

Latané, David E. *William Maginn and the British Press: A Critical Biography*. London: Ashgate, 2013. 378 pp. £95.

‘The Most Talented Writer in London Who Refused to ‘Come Forward’ as an Author’: William Maginn’s Literary Life

David Latané’s remarkable biography of William Maginn is an invaluable resource that scholars will, no doubt, return to time and again. This study is not simply a biography of author and editor William Maginn (10 July 1794 - 21 August 1842); it also provides a wealth of information about literary life and publishing history in Ireland, Scotland, and England in the early decades of the nineteenth-century.

As we would expect from a biography, Latané’s narrative traces Maginn’s life from his early childhood in Cork, Ireland to his death in London, England. An avid student from a young age, literary life became central to Maginn from the time he began his studies at Trinity College (Dublin) in 1806. By 1819, Maginn had begun to contribute to the first English and Scottish periodicals to gain widespread circulation in Ireland (Colburn’s *Literary Gazette* and *Blackwood’s*), and Latané shows Maginn’s unmistakable centrality to the period’s periodical culture.

For Maginn, literary and social life were always intimately connected, and his personal and professional relationships would intermingle, for better or worse, throughout his life. These relationships began with his correspondence with William Blackwood when he was still in Ireland, and it was amongst the Blackwoodians that Maginn found a group of writers who “also def[ined], rather than deif[ined], the Romantic notion of the author (the hegemony of which in this period is in any case overrated)” (23). As Latané delves into the period marked by the most notable relationships of Maginn’s life—between 1830 and 1835—the import of literary networks to the startling growth of print during the period comes to the fore. It has been long known that Maginn was a central and early contributor to *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, and that his move to *Fraser’s Magazine for Town and Country* in late 1829 caused tension between him and his long-time friend and correspondent William Blackwood. However, what Latané brings to the surface in this biography is how, for Maginn, authorship was always a fraught concept, and an identity he was reluctant to adopt. Maginn saw himself as more than a mere ‘author’, instead, he saw himself as – and indeed became – a central and powerful figure to the periodical press, helping to shape the literary landscape and the politics therein.

As Latané explains, in early days, “Maginn’s eye wasn’t on moving up the ladder of genres, but down into the London trenches of the newspapers, where political power

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might be wielded and an income secured without coming out as an ‘author’” (37). Throughout his life, Maginn resists identifying as an author, in spite of his importance as one; indeed, his story, “The Man in the Bell” was reproduced in school textbooks and was a well-known influence on Dickens and Poe. Latané cites this reluctance as the central commonality between Blackwood and Maginn, “the authority of their abjuring of authorhood” (46).

Like so many authors, Maginn was impoverished and reliant upon charity at the end of his life. The convivial and gregarious life he led caught up with him, and by his winter years was considered “a glorious ruin” (289). Latané supplements this narrative by demonstrating that Maginn’s poverty was in part because of a life-long practice of “impulsive generosity” (176) and a frivolity with his funds, that was, no doubt, in part, because of his commitment to social issues, particularly concerning the Poor Laws. Beginning with his time as a journalist in Ireland, Maginn continued to engage with political reform throughout his career. However, he never let partisan politics come in the way of his literary endeavours or his social life, and as such, opened up dialogue on diverse issues such as the Catholic Relief Act, the Poor Laws, and Malthusian economics, between interested parties in a variety of print media.

Though Maginn was never fiscally responsible in his personal life, he was savvy to the literary market. Beginning with his successful commitment to increase the contributions from Irish authors to the *Literary Gazette* and *Blackwood’s* (23) to his later development of *Fraser’s Literary Chronicle, and Register of British and Foreign Literature, Sciences, and the Fine Arts*, which was designed to undercut the established weeklies the *Literary Gazette* and the *Athenaeum*, Maginn’s contributions to print culture evolved over the course of his career.

The strength of this book – and where it can rightfully be considered as much as a reference book as a biography – is in the utterly astounding amount of archival research in the text. Latané provides us with hundreds of resources that will be of great use to scholars studying periodical culture, Romantic and Victorian authors who contributed to *Blackwood’s*, *Fraser’s*, the *Literary Gazette*, *The Standard*, *John Bull*, and dozens of other newspapers in Scotland, Ireland, and England. Further, Latané’s painstakingly detailed appendices that describe the archival locations of these materials and will act as a research guidebook for scholars for years to come. Indeed, this biography has the potential to spark a new wave of scholarship that considers the importance of Maginn in nineteenth-century literary studies.

I agree with Nicholas Mason’s assessment that the price of this book (\$149.95) will make this a difficult investment for many scholars.¹ However, its contributions to the field are significant and much awaited, and as such, this book is worth the price. Latané

¹ Mason, Nicholas. Review of *William Maginn and the British Press: A Critical Biography* by David Latané. *Review 19* (www.nbol-19.org).

had no easy task in writing this biography: as he outlines in the first appendix, there is virtually no extant, contemporaneous biographical material, with the exception of a few newspaper biographies written shortly after Maginn's death. Maginn warrants some attention in Margaret Oliphant's 1897 biography of the House of Blackwood, and Miriam Thrall began to fill the scholarly gap in her 1954 text on *Fraser's Magazine*. Drawing our attention to little-known or understudied newspapers and periodicals, such as *Fraser's Literary Chronicle, and Register*, this book reminds us of how much more work there is to be done in periodical studies. With its multiple plates, illustrations, guides to archives and nineteenth-century periodicals and newspapers, Latané provides a superb resource as he begins to unravel the densely woven threads of the tapestry that characterized nineteenth-century British print culture.

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