of the Indian rupee.

### CLASSICAL POLITICAL ECONOMY REDUX

In 1874, Thornton published a short article in the *Fortnightly Review* on the economic definition of wealth. His aim was to clarify and codify the “peculiar qualities” or “characteristic constituents” that a thing or object must possess to be classified as economic or material wealth. Thornton insists that the principle of wealth be confined only “to material things” (574). The exceptions Thornton identified “resolved themselves into

legal rights and privileges". His account opens with a statement that the definition of economic wealth hinges on three conditions: first, he says, the thing should "possess utility" or "be capable of ministering to some human want or wish" (566); second, a thing must be scarce or "somewhat difficult of acquisition" (566); and, third, the thing must be exchangeable or "capable of being made over from yourself to another person, which another person desires to have but cannot independently acquire without trouble" (567).

The first two attributes indicate that Thornton understood that utility (demand) and scarcity (supply) were crucial co-determinants of subjective value. But, Thornton insisted, a thing cannot possess material or economic wealth unless it is exchangeable. "Everything whatsoever which is exchangeable", he explains, "is economic wealth" (567). Thornton claimed little originality for this definition of economic wealth; his main purpose in attempting such a codification was purely the elimination of the "disastrous confusion" being perpetuated "even in sensible people's minds" (574). Although Thornton's subjective definition of economic wealth did not resolve problems associated with the theory of value, his analysis did foster fundamental breakthroughs by Marshall, Jevons and Edgeworth (Cook 2009: 156 and Creedy 1986: 47–48, 75–76).

Thornton's *Fortnightly Review* article was inspired, in part, by the publication of J.E. Cairnes's *Some Leading Principles of Political Economy newly Expounded* (1874). Thornton contributed a review of it to the *Contemporary Review* in 1876. It began with the following anecdote:

Most members of the Political Economy Club must be familiar with an anecdote of Sydney Smith, who not many months after joining the club announced his intention to retire, and, on being asked the reason, replied that his chief motive for joining had been to discover what Value is, but that all he had discovered was that the rest of the club knew as little about the matter as he did. (Thornton 1876b: 813)

Thornton evaluated the "recent attempt made by ... my lamented friend, the late Professor Cairnes, to pierce the cloudy envelope" of value as "but a very partial success". His main concern lay in the phrasing of Cairnes's definition of exchange value as "the ratio in which commodities are commercially exchangeable against each other". "His definition of exchange value", says Thornton, "is unimpeachable while confined to its proper subject". However, Thornton charged Cairnes with mistakenly

using the term “exchange value” when, in fact, he meant “pecuniary value” or “price”. “Prices”, noted Thornton, “may be summed up into a total, and that total may subsequently increase or diminish; but sums total of and augmentations or diminutions of general exchange values are, quite as obviously, impossible conceptions” (817). Thornton regretted that his friend had not more clearly distinguished “exchange value” from “pecuniary value”. Following these preliminaries, Thornton shifted his attention to consider an economy operating—first, under a “barter regime” and, second, an economy operating under a “monetary regime”.

The type of formulation Thornton outlines involves a simple barter economy with no commodity serving as an instrument of exchange: “every offer to sell is therefore equally an offer to buy, and every offer to buy is equally an offer to sell. The sum total of goods which customers offer to purchase is consequently identical with the sum total offered for sale” (818). In this situation, a state of equilibrium between aggregate demand and aggregate supply exists. Satisfied that his supply and demand analysis within a pure exchange economy was in accordance with Cairnes’s, Thornton proceeded to examine the definition and operation of supply and demand in an economy operating under a “monetary regime”.

It was this aspect of Cairnes’s work that drew Thornton’s sharpest rebuke. Firstly, Thornton argued that Cairnes’s definition of money as an instrument of exchange had not been rigorously defined. Secondly, and more seriously, he found little to commend in Cairnes’s supply and demand analysis, which egregiously supposes that “the entire *supply* of goods still continues to represent an equal *demand* for goods” (819). “Under a monetary *regime*”, Thornton observes, “a dealer would offer for sale whatever quantity of goods he expected to be able to sell at a remunerative price for money, whether he were or were not prepared immediately to lay out the whole of the expected sale proceeds in the purchase of other goods” (820). Individual buyers and sellers respectively purchase and offer “certain specified goods” in isolated market situations, where each participant to the exchange places a personal value on the commodity they desire to buy or sell. Thornton was, by now, habituated to thinking about isolated or incomplete market situations; there is no attempt to investigate the kind of market or equilibrium outcomes that Marshall had derived graphically around this period.

The balance of Thornton’s article was devoted to highlighting anomalies and inconsistencies in Cairnes’s “somewhat novel theories of cost of production and normal value” (821), which he labelled “rather illustrative

and amplificatory of, than antagonistic to, the teaching of Mill” (821). It is “simply astounding”, observes Thornton, “that Cairnes should have so completely misapprehended the meaning of his great predecessor as to suppose the latter to have confounded the *cost* with the *results* of production” (821). In sum, although some progress was made in clearing up disputed points between Cairnes and Thornton over the concepts of *exchange* value and *pecuniary* value, neither Cairnes nor Thornton had managed to produce significant new insights into supply and demand analysis at a time when the old order in political economy was already giving way to the new. This did not, however, deter Thornton from raising “minor” objections to Cairnes’s theory of the wage fund a few years later.

In 1879, Thornton published an article in the *Nineteenth Century*, in which he vigorously defended his “conception of the wages fund [theory]” in *On Labour* against the earlier criticism by Cairnes.<sup>2</sup> These related to Cairnes’s definition of the average wage rate, his interpretation of Francis Longe’s argument, linking the demand for commodities to the size of the wage fund and their differing estimates of the relevance of Mill’s “static” wage fund theory. But, in the final analysis, Thornton had little appetite to reopen a debate on wages with Cairnes:

When Professor Cairnes—between whom and myself, during the latter years of his life, a close intimacy subsisted—was engaged upon his new exposition of “Some Leading Principles of Political Economy,” he one day told me that he was sorry to have been compelled to take up a position of antagonism to Mr. Mill and me in respect of the Wages Fund. I replied that when his new book appeared I would not fail to read it carefully, and that I would then either publicly answer the portions directed against us, or publicly acknowledge my inability to answer them. I regret exceedingly that circumstances prevented me from redeeming this pledge while my friend was still living, and I regret it the more because I am thereby deprived of the satisfaction which I might otherwise have had of convincing him that, on the point specially referred to, there was little or no real difference between us. (Thornton 1879b: 293)

As the above indicates, Thornton’s decision to refrain from further engagement on the theory of wages amounted to an act of conciliation with his friends, John Stuart Mill and John Elliot Cairnes. By now, however, a “new breed of economist” was breaking new ground, developing a more comprehensive marginal productivity theory of distribution, which began to materialize throughout the 1880s.

## A FINAL PLEA

In the early 1870s, Mill encouraged Thornton to reissue *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors* (1874) to profile the economic advantages of small-scale agricultural practices. Thornton had been a prime mover in promoting wasteland reclamation in Ireland as a permanent solution to the poverty of the Irish countryside. This arrangement involved the state acquiring fallow land from large landholders and either giving it to small-scale peasant farmers or leasing it to them at a moderate rent with a secure title (Perkins 1975: 2). Security of tenure was especially important as farmers were reluctant to invest in agricultural improvements without it. The conversion of wasteland into permanent farmland, together with the provision of security of land occupancy, would help in relieving Ireland's rural malaise and accelerate the moral rejuvenation of rural communities (Dewey 1974b: 42).

In recognition of his expertise on Irish land tenure, Thornton was elected a member of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland in 1874. Originally formed in 1848 as the Dublin Statistical Society to improve Ireland by “promoting the study of Statistics and Economical Science”, the Society changed its name in 1862 to the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland to better reflect the nature of its mandate—namely, improving economic and social conditions in Ireland (Daly 1997: 33). The establishment of the original Society was, of course, linked to the Irish famine and the need to better understand its causes. From its inception, the Society provided a forum for airing, debating and improving understanding of Irish social and economic issues among the public. As Daly (1997: 37) has argued, “The evidence that they presented fed into public debate and ... often exerted an influence on subsequent policy.”

Thornton's involvement in the economic, social and political affairs of Ireland spanned very nearly forty years. In the 1840s, he composed political tracts containing references to and recommendations for the rejuvenation of the Irish agrarian economy. His thoughts and opinions helped Mill to refine his ideas on the resettlement of Irish cottiers on reclaimed wastelands. Thornton's confidence in the ambitious plan to establish peasant proprietors on reclaimed wastelands never abated throughout his lifetime. In preparing a second edition of *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors*, he took the opportunity to relate his earlier knowledge to more recent developments on Irish land tenure legislation.

In “The Bright Clauses of the Irish Land Act: A Supplementary Plea for Peasant Proprietors,” Thornton (1879a) evaluated the impact of two enactments, the Irish Church Act of 1869 and the Irish Land Act of 1870, both “aiming at one same object”. Thornton (1879a: 609) believed that the “first of these arrangements” had “operated very successfully” in terms of the number of “bonà-fide tenants” now occupying farmland. Under the terms of the latter, John Bright, president of the Board of Trade in Gladstone’s first ministry, had formulated a plan that allowed potential tenant farmers to borrow at 5 % interest from the government two-thirds of the cost of purchasing their landholding on the condition that the landlord was a willing seller. However well-intentioned the Bright Clauses were meant to be, Thornton saw the Irish Land Act as “a nearly complete failure” due to the fact that fewer than 1000 tenants had availed themselves of a legal interest in their landholdings. “Struck by so wide a difference in the results of two enactments aiming at one self-same object,” Thornton proceeded to explain the reasons for the relative success and failure of each piece of legislation: “Whereas the Church Commissioners took great pains to enable an ignorant peasantry to understand and appreciate the facilities placed within their reach, the Landed Estates Court deemed itself to be adequately carrying out the intentions of Parliament in leaving the peasantry to discover for themselves the nature and value of those facilities” (610). In reviving the “old controversy as to the comparative merits and demerits of peasant proprietorship”, Thornton was concerned to show that “small farms require a special mode of culture, and that if the proper mode be adopted, ... they may become in the British Islands ... far more productive than the best large farms, far more productive, too, of precisely those things which we most need and which it is most indispensable to raise at home” (623).

In Thornton’s view, the elevation of peasant occupiers to proprietors of the farmland they cultivated remained valid and the only feasible solution to Ireland’s perennial land tenure problems. To that end, neither the land tenure legislation introduced under the auspices of Gladstone’s (first) Liberal government nor the more far-reaching enactments granted to the Irish tenants in the early 1880s during Gladstone’s second ministry ever fully satisfied these objectives. Nevertheless, emphasis should be laid on the fact that many of the later reforms, which Thornton did not live to witness, would certainly have met with his (as well as Mill’s) approval. Indeed, the second (1881) Irish Land Act, which conceded fixity of tenure

and fair rents, can be seen as a partial vindication of their Irish land reform agenda (Dewey 1974b: 61).

### THE INDIAN CURRENCY SYSTEM

Following the publication of *Indian Public Works and Cognate Indian Topics* (1875), Thornton continued composing articles that surveyed the “late classical case for the legitimate undertaking of public works” in India (Mirowski 2004: 316). On two separate occasions, he presented his views on irrigation schemes as preventative of Indian famine to the Society of Arts. These were subsequently published in the Society’s journal. He also delivered a speech on the Indian railway gauge to the Institute of Engineers as reported in the *Times*. However, it was the debate around the Indian currency system that increasingly became the focus of his attention, especially in the final years of his life, when he participated in a lively exchange with one of his most senior India Office colleagues, Sir Louis Mallet, concerning the reasons for the precipitous fall in the value of the Indian rupee against the British pound. Their contribution to the debate was part of a much wider dispute around the role that India was expected to play in a tightly interwoven global imperial order that Britain was in the process of creating to preserve its status as the world’s hegemonic power. Before turning to discuss the part played by Mallet and Thornton in that debate, however, it might be useful to provide some background to the Indian currency crisis and explain what was happening to the Indian rupee during the 1860s and 1870s.

The monetary system of India was established on a silver standard in 1835, and the value of the Indian rupee was, from this point onwards, determined by the market price of silver.<sup>3</sup> Britain had been on a gold standard since 1821.<sup>4</sup> During the 1870s, France, Germany and the United States switched to a gold standard. The decision by Germany, in particular, to abandon its silver monetary standard in favour of a gold one produced a sharp fall and wide fluctuations in the market price of silver relative to gold (Friedman 1990: 91). This fall was reinforced when the members of the Latin Monetary Union,<sup>5</sup> who were afraid that a significant drain of gold and flood of silver would produce a significant rise in the general price level, decided to restrict the free coinage of silver “by assigning each country a maximum quota of silver coins to be minted in 1874” (Oppers 1996: 149). This restriction, in effect, suspended the operation of the bimetallic monetary system in the union.<sup>6</sup> The dramatic developments in

monetary arrangements in Europe after 1873 had far-reaching economic consequences on the Indian subcontinent. By 1879, most of the industrialized world had adopted the gold standard and demonetized silver. Falling silver prices between the 1870s and 1890s led to a severe decline in the exchange value of the Indian rupee against the gold-based pound sterling.<sup>7</sup> India continued to act as a major importer of silver at a time when the production of silver was rising rapidly and the world's mints were being closed to its free coinage. This situation continued to produce a divergence in the relative prices of gold and silver as the price of silver collapsed.

As a result, the exchange value of the Indian rupee fell by almost a half against the British pound during the last four decades of the nineteenth century. The decline in the exchange value of the Indian rupee against the gold-based pound sterling began in the early 1860s and accelerated after 1873, when the gold price of silver began to fall sharply. The rupee being backed by silver, India suffered badly from monetary depreciation. Moreover, its foreign trade position deteriorated, British investment was dislocated, and it faced an increase of the real burden of the annual *home charges* (fees paid by India to Britain for the privilege of British rule). By the mid-1870s, to underline this point further, a special parliamentary committee had been established to investigate the causes of the fall in the value of silver and its effects on the Indian currency. Despite strong pressure for change in both Britain and India, the India Office introduced no remedial measures: the rupee was maintained on the silver standard even though most of the major industrialized nations of the world, following Britain's earlier lead, had begun to shift onto a gold standard during the 1870s.

The decision to keep India on a silver standard, which fuelled a currency crisis that lasted for at least two decades, affected India's trade position with Britain. On the one hand, British-manufactured goods sold in India became relatively dearer in terms of the rupee. On the other hand, Indian raw materials sold in Britain became relatively cheaper in terms of sterling (Green 1988: 591).<sup>8</sup> Typically, such differentials would lead to an improvement in the trade balance as exports became relatively cheaper and imports more expensive. In the case of India, however, the trade surpluses were financed so as to minimize the gold outflow from London. Instead of benefiting from growth in export income—what is often called an export bonus arising from the depreciation in the exchange value of the rupee—the Government of India was obliged to redirect a significant

portion of its trade surplus into the annual tribute to the British government by way of the home charges.<sup>9</sup> The exchange problem arose because the home charges were transferred by means of the Council of India's sale of *Council Bills* on the London money market. These bills were, in essence, a device for transforming India's balance-of-trade surplus into credit for India *and* a mechanism to prevent conversion of that surplus into gold (see Pope 2001: 160). British importers in Britain who required rupees in India purchased a Council Bill in London. Paid for in sterling, it was redeemable in rupees in one of the three presidency capitals (Madras, Bombay and Calcutta). The rupee balances, once transferred, could be used to pay debts owed in India, or, more commonly, to purchase Indian goods for export (see Adams and West 1979: 59). These bills of exchange, as Meade pointed out, were the evidences of debt due to England from India, and are sold to Indian importers who are, thus, saved the trouble of purchasing and shipping silver to meet their obligations [in India] (Meade 1897: 317).<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the Council of India used the sterling funds raised from the sale of Council Bills to meet the annual home charges and to purchase silver for coinage in India (see McGuire 2001a: 16).<sup>11</sup>

The currency crisis highlighted the difference between the colonial regime in India and the imperial state in Britain. In particular, the colonial regime had a set of concerns that were not the same as those of the imperial state. These differences reflected, to a large extent, the differences in the obligations of the Secretary of State for India, whose political appointment depended on the outcome of elections and restructuring of cabinets; the India Office, which advised the Secretary of State, but whose policy agenda was shaped by the Permanent Under-Secretary of State for India; and the Government of India, whose responsibility was the day-to-day running of a large and complex economy. "Their positions", as McGuire observes, "were by no means the same. On the contrary, not only did they disagree, usually in a polite manner, with one another but in certain circumstances they also shifted ground quite significantly" (McGuire, 2001b: 184). Nevertheless, it was generally the case that, as McGuire (2001b: 195) puts it: "The imperial factor overruled the colonial factor." As the debate over the Indian currency question intensified, Thornton and Sir Louis Mallet, both permanent officials in the India Office, had a private correspondence in which they outlined their views on how best to deal with the crisis. Beginning in November 1876, Thornton wrote to Sir Louis on five occasions over a six-month period, pressing his case for introducing to India a new monetary standard, based on gold

and silver coinage. In 1877, four of Thornton's letters were published as *The Indian Side of the Silver Question* and the monograph received a sympathetic notice in the *Times*.<sup>12</sup> In 1880, in the *Westminster Review*, Thornton identified the home charges paid by the Government of India to the British government as the main cause of the fall in the exchange value of the Indian rupee.

### THE INDIAN SILVER QUESTION

Sir Louis Mallet joined the India Office in February 1874 as Permanent Under-Secretary of State for India, succeeding his cousin, Herman Merivale, in the position. An accomplished political economist, Mallet would, later in life, publish several books on monetary theory and policy. He had begun to take an interest in the Indian currency question while serving on the Council of India from August 1872, and in February 1873, he observed that the Netherlands' demonetization of silver had contributed to the metal's depreciation in value (McGuire 2001b: 186). Thus, Mallet recognized very early the likely impact of a rupee based on silver—and, in his estimate, it would be serious. In a confidential memorandum circulated within the India Office, he wrote:

Now in its effect on India, and on the Government of India, the gravity of this state of things can hardly be over estimated. The financial condition of India (and on its financial condition the prosperity of the country and the security of our Government must depend) is not so strong as to enable it to bear the new demand on its resources, caused by the present loss on exchange, without encroaching dangerously on the limited funds available for measures of necessary improvement, and for urgent fiscal reforms. (Mallet 1877a: 15)

Seeking to offset the financial problems created by the decline in the silver exchange, Mallet pressed for a shift towards some kind of gold standard. He argued that “the only radical cure which would avert a disastrous loss to Indian finance” would be “by the introduction of a gold standard in India and a restriction of the silver coinage, with certain subsidiary measures” (ibid.). He knew, however, that if the rupee were linked to gold in some way, the crucial calculation would be the resulting new demand for gold in India—at the expense of the Bank of England's gold repository. Mallet had also shown an interest in the

adoption of a bimetallic currency system.<sup>13</sup> In a short memorandum, titled “Statement of Bimetallic Theory” and circulated within the India Office, he presented a case for bimetallism as the basis of an international monetary system. Although he acknowledged the unlikelihood of finding a mechanism for putting an international agreement into effect, he believed in principle that if the world’s most important industrialized nations replaced the gold standard with a bimetallic currency system in which gold and silver coins of any recognized guaranteed quality were acceptable in settlement of international transactions, the monetary problems that India was experiencing would be alleviated.

It can hardly be doubted that an union of the four great States, England, France, including the Latin Union, Germany, and the United States of America, would more than suffice for such a purpose. But, if this is questioned, it must, at least, be admitted that, as such a combination would include all the important States with a gold standard, no increase in the supply of silver could drive out the gold coinage (for where could it be driven?): while, on the other hand, the expulsion of silver by gold could only arise from such an increase in the supply of the latter as would provide the union with a sufficient basis for a single gold standard. The bimetallic system could, therefore, in this case, only fail from causes which would obviate the main practical evils of monometallism. (Mallet 1877b: 2)

Another major issue that Mallet addressed during his tenure as Permanent Under-Secretary of State for India was the question of the rise in home charges. His argument was that the annual remittances the Government of India paid to the British government were a crucial factor in exacerbating India’s fiscal problems, and he went so far as to propose that the expenditures of the India Office itself be significantly reduced to relieve the fiscal pressure on the Indian government (McGuire 2001b: 187). Pointing out that the remittances to Britain for servicing of debt and for home charges were enough to dislocate the natural terms of the Indian exchange and to compel India to import fewer goods and services, he wrote:

India has to pay annually to England 20,000,000 *l* sterling in some way or other. She cannot pay it in specie, because it is dearer in India than in England, and the 20,000,000 *l*. would very rapidly amount to a larger sum. She must send produce, and she sends cotton, jute, tea, &c., but in order to produce these articles she must divert some portion of her currency

from other employment—in other words, decrease her internal demand for goods in the same proportion as she increases it for the purpose of remittance. (Mallet 1877a: 4)

In 1876, when Sir Louis Mallet put some questions to Thornton about the Indian currency question, Thornton felt compelled to respond. Between November 1876 and March 1877, Thornton wrote Sir Louis on at least five occasions, outlining his views on the problems of Indian government finance and the monetary standard. In these letters, Thornton was particularly forthright in his advocacy of bimetallism as an alternative to either the existing monometallic silver standard or the introduction of a monometallic gold standard in India. In the first two letters, the second of which, dated 13 November 1876, was published in full in the *Times*, he briefly outlined the objectives of a bimetallic standard. Under the resulting system he described, both silver and gold bullion could be coined by the mint in “such quantities as may be required, ten, five, and two rupee pieces”, with the legal price ratio to be defined in terms of.

those weights of gold which would bear to the weights of silver contained in ten, five, and two silver rupees the proportion of either 1 to 15½, or any other that may be decided upon, and let it then declare silver and gold to be both equally legal tender. (Thornton 1877: 3)<sup>14</sup>

In the event that the price of gold or silver fluctuated so as to cause the market price ratio to deviate from the legal price ratio, the monetary authority, he suggested, should temporarily suspend coinage of the precious metal whose price had fallen until such time as the two ratios were again equal. He referred to this possibility, curiously enough, as a “self-adjusting” mechanism whose operation would guard “against a recurrence of monetary disorder” and establish “a nearly perfect and almost self-adjusting equilibrium between gold and silver money”.<sup>15</sup> Such a bimetallic monetary system, he said, would place India “in possession ... indeed of currency of absolutely impregnable stability” (Thornton 1877: 4).

Some months passed before Thornton wrote again to Sir Louis, remarking that during this time “the aspect of the [Indian currency] question has materially altered”. In a letter dated 22 February 1877, the longest of the four letters published, Thornton further developed his ideas on a bimetallic monetary standard in India, elaborated on the nature of the

adjustment process between the market and legal price ratios and continued to advocate the temporary suspension of coinage by the mint until such time as any divergence between the ratios had been eliminated. His motivation for writing to Sir Louis after a lapse of some months was that the Indian rupee had been volatile in the intervening period, and he had been concerned that “the exchange value of the rupee might continue to fall to an indefinite extent, and eventually become depressed at a still lower level than any yet reached” (8). This situation, as Thornton saw it, had been “aggravated ... by the diminished value of silver”, and he estimated that it had “occasioned to the Indian government a loss of more than two million” (9). Specifically, “at present, what with public works, repeated famines, and loss by exchange, the Government is at its wits’ end to make both ends meet, and yet shrinks from the unpopularity of either imposing new taxes or of augmenting old ones” (18).

Thornton’s argument was that policy should aim to avoid a reoccurrence of this situation. To that end, he recommended the adoption of a bimetallic standard based on the system “enunciated with such force, clearness and vivacity by [Henri] Cernushi”, an Italian-French economist whose writings on bimetallicism had excited much interest in France and Britain between the 1860s and 1880s.<sup>16</sup> According to Thornton, Cernushi’s original bimetallic proposal would have to be “supplemented by certain accessories” to make it work in India. The first step in that process would be for the monetary authority to issue “gold pieces of ten rupees (which for shortness sake I will henceforward call Victorias) in whatever quantity might be necessary for those commercial exchanges for which gold is a more suitable instrument than silver” (9).

The next step would be the withdrawal of a portion of the silver rupees in circulation in India and the introduction of gold rupee pieces. Thornton estimated the “gold coinage required to be the equivalent of one-fourth ... or 500 millions of silver rupees”. On the withdrawal of those rupees, the Indian government would suffer a loss because, once the silver had been melted down into bullion, it would be sold at a lower market price. He estimated that the “loss by sale of these in the bullion market” or “the expense of providing India with a bimetallic currency” would be “eight millions and a half sterling” (11). Thornton’s next consideration was the desirable relationship between the values legally assigned to gold and silver coins and the relative market values of these metals. Throughout the nineteenth century, the monetary authorities in a bimetallic country normally attempted to set the legal price ratio approximately equal to the

market price ratio (see Redish 1995: 725). Thornton implicitly advocated this convention when he proposed “that the Government should undertake to give, on demand, a gold Victoria for every ten silver rupees, and ten silver rupees for every Victoria tendered in exchange” (12).<sup>17</sup>

Yet, Thornton was mindful that changes in the market price ratio could disrupt the bimetallic standard. He outlined four cases in which changes in the demand for gold or silver might change their prices, creating a divergence between the legal and the market price ratio: the first “would be that of an increased demand on the part of the public for gold or silver coin, consequent on the multiplication of the commercial exchanges, of the kind for which coin of one of the metals was the more convenient instrument in a greater ratio than of those for which coin of the other metal was more suitable”; the second “is that of the bullion of either of the precious metals rising in value, while the value of the other, in reference to commodities in general”, remained unaltered; the third, which had been identified with India, was where one trading nation, “in exchange for a considerable portion of her exports, would take nothing from India but gold”; and the fourth was “that while the number of exchanges for which gold was the more convenient instrument remained unaltered, the number of those for which silver was best adapted absolutely diminished, and that silver rupees thereupon became relatively depreciated”. Thornton contended, however, that the occurrence of one of these cases, “although theoretically conceivable, would be practically impossible” (Thornton, 1877: 13–15).

In his third and fourth letters to Mallet, Thornton reiterated the claim made in the first two that a bimetallic system would not obligate the mint to coin freely either metal brought to it. In saying this, he was attempting to “justify, more fully than has hitherto been done, the withdrawal from individuals of the right to have coined whatever bullion might be brought by them to the mint for that purpose” (19). The need for this restriction could arise if the market price ratio persistently deviated from the legal price ratio. To motivate his analysis, he considered the case of a fall in the market price of silver because of new discoveries of the metal.

Now, be this aggregate demand what it may at any given time, an extraordinary large supply of only one of the precious metals can evidently not take place without lowering the price of that one metal in the bullion market, whereupon, although the relative values of both coined metals

may continue to be such as law had prescribed, the relative prices of the same metals in bullion will necessarily be disturbed. (Thornton 1877: 20)

Thornton then carefully described the process through which the bimetallic country would be stripped of one of the precious metals—in his example, gold—so as to end up on a pure monometallic standard:

Let us suppose ... that while 15½ ounces of coined silver are legal tender for one ounce of coined gold, 16 ounces of silver bullion must be given for an ounce of gold coin. ... In such circumstances a silver merchant, instead of selling in the market, will take his 15½ ounces to the mint to be coined, thereby rendering them equal in value to an ounce of gold, while, on the other hand, an owner of gold coin, instead of giving an ounce in exchange for 15½ ounces of silver coin, will by melting down make it worth 16 ounces. These processes would go on until ... the command over bullion of both descriptions of coin again became equalized; and in case the depreciation of silver bullion were very great, gold coins might entirely disappear from circulation and be entirely replaced by additional silver coin. If gold bullion instead of silver became depreciated, the converse of all this would take place. (Thornton 1877: 20–21)

Thornton's analysis of the consequences of the depreciation of the market price of one metal relative to the other contains a crucial flaw, however. He wrote that the "free mintage of both metals is incompatible with the permanence of bimetallicism" (*ibid.* 21). However, it is generally understood that a cornerstone of a bimetallic system is the mint's commitment to coin silver and gold at fixed prices. In Thornton's example, the mint would be overflowing with silver and out of gold. His recommendation was to temporarily close the mint to the free coinage of the undervalued metal until such time as the market price ratio equalled the legal price ratio. He reasoned that the bimetallic scheme would not inherently provide a fixed nominal anchor because variations in the relative market prices of gold and silver would invariably lead to a reduction in the specie value of the unit of account (see Redish 2000: 27–34, for further general comment).<sup>18</sup> However, the typical response to a persistent undervaluation of one of the precious metals was, as Redish (1995: 725) correctly observes, not the temporary closure of the mint to the coinage of one metal, but rather, the monetary authority's adjustment of the legal price ratio to reflect the change in the market price ratio. This action, in turn, would stem the outflow of gold and re-establish the operation of the

bimetallic standard. Thus, Thornton's suggestion of suspending convertibility of a depreciating metal would simply and inexorably move, where one currency was on a secular path (as silver was), towards a monometallic system. It is far from clear that he had fully understood the standard economic effects of suspending convertibility of a depreciating metal in a bimetallic system.

### THE INDIAN EXCHANGE DIFFICULTY

At a meeting of the Political Economy Club on 4 July 1879, Thornton posed a question that, he thought, would be instructive in his investigation into the reform of the Indian monetary system: "Is it possible, and if possible, would it be desirable, to establish and maintain Bimetallism in India, without regard to the monetary arrangements of any other country?" (Mirowski and Tradewell 1999: 36) Although the club's minutes do not record the ensuing discussion, the question Thornton tabled was of considerable interest both to himself and to other club members, many of whom had a vested interest in the Indian currency question. Thornton returned to this issue in his last journal article, published posthumously in the *Westminster Review* in 1880, where he again set forth his views on the subject. His purpose here was to show that it was the imperial transfers or annual home charges that India paid to the British government that were the source of the Indian currency crisis. As he wrote, there had arisen "a great increase in the issue of council bills", which were denominated in pounds and placed downward pressure on the exchange value of the rupee (Thornton 1880b: 184). Thornton argued:

In the twelve years beginning with 1861 and ending with 1872, the exchange value of the rupee fell from 2 *s.* to 1 *s.* 10<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>*d.*, but as the depreciation of silver did not commence until 1873, it can have had nothing to do with this first fall, which must therefore have resulted from quite different causes, whereof an increase in Council Bills was certainly the chief, if not the only one. During the three years immediately succeeding and ending with 1875, the exchange underwent a further fall to 1 *s.* 9<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>*d.*, for which the simultaneous increase of Council Bills from an annual average of seven, to one of twelve and a half millions, would perfectly account, and would no doubt have been universally supposed to account perfectly, if it had not been overlooked in the consternation produced by a fall in the value of silver from 60*d.* to 56<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>*d.*, which also took place simultaneously, and to which the entire discredit of having lowered the exchange was immediately and generally transferred. (Thornton 1880b: 179)

Although Thornton believed that the home charges should be reduced, if need be by bringing the “aggregate and general expenditure of the [Home] Government. . . within more moderate limits” (ibid. 192), his position did not reflect the dominant interests of the British government. Not for the first time, he found his views at variance with those of several prominent contemporaries, including G.J. Goschen, a member of a powerful banking family in the City of London, and W. Bagehot, the founder of the *Economist* magazine. Both were among the strongest advocates of a monometallic gold standard for Britain and a monometallic silver standard for India (Rothermund 1970: 94–95).<sup>19</sup> Although Thornton accepted their argument that the change in the relative price of Indian goods (i.e. the real exchange rate) meant that more Indian rupees—or, what amounts to the same thing, more Indian products—were required to purchase a given unit of British currency, or a given quantity of English merchandise and further noted that the “English merchant [will] have acquired purchasing power over Indian produce,” he rejected the view, advanced by “economists of no less mark than the late Mr. Walter Bagehot and Mr. Goschen” that “the depreciation of silver had . . . appreciably contributed to reduce the exchange value of the rupee” (Thornton 1880b: 181, 183, 190).<sup>20</sup> In probing the issue, he explained that the importation or coinage of silver in India had not increased in the first half of the 1870s.

In order that the depreciation of silver should even cooperate in thus affecting the exchange, it was indispensable both that more silver should be imported into India than in previous years, and that more of the silver should be coined, whereas, in point of fact, between 1872 and the end of 1875, less was imported and less coined. It follows necessarily that depreciation of silver had no more to do with the fall of exchange during 1873–5, than it had with the previous fall during 1861 and 1872. (Thornton 1880b: 179)<sup>21</sup>

Nor, he argued, had there been an appreciable rise in the general price level, which might have been expected following an increase in the monetary circulation of silver in India.

Did then Indian prices in general rise when silver became depreciated? Of some few articles, wheat for example, the price did for a while rise slightly; but, in every such instance, the rise can be traced to variations of supply and demand or other circumstances affecting exclusively the particular article

concerned; while, with regard to the great majority of commodities, either prices have remained stationary, or if there has been any change, the movement has taken a downward more frequently than an upward direction. (Thornton 1880b: 179–180)

Thornton's analysis of the situation was unconvincing. First, there is the question of the importation of silver into India. It does not matter at all if silver is actually imported into India, although Thornton seems to think that it does; all that is required is that the world price, which governs the rate of exchange between the pound and the rupee, for the transfer of the home charges, should alter, as it did with demonetization and the silver discoveries. Yet, Thornton remained adamant that remittances to Britain were the crucial factor in the rupee's depreciation against the pound. India, as a vassal state, had to pay the British government for the services that it rendered to the subject nation and this payment had to be made in British pounds, which were backed by gold. In addition to the home charges, there was the ever-increasing interest on debt for the loans raised in London to finance public works and other fiscal activities in India. These interest payments also had to be made in gold-backed currency. Thus, these obligations placed downward pressure on the value of the Indian rupee against the British pound. As the imperial transfers rose throughout the 1860s and 1870s and the rupee continued to depreciate, more and more silver had to be committed to the payment of these charges. Here, Thornton does not seem to appreciate the fact that the fall in the exchange value of the rupee generated an export surplus for India that was the real counterpart to the unilateral transfer from India to Britain. Nor does he appear to realize that there is a unilateral transfer in the *opposite* direction in the form of British investment to India, which is *negatively* related to the exchange value of the rupee. Consideration of the relative magnitudes of these two transfers, which were affected by the depreciation of the Indian rupee, remains of some importance in determining the overall impact on India's trade balance. Critics wasted little time in highlighting these deficiencies in Thornton's economic analysis.

Like Thornton's other contributions throughout the 1870s, this one was received respectfully in notices and reviews in the periodical press of the day, although many of his contemporaries did not agree with his conclusions. Writing in the *Westminster Review* in early 1881, J. Barr Robertson was critical of Thornton's views on the Indian currency question. "The cardinal defect of his article is", Robertson opined, "that he

assumes the depreciation of silver, and never once touches on the appreciation of gold. The truth is, gold has risen in purchasing power; but Mr. Thornton, looking at the problem from the English gold standard point of view, declared that silver had depreciated, instead of that gold had appreciated" (Robertson 1881: 200–201). In the same journal a few months later, Colonel I.T. Smith praised the "able article by the late Mr. W.T. Thornton, C.B.," but found himself unable to accept its deductions. "Mr. Thornton erroneously came to the conclusion that the low state of the Indian exchange was produced by the annual payments made in England 'of the nature of tribute;' whence he deduced the unfortunate result that the investment of British capital was a grievous injury to her. Instead of this, had it not been that India was unable to remit specie to England without loss, the 'tribute' bills, which have the same economic effect as all other bills, could not permanently dislocate the exchange; and it is needless to say that to shut out British capital from India would be to do her the greatest possible injury" (Smith 1881: 507–508). Neither writer had, in making their determinations, been taken in by Thornton's misdiagnosis of the situation.

Indeed, it has to be said that neither Thornton nor Mallet emerge from this debate with enhanced reputations as monetary commentators as they both failed to fully comprehend the economic implications of the depreciation of silver on the exchange value of the Indian rupee, on the Indian export surplus generated, on the flow of British investment to India, on the real value of the home charges and on the overall Indian trade balance. Of particular concern to both officials was the role of the drawing of Council bills to transfer home payments in the depreciation of the rupee against the pound when, in fact, India managed to generate a sufficient export surplus to make the home payments anyway. In other words, if silver were not to depreciate, or if India had been on gold, Indian exports might not have grown so fast as they did, although, again, as explained above, this issue turns on the relative magnitudes of the two unilateral transfers and changing patterns of trade, all of which was influenced by fluctuations in relative exchange rates. Overall, there seems little justification either for Thornton's claim that it was the size of the imperial tribute that was responsible for the precipitous decline in the exchange value of the Indian rupee or that it ushered in the so-called Indian currency crisis. It should be remembered that neither John Maynard Keynes nor Alfred Marshall, both of whom were writing on the Indian currency question at the end of the nineteenth century, believed that bimetallism was the

solution to such a problem. In fact, they both emphasized the inherent problems of an orthodox bimetallic standard, and in Marshall's opinion, there was no Indian currency crisis to worry about anyway.<sup>22</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In his last years, Thornton devoted considerable energy preparing books, articles and public lectures in the areas of Irish land reform, classical political economy and Indian public works and finance, where his credentials were firmly established. Indeed, in the final decade of his life, Thornton's engagement in public debates and forums on topical questions widens, often through the medium of letters to or columns in the *Times*. However, owing to the rapid advance of knowledge in these fields during the nineteenth century, many of his ideas were obsolete well before his death.

Thornton's most sustained intellectual insights were in the field of Irish land reform, where his contributions to peasant proprietorship assisted in the rehabilitation of that form of land tenure. As early as the 1840s, his proposed "radical" solution to the problem of Irish rural poverty had been classed as authoritative (Gray 1999: 13). He never relented from advocacy of the principle of smallholdings in Ireland, where his earlier remedy had caught the attention of Mill and Poulett Scrope, among others. He further stipulated that the state acquire, where possible, wastelands from Irish (typically absentee) landlords, which would be made over to improvident Irish farmers on concessional terms. Thornton's writings on land tenure reform were practical expressions of concern for the poor and vulnerable in his own and other societies.

Thornton's oldest sparring partners, John Stuart Mill and John Elliot Cairnes, passed away in 1873 and 1875, respectively. Cairnes and Thornton, together with Henry Fawcett and T.E. Cliffe-Leslie, had formed a tight knot of economists around Mill in his final years (Lipkes 1996). Cliffe-Leslie and Thornton held quite unorthodox views on economic issues, while Fawcett and Cairnes remained faithful servants of the classical school. Their differences regularly bubbled to the surface, leading to heated exchanges over the definition of economic science and the operation of its scientific laws. In particular, Thornton had occasion to make his differences known, especially in relation to the classical theories of value and wages, which created a storm of controversy in the 1860s and early 1870s. This dispute marked a critical transition point when a longstanding pillar of the classical system began to weaken. After the deaths of Mill and Cairnes, the controversy had

not entirely died away, but the challenges that Thornton had laid down to economic orthodoxy had been met by a new crop of professionally trained economists who were providing new interpretations and moving political economy in a new direction.

From the early 1870s, the monetary problems of the British Raj became a focus of attention, not least because India, as Britain's largest colonial possession, played such a pivotal role in ensuring that London retained its position as the "financial centre of the universe". From the mid-1870s, Sir Louis Mallet and Thornton began a private correspondence on whether India should be kept on a silver exchange standard in the midst of a sharp and persistent decline in the gold price of silver. Both men attempted to show that the currency crisis led to a sharp deterioration in India's fiscal position, an unstable investment environment for British capital, and an increasingly heavy burden on the Government of India due to the rising real cost of the annual home charges paid to the British government for the operation of the Indian empire. What neither Thornton nor Mallet seemed to appreciate was that, for most of this period, the depreciation of the Indian rupee had actually been responsible for a rise in Indian exports that underpinned the export surplus from which the imperial tribute was due. Barring an unexpected collapse in international trade or sudden changes in the pattern of trade, this situation could be expected to persist. In other words, the home charges payable by the Government of India to the imperial state were not the cause, but rather, the result of the depreciation in the exchange value of the rupee.

While Thornton's evaluation of the Indian currency crisis may have rested on doubtful economic foundations, another reading of the situation is possible. India, as a vassal state, had to pay the British government for the services that it rendered to the subject nation. What led Thornton to take such a dim view of the imperial tribute was that a large proportion of the Indian population, who ultimately bear the burden of producing that tribute, never benefitted from it. What Thornton was suggesting was that scarce resources were being diverted from India and its people to meet the needs of the British imperial state. In making this determination, he was tacitly assigning a higher priority to the duties and obligations of the British state in the provision of crucial public works to lift as many Indian people out of crippling poverty. "Here, then, I bring my story to a close", says Thornton, "by drawing from it the pregnant moral that it is India's tribute which is so balefully weighing down the Indian exchange, and that the same burden threatens, unless speedily

and materially lightened, to break the Indian camel's back—miracle of endurance though the animal be" (Thornton 1880b: 192). What this passage makes clear is the circumstances that led Thornton to take this position—the coercive way in which Indian resources were being funnelled to Britain to bolster its global financial position. Whatever the merits of Thornton's economic diagnosis of the Indian currency question, his resentment at the failure of the imperial state to fulfil its higher duties and obligations was perfectly consistent with his ongoing appeals for broader reforms intended to transform India from "backwardness" into a "progressive" state, so that Britain could relinquish political control in favour of Indian self-rule.

### NOTES

1. *Word for Word from Horace* received reviews in the *Academy* (June 29 1878 13: 572), *British Quarterly Review* (July 1878 67: 141–142), *Athenaeum* (25 May 1878 n.2639: 666–667), *North American Review* (1878 127: 348–349) and the *Times* (3 April 1880 5).
2. Cairnes (1874: vii) chided Thornton for enunciating "certain theoretic positions which it seems to me are fundamentally erroneous".
3. Silver coinage was also standardized in 1835 when the Madras rupee was made the basic standard of value throughout British India. This coin weighed 180 grains and was 11/12 fine. It served as the base of the British India currency system until 1893, when it became token money. The mints of Bombay, Madras and Calcutta provided free coinage of silver—that is, they coined all silver brought to them until they were closed in 1893 (see Adams and West 1979: 55).
4. A gold standard, like a silver standard, is simply a law, passed by the legislative authority of a country, which says that some authority in the country (usually the central bank or the treasury of the government itself) is obliged to exchange gold (silver) for the money of the country and the money of the country for gold (silver) at a fixed legal rate. When two countries are on a gold (silver) standard, arbitrage makes it impossible for the exchange ratio of their currencies to differ appreciably in the foreign exchange market from the ratio of the fixed prices of these currencies in terms of gold (silver). However, when one country operates under a gold standard and another under a silver standard, as in the case of Britain and India throughout much of the nineteenth century, arbitrage does not stabilize the exchange rate between two countries because changes in the relative price of gold and silver invariably lead to fluctuations in the exchange rates between two countries.

5. The members of the Latin Monetary Union were France, Belgium, Switzerland and Italy. The Latin Union operated under a bimetallic monetary standard with a legal gold-silver price ratio of 15½ to 1.
6. A bimetallic monetary standard is a standard under which the monetary authority issues coins in two metals (gold and silver in recent centuries), gives both series of coins legal tender values and stands ready to coin, for anyone who requests it to do so, either metal into coins of designated face value and specified weight and fineness on demand, typically for a small seignorage fee to cover the cost of minting (see Friedman 1990: 85).
7. In those countries that operated under a bimetallic scheme, the market price ratio might (and did) deviate from the legal price ratio due to new discoveries of gold or silver, the demonetization of one metal and changes in the share of non-monetary or industrial uses for each metal (see Drake 1985; Timberlake 1978).
8. Foreman-Peak (1989: 371) convincingly argues that the increase in the cost of imports, resulting from the exchange rate depreciation, imposed an increased tax burden on India.
9. These amounts comprised pensions to returned soldiers and civil servants, the expenses of the India Office and payments such as the interest guaranteed on private railway loans (see Adams and West 1979: 58 and Kaminsky 1980: 307).
10. The Council Bills competed with physical silver as a method of payment to India. The bills also had some influence in reducing the demand for silver in India, which tended to depress its price.
11. The sale of Council Bills, either as means to discharge the annual home charges or to purchase silver for coinage in India, sometimes exceeded India's balance of trade surplus, preventing that surpluses being converted into gold (see Balachandran 2001: 213–214).
12. A fifth letter Thornton wrote to Mallet, dated 25 November 1876, was not included in this publication.
13. In the early 1880s, Mallet took a leading role in the establishment of the International Monetary Standard Association, a grouping of bimetallists who proposed as an alternative to the gold standard a dual monetary system, which used both gold and silver (see McGuire 2001b: 186; Ambirajan 1984: 121–122).
14. The proportion “1 to 15½” refers to the legal price ratio of gold to silver established by France in 1803 under its bimetallic standard—one ounce of gold could be exchanged for 15½ ounces of silver at the mint—and fixed by the French monetary authority for much of the nineteenth century.
15. In a critical annotation in the margin of Thornton's monograph, Sir Louis commented on the self-defeating nature of the policy objective: “Far from

- a self-adjusting equilibrium. A bar upon coining when the metal is in disfavour can never be a self-adjusting equilibrium”.
16. Henri Cernushi (1821–1896) was a strong advocate of bimetallism, who published his *Bimetallic Money* in 1876, which was widely read in France and in England.
  17. In a marginal note next to this passage, Sir Louis Mallet wrote that “with fluctuations so great, so unaccountable, and so frequently recurring, the idea [is] impracticable”.
  18. In this context, Thornton (1877: 22) remarked, “It would be a grand thing if some substance could be found, the intrinsic value of which was unalterable, and a given quantity of which might, therefore, serve as a measure of all other values; but, unfortunately, there is no such substance”.
  19. McGuire (2001b: 185) notes that “Goschen was considered to be the ultimate authority on matters relating to exchange, and his views, which were highly orthodox and very pro-monometallist standards for Britain (gold) and India (silver), were sought by all governments. Certainly, he more than any other figure, shaped the imperial policy of the British government on questions relating to exchange”.
  20. Thornton (1880b: 189) described the depreciation of silver, which some contemporary commentators identified as the reason for the depreciation of the rupee, as “little more than a bugbear”.
  21. Kaminsky (1980: 309) notes, however, that “silver was imported into India in large quantities ... and there was a rise in the general level of prices during 1873–1893 as the silver currency expanded”. Adams and West (1979: 64, 67) argue that “in every year from 1861 to 1895 there was a net inflow of silver”.
  22. For a summary of Marshall’s views on the Indian currency question, see Eshag (1965).

## Epilogue

On the Thursday morning of 17 June 1880, “the eldest of Mr. Mill’s disciples” finally succumbed to “the effects of a severe cold”. Both patron and disciple, whether by chance or design, had died at age sixty-seven. At the time, William Thornton still held the position of secretary of the India Office’s Department of Public Works. For some time, he had been suffering from the debilitating effects of a “lung disease” that left him “in feeble and precarious health” (Barraclough 2009: 4). The *Times* obituary notice mentions that “though he had latterly appeared weaker than usual, no apprehensions were entertained that his malady was likely so soon to prove fatal”. In fact, on the Wednesday evening, Thornton seemed to be “rapidly recovering his strength, but in the morning he was seized with a fainting fit, and passed away quietly” at his home at 7 Cadogan Place SW1. The *Times* obituary registered the nation’s depth of gratitude as follows: “In [William Thornton], the India Office and the country at large lose a tried and valuable public servant.”

The *Annual Register* (1880, 122: 175) was similarly fulsome in recognizing his services to the India Office. It then went on record as saying, “Mr. Thornton was a man of literary tastes. Besides several treatises on economical and philosophical subjects, he published two or three volumes of poems, and his last effort was that most difficult one of translating Horace into English verse.” As expected, the great Victorian periodicals carrying notices of Thornton’s death also heralded his literary achievements, especially—though not exclusively—“in the field of

political economy". "Like not a few other members of the permanent Civil Service", the *Academy* (26 June 1880, 17: 474–475) remarks, "his leisure hours were given over to literature". It also commented upon the fortuity of his East India Company appointment, which had the special charm of bringing him into John Stuart Mill's orbit. "Mr. J.S. Mill, his life-long friend and colleague in the India House, has acknowledged his indebtedness to Mr. Thornton in the field of political economy, where his views are characterized both by originality of speculation and personal study of facts."

The memoirist in the *Athenaeum* (26 June 1880, n.2748: 822–823) also commented on the special bond between Mill and Thornton. "During the last thirteen or fourteen years of Mr. Mill's life", the *Athenaeum* observes, "Mr. Thornton was often to be met at his table". It then proceeded to highlight their overlapping intellectual interests. "Alike in conversation, in oral argument, and in his publications, his intellect appeared subtle and ingenious rather than powerful or profound, but it is hard to say how much more he might not have accomplished had he been able to devote his energies undivided to philosophy and letters." The latter was, of course, a comment on the fact that Thornton did not "obtain the emancipation from the labors of official life which Mr. Mill secured in later years". Thornton was obliged to compose and revise his publications in such interstices of time as he could find between fulfilling his official India House duties and attending to home and hearth. Thus, "to estimate fairly the capacity shown in his literary and philosophical work, it should be remembered that he could devote to it only the hours he could economize from the scanty leisure of a conscientious and hardworking official, whose health was delicate and his temperament so nervous that he often suffered much from loss of sleep." The obituarist also made reference to a new work on political economy that Thornton had in preparation, which, the *Athenaeum* adds, "would have tasked powers of the highest order".<sup>1</sup>

As news of Thornton's death reached his friends, they immediately rallied to his family's side, displaying the kind of solidarity that had once bound them together as members of a unique scholarly enclave committed to upholding John Stuart Mill's radical reform programme. When the Duke of Argyll arrived home on the evening of 17 June 1880, after another long day sitting in the House,<sup>2</sup> he found a letter waiting on the side table from Edward Zohrab Thornton with news that his father had passed away earlier that day. "I am much grieved to hear of Thornton's death", the duke wrote, "[h]e gave me the impression of being one of the best men

I have ever known—so conscientious—and amiable and affectionate in disposition. I had not heard of his illness—else I should have gone to see him”. Over the years, and despite the occasional quarrel, the two men had formed a close friendship, prompting Argyll to portray him, many years after his death, as one “of whom I cannot speak too highly either as a man or as a public servant” (Barraclough 2009: 2). Henry Fawcett, Thornton’s fellow Millite, was also deeply moved when he learned that one of his intellectual kin had died. “It is with the most sincere regret that I heard from your letter this morning of your father’s death. I always regarded him as one of my most valued friends and I am sure everyone who knew him must have had the same warm appreciation, not only of his ability, but also of his worth in all the private relations of life. I am very sorry that I did not know of his illness, as I should have at once called to inquire for him.”<sup>3</sup> Writing from the House of Commons, Leonard Courtney, another old friend, was “much grieved” to hear of his friend’s death. “The last time I met him he seemed weak and ill”, Courtney observes, “but I had hoped I should have had the comfort of his companionship for some years to come”. Courtney, reminiscing about bygone days, added, “[w]e shall miss him at the political economy club, and I am sure the feeling of sorrow will be universal.” “I hope Mrs. Thornton bears the blow bravely. If you could conveniently send a card mentioning the hour and place of the funeral I should be obliged. I am so much engaged in committees and other work that I cannot be sure of attending, but I shall make an effort to do so.”<sup>4</sup> What is apparent from all these condolence letters is that Thornton, an intensely private individual, had been suffering from a serious illness for some time, but had deliberately concealed it from friends and acquaintances.

Thornton’s immediate legacy can be gauged by the terms and conditions of his last will. The executors of his final will, dated 6 June 1878, were his son, Edward Zohrab Thornton, and son-in-law, Thomas W.C. Jones, his personal estate being sworn under £8000. He left all his possessions to his wife, Elizabeth Evelyn Danvers, his son and his son’s wife, Georgina Danvers. “I give unto my dear wife Elizabeth Evelyn Thornton all the furniture, books, pictures, plate, jewelry, wine and linen of which I may die possessed.” The sum left to Elizabeth Evelyn in his will, together with the annual pension of £400 from the India Office, ensured that she would live out her remaining days in dignity and comfort. The bequest nominated Henry Festing Jones of Trinity Hall and Sir George Chesney of the Royal Indian Engineering College at Coopers’ Hill as trustees and made

arrangements for his wife to reside in the family residence “during her life and upon trust to pay the annual income of such other property as I may die possessed of unto my wife during her life and after the decease of my said wife upon trust to pay the said annual income to my said son Edward Zohrab Thornton during his life and after the death of my said son upon trust to pay the said annual income to his wife Georgina Thornton during her life and after the decease of the said Georgina Thornton upon trust to divide the whole of my property equally between whatever children may then be living either of my said son Edward Zohrab Thornton or of my deceased daughter Evelyn Danvers Jones wife of the said Thomas William Carmalt Jones”. Thornton also left strict instructions for his interment. His express wish was “to be buried in an unbricked grave and in a wicker coffin of some such kind as that lately recommended by Mr. Seymour Haden”.<sup>5</sup> The will was signed in the presence of Edmund Thompson and Clement Colvin, respectively assistant and senior clerks in the India Office’s Public Works Department. Thornton’s final will failed to mention where he wished to be buried, suggesting that, in death, he chose to conceal his final resting place.

There was a general consensus among the obituarists that Thornton’s “scholarship was wide and varied”. They further agreed that his most sustained intellectual contribution was in the fledging science of political economy, where he played an important role in theoretical developments in the 1860s and 1870s. Attention was also paid to his role in the rehabilitation of peasant proprietors involving the successful reclamation of Irish wastelands to be cultivated by indigenous farmers. His philosophical, poetical and Indian writings, though less well known than his contributions to political economy, were seen as rounding out his intellectual *oeuvre*. All agreed that Thornton’s work displayed an abiding interest in and deep concern for the precariousness of the human condition; whether it be the prospect of the British factory hand or the Indian *ryotwari*, he strove hard to outline measures needed both to relieve their predicament and elevate their station. He wanted to make the world a better place and developed his solutions for social problems at considerable length in his political tracts of the 1840s, his poetical works of the 1850s, his economic narratives of the 1860s and in philosophical and Indian writings of the 1870s. Together, they form links in an extended chain of themes and concerns recurring throughout his writings. This was the vital importance of championing the interests of those left behind by the forces of urbanization and industrialization then buffeting the Victorian economy.

Thornton's reaction to all this was entirely consistent with the humane motives feeding the imagination of other Victorian reformers, regardless of political affiliation.

Besides his contribution to economics, recent scholarship has begun to revive Thornton's innovative contributions to Irish land reform and Indian public works, where his work has been described as constituting an ingenious contribution towards some of the most hotly contested topics of the Victorian era. Although Thornton's engagement in social, political and economic debate has not been as widely courted as other members of the Mill Circle, the mere fact that recent scholarship has seen fit to recover his place in several fields confers upon it a certain historical respectability and legitimacy. This recent revival of interest has also enabled a more rounded picture of Thornton's life and intellectual achievement. While his writings never lined up among the forefront of Victorian letters, Thornton was content moving on the fringes of literary London for nearly four decades, writing articles and books on a host of topical issues that were a kindling force in shaping and defining public opinion in the mid-Victorian decades.

Thornton's work can be seen, therefore, as part of an exercise in apprehending where Mill's ideas might lead others when carried to *their* logical conclusions. The company Mill chose to keep in his final decade was primarily concerned with the economic, social and moral advancement of mankind. Although the Mill Circle became an important conduit for transmitting Mill's policy goals, its members were never expected to present a set of uniform policy prescriptions. Even though they shared many of the same attitudes, the Millites firmly opposed the idea of adopting principles or following rules of a particular school because the truth was never found through consensus in thought and aims. Indeed, an examination of Thornton's work shows that the quest for truth inculcated at Blackheath Park could have unexpected results and impulses that still drove their passionate devotion in the campaign for reform. Examining the diverse and often contrary set of opinions of Mill's disciples makes it possible to trace the essential unity of that period because it was from such discordant opinions and discourses that the representative works exemplifying the drama of the age were often produced.

In 1873, Thornton penned a critical evaluation of David Hume that could well serve as the inspiration for his own theory of knowledge.

His serious purpose was to unmask the numberless pretences which in politics, political economy, metaphysics, morals, and theology he found

universally current as gospel truths; to expose the ambiguity and contradictions latent in popular thought, and in popular forms of expression which are so apt to be mistaken for thought, and to indicate the only safe mode of investigation and the only trust worthy tests of genuine knowledge; his favourite amusement to put time-honoured commonplaces on the rack, and demanding their *raison d'être*, to pass on them summary sentence of extinction if they failed to account satisfactorily for their existence.

The change in attitude to his classical inheritance, which lay at the heart of his reform agenda, was revealed with special clarity in his work on political economy. In exposing what he saw as inherent flaws in the classical system, Thornton demonstrated categorically that he would not be beholden to ideas or principles if they did not match either the material evidence he collected or the facts and figures he studied. As a result, he was hailed a maverick for not being swayed by representative or mainstream opinion. But winning acceptance for his opinions and views, although important, was secondary to his individualistic world view, which often led him to develop uncompromising, sometimes unpopular, solutions to problems without regard to public fashion or prejudice. Indeed, as Collini (1991: 17) has pointed out, those “belonging to the fraternity of the reflective and articulate ... were aware that they held views which were regarded with some suspicion in the best circles”.

For Thornton, the optimism associated with industrialization and rapid economic growth sat uneasily alongside the economic and social dislocation that had left so many in its wake. As a result, Thornton's writings were deeply concerned with repairing the kinds of fraught relationships that economic development threw up both in his own society, and elsewhere. To this end, Thornton held out the promise of resolving tensions between Irish landlords and tenants, Indian zemindars and ryots, factory hand and factory owner, to name a few. Although his views never lacked criticism, Thornton's reform project did strike a responsive chord in those who valued his special mission to restore security and dignity to persons dwelling on the fringes of society, but without a voice in it. The empathetic heights Thornton reached in his earlier prose writings and poetry were a mere prelude to his mature narratives on class relations and industrial cooperatives, where the harsher paradigm of competition and progress of Herbert Spencer and the Social Darwinists was repudiated in favour of a new social and economic charter based on cooperative institutions and practices.

Caught up in the new realities around him, Thornton resolved to make sense of them. Thus, the challenge to the grounds of faith and the nature of religious experience tested Victorians on many levels. Disputes within Christianity over its teachings and beliefs were as common as disputes within science itself over how best to integrate science and religion. Thornton wrestled with new scientific knowledge, too, even as he stoutly defended Christian beliefs as a basis for a morally virtuous life. He accepted Newtonian theories and principles, but rather than holding that the Newtonian universe had delivered a knockout blow to revealed religion, he maintained that God was, in fact, the original architect of the mechanical order of heaven and earth. Christian beliefs remain the source of his system of values, the key to unlocking social and moral progress and the best hope for man's future without which mankind would lack an ultimate hope capable of helping them face life's tribulations.

The last word on William Thomas Thornton comes from the obituary in the *Athenaeum*, which betrays the loftiness of his spirit and of his life's work to redeem mankind. He would surely have relished this final tribute:

Mr. Thornton, as already said, was no mere economist; he loved the fine arts, but nature still more, and man most of all. Pictures and sculpture pleased him, natural scenery delighted him still more, but what gave him greatest happiness was to look forward to such a Utopia as is described in verse in the concluding chapter of his book 'On Labour'.

Thus, Thornton's legacy is framed by the vision of a cooperative society built around those cherished Victorian values and ideals most conducive to human progress (i.e. the moral and material improvement of mankind). The last chapters of his *magnum opus* form a dramatic realization of this vision which looked back to a time before industrialization and which expounded the necessity of man's personal and social fulfilment through meaningful work and civic engagement.

## NOTES

1. The whereabouts of this manuscript is unknown.
2. At the time, Argyll held the office of Lord privy seal in the second Gladstone ministry.

3. In a letter Fawcett wrote to Edward Zohrab of 6 June 1884, he said, “Your father and Mrs Thornton were amongst my kindest and most valued friends.”
4. Some years later, Edward Zohrab Thornton presented Leonard Courtney with “a magnificent inkstand” as a token of the friendship between his late father and Courtney. In his reply of 30 January 1883, Courtney accepted the gift “as a remembrance of the great regard I had for your father and of his sturdy friendship. Nothing was necessary to keep alive affection for his memory, but your gift would never let me forget it. I can assure you I am sincerely moved by this instance of kindness.”
5. Sir Francis Seymour Haden (1818–1910) was well-known for promoting the use of easily degradable coffins, notably wicker coffins (Kazmier 2009). It is not known how Thornton became acquainted with Haden’s perishable coffins.

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