

## READING CHILDREN'S BOOKS IN LATE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY DISSENTING FAMILIES\*

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**ABSTRACT.** *The eighteenth-century commodifications of childhood and the sciences overlapped in the production of science books for children. This article examines a children's book written by two members of the Unitarian circle around Warrington Academy in the 1790s, and contrasts it with a Church of England work. The analysis reveals the extent to which religious differences could affect parental attitudes to the natural world, reason, the uses of the sciences, and the appropriate way to read and discuss books. Although the sciences were admitted as suitable for children, the issues of the subjects to be chosen, the purposes they were intended for, and the pedagogical methods by which they were presented, were still contested. This article also goes beyond the usual studies of children's books by focusing on non-fiction, and by emphasizing readers and use, rather than authors or publishers. Yet producing a history of reading based entirely on actual readers will be exceedingly difficult, so this article suggests an alternative, by combining accounts of actual readers' experiences with attitudes towards practices like orality and discussion.*

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Kitty to her Mama:

As I suppose I must learn all these things some time or other, I thought you would like to have me begin them soon, for I have often heard you say that children cannot be set too early about what is necessary for them to do.<sup>1</sup>

Through a variety of lectures, demonstrations, books, and periodicals, the sciences in the eighteenth century became part of a 'public culture'.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, they joined other commodities which reached wider audiences through the increasing commercialization of society.<sup>3</sup> Books written specifically

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<sup>1</sup> John Aikin and Anna Letitia Barbauld, *Evenings at home; or the juvenile budget opened: consisting of a variety of miscellaneous pieces for the instruction and amusement of youth* (1st edn, 6 vols., London, 1792–6), II, pp. 85–6.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Stewart, *The rise of public science: rhetoric, technology and natural philosophy in Newtonian Britain, 1660–1750* (Cambridge, 1992); Jan Golinski, *Science as public culture: chemistry and Enlightenment in Britain, 1760–1820* (Cambridge, 1992); Roy Porter, 'Science, provincial culture and public opinion in Enlightenment England', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 3 (1980), pp. 20–41; Steven Shapin, 'The audience for science in eighteenth-century Edinburgh', *History of Science*, 12 (1974), pp. 95–117.

<sup>3</sup> N. McKendrick, J. Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, eds., *The birth of a consumer society: the commercialization of eighteenth-century England* (Bloomington, IN, 1982); John Brewer, *The pleasures of the imagination: English culture in the eighteenth century* (London, 1997).

for children were one of these developments, and it was not long before children's books which dealt with scientific subjects began to appear.<sup>4</sup> The existence of these books show us that the sciences had become sufficiently accepted in polite society that they could be regarded as suitable for children. When these children became adults and started attending lectures or reading books on the sciences, they, unlike the previous generation, approached them with experiences gleaned from the reading of their childhood. Children's science books, therefore, were not only indicative of the society in which they were produced, but formative for the next generation.

While there is a large literature on the history of children's books, relatively little of it has been concerned with books on the sciences, or, indeed, with non-fiction more generally.<sup>5</sup> Such 'non-literary' books are seen to be the preserve of historians of textbooks, yet these historians tend to begin their story in the early nineteenth century, and are primarily concerned with books used in schools, rather than the 'instructive and amusing' books used in the home.<sup>6</sup> Recent attention from scholars interested in the involvement of women in the sciences has focused on some of these books, especially botanical ones, and we now know much more about how children's books were important to their authors.<sup>7</sup> Our understanding of readers, on the other hand, is still limited, due to the difficulty of finding out who read what, when, and how, let alone what readers took away from the experience.<sup>8</sup>

This article suggests a way of addressing readership which makes use of accounts of actual reading where possible, but supplements them with other approaches. Close readings of the text and its format suggest how the authors intended their books to be read, and what messages about the role of the sciences they wished to convey. Only in a few cases can we know whether these

<sup>4</sup> J. H. Plumb, 'The new world of children', in McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, eds., *Birth of consumer society*, pp. 286–315; James A. Secord, 'Newton in the nursery: Tom Telescope and the philosophy of tops and balls, 1761–1838', *History of Science*, 23 (1985), pp. 127–51; F. J. Harvey Darton, *Children's books in England: five centuries of social life* (3rd edn, Cambridge, 1982). But contrast Darton's account of the late eighteenth century with Alan Richardson, *Literature, education, and romanticism: reading as social practice, 1780–1832* (Cambridge, 1994), ch. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Notable exceptions include M. V. Jackson, *Engines of instruction, mischief and magic: children's literature in England from its beginnings to 1839* (Aldershot, 1989); Greg Myers, 'Science for women and children: the dialogue of popular science in the nineteenth century', in John Christie and Sally Shuttleworth, eds., *Nature transfigured: science and literature, 1700–1900* (Manchester, 1989), pp. 171–200; Secord, 'Newton in the nursery'; and Harriet Ritvo, 'Learning from animals: natural history for children in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', *Children's Literature*, 13 (1985), pp. 72–93.

<sup>6</sup> Chris Stray, 'Paradigms lost: towards a historical sociology of the textbooks', in Staffan Selander, ed., *Textbooks and educational media: collected papers, 1991–1995* (International Association for Research on Textbooks and Educational Media, 1997), p. 59.

<sup>7</sup> Ann Shteir, *Cultivating women, cultivating science: Flora's daughters and botany in England, 1760–1860* (London, 1996); Mitzi Myers, 'Impeccable governesses, rational dames, and moral mothers: Mary Wollstonecraft and the female tradition in Georgian children's literature', *Children's Literature*, 14 (1986), pp. 31–59.

<sup>8</sup> James Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadmor, eds., *The practice and representation of reading in England* (Cambridge, 1996).

intentions were manifested in actual readers, but by combining this with material on reading practices and attitudes to the sciences in the period, we can assess whether those intentions were more or less likely to be carried out. The core of this article is an examination of a Unitarian children's book from the late eighteenth century. By comparing it with contemporary books, particularly one by a Church of England author, we can see how the suitability of the sciences for children, their uses, and the appropriate pedagogical methods were contested issues in the decades around 1800.

*Evenings at home; or the juvenile budget opened: consisting of a variety of miscellaneous pieces for the instruction and amusement of youth* (6 volumes, 1792–6) was written by John Aikin (1747–1822) and his sister Anna Letitia (Aikin) Barbauld (1743–1825), and remained in print until 1915. Barbauld wrote only two-thirds of the first two volumes while Aikin wrote the remainder, but historians have tended to attribute the work to Barbauld, who is the better-known children's author.<sup>9</sup> As the children of the theology tutor at the dissenting academy at Warrington, Aikin and Barbauld came to know members not only of the academy, but of the Lunar Society and the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society, including Joseph Priestley, Erasmus Darwin, Josiah Wedgwood, Thomas Percival, and Richard and Maria Edgeworth.<sup>10</sup> Aikin trained as a surgeon, and later took an MD at Leiden. He taught chemistry and anatomy at Warrington for a time, but moved to Great Yarmouth to pursue his medical career. His sister married a dissenting minister, and set up a school for boys with him at Palgrave, Suffolk, and they adopted one of her brother's five children. Both Aikin and Barbauld became well-known authors, writing on politics and literature, as well as for children.<sup>11</sup> Their work will be contrasted with *An easy introduction to the knowledge of nature, and reading the Holy Scriptures, adapted to the capacities of children* (1780), which was written by Sarah (Kirby)

<sup>9</sup> Lucy Aikin, ed., *The works of Anna Laetitia Barbauld, with a memoir* (2 vols., London, 1825), note to pp. xxxvi–xxxvii.

<sup>10</sup> On this group, see Robert E. Schofield, *The Lunar Society of Birmingham: a social history of provincial science and industry in eighteenth-century England* (Oxford, 1963); Arnold Thackray, 'Natural knowledge in cultural context: the Manchester model', *American Historical Review*, 79 (1974), pp. 672–709; Maureen McNeil, *Under the banner of science: Erasmus Darwin and his age* (Manchester, 1987); Isaac Kramnick, 'Children's literature and bourgeois ideology: observations on culture and industrial capitalism in the later eighteenth century', in Perez Zagorin, ed., *Culture and politics from puritanism to the Enlightenment* (London, 1980), pp. 203–40; Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, rebels and reactionaries: English literature and its background, 1760–1830* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 32–3; John Money, *Experience and identity: Birmingham and the West Midlands, 1760–1800* (Manchester, 1977); and Knud Haakonssen, ed., *Enlightenment and religion: rational dissent in eighteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> On Aikin, see Lucy Aikin, *Memoir of John Aikin, M.D., with a selection of his miscellaneous pieces, biographical, moral and critical* (2 vols., London, 1823); and Philip Hemery Le Breton, ed., *Memoirs, miscellanies and letters of the late Lucy Aikin: including those addressed to the Rev. Dr. Channing from 1826 to 1842* (London, 1864); on Barbauld, see Lucy Aikin, ed., *Works of Anna Laetitia Barbauld*; Anna Letitia Le Breton, ed., *Memoir of Mrs. Barbauld, including letters and notices of her family and friends* (London, 1874); and Betsy Rodgers, *Georgian chronicles: Mrs. Barbauld and her family* (London, 1958).

Trimmer (1741–1810), and remained in print until the late 1820s.<sup>12</sup> Trimmer's father had taught perspective drawing to the prince of Wales (later George III), and was appointed clerk of works at the royal palace at Kew. Young Sarah had access to fashionable circles, and is said to have greatly impressed Dr Johnson with her knowledge of Milton. After her marriage to James Trimmer, a prosperous brick merchant, she continued to live near Kew, where she brought up twelve children, teaching most of them herself, and helped to organize Sunday schools and schools of industry.<sup>13</sup>

Trimmer and the Aikins were similar in so far as they were well educated, both their fathers had reputations for being well read in divinity, they derived their incomes from the professions and trade rather than land, and were actively involved with educating both their own children, and, through their books and teaching, other people's children.<sup>14</sup> The main differences were religious, for while Trimmer, as a staunch member of the Church of England, could be invited to Court to advise Queen Charlotte on Sunday schools, Aikin and Barbauld, as Unitarians, had no access to such circles. Aikin was forced to leave Yarmouth in 1794 amid the reaction to the Terror, when his views came to be seen as radical. He and Barbauld supported tolerance in religious matters (and were bitterly disappointed at the 1790 failure to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts), and they disliked what they perceived as the bigotry of the Church of England, and especially of evangelicals within it. Trimmer did not move in evangelical circles, and seems to have placed more emphasis on God the Father and Creator than on Christ the Redeemer, but she indubitably took her religion very seriously.<sup>15</sup> She was strict about keeping the Sabbath, and she was concerned to help the neighbourhood poor through home visits and Sunday school provision for their children. Her memorialist recorded her thoughts on Unitarianism by saying that 'she used every effort in her power to counteract opinions which she regarded as so erroneous'.<sup>16</sup> These religious differences are central to understanding their different approaches to the sciences.

## I

In its original format, *Evenings at home* contained ninety-nine short pieces, in a variety of genres, divided into thirty chapters called 'evenings'. The stories

<sup>12</sup> Sarah Trimmer, *An easy introduction to the knowledge of nature, and reading the Holy Scriptures, adapted to the capacities of children* [1780] (8th edn, London, 1793).

<sup>13</sup> The main account is Sarah Trimmer, *Some account of the life and writings of Mrs. Trimmer, with original letters, and meditations and prayers selected from her journal* (London, 1814), though D. M. Yarde, *Sarah Trimmer of Brentford and her children, with some of her early writings* (Hounslow, 1990), has some interesting material on her family.

<sup>14</sup> On family life, see L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family fortunes: men and women of the English middle class, 1780–1850* (London, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> Historians of children's literature frequently assume Trimmer to be an evangelical. I believe Knickerbocker is correct to challenge this, Driss Richard Knickerbocker, 'The popular religious tract in England, 1790–1830' (Ph.D. thesis, Oxford University, 1981), p. 214.

<sup>16</sup> Trimmer, *Life of Mrs Trimmer*, p. 93.

were in no apparent order, and were supposed to resemble the sequence which might have resulted from the random choosing of papers from a box. For example, the fourteenth evening starts with a conversation between Eliza and her mother, promoting presence of mind in adversity, followed by a catchy poem about the disasters that befell a boy who persuaded his father to let him drive the gig, which is followed by a dialogue explaining why an apple falls, and the evening ends with a fable on nature and education.<sup>17</sup> *Evenings at home* thus contains a variety of both subject and genre which was unusual in children's books. Thomas Percival's collection of moral tales, *A father's instructions* (1775), also opted for the miscellaneous approach, but most writers shared Thomas Day's fear that stories collected without an order would be confusing.<sup>18</sup> Both Trimmer's *An easy introduction* and the Quaker Priscilla Wakefield's *Mental improvement* (1794–7) used the format of a series of conversations between a single set of characters to provide an underlying coherent story.<sup>19</sup> *Evenings at home* and *A father's instructions* used several sets of characters, and made no attempt to connect them in a single story line. That such variety appeared in two books by Unitarians, yet was rare in children's books generally, is not coincidental.

The introduction to *Evenings at home* acknowledged its 'promiscuous' arrangement, but thought that 'this will prove more agreeable than a methodical arrangement', and the Edgeworths noted approvingly in their *Practical education* (1798) that 'the mixture of moral and scientific lessons is happily managed so as to relieve the attention'.<sup>20</sup> 'Promiscuity' thus encouraged effective learning by preventing boredom. Although it would almost certainly have appeared so to a child, the arrangement was not entirely random. Occasional dialogues have parts I and II, while some of Harry and George's conversations with their tutor, and those between Lucy and her father, refer to previous discussions, showing that though the narrative is fragmented, it has a chronological order. The effect is that, unlike a fictional child with a box of papers, the reader of the book was not free to dip in and choose his stories at random. The randomization had been done by the authors, and fixed in print. A gradual progression in difficulty demonstrates the authority of the writer as teacher, as well as story-teller, and it is disguised, and thus made more effective, by the overall lack of subject order in the book.

The variety also allowed a wide range of subjects to be introduced, or, as the

<sup>17</sup> Aikin and Barbauld, *Evenings at home*, III, pp. 97–129.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Percival, *A father's instructions; consisting of moral tales, fables and reflections; designed to promote the love of virtue, and a taste for knowledge, and an early acquaintance with the works of nature* [1775] (4th edn, London, 1779); Thomas Day, *The history of Sandford and Merton, a work for the use of children* [1783–9] (4th edn, 3 vols., London, 1787), preface, pp. vi–vii.

<sup>19</sup> Priscilla Wakefield, *Mental improvement: or, the beauties and wonders of nature and art* [1794–7] (East Lancing, MI, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> Aikin and Barbauld, *Evenings at home*, I, p. 2; Maria Edgeworth and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, *Essays on practical education* [1798] (2 vols., London, 1815), I, p. 435. Also I, p. 68.

Edgeworths put it, ‘the mind is opened to extensive views’.<sup>21</sup> With such constant changes of topic, no single subject could be dealt with in great detail, but Aikin argued that giving young children a broad overview of many areas of knowledge was more important than giving them a complete education in a necessarily limited area.<sup>22</sup> *Evenings at home* thus exemplified Aikin’s ideal early education by being ‘a varied and extensive plan, comprising many changes of discipline, and embracing a large field of instruction’.<sup>23</sup>

Aikin and Barbauld, in common with other Unitarians, saw education as a way of improving society and expressed this explicitly in the epilogue to *Evenings at home*:

May wisdom’s seeds in every mind,  
Fit soil and careful culture find;  
Each generous plant with vigour shoot,  
And kindly ripen into fruit!  
Hope of the world, the *rising* race,  
May heav’n with fostering love embrace,  
And turning to a whiter page,  
Commence with them a *better* age!  
An age of light and joy, which we,  
Alas! In promise only see.<sup>24</sup>

As the analogy of the seeds ripening into fruit suggests, this improvement is not revolutionary, but is to be built gradually on existing society. The epilogue is typical of the desire for personal spiritual, as well as practical social, improvement which can be found in many children’s books of the time, including both *An easy introduction* and *Evenings at home*.<sup>25</sup> However, while Trimmer’s work urged the importance of religion before everything else, and of practically useful skills before fashionable accomplishments, *Evenings at home* went further in recommending serious education for girls, promoting science and manufactures, arguing against war, and rank-based distinctions, and suggesting a moral code of conduct based on reason.

Aikin and Barbauld believed that girls needed to learn practical house-keeping skills, because ‘the arts of housewifery should be regarded as professional to the woman who intends to become a wife’, but that they should also have a broader education, in many ways similar to that received by boys.<sup>26</sup> The main difference was that while some men might use their knowledge of science, mathematics, or languages in their professional lives, women (and non-

<sup>21</sup> Edgeworth and Edgeworth, *Practical education*, 1, p. 435.

<sup>22</sup> John Aikin, *Letters from a father to his son, on various topics, relative to literature and the conduct of life* (2 vols., London, 1796–1800), 1, p. 2. See also Edgeworth and Edgeworth, *Practical education*, II, p. 131.

<sup>23</sup> Aikin, *Letters from a father*, 1, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Aikin and Barbauld, *Evenings at home*, VI, p. 152. Compare Joseph Priestley, *The proper objects of education in the present state of the world* (London, 1791), p. 30.

<sup>25</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family fortunes*, p. 23. Compare the political messages in French children’s books in this period, Margaret R. Higonnet, ‘Civility books, child citizens, and uncivil antics’, *Poetics Today*, 13 (1992), pp. 123–40.

<sup>26</sup> Aikin, *Letters from a father*, 1, p. 338.

professional men) could only use their knowledge in serious conversation or as rational recreation.<sup>27</sup> The conversations in *Evenings at home* called 'On things to be learned' and 'The ship' discussed suitable education for girls and boys, respectively.<sup>28</sup> Reading, both in English and French, was presented as an essential skill for acquiring further knowledge. Both conversations recommended arithmetic, modern languages, and the sciences, but while arithmetic would help girls to keep accounts, the boys might use it in navigation, or firing cannon. Similarly, girls should learn about the sciences 'that we may not make foolish mistakes' in conversation, while boys learned the medicinal, agricultural, culinary, and industrial uses of plants and metals, with the implication that they might need to use some of this knowledge. The emphasis on botany in the conversations between Harry and George contrasts with recent historical portrayals of botany as a subject practised by women. This concentration on women has ignored the many men and boys who pursued botanical interests, both for professional and recreational purposes, and who ought to appear in a balanced picture of late eighteenth-century botany.<sup>29</sup> Aikin had recommended botany to his son as providing 'more pure and active delight than almost any other single object ever afforded me', and he recommended it again in *Evenings at home*.<sup>30</sup>

The differences in aims between boys' and girls' education are also reflected in the structure of the conversations.<sup>31</sup> Generally, these were between parent and child (usually same sex), but most of the specifically scientific conversations took place between Harry and George, and their tutor. The three conversations featuring Lucy had her father as the mentor. First, this shows us that the boys were being taught these subjects more formally, as befitted knowledge which might be professionally useful. This was emphasized by the choice of practical men like Richard Arkwright and James Brindley, the canal engineer, as role models.<sup>32</sup> Secondly, Lucy was allowed to study astronomy, but she did so with her father – although Erasmus Darwin recommended schools for girls, Aikin agreed with his sister that 'the best way for women to acquire knowledge is from conversation with a father, brother or friend, in the way of family intercourse, and by such a course of reading as they may recommend'.<sup>33</sup>

The scientific lessons in *Evenings at home* dealt with natural history (especially botany), chemistry, geography, and astronomy. These subjects were recommended in many Unitarian educational plans, yet an examination of the review written by Trimmer in her *Guardian of Education* in 1803 shows how

<sup>27</sup> Similar claims are made in Erasmus Darwin, *A plan for the conduct of female education in boarding schools* (London, 1797), pp. 40 ff.

<sup>28</sup> Aikin and Barbauld, *Evenings at home*, I, pp. 84–98, 134–50.

<sup>29</sup> Shteir, *Cultivating women*, ch. 4. <sup>30</sup> Quoted in Aikin, *Memoir of John Aikin*, p. 36.

<sup>31</sup> Compare Greg Myers, 'Fictions for facts: the form and authority of the scientific dialogue', *History of Science*, 30 (1992), pp. 226–30.

<sup>32</sup> Aikin and Barbauld, *Evenings at home*, II, pp. 97–119; VI, pp. 10–19; compare Kramnick, 'Children's literature', pp. 224–30.

<sup>33</sup> A. L. Barbauld to Mrs. Montagu, 1774, in Aikin, ed., *Works of Anna Laetitia Barbauld*, p. xviii.

potentially controversial they could be.<sup>34</sup> Trimmer acknowledged that the work had been praised by dissenting writers, but set out to ‘examine this work in *another light*, and to consider how it is compatible with a System of which REVEALED RELIGION *is the basis*; and whether the different lessons ... are calculated to establish the doctrines and precepts of Christianity; or the contrary’.<sup>35</sup> Trimmer’s review thus exemplifies what serious Christians would have found problematic with *Evenings at home*.

Trimmer did not believe that the sciences were suitable for young children. First, the age at which children were expected to be reading *Evenings at home* ‘is one of the most important for the purpose of *Religion* ... This is the time in which the *principles of CHRISTIANITY* should be learnt from the SCRIPTURES themselves.’<sup>36</sup> In *An easy introduction*, Trimmer had already made clear that she regarded the ‘spiritual graces’ needed for ‘a happy eternity’ to be more important than ‘the ornamental parts of education’ which were of use only in this life.<sup>37</sup> Trimmer also felt that many of the sciences, though ‘delightful’, were too difficult for young children.<sup>38</sup> Aikin’s conversation ‘Why an apple falls’ was considered ‘too philosophical for children’, and, in its counterpart in *An easy introduction*, Henry was told he was too young to understand much about it.<sup>39</sup> As for chemistry, Trimmer remembered the connection, exemplified by Priestley, with radicalism: ‘We are not among those who would teach *Chemistry* to Children; it is a fascinating thing, likely to occupy their thoughts and attention to the exclusion of more important subjects, and put them upon dangerous experiments.’<sup>40</sup>

In *An easy introduction*, Trimmer had included conversations on plants, animals, the globe, and the solar system, but she presented them very differently from Aikin and Barbauld.<sup>41</sup> *An easy introduction* was more concerned with nature than with the sciences, and must be read as part of Trimmer’s programme of theological education. The natural world was to be seen as awe-inspiring, and full of evidences of divine foresight, beneficence, and design. As Trimmer’s choice of subjects showed, natural history was felt to be far better suited to this use than chemistry. The solar system, for all its sublimity, did not make a good example because it was too complicated for young children to understand properly. In her 1802 edition, Trimmer removed the explicit statement of the logic of the argument from design, and relied entirely on the sense of awe and wonder which permeated the work: ‘Every garden, every field, is a collection of curiosities; and the creation itself ... forms the great Book

<sup>34</sup> Sarah Trimmer, review of *Evenings at home*, *Guardian of Education*, 2 (1803), pp. 304–11, 343–53.

<sup>35</sup> Trimmer, on *Evenings at home*, p. 305.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305.

<sup>37</sup> Trimmer, *Easy introduction* (1793), p. x.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vi.

<sup>39</sup> Trimmer, on *Evenings at home*, p. 345; Trimmer, *Easy introduction* (1793), p. 142.

<sup>40</sup> Trimmer, on *Evenings at home*, p. 310. On Priestley, see Maurice Crosland, ‘The image of science as a threat: Burke vs. Priestley and the philosophic revolution’, *British Journal for the History of Science*, 20 (1987), pp. 277–307; R. G. W. Anderson and Christopher Lawrence, eds., *Science, medicine and dissent: Joseph Priestley, 1733–1804* (London, 1987).

<sup>41</sup> Wakefield’s treatment is similar to Trimmer’s.



of Nature, which proves the existence, the power and the goodness of God in every page of it, and should awaken the gratitude of mankind for the numberless blessings he has bestowed on them.<sup>42</sup> Although *Evenings at home* contained plenty of natural history, there were few references to the Creator. Trimmer criticized this omission, and wrote of 'The oak': 'Lessons of this kind for children ought ever to "lead from Nature up to Nature's God;" and they ought also to agree with the account of things we have in the Sacred Volume; but in this lesson ... not a word is said of the CREATOR.'<sup>43</sup> For Trimmer, the science presented in *Evenings at home* was doubly pernicious because it contained some lessons which she regarded as contrary to Scripture. In 'Eyes and no eyes', the following exchange occurred:

*William*: ... how sea shells could get there, I cannot imagine.

*Mr. Andrews*: I do not wonder at your surprise, since many philosophers have been much perplexed to account for the same appearance. It is not uncommon to find great quantities of shells and relics of marine animals even in the bowels of high mountains, very remote from the sea. They are certainly proofs that the earth was once in a very different state from what it is at present; but in what manner and how long ago these changes took place, can only be guessed at.<sup>44</sup>

As Trimmer pointed out, the sea shells could have been regarded as evidence for the Mosaic flood, as they were in *Mental improvement*, when Sophia found them 'a convincing proof of the truth of the history of the deluge'.<sup>45</sup>

Another passage suggested that men ate acorns before they invented agriculture.<sup>46</sup> Trimmer responded that 'the only book which gives an account of the origin of mankind, namely, THE BIBLE, describes the first human pair as completely *civilized* ... And after their fall ... instead of condemning them to *eat acorns with swine*, GOD mercifully taught Adam to have recourse to *agriculture*, for the purpose of producing bread.'<sup>47</sup> Trimmer made the theological points that there *was* no time before agriculture (except in Eden), and that God teaches men the skills they need. More importantly, the Bible, for Trimmer, was the *only* authority for such distant history. Other evidence (even fossils) could not be allowed if it disagreed with Scripture. This absolute faith in the authority of the Bible is contrary to the rational approach taken by Unitarians, whose scientific interests were not characterized by an omnipresent theology of nature. For Trimmer, only such a framework could make the sciences suitable for children.

Trimmer also criticized the lack of a religious underpinning to the moral lessons in *Evenings at home*. Most of the 'moral' lessons in *Mental improvement* and *An easy introduction* were essentially theological and dealt with issues, like the

<sup>42</sup> Sarah Trimmer, *An easy introduction ...* (11th edn, London, 1802), pp. 164–5. Compare Trimmer, *Easy introduction* (1793), p. 160. <sup>43</sup> Trimmer, on *Evenings at home*, p. 306.

<sup>44</sup> Aikin and Barbauld, *Evenings at home*, iv, pp. 106–7. A similar point is made at v, p. 7.

<sup>45</sup> Trimmer, on *Evenings at home*, p. 347. Wakefield, *Mental improvement*, p. 49.

<sup>46</sup> Aikin and Barbauld, *Evenings at home*, 1, pp. 6–7.

<sup>47</sup> Trimmer, on *Evenings at home*, p. 306.

beneficence of the Creator, which could be made to arise from the scientific conversations. But in *Evenings at home* and *A father's instructions*, the moral lessons were usually separated from the scientific ones, and thus addressed a wider range of issues. The moral lessons drawn by Percival, Aikin, and Barbauld were not dependent on any specific creed, and could theoretically be agreed by all rational humans. As Lucy Aikin wrote, the lessons 'engage the youthful feelings in the cause of truth, of freedom and of virtue'.<sup>48</sup> Some of the attitudes were typical of contemporary conduct books: sincerity; the importance of personal influence, and especially that of family members; respect for character, not wealth or rank. Marjorie Morgan associates the enthusiasm for conduct books with the evangelical revival, though the similarities between the conduct books and the Unitarian children's books showed that many of these values were shared by a broad section of society.<sup>49</sup> Some of the social attitudes adopted in *Evenings at home*, however, were less typical.

Several stories illustrated the point that 'moral and intellectual proficiency ... [are] the only really important distinctions among mankind'.<sup>50</sup> Others showed that 'moral worth was proved by fulfilling the duties of one's calling and station', so that a poor but industrious weaver was as important a member of society as the local industrialist.<sup>51</sup> Both Aikin and Percival condemned characters who acted in ways which were 'inconsistent with their station, character or profession'.<sup>52</sup> Unlike Trimmer's rural parish society in *An easy introduction*, the poor in *Evenings at home* were to be treated not as objects of charity, but as respectable workers performing tasks which were necessary to society. While Trimmer could argue that philanthropy to the poor helped the rich to be distinguished 'by their benevolence and greatness of mind', Aikin argued that impoverished workers deserved better treatment by society, not out of charity but due to the natural rights which they possessed as much as the next man.<sup>53</sup> *Evenings at home* extended the application of the natural rights of men to the issue of slavery, arguing that liberty was a right which could not be taken away.<sup>54</sup> Opposition to slavery was common to most children's books in this period, but while the Unitarians based their opposition on the rationality and humanity of the slaves, Trimmer and Wakefield opposed the unnecessary

<sup>48</sup> Aikin, *Memoir of John Aikin*, p. 159.

<sup>49</sup> Marjorie Morgan, *Manners, morals and class in England, 1774-1858* (Basingstoke, 1994), ch. 3; also Davidoff and Hall, *Family fortunes*, ch. 1; and Barbara M. Benedict, *Making the modern reader: cultural mediation in early modern literary anthologies* (Princeton, 1996), pp. 198-210.

<sup>50</sup> Aikin, *Memoir of John Aikin*, p. 121; for example, Aikin and Barbauld, *Evenings at home*, iv, pp. 62-9.

<sup>51</sup> Morgan, *Manners, morals and class*, p. 64; for example, Aikin and Barbauld, *Evenings at home*, v, pp. 122-38; iv, pp. 1-30.

<sup>52</sup> Percival, *A father's instructions*, p. 52. For women, 'sex' replaces 'profession', p. 33.

<sup>53</sup> Trimmer, *Easy introduction* (1793), p. 115; Aikin, *Memoir of John Aikin*, pp. 120-8; Aikin and Barbauld, *Evenings at home*, v, pp. 132-4.

<sup>54</sup> Aikin and Barbauld, *Evenings at home*, vi, pp. 82-3; see also Percival, *A father's instructions*, pp. 126-33.

barbarity of the Europeans, using essentially the same argument as the opponents of cruelty to animals.<sup>55</sup>

Even more radical than the opposition to slavery was the attitude to war expressed in *Evenings at home*. Aikin did not approve of war, and especially not of that with Revolutionary France. This attitude had already lost him his medical practice in Yarmouth, but he was determined to stand by his principles.<sup>56</sup> Both the fourth and fifth volumes of the book, which appeared after 1793, contain passages condemning war. 'The price of a victory' opened: Good news! Great news! Glorious news! Cried young Oswald, as he entered his father's house. We have got a complete victory, and have killed I don't know how many thousands of the enemy; and we are to have bonfires and illuminations.

And so, said his father, you think that killing a great many thousands of human creatures is a thing to be very glad about?<sup>57</sup>

Oswald's father concluded that 'wars are very seldom to the real advantage of any nation; and ... so many dreadful evils attend them, that a humane man will scarcely rejoice in them'.<sup>58</sup> This explicitly anti-war attitude was markedly different from other children's books and from evangelical conduct books. As Trimmer pointed out, it was both unpatriotic and contrary to the Old Testament.<sup>59</sup>

The moral lessons in *Evenings at home* were presented as being obvious to the reasoning mind which has been provided with the necessary information and experiences, whether this means reading about the different races of man, or actually meeting and talking to a poor weaver. The Bible was never presented as the basis for this 'rational morality'. The absence of religion in *Evenings at home* was not due to any lack of belief on the part of the authors. Both were Unitarians all their lives, and Barbauld's *Hymns in prose for children* (1781) was widely praised for the way it introduced young children to religious feelings.<sup>60</sup> However, they were utterly opposed to what they saw as the bigotry of trying to impose religious opinions on other people.<sup>61</sup> The Edgeworths pointed out another reason for omitting religion from their *Practical education*, observing that avoiding the controversial topic allowed them to address all sects and parties.<sup>62</sup> They wrote that 'children usually learn the Religion of their parents; they attend public worship, and both at home and at school they read the Bible and various religious books, which are of course put into their hands ... Could any

<sup>55</sup> Trimmer, *Easy introduction* (1793), p. 117; Wakefield, *Mental improvement*, pp. 74–8.

<sup>56</sup> Aikin, *Memoir of John Aikin*, pp. 149–60.

<sup>57</sup> Aikin and Barbauld, *Evenings at home*, iv, p. 51.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, iv, p. 52.

<sup>59</sup> Trimmer, on *Evenings at home*, pp. 345–6.

<sup>60</sup> Florence V. Barry, *A century of children's books* (London, 1922), pp. 149–50; Mary F. Thwaite, *From primer to pleasure in reading: an introduction to the history of children's books in England from the invention of printing to 1914* (2nd edn, London, 1972), p. 58. On Unitarian piety and devotion, see R. K. Webb, 'Rational piety', in Haakonssen, *Enlightenment and religion*, pp. 287–311.

<sup>61</sup> A. L. Barbauld to Mrs Taylor, 5 May 1813, quoted in Mary Bradford Whiting, 'A century-old friendship: unpublished letters from Mrs. Barbauld', *London Mercury* (Sept. 1932), p. 440. Also Percival, *A father's instructions*, p. 59.

<sup>62</sup> Edgeworth and Edgeworth, *Practical education*, I, p. vii.

particular system meet with general approbation?’<sup>63</sup> In another period, the Edgeworths’ view might have been acceptable, but in the 1790s, as Trimmer’s comments showed, the absence of religion was immediately suspect, and all but the most liberally minded parents would have felt the need to add their own theological commentary to the framework of *Evenings at home*, as the next section will show.

## II

Finding evidence of how people used their books is difficult, and the problems are exacerbated when the readers were children. Adult recollections of childhood reading practices were rare, as were parents who recorded their children’s reading habits. Marilyn Butler has noted the importance of the literary review in creating an informed market for books, so that while periodical reviews voiced the opinion of an individual reader, they also suggested general responses and suitable reading practices to the periodical’s subscribers.<sup>64</sup> Another source, particularly for children’s reading, is the literature on education, which frequently included advice on how to teach children to read, and how and what they should read once this had been achieved. Priestley, Darwin, Aikin, and the Edgeworths were among the many authors who wrote on education in the late eighteenth century, and it was to the Edgeworth’s *Practical education* that the Aikin family later turned for advice while educating a grandchild.<sup>65</sup> *Practical education* included anecdotes of the activities of the Edgeworth children, and is thus a useful source for accounts of actual readings, including some of *Evenings at home*. A third source is the text of the books themselves. The implied readers were ‘ideal’ readers, and their descriptions acted as prescriptions for parents on how to use the book and how to educate their children.

*Evenings at home* and *An easy introduction* were both frequently reprinted in their first twenty-eight years, reaching their 12th and 11th editions, respectively.<sup>66</sup> This suggests that there were around 10,000 copies of each in circulation, which is an impressively large audience for a book in this period. Children’s books were usually priced much more cheaply than adult books, which helped to increase their audience: *Evenings at home* cost 1 s 6 d for each of its six volumes, while *An easy introduction* cost 2 s for a book which was roughly the same length as one of the *Evenings at home* volumes. Such prices made the books potentially

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 1, pp. xi–xii.

<sup>64</sup> Marilyn Butler, ‘Culture’s medium: the role of the review’, in Stuart Curran, ed., *The Cambridge companion to British Romanticism* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 121–2, 130.

<sup>65</sup> L. Aikin to Mrs Taylor, Oct. 1805, in Le Breton, ed., *Memoirs of the late Lucy Aikin*, pp. 131–2. See also Schofield, *Lunar society*, pp. 131–2, 404–7, for an account of the effect this interest in education had on the children of the Lunar Society.

<sup>66</sup> This is the term of their copyright protection under the 1710 act. Both continued to be reprinted after this. On the publishing history of *Evenings at home*, see Aileen Fyfe, ‘Copyrights and competition: producing and protecting children’s books in the nineteenth century’, *Publishing History*, 45 (1999), pp. 35–59.

available to clerks and shopkeepers, as well as wealthier families. *An easy introduction* was originally printed privately, and would have had a limited circulation, but its later editions were published by a group of major London publishers, including Thomas Longman, C. & J. Rivington, and Joseph Johnson. *Evenings at home* was published by Johnson alone. He was a well-known Unitarian publisher, and although he issued a wide range of works, including his share of *An easy introduction*, the majority of his children's books were by authors connected with the dissenting academies, such as John Bonnycastle, William Enfield, Percival, Priestley, and Aikin.<sup>67</sup> This meant that potential purchasers of *Evenings at home* would be likely to associate it with dissent, even if they did not notice the prominent adverts for other Aikin and Barbauld books on the contents page, and had not read the early review identifying the authors.<sup>68</sup> Thus, *Evenings at home* was identifiably different in a way that *An easy introduction* was not, even before its contents had been inspected.

This difference mattered, for while Unitarians had always been regarded as more liberal than most, in the wake of the French Revolution and Terror, they could be seen as dangerous to the stability of the nation. The polarization of political opinion was reflected in the reception of *Evenings at home*, for, while it was welcomed by the *Monthly, Critical and Analytical Reviews* and the *Monthly Magazine*, all of which were edited by dissenters,<sup>69</sup> and was recommended by Maria Edgeworth and Erasmus Darwin in their educational treatises,<sup>70</sup> Trimmer's review devoted seventeen pages to detailing its many faults, mostly based on religious and political objections.<sup>71</sup> This division between dissenters and Churchmen in the 1790s is made more striking by its absence by the 1820s, when *Evenings at home* was read by the young Anglicans Charles Kingsley, Jane Loudon, and John Ruskin (all of whom particularly remembered the story 'Eyes and no eyes') as well as by the young Methodist Benjamin Gregory.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>67</sup> See Leslie F. Chard, 'Bookseller to publisher: Joseph Johnson and the English book trade, 1760–1810', *The Library*, 5th ser., 32 (1977), pp. 138–54; idem, 'Joseph Johnson: father of the book trade', *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 79 (1975), pp. 51–82; and Gerald P. Tyson, *Joseph Johnson: a liberal publisher* (Iowa City, 1979). For a copy of Johnson's catalogue, c. 1790, see appendix to Peter Haywood, 'Joseph Johnson, publisher, 1738–1809' (Student Project 6, Aberystwyth, 1976).

<sup>68</sup> The authors' names did not appear on the early editions. They were identified in [John Aikin], review of *Evenings at home*, *Analytical Review*, 16 (1793), pp. 221–2.

<sup>69</sup> *Monthly Review*, 12 (1793), p. 355; 15 (1794), p. 115; 17 (1795), p. 113; *Critical Review*, 9 (1793), p. 451; 17 (1796), pp. 442–6; *Analytical Review*, 20 (1794), pp. 323–7; 23 (1796), pp. 210–11; *Monthly Magazine*, 2 (1796), p. 488. On the literary reviews in the 1790s, see Butler, 'Culture's medium', pp. 120–47.

<sup>70</sup> Edgeworth and Edgeworth, *Practical education*, 1, pp. 434–5; Darwin, *Female education*, pp. 13, 119; Elizabeth Hamilton, who was grouped with Edgeworth by Trimmer as an author who based her educational system upon 'principles of Reason and Morality', also recommended it, Elizabeth Hamilton, *Letters on the elementary principles of education* (2nd edn, 2 vols., London, 1801), II, p. 115.

<sup>71</sup> Trimmer, on *Evenings at home*.

<sup>72</sup> Charles Kingsley, *Madam how and Lady why* (London, 1870), pp. viii–ix; Jane Loudon, *Glimpses of nature, and objects of interest described, during a visit to the Isle of Wight* (London, 1844), p. vi;

Shortly before this, it had been suitable for the seven-year-old daughter of a Winchester prebendary to receive as a gift from her aunt.<sup>73</sup> In the 1790s, however, the only readers I have found were from backgrounds similar to its authors. Gideon Mantell was another child influenced by an early reading of ‘Eyes and no eyes’, while the most enthusiastic recorded reader was Charles Sneyd Edgeworth, Maria’s younger half-brother, who was not only ‘delighted with the four [sic] volumes of *Evenings at home* and has pitched upon the best stories’, but went on to write a poem based on one of the stories.<sup>74</sup> Further indications of the widening audience for *Evenings at home* come from its presence in locations as diverse as the school library at King’s Somborne, the Dukinfield village library, and the library of the Shropshire Mechanics’ Institute by the 1840s.<sup>75</sup>

If *Evenings at home* and *An easy introduction* initially had different readerships, we might wonder whether they were likely to have been read in different ways. Recent studies of reading practices have emphasized the continuing importance of the social activity of reading aloud in the late eighteenth century.<sup>76</sup> Young children’s earliest experiences of reading are generally of reading aloud in a didactic context, but they also participated in family readings. Both *Evenings at home* and *An easy introduction* featured parents and children participating in activities together, and this was explicitly extended to reading aloud in *Evenings at home*. The introduction purported to explain how the book came to be: friends of the family had written stories for the amusement and instruction of the children, and these stories were kept in a box until all the children were home from school:

It was then made one of the evening amusements of the family to ‘rummage the budget’ as their phrase was. One of the youngest children was sent to the box, and putting in its little hand, drew out whatever paper came first, and brought it back to the parlour. This was then read out distinctly by one of the elder ones; and after it had undergone sufficient consideration, another little messenger was dispatched for a fresh supply of

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John Ruskin, *The works of John Ruskin on CD-ROM* (Cambridge, 1996), 26, p. 114; Richard D. Altick, *The English common reader: a social history of the mass reading public, 1800–1900* (London, 1957), pp. 117–18.

<sup>73</sup> Inscription, dated 1813, on copy of *Evenings at home* in the library of Baddesley Clinton Hall, Warwickshire. The girl became Henrietta, Lady Chatterton. My thanks to Morag and Alastair Fyfe for finding this reference.

<sup>74</sup> On Mantell, see D. Dean, *Gideon Mantell and the discovery of dinosaurs* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 19. My thanks to Jim Secord for this reference. On Charles Edgeworth, see letter from M. Edgeworth, 1796, quoted in Barry, *Century of children’s books*, pp. 150–1; M. Edgeworth to A. L. Barbauld, 26 Feb. 1806, in Le Breton, ed., *Memoir of Mrs. Barbauld*, p. 115.

<sup>75</sup> Alec Ellis, *A history of children’s reading and literature* (Oxford, 1968), p. 41; D. A. Hinton, ‘Popular science in England, 1830–1870’ (Ph.D. thesis, Bath University, 1979), p. 174 n. 40.

<sup>76</sup> Raven, Small and Tadmor, eds., *Reading*; Robert Darnton, ‘Readers respond to Rousseau’, in Robert Darnton, ed., *The great cat massacre* (New York, 1985), pp. 215–56; and Brewer, *Pleasures of the imagination*, ch. 4.

entertainment; and so on, till as much time had been spent in this way as the parents thought proper.<sup>77</sup>

The format of the book allowed the actual readers to replicate this 'ideal' situation: the random order of the pieces dispensed with the box full of papers; and the division into chapters called 'evenings' helped parents decide how much was suitable for each session. Reading aloud in a family setting was also a favourite winter evening activity in the Trimmer household, when James Trimmer used to 'assemble a little group of hearers, while one of his children read aloud from some of his favourite authors. The books selected were not very numerous, but of a kind to strengthen and enlarge the mind, and to give a desire for further improvement.'<sup>78</sup>

An indication that this sort of reading came to be less common can be found in later editions of *Evenings at home*. When Aikin's daughter, Lucy, was revising it for a new edition in 1826, she rearranged the stories into four volumes, according to the difficulty of the language and subject matter.<sup>79</sup> The first volume contained mostly stories and fables about animals, the scientific conversations were in the third volume, and the moral tales in the fourth. She explained that the new order would 'conduct the young reader, in a gentle progress, from the easier pieces to the more difficult', but also, it meant that the four individual volumes were adapted 'to different ages, by which the inconvenience might be avoided of either putting the whole set into the hands of a child, whilst one portion of its contents would not be intelligible to him, or of withholding the whole until another portion should have ceased to be interesting'.<sup>80</sup> She was quite specifically thinking of a situation where each child could have his own volume of *Evenings at home*. When the books were read in a setting where there were older siblings or parents available to help explain difficult terms or concepts, such a concern had not been necessary.<sup>81</sup>

Reading aloud helped the child to become a clear and confident speaker, and dialogues, due to their resemblance to conversation, encouraged this.<sup>82</sup> The Edgeworths commended *Evenings at home* for its well-written dialogues, relating that a nine-year-old boy, 'who had never been taught elocution by any reading-master', was able to read them 'in a manner which would have made even Sterne's critic forget his stop-watch'.<sup>83</sup> Another advantage was that it fostered discussion of the text, either amongst the children themselves or

<sup>77</sup> Aikin and Barbauld, *Evenings at home*, 1, pp. 1–2.

<sup>78</sup> Trimmer, *Life of Mrs Trimmer*, p. 16.

<sup>79</sup> Aileen Fyfe, 'How the squirrel became a squigg: the long history of a children's book', *Paradigm*, 27 (1999), pp. 25–37.

<sup>80</sup> Lucy Aikin, ed., *Evenings at home ... carefully revised and corrected throughout, and with some additional pieces, by the authors, the whole newly arranged in four volumes* (14th edn, 4 vols., London, 1826), p. iv.

<sup>81</sup> Joyce Irene Whalley, *Cobwebs to catch flies: illustrated books for the nursery and schoolroom, 1700–1900* (London, 1974), pp. 42–3.

<sup>82</sup> Patricia Howell Michaelson, 'Reading *Pride and Prejudice*', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 3 (1990), pp. 70–2.

<sup>83</sup> Edgeworth and Edgeworth, *Practical education*, 1, p. 439.

between parents and children. The Edgeworths recorded several instances of *Evenings at home* being used in this way, noting that ‘our pupils were always permitted to stop when they were reading aloud, to make whatever remarks they pleased upon whatever books they read’.<sup>84</sup> While discussion could occur if children read silently and asked their parents for assistance, it could occur far more frequently and with more parental involvement if books were read aloud in the family circle. The need for a book like *Evenings at home* to be discussed in order for it to have its full ‘instructive’ impact was widely recognized, but, crucially, for two different reasons.

In her *Guardian of Education*, Trimmer recommended that children read *Evenings at home* ‘under the care of a judicious parent, or teacher’.<sup>85</sup> She believed that if children were ‘left to themselves, “to read it over and over again in their leisure hours,” to ruminat upon all its contents, without discrimination, it may prove very injurious ... [for] the leaven of *Modern Philosophy* is as dangerous in these days as that of the Scribes and Pharisees in our Saviour’s time’.<sup>86</sup> Parents could impose the ‘correct’ interpretation on the text, and ensure their children did not pick up dangerous ideas.<sup>87</sup> The *Monthly Review* also recommended discussion: ‘Our youth, not to mention others, may derive considerable advantage from the perusal of these dialogues, especially if they happen to fall under the direction of some capable friend, who may prosecute the subjects to farther effect.’<sup>88</sup> According to Percival, the capable friend should ‘explain the terms, point out the analogies, and enforce the reflections which are here delivered ... And when the words, the subject, and the moral are clearly understood, his curiosity concerning whatever may be connected with, or suggested by them, should be gratified and encouraged.’<sup>89</sup> There is an important distinction between the use of discussion to inculcate parental beliefs, and its use to broaden the child’s education and encourage curiosity. Unitarian parents, and those of many other dissenting traditions, regarded discussion in the latter light.

Instructive conversation was widely seen as a good way for young children to learn about a whole range of subjects.<sup>90</sup> This belief was reflected in the use of fictional conversations in books.<sup>91</sup> Although the conversation depicted the fictional child learning from the fictional adult, the aim was for the real child to learn from the fictional adult.<sup>92</sup> A true dialogue must give children as well as parents a voice, and the children’s voices represent the child reader. The amount of autonomy the fictional child has in the dialogue reflects the freedom (or not) of the real child to act and to ask questions. Just as the discussion of

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, II, p. 469; I, p. 210.

<sup>85</sup> Trimmer, on *Evenings at home*, p. 353.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Hamilton, *Principles of education*, I, pp. 406–13, makes the same point.

<sup>88</sup> *Monthly Review*, 17 (1795), p. 113.

<sup>89</sup> Percival, *A father’s instructions*, pp. xiii–xiv.

<sup>90</sup> On conversation for teaching the sciences, see Edgeworth and Edgeworth, *Practical education*, I, p. v, and II, p. 471; Hamilton, *Principles of education*, II, pp. 80–1.

<sup>91</sup> Shteir, introduction to Wakefield, *Mental improvement*; idem, *Cultivating women*, ch. 4.

<sup>92</sup> Myers, ‘Science for women and children’, pp. 172–6.



reading material was recommended for various reasons, so the instructive conversation could be constructed in different ways.

*Evenings at home* contained conversations in which the children were not merely passive receptacles for the teacher's knowledge. They thought for themselves, were curious and asked questions based upon their past experiences. Most of the conversations began with curious children asking for an explanation of something which puzzled them, rather than with the parent choosing the topic. A conversation on grasses opened as follows, with the tutor completely silent for the first four lines:

*Harry* Pray what is that growing on the other side of the hedge?

*George* Why it is corn – don't you see it is in ear?

*Harry* Yes – but it seems too short for corn; and the corn we just now passed is not in ear by a great deal.

*George* Then I don't know what it is. Pray, sir, will you tell us?

*Tutor* I don't wonder you were puzzled about it. It is a sort of grass grown for hay, and it is called rye-grass.<sup>93</sup>

The children were also able to connect facts, to think for themselves, and to produce rational conclusions. In 'On earths and stones,' George decided to try adding vinegar to a calcareous shell – until he remembered that 'I have often done so in eating oysters, and I never observed it to hiss or bubble.'<sup>94</sup> He showed that he was able to make use of his past experiences by bringing them to bear on the present problem (that of acids and lime). The conversations appeared to be directed by the children, and fuelled by their curiosity and desire to learn, though the mentor could be seen occasionally to guide the conversation to a fruitful subject.

The conversations in Trimmer's *An easy introduction* did not permit the children to speak at any point, although the mother addressed them as if they could: 'Do you not smell something very sweet? Look about in the hedges, Henry, and try if you can discover what it is.'<sup>95</sup> It is frequently possible to infer what the child said or did, though we are never told, and the device served to make the children seem more lifelike, and the monologues more readable. But as Henry's exploration of the hedge demonstrated, the children were not curious about anything: mother pointed out things that they should be interested in. While Trimmer advocated teaching by conversation, she believed that this conversation, like the discussion of books, should be controlled by the parent. Aikin and Barbauld did not share this approach, preferring to encourage curiosity, observation, and reasoning.<sup>96</sup>

The conversations in Wakefield's *Mental improvement* illustrate a different issue. These conversations all take place in Mr Harcourt's study, where there are few objects for curiosity. Mr Harcourt starts by announcing that: 'I have chosen the Whale for our subject tonight, and the information it affords I

<sup>93</sup> Aikin and Barbauld, *Evenings at home*, II, p. 59.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, v, p. 8.

<sup>95</sup> Trimmer, *Easy introduction* (1793), p. 22.

<sup>96</sup> For example, Edgeworth and Edgeworth, *Practical education*, II, p. 131.

expect will be new and wonderful to you all.<sup>97</sup> The later topics were chosen by both children and parents, and, despite the strong parental control, the children did ask questions. The striking point is the voices that the children used. Unlike the children in Trimmer or Aikin and Barbauld, these children sounded like young adults. Typically, twelve-year-old Cecilia commented: ‘I observed you named sponge among the zoophytes; surely that cannot be the habitation of insects. I have often wondered what it is, but have never been able to satisfy my curiosity.’<sup>98</sup>

This attribution of adult voices to child characters was taken to extremes in the Christian catechism, and in the derivative school-room version for secular material. The adult asked simple questions, to which the child was supposed to respond with the detailed and correct answer. In the catechism, the child had the longest speeches, but, crucially, had no flexibility and no autonomy. Only one answer was acceptable, and it was not necessarily an answer that would be easily understood by a child. The answers to the questions were expected to be learned by rote, and were to be believed on the authority of the book and the teacher.<sup>99</sup> Aikin and Barbauld wanted children to base their knowledge on ‘observation and experiment ... hand in hand with reasoning’, so it is hardly surprising that *Evenings at home* did not use a catechetical style of dialogue.<sup>100</sup>

Aikin enjoyed taking his children into the countryside to learn about animals and plants, and remembered rambles ‘by the seaside, where my wife and I are as much amused as the young ones in picking up shells, pebbles and seaweed’.<sup>101</sup> These experiences were repeated in *Evenings at home*. As Greg Myers has pointed out, it is somewhat ironic to find this emphasis on personal experience and activity transmitted through a book, for while the fictional characters learned through experience, the child readers learned from the authority of the printed page.<sup>102</sup> But *Evenings at home* must also be considered as an educational manual for parents, who were expected to continue their children’s education by conversing with them and giving them ‘object lessons’ in the style portrayed in the book.<sup>103</sup>

The dialogues in *Evenings at home* were all about looking at the things around you, and asking questions. Thus Harry’s question ‘What plant is that man gathering under the hedge?’ led to a discussion of the umbelliferous plants, while a visit to a neighbour’s grapery led George to ask how wine differed from grape juice.<sup>104</sup> Once started on a particular topic, the tutor or parent used an

<sup>97</sup> Wakefield, *Mental improvement*, p. 8.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>99</sup> Richardson, *Literature, education, and Romanticism*, pp. 64–77.

<sup>100</sup> Aikin, *Letters from a father*, II, p. 304.

<sup>101</sup> J. Aikin to A. L. Barbauld, 1785, in Aikin, *Memoir of John Aikin*, I, p. 102. See also Le Breton, ed., *Memoirs of the late Lucy Aikin*, p. xviii.

<sup>102</sup> Myers, *Science for women and children*, p. 179.

<sup>103</sup> Shapin and Barnes’s characterization of object lessons for teaching facts by rote to working-class children applies to older children than the readers of *Evenings at home*, Steven Shapin and Barry Barnes, ‘Head and hand: rhetorical resources in British pedagogical writing, 1770–1850’, *Oxford Review of Education*, 2 (1976), pp. 240–5.

<sup>104</sup> Aikin and Barbauld, *Evenings at home*, IV, p. 72; III, p. 33.

ordered and systematic structure to discuss related topics. It was clear from the Harry and George conversations that the tutor was working through the plant families, and that each conversation would deal with all the relevant characteristics and uses of each genus in the family. However, the order in which the families were met, and the order in which uses and genera are mentioned within each conversation, depended on the children's questions. In *An easy introduction*, the mother chose the topics, and tended to flit from one to another at will. She followed the general framework of starting with things that the children could see, but was capable of going from dogs to deer, to cats, to wild beasts, to elephants, to camels, and back to chickens in the course of a pre-breakfast walk devoted to the animal kingdom.<sup>105</sup> The lack of defined structure was a consequence of the different aims discussed above: since Trimmer's goal was to show that the whole of Creation was full of wonderfully designed objects, the order in which this was done did not particularly matter. However, if Aikin and Barbauld were to lay down the foundations for a rational education, and to show how the sciences can provide a training in logical thinking and reasoning, the systematic structure was essential.

The conversations in *Evenings at home* also showed that Unitarian children could participate in the sciences. They were distinct from learned practitioners of science, but they were allowed to learn about science by doing things. While the children in *Mental improvement* sat in the study and conversed about whales, salmon, and sugar, Harry and George not only went to a blacksmith's forge, a lime-kiln, and a vine-yard, but they made collections of dried plants, collected flowers to dissect, and tried some practical chemistry at home. Trimmer's children also gathered flowers, but they did so to marvel at their variety and beauty, not to form collections, nor to dissect them. Their mother had a microscope, so the children were allowed to examine feathers, insects, and butterfly wings, but they did so to learn about their Creator.<sup>106</sup> Trimmer's children were promised more advanced books and visits to museums, almost all of which were for natural historical topics, and therefore fitted easily into an introduction to God's creation.<sup>107</sup> In the single occasion in *Evenings at home* when the mentor had recourse to outside resources, Lucy's father promised to take her to 'the lecture of an ingenious philosopher who has contrived a machine that will give you a better notion of these things [planetary motion] in an hour, than I could by mere talking in a week'.<sup>108</sup> While Trimmer had mentioned planetary motion in her own book, she quite specifically avoided explaining the details, giving anthropocentric and theological arguments for the earth's movement around the sun.<sup>109</sup> Thus, we see that Unitarians were willing to teach scientific details to young children, including girls, while orthodox Anglican parents would have regarded such complex natural

<sup>105</sup> Trimmer, *Easy introduction* (1793), pp. 54–66.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83–6.

<sup>107</sup> For example, the Tower of London menagerie, *ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>108</sup> Aikin and Barbauld, *Evenings at home*, VI, p. 123.

<sup>109</sup> Trimmer, *Easy introduction* (1793), pp. 107–8, 132.

philosophy as unsuitable. According to Trimmer, children needed only to appreciate the solar system as awe-inspiring and magnificent.

From these comparisons, we can see that children who read *Evenings at home* were encouraged to be curious, to look at things around them, even to make collections or do experiments, while their parents were urged to use this curiosity as an opportunity for instruction. The activities of the fictional children supplied parents with ideas for activities for their own children.<sup>110</sup> Although I have taken my examples from the natural sciences, the emphases on curiosity, observation, instructive conversation, and personal reasoning also appear in the conversational lessons which deal with the moral sciences. The child protagonists were taken to meet poor weavers or industrious farmers, and by talking to them and experiencing something of their life, the child (occasionally with some help from the parent) realized that poverty was not to be despised, and that hard work had its rewards.<sup>111</sup> Whether the subject was a passage from a book, an object in the natural world, or a situation in society, children were to be invited to look, to question, and to think about the answers. This contrasted with Trimmer's *An easy introduction* where the children had no voices, and the conversations were steered by the parent to the objects which the parent wished to consider. The difference reflected Trimmer's faith in the Bible as the ultimate authority, and religion as the most important object of education.

### III

*Evenings at home* remained in print for one hundred and twenty years. Over that time, its format and audience changed.<sup>112</sup> By the 1850s, it was regarded as a 'classic' children's book, and began to appear in publishers' selected libraries, while by the 1870s, it had been turned into a book of one-syllable words to teach children to read. These publishing changes indicate a much wider audience than the restricted one this article has discussed, and this is borne out by the evidences of reading from the later period. By the 1820s, *Evenings at home* was read by Anglican and Methodist children as well as Unitarians. Ultimately, the Edgeworths were right about the benefits of not including a specific creed.

'Instructive and amusing' children's books should not be neglected merely because they do not fit easily into the grand narratives of textbooks or imaginative fiction. Even though most titles are now long forgotten, and were never as successful as the books discussed in this article, they filled the nursery bookshelves of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This example has also shown that it is possible to do more with children's books than examine authors and publishers. The texts of these books offer us important indications of the ways in which audiences in the early nineteenth century might approach

<sup>110</sup> Edgeworth and Edgeworth, *Practical education*, ch. 17–18, provides details of experiments which can be carried out in the home.

<sup>111</sup> For example, Aikin and Barbauld, *Evenings at home*, v, pp. 122–38, and iv, pp. 1–30.

<sup>112</sup> Aileen Fyfe, 'How the squirrel became a squigg'; idem, 'Copyrights and competition'.

the sciences, depending upon which books they had read when young. It may be difficult – or perhaps impossible – to write a history of reading based entirely on actual readers' experiences, but combining the available accounts with attitudes towards practices like orality and discussion provides a fruitful alternative.

The parents and writers of the Unitarian circles connected with Warrington Academy favoured a wide and varied education with the emphasis throughout on the practical utility of subjects. The contrast with other children's authors, particularly Sarah Trimmer, brings out the unusual and controversial aspects of this educational approach. The sciences were to be studied by both sexes for logical training and as sources of conversation and rational amusement, rather than as adjuncts to a theology of nature. Similarly, morality was to be grounded on reason and experience, not religious creed, and the combination of practical and moral lessons was intended to produce good adult citizens who would contribute to the improvement of society.

The favoured method of education was the rational, instructive conversation. Whatever the subject matter, children were encouraged to question their parents. Parents were expected to satisfy and encourage this curiosity, as their children would learn more easily when the subject was one in which they were interested. The use of fictional conversations in children's books was partly due to the belief in the efficacy of conversation, and partly to a conscious effort to appeal to children, by using a format which they would be able to read aloud easily. Similarly, the variation in the subject matter and genre of the pieces, and their short length, helped to prevent boredom. It was assumed throughout that children were rational beings, who would be able to connect past experiences or readings with new ones, and who would be able to draw conclusions, if presented with the appropriate material. Knowledge, both practical and spiritual, was ideally to be based on experience and personal reasoning, not on the authority of the parent or the printed page, although both were available if needed. By discussing the lessons of *Evenings at home*, readers and their parents could practise the rational and instructive approach which they were learning to apply, not just to books, but to their experiences of nature, religion, and society as well.