RAMMOHUN ROY AND THE
MAKING OF VICTORIAN BRITAIN

Lynn Zastoupil
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Rammohun Roy and the Making of Victorian Britain
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LYNN ZASTOUPIL
IN MEMORY OF
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN ZASTOUPIL
1922–2007
AND
ARTUR LÜCK
1920–2003
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Introduction

The Celebrated Rammohun Roy

On April 8, 1831, a turbaned Bengali brahman disembarked at Liverpool, limping because of a mishap in Cape Town. His party included an adopted son, several servants, and cows to provide milk during the voyage. Accompanying him as well was a friend, the sailor-turned-journalist James Sutherland, who sent back to Calcutta reports of their arrival. Indians had been turning up in Britain for some time, owing to a growing empire in the subcontinent. Lascars employed on ships, servants and slaves returning with their masters, merchants setting up shop in Britain, learned men hoping for academic work, envoys and supplicants seeking redress of grievances—numerous Muslims, Parsis, Hindus, and others had found their way to Britain in the two centuries before 1831. Thanks to the pioneering investigations of Rozina Visram and the exhaustive scholarship of Michael Fisher, we know much about these early visitors and immigrants. What set our Bengali apart, however, was his transnational celebrity, which led to a reception in Britain unlike that accorded previous Indians.

This luminary was Rammohun Roy. Rammohun is known today as a founding figure of the modern Indian nation-state—“the father of modern India” as an earlier generation called him. He is renowned for embracing a Western-influenced modernity associated with the emergence of Indian nationalism. Social and religious reformer, education activist, pioneering journalist and Bengali prose writer, and critical admirer of the West, Rammohun and his interests reflect many currents of modern South Asian history. Less familiar is the fact that his passions intersected with the projects of reformers and humanitarians in Britain. Rational religion, liberty of the press, constitutional reform, free trade, modern education, the condition of women, and suppression of inhumane practices are causes that Rammohun shared with many Britons. These were causes shaping a new order in Britain, and those who most admired him were ushering in an age of reform. Recovering Rammohun’s significance for this modernization project is the aim of this book. His celebrity, as we shall see, is a mirror in which the making of Victorian Britain is reflected.

Evidence of this fame is abundant and striking. From the moment he arrived, Rammohun was besieged by visitors and invitations, his social calendar was filled, and his whereabouts were publicized. In Liverpool he was out “morning, noon, and night” and overbooked himself. A train ride to Manchester was widely reported in local newspapers, as were the throngs of workers who met him there. The crowds in
Manchester were large enough to necessitate police intervention. Wherever he stopped on his journey to London, the inns were surrounded by gawkers. Once settled in the capital, Rammohun’s social engagements did not let up. He often had “two or three invitations to parties for every day in the week,” and carriages were lined up outside his door as visitors pressed to meet him. Many were disappointed. Thomas Macaulay waited in vain at one gathering until midnight, when he “went away in despair.”

Not everyone was frustrated. Royalty enjoyed Rammohun’s company. King William invited the Bengali to sit in the royal pavilion at the opening of the new London Bridge in August 1831. Rammohun was also presented to the king on September 7, 1831, and the next day he sat among the foreign dignitaries at the coronation of William and Adelaide. The queen took an interest in him, as did William’s brothers. The archconservative duke of Cumberland introduced Rammohun to the House of Lords, which offended the Bengali’s friends. More palatable to them was Rammohun’s relationship with the black sheep of the royal family, the duke of Sussex. As we will see in chapter 3, the two shared liberal sentiments on religion and politics. The earl of Munster—William’s eldest son by the actress Dorothy Jordan—may have played a role in introducing Rammohun to these circles. As a young officer, George Fitzclarence had met Rammohun in Calcutta and published an early account of the Bengali. He was heard praising Rammohun after the Bengali arrived in London.

Lesser notables shared the royal family’s interest. Rammohun watched Fanny Kemble perform from the duke of Devonshire’s box. Other Whig elites courted him, including the marquess of Lansdowne and countess of Cork, as chapter 3 explores. The soirees of the countess were not the only instances of lionizing that Rammohun experienced. A raft of people held lesser social gatherings where he was a guest of honor. Harriet Martineau, who detested the phenomenon, penned a critical account of the literary lionizing inflicted on her and Rammohun. Of a different mind was Kemble, who wrote of a flirtatious evening with Rammohun at a party hosted by Basil Montagu—the legal reformer and editor of Francis Bacon’s works—and his wife, Anna. Rammohun’s social obligations were extensive enough to alarm friends who were worried about the effect on his health. Some feared that his head was turned by all the attention.

And there was plenty of attention. The press recorded Rammohun’s presence at various events. They took note of a Lords’ debate on the reform bill where Rammohun was seated near the throne. His presence at a reform debate in Commons—and “the most lively curiosity and interest” this announcement created in that house—was also newsworthy. A visit by “the celebrated Rajah Rammohun Roy” to the newly refurbished Beulah Spa in Norwood was duly publicized, along with the words that he inscribed in the visitors’ book. Accounts of literary or learned society meetings he attended mentioned Rammohun’s name among the notables present. At times, what he did or did not eat at festive dinners was also reported. His opinions were represented and misrepresented in print to the point that Rammohun asked the Times not to print any more such accounts. After his death, that newspaper caused a stir by refusing to print any more letters from individuals claiming to know Rammohun’s religious views.

Those who could not see him in the flesh had resort to a popular likeness. A miniature portrait of Rammohun done in Calcutta and reproduced by Unitarians in 1823 and 1824 resurfaced upon his arrival in Britain (see frontispiece and figure 3.1). James Sutherland reported that while they were in Liverpool, “new impressions” of the Calcutta engraving were “exhibited in every print shop in the place.” Some periodicals splashed
lithographic reproductions of the portrait during Rammohun’s visit or illustrated their obituaries with it. These contained a facsimile of his signature, as had the Unitarian image. Other versions of the image sans the facsimile signature were produced: the British Museum collected one bearing Rammohun’s autograph signature. He may have signed other copies while in Britain. The duke of Sussex used the new impression as frontispiece to his copy of one of Rammohun’s volumes. The likeness was popular enough to be given new life by artists. A watercolor and pencil drawing based on the profile portrait were executed by unknown persons in 1832 or thereabouts. Shortly after Rammohun’s death, a Miss Howe produced two miniature watercolors after the original profile image. In 1841 J. C. Prichard reproduced the profile portrait in color as the frontispiece to a volume of the third edition of his *Researches into the Physical History of Man*. Shortly after Rammohun’s death, Unitarians published a new frontal portrait as well (see figure 3.4).

Rammohun’s endorsement was no less eagerly sought after. Chapter 3 examines the Unitarians perfecting this strategy, setting the stage for later imitators. Those letters to the *Times* claiming to know the celebrity’s opinions are one example. Another was the use of works purportedly written by Rammohun, such as a satirical letter published in *The Age* lampooning Jewish emancipation and Indian immigration to Britain. Reformers tended to be more serious. In the unpublished papers of Frederick John Shore—Bengal civil servant and critic of colonial administration—is a draft letter to the editor of the *India Gazette* in which Shore transmits a dialogue supposedly found among Rammohun’s papers after his death. The dialogue addresses the advantages of making Bengali the language of government in Bengal. It expresses perfectly Shore’s views on using vernacular languages and scripts in colonial administration. Another instance of this unauthorized use of celebrity endorsement is an 1833 tract calling on the U. S. Congress to abolish slavery that the anonymous author closed by assuming the name of Rammohun Roy.

Rammohun’s name could also be employed to create symbolic or fictive relationships. This was the case with the infant baptized in Rammohun’s presence and christened Thomas Rammohun Roy in his honor. This was also true of Thomas Medwin’s fictionalized recounting of his Indian career. In 1834 and 1842 the former captain recast the journal of his military service into tales of rescuing an Indian woman from sati, converting to Vedanta, and becoming a correspondent and disciple of “that excellent person Ram Mohun Roy.” Like his famous cousin, the poet Shelley, Medwin was attracted to Rammohun’s reputation as a Hindu reformer, which he used to validate negative views of popular Hinduism.

Celebrities are often hounded by gossip and rumor. Rammohun was no exception. The son—Rajaram—he adopted and brought with him to Britain had set tongues wagging in Calcutta about a Muslim mistress. In Britain, there was talk of romantic involvement with English women, even a private marriage. As we will see in chapter 5, Lucy Aikin was linked to Rammohun in this fashion. The rumors animated Rammohun’s enemies back in Bengal. Interesting in this regard is the family that claims descent from Rammohun through a son born to an English woman from the Bristol area.

Rammohun was also bedeviled by another celebrity woe—extortion. Sandford Arnot met Rammohun in Calcutta, where Arnot worked for James Silk Buckingham, editor of the *Calcutta Journal*. Like his radical employer, Arnot was deported from India in a crackdown on the press. It seems he carried with him to Britain one of the Ram
Doss letters that Rammohun wrote during this phase of his anti-Trinitarian agitation.\textsuperscript{45} In London Arnot revived his working relationship with Buckingham, until a financial dispute led to an acrimonious break-up. In 1829 Arnot was employed by the Court of Directors to write a pamphlet smearing Buckingham, who was hitting his stride as a critic of the East India Company.\textsuperscript{46}

Once in London, Rammohun employed Arnot as an assistant. This no doubt alienated Buckingham, who as chapters 6 and 7 demonstrate, was spreading Rammohun’s fame across Britain. Pressed for time and inundated with invitations and visitors’ cards, Rammohun needed a secretary.\textsuperscript{47} According to Arnot, he also required assistance writing in English, a service Arnot rendered first in Calcutta and then for two years in London. That assistance—if Arnot is to be believed—sometimes consisted of rendering into polished English Rammohun’s verbalized ideas, sometimes editing what Rammohun had drafted, and sometimes instructing Rammohun as he wrote out his thoughts. Several of Rammohun’s Calcutta productions were thus composed, as was nearly everything of importance attributed to Rammohun during his years in Britain.\textsuperscript{48}

Arnot’s assertions, published after his employer had died, were hotly disputed. John Hare and Lant Carpenter challenged the idea that Arnot was anything more than an amanuensis.\textsuperscript{49} Carpenter was keen to preserve the legacy of someone widely recognized as a Unitarian convert and brilliant controversialist.\textsuperscript{50} Hare, with whom Rammohun had lived on Bedford Square, had another motive: exposing Arnot as an extortionist. Shortly before his death, Rammohun was approached by Arnot with “a pecuniary demand” accompanied by a threat to go public with his claims.\textsuperscript{51} After a conversation with Hare, H. H. Wilson relayed this news to India. Arnot had been Rammohun’s secretary, Wilson wrote, and then Arnot “importuned him for the payment of large arrears which he called arrears of salary, and threatened Ram Mohun, if not paid, to do what he has done since his death, claim as his own writing all that Ram Mohun published in England.”\textsuperscript{52} Arnot, as we will see later, belonged to an underworld of journalists, some of whom were literary blackmailers making life difficult for public figures. His extortion attempt was its own underhanded testimony to Rammohun’s celebrity.

Other Britons paid their respects more kindly. Rammohun discussed religion and politics with Robert Owen, passed a week at Barham Court with the aging William Wilberforce, talked politics with James Mill, answered William Godwin’s request for information, and attended a Literary Fund meeting with Benjamin Disraeli.\textsuperscript{53} Rammohun also had the confidence of Lord Brougham, one of whose works he proposed to translate.\textsuperscript{54} In Liverpool he debated the merits of phrenology with J. G. Spurzheim.\textsuperscript{55} One of Spurzheim’s British disciples later wrote an analysis of the famed Bengali’s head, using Rammohun’s case to argue that brain size, not climate, determined intellectual achievement. This assessment of the source of Rammohun’s greatness had supporters in Britain and India.\textsuperscript{56} A more reputable scientific interest was shown by J. C. Prichard, who probably met Rammohun in Bristol. Prichard used the example of Rammohun and his servant (or associate),\textsuperscript{57} Ramratna Mukherjee, to support his monogenetic ethnology, which denied that different skin colors were proof of distinct racial origins. The two dark-skinned brahmans indicated that some variations could reflect climatic influences.\textsuperscript{58}

* * *

What explains this fascination with a visitor from the periphery of the empire? Some who pursued him were celebrity-hounds eager to meet a famous man wearing the exotic
dress of the Bengali gentry.\textsuperscript{59} Rammohun was wearied by such as these.\textsuperscript{60} Most had serious motives, and they are the focus of this book. Agendas varied, of course, and close examinations of individual Britons will likely yield important insights. Chapter 9 is such a study of Jeremy Bentham's interest in Rammohun. The following pages, however, will focus on three overlapping groups who admired the Bengali long before he set foot in England.

Religion was on the minds of many who flocked to Rammohun. Not a few were orthodox Christians. Thomas Burgess, bishop of Salisbury and archfoe of Unitarianism, wished to discuss missionaries. William Scoresby, an evangelical Anglican clergyman, probed Rammohun about Unitarianism the day he landed in Liverpool. In Bristol, the Baptist John Foster and others quizzed Rammohun about his views of original sin and the resurrection.\textsuperscript{61} Skeptics such as Robert Owen were no less interested in what he had to say about religion.\textsuperscript{62} Not that any of these had an unwilling interlocutor. One person complained that Rammohun compelled “any one who might visit him to converse upon theological subjects.”\textsuperscript{63}

The religiously minded were attracted because Rammohun was a renowned controversialist and apparent Unitarian convert. Chapter 2 examines how his Vedanta publications convinced many that Rammohun was something like a Luther of Hinduism. By 1820 he was famous on both sides of the Atlantic, and the word “celebrated” was soon as firmly attached to his name as was “venerable” to that of Bede.\textsuperscript{64} That year \textit{The Precepts of Jesus} appeared, sparking a famous controversy with missionaries that changed, and enhanced, Rammohun’s reputation. Chapters 2 and 3 read that controversy in the neglected context of a long, bitter theological dispute in Britain regarding the Trinity. Rammohun was firmly in the anti-Trinitarian camp, and his mastery of Unitarian discourse transformed him in Western eyes from a Hindu reformer into a Christian theologian. The triangular circulation of heterodox individuals and texts between Britain, Bengal, and North America—and the presence of Unitarian communities in each—ensured that his was a transnational celebrity. Contributing to the phenomenon was the Unitarian practice of touting prominent individuals holding anti-Trinitarian views. Thomas Jefferson, as we shall see, almost gave them the opportunity. John Milton did so, in a posthumous tract discovered about the time that Rammohun’s Unitarian works were circulating in the Western world. Celebrity heterodoxy in other words was not unique to Rammohun. He was, however, one of its most striking examples—a trophy for Unitarians, as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it.

Conversancy with the Bible was central here. Whether scripture supported the personal deity of Jesus or the doctrine of atonement was of intense interest to many Britons of the long eighteenth century. Visiting Paris in 1678, John Locke consulted old copies of the New Testament to see if they contained 1 John 5:7.\textsuperscript{65} By Rammohun’s time Unitarians were certain that Locke was one of them, and this verse was widely recognized as an interpolation. Debates about the Trinity still raged, however, and invariably ended with disputants unconvinced by their opponents. This led some to wish for an intelligent outsider to declare whether the Bible supported Trinitarian or Unitarian interpretations. The possibility that Rammohun was this umpire explains the urgent interest in his biblical exegeses. As chapter 3 reveals, Unitarians on both sides of the Atlantic rejoiced in the conviction that he had declared them victors. The fruits of this victory would prove short-lived. Victorians and Edwardians moved on to other issues, as the biographers of William J. Fox testified. To them, Fox was a social reformer and journalist who campaigned against the Corn Laws, advocated equality for women, supported a national theater, and promoted the elevation of the working classes. The young Fox
who fiercely advocated Unitarianism and admired Rammohun Roy was less interesting, and they gave short shrift to his published sermons. *The Apostle John an Unitarian*, for instance, was dismissed with the curt comment: “The tract is a good specimen of what would now be regarded as an antiquated method of controversy.” The following pages will demonstrate that Rammohun was famous because he wrote works very much in the vein of *The Apostle John an Unitarian*. His celebrity is a reminder that the “antiquated” age of Locke and Unitarian controversy endured into the nineteenth century.

There was more to Unitarianism than rationalist theology. Chapter 1 surveys the role of Rational Dissenters as social reformers, civic leaders, and political activists. Their influence was out of all proportion to their numbers, as they campaigned for freedom of conscience and expression, helped dismantle the confessional state, and established close ties to Whig leaders. In the eyes of some, more a political than a religious sect, Unitarians held high profile positions as lobbyists, political advisers, mayors and councilors, and members of parliament. This prominence ensured that Rammohun’s endorsement of their views had repercussions beyond theology. The ease with which he moved in elite Whig circles, examined in chapter 3, is one example. Another is the suggestion that Rammohun stand for parliament. As the final chapter indicates, imagining a Bengali MP was a project connected to Unitarianism in multiple ways.

The causes Unitarians supported were shared by others. Britons supporting liberty of the press, free trade, and parliamentary reform comprise the second major group of Rammohun’s admirers. Chapters 6 and 7 use the career of James Silk Buckingham to explain how the Bengali reformer became a household name in reform circles. With a knack for turning causes into career opportunities, Buckingham made an improbable journey from smuggler-sailor to member of parliament. He developed ties with influential politicians and merchants in Calcutta, London, and provincial towns across Britain. As radical journalist and then popular lecturer, Buckingham introduced Rammohun’s progressive political views to Whigs and radical reformers. In turn these groups, as we shall see, used the famous Bengali to advance their own agendas.

As with his religious convictions, Rammohun’s political opinions interested people across the spectrum. Tories and defenders of the East India Company were keen to engage him in conversation or claim him for their cause. Their contested readings of Rammohun’s views on Indian administration are taken up in chapter 7. Conservatives and reformer alike found compelling Rammohun’s mastery of British political culture. Sir Edward Hyde East was chastened for voting against the reform bill, but impressed enough by Rammohun’s arguments to invite the Bengali to his home. Already in 1817 George Fitzclarence was struck by Rammohun’s familiarity with British politics, especially Whig arguments against a standing army. What intrigued Fitzclarence in Calcutta disappointed Henry Crabb Robinson in London. Hoping to learn something about India at a soirée, Robinson discovered that the guest of honor was all too versed in European affairs: “[Rammohun] talks English very well—Better than most foreigners[.] Unfortunately he talked on European politics so that he did not in his conversation show any Oriental sentiment or opinion. Not a word that might not have been said by a European.” Lord Ellenborough found this intolerable in an Indian he believed coached by others. “They have given him [Rammohun] radical notions on English affairs,” he wrote in an 1831 diary entry, “which it is ridiculous in him to talk about, & when he began I took my leave. He is great for an Indian, I dare say, but he would be nothing particular as an European.”
The Tory and former president of the Board of Control was in a small minority. Facility with Western ideas—and the stamina to spend hours at social gatherings demonstrating it—was a major reason that Rammohun was the lion of the season, as one contemporary put it. Other factors were at play. Women form the third significant group of Rammohun’s admirers. In Manchester, crowds of female workers sought to embrace or shake hands with him. Chapter 5 explores the middle-class women—many of them Unitarians—who were no less enamored. Crucial here were the overlapping campaigns against slavery and sati, particularly the explicit appeals to women discussed in chapter 4. These appeals encouraged women to take on new public and even political roles. They also brought attention to Rammohun as a critic of widow burning who disputed religious sanctions for the practice and highlighted socioeconomic conditions that encouraged it. This analysis and the attraction it held for early feminists is taken up in chapter 5.

* * *

Several structural developments made it possible for a traditionally educated Bengali to become a celebrity on three continents. One was the transition to a print-based public arena in colonial India. C. A. Bayly has demonstrated that a precolonial world of circulating manuscripts and oral disputations gave way in nineteenth-century India to the print culture already shaping public discussion in the West. Lithography assisted this process by simplifying the printing of newspapers and books in the many scripts of India. Rammohun illuminates the transition. Chapter 2 traces his emergence as a religious controversialist skilled in conventional forms of debate but open to the new possibilities of print. Attacked for challenging religious orthodoxy, Rammohun responded to critics in speech and in print. He met some opponents in face-to-face debates in private homes, and a few critics addressed him in circulating manuscripts. But he and the defenders of sanatana dharma conducted much of their dispute on the printed page. Rammohun testified to this, writing that the printed page allowed him to oppose “the advocates of idolatry with still greater boldness.”

Availing myself of the art of printing now established in India, I published various works and pamphlets against their errors, in the native and foreign languages. This raised such a feeling against me that I was at last deserted by every person except two or three Scotch friends.

Compensation for isolation at home came in the form of adulation outside India. Sending his English-language Vedanta essays abroad, as chapter 2 demonstrates, was a calculated effort to win support overseas that paid handsome dividends. It created a new readership and set him on the path to international fame. Had he remained wedded to circulating manuscripts and oral debates, this could scarcely have happened.

Contemporary journalism practices are also important to this story. Early nineteenth-century periodicals were mostly one-man shows. Most editor-proprietors employed few assistants and even fewer reporters. The universal practice was to supplement original copy—editorials or letters from correspondents—with recycled material from other sources. News, reviews, scandal, gossip, and other types of information thus quickly circulated from one periodical to another. This is how the phrase “the celebrated Rammohun Roy” became a cliché on both sides of the Atlantic.
Also vital to Rammohun’s transnational renown were networks of communication fashioned by empire. Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper identify the circulation of people, texts, and ideas as a central feature of modern empires. The routes traversed were often more than a simple circuit between metropole and colony. Information and people crossed multiple national and imperial boundaries with ease and frequency. Rammohun’s fame exemplifies this. By the early 1820s he was known on three continents because of the transmission of texts by and about him that followed a triangular circuit linking Bengal, Europe, and North America. As chapter 2 explains, his first English pamphlet—*Translation of an Abridgment of the Vedanta* (1816)—was republished in extracts or its entirety in at least four different venues in Britain and Germany within a year of its initial release. Reviews and commentaries in sundry periodicals followed. Three of his subsequent Vedanta pamphlets tell a similar tale. Originally published in Calcutta in 1816–1817, copies of each made their way to North America, Britain, and most likely France and Germany too. In 1818 and 1819 they were favorably reviewed in several London journals and in the New York–based *North American Review*. A copy of the last review circulated back to Calcutta, where Buckingham reprinted it in the *Calcutta Journal*. An advertisement in the *Revue Encyclopédique* indicates that the three Calcutta pamphlets received favorable attention at this time in France.

The process was repeated with Rammohun’s Unitarian and anti-sati tracts. Missionaries were involved here, as they were with the diffusion of his Vedanta pamphlets. Jeffrey Cox reminds us that the development of a British missionary movement after 1700 is part of the story of empire, even though the relationship between the two was complex and conflicted. This movement had its own motives and methods for circulating information concerning Rammohun among Western audiences. As chapters 4 and 5 suggest, this was most telling in the domestic mobilization effort against sati and the special appeal to women to rescue their sisters overseas. Also important was the propaganda value of a celebrity convert, which led first Baptists and then Unitarians to publicize Rammohun’s interest in Christianity. The pages that follow will make apparent why Unitarians were instrumental in spreading Rammohun’s name among the religiously minded. Although less interested in institutional missionary work than other denominations, Unitarians were adept at diffusing their version of Christianity abroad, as the examples of Thomas Jefferson and Rammohun demonstrate. Their success did not cause the orthodox to abandon interest. The *Missionary Register* continued to mention Rammohun long after it became obvious that he would never convert to orthodox Christianity. Famous for his religiosity, Rammohun remained of interest to transatlantic audiences awakened to possibilities of propagating the gospels overseas. The modern missionary movement and the global networks it created are factors in the story of how this Bengali became a transnational celebrity.
Chapter 1

The Unitarians

The contribution of Unitarianism to modern British society is well known. Unitarians were active first in the fight for liberty of conscience and later for dismantling the confessional state. In the course of this struggle most Unitarians came to champion freedom of the press, the civil rights of religious minorities, and, in the Victorian era, a more secular society. The denomination was also prone to political and social radicalism. Many members supported the colonists during the American war of independence, and prominent Unitarians were imprisoned or hounded out of Britain during the French Revolution. Others opposed slavery, supported the animal rights movement, or promoted female education when these causes were yet unpopular. Unitarians also figure large in the making of provincial middle-class culture. In the 1770s and 1780s Unitarians were members of a new merchant-gentry elite that dominated towns such as Hull, Leeds, and Wakefield. Early in the next century they wielded considerable economic power in cities such as Liverpool, Bristol, and Manchester, where they were conspicuous for civic leadership and political influence.

Even unsympathetic scholarship attributes great influence to the denomination. In challenging conventional interpretations of the 1832 Reform Act, J. C. D. Clark offers a back-handed compliment to the Unitarians. The great age of reform, he argues, did not result from underlying socioeconomic and political pressures associated with emergent industrialism and parliamentary corruption. Instead, heterodox thinkers paved the way for the English revolution of 1828–1832 by challenging the theological underpinnings of the established order. According to Clark, the ideas and values holding English society together were undermined by radicals espousing various strands of anti-Trinitarianism. Among the latter were John Locke, Joseph Priestley, and Richard Price.

Other religious groups made similar contributions to British society in this period. Quakers, for instance, were pioneers in the antislavery movement, important social reformers, early advocates of women’s equality, and prominent members of the provincial business class. Yet, the Unitarian contribution is noteworthy. The denomination wielded an influence disproportionate to its numbers. The 1851 religious census revealed some 250 Unitarian chapels in England and Wales, with barely 50,000 congregants. For comparison, records from over 34,000 religious buildings were returned, listing some 7.2 million worshippers; of these 52 percent were Anglicans and the remainder non-Anglicans. In England proper, Unitarians thus represented a mere 0.2 percent of
the total population. Although this was late in the season for Unitarianism, it is doubtful that in its heyday the denomination represented a substantially larger percentage of the church-going public.

A distinguishing mark of Unitarianism was its indeterminate, shifting nature. The very name “Unitarian” defies easy definition. Hostile commentators cite the traditional articles of faith that Unitarians commonly rejected, such as the divinity of Jesus and the doctrines of atonement and eternal punishment. Sympathetic observers list the denomination’s leading principles, including freedom of conscience, unrestricted use of reason in religion, and a spirit of tolerance. Both attempts at definition are useful. For instance, while true, the charge of anti-Trinitarianism leveled at the Unitarians masks important doctrinal differences regarding the nature and mission of Jesus. Such differences could be accommodated because the Unitarian “movement has throughout its whole course strenuously resisted any attempt at dogmatic fixity, has made reason its ultimate court of appeal, and has normally been hospitable to changes and restatements in its forms of thought.”

This flexibility drove orthodox opponents mad. To them, Unitarianism was a halfway house on the road to heresy, atheism, or infidelity, and its proponents “followers of Mahomet, Jews, Atheists, Anti-Christ, children of the devil,” and so on. There was a small germ of truth in some of these epithets. Unitarians were open to other religions. In 1682 two London anti-Trinitarians presented an address to a Moroccan emissary, hoping “to foster friendly relations between Unitarians and Mohammedans,” and nineteenth-century Muslim visitors often attended Unitarian chapel services. By the latter period some congregations drew Jewish visitors and converts, and key Unitarians supported the early Jewish emancipation campaigns. William J. Fox lectured in 1818 that Christianity was a subset of a worldwide system of Unitarianism that included Jews, Muslims, and philosophers in the ancient world and across Asia. The charge of harboring infidels and subversives was not completely off-target either. Radical millenarians prophesying restoration of the Jewish homeland as a prelude to revolution at home found inspiration in Unitarian ideas and homes in Unitarian chapels at the turn of the nineteenth century. In the turbulent years after 1815, Spencean ultraradicals sought refuge from prosecution by taking out licenses as Unitarian chapels.

Critics failed, however, to see a fundamental principle at work. Unitarianism was a gathering place for the spiritually curious, homeless, or persecuted. It might be considered a big tent capable of accommodating unconventional, unpopular, or minority religious opinions. At times, the tent could be used for shelter by political revolutionaries employing the language of radical Christian discourse. This was possible because, as John Seed notes, most Unitarians believed not in “any specific theological tenets but [in] absolute doctrinal individualism,” that is, in “the right of every individual to judge for himself in matters of religion.” They prided themselves on the heterogeneous nature of their congregations. William J. Fox put it this way in 1830: “Let sects enforce uniformity, and chain the mouths and the minds of their members—it is for Unitarians to cherish independence of thought by the free expression of individual opinions.” As another chimed in, “[t]here is more individuality of mind . . . and therefore more diversity of opinion among us than in any other denomination.” Thanks to this attitude, Unitarianism became Christianity’s permeable boundary zone, a religious space that individuals holding divergent beliefs might briefly enter or permanently occupy while claiming a Christian identity, however contested that identity might be.

The import of this becomes clear with Rammohun Roy. As the next chapters demonstrate, during the 1820s many Anglo-Americans thought he had converted to Christianity because he embraced Unitarianism. This interpretation has its doubters.
Some argue that Rammohun remained always a Hindu reformer, others that his was but a brief flirtation with Unitarian Christianity. The focus here will be on the fluid nature of Unitarian identity and its function as a permeable border. Rammohun’s adoption of that identity need not entail rejection of his rational Hinduism nor need it be permanent for us to join contemporaries in believing that he too found Unitarianism a congenial resting place.15

That resting place had a political significance. Unitarians were at the forefront in dismantling the confessional state; they had a long history of social, cultural, and political influence in provincial towns; and they enjoyed the confidence of Whig leaders. This meant that his apparent conversion provided Rammohun with an entry point into an established world of (mostly) respected middle-class reformers. The boundary he crossed, in other words, was political as well as religious. This is made plain by the fact that some Britons thought Rammohun a suitable candidate for parliament. This imagining of a turban-wearing Bengali MP makes perfect sense if one keeps in mind the Unitarian contribution to the making of modern Britain and Rammohun’s embrace of that fluid entity called Unitarianism.

Rammohun’s extraordinary reception in Britain is also more intelligible in the light of his crossover into British Christianity’s nebulous borderlands. Many of those most eager to meet him were interested in his views on Christianity. This intense interest in Rammohun’s personal theology resulted from his controversy with Joshua Marshman. Such debates had become a familiar part of the intellectual landscape of Britain since the late seventeenth century. Now, Britons were fascinated by the spectacle of an Indian exegete making what many—and not just Unitarians—believed to be a skillful case against the Trinity, employing both familiar and new arguments. Adding to their fascination was the idea that Rammohun was a neutral umpire from outside Christianity who could adjudicate bitter disputes about the meaning of the Bible. In this regard, Rammohun’s fame sheds fresh light on British religion in the era of the Reform Act. If the future belonged to evangelicalism both in church and chapel, Rational Dissent was not yet a spent force. And, if secular tendencies were destined to eclipse both, religious controversies remained an important feature of British intellectual life and those skilled in the genre still lauded.

* * *

The early history of Unitarianism is not our concern here.16 Heterodox developments in Britain during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries need not detain us long either. Arminian, Socinian, Arian, and Unitarian views flourished then, and the sheer diversity of ideas about such matters as the divinity of Jesus, original sin, eternal punishment, and atonement, created an intellectual ferment that made possible the openly Unitarian congregations that appeared after 1774. Vital during this formative phase were developments in biblical criticism and religious rationalism that became central features of Rational Dissent and its most lasting offshoot, Unitarianism.17 A defining feature of the Unitarians—freedom of conscience—can likewise be traced to this earlier period, as is the case with such corollaries as tolerance of religious diversity, opposition to state control of religion, and respect for those who doubt or change their religious opinions.18

The focus in this chapter is on a later period. The emergence and evolution of an organized British Unitarian movement in the half-century after 1774 needs to be traced if we are to understand how a colonial outsider became a transnational celebrity with access to the highest ranks of British society and politics. For Rammohun’s fame is
part of a larger story about revolutionary changes in religion and politics that mark the transition to the Victorian era.

Most accounts date the appearance of a permanent Unitarian organization in Britain to 1774, when Theophilus Lindsey opened the Essex Street Chapel in London. Like many of his first congregants, Lindsey was a refugee from the Church of England. He was part of a Cambridge rationalist tradition and had developed serious doubts about the Trinity during the 1760s. Convinced by a close reading of the Bible of the humanity of Jesus, Lindsey resigned his vicarage in 1773 and opened his avowedly Unitarian chapel in Essex Street the next year. “Widely known as a ‘Unitarian Christian,’” Lindsey’s success at defying laws designed to punish anti-Trinitarian views—particularly the 1689 Toleration and 1698 Blasphemy Acts—galvanized others. 19

Among those emboldened was Joseph Priestley, 20 who soon became the dominant figure in the movement. Priestley’s journey through the varieties of heterodoxy is indicative of a larger pattern of development among early Unitarians. Raised an orthodox Calvinist in the Independent tradition, he adopted Arian views while attending the Dissenting academy at Daventry. During the 1750s a careful reading of the Bible led him to reject the doctrine of atonement and develop critical views on St. Paul. From 1761 to 1767, Priestley was a tutor at Warrington academy, where heterodoxy reigned supreme. He then spent six years as minister of the influential Mill Hill Chapel in Leeds. During this period Priestley adopted views regarding the humanity of Jesus and the unity of God, associated then with Socinianism, but which he would popularize under the rubric of Unitarianism. In Leeds, he began publishing the influential religious tracts that transformed him into the most famous anti-Trinitarian advocate of the age. He also published political pamphlets siding with North American colonists and delineating the case for civil liberty for Dissenters.

His talent for political writing led to Priestley’s next change of address. On the recommendation of his Rational Dissenter friend, Richard Price, Priestley served the earl of Shelburne as librarian and literary companion from 1773 to 1780. This gained him access to the world of high politics and London society. In London, Priestley regularly attended the Essex Street Chapel and was a frequent dinner guest at the Lindsey home. He now began to promote the new name of Unitarian that Lindsey had adopted. After being called to the ministry at the New Meeting House in Birmingham in 1780, Priestley emerged as the intellectual voice of what had become a new denomination, publishing a series of important Unitarian works. He also engaged in an eight-year theological controversy with Samuel Horsley.

But the events of the 1790s ended Priestley’s career in Britain and nearly destroyed his fledgling denomination. Unitarians were champions of liberty and supported the American and French revolutions. Benjamin Franklin had intimate contact with Priestley, Lindsey, and Price, and sympathy for the French revolutionaries, even Napoleon, ran strong in Unitarian households. Most Unitarians were also antiwar throughout the entire two decades of conflict with France. 21 As British fears of revolution at home escalated into a frenzy of anti-Jacobinism, Unitarians were singled out as objects of public fury and government prosecution. In 1791 a Birmingham mob out to defend “Church and King” burned Priestley’s chapel and home, as well as other Unitarian buildings. Priestley was also burned in effigy many times, and he became the object of vicious cartoons and hate mail. After a brief spell in London, he emigrated to America in 1794. Other Unitarians were caught up in the hysteria as well. Several were jailed or transported for their unpopular political views. A few joined Priestley in exile. 22

Thomas Belsham assumed leadership of the denomination after Priestley’s departure. Belsham, son of an Independent minister, had trained to follow his father’s calling before
converting to Unitarianism. Encouraged by Priestley and Lindsey, Belsham formed the Unitarian Book Society in 1791 with the goal of promoting Unitarianism—which he defined as belief in “the simple humanity of Jesus Christ”—through the publication and distribution of books. A subsidiary purpose was to create a national network of support. Given the climate of opinion, this was crucial and the society spawned regional and local organizations. When Priestley left for America, Belsham succeeded him at his Hackney chapel. Eleven years later, Belsham was called to Lindsey’s pulpit, when the latter died. As minister of the prestigious Essex Street congregation, Belsham became the most visible representative of Unitarianism until his death in 1829. His most important work was editing a revised version of the New Testament, published by the Unitarian Book Society in 1808. *The New Testament, in an Improved Version*, as the next chapter explores, used recent biblical scholarship to call into question key passages. Although Belsham deviated from Unitarian tradition in wishing to exclude Arians, his leadership and organizational abilities were vital to Unitarianism’s resurgence after the dark days of Pitt’s repressions.

Others assisted in that resurgence. One was Robert Aspland, a General Baptist convert to Unitarianism. Aspland succeeded Belsham at Hackney, where he ministered to Priestley’s former congregation for over forty years. Son of a village shopkeeper, Aspland supported missionary outreach to the lower classes. This was true of other Baptists and Methodists who found their way to Unitarian chapels. Unitarianism, as we shall shortly see, was dominated by prosperous merchants and professionals. This group favored the philosophical discourse of Price and Priestley over the itinerant preaching of George Whitefield and John Wesley. The Unitarian Book Society catered to their views. Concerned to cast a broader net, Aspland joined with David Eaton—shoemaker, part-time minister, and Baptist-turned-Unitarian—and others in forming the Unitarian Fund in 1806. Stealing a chapter from the Methodists, the Fund hired popular ministers to traverse the country preaching to lower-class audiences. The most important of these was Richard Wright, another convert from the ranks of General Baptist ministers.

Aspland is also important in the history of Unitarian journalism. The growth of the British religious periodical press after 1760 gave rise to Priestley’s *Theological Repository*, perhaps the “first scholarly journal for speculative theology” in the land. It ran in two series (1769–1771 and 1784–1788). Other Unitarian journals soon appeared. One was founded and edited by William Vidler, a stone mason whose religious odyssey included stops at Congregationalism, Particular Baptism, Universalism, and Unitarianism. Besides stints as a minister and bookseller, Vidler edited the *Universalist’s Miscellany*, which, after converting to Unitarianism, he renamed the *Universal Theological Magazine*. Aspland purchased the magazine from Vidler and in 1806 began publishing it as the *Monthly Repository of Theology and General Literature*. Over the next twenty-one years, Aspland’s journal provided Unitarians with news and information regarding the denomination, most of which was supplied by subscribers. It offered learned articles on doctrinal matters, religious history, and theological controversies. The *Monthly Repository* also printed miscellaneous essays on politics, literature, and foreign affairs. As we shall see, British Unitarians came to know of Rammohun Roy in its pages. From 1827 to 1831, the journal was edited by William J. Fox on behalf of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association. In 1832 Fox purchased the *Monthly Repository* and transformed it into a general review. Aspland, meanwhile, continued producing another Unitarian journal—the *Christian Reformer*—that was aimed at lower-class audiences. He edited this journal from 1815 until shortly before his death in 1845. After Fox began appealing to nonsectarian audiences in 1832, Aspland’s *Christian Reformer* replaced his former journal as the leading Unitarian periodical.
Aspland and Fox did more than edit important journals. Below we will see that Aspland was a civil rights activist who played a significant role in the campaign to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts. Fox emerged in the post-Napoleonic wars period as the denomination’s most popular preacher and writer. A convert from humble Independent origins, Fox’s oratory skills earned him fame both within and outside the ranks of Unitarians, as did his defense of the principles of free speech and religious toleration. In 1825 Fox helped bring into being the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, an amalgamation of the Unitarian Book Society, the Unitarian Fund, and other organizations. He too became active in politics, first on behalf of Unitarians, and later with an eye on other issues. His fame as one of the Anti-Corn Law League’s most popular lecturers helped him in 1847 win election to parliament, where he sat for most of the next fifteen years. But for a scandal surrounding his unhappy marriage and subsequent affair with Eliza Flower, Fox would have become Unitarianism’s most important figure after Priestley.

The denominational backgrounds of key figures such as Lindsey, Priestley, Belsham, and Aspland testify to the diverse nature of Unitarianism. A similar picture emerges when one looks at entire congregations and ordinary congregants. Most Unitarian congregations began their history as English Presbyterians, but some drifted over from the General Baptists. There were also isolated cases of Methodist congregations moving en masse to Unitarianism, and there was that one notable London congregation of ex-Anglicans. Individuals were attracted to the movement from almost all Protestant denominations.

What held this diverse group together was a fundamental respect for freedom of conscience. Most of them likely doubted or denied the divinity and atonement of Jesus, the ideas of original sin and eternal punishment, and other features of orthodox Christianity. But their diverse sectarian origins, and the long history of dissident views in British Protestantism, led to considerable differences of theological opinion. After the 1719 Salters’ Hall conference, the right of individuals to interpret the Bible according to their own conscience became a defining feature of British Dissent, and the Unitarians openly embodied this. Opposed to creeds and doctrinal uniformity, the Unitarians were defined by a strong sense of “religious individualism” that resulted in heterogeneous congregations. One critic adverted early on to the phenomenon, complaining in 1732 how some of their ministers admit all sorts of persons that will but say they are Christians into their communion, be they Arminians, Calvinists, Freethinkers, Arians, or Socinians, it is all one to them, and their pulpits too are ready to receive ministers of the same make.

The Unitarians of a later day were no less tolerant and diverse. In an age of state-sponsored religion, their congregations served as safe-havens for disparate groups and individuals, including “[r]efugees from Methodism, radical Baptist groups, isolated Jewish families, small groups of ‘Free-thinking Christians’ and other religious dissenters.” This led William Wilberforce to lament that, because it had no fixed doctrines, Unitarianism was in effect a resting place for all kinds of heresy.

The Presbyterian origins of the movement explain the regional pattern of Unitarianism and the social composition of most congregations. From the start, Presbyterianism flourished in market towns, especially in the midlands and north England, and there was a clear connection to the cloth trade, where traditions of religious dissent extended back to the Lollards. While weavers, artisans, wool-combers, and others from the lower classes became Presbyterians, most early eighteenth-century congregations were dominated by
wealthy merchants, who provided funds and managed affairs. This pattern was more pronounced by Priestley’s day, as gentry membership dwindled and the Presbyterian-Unitarians failed to keep pace with the evangelicalism that was sweeping the lower classes into other denominations. By the early nineteenth century, the dearth of working-class congregants in many Unitarian chapels was as noteworthy as was the dominating role played by prosperous merchants, bankers, and professionals. The general impression, in short, is of a wealthy, middle-class denomination.

This needs to be qualified. There was a lower-class strand of British Unitarianism dating back to its earliest days. John Biddle, the “Father of English Unitarianism,” was born in 1615 or 1616 to “a tailor of moderate means.” In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, large proportions of many Presbyterian congregations were tailors, shoemakers, and weavers; and impoverished weavers, along with unskilled laborers, continued to comprise a significant proportion of some Unitarian congregations in the 1830s. Thanks to the Unitarian Fund and Richard Wright, there were a few predominantly working-class congregations in the early nineteenth century. Popular radicalism from the age of Paine through that of the Chartists had a Unitarian dimension as well. Millenarian philosemites exemplified this, as did Robert Wedderburn, the mulatto sailor, tailor, Unitarian minister, and Spencean ultraradical. In addition, Unitarianism was notably lacking in appeal to members of the industrial bourgeoisie. Despite the growth of a large class of manufacturers, often in areas of traditional Presbyterian-Unitarian strength, the denomination attracted limited support from this important new economic group. Although there were prominent Unitarian factory owners (particularly in Manchester), more typical of the denomination’s elite in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century were merchants, bankers, and professionals.

The most influential Unitarians were clearly “old” bourgeoisie flourishing in provincial market towns as had their Presbyterian forerunners. Their influence extended beyond the walls of their chapels, as they helped shape an emerging middle-class culture during the crucial period 1770–1850. A complex convergence of religious, socioeconomic, and political factors explains this larger influence.

Unitarians contributed to the making of middle-class attitudes in multiple ways. They opposed Puritan asceticism with a justification of worldly success and evangelical otherworldliness with the idea of promoting social improvement. The virtuous Christian, Unitarians believed, prospered in this world because divine providence rewarded frugality, hard work, and the application of reason to the problems facing humans.

Their faith in God-given reason encompassed science and instrumental reason. The academies that Unitarians attended encouraged a scientific temper. Some, such as Priestley, made distinguished contributions to scientific knowledge. Others were simply noteworthy for promoting science in the pulpit or pursuing it as an avocation or profession. A good example of the latter is Dr. John Aikin, son of a Warrington academy tutor and student of Priestley. An avid botanist, Aikin practiced and tutored in medicine, as well as authored popular books on various subjects. He also edited the Monthly Magazine, which, during the 1790s, became the most widely circulated periodical in Britain by serving as the national voice of middle-class Dissenters. The original purpose of the magazine was to disseminate information about advances in science and the arts; this concern for useful knowledge led Aikin to support reading rooms for the benefit of the lower classes. Aikin remained a part of the inner circle of his old tutor, who provided theological justification for such secular intellectual pursuits. “Christ came ‘to bless mankind,’” Priestley proclaimed. This meant that Christianity was “a means to an