**‘A MISER’S PRAYER’ AND JOHN WARD OF HACKNEY**

The aim of this note is to explore the myths surrounding a work known as ‘The Miser’s Prayer’, reprinted on innumerable occasions, and taken up by Rowlandson and Dickens among others. Evidence will be adduced to show that it has been misinterpreted and misattributed for almost two centuries. The issue was first raised in this journal more than 150 years ago. It surfaced in a note entitled ‘A Fanatical Citizen’s Prayer,’ by J.Y. (almost certainly James Yeowell, then sub-editor), which appeared in *N&Q*, xix (1859), 433-4. The author reproduces a prayer, headed by a short introduction: ‘William Cole says, “This was brought to me, Aug. 21, 1776, by Dr. Ewin of Cambridge, from Dr. Colignon, who took it out of an old *Fog’s Journal*”.’ This statement of provenance refers to the well known antiquarian William Cole (1714-82); his friend William Ewin, Ll.D (1731-1804), by profession a usurer; and Charles Colignon (1725-85), Professor of Anatomy at Cambridge. In the next month a writer using the signature ‘Ache.’ followed up on this note with further information on the prayer:

Dr. Wm. Robinson, in his *Hist. and Ant. of the Parish of Hackney,* 1842, vol. i. p. 125, gives this under the more appropriate title of ‘The Miser's Prayer;’ and states that it was found ‘among a variety of curious papers of Mr. Ward, in his own hand-writing.’ In the version of the prayer given by Dr. Robinson there are some verbal differences from that inserted by J. Y., but these are not material to the sense.

(*N&Q*, xix (1859), 507)

The author concludes with brief remarks on John Ward, generally known as ‘Ward of Hackney’, and mentions a reference by Pope in the *Epistle to Bathurst* (1733).The label applied by William Robinson has stuck, but he was not the first writer to use this title or to connect the prayer with Ward.

In fact, the item had been reprinted many times before this, with minor variants, but initially without any suggestion of a personal application. The earliest example we have found is in the *Westminster Magazine*, on 11 April 1752. A week later the *Ladies Magazine* reproduced this. The prayer was picked up in the *Boston Evening-Post*, 14 January 1754, which claimed to be taking it from the *New Universal Magazine.* At least nine further American newspapers reprinted it, with no mention of Ward, between 1754 and 1813. A specifically American variant, with the details changed to reflect more local commercial concerns, appeared in *The Columbian Centinel* on 14 August 1802, supposedly ‘Improved from An European Original’. It was still called ‘The Miser’s Prayer’, again lacked any reference to Ward, and was reprinted at least 18 times up to 1820. Meanwhile the text appeared in English jest books, such as *The Convivial Jester* (1800), as well as collections of ana such as ‘Jack Strange’, *A Book of Oddities* (*c.*1775) and *Notes of a Bookworm* (1828). It had acquired enough fame to become the subject of Thomas Rowlandson’s print *The Miser’s Prayer* in 1801. Even before the exchange in *Notes & Queries*, the prayer continued to appear regularly in books and journals on both sides of the Atlantic, including such unlikely organs as the *Boston Musical Gazette*, and by 1838 had reached the pages of *The Australian.*  A local version came out in the *Monmouthshire Merlin* on 20 June 1857, with allusions converted to a Welsh setting.

The connection with Ward starts in 1828. On 24 March, two British newspapers, *The Standard* and *The Times*, produced a new version, directly attributing the prayer to John Ward of Hackney, with the claim that it had been found ‘a few days ago’ in his handwriting, among his papers. This was soon repeated in various places, including the *Hampshire Telegraph,* 7 April; *Leicester Chronicle*, 12 April; and *The Imperial Magazine* for May 1828, which retells the story in an article on Ward as an ‘infamous character’, citing *Notes of a Bookworm* as an additional source. By 1830 the *Belfast Telegraph* had joined in. Dickens has this version of events in *Household Words*, 17 April 1858, just before it resurfaces in *N&Q*. It is no surprise that the creator of Ralph Nickleby and Scrooge should have wished to include this material in his journal. The afterlife of ‘A Miser’s Prayer’ shows that it exactly fits the reading list which Boffin supplies to Bella Wilfer in *Our Mutual Friend,* ch. 5:

Mr Boffin would say, ‘Now, look well all round, my dear, for a Life of a Miser, or any book of that sort; any Lives of odd characters who may have been Misers.’....The moment she pointed out any book as being entitled Lives of eccentric personages, Anecdotes of strange characters, Records of remarkable individuals, or anything to that purpose, Mr Boffin’s countenance would light up, and he would instantly dart in and buy it.

Shortlyafterwards, Silas Wegg is able to provide further examples of such collections, among which ‘The Miser’s Prayer’ would have been staple material.

From the 1840s onwards the piece practically always has Ward’s name attached. It figures thus in *The Book of Notions* (Boston, 1850), 226. Equally, it is found in the sections devoted to Ward in [George Soane], *New Curiosities of Literature* (1849), II, 192, and John Timbs, *English Eccentrics* (1875), 74. Soane’s characterization represents the general view of the piece: ‘This is one of the many examples…of men combining in themselves the utmost fanaticism of religion with the total absence of any thing like moral feeling.’ More strikingly, it still occurs on contemporary evangelical websites as an instance of wrongful habits in prayer: see for example the article at [www.ephiliopdavis.com/alpha-prayer.pdf](http://www.ephiliopdavis.com/alpha-prayer.pdf). All the modern citations we have found include a reference to Ward,. implying that he meant the words in earnest.[[1]](#endnote-1) The association has become so entrenched that a portion of the prayer is found in the article on Ward in the History of Parliament series.[[2]](#endnote-2)

What no one who has accepted this venerable ascription has done is to go back the original version of the

prayer. This is the way it appeared in the Jacobite newspaper, *Fog’s Weekly Journal,* on 24 July 1731:

If you will allow a Place to any thing besides Politicks, let me recommend a Curiosity to you; it is the dailv Prayer of a Godly Citizen, who goes to *Meeting* every Sunday, and is very well affected to our present wise and able M----s.

O Lord, thou knowest, that I have nine Houses in the City of London, and likewise, that I have lately purchased an Estate in Fee--simple in the County of *Essex*; Lord; I beseech thee to preserve the two Counties of *Essex* and *Middlesex* from Fires and Earthquakes. And, as I have a Mortgage in *Hertfordshire*,I beg thee likewise to have an Eye of Compassion on that County; and, Lord, for the rest of the Counties, thou may’st deal with them as thou art pleased.

O Lord, enable the Bank to answer all their Bills*,* and make all my Debtors *Good* Men. Give a prosperous Voyage and Return to the *Mermaid Sloop,* which I have insured. And, Lord, thou hath said, that the Days of the Wicked are short, and I trust thou wilt not forget thy Promise, having purchased an Estate in Reversion of Sir *J. P.* a profligate Young Man.----Lord, keep our *Funds* from sinking, and, if it be thy Will, let there be no *sinking Funds.* Keep my Son *Caleb* out of Evil Company and Gaming-Houses; and sanctify, O Lord, this Night to me, by preserving me from Thievesand Fire, and make my Servants honest and careful, whilst I, thy Servant, lie down in thee, O Lord. *Amen.*

Plainly, neither Ward nor any other individual is named; and it is equally obvious that this is a satiric portrait of a

grasping City businessman, as seen from the highflying Tory side of politics. The first sign that the traditional story is wrong comes with the date: Ward lived on until 1755, and it is most unlikely that his papers would have been available in 1731. How they would have surfaced in 1828 is far from obvious. While he did have landholdings in Surrey, no evidence has come to light that he owned property in Hertfordshire.[[3]](#endnote-3) He apparently picked up forfeited estates in Essex while engaged in unsuccessful attempts to repair Dagenham Breach in 1713: critics alleged that the cause of his failure was the use of shoddy materials. However, there is no sign that he engaged in marine insurance; or that he owned as many as nine houses in the City. His son was named not Caleb, but Knox. Like most of his kind, he generally supported the Walpole ministry, but his ties were not strong enough for him to avoid expulsion from the House of Commons, a sentence to the pillory for forgery, or ultimate bankruptcy. More generally, the details point to a member of a radical dissenting sect, perhaps the Quakers.[[4]](#endnote-4) Ward had no clear association with any religion, though his brother Joshua (famous for his antimony pills known as the ‘drop’) was buried at his own request in Westminster Abbey.

The writer for *Fog’s* may have picked up an odd feature of John Ward for his portrait. But the satire leaves out many obvious aspects of his career – apart from his representation of venal boroughs, his exclusion from parliament and his spell in the pillory, there is nothing that hints at his involvement with the South Sea Company, an easy target for critics, or his cronyism with his notorious brother.[[5]](#endnote-5) (Both men were implicated in the forgery charge which brought John down.) Pope took care to recall most of these facts. By contrast, the prayer appears to be composed by a morally lax and acquisitive businessman, rather than an embezzler, a forger and an alleged poisoner of animals – which is how contemporaries would have recognized his lineaments. Acquisitive and crooked Ward certainly was – the South Sea Company eventually won an action against him for attempting to salt away assets that had been declared forfeit by transferring them to his brother and son. But ‘Miser’ was not a term people invoked in his regard.

In any case, even if we made the very questionable assumption that Ward was the intended target, this still leaves it clear that he was not the author of the prayer, as has been universally supposed. He can only have been at most the object of its satire.

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1. See for example Gus McLeavy, *The Bathroom Almanac* (New York, 1981), 19: ‘Although it is now highly amusing in its presumption, Ward wrote it as a serious entreaty to his Maker.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *The House of Commons 1690-1715*, ed. D. Hayton, E. Cruickshanks and S. Handley, 5 vols (Cambridge, 2002), V, 803. .V. 803Handley, 2002 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. He also laid claim to an estate near Ipswich as he held a mortgage on the property of a bankrupt. The case went into Chancery and was not settled until the 1770s. Meanwhile his son Knox bought the manorial rights and lived there up to his death in 1741. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Caleb was an especially popular name among the Society of Friends. In John Gay’s ‘The Espousal. A Sober Eclogue. Between two of the People called Quakers’ (1720), the male protagonist is Caleb. Also in 1720, a quaker named Caleb Sturge of Bristol was disowned by the Society for having ‘of late lived a very disorderly life and conversation and very disagreeable to what we make profession of” ([www.sturgefamily.com/Discover/CALEB'S%20FOLLY.htm](http://www.sturgefamily.com/Discover/CALEB'S%20FOLLY.htm)). Knox Ward was successfully sued for breach of promise in 1730 and damages of £2,000 awarded against him: he appealed against the verdict, and a composition was agreed in 1733. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For Ward’s career, see Paul Baines, *The House of Forgery* *in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Aldershot, 1999), 61-80. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)