

John Hughes, reluctant *agent provocateur* and millenarian: a note and new documents

MICHAEL DUREY

THE PURPOSE OF THIS NOTE is to draw attention to two previously unnoticed documents relating to John Hughes, the United Irish bookseller from Belfast who gained notoriety as an informer and *agent provocateur* in 1797-98. The documents do not throw much light on the events of these years, but they are significant in adding to our knowledge of Hughes' early life and his state of mind very soon after he quit Ireland for the United States. The documents are letters written by Hughes from South Carolina in 1802 to Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States. They are filed in Jefferson's papers held in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.. Jefferson did not reply to them.

Three points of interest emerge from these letters. The first relates to Hughes' early life. What little evidence has been available until now has placed Hughes permanently in Ulster during his youth. Born into an extended family of respectable Presbyterian farmers, his early years were disrupted by a quarrel of unknown cause between his parents. His father James was ostracised by the family and his mother, a Carson, left her husband and settled in Belfast, where she opened a dram shop. According to R. R. Madden, John Hughes was apprenticed to the editor of the *Belfast Newsletter*, before becoming a prosperous stationer and bookseller.¹ The letters below suggest that before his apprenticeship Hughes spent some time at sea, shortly after the end of the American War of Independence. He may possibly even have been at sea earlier, becoming a prisoner of war of the Americans. The fate of such prisoners seems to have been an obsession with him and a major motivation for his writing to Jefferson. He may, like Thomas Paine, have run away to sea, anxious to avoid the unhappiness of family life.

A second point of interest from these letters is some confirmation that Hughes had been a reluctant spy and *agent provocateur* for the British government. A member of the first Society of United Irishmen from 1793, he had been sworn into the underground second Society by Robert Orr in 1796. Forming his own cell in Belfast, he acted as its secretary, swearing in new members, a capital offence. On several occasions he acted for the Belfast United Irishmen in

1. Richard R. Madden, *The United Irishmen: Their lives and Times*, 2nd ed., Ser. 1 (Dublin, 1858), pp. 463, 451.

Dublin, where he met most of the leading figures in the Central Committee. Until his arrest in Newry in October 1797, Hughes was a trusted and committed member of the United Irishmen.²

Faced with the threat of a trial for treason and the collapse of his business in 1797, Hughes' nerve quickly broke. For the next six months, he acted under the orders of Major Sirr in Dublin, incriminating among others Henry Grattan, whom he claimed, in his evidence before the Irish House of Lords, had been sworn into the United Irishmen by his kinsman, Samuel Neilson.³ To his credit, however, Hughes refused to give evidence in open court, thereby helping to save the lives of many of the United Irishmen Central Committee.

Some of the spies used by the authorities against the United Irishmen were unsavoury characters; others, such as Hughes and the Dublin feather merchant John Cormick, were trapped by circumstances and personal timidity into betraying their fellow conspirators.⁴ According to Madden, forty years later, former United Irishmen had gained some understanding of Hughes' predicament in 1798; he at least had been truthful and free of 'personal rancour' (if true, this raises an interesting sidelight on whether Grattan really took the oath in the April before the rebellion).⁵ Benjamin Binns, however, who liaised between Dublin and the United Britons in London in 1798, still thought of Hughes as a 'lying traitor' and a 'scared traitor' in 1843, although he acknowledged that Hughes had not incriminated all those against whom he had information.⁶

The letters to Jefferson show that once out of the British government's clutches, Hughes reverted to his former Anglophobia, to the extent of suggesting that the United States should declare war on Britain. Obliquely referring to his own role in Ireland, he advised Jefferson to beware of 'Fell agitators' who would lull the United States into a false sense of security by suggesting that the war in Europe would soon end. These 'monied agents of dishonest Governments' were both American-born members of Congress (presumably New England Federalists) and recent immigrants in the pay of Britain (bringing to mind the English spies 'Bird' and 'Smith' used in Ireland). Jefferson should guard against these 'imposters' and prepare for the inevitable war with Britain, argued Hughes.

Of even more interest than Hughes' warning of a British fifth column insinuating itself into American public life – a charge which was not unknown at the time, having been aimed at William Cobbett during his years in Philadelphia – are his references to the millennial writings of Richard Brothers. Brothers was born in Newfoundland (significantly, so he thought) on Christmas Day 1757. Sent to England, he joined the navy as a midshipman and served

2. *Report from the Secret Committee of the House of Lords* (Dublin, 1798), 23-9; W. J. Fitzpatrick, *Secret Service Under Pitt* (London, 1892), p. 94.

3. Madden, *United Irishmen*, ser. 1, p. 451; *Report of the House of Lords*, 32.

4. For Cormick, see *Report from the Secret Committee of the House of Commons* (Dublin, 1798), p. 322.

5. Madden, *United Irishmen*, Ser. 1, p. 455.

6. Benjamin Binns to R. R. Madden, 30 January 1843, Madden Papers, Trinity College, Dublin 873/451.

throughout the American War, including several years in the West Indies. After the war he was retired on a lieutenant's half-pay and probably served several years on merchant ships. His marriage did not survive his trips away; his interest in prophetic religion began at about the time he discovered his wife had established a home with, and borne several children to, another man. His prophesying probably began about 1790 in London, but it was not until 1794, when he published *A Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times Book the First*, that he gained notoriety. Lamphooned as 'the Great Prophet of Paddington Street', from mid-1794 to the spring of 1795 Brothers was visited by many curious, and probably credulous, people.⁷

Brothers' millennial teachings were not original, nor did he make any attempt to attract a following, but prophesying disasters, including 'a large river running through London coloured with human blood' and the destruction of London in June 1795, naturally concerned the government, who in March 1795 after examination placed him in a private insane asylum in Islington, where he remained for eleven years.⁸

The great rise in interest in millenarian ideas which the French Revolution promoted, and of which Brothers was just one manifestation, has in recent years been a subject of research by historians of Ireland. Particular emphasis has been placed on an ancient Irish millennialism which was resurrected in the years before the 1798 Rebellion, given a new focus, and used by United Irish leaders to spread revolutionary ideas amongst the peasant Defenders.⁹ Aiming to harness peasant credulity to their cause, none of the secular United Irish leaders themselves appear to have openly expressed belief in biblical millennialism, although many Presbyterian Ulstermen, especially in the heady years of 1791 and 1792 when international co-operation and world revolution seemed a possibility, may well have turned to their bibles for inspiration. Certainly, the Belfast *Northern Star* was prepared to publish the Reverend Thomas Ledlie Birch's millennial letters from Saintfield and the editor, Samuel Neilson, son of a Presbyterian clergyman, occasionally made statements of a millennial flavour in his editorials.¹⁰

In this context, it is of some significance, therefore, that Hughes in 1802 was under the influence of Richard Brothers' writings. Brothers' *A Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times*, which was reprinted in the anonymously-edited *The World's Doom* mentioned by Hughes, was published in Dublin in 1795, but no historian has commented on its possible influence in Ireland. The

7. J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism 1780-1850* (London, 1979), pp. 57-70.

8. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1968), p. 127.

9. David W. Miller, 'Presbyterianism and 'Modernisation' in Ulster', *Past and Present*, 80 (1978), 66-90; James S. Donnelly, Jr., 'Propagating the Cause of the United Irishmen', *Studies*, 69, (1980), 5-23; Thomas Bartlett, 'Defenders and Defenderism in 1795', *Irish Historical Studies*, 24 (1985), 373-94.

10. For examples of millennial or quasi-millennial statements, see *Northern Star*, 7 April 1792 (Samuel Neilson), 26 September 1792 (Neilson), 3 November 1792 ('Aristedes'), 7 November 1792 (Neilson), 17 November 1792 (T. L. Birch).

only known connection Brothers had with Ireland can be found in the autobiography of John Binns, who visited Brothers several times in London. The Dublin-born Binns, the younger brother of Benjamin, was at this time a member of the London Corresponding Society. Unfortunately, his account of his meetings with Brothers is either disingenuous or based on faulty memory, for he claims that his visits to Pentonville began several days after the massive storm which occurred on 4 June 1795, the day Brothers had prophesied the destruction of London. In fact, Brothers was already by then in the Islington asylum, which Binns visited only once. Most probably, many years later Binns did not wish to acknowledge that it was not the storm which had stimulated his interest but Brothers' published millenarian ideas in general. He was more credulous in his early years than he was later willing to admit, although he was prepared to write that Brothers was 'insane on one subject, sane on all others, and intelligent on many'.¹¹

It is not possible to confirm that Hughes first came under the influence of Brothers' millennialism at about the same time as Binns, but one can speculate that most probably his interest was aroused only after he had become a government informer (it is drawing far too long a bow to suggest that Hughes and Brothers might have been acquainted in the West Indies). Millennialism, with its emphasis on great upheavals prophesying the imminent end of the world, could appeal both in periods of extreme uncertainty and exhilaration and in periods of despair. The guilt which he felt on account of his activities for the British government, combined with the upheaval of emigration, would have brought Hughes to the edge of despair, perhaps even to a state of breakdown; the agitated letters to Jefferson certainly suggest a temporary unhinging of his mind. In that state, the prophecies of Brothers, that Britain would be brought low, that French arms would triumph and monarchies fall throughout Europe, might have appealed to his desire of vengeance against those who had exposed his frailties and ruined his life in Ireland.¹²

THE TEXTS

(Spelling and punctuation remain unaltered)

DOCUMENT 1

JOHN HUGHES TO THOMAS JEFFERSON,
CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA, 10 JANUARY 1802

The idea of a Peace in Europe seems to be here generally believed, as certain, and has been a ground of some Debates in our National Councils. I hope you will not be off your Guard – by this delusive Expectation – As a Man of Extensive Information, you can be no Stranger to the Views of the fell Agitators concerned in the present bloody Drama. I do not doubt your integrity, or

11. [John Binns], *Recollections of the Life of John Binns* (Philadelphia, 1854), pp. 47-51.

12. Clarke Garrett, *Respectable Folly: Millenarians and the French Revolution in France and England* (Baltimore, 1975), p. 183.

Capacity – As a Man you cannot see every where therefore in your Collection of Information must have it, in many instances from Others – A moderate share of political foresight induces me to disregard the protestations of Men blackened with so many Crimes – there is no sincerity in their Professions, inured to Wickedness, they are not to be trusted, As experience will soon Demonstrate, – It is declared by unquestionable Authority. That a Universal Revolution must ensue, And a New Order of things take place under divine Direction. Experience of human Government has as yet, produced nothing permanently Safe; you have seen the Risque of loosing all in a few Years, which Virtuous Energy had long laboured to Produce, When the foul Pages of Ancient and Modern History are justly appreciated and Truth is discovered – What a lowring Horrizon astonishes the Daring Reformer! As Brissot¹³ justly observes, there is something more necessary than human Effort to Conduct the Enterprise, and Sustain the Adventurer – I know you to be more Manly than to reject the well meant Endeavours of an Individual, however humble his Station – I therefore take the Liberty of recommending to your perusal 2 Volumes of the Worlds Doom, I am certain you will agree with me in Opinion, That Richard Brothers has displayed more sanity of Judgement than the British Administration, who indecently rejected his Salutary learning – Your unfortunate predecessor¹⁴ has in my Opinion, involved us, as a People in National Guilt, by his hostility to France. It remains for you as our Chief to atone, by avoiding an Evil of Such Magnitude. To be frank with you, I advise you to prepare promptly for war with England – It is not in your Power, or the Wisdom of Congress to put it by. The principal purpose of this Letter to you has been to suggest to your Consideration, the Condition of Prisoners of War – and to induce [you] to attempt a revisal of the Laws to alleviate the oppression of those innocent Sufferers – it is against the Government, and not the people that Wars should operate – the atrocious Government of England has already alienated the Affections of her best Men. At the beginning of our Revolution, the Pride, and Ferocity of the British Soldiery was urged to heights, which were only suppressed by Threats of Retaliation and favorable Resistance. – But the Seamen of Britain were generally well disposed to America, especially at the commencement, when their Wages, Ventures etc were paid out of the Sale of the Prizes taken. Unfortunately, this just, and truly politick conduct was lost Sight of in the progression of the war. Sir, I would advise you to pay attention to this Important Subject. Britain's wealth may buy Men. Her arrogance cannot ensure affection, and I trust no cruel Example of hers or any other Nation will ever induce the United States of America to deviate, from the Cause of humanity or from setting so laudable an Example to a barbarous Era. I trust on reflection She will consider the Cause of the Stranger and not vex or oppress him. It has been generally thought in Europe that America was the Common Asylum of those who wished to become inhabitants. I think that Sacred Writ

13. Brissot de Warville, a leader of the Girondins in France, who was executed in 1793. Before the Revolution he had lived in London and visited the United States. His writings frequently had a millenarian tone.

14. President John Adams.

warrants my considering the whole Globe as a common right of Inheritance. Honest Legislators may easily prevent Foreigners from any Dangerous interference in a Government. It is the monied agents of dishonest Governments who are dangerous to the repose of every People. It is Mammon, the Idol worshiped by Europe and most of America, that wars with the Rights of Man and usurped the Adoration alone due to the Father of Mankind. May he who gives liberally and uprades not, bestow on you everything needful to assist you in your important Station is the wish of him who is
yours with Esteem

John Hughes

DOCUMENT 2
JOHN HUGHES TO THOMAS JEFFERSON,
COLUMBIA, SOUTH CAROLINA, 5 MARCH 1802

I wrote you formerly my opinion, of there being a propriety, of attending to alleviate, the condition of prisoners of war, and of certainty of a war with England, and the propriety of declaring the war in particular against its Government, and treating English prisoners of war, as was done at the commencement of the Revolution, allowing the sailors their wages, and ventures, out of the prize taken. I conceive that a vigilant attention should be kept on those who are, or may be employed, by the British Government on the footing of Citizenship, even such a man as Nicholas Madgett might have a protection.¹⁵ Justice intitles the sincere foreigner to favour, but, should guard against the imposter, whose admition is baneful to the publick welfare; and who mostly intangle their employers in deception (justifying the addage of honesty is best policy). The purport of this, is chiefly to inform you, of a discovery made in the year 1785, on an emminence near the east end of Jamaica, in a clear morn, with a common tellescope of Dollands, viewing the sun, as he emerged from the ocean, I discovered 3 globes, or sattelites, near the sun, I long suspected that such, was the cause of the dark spots, seen on that planet; from the distance of these globes I think the number is 7. Repeated observations convinces me of this visual truth. I showed it to [a] friend, now no more. Having seen no publication of the subject, I now submit it to your consideration to ascertain the truth. An early aversion to methodic systems, and various impediments obstructing my persuits, have deterred me from scientific activity. My days are hastening to a period, observation with you, may publish what for some time, otherwise perish, with an obscure individual, who is with esteem yours

John Hughes

15. Nicholas Madgett, a pre-Revolution exile from Kerry, who had been employed under the French monarchy and became head of the *Bureau de Traduction* attached to the Committee of Public Safety in 1793-94. He liaised at times between the French government and disaffected British subjects in France and was involved in spy hunting in Paris; see Marianne Elliott, *Partners in Revolution: The United Irishmen and France* (New Haven, 1982), pp. 60-62.