

## *Periodicals & Journals. Why They Matter?*

Whilst the importance of many topics discussed in the 18th and 19th century are fully appreciated today, albeit with the conclusions still argued about, it is easy to forget from our well informed 21st century view how controversial and revolutionary many topics from transport, economic activities, religion, social ideas and the fields of scientific discovery were one or two hundred years in the past.

The battlefield this played out across was that of the periodical press, led by the Quarterly Review and Edinburgh Review. As early as 1824 William Stevenson remarked that there was "a reciprocal influence between the periodicals and the intellectual progress of this country"(Blackwood's v16). Periodicals create an ideal medium for the dissemination of new ideas and experiences, communicating them much more promptly than more formal publications and to some extent more easily accessed than whole tomes on a given subject. Much of the material published in them never reaches book form and as such remains scarce and widely under-read.

Houghton observed that "an intelligent interpretation often depends on knowing the author's position or his other works. An anonymous paper attacking the Thirty-nine articles would mean one thing if written by T.H.Huxley and something quite different if the author were the Bishop of London" (Wellesley, intro., p xvii). Wherever possible we have given the author attribution to the best of our abilities, but we have not usually chosen to contextualise the piece, leaving the importance of that to the writer of the article and the publisher.

The great benefit of writing anonymously was chiefly that articles could be free of selfish motivations, speaking the truth as seen by the writer, and with the respectability of the journal publishing the piece adding gravitas and importance. The implication, however misplaced, being that all articles must be by men of great learning and authority. As the 19th century progressed writers became more willing to see their names applied to their articles, and the periodical press, excepting the Edinburgh and Quarterly Review, took on a style more akin to modern journals such as the Times Literary Supplement with attributed authors.

The publishers, and in turn their editors (often the same individual) had great interest in setting the tone of their periodicals, whether Whiggish or Tory, Catholic or Protestant, modern or traditional. These influences can be key to understanding the importance of a given writer or topic at a moment in history, and can also provide clues to follow a train of thought or a seam of research across numerous publications, and different authors, all the while building up a picture of how a debate was being viewed at the time of writing. This presents a unique insight not otherwise readily available from reading latter published works or critiques.

Historic periodicals and journals provide a scarce resource of contemporary views on themes and topics of importance with an interpretation that puts the modern reader in the original debate in a way that no other resource can.