Society has changed enormously over numerous generations, but some aspects of life remain the same. At this time of year, many people travel and accommodation can be scarce; but even Mary and Joseph could find no room at the inn, which was fully booked over the Christmas period. Transport is no different. You stand at the camel stop for ages, waiting for a wise man, and then three of them arrive at the same time. You have been waiting for Balthasar to take you to Croydon, but when he sees you he accelerates his camel and overtakes Gaspar and Melchior, and he is not due back again for a year. So you flag down a private-hire ass, only to find that the fare is double on that day, while the driver insists on telling you ‘I had that Herod on my ass last week’, and lectures you on why hay should not be taxed and why he is not responsible for exhaust fumes.

On a different note: works of literature have often included contributions by unknown authors who remain obscure, but some collections have occasionally preserved the words of those who in later times have proven more eminent, as in these few pages here.

Bob Marriott, Director

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FRAGMENTS FROM THE DIARY OF WILLIAM HERSCHEL

Late of the Electorate of Hanover and afterwards residing in the North of England, the West Country of England, and the County of Buckinghamshire

With Details of His Private Life Suppos'd Writ by His Own Hand

Excerpted from Unproven Manuscripts Purloin'd by Stealth and Design and Unjustly Claim'd as a Faithful Testimony With Errors and Indiscretions Preserv'd

Publish'd In Absentia of Conscience For Profit and Undeserv'd Advantage

Streatham: Printed by Mr M. P. Vicars, and sold by Mr Payne at the sign of the Brothelkeeper

1822
Bath, September 1778

I have at last manage'd to dispose of my soldier's uniform at Mr Cohen's pawnshop, tho' at a lesser valuation than expected due to the bullet holes in the jacket and the blemishes in the trousers. The proceeds have enable'd me to purchase a portable organ, tho' the moving of it is very tiring, as it has no wheels, and 'tis some distance from King Street to the Octagon Chapel. The vegetables collected during performances of my compositions have oft help replenish my larder, but I have lately taken to playing some pieces by Mr Handel, notwithstanding he was a common Saxon. These concerts are well attended, and the environs have recently been grac'd with the arrival of Mrs Siddons, whose reputation as a teâthespien is waxing. She is of a very amiable disposition, and on attending one of my recitals she favour'd me by pumping my organ. Knowing that I fancy myself a composer, she opin'd that the music my pen scrawls onto paper is insipid and vacuous and is not worth the hovel of the dog that accompanies it ~ to which I reposte'd that her stage performances are as wooden as the stoutest oak and accommodate more ham than does a full-grown Cumberland pig. She then endeavoured to impale my nethers on the end of her parable, tho' I gain'd her submission by seizing her in a half-Nelson ~ an embrace which I am inform'd was devi'd by a naval officer of that name. This altercation with the said lady awaken'd thoughts of Mr Mesmer, who has promulgate'd a doctrine which he calls 'animal magnetism'. Whether or not he is a charlatan is a matter of debate, but 'tis certain that the presence of Mrs Siddons in my bed is of greater benefit than a warming pan.

December 1778

I am weary of the menagerie of ill-educated slobs who gossip and chatter throughout my recitals, and have withdrawn from their unappreciative company, tho' to ensure that my works are preserve'd for posterity I have deposited my manuscripts with the Khazi Publishing and Recycling Company. I have now constructed several telescopes, and have thus turn'd to astronomy as a divergent occupation conducive to much contentment. Caroline too has become enamour'd of the firmament, and every evening, after we have consum'd our supper of sauerkraut, wheats, and stew'd rhubarb, she adjourns to the darkness of the garden, tho' what she does there I know not. ~ This brings to my mind that I must engage some labourers to attend to plumbing and carpentry, as the thunderbox is many paces distant beyond the orchard.

April 1779

On occasion I have inform'd Caroline that I will let her use a telescope when the sky is too cloudy for me to observe. Each time I thought that this would please her, and 'tis a mystery why she always insist's that when I was born our parents were not married. She is always ready to view the starry heavens, and so the lighting in her room is subdued. This she achieves by placing a single red candle by the window, but
of late she has receiv'd so many gentlemen friends that she has had little time for observing. I have never paid her for domestic duties, so it was of considerable surprise when she reveal'd that she had procur'd sufficient funds to buy herself a telescope.

February 1780

Yesterday eve I was guest striper at the sennightly meeting of the Bath Ladies Abstinence and Morality Society. What revelries we had! Spirituous potions were consurn'd as if th'were riches in the South Sea Bubble, and the smoking preparation was of an exotic herbal variety which I had never before encounter'd but which I was inform'd had been acquir'd from an agent with connexions in the southmost continent of the Americas. The episode was both exhilarating and tranquiliSing, and I scarce remember returning home, tho' I have an inexact recollection of consuming a new delicacy known as a 'kebab', procur'd from a shoppe which remains open 'til a very late hour. E'en so, after I remov'd the grease from my sleeves I set to work with the telescope, and within a short time I recorded 87 new nebulae, swill'd four mugs of Bovril, discover'd infrared radiation and two new planets, visited the bushes several times, and saw a giant rabbit. ~ This morning the constitution of my mouth was as the floor of a parrot's cage. Did step out to partake of fresh air, and during my perambulation I was greeted by the street urchins who play in the gutters and sewers and earn farthings by delivering bread. Their dialect is colloquial, and I could not discern their exclamations with much clarity. ~ I have resolv'd to avail myself of Mr Johnson's dictionary to ascertain the meaning of 'bug off you mutter'.

March 1781

I have discover'd what I thought was a comet! Mr Lexell has observ'd it and measur'd its changing position, and has proven it to be a previously unknown planet. I did not realise its true nature; and likewise, almost a century past, Mr Flamsteed also observ'd it, misidentifying it, and included it in his catalogue of stars. In truth, Mr Lexell's name should be foremost, just as Mr Dollard is credited with the invention of the achromatic lens, e'en though he gather'd and claim'd the knowledge of others, which he then brought to the attention of the public. Nevertheless, to ensure that my name will forever be attach'd to this new wonder I shall ingratiate myself with the king by denominating it 'Poetry Planet'; 'Georgium Sidus'. ~ The king will then reward me with a big fat annual pension matching his big fat son, and name me as exclusive 'Royal Astronomer'. This will also vex those whose abodes lie beyond the Strait of Dover, but 'twill be of ill consequence if perchance I am requir'd to allow society dummies and glittering nonentities with visages like halbutts to gawp and squint through my telescope with not the slightest nous of what is presented to them. ~ The news of my discovery has been carried on the wings of Mercury, and I am flatter'd to learn that a new song is already being perform'd in my honour in the
music halls and taverns of the lower classes, both in the metropolis and in many
parishes throughout the counties. It is entitl’d 'Why does everybody call me big’cad?'
and tho’ I am not entirely assur’d of its denotation I do conclude that 'tis influenc’d
by the charms of the English character. Perhaps too, in the future, when my
venerated name and unequall’d achievements have become ever more famous, a young
poet will write of some watcher of the skies when a new planet swims into his ken.

--- Slough, 1820 ---

John and some of his familiar’s recently had their snouts in the trough at the
Freemason’s Tavern when they form’d the idea of a new venture to be call’d the
Astronomical Society of London. Chunky Pearson and Beeryshoe Baily are the
provisional officers, while Spottyneck Babbage will probably continue his monotonous
prolificity concerning his absurd invention. This machine might appear futile, but if it
succeeds it is possible that in the distant future no-one will need to learn
mathemetics, and if its applications are extended to grammatical spheres, the
richness of the language may well be degraded to become illiterate grunts and
twitterings. I have agreed to be President of the said Society, but on condition that I
do what is, I believe, termed in the vernacular, ‘naif-all’. ~ ‘Tis pleasing that Mr
Banks is furious. He has been President of the Royal Society for more than forty
years, and the old goat objects to other scientific assemblies. During a recent sojourn
in London I encounter’d him in Pall Mall. We deliver’d each other several injurious
epithets, but by good fortune a passing Bow Street Runner curtailed the dispute by
bludgeoning him to unconsciousness. We then shar’d the contents of his purse, and
parted company. Thence to Mistress Summers’ shoppe in the Strand, and forward to
the theatre on Drury Lane with the hope of reacquainting myself with Mrs Siddons.
There I learnt that she had retir’d, tho’ one of Mr Sheridan’s plays was being
rehears’d and there were several young actresses willing to show me their parts.

--- April 1821 ---

I have of late been reading poetry, and have discover’d the work of a young poet
called John Keats. One of his poems, publish’d but five years ago, contains the lines:
‘Then felt I like some watcher of the skies When a new planet swims into his ken.’
~ My prognostication was correct. ~ Perhaps I should take up astrology.

[Being the last entry in the private Diary of this esteem’d personage.]