Reading James Jackson: Footnotes

The Roving Reader Files

Last time we discovered who wrote the Centre’s edition of *Memoir of James Jackson*, and why. This time, I’d like to ask the pressing question:

Is there any point in footnotes?
Academics among you might have written a few footnotes yourselves, and are now suddenly sporting wry smiles. Everyone else is perfectly entitled to be wondering what on earth I’m talking about. Footnote, endnote, twenty pound note? What’s the difference, except the last one buys you a few bars of chocolate and the others don’t?

Well, footnotes at the bottom of a page, endnotes at the end of a book, or any kind of ‘notes’ found in an academic study, are where the author stuffs any information that won’t fit into the main body of the text, which is nevertheless necessary to support, expand on or aid understanding of some point that’s being made. Lois Brown banishes bits and bobs like this to the end of Memoir of James Jackson as endnotes, where they can be found under the grand title ‘Notes’.

Notes can be quite a mixed bag, full of something or nothing. I’ve become an avid note-reader, because it’s like rummaging around at a car boot sale – you never know what gems might turn up.

I’m not particularly taken with the kind that say ‘op. cit.’ or ‘ibid.’ They’re a bit like signposts – the first telling you the relevant work has been mentioned in an earlier note, and the second directing you to the note appearing immediately before. It’s a bit like finding a pair of socks; useful but boring. Notes giving you details of other books are marginally better. At least you get a bit of exercise chasing them up.

But my favourites are those that give me really meaty chunks of information…

Take this example. On page 2 of Memoir of James Jackson, Lois Brown tells us that Susan Paul’s wider family included two uncles who, like her father, were Baptist ministers and anti-slavery activists. You might say that’s interesting enough. But look at the little superscript 2, which indicates there’s more to be said. If we decide to carry on with the text, that’s fine. But if we forget to look at the note, we miss a trick. In this case, by turning to note 2 on page 133, we find a whole potted history of the Paul brothers, including the amazing fact that, in the 1830s, Nathaniel Paul spent four years in England, consulting with influential British abolitionists, lecturing throughout the British Isles, and even advocating abolition in the House of Commons. Might he have passed through Manchester?

And look at this. A “Mr Redmond” and his family are mentioned in passing in a letter from Susan Paul to abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, transcribed on page 122. Apparently, Redmond had done all he could in 1834 to make the visit to Salem, Massachusetts, of Susan and her 50-strong Juvenile Choir as pleasant as possible. Fine. But pay attention to the tell-tale superscript 4. There’s more to this story than meets the eye.

Turning to note 4 on page 166, it’s fascinating to learn that Mr Redmond’s daughter Sarah Parker Redmond, had spent ten years as an abolitionist lecturer in Europe, during that time undertaking a speaking tour of England. A Black African American woman, thousands of miles from home for a whole decade, speaking in public about one of the most controversial topics of the era? Give me more notes like that any day…

And some notes can be vital in clearing up potential misunderstandings. For example, I was going to leave page 126 of Memoir of James Jackson with the abiding image of straight-laced Miss Susan Paul teaching her young charges about the benefits of drinking rum. After all, the letter written by Susan in 1836 (included by Lois Brown) noted that her pupils were offering to sing to their White supporters, “about the slaves, and the Sabbath Schools, and about drinking rum.”

But my abiding image would have been totally wrong! Far from advocating child drunkenness, Susan was teaching the children temperance songs, imploring the general public to give up the strong stuff in favour of teetotalism. And how did I find out my mistake?

Simple. I followed the advice of the tiny 9 almost mid-way down page 126, by turning to note 9 on page 167, which stated that: “The students were prepared to perform abolitionist and temperance songs often included in Paul’s Juvenile Choir concerts.” Phew!

So if you ever come across a small number floating around in a text, remember it may be pointing you towards some earth-shattering new vista. If it does, remember to let me know.