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Execrable Human Traffic: Charles Dibdin, George Morland, and the waterman.¹

Charles Dibdin's ballad *The Waterman*, better known as *My Poll and my Partner Joe*, was written and first performed on his 'Farewell Tour' in 1788, and tells the story of a waterman who is pressed into service and who comes home when peace is declared to find his friend and wife 'lock'd in each other's arms!'. Scenes from the ballad's four verses were painted and etched many times in the following years. Robert Sayer's broadside published in December 1790 is typical in its focus on the denouement taken from the final verse (**fig.1**). The waterman, dressed as Jack Tar, climbs from the boat up the steps to his cottage only to find Joe embracing his wife and looking lovingly into her eyes. The waterman's large stick gives a hint of the scrap that is shortly to follow, but this mezzotint is far from being a crude image and the scene that Sayer has published dwells on the sentimental appeal of the couple by the cottage, and the comic appearance of the waterman back from naval service.

The image must have been successful because it was re-engraved and republished in 1794 by Sayer's assistants Robert Laurie and James Whittle, who rented Sayer's premises and bought his stock after 1792 (**fig.2**). By this time Dibdin was performing in his one-man show in venues on the Strand, a short walk to the west of Laurie and Whittle's shop on Fleet Street. Half a mile further west still, in St James's, James Gillray was shortly to publish an altogether earthier burlesque in which a corpulent and lively Poll dances a jig with Joe, oddly dressed as a sailor and saluting his good fortune with his gin (**fig.3**). Gillray based his satire on a Flemish tradition of peasant dances painted for wealthy

urban elites, while Sayer's picture appealed to viewers familiar with a more recent fashion for pictures showing domestic tenderness such as Thomas Gainsborough's cottage door scenes. His own picture is a gentle inversion of the theme of a labourer coming home to his family at the end of a day's toil, and he has retained the theme of domestic harmony by using a tree to frame off the image of Poll, Joe and their baby outside the cottage door.

In 1803 an aquatint in *The Professional Life of Mr Dibdin* by Dibdin's daughter Anne, showed the waterman kicking out Poll and Joe from his cottage. This slapstick humour formed the basis of a topical etching by Thomas Rowlandson showing Napoleon and his brother Joseph being kicked to the Devil, a reference to Joseph being deposed as King of Spain (**fig.4**). Rowlandson substituted 'Poll' with 'Nap', but the important point to make is that the image only works if you are familiar with Dibdin's ballad. The joke was repeated in 1813 in an etching on the French retreat from Holland, but in this case Joseph had nothing to do with events (**fig.5**). Presumably Dibdin's lyrics were so well known that Rowlandson was happy to include a gratuitous reference to Joseph if it meant that he could use the song as a means to more effectively communicate the print's message and its comic form.

The market for popular prints found a rich vein of subject matter in Dibdin's popular song, all of it coming from the closing lines of the final verse. It is therefore all the more surprising that the first pictures drawn from *Poll and my Partner Joe* were done in a genre which was more clearly aligned with the ambitions of high art, and that they took verses one and two as their subject matter. These are two paintings by George Morland, titled *The Cottage Door*

and *The Press Gang*. *The Cottage Door* shows a contented waterman outside his cottage door with Poll, his daughter, and his partner Joe (**fig.6**). The girl with her doll is a detail introduced by Morland and the effect is not only to liven up the composition with a fourth figure, so that the four figures form a circle in the centre of the picture, but also to place the picture within the genre of *Cottage Door* scenes, which we have seen was also the paradigm for Robert Sayer's mezzotint which was published a few months later. Three lines from the ballad's first verse appear below the print: 'My cot was snug, well fill'd my cag, / My grunter in the sty', which gives a context to what might otherwise be taken as a 'tavern door' type of picture, where working men drink beer and carouse with women.

The second scene is altogether more surprising (**fig.7**). It describes the waterman's capture by the press-gang in terms which are more dramatic and violent than what we find in the ballad itself. Dibdin wrote: 'I roll'd in joys like these awhile, / Folks far and near caress'd me, / Till woe is me, / So lubberly, / The press-gang came and press'd me: / How could I all these pleasures leave? / How with my wherry part? / I never so took on to grieve- / it wrung my very heart'. Morland captures the waterman's distress, but leaves the viewer in no doubt about the brutal nature of the encounter. The sailor who pulls the boat to the landing has a profile every bit as ugly as his cudgel, and there's a dramatic energy in the middle sailor's fist which threatens the waterman.

Four years prior to *The Cottage Door* and *The Press Gang* a twenty-three year old Morland had exhibited at the Royal Academy summer exhibition *The Flowery Banks of the Shannon*, a ballad about a swain who is press-ganged

on the morning of his marriage, but: 'When peace was made, his ship came back, / But Teddy ne'er returned. / His beauteous face and manly form / Have won a nobler fair; / My Teddy's false, and I forlorn / Must die in sad despair'.² I don't know of any versions of *The Flowery Banks of the Shannon* and it doesn't seem to have been engraved, but perhaps it was similar in tone to his pair of pictures from four years later. Dibdin's own ballad paints the conscripted sailor in a better light than Croker's song and also provides a comic ending. We have already seen that Morland's treatment of the waterman is darker than Dibdin's, and his omission of scenes from verses three and four compounds the sense that here is an emergent genre of press-gang *noir*. There are few other images of press-gangs but these are mostly caricatures, and none I know of that make claims to narrative painting apart from Morland's. On the other hand, literary representations of press-gangs were usually in the context of a biography, such as Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*. Equiano's press-gang was based at Westminster Stairs, since press-gangs were allowed to press anyone who had knowledge of boats and were not confined to coastal regions, and it is on this same stretch of river that Dibdin's waterman, who worked 'Twixt Richmond town / And Horsleydown' is shown as being taken in Morland's painting.

A further precedent for Morland's treatment of *My Poll and my partner Joe* can be found in his astoundingly successful painting *Execrable Human Traffic* (1788).³ This painting, the largest he had painted at this point in his career, showed families being separated and sold off on the African coast (**fig.8**). Its companion *African Hospitality* was painted two years later, at the same time as the scenes from *Poll and my Partner Joe* (**fig.9**). It's possible that Dibdin gave Morland the idea for the

slavery pictures since he discussed abolition and agitation in Manchester and Liverpool in *The Musical Tour of Mr Dibdin*, published in 1788, the year that Morland exhibited *Execrable Human Traffic* at the Royal Academy summer exhibition. By 1788 the twenty-five year old Morland was effectively employed by the engraver and publisher John Raphael Smith to paint works which would be turned into profitable mezzotints, which is what happened with *Execrable Human Traffic* and *African Hospitality*, which were advertised and sold in the same regional cities that Dibdin discussed in *The Musical Tour*. Smith and Dibdin were part of a publishing circle which included Rowlandson and William Ward, as well as Morland, so it's possible that ideas for the slavery paintings came from this milieu, especially if (as seems likely) Smith was involved in their conception.⁴

The contrast of one scene with another was a well-established mode of pairing pictures together. What's striking about *The Cottage Door* and *The Press Gang* is how a bucolic scene is contrasted with one so violent. The description of violence far exceeds what is referred to in the words of the ballad itself. It's possible that the idea came to Morland from his work on the slavery paintings. *Execrable Human Traffic* was painted in 1788 but *African Hospitality* only in 1790, and it's likely that Smith was the driving force in getting Morland to paint a companion in the hope that the comforting message of the later painting would ameliorate the brutal realities of the earlier. Smith's sense of what would sell and what would not may be one reason why William Ward's mezzotints done after Morland's paintings, and given the titles *The Contented Waterman* and *Jack in the Bilboes* were published by John Linnell rather than Smith (**figs. 10 and 11**). At this time Smith published the overwhelming majority of prints after Morland's works and also bought many of

his paintings so the fact that another publisher issued these pictures is unusual.

The genre of a 'contrast', and the surprising degree of contrast, may explain why Morland has only represented the first two of Dibdin's four ballad verses. There was a precedent for painting a selection of scenes from a literary work, but with a short ballad it one would expect Morland to paint scenes from all four verses. The previous year Smith had published a series of six mezzotints after Morland chronicling the social rise and moral fall of a girl named Laetitia, and one scholar has suggested that Dibdin's songs may well have been the source for Laetitia's story.⁵ Two years later, in 1791, Smith published four mezzotints after Morland called *The Deserter* which showed a soldier's recruitment, desertion, capture and pardon, and it's quite likely that Smith was the instigator and Dibdin's *Deserter* was the source. But in the case of *The Cottage Door* and *The Press Gang*, it may well have been Morland's intention to devise a dramatic contrast, and he perhaps recognised that the impact may have been lost if the third and fourth verses had been illustrated. Moreover it is likely that he would have been obliged to temper the second image in keeping with the tragic-comic mode of the ballad as a whole.

Morland's decision to interpret Dibdin's ballad using the trope of a 'contrast' rather than a sentimental narrative which leads to a conclusion seems to be deliberate, but I think we also need to search for an explanation for his choice. His *de facto* publisher, as we have already seen, appears to have declined the pictures. Given that Morland and Ward were very close to Smith and remained so for many years, and that they probably knew Dibdin too, it is unlikely they would have been unaware of the degree to which their work

might startle the public. In the remaining part of this paper I therefore want to see if I can put their choice in the context of changes to the structure of economic relations in the market for artistic commodities (including printed music) in the late eighteenth century in order to show that subject matter is not autonomous from the conditions of production.

Dibdin and Morland were London contemporaries and their careers have some striking parallels. Between 1789 and 1804 both enjoyed success as independent performers who worked outside the established systems of salaried performance and private patronage. Dibdin performed solo shows and ran a shop selling his compositions, and received money when other performers used his songs. Morland, who served an apprenticeship with his father and then worked for a Covent Garden pornographer and also for Smith, developed a practice of selling his paintings directly to dealers, who would then sell them on at a profit. Biographers were quick to point out that this meant he gained only a fraction of the income he might otherwise have earned but at the same time noted that this way of operating brought him almost complete independence from the demands of patrons, and led to the creation of a market for his works which saw prices inflate to unimaginable proportions. Morland joked that his paintings were as sound a currency as the Bank of England's notes, but the Bank was created to fund the National Debt, and in the same way the dealers who advanced him money on his pictures were effectively buying his debt in the expectation that his stock would continue to rise, which was a risky business since part of what drove the demand for his work was the assumption that his life would be short since he was renowned for drinking a great deal (as was Dibdin, by his own account in the opening pages of *The Professional Life of Mr Dibdin*).

Morland and Dibdin would therefore seem to have found quite different fortunes as the result of pursuing solo careers. When a wealthy Charles Dibdin was drawing his career to a close and publishing the first volume of his autobiography in 1803, an indebted and ill George Morland was painting a picture of himself in fairly squalid conditions in a garret in order to repay friends who had stood him bail after a landlord impounded his property. In the Westminster election the preceding year Dibdin had voted loyally for Admiral Gardner, candidate of the Tory ministry which was shortly to commission patriotic songs from him and then to award him a pension of £200. Morland was in prison for debt and probably didn't vote, but if he had it would likely have been for the much-ridiculed Radical candidate John Graham, who was to part-pay his bail when his landlord arrested him. Morland and Dibdin would seem to be far apart in almost every respect.

I want to suggest, however, that they are closer than a brief comparison would make them seem. A salient point is that contemporaries could only conceive of their independence, and the changes in economic relations of which their independence was a function, in terms of specific personal traits which served to explain how they were able to flourish, and why they were a bad example to others. Both were the subject of a large body of writing; in Dibdin's case it was autobiography, and Morland's life was written by no fewer than four contemporaries in the months following his death. The writings reveal some remarkable similarities in how their personal characteristics were described. Both were described as having a reputation for wasting their time and their health. Neither underwent formal training and were reputed to be children of nature who learnt from observation alone, and evidence of this was

to be found, it was alleged, in the fact that both men were known for eschewing preparatory work (Morland for painting straight onto canvas, Dibdin for not writing down music unless required by others).⁶ A direct result of this was that each man's solo career consisted of an output that was unparalleled among contemporaries (360 songs for Dibdin, 4000 paintings and drawings for Morland), but quantity came at the price of quality, and both were lauded as gifted artists who chose to work in lower genres when more application and submission to established patterns of training and patronage would have meant they could have attained the pinnacle of their respective fields.

It may be objected that since Dibdin wrote his autobiography his words have a relationship to things as they really are in a way that isn't true of Morland's biographies, which were penned by people who knew him rather than the man himself. But there is plenty of evidence that Morland went to great lengths to market himself as someone who disregarded convention in the same way as we see Dibdin do in the account of his own life. This suggests to me that not even Morland or Dibdin were able to understand the changes in economic relations which provided the structures necessary for solo careers. Just like their contemporaries they had to use whatever paradigms were available to them to represent their experiences and ambitions.

Karen Junod has noted that the fame of Morland's prints 'helped generate the rash of biographies and other commemorative pieces that appeared in the years after his death in October 1804'.⁷ In 1830 Henry Angelo described the volume of prints published by Smith, often after Morland, as so great that it created a traffic not only in prints but other kinds of goods as

well.⁸ I'd like to take Angelo's point further and suggest that 'traffic' became the paradigm for Morland's and Dibdin's lives. There are important differences. Whereas Morland's *Lives* (as a genre of artistic biography) are roughly chronological, they are peppered with anecdotes which have no temporal situation. This disjointedness is similar to what we find in the exceptionally popular narrative of the gypsy/gentleman Bampfylde Moore Carew, first published in 1745 and still reprinted at the end of the century. John Barrell has argued that such a residual imagining of space resists conceptions which are more organised according to economic imperatives.⁹ I think that if we see Morland's biographers as working to fashion an essentially romantic literary figure, then the opposite is the case: the uncertain spatial and temporal location of Morland's life is an expression of the insecurity and dislocation which new economic conditions bring into being. At the same time it also serves to build a gulf between the romantic subject and the economic relations themselves, as Karen Junod has pointed out, so that Morland is not sullied with accusations of being personally greedy – that's the job of his dealers.¹⁰ Dibdin's autobiography makes explicit reference to its subject's professionalism. Unlike Morland, Dibdin's narration of events is carefully ordered and supplemented with explicit reference to names and places, but like Morland, Dibdin's career is a mobile one, and the same claims are made for Dibdin as are made for Morland, namely that 'genius as a quality that was outstanding and special, and yet at the same time also tainted and corrupted, the one often a condition of the other'.

'Traffic' is a paradigm for understanding Morland and Dibdin, and their paintings and songs as sold on the open market in conditions shaped by new economic

relations. It would be facile to say that this then found expression in subject matter of their work, although it's interesting that one of Morland's more perceptive biographers sandwiched his *Lives* in between two volumes describing the adventures of a picture as it was bought and sold; and that the key structuring feature of Dibdin's life were the songs which he published, so that his life is told in terms of the music he sold. More realistically I think we can argue that these conditions, and the language in which contemporaries found they could understand and express the changes they experienced, rendered only certain kinds of subject matter possible. Morland and Dibdin sold their work to whoever could pay for it. Their products were alienable goods and part of the flow of goods and money which shaped the late eighteenth century international economy. Morland's own person became a marketable commodity insofar as he became figured in terms of his value as a quantity of debt. It therefore seems to me that a language of sentimental narrative in which separation is temporary and where there is always a resolution was not available to Morland. That particular expression of social relations as natural relations was confounded by the principles on which his own practice as an independent performer was modelled, that is to say the rendering of social relations as a function of economic relations. In this setting, narrative resolution, whether of the picture's subjects or of the artist's practice, life, and relations, makes way for a perpetual traffic of people and goods, whether this be the press-ganged waterman and the slaves, the art objects, or even the painter and songwriter themselves.



POLL and my PARTNER JOE.

I was dy'd as a Waterman,
At eight and uprose at nine,
Twixt Richmond Ewin,
And Thrope I down,
I turn'd an honest party,
Were said of Dickster favors being
More than could satisfy I,
My lot was such and fill'd my Day
By service in the City,
With Wherry night
And fifteen light
charitable did I be,
to complete this princely life
no man had there'd with
my Poll and my partner Joe.

I roll'd in sea like those onshore,
Jolly fit and now carry'd me,
Till now is my
So Tally-ho,
The Venues came and prigg'd me,
How could I all the pleasures leave,
How with my Wherry part,
I never so took on to grieve,
It wrung my very heart,
But when we heard,
They gave the word
To foreign parts to go,
I call the moment I was born,
That ever I should thus be torn,
From my Poll and my partner Joe.

I did my Duty manfully,
While on the Bellow rowling,
And Night or Day,
I could find my way,
Blindfold to the main top heading,
Down all the dangers of the main,
Quickheads and gales of wind
I brav'd in hopes to taste again,
The Joy I felt behind,
In a time after
The hottest War,
Pow'd knowledge on the Br,
In hope these Verses to relate,
As by my side attentive sat
My Poll and my partner Joe.

At last it pleas'd his Majesty,
To give Peace to the Nation,
And honest hearts
From Foreign parts,
Came home for consolation,
Like Lightning— for I felt now too
New life from all alarms,
I rush'd and found my friend and Wife,
Lock'd in each others Arms,
Yet lively not
I shew'd not
Time like a Lubber— No
For swag I was thirty seven,
Flung in the Dowry I boldly took it,
My Poll and my partner Joe.

Printed at the Sign of the Sun in St. Dunstons Church Lane London.

Fig.1. Anonymous, *Poll and my partner Joe*, pub. Robert Sayer, 1790, mezzotint, 35.3 x 25.1 cm, British Museum.



Fig. 2. Anonymous, *Poll and my partner Joe*, pub. Robert Laurie and James Whittle, 1794, mezzotint, 36.7 x 27 cm. National Maritime Museum.



Fig.3. James Gillray, *Poll and my partner Joe*, 1796, hand-coloured etching, 28.5 x 35.7 cm. British Museum.



Fig.4. Thomas Rowlandson, *Nap and my Partner Joe*, 1808, hand-coloured etching, 26 x 34 cm. British Museum.



Fig.5. Thomas Rowlandson, *Plump to the Devil we boldly kick'd both Nap and his partner Joe*, 1813, hand-coloured etching, 24 x 35 cm. British Museum.



Fig.6. George Morland, *The Cottage Door*, 1790, oil on panel, 35.5 x 45.7 cm. Royal Holloway, University of London.



Fig.7. George Morland, *The Press Gang*, 1790, oil on panel, 35.5 x 45.7 cm. Royal Holloway, University of London.



Fig.8. John Raphael Smith after George Morland, *The Slave Trade*, 1791, mezzotint, 46.3 x 64.8 cm. British Museum.



Fig.9. John Raphael Smith after George Morland, *African Hospitality*, 1791, mezzotint, 48 x 65.5 cm. British Museum.



Fig.10. William Ward after George Morland, *The Contented Waterman*, 1806, mezzotint, pub. J. Linnell, 40 x 46 cm. British Museum.



Fig.11. William Ward after George Morland, *Jack in the Bilboes*, 1790, mezzotint on paper, 35 x 45 cm (trimmed). British Museum.

¹ I would like to thank John Barrell for bringing this symposium to my notice.

² For *The Flowery Banks of the Shannon* see Thomas Crofton Croker, *Popular Songs of Ireland* (Dublin, 1839), 310.

³ The print for *Execrable Human Traffic* appeared in 1791 (see fig.8) under the title *The Slave Trade*, but I shall refer to the image here as *Execrable Human Traffic*.

⁴ For Smith's role in devising *African Hospitality* as a pendant to *Execrable Human Traffic* see Meredith Gamer, 'George Morland's 'Slave Trade' and 'African Hospitality': Slavery, Sentiment and the Limits of the Abolitionist Image', in Elizabeth McGrath and Jean-Michel Massing eds. *The Slave in European Art: From Renaissance Trophy to Abolitionist Emblem* (London: The Warburg Institute, 2012) 297-320.

⁵ See S.M. Cullen, *George Morland and his Patrons* (M.Phil thesis, University of London, 1983), 76.

⁶ For Dibdin's health, see *The Professional Life of Mr Dibdin*, volume 1 (London: C. Dibdin, 1803), 2; for his lack of training, 21; for his avoidance of preparatory work, 104.

⁷ Karen Junod, *'Writing the Lives of Painters': Biography and Artistic Identity in Britain, 1760-1810* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 180.

⁸ Henry Angelo, *Reminiscences of Henry Angelo*, vol.1 (London: Henry Colburn, 1828). No pagination on electronic version.

⁹ John Barrell, 'Afterword: Moving Stories, Still Lives', in Donna Landry et al eds., *The Country and the City Revisited: England and the Politics of Culture, 1550-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Junod, *'Writing the Lives of Painters'*, 184.