

# “Under the Existing Rules”: Anne Lister and the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society

CASSANDRA ULPH

**T**HE Literary and Philosophical Societies established in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have been seen, generally speaking, to operate within a masculine model of civic sociability. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, for example, observe that “this public world was consistently organized in gendered ways and had little space for women.”<sup>1</sup> Although Peter Clark, in his study of British clubs and societies before 1800, identifies an increase in female participation in associational life in the late eighteenth century, he notes that this is limited to particular areas: “During George III’s reign women began to make more of an impact, particularly with the appearance of new subscription associations and philanthropic societies, but the great majority of societies remained exclusively male.”<sup>2</sup> There is some evidence to suggest

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<sup>1</sup> Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), p. 416.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580–1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 130–31.

that this exclusion was, in the case of the Literary and Philosophical Societies, by default rather than by design. The Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society claimed that it had theoretically allowed female members since its inception in 1793, but it was not until 1798 that the question of female participation was seriously considered, when a query from John Clennell about female membership prompted the proposal of a category of “reading members.”<sup>3</sup> Reading members would be allowed to attend lectures but not the monthly meetings that ordinary members attended. This new category would allow for the “delicacy” of female members; by implication, the kind of membership that had previously been available to women in theory would have been considered “indelicate” and therefore unlikely to be adopted in practice. Similarly, women seem to have been admitted to public lectures of the Manchester Lit and Phil, but not to its meetings. A letter by a female correspondent to the *Leeds Mercury* in 1819 claims that “at the celebrated societies of Liverpool and Manchester, ladies are admitted,” and proposes that the same measure be adopted at the Leeds Phil and Lit. Another correspondent, a week later, “seconds her motion” by citing the example of Birmingham Philosophical Society “in which is to be seen every Monday night, (in the Winter season,) an assemblage of the most respected *Ladies* of that town and neighborhood. And why not?”<sup>4</sup> It seemed, then, that by this point women were being admitted to several major societies, but

<sup>3</sup> According to Jon Mee and Jennifer Wilkes, “Ladies . . . were allowed tickets for the lectures at half price, despite the fact that none were members of the parent society. Although the committee responded to an enquiry from John Clennell by claiming ‘ladies are & always have been admissible as members by the rules of the Society,’ in 1799 it had introduced the idea of ‘reading members’ as a ‘mode [of membership] less revolting to their delicacy” (Jon Mee and Jennifer Wilkes, “Transpennine Enlightenment: The Literary and Philosophical Societies and Knowledge Networks in the North 1781–1830,” *Networks of Improvement*, a special issue of *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 38 [2015], 606). As Mee notes, “Clennell . . . did encourage women members in his various associational ventures in Hackney early in the nineteenth century” (Jon Mee, “Introduction,” *Networks of Improvement*, 477).

<sup>4</sup> *The Leeds Mercury*, 20 and 27 February 1819. The correspondent “Di. Vernon” is presumably a self-consciously topical reference to the heroine of Walter Scott’s *Rob Roy* (1817). Thanks to Jon Mee and Jenny Wilkes for information about female membership (or lack thereof) at Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society and Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society.

(Birmingham apparently excepted) this was usually a kind of auxiliary membership that did not really penetrate the concentric inner circles of ordinary and committee membership.

The Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society was inaugurated in 1830 and, within a year, had elected a woman, Anne Lister, as one of its ordinary members. The Society's Centenary Handbook of 1930 relates the history of the Society and records that "at the first Annual Meeting . . . it being the opinion of the council that Ladies were eligible as members Miss Anne Lister, of Shibden Hall, was duly elected."<sup>5</sup> The matter excited no further comment in 1930 than this. However, the original minutes of that meeting, held in the Calderdale Archive in Halifax, reveals that, as far as the committee was concerned, no positive change to the Society's constitution needed to be made. In some senses, the resolution passed on 3 October 1831, "that it is the Opinion of the Meeting under the existing Rules Ladies are eligible as Members," could hardly be called a resolution at all.<sup>6</sup> This clarification of the rules—one that was clearly deemed necessary, as it had been in Newcastle in 1798—was prompted by the more concerted voice of the ordinary members at the monthly general meeting in September, at which "it was Resolved, that it is the Opinion of the present meeting that the Attendance of Ladies at the monthly meetings is very desirable and that the same be submitted for consideration and adoption at the ensuing annual meeting."<sup>7</sup> Lister was elected on the seventh of October that year.

Despite the apparent enthusiasm at the monthly meeting for female members, where their attendance was deemed not merely permissible but "desirable," Lister remained the only woman elected in her lifetime (she died in 1840), and the extent of her active engagement with the Society is unclear. Helena Whitbread asserts that Lister "became the first woman to be elected to the committee of the Halifax branch of the

<sup>5</sup> *Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society, 1830–1930: Centenary Handbook* (Halifax: Stott Brothers, Lister Lane, 1930), p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> *Council Minute Book of the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society, 1831–39*, Calderdale Archives, Halifax, mm. MISC 49/7, 3 October 1831.

<sup>7</sup> *Transactions of the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society, 1831–39*, Calderdale Archives, Halifax, mm. MISC 49/14, 2 September 1831.

Literary and Philosophical Society because of her academic contributions to that society,” but there is no evidence that Lister was ever more than an ordinary member, and evidence of her attendance at meetings is elusive.<sup>8</sup> During her nine years of membership, Lister was often traveling, both abroad and in the United Kingdom, so her regular attendance was unlikely.<sup>9</sup> What is known is that Lister contributed significantly to the building of a New Museum, a total of £150 in the space of little over a year. When a subscription for the new Museum was raised, Lister’s name was first on the list (*Council Minute Book*, 11 March 1833). In Lister’s correspondence, the Lit and Phil is most frequently mentioned where a financial transaction, such as the payment of membership fees or a contribution to the Museum fund, takes place; her involvement (or not) in the associational activities of the Society is less well documented.

To understand the nature of Lister’s engagement with the Lit and Phil, it is instructive first to look at the origins and ethos of that Society. The record of committee meetings from 1830 and 1831 reveal the extent of borrowing from other Societies—those of Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle, and York in particular—in terms of both organizational and physical structure. For example, the membership certificate was copied from the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the cabinet maker (and the plans to which he worked) was borrowed from the Yorkshire Philosophical Society, and envoys were dispatched to all corners of the North: “Mr Smith and Mr Leyland having undertaken to examine the Museums at Manchester and Liverpool, and Mr E Alexander those at York and Scarborough” (*Council Minute Book*, 6 December and 30 August 1830). It was clear that the committee’s intention was to

<sup>8</sup> Helena Whitbread, “Introduction,” in Anne Lister, *I Know My Own Heart: The Diaries of Anne Lister (1791–1840)*, ed. Whitbread (London: Virago, 1988), p. xii. Further references to Lister’s diary from this edition appear in the text. The Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society (like others in Britain) was an autonomous institution, rather than a “branch” of any national association (albeit with links to other similar institutions through kinship, shared membership, and friendly correspondence), so Whitbread’s assertion seems doubly unreliable here.

<sup>9</sup> For a rough guide to Lister’s movements during this period, see “Chronology” in Anne Lister, *Miss Lister of Shibden Hall: Selected Letters (1800–1840)*, ed. Muriel M. Green (Sussex: The Book Guild, 1992), pp. 7–13.

replicate the success of other societies by abiding by an established set of practices. It seems reasonable, then, that, in the matter of female participation, Halifax would take its cues from these older, more established societies.

The Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society was established, first and foremost, with a view to tangible civic improvement, which would be expressed in the concrete form of a museum. As David Livingstone has argued, “the museum voiced the values of its curators and disclosed their mental geographies.”<sup>10</sup> The immediacy with which the Halifax Society set about establishing an architectural manifestation of those values anticipates the Victorian preoccupation with the spatial and material nature of public culture that Livingstone identifies:

While its architecture was intervening in the cultural struggles of late Victorian society, the museum as an institution did much to promote what has been called an “object-based” approach to knowing in the decades around 1900. (*Putting Science in Its Place*, p. 38)

The material manifestation of knowledge, and the need to house that knowledge, is thus one of the driving principles behind the establishment not only of the Museum, but of the Society itself. Further, the gendering of scientific space required the founders to consider, in its admission practices, the mediation of such supposedly “masculine” knowledge for an unregulated (possibly female) audience, in accordance with the paternalistic values the museum embodied. The minutes of the inaugural meeting, on 30 August 1830, launch immediately into details of the trusteeship of the proposed institution and its projected status in the Halifax community. The meeting resolved as follows:

with a view to extend more generally the great Advantages and Information to be derived from the Establishment of the Museum, Individuals, not being Members of the Society, be allowed to become Subscribers to the Museum, on payment of the annual sum of One Pound, and that in Consideration

<sup>10</sup> David N. Livingstone, *Putting Science in Its Place: Geographies of Scientific Knowledge* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 33.

of such payment they, together with the Members of their Families actually resident with them, shall have the Privilege of visiting the museum at all times during the Hours of Attendance to be fixed by the Society's Rules, and also of introducing personally or by Ticket, Friends and Strangers resident upwards of Five Miles from Halifax, but such subscribers are not to have any Control whatever over or interest in the Museum, nor to be considered in any way Members of the Society. (*Council Minute Book*, 30 August 1830)

This resolution outlines the complex relationship between the Society and the Museum, which were intricately connected while remaining separable. The Society was to curate the Museum, the trustees of which would "consist of Depositors of Collections to the actual value of fifty pounds and upwards, and of Contributors in Money or Specimens to the Amount of Twenty pounds" (*Council Minute Book*, p. 2). Trustees, then, did not necessarily have to be members, and it was possible to subscribe to the Museum, thus receiving the tickets without joining the Society. As Catherine Euler notes, being a subscriber to the Museum meant that Lister had tickets such as these in her gift, which she could bestow on her servants. Euler points out: "The gifts, which were not gifts, were a display of gentry paternalism which was not really paternalism. It reflected self-interest more than philanthropy."<sup>11</sup> Yet, as Davidoff and Hall have suggested, "philanthropy came to occupy the status of profession for some women" (*Family Fortunes*, p. 431), suggesting that Lister's philanthropy could also be means of cementing her social status along appropriately feminine lines. Regardless, philanthropy and self-interest in this case arguably went hand-in-hand. In contrast to the Machiavellian function of the museum as symbolic of princely power, Tony Bennett has argued that "nineteenth-century reformers . . . typically sought to enlist high cultural practices for a diversity of ends: as an antidote to drunkenness; an alternative to riot; or an instrument for civilizing the morals and

<sup>11</sup> Catherine A. Euler, *Moving Between Worlds: Gender, Class, Politics, Sexuality and Women's Networks in the Diaries of Anne Lister of Shibden Hall, Halifax, Yorkshire, 1830-1840* (Doctoral Thesis, University of York, 1995), p. 210.

manners of the population.”<sup>12</sup> Established before the governmentalization of cultural spaces that gathered pace in the late-Victorian period, the Halifax Museum’s system of ticketed access would seem to fulfill both of these functions, allowing Lister to reinforce her construction of dynastic status while offering a practical mechanism for the regulation of the behavior of her dependents. The complex relationship between the Society, the Museum, and its subscribers underscores the Committee’s assumption that visitors to the Museum would extend to the friends, neighbors, and families of their membership, and that subscription would extend beyond the Society’s membership, the core of which consisted of Halifax’s wealthy elite. The paternalist dissemination of knowledge embodied in this model of access, filtered through traditional family networks or patronage relationships, does not necessarily extend to inclusion or proprietorship. It is this same paternalism that Euler identifies in Lister’s bestowal of tickets on her servants. From its inception in 1831, then, the Society appears to have reinforced the existing hierarchy of Halifax’s wealthy and established industrialist families. Arnold Thackray has noted an important generational shift in his study of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society, one of the several major societies on either side of the Pennines from which the Halifax Society took its pattern:

By the 1830s and 1840s the descendants of Manchester manufacturers were active in the consolidation of science within the central value system of English life and, in response to the challenges they now faced from a new urban lower class, in finding deeper conservative meanings in the very structure of natural knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

Just as the development Thackray identifies here is the move of the descendants of manufacturers into a bourgeois respectability, the founders of the Halifax Society were overwhelmingly drawn from Halifax’s wealthy and powerful families such as the Waterhouses and Rawsons, who had made their money, a generation

<sup>12</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 22.

<sup>13</sup> Arnold Thackray, “Natural Knowledge in Cultural Context: The Manchester Model,” *American Historical Review*, 79 (1974), 678–79.

back, in woollen and worsted manufacturing, and some of whom had moved into banking.<sup>14</sup> Many of those listed as “founders” in the Society’s 1930 centenary handbook also appear as part of a committee formed for the support of those affected by the Luddite uprisings of 1811–16 (which had particularly targeted wealthy industrialists). The membership of the committee is detailed in a notice in the *Leeds Intelligencer*, which records:

a numerous and highly respectable Public Meeting of Inhabitants of the Town and Parish of Halifax, called by the Constables of Halifax, to take into Consideration the Services of those Gentleman who so meritoriously exerted themselves during the late Disturbances in the West Riding of the County of York, and held on Wednesday, the 12th of May, 1813, at the White Lion Inn.<sup>15</sup>

These “Gentlemen” included several founder members, including the Society’s first two presidents, Christopher Rawson (banker, and later Chairman of Halifax and Huddersfield Union Banking Co., 1836–43) and John Waterhouse Jr., son of woollen merchant John Waterhouse Sr.<sup>16</sup> The exertions in question had taken the form of financial assistance to William Cartwright, whose factory had been one of the targets of the

<sup>14</sup> The composition of the list of “Founders” makes interesting reading, particularly for the occupations of its members. Of the fifty-five “Founders” listed, six were bankers (mostly with links to cloth-merchant families such as the Rawsons), eight were legal professionals (i.e., solicitors, barristers, or attorneys), eight were doctors, and nine were woollen and/or worsted manufacturers or merchants. There were also three clergymen (from the Anglican, Unitarian, and Methodist churches), a schoolmaster, a drawing master, and a handful of artisans or small tradesmen, including the bookseller Roberts Leyland. Thus the demographic of the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society at its inception was largely, if not exclusively, the wealthy and socially influential. See *Centenary Handbook*, pp. 6–15. The Waterhouses were particularly prominent in Halifax, and are listed among the “Testamentary Burials” detailed in the Rev. J. Watson’s *Biographia Halifaxiensis*, in which the family merits numerous entries. See John Watson (1725–83), *Biographia Halifaxiensis: or, Halifax Families and Worthies. A Biographical and Genealogical History of Halifax Parish*, compiled by J. Horsfall Turner (Bingley: T. Harrison, 1883), pp. 174–75 and passim.

<sup>15</sup> *The Leeds Intelligencer*, 24 May 1813.

<sup>16</sup> Other members of the Committee featuring on the Society’s list of “founders” included: George Pollard JP, of John Pollard and Co. Woollen Merchants, Lt. Colonel 2nd West York Yeoman Cavalry, and Chairman of the Halifax Commercial Banking Co., 1859–1866; William Henry Rawson, Chairman of Halifax and Huddersfield Union Banking Co., 1856–1864; and Christopher Saltmarsh of the firm of Rawdon and Saltmarsh, Stuff and Woollen Cloth Merchants. See *Centenary Handbook*, pp. 6–15.

uprising, and of keeping the “Public Peace.” The interests of the cloth trade that had built Halifax’s merchant elite were protected and the social status quo maintained.

That such prominent local “Gentlemen” were also some of the key proponents in establishing the Society at Halifax suggests a change in the nature of the Literary and Philosophical Society as an institution by 1830. Underlining the role that the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society had formerly played in “the social legitimation of marginal men,” Thackray argues: “When political power finally arrived, it was members of the ‘Lit & Phil’ who, as the local elite, naturally exercised it” (“Natural Knowledge in Cultural Context,” pp. 678, 680). The Literary and Philosophical Society at Halifax was established at precisely this crucial political moment; following the death of George IV in June 1830, electoral reform began to look like a serious prospect, with the first Reform Bill being brought before the House of Commons in March 1831, and its final iteration being passed by the House of Lords in June 1832. It is this political moment to which Thackray refers, in which the members of the Lit and Phil constituted the “social elite,” and it is in this context that the Halifax Society was inaugurated. The founding membership of the Society itself represented the next generation of Lit and Phils in a literal sense. Edward Nelson Alexander was in all probability a descendant of William Alexander MD, Halifax, who is listed as an honorary member at Manchester in 1798 and an early subscriber to the Halifax Circulating Library in 1768; the Rev. William Turner, Minister of Northgate-End Unitarian Chapel, Halifax, was the son of another honorary member of Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society and founder of the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society (also a William Turner).<sup>17</sup> This reinforces the feeling that Halifax Lit and Phil was a natural inheritor of

<sup>17</sup> See *Memoirs of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester*, Vol. 5, part 1 (London: Cadell and Davies, 1798). Thanks to Jon Mee for this reference. William Turner of Halifax (1788–1853) was the son of William Turner (1761–1859), the minister of Hanover Square Unitarian Chapel in Newcastle and former student at Warrington Academy, and the grandson of William Turner (1714–94), Minister at Westgate Unitarian Chapel, Wakefield. The founding membership of the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society also included Methodist and Anglican clergymen, so it appears to have been nondenominational in this sense.

the modes and mores of these earlier societies, and the result of an evolution those societies had already undergone. Many of those early members had also been members of other, smaller societies such as the Halifax Convivial Society (formerly, the Conversational Society), at which Literary and Philosophical Society founder member John Stott, engraver, gave at least two lectures; the Society also had strong links with the Mechanics' Institute (founded in 1825), of which John Waterhouse Jr. was chair, and of which the Rev. William Turner would become president.<sup>18</sup> Further, the prominent Halifax families that established the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society echoed the names that appeared on the first committee of the Halifax Circulating Library in 1768: Alexanders, Waterhouses, Rawsons, and Briggses dominated, and a Miss Lister (possibly Lister's aunt Anne) is also among the names in the first subscription book.<sup>19</sup>

In some ways the move posited by Thackray, from marginality to centrality, would surely preclude Lister's membership in the Society. Lister's "masculinity" had long been the subject of Halifax gossip, and by 1831 she was living in what she considered a "married" state with her partner, neighboring heiress Ann Walker. The two women effectively joined their large, landed estates, with Lister to all intents and purposes managing both, and redrafted their wills to leave each other a life interest in their own property. Lister's homosexuality continues to attract more popular and academic attention than any other aspect of her life, and her relationship with Walker is repeatedly cited as an important early example of same-sex marriage—which, indisputably, it is. While I have no intention of retreading this ground in detail, it is important to remember that Lister was doubly marginalized, through her sex and her sexuality, and that the discourse of gender necessarily inflected those of politics, power, and social status. While the first Literary and Philosophical Societies may have offered a route to respectability for "marginal *men*," the Halifax Society seemingly belonged to the later generation of more conservative institutions that Thackray

<sup>18</sup> See Arthur Porritt, "18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Clubs and Societies in Halifax," *Transactions of the Halifax Antiquarian Society* (1963–1965), 65–93.

<sup>19</sup> See E. P. Rouse, "Old Halifax Circulating Library, 1768–1866," *Papers, Reports, &c., read before the Halifax Antiquarian Society* (1911), 47.

describes, and so would have been unlikely to welcome this unconventional woman as a member; the fact that they did admit her is, therefore, significant.

There is an understandable impulse to equate Lister's unconventional personal life with unconventional politics, but this is a mistake. As a local landowner from an established family, Lister was part of the conservative, Anglican elite of Halifax. Euler observes that Lister "was not 'ahead of her time' in any obvious way," calling her "a snobbish but untitled member of the lesser gentry, and an enthusiastic Tory" (*Moving Between Worlds*, p. 393). Lister had many tenants, and under the reformed system anyone renting a property for £50 per year or more was eligible to vote in local elections; Jill Liddington describes how in one case Lister increased a tenant's rent to £50 temporarily during the election year of 1833, but then made the tenant a "gift" equal to the increase (on the understanding, of course, that the tenant voted "Blue").<sup>20</sup> As outlined by Euler and Liddington, Lister's election-rigging activities ranged from bribery to intimidation, and she was not above threatening to turn tenants off her property should they support the Whig cause. Lister's political ambition is manifest in her diary as early as 1823 (prior to inheriting Shibden Hall), following a discussion with the Waterhouses of the prospect of a new MP for Halifax. Lister imagined writing anonymously to the Chancellor of the Exchequer for advice on who this should be, and then, "Began building castles about the result of my success, the notoriety it would gain me. An introduction to court. Perhaps a Barony, etc." Although Lister immediately dismisses her fantasy as the result of too much "negus," observing "how slight the partition between sanity & not," this episode exemplifies her desire for an aristocratic model of success, aptly figured as "building castles," that was remote for many men of her class, and nigh-impossible for a woman (Lister, diary, 18 July 1823, in *I Know My Own Heart*, p. 264).

Aware of the social reality, nevertheless Lister did not let her gender limit her ambition. As Euler observes, political influence was something that Lister actively courted:

<sup>20</sup> See Jill Liddington, *Female Fortune: Land, Gender and Authority: The Anne Lister Diaries and Other Writings 1833-36* (London and New York: Rivers Oram Press, 1998), p. 51.

Anne Lister knew exactly where the blue political power in the borough lay: with those old gentry families with whom she had been on visiting terms since her youth. She made a point of visiting the men who would consistently play their part for the next decade: James Edward Norris, Christopher Rawson and John Waterhouse. (*Moving Between Worlds*, p. 245)

Lister was part of a powerful network by birth and rank, and her willingness (and ability) to champion the Tory cause cemented her position within that group of “old gentry families,” who sought her support in the political campaigns of the 1830s. The same group who sought to determine the political future of Halifax were arguably more successful in directing its civic development: as noted above, Christopher Rawson and John Waterhouse were the first two presidents of the Literary and Philosophical Society, and between them held the office for thirty-three years.<sup>21</sup>

The evidence that remains of Lister’s involvement in the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society is mostly limited to her financial contributions. Although by the time of the Society’s inception Lister’s financial circumstances were materially improved, her investment of £150 to the building of the Museum in 1833–34 is significant at a time when Lister was frequently required to draw on her partner, Ann Walker, for money to make improvements to her estate.<sup>22</sup> As Lister’s editors have frequently observed, her attention to financial details is minute and shrewd; her accounts and journals take sedulous note of her income and outgoings, and she is reluctant to involve herself in unnecessary expense. Indeed, such prudence was necessary; Liddington notes that by 1832 “[Lister’s] aristocratic ambitions already outstripped her modest estate income.”<sup>23</sup> However, when Lister did invest, there was a pattern to that investment. Euler’s analysis of the Shibden Hall records demonstrates that Lister was often driven by dynastic motives over and

<sup>21</sup> Rawson was president from 1830–1842, with Waterhouse succeeding him, remaining in post until 1863. See *Centenary Handbook*, pp. 33–36.

<sup>22</sup> See Anne Lister, diary, 19 December 1834, in Liddington, *Female Fortune*, p. 135. Further references to Lister’s diary from this edition appear in the text.

<sup>23</sup> Jill Liddington, *Presenting the Past: Anne Lister of Halifax, 1791–1840* (Halifax: Pennine Pens, 1994), p. 39.

above the financial. For example, Euler notes: “When [Lister] planted trees on the estate, she planted oaks and hollies in their thousands, with less regard to profit and loss than in almost any other area of activity” (*Moving Between Worlds*, p. 173). Short of “building castles,” long-term plantation was an “improvement” that smacked more of dynastic pride than Lister’s usual shrewd financial calculations. Not content with a metaphorical castle, Lister ultimately erected a huge property in the center of Halifax, the Northgate Inn, and her address at the groundbreaking ceremony in 1835, which she recounts in her diary, conveys typical ambition:

“I am very anxious that this . . . should be an accommodation to the public at large, but more especially to this my native town in whose prosperity I ever have felt, and ever shall feel, deeply interested.” (Lister, diary, 26 September 1835, in Liddington, *Female Fortune*, p. 191)

Lister’s speech here is intended to cement her status as part of the civic elite, constructing an “accommodation” not only for the people of Halifax but also for the increasing traffic of the rapidly industrializing town; it was also a financial speculation, giving her a landlord’s interest in the center of town. Her subscription to the Lit and Phil’s new museum in all probability represents a similar kind of speculation, reinforcing the civic status of the ancient family of the Listers alongside the rich industrialists who were expanding the town. Lister Lane, in the center of modern-day Halifax, seems testament to her success. Whether Lister’s personal standing in that Society itself reflected her investment is less certain, as I will discuss.



Lister’s decision to focus her investments locally is prefigured in 1821, in an episode that also casts light on her associational activity. Lister was honorary member of the York Female Friendly Society, with which she had been associated through the Belcombe Family, and specifically through her lover, Mariana. According to Jane Rendall, Mariana was active on the committee until around 1815. Lister’s name appears on two

lists of Honorary Members of the York Female Friendly Society, one begun in 1796 but updated later, and another begun in 1811, now held in York City Library. In both cases Mariana Belcombe's name appears a few entries above Lister's, and also present are the names of Ann and Charlotte Norcliffe, the mother and sister of another of Lister's lovers, Isabella.<sup>24</sup> In 1821, though, Lister gave up her membership:

Letter . . . from York about the Friendly Society there, of which I have been an honorary member (12s. a year) ever since 1810 or 1811 but, during my last stay in York, I asked Miss Marsh to withdraw my name from their books. Whatever I can give in charity, my uncle & aunt have long said should be given here [i.e., in Halifax], to which Miss Marsh readily agreed. (Lister, diary, 19 January 1821, in *I Know My Own Heart*, p. 143)

Lister remained in contact with the Belcombes and Norcliffes throughout her life, despite Mariana's marriage to Charles Lawton in 1816 (in fact their affair continued),<sup>25</sup> so her withdrawal from the York society in 1821 seems to have been motivated by financial expedient rather than any estrangement from that circle. Indeed, Lister's intimate circle exemplifies the ways in which women could participate in local institutions by proxy. In the case of the neighboring Yorkshire Philosophical Society (YPS), whose museum Halifax took much of its inspiration from, women of the Belcombe and Norcliffe families found alternative modes of participation in the 1820s: early donations to the YPS's museum collection include fossils from Mrs. Norcliffe (Isabella Norcliffe's mother) and geological specimens from Miss Belcome (Mariana Lawton's younger sister), whose father, Dr. Henry Belcombe, was a founding member of the YPS.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> "Private Funds: Resolutions and Memoranda. Book completed at both ends. The Cash Book belonging to the Honorary Members of the York Female Friendly Society Instituted August 1st 1788," MS Acc 50/24, York City Library. I owe this information to Jane Rendall.

<sup>25</sup> Lister's relationship with Mariana Lawton is the subject of *No Priest But Love: Excerpts from the Diaries of Anne Lister, 1824–1826*, ed. Helena Whitbread (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1992).

<sup>26</sup> Records of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society (YPS), Borthwick Institute for Archives, Univ. of York. *General Meeting Minutes of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society*, 14 October 1823, p. 42; 8 February 1825, p. 84.

In fact, at the YPS, investment (by monetary or specimen donation) became the key way in which women could contribute, and a subscription category was created on 30 November 1829 specifically for ladies. This annual subscription (of one pound) also allowed them to introduce female friends as “occasional visitors,” rather tantalizingly hinting that museum access was imagined by the YPS as operating through homosocial networks.<sup>27</sup>

Lister’s membership in the York Friendly Society is evidence of just one institution with which she had links before the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society, and throws some light on how her motives for involvement in such institutions may have gradually changed. It is one of several examples of Lister participating in associational activity in a fairly selective manner. Within a week of withdrawing from the York Friendly Society, Lister declined another invitation, this time to join a book society. She records a request from Mr. Edward Priestly:

Perhaps his chief object was to ask me if I would be a subscriber to a book society they wished to establish. About 12 subscribers at one guinea per annum each, the books to be disposed of every year to the highest bidder of the subscribers, but if none wished to purchase, the recommender of the work should take it at half-price. I said I should be sorry their plan fell through for want of a subscriber but that such a thing was quite out of my way who went so often to the Halifax library & had there as much reading as I had time for. The thing originated with the young ladies at Crownest, tho’ Mr Edward Priestly had long ago thought of it, it was so long before they could get popular new works from the Halifax library; but *I* have no difficulty of this sort. (Lister, diary, 25 January 1821, in *I Know My Own Heart*, pp. 143–44)

The Halifax library mentioned here is almost certainly the above-mentioned Halifax Circulating Library founded in 1768, which, despite its name, was in fact a subscription library.<sup>28</sup> While Priestly complained of the long wait for “popular new

<sup>27</sup> *Council Minutes of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society*, 1824–49 (YPS:1a), 20 November 1829, p. 190, Borthwick.

<sup>28</sup> Like the Lit and Phil more than sixty years later, the founding of this library was influenced heavily by similar institutions in Liverpool and Manchester. See Rouse, “Old Halifax Circulating Library,” p. 47.

works,” Lister’s claim that she had “no difficulty of this sort” is perhaps explained by the private arrangement with the Halifax librarian, detailed in her diary a year earlier:

Gave the librarian five shillings as I said, last September, I would do every half-year on condition of his managing to let me have as many books at a time as I wanted. Not, however, that I think of exceeding the regulated allowance by more than two. (Lister, diary, 4 January 1820, in *I Know My Own Heart*, p. 113)

Lister’s status as a member of the Shibden Hall family, as much as her judicious application of five shillings, probably explains her ability to circumvent the library’s rules in a way that the Priestleys and the Walker family at Crow Nest, wealthier than but socially inferior to the Listers, would not have been able to do.<sup>29</sup> It also demonstrates Lister’s rather individualistic approach to the mutual basis of the subscription library, as she has no qualms with exceeding the “regulated allowance” for members, if only by two books.<sup>30</sup> What this reveals is Lister’s sense of her own exceptionality within the Halifax community, in both social and intellectual status.

The Halifax Circulating Library was one of several avenues of self-improvement open to residents before the inauguration of the Lit and Phil, and not the only one in which Lister participated. According to her diary, for example, Lister attended lectures in the Halifax area by prominent natural philosophers: in August 1817 she records attending at least two lectures by “Dalton,” presumably John Dalton of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society (Lister, diary, 18 and 27 August 1817, in *I Know My Own Heart*, pp. 12–13); in March 1819 she

<sup>29</sup> The young ladies at Crownest included Ann Walker, Lister’s future partner.

<sup>30</sup> Conversely, the Library committee viewed such transgressions starkly, instituting a rule in 1786: “If any subscriber take out from the library any more books than are allowed by Rule 9, or shall take out any book without having it entered to his account, he shall forfeit for every book so taken the sum of 2s. 6d.” As of 1790, the Librarian was liable to a fine of half a guinea should he be found to have delivered a book to any subscriber except at the regular hours. According to Rouse the committee “enforced their own rules vigorously” (“Old Halifax Circulating Library,” pp. 53–57). This penalty (10s. 6d.) was significantly more than the 5s. bribe Lister was offering for a comparable infraction, reinforcing the argument that she was exercising primarily social rather than financial influence over the librarian.

attends a lecture by the renowned geologist Thomas Webster at the Assembly Rooms (diary, 22 March 1819, in *I Know My Own Heart*, p. 84); and in 1823 she refers to attending a further lecture by a Mr. W, possibly also Webster. In her March 1819 entry she remarks in particular her surprise on finding “his oratory . . . disfigured by frequent instances of bad grammar”:

. . . after reading Mr Webster’s book on chemical & natural philosophy & not remembering or observed in it any heinous sins against grammar, I did not expect that his oral language would be so thickly strewn with the misuse of the person of his verbs. (22 March 1819, in *I Know My Own Heart*, p. 84)

Lister’s attendance at these lectures is part of a wider round of entertainments of which she is a regular participant. In late 1819 and early 1820, she records attending an Oratoria in Southowram, an officer’s ball in York, and a display of Madame Tussaud’s waxworks in Halifax; in 1824 she attends an exhibition of two “Esquimaux Indians” and a balloon launch.<sup>31</sup> For Lister, Webster’s lectures in particular held the promise of social and possibly even sexual contact with other women. Clara Tuite has observed of Lister’s diaries, “how different spaces of sociability, such as the circles of Halifax society, work to tolerate and enable different degrees of gender and sexual deviance.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Lister exploited those tolerant spaces in order to pursue her flirtations, as she relates telling her aunt: “Talked of my fancy for Miss Browne. Told her I had gone to the lectures for no other purpose than to see her” (Lister, diary, 3 March 1819, in *I Know My Own Heart*, p. 82). Anne Lister senior seems to have been aware of her niece’s interest in women (although she may have refrained from inquiring too closely into the details), and Lister’s journals record her occasionally “testing” her aunt’s knowledge, so this statement is probably a deliberate exaggeration. After all, Lister’s claim that she had “no other purpose” in attending Webster’s lectures sounds disingenuous in the knowledge that she has in fact read his work on natural

<sup>31</sup> See Anne Lister, diary, in *I Know My Own Heart*, pp. 101–20, 337–40.

<sup>32</sup> Clara Tuite, “The Byronic Woman: Anne Lister’s Style, Sociability and Sexuality,” in *Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain 1770–1840*, ed. Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), p. 206.

chemistry. Neither her interest in chemistry nor her romantic interest in Miss Browne conforms to a discourse of traditional femininity, which Lister seems to take pleasure in confounding.

Lister's use of intellectual sociability as a means of meeting or pursuing potential sexual partners has been well established. As Stephen Colclough has observed, Lister used "the *shared* act of reading, the shared intimacy of the page" to enact "the transition from 'friendship' to 'romance'"; she gave gifts of particular texts as a coded sexual overture, and used shared literary tastes as a barometer of sexual affinity; in Miss Browne's case, Lister interpreted her taste for Byron as evidence of her attraction.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, I would argue, Lister reinforced homosexual and homosocial relationships with more structured networks and social encounters, such as her membership, along with Mariana, in the York Female Friendly Society, or her attendance of lectures with Miss Browne and later Miss Pickford, whom Lister describes, rather disparagingly, as a "*bas bleu*" (Lister, diary, 30 November 1819, in *I Know My Own Heart*, p. 106).

Lister's attitude to intellectual community with her female networks was rather contradictory, however. Of Miss Pickford, she remarks: "She is better informed than some ladies & a godsend of a companion in my present scarcity, but I am not an admirer of learned ladies. They are not the sweet, interesting creatures I should love" (Lister, diary, 28 February 1823, in *I Know My Own Heart*, p. 237). On the one hand, Lister suggests that Miss Pickford's company is a poor substitute for the preferred "sweet, interesting creatures" who are by implication not "learned." On the other hand, Lister expresses her frustration with one of her lovers, Isabella Norcliffe, for retarding her "improvement": "I am never much good at study when she is with me & I am weary of this long stoppage I have had to all improvement." While Lister had entertained hopes that Isabella might prove the long-term companion she wanted, she gradually became convinced of both her intellectual and social inadequacy to the task, concluding: "she . . . by no means would relish the sort of elegant society I covet to acquire" (Lister, diary,

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Colclough, *Consuming Texts: Readers and Reading Communities, 1695–1870* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 142.

17 September 1819, in *I Know My Own Heart*, p. 99). Lister's idea of "improvement" was doubly intellectual and material, particularly prior to inheriting the Shibden Hall estate: "I must . . . study only to improve myself in the hope of a possibility of making something by writing" (Lister, diary, 30 October 1819, in *I Know My Own Heart*, p. 102). The "improvement" Lister seeks, to enable her to "make something," prefigures the political "castles" she builds. Her determination to "make something" is realized in her development of the Northgate Inn and her significant investment in the Halifax Museum.

Lister's idea of "improvement" is bound up with "study," which she seems to conceive of as a solitary pursuit separate from the sociable reading practices she engages in. A determined autodidact, Lister often records, rather melodramatically, her sense of intellectual dissatisfaction and isolation. In 1823, pining that no letter from Mariana Lawton has arrived, she apostrophizes: "O books! books! I owe you much. Ye are my spirit's oil without which, its own friction against itself would wear it out" (Lister, diary, 20 July 1823, in *I Know My Own Heart*, pp. 265–66). The internal friction of Lister's mind is reminiscent of the combative, dissenting model of knowledge production through conversation that Jon Mee has described as "like a spark struck out between two flints," which Lister, in the absence of intellectual community, seems to internalize.<sup>34</sup> Lister's self-dramatization of a frictive, divided mind conveys her anxiety and self-doubt on the one hand, but suggests a kind of intellectual self-sufficiency on the other: the onanistic internalization of rational debate, lubricated by books. Lister seems to lament this isolation as necessity rather than choice. Ahead of a visit to France in 1818, she drafts a letter (in English, then French) to the naturalist Georges Cuvier, professor at the *Jardin des Plantes*, in the hope of visiting him in Paris. She writes:

My mind longs after the pursuit of knowledge and I have no guide to direct me in the way.

<sup>34</sup> Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), p. 38.

I wd ask your friendship and assistance, in the confident hope that you would not find me unworthy of them.<sup>35</sup>

Whether Lister ever sent a fair copy of this letter is unknown, but she certainly did make the acquaintance of both Cuvier and his wife in Paris, and maintained a correspondence with the latter. What is notable about this, her initial address to Cuvier, is Lister's claim to have "no guide" to direct her studies. Lister had in fact employed a tutor, the Reverend Samuel Knight, who later became Vicar of Halifax, and with whom she remained in correspondence. (Knight's successor, the Reverend Charles Musgrave, would become a founder member of the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society.) She had also received literary advice from Dr. Henry Belcombe, Mariana's father, including lists of recommended reading in poetry, history, and philosophy.<sup>36</sup> Yet Lister found these guides insufficient in the "pursuit of knowledge," perhaps implying that the "knowledge" she refers to in this case is scientific. Certainly, her letter to Cuvier corresponds to the narrative of intellectual isolation she frequently constructs and that she seeks to address through Parisian salon culture, rather than in the local environs of Halifax.

Lister's acceptance in Halifax society depended, in many ways, on her exceptionality. There was no public language with which to talk about lesbian sexuality; in a landed culture dominated by primogeniture, female landowners were the exception rather than the rule. Lister's admission to the Literary and Philosophical Society, according to the rules, was not an exception, yet in practice this did not open the floodgates to female membership, and Lister herself seems to have attended rarely. Women, particularly the wives and daughters of members, participated in other ways, often through the disseminated access to the Museum through families and through contributions made to the collections, as the Norcliffes and Belcomes had done at the Yorkshire Philosophical Society.<sup>37</sup> The museum was

<sup>35</sup> Anne Lister to Georges Cuvier (draft), 18 January 1819, Calderdale Archives, Halifax, mm. SHL:7/ML/83.

<sup>36</sup> Henry Belcombe to Anne Lister, December 1815, Calderdale Archives, Halifax, mm. SHL:7/ML/71.

<sup>37</sup> For instance, a minutes entry records "the Thanks of the Society... to Miss Walkinson for Present of a Young Crocodile" (*Council Minute Book*, 25 October 1830).

an interface between the scientific community and the public, and women's bodily presence as a constituent part of that audience was therefore mediated in a variety of ways. As Livingstone notes,

For all the rhetorical claims to the disembodied character of scientific knowing, there was a long-standing "understanding" that female corporeality rendered women unsuitable for intellectual pursuits in general and for science in particular. Scientific space, by and large, was masculine space. (*Putting Science in Its Place*, p. 78)

Livingstone's observations in relation to spaces of science, from the laboratory to the museum, is applicable by extension to the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society as an institution, with the bodily presence of its ordinary members at the heart of its associational model (corresponding members of course complicated, but were not an adequate substitute for, this physical presence). Indeed, Lister could have elided some of this troubling corporeality and become a subscriber to the Museum without joining the Society, and for less money. However, the Lit and Phil presented another opportunity to make her mark on the local community, just as she hoped to do in politics, and in "making something"; in a partially coded diary entry, reproduced (and deciphered) by Liddington, Lister writes:

Thinking as I dressed of the Literary & philosophical society just established at Halifax. I have thought of it repeatedly since hearing of it—*building castles in the air about the part I myself may take in furthering it—about its becoming celebrated* etc etc. Think of rules that might be for the good of the Society—ladies should be admitted as fellows. . . . To prevent overflow of useless members let everyone be elected on the doing some benefit to the society by mind or money. (Lister, diary, 27 February 1831, in Liddington, *Female Fortune*, p. 45)

Once more, we find Lister building "castles," with her thoughts turning to the Society being "celebrated," just as she had fantasized in 1823 about political "notoriety." Again, Lister has identified a preexisting structure to which she might contribute, establishing her local importance "by mind or money"—but with

the emphasis on the money. It is significant, though, that the “castles in the air” she builds “about the part [she her]self may take” are recorded in code, concealed from prying eyes, or (she may have supposed) her future editors. In concealing her ambition of making a public contribution to civic life, using a cipher more frequently employed to record her emotional and sexual encounters with other women, Lister tacitly discloses the potential impropriety of that ambition as equivalent to sexual transgression. In the original diary entry of 27 February 1831 (but omitted from the passage quoted by Liddington), Lister goes on to reveal a related concern with the more prosaic problems that the female body, in the case of admitting ladies as fellows, would present in a civic space:

It strikes me it would be well in such a case to have a sort of sumptuary law so that there could be no tendency to any inconvenience about dress, & what more incommodious than a large bonnet over which nobody can see & which too often prevents the unfortunate wearer from either seeing or hearing clearly—let there be a costume—black, with a small brimmed hat that could incommode nobody.<sup>38</sup>

Lister recapitulates the problem of conspicuousness for women participating in public life, as a matter both originating in, and solvable through, sartorial choices. The potential of fashion, such as that for “large bonnets,” to “incommode” both its wearer and other audience members can be overcome by “costume,” which can similarly prevent “inconvenience about dress.” The “inconvenience” Lister identifies might be one of cost, but it seems likely that she has in mind the problem of knowing what to wear as much as being able to afford it. On 2 September 1817 she recorded, “I have entered upon my plan of always wearing black” (Lister, diary, 2 September 1817, in *I Know My Own Heart*, p. 14), and Whitbread notes Lister’s “secretive attitude towards discussing or writing about her clothes. She obviously felt reticent about her dress and appearance and was constantly the subject of criticism from her

<sup>38</sup> Anne Lister, diary entry for 27 February 1831, Calderdale Archive, MSS SH/7/M/E/14

friends for her shabby and unfashionable wardrobe" (*I Know My Own Heart*, p. 14). In imagining a place for women in public institutions, Lister also imagines a place in which her own singular appearance is rendered unremarkable, or even becomes the sartorial model for female intellectualism.

In many ways, Anne Lister's motivation in joining the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society—civic improvement, the reputation of the town and of her family, and political consolidation—were the same reasons motivating its founders. Lister's financial contribution suggests a strong reason for them to welcome her as a member, but evidence that she regularly attended the associational forum that was the monthly meetings is not forthcoming in the minutes. In fact, Liddington suggests that Lister, despite being a member of the Society, may have been excluded from events, such as members' dinners, because of her sex (*Female Fortune*, p. 105). However, it was Lister's desire to construct an edifice, "to build something," that, at least imaginatively, united her with the men of the Halifax Lit and Phil. In this both Lister and the Society were partially successful. Although its collections were absorbed into the new Bankfield Museum in 1897, the Society's lecture theater and museum in Harrison Road, Halifax, still stands, albeit in private hands.<sup>39</sup> The Northgate Hotel, whose foundations Lister laid in 1835, became the Theatre De Luxe, which finally closed in 1938 and was demolished after World War II to make way for a shopping plaza. Yet Lister's mark on the town of Halifax remains, through the buildings and streets that bear her name, and through the Shibden Hall Estate she so sedulously improved (through both mind and money) and of whose archive her papers are one of the chief treasures. Davidoff and Hall ask: "Men built, men planned, men organized, men acted. Meanwhile, what did women do?" (*Family Fortunes*, p. 447). Anne Lister would not recognize the question.

*Bishop Grosseteste University*

<sup>39</sup> Harrison House is a Grade II Listed Building with Historic England, available online at <<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1133909>>; accessed 15 March 2016.

## ABSTRACT

## Cassandra Ulph, “‘Under the Existing Rules’: Anne Lister and the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society” (pp. 462–485)

Anne Lister’s membership in the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society is considered here as an early example of a woman admitted to such a society. Lister’s membership in this Society, and the Society’s decision to admit her, illuminates much about women’s participation in civic and intellectual life in this period, and more particularly about Lister’s particular status in her hometown of Halifax. This essay investigates the extent to which Lister’s membership in the Society constituted true participation and how it intersected with, and compared to, other formal and informal kinds of intellectual and associational activities available to women in the period. It also explores the ways in which such institutions themselves imagined their role in society extending beyond their membership through largely patriarchal models of diffusion.

Keywords: Anne Lister; women in public life; Literary and Philosophical Societies; civic improvement; networks