

The Making of
Mary Russell Mitford's
'Our Village'

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CONTENTS

	page no.
Abbreviations and Notes on Procedure	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Preface	vi
Chapter One An Outline of the Life of Mary Russell Mitford (1787-1855)	1
Section I Previous Biographical Accounts ..	1
Section II Life and Education up to 1820 ..	14
Section III Early Prose Career	29
Section IV 1824-1855	43
Chapter Two The Nature of Mary Mitford's Early Prose	53
Section I Mary Mitford's Response to Village Life	54
Section II 'The Cowslip Ball'	63
Section III 'The Cowslip Ball': Childhood and Fancy	80
Chapter Three Nature and Art	90
Section I Nature	91
Section II Landscape Painting	98
Section III 'graphic description'	119
Section IV 'Dutch picture finishing'	127
Chapter Four The Literary Context	140
Section I Imitators and Antecedents	140
Section II Letter-writing	149
Section III The Conversational Essay	168

				page no.
Chapter Five	Rural Life	..	..	183
Section I	Politics and Literature	..	..	184
Section II	Agricultural Conditions around Three Mile Cross in the Early Nineteenth Century	..	..	187
Section III	Rustic Poverty	..	..	199
Section IV	'The Incendiary'	..	..	221
Section V	Play and Work	..	..	234
Section VI	The Aims and Effects of Mary Mitford's Presentation of Rustic Life	..		246
	Conclusion	..	..	257
	Appendix A: A Selective Chronology of Prose Articles by Mary Mitford			261
	Appendix B: Maps	..	..	271
	Appendix C: Illustrations		..	275
	Select Bibliography	..	..	279

Abbreviations and Notes on Procedure

- Berks C.R.O. Berkshire County Records Office
- B.M. British Museum
- Correspondence W. A. Coles, 'The Correspondence of Mary Russell Mitford and Thomas Noon Talfourd (1821-25)' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Harvard, 1956)
- Friendships The Friendships of Mary Russell Mitford as recorded in Letters from her Literary Correspondents, edited by A. G. L'Estrange, 2 vols (1882)
- Lee Mary Russell Mitford Correspondence with Charles Boner and John Ruskin, edited by Elizabeth Lee (1914)
- L'Estrange, I-III The Life of Mary Russell Mitford as recorded in a Selection from her Letters to her Friends, edited by A. G. L'Estrange, 3 vols (1870)
- OED Oxford English Dictionary
- OV 1-5 and 1.1,
 etc. Mary Russell Mitford, Our Village volumes 1 (1824), 2 (1826), 3 (1828), 4 (1830), 5 (1832). OV is not cited where the context is unequivocal: volume number only is given, followed by page number
- RLI, I-III Mary Russell Mitford, Recollections of a Literary Life, 3 vols (1852)
- TLS The Times Literary Supplement
- Watson Vera Watson, Mary Russell Mitford (1949)

Additional notes:

The place of publication in all instances is London, unless otherwise stated. Nineteenth-century magazine volumes are cited in roman numerals, following the practice of contemporary editors; twentieth-century magazine references are given in arabic numerals. The Our Village volumes are cited in arabic numerals to distinguish them from volume references to any other work.

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Preface

This thesis concerns the making of those sketches in which Mary Russell Mitford's 'village' world first finds literary definition. In addition to examining the quality and appeal of their writing, I wish to demonstrate how these apparently simple essays are in fact the product of a complex range of their author's immediate social and cultural experience and, as such, a reflection of certain aspects of English life in the early 1820s.

Any endeavour to assess Mary Mitford's achievement in her country writings is not helped by the fact that she consistently undervalued her work in this area, insisting that Our Village was 'purely an affair of bread and cheese'¹ and preferring towards the end of her life to be known for her tragedies where, she insisted, 'the true portrait of [her] mind' was to be found.² She regarded her prose output as the inferior side of her creativity and made very few explicit pronouncements as to her intention or method in any of her sketches or tales. None of the manuscripts of individual pieces discussed in this thesis has survived and their literary assessment is based on analysis of the printed works, guided by the few relevant remarks from Mary Mitford's prefaces or letters.

Another area of difficulty arises from the fact that Mary Mitford's literary output was so prolific that one is faced with

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1. Letter to W. C. Bennett, 1 Sept. 1854. B.M., Egerton MS 3774, f.84.
 2. Letter to Charles Boner, 5 Sept. 1854. Lee, p. 281.

considerable problems of selection. I have chosen to concentrate on the early sketches in the belief that they represent the best of her prose. The reputation that she established particularly with those essays which appeared in The Lady's Magazine between September 1822 and August 1824 (later collected into Our Village volumes 1 and 2 (1824 and 1826))¹ paved the way for the success of subsequent work of an increasingly inferior quality. The first edition of the fifth volume of Our Village (1832), for example, was sold out in a day despite the fact that six of its twenty-three items were charades² and the remaining pieces mostly the second-rate fiction of a writer whose prose output by that time had become little more than hack-work, produced in the security of her publisher's conviction that '[her] name would sell anything'.³

The thesis has been organized thematically with individual sketches being considered as they relate to the particular subjects covered in each chapter. This method has been preferred as the similarity of style and content between the early sketches would have made a purely chronological account of them repetitive.

Chapter 1 outlines the biographical facts of Mary Mitford's life, stressing in particular those areas of her experience that relate to the production of the early sketches. In Chapter 2 the nature and method of her early prose and the human response that underlies the sketches is demonstrated through the analysis

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1. See Appendix A.
 2. Co-written with William Harness.
 3. Mrs Trollope to Mary Mitford, 23 April 1832. Friendships, I, 233.

of a typical essay. In Chapter 3 Mary Mitford's views on nature are discussed in the context of her understanding of landscape painting and the broader influence of the visual arts in determining the innovative quality of her prose descriptions is also considered. Her relationship to her literary contemporaries, and in particular to the prose essayists of the early 1820s, is discussed in Chapter 4, as is the relationship between her own letters and her published prose. Chapter 5 aims to bring together the various threads of influence outlined in the preceding chapters to demonstrate how Mary Mitford blended fact with fancy to achieve a realistic yet idyllic image of rustic life in and around her village of Three Mile Cross. The truth of her pictures is measured against accounts of Berkshire life in the early 1820s taken from contemporary historical documents and local archive sources. Her success in mitigating the often harsh reality of rural life in her early work is set against her later failure in her presentation of the agricultural riots that swept southern England in the winter of 1830.

I shall not discuss the sketches of fashionable life nor the childhood recollections that constitute an important part of Mary Mitford's early prose-output except insofar as they relate to the 'village' writings. However, full details of their original publication are given in Appendix A, which is a selective chronology of prose articles by Mary Mitford dating from 1821 to 1841. No previous chronology of her individual essays has been compiled and the true order of her publications is generally obscured by the fact that the vast majority of her individual prose pieces, originally meant for magazines

or annuals, were subsequently re-published in comparatively random order in Our Village (five volumes, 1824-32), Belford Regis (1835), Country Stories (1837) or Atherton and Tales (1854). Her poetry and tragedies, her editorial work and the later tales will be mentioned only as they relate to the general outline of her career.

Appendix B consists of three maps which illustrate the geographical location of 'our village' and its surroundings, confirming the impression of accuracy that is generated by the descriptions of the early sketches. In Appendix C three paintings are reproduced to illuminate certain points regarding Mary Mitford's relationship with her artist contemporaries.

In December 1825 Mary Mitford wrote, 'It is mere accident that has put my prose into fashion at present'.¹ By this time her popularity was well established. In March 1825 the first volume of Our Village, within a year of its original publication, had gone to press for 'a third very large edition'² and she was in constant demand for more essays in the style of the first series. I intend to demonstrate that such success was no 'mere accident'. Mary Mitford captured the imagination of a large section of the reading public partly because she had successfully encapsulated in her writing certain contemporary trends of thought and feeling about the artistic representation of English

1. Letter to T. N. Talfourd, 15 Dec. 1825. Correspondence, p. 522. MS Harvard.

2. Mary Mitford to Haydon, 19 March 1825. MS Reading Reference Library. The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford in 6 vols, f. 512.

landscape and rural life. Through an understated, associative technique she is able to bring together a diverse array of material, pleasurably and without controversy. Meanwhile, the calm, apparently easy, flow of her prose is at once an apt expression of her belief in the soothing and restorative qualities of nature and of the genuine good feeling that is the shaping artistic vision of Our Village.

Chapter One

An Outline of the Life of Mary Russell Mitford (1787-1855)

The precise nature of the evolution of Mary Mitford's early sketches has never been fully explained. I believe that this neglect derives in part from the over-simplified accounts of her life and character that have been written since her death. Section I of this chapter is therefore devoted to a brief survey of these accounts and endeavours to explain the origins of some misplaced areas of emphasis which, in my view, have probably inhibited serious analysis of her work. In Sections II and III I give a selective account of her early life, emphasising those areas of her experience that relate to the production of the 'village' sketches. The final thirty years of her life and the reasons for the decline in the quality of her prose during this time are briefly described in Section IV.

Section I - Previous Biographical Accounts

Mary Mitford was, as W. J. Keith observes in his brief but perceptive evaluation of her presentation of rural life, 'a far more complex figure than is usually recognized'.¹ The vast majority of material that has been written about her since her death has in fact been biographical, concentrating on the more sensational aspects of her domestic life and consequently neglecting the full range of her literary and artistic experience

1. W. J. Keith, 'Mary Russell Mitford' in The Rural Tradition (Toronto, 1975), p. 87.

or her awareness of contemporary social issues. This general denial of the complexity of her experience has led to two erroneous views: that the cheerful persona of the sketches is a complete self-portrait and that the sketches are an inexplicable anomaly within the context of a domestic life of almost unrelieved anxiety and drudgery.

Because of the literary aims which will be explained in Chapter 2, Mary Mitford's accounts of her experience in her village sketches tend to stress the sunnier side of her life. In later years she sought to redress the fairly simple image of herself that she had created in her early prose by publishing her memoirs in 1852 as Recollections of a Literary Life and bringing out in 1854 a collected edition of her plays,¹ insisting to her contemporaries that 'the true portrait of [her] mind' was to be found in 'the Tragedies and the Dramatic Scenes'.²

An ironic example of how futile were such endeavours to dispel her earlier self-made prose image emerges from her relations with John Ruskin (1819-1900) whom she first met in January 1847 and corresponded with until her death in 1855. Much of their correspondence was of a literary nature and, following the publication of the collected edition of her plays, she explained to him:

My only reason for leaving a mode of composition I loved so well was the necessity of earning a fixed and certain income - and the terrible uncertainty between managers, actors and licensers of all earnings on the stage.³

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1. The Dramatic Works of Mary Russell Mitford, 2 vols (1854).
 2. Letter to Charles Boner, 5 Sept. 1854. Lee, p. 281. See also Preface.
 3. 2 August 1854. Lee, p. 280.

Ruskin's taste, however, was for her country writings. He considered Atherton, the much-delayed sentimental novel she finally published in 1854, one of her best works:

I have just finished 'Atherton', to my great regret, thinking it one of the sweetest things you have ever written, and receiving from it the same kind of refreshment which I do from lying on the grass in spring.¹

It is his appreciation of her work that predominates in the sketch of Mary Mitford herself that appears in his autobiographical reminiscence, 'My First Editor', in 1878:

Merry Miss Mitford, actually living in the country, actually walking in it, loving it, and finding history enough in the life of the butcher's boy, and romance enough in the story of the miller's daughter, to occupy all her mind with ...²

This unbalanced, almost comically inaccurate, tribute is a perpetuation of the image presented in the sketches and tales rather than a representation of the much more sophisticated old lady with whom he had been personally acquainted.

The distorted portrayal of Mary Mitford's life to be found in every single biography of her derives partly from the limited image of the sketches and tales and partly from her earliest biographer's strong personal feelings about her domestic situation. The Rev. William Harness (1790-1869) was joint executor³ of Mary Mitford's will. He intended, after her death, with her foreknowledge and co-operation, to publish her life and

1. 24 March 1854. Lee, p. 268.
2. 'My First Editor. An Autobiographical Reminiscence. 1st Feb., 1878' in The Works of John Ruskin, edited by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (1903-12), XXXIV, 103.
3. The other executor was Thomas May, her physician.

correspondence. He had known her from childhood: his father had given away her mother, then Miss Russell, on her marriage to Dr Mitford and also administered the trust by which, after Miss Russell's marriage, she retained £3,500 of the fortune she had recently inherited from her parents. Dr Mitford at the time of his marriage was in what William Harness later described as a state of 'deplorable poverty'¹ and since it is clear that by 1797 his wife's fortune had almost entirely disappeared, it was inevitable that the Harness family, as old friends of the Russells, should feel hostile to such an apparent wastrel. On his father's death, William became the trustee of the £3,500 which was subsequently held on Mary Mitford's behalf after Mrs Mitford's death in 1830. He was her closest confidant throughout her financial troubles and, as such, was aware of many details concerning Dr Mitford's extravagance and financial irresponsibility. In 1833, for example, she wrote the following note to him:

I write in great haste, just to caution you in case you should receive any authority, or pretended authority, from any quarter, to sell out our money in the funds, not to do so without communicating with me. I have no doubt of my father's integrity, but I think him likely to be imposed upon.²

Harness replied that the money should not be touched and added:

I do not doubt Dr. Mitford's integrity, but I have not the slightest confidence in his prudence; and I am fully satisfied that, if these three thousand and odd hundreds of pounds were placed at his disposal to-day, they would fly the way so many other thousands have gone before them, to-morrow.³

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1. Harness to L'Estrange, 1 Sept. 1866. A. G. L'Estrange, The Literary Life of the Rev. William Harness (1871), p. 270.
 2. Christmas Eve [1833]. L'Estrange, III, 9.
 3. 26 Dec. 1833. L'Estrange, III, 10. Harness's italics.

Harness's opinion of Dr Mitford is more strongly expressed in his correspondence with the Rev. A. G. L'Estrange, who assisted him in the task of editing and arranging Mary Mitford's letters:

I write 'The Doctor used to tell his friends that he should settle the money on his daughter.' You write 'inform'. Why, my dear boy, the old brute never informed his friends of anything. To 'inform' implies some kind of seriousness and solemnity in relating a matter - which the Doctor never had. All that his friends ever knew of him or his affairs - or whatever, false or true, that he intended them to believe about them - came out carelessly from him in his loose, disjointed talk.¹

A month later he wrote, 'My disgust of the old father increases with every letter I read'² and in another letter he insists that 'some of her "dearest loves" and overflowing affection to that humbug, her father, must be slightly mitigated'.³

Harness died before the biography (linked by an extensive selection of letters) was finally published in three volumes in 1870, misleadingly under L'Estrange's name alone, as The Life of Mary Russell Mitford, related in a Selection from her Letters to her Friends. This was followed in 1882 by The Friendships of Mary Russell Mitford, as recorded in Letters from her Literary Correspondents, edited by L'Estrange in two volumes. The presentation of Dr Mitford in both L'Estrange works is coloured by Harness's strong dislike for him and it is probable that much of the text in the Life was in fact written by Harness rather than L'Estrange. It is prefaced by an address to the reader written by Harness shortly before his death. There he says:

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1. 5 June 1866. L'Estrange, Life of Harness (1871), p. 259. Harness's italics.
 2. 16 July 1866. L'Estrange, Life of Harness (1871), p. 265.
 3. 26 Sept. 1866. L'Estrange, Life of Harness (1871), p. 273.

I was prompted to give the story of her life, not only by my admiration of her genius, but from feeling that such an example of self-sacrifice to filial duty as her life affords, ought not to be left without a record.¹

It is an emphasis on the notion of 'self-sacrifice' that dominates the work. It is reflected both in the selection of letters and within the body of the biographical text where the presentation of Dr Mitford is characterized by such terms as these:

He had high animal spirits, and a joyous constitutional good humour, so long as he was pleased; but it was accompanied by a corresponding amount of irascibility if his wishes were thwarted ... he was ... utterly selfish at heart, and incapable of sacrificing the slightest inclination of his own for the welfare of his wife, or even of his daughter.²

In Friendships he is described as 'one of those good-looking, profligate spendthrifts',³ and it is suggested that Mary Mitford's regard for him was 'mostly due to filial devotion'.⁴

This view is given a new twist by Henry Chorley (1808-1872), another early Mitford biographer, who describes her story as that of 'a credulous woman sacrificing herself to an utterly worthless idol'.⁵ Although Chorley had been personally acquainted with Mary Mitford, he was also Harness's first assistant in editing the letters and in his own two-volume work, The Letters and Life of M. R. Mitford (Second Series) (1872), a less restrained version of Harness's view of Dr Mitford emerges.

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1. L'Estrange, I, iii. This address is signed 'One of Mary Russell Mitford's executors' and is dated 21 Oct. 1869.
 2. L'Estrange, I, 6.
 3. Friendships, I, 19.
 4. Friendships, I, 20.
 5. Chorley, I, 2.

The Harness influence is similarly evident in a biographical sketch of Mary Mitford by S. C. Hall in A Book of Memories of Great Men and Women of the Age (1871). Hall had been acquainted with Mary Mitford in the early stages of her prose career when he was editor of The Amulet, one of the many annuals to which she contributed in the late 1820s and early 1830s.¹ His wife was one of Mary Mitford's early imitators and dedicated her first edition of Sketches of Irish Character (2 vols, 1829) to her. Although the Halls visited Three Mile Cross, there is no evidence to suggest that they were personally acquainted with Dr Mitford (who tended to avoid his daughter's literary associates) and therefore it is likely that the following account derives from Harness and L'Estrange's Life, which is acknowledged in a footnote:

All his life long [Dr Mitford] had an exaggerated value of himself, and was the very embodiment of selfishness. That terrible defect in character was encouraged and strengthened by his wife and daughter. They seem to have considered it an honour to be his slaves, and to have derived happiness from any sacrifices that could enhance his pleasure ... It is a melancholy and very degrading picture - that which brings before us the sensualist at his club in London, and the wife and daughter in their poor cottage, beseeching him to send them if but a pound ...²

This melodramatic account is very damaging both to Dr Mitford and to an understanding of his daughter. The image of her and Mrs Mitford begging for money probably derives from Hall's reading of Harness/L'Estrange's account of how, in 1811, the family were 'reduced to great distress for want of money'

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1. See Appendix A for details of her contributions to The Amulet.
 2. 'Mary Russell Mitford' in A Book of Memories of Great Men and Women of the Age (1871), p. 437.

owing to 'some unexplained extravagance of Dr. Mitford'.¹

Mrs Mitford then wrote to her husband:

I shall depend on a little supply of cash tomorrow, to settle with Frank and Henry as the few shillings I have left will not more than suffice for letters, and such trifles.²

At this time the Mitfords were still living at Bertram House, their mansion home at Grazeley.³ By the time they had moved to their cottage at Three Mile Cross Mary Mitford had taken over the family finances and there was then no occasion on which such a 'degrading picture' could have taken place. The image is, however, indicative of the caricatured presentation of Mary Mitford's relationship with her father that was to become a feature of subsequent biographies.

From the 1870s to the present day every biographical account of Mary Mitford has focussed strongly on Dr Mitford's improvidence and extravagances and the besotted tolerance of his wife and daughter for what is described by one biographer as his 'almost inhuman selfishness'.⁴ The influence of such judgements is evident in the biographical sketches that introduce selected editions of Our Village. In her lively and appreciative introduction to the 1893 illustrated edition, for example, Anne Thackeray Ritchie asks, after quoting from a letter in which Mary Mitford praises her father:

Was ever filial piety so irritating as hers?
It is difficult to bear, with any patience,
her praises of Dr. Mitford.⁵

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1. L'Estrange, I, 116.
 2. 21 Jan. 1811. L'Estrange, I, 116.
 3. See Appendix B, Map 1. The variant spelling to appear there is 'Grazely'.
 4. W. J. Roberts, Mary Russell Mitford, The Tragedy of a Blue Stocking (1913), p. 293.
 5. Our Village (1893), p. xxxiv.

The same impatience with Dr Mitford appears in the foreword to the illustrated edition that was published by J. M. Dent in 1904 as part of the English Idylls series:

Such, indeed, was [Mary Mitford's] life, made sordid and in part miserable through the diversions of a father, of whom it is difficult to speak with patience or find in his character one redeeming principle.¹

An emphasis on Dr Mitford's irresponsibility is also evident in Vera Watson's Mary Russell Mitford (1949), by far the most accurate biography to have appeared since her death. While Vera Watson generally subscribed to the post-Harness condemnation of Dr Mitford, presenting him as 'a moral coward' (p. 98), and speaking at different points of his 'childish vanity' (p. 104) and his 'egotistical vanity' (p. 187), she is nevertheless sceptical about Harness as a reliable source of information. She rightly points out that:

... it is owing to information vouchsafed by him that so many erroneous statements about the Mitford family, and in particular Dr. Mitford, have been perpetuated. (p. 9)

She discredits Harness's account of certain events,² observing that Harness's dislike for Dr Mitford suggests 'that he would not take much trouble to verify any information derogatory to the Doctor' (p. 29). Although she is aware of the close connection between Harness and L'Estrange³ and casts doubts on Hall as a reliable source (p. 27), her questionings seem to have been limited to particulars while the emphasis of her account follows theirs in its concentration on Mary Mitford's domestic anxieties, thus, within that context, presenting

1. Our Village (1904), p. xi.
2. e.g., pp. 9-10, 11, 28-29.
3. 'Foreword', pp. xiii-xiv.

Dr Mitford simply as a worthless spendthrift.

The most recent evaluation of Mary Mitford's life and work is Margaret Lane's Introduction to the 1982 Oxford Paperback reprint of an earlier selected edition of Our Village.¹ This gives a somewhat muddled and, at times, inaccurate account of Mary Mitford's career,² despite an evident appreciation of some of the literary qualities of Our Village. It recalls the earlier biographies most specifically in its presentation of Dr Mitford as 'the hero-villain of the piece', a 'rascal', 'enthroned in [his daughter's] imagination as something between a child and a demanding god'.³

This abiding image of Dr Mitford is not without some foundation, and it is undoubtedly true that he was financially irresponsible, precipitating his daughter into an intensive literary career and then relying on the income from her writings 'as if it were money in the funds'.⁴ There is also, however, a much more positive side to his relationship with her. His existence was no more wholly 'self-centred [and] absolutely selfish' than hers was wholly 'generous, humble, beautiful',⁵ but it is probably as a result of this kind of emphasis that no biographer has taken seriously his activities as a magistrate. This was an important area of his life which brought both him

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1. Published by Harrap in 1947 with an Introduction by W. J. Roberts. The 1947 illustrations by Joan Hassall are retained in the Oxford edition.
 2. e.g. She is erroneously described as having written the original 'Our Village' sketch 'to please herself' (p. vii); it is also implied that she wrote only four tragedies (p. vii) whereas she wrote eight, of which six have been published (see Section III below).
 3. pp. vi and ix.
 4. Mary Mitford to Miss Jephson, 20 August 1838. L'Estrange, III, 92.
 5. A. T. Ritchie, Introduction to OV (1893), p. xxxiv.

and his daughter into contact with the more distressing social realities of the day. Again, in dwelling too much on her 'foolish and docile ... incomprehensible infatuation',¹ no biography sufficiently takes into account the nature of Mary Mitford's literary and artistic contacts in the formative early stages of her career. Effectively, the unbalanced emphasis on her domestic troubles has led to a neglect of the intricate relationship between the broader aspects of her life and work.

A fuller picture of Mary Mitford's life emerges from her correspondence. The most important published collection of letters remain those edited by Harness/L'Estrange in Life and L'Estrange in Friendships. It is clear from the surviving manuscripts² of these letters that they have at times been quite heavily cut or inaccurately transcribed (as Harness's directive that Mary Mitford's 'overflowing affection to that humbug, her father, must be slightly mitigated'³ would suggest). These and subsequent editions of her correspondence are detailed in R. J. Hart's unpublished bibliography of Mary Mitford's works, with indications as to where many of the manuscripts are held.⁴

Perhaps the most interesting letters are those which have not been published for it is these that most effectively redress the imbalanced accounts of the biographies. While Vera Watson

1. W. J. Roberts, op. cit., p. 12.

2. Most of which are held by Reading Reference Library.

3. See above, p. 5.

4. R. J. Hart, 'Mary Russell Mitford: A Bibliography' (unpublished thesis submitted for Fellowship of the Library Association, 1981), pp. 307-313, 327-363. This bibliography was compiled without reference to the Coles thesis-edition and does not include the Harvard MSS of the Mitford-Talfourd correspondence.

makes quite widespread use of manuscript letters, she has limited herself to those available in England. An invaluable collection of unpublished correspondence has been transcribed and edited by W. A. Coles in his thesis-edition, 'The Correspondence of Mary Russell Mitford and Thomas Noon Talfourd¹ (1821-1825)' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Harvard, 1956). This admirably collates material from manuscript letters held by Harvard University Library, the John Rylands Library, Manchester, the Bodleian Library, Oxford, the British Museum and Yale University Library. These letters cover the vital early years of Mary Mitford's prose career and, although the facts relating to her publications have been abstracted by Coles into two separate articles,² the correspondence as a whole creates a vivid picture of her life at that time. This picture is supplemented by an interesting two-part article, 'Thomas Noon Talfourd and his Friends', published by Vera Watson in 1956.³ The article is based on her discovery of a collection of Talfourd correspondence not covered in her biography or included in the Coles thesis.⁴

The following account of Mary Mitford's life is based on a collation of material from her biographies, related biographies

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1. Thomas Noon Talfourd (1795-1854), later known as Serjeant Talfourd, was called to the bar in 1821 and became M.P. for Reading in 1837. He was the executor and first biographer of Lamb.
 2. 'Mary Russell Mitford: the Inauguration of a Literary Career', Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, Manchester, 40 (Manchester, 1957-58), 33-46.
'Magazine and other Contributions by Mary Russell Mitford and Thomas Noon Talfourd', Studies in Bibliography, (Charlottesville, 1959), pp. 218-226.
 3. The Times Literary Supplement 20 and 27 April 1956, pp. 244 and 260.
 4. I have not been able to trace the location of this correspondence.

of her friends, all published editions of her letters and those of her friends as are relevant, as many of her unpublished letters as possible, her diary for 1819-1823¹ and the accounts of herself given in her published work. It is supplemented by local archive material from Berkshire County Records Office. This material, particularly the Shinfield Parish Records, expands our knowledge of the Mitfords' property at Three Mile Cross and provides certain information relating to their servants and other individuals who subsequently feature in Mary Mitford's published work. In addition, these unpublished records provide valuable evidence of the nature of Dr Mitford's role as resident magistrate for the parish during the years that the Our Village sketches were conceived and written.

In this chapter, as throughout the thesis, I have quoted letters from published versions where available and from L'Estrange in preference to any other printed source, although many letters are duplicated in later collections. Where a manuscript letter is included by Coles I refer to his edition, stating at the end of each reference where the manuscript is held. I have followed his dating and conjectural insertions of specific words where the legibility of the manuscript is occasionally unclear.

1. The diary is written in The Literary Pocket Book; or Companion for the Lover of Nature and Art, 1819. The entries for 1819 and 1820 are fairly expansive, but those for 1821-23 are increasingly compressed and illegible. The diary covers the period from 1 Jan. 1819 to 11 March 1823. It is inscribed as having been given to Mary Mitford by her father. It is held by the British Library. C.60.6.7.

Section II - Life and Education up to 1820

Mary Russell Mitford was born at Alresford in Hampshire on 16 December 1787.¹ She was effectively the only child² of George Mitford (1760-1842) and Mary Russell (1750-1830) who were married in 1785, shortly after the deaths of both Mary Russell's parents.³ While Miss Russell was sole heiress to her parents' fortune,⁴ it is believed that George Mitford, widely known as Dr Mitford, was at that time trying to establish a medical practice in Alresford.⁵ Dr Mitford's medical qualifications are uncertain. He came from a Northumberland family of surgeons and apothecaries,⁶ but there is no evidence to suggest that he ever obtained an M.D. or indeed received any other medical qualification.⁷ He was, however, an assistant dispenser at Haslar Naval Hospital from 1780-82⁸ and it is clear that he did have some medical knowledge from an incidental remark in one of Mary Mitford's letters, probably more reliable evidence than her unverifiable statement in Recollections of a Literary Life that he was 'a graduate of Edinburgh, a house pupil

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1. This is erroneously written as 1786 on her tomb-stone and followed by S. C. Hall in A Book of Memories of Great Men and Women of the Age (1871), p. 433.
 2. An infant son had died on 23 Nov. 1786. Baptismal register for New Alresford Church. Quoted by W. J. Roberts, Mary Russell Mitford (1917), p. 17.
 3. Watson, p. 2.
 4. Estimated to be in the region of £28,000. See also above, p. 4.
 5. Watson, p. 4.
 6. The Northumberland County History Committee, The Northumberland County History, 15 vols (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1893-1940), III, 298-299.
 7. This is discussed by Watson, Appendix II, pp. 310-311. I have checked all possible sources and can find no further evidence.
 8. Watson, p. 4.

of John Hunter'.¹ Writing to Talfourd in 1824 on the death of his infant son she mentions the baby's 'organic defects' and observes, 'My father always attributed his sufferings to that cause, and therefore feared that you would not rear him to manhood'.² It is also evident that he nursed Mrs Mitford during her bouts of illness in the 1820s.³ However, medicine does not seem to have played a large part in Dr Mitford's public life and he was better known in Berkshire circles as a magistrate from the time of his qualification in 1804.⁴

During Mary Mitford's early childhood the family moved from Alresford to Reading, then to Lyme Regis and in 1797 to London. By this time it appears that the Russell fortune had entirely disappeared and all that remained was the income from the trust administered at that time by Dr Harness. It is clear that Dr Mitford was in the habit of gambling and on his daughter's tenth birthday he took her to a lottery office to choose a ticket for an Irish lottery just about to be drawn. By an incredible stroke of good fortune, she chose a winning ticket and the family suddenly found themselves in possession of an unexpected twenty thousand pounds. In her account of this event in Recollections of a Literary Life Mary Mitford wistfully observes:

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1. RLL, II, 281.
 2. 12 May 1824. Correspondence, p. 379. MS Harvard.
 3. e.g. 21 Dec. 1823. 'I cannot be thankful enough for the present escape. Mr. Sherwood's skill & Papa's nursing saved her.' Correspondence, p. 358. MS Harvard.
 4. 2 Oct. 1804. Berkshire Magistrates Roll. Berks C.R.O.

Ah me! In less than twenty years what was left of the produce of the ticket so strangely chosen? What? except a Wedgwood dinner-service that my father had had made to commemorate the event, with the Irish harp within the border on one side, and his family crest on the other.¹

The making of this dinner service² is indicative of the luxurious lifestyle adopted by the family in their new-found wealth. Mary was sent away to school³ in London and plans were made for the building of Bertram House at Grazeley, near Reading.⁴

From 1797 until 1810 the Mitfords lived in apparent affluence, establishing themselves in Bertram House some time before 1804,⁵ claiming kin with the wealthy Mitfords of Mitford in Northumberland⁶ (whom Dr Mitford visited with his daughter in 1806), and consolidating their position as leading figures in Berkshire social circles. It was also at this time that Dr Mitford (an ardent Whig) became heavily involved in politics.

Up until 1810 Mary Mitford's letters do not reveal any excessive anxiety about money, but during 1810 it is clear that Dr Mitford was in some difficulties. He received in March a summons for non-payment of taxes⁷ and in May his daughter cautioned him to be careful in his dealings with some dubious

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1. RLL, II, 293-4.
 2. The remains of which are held by Reading Museum.
 3. The school was at 22, Hans Place, Chelsea. It was run by M. de St. Quintin, a French emigré and friend of Dr Mitford.
 4. The house was built on the site of Grazeley Court, an old farmhouse which was demolished by the Mitfords soon after its purchase. See Appendix B, Map 1.
 5. See L'Estrange, I, 28.
 6. See Watson, Appendix I, p. 308 for the genealogy of the Mitford family.
 7. Mary Mitford to Dr Mitford, 27 March 1810. L'Estrange, I, 94.

business associates.¹ In January 1811 some of the family pictures were taken by creditors² and it was at this time that Mrs Mitford wrote to her husband anxiously asking for 'a little supply of cash'.³ Matters appear to have worsened rapidly for it seems that in March Dr Mitford was imprisoned for debt.⁴ He was released on the strength of a loan raised on his pictures and it appears to have been decided that Bertram House must be sold. 'Once out of debt and settled in some quiet cottage', Mary Mitford wrote to her father, 'we shall all be well and happy again'.⁵

The precise cause of this second ruin is not clear, but it appears to have been a combination of extravagant living, imprudent financial speculations and gambling. The sale of Bertram House was by no means a straightforward matter. The eventual buyer, Charles Elliott,⁶ questioned the validity of Dr Mitford's title deed to part of the land and refused to complete the purchase. Dr Mitford's decision to take legal action against him led to a ruinous chancery suit that was not finally settled until 1819. During this time the family continued to live at Bertram House, but with a reduced

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1. Letter to Dr Mitford, 10 May 1810. L'Estrange, I, 104.
 2. Mary Mitford to Dr Mitford, 21 Jan. 1811. L'Estrange, I, 116.
 3. L'Estrange, I, 116. See above, pp. 7-8.
 4. L'Estrange, I, 118.
 5. 3 March 1811. L'Estrange, I, 118.
 6. A Bond Street upholsterer. The house was sold for £5,985. See Watson, pp. 106-7 for a more detailed account of the sale and the complications that followed.

establishment of servants. The house gradually fell into disrepair and in May 1814 Mary Mitford described its state in the following terms:

... now it is desolation more desolate ...
 a sort of new ruin, half inhabited ... The
 gravel is covered with moss - the turf
 turned into pasture - the shrubberies into
 thickets.¹

All the same, the family's pursuits remained those that had occupied them up to 1811. They continued to socialize with local families; Dr Mitford maintained his kennel of greyhounds and still attended coursing meetings. He continued to indulge his interest in politics and to pursue his activities as a magistrate.

Mary Mitford's own life from 1802-1820 reflects the dichotomy of interests that characterizes her later years. Her pleasures were divided between literature and the countryside, both offering relief from the various worldly cares that assailed the family. Her love of the countryside at this time will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3, but it is perhaps worth giving a brief account at this stage of the literary and artistic friends who helped shape her writing during these early years.

It was at school in Hans Place, Chelsea (which she attended from 1798-1802) that, being taught to a large extent by French emigrés, she acquired a fluency in the language which enabled her in later life to read French literature with as much facility as she could read English. It was also at this time that her

1. Letter to Sir William Elford, 5 April 1814. L'Estrange, I, 261.

interest in literature was first stimulated by Fanny Rowden, or 'Miss R.', the 'English teacher' of the 'Boarding School Recollections':

With her I first became acquainted with Pope's Homer, Dryden's Virgil, and the Paradise Lost ... After these master-poets we turned to some peculiar favourites of her own, Akenside, whom I could not understand then, (neither can I now,) and Young, whom I could not read. Three weary evenings did we consume over his first three nights: but the lecture was so dismal, so afflicting, and my impatience and ennuï were so contagious, that at last we fairly gave him up. I have never opened the Night Thoughts since; the bare recollection of that attempt is enough.¹

This early dislike for Young's poetry prefigures Mary Mitford's lifelong aversion to 'the dismal' in literature, a response that was to colour her presentation of rustic society in her own 'village' sketches and at the end of her life to inhibit her appreciation of novels that dealt with painful social issues, such as Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) of which she wrote:

I read about a hundred pages, and found the book so painful, that I put it down, and certainly am not likely to take it up again.²

It appears from Mary Mitford's own account that Fanny Rowden was the first person to interest her in Shakespeare and the theatre³ and it is equally likely that it was reading Fanny Rowden's poems that inspired her to start writing poetry. The teacher-pupil relationship extended into a friendship of many years' duration and Fanny Rowden's address⁴ still appears in

1. OV 2.148.
2. Letter to William Harness, 10 Nov. 1852. L'Estrange, III, 245.
3. 'The English Teacher'. OV 2.148-9.
4. 'Mrs Rowden - No. 6 L'Allée des Veuves Champs Elisées Paris.' Fanny Rowden had returned to France with the St. Quintins after the fall of Napoleon. She later married M. de St. Quintin. (See Mary Mitford to Talfourd, 10-13 Sept. 1825. Correspondence, p. 493. MS Harvard.)

Mary Mitford's diary for 1819-23, although the friendship appears to have cooled after a quarrel¹ in 1811 concerning a proposed joint translation of Lucien Bonaparte's Charlemagne.² During the early 1800s, however, Fanny Rowden was clearly a formative literary influence on Mary Mitford.

An example of Mary Mitford's early work is a poem entitled 'On Revisiting the school where I was educated'. Published in Poems (1810), it is addressed to 'Miss Rowden, of Hans Place' and concludes with the following tribute:

Lov'd friend of childhood's early day,
Still deign to guide my devious way!
What though I fondly strive in vain
Like you to frame the polish'd strain;
Though no bright rays of genius fire,
But faintly breathes the trembling lyre;
Yet be your bright example mine
And lead my steps to virtue's shrine.³

Fanny Rowden's own attempts 'to frame the polish'd strain' culminated in 1810 with the publication of The Pleasures of Friendship,⁴ dedicated to 'Miss Mitford, of Bertram House, near Reading'. The poem, written in heroic couplets, extols the virtues of friendship and is illustrated by many allusions both to classical literature and to more modern works. It concludes with the supposedly true story of Bessy Bell and Mary Gray, two friends who lived and died together during the great plague in Scotland in 1666. The same story is used (with

1. See footnote, L'Estrange, I, 159.

2. It was finally translated by the Rev. S. Butler and the Rev. Francis Hodgson. It was published in English in 1814.

3. Poems (1810), p. 34.

4. The Pleasures of Friendship, a poem, in two parts by Frances Arabella Rowden (1810). The poem went into two more editions, the last in 1818.

an acknowledgement to Miss Rowden) by Mary Mitford in the second volume of her poems.¹

Although there is little merit in Mary Mitford's early verse, it nevertheless gave her a facility in the medium that was to stand her in good stead for the writing of her blank verse tragedies in the 1820s and 30s. At the same time, it gave her a limited literary status so that it was a natural step for her to turn to writing when it became necessary for her to take up a career to support her parents after the move to Three Mile Cross.

That up to at least 1809 she was writing for pleasure rather than profit is evident from the following note to Dr Mitford:

I am very much obliged to Mr. Plomer for his good opinion of my trifles; but I should be a thousand times more so if he would exert any influence he may have with those literary despots, the Edinburgh Reviewers, in favour of dear, dear Miss Rowden.²

It does not appear to have been until 1811 that she first thought seriously of making money from her poetry. In this year she published an enlarged edition of Poems (1810) and her first long narrative poem, Christina, Maid of the South Seas,³ based on the story of the mutiny on the 'Bounty'. She then began work on 'Blanch of Castile',⁴ apparently the first of her works to be conceived partly in terms of its potential financial

1. 'Bessy Bell and Mary Gray', Poems (1811).
2. 7 Feb. 1809. *L'Estrange*, I, 68-9.
3. This was begun in July 1810. It is dedicated to Sir William Elford.
4. Published in full in Narrative Poems on the Female Character, in the Various Relations of Life (1813). Canto I, sections xiv and xv previously appeared as 'A Portrait' and Canto II, section xxi as 'Infantile Love' in Poems (1811), pp. 56 and 179.

reward. In July 1811 she wrote to Dr Mitford:

I wish to heaven anybody would give me some
[money]: If I get none for 'Blanch' I shall
give up the trade in despair.¹

In August she writes, 'We ought to get something by it'² and later in the year she was evidently quarrelling with Fanny Rowden specifically over financial terms for the proposed translation of Charlemagne.³

This new association of the pastime of "'the clever Mary Mitford'"⁴ with making money derives from the sudden and disastrous decline in the family fortunes which led to the decision to sell Bertram House. In the hope of a favourable outcome from the Chancery suit, the financial crisis was not accepted until 1820. During these years of uncertainty Mary Mitford published only Watlington Hill, Ode to Genius (1812) and Narrative Poems on the Female Character (1813). This relatively low output would suggest that she did not seriously pursue far beyond 1811 the idea of repairing the ailing family fortunes by her poetry writing.

She did, however, continue to read avidly and her letters provide detailed evidence of her literary tastes. A fairly

1. 12 July 1811. L'Estrange, I, 144.
2. Letter to Dr Mitford, ? Aug. 1811. L'Estrange, I, 144.
3. 'Fanny Rowden means to cheat us if she can'. Undated fragment, as note to letter to Dr Mitford, 21 Oct. 1811. L'Estrange, I, 159.
4. A term by which she was known to distinguish her from relatives of the same name. See her letter to Mrs Mitford, 29 May 1809. L'Estrange, I, 82.

typical letter is one to Sir William Elford (1749-1837) dated 31 October 1814. In it she identifies Waverley as being by Sir Walter Scott ('if there be any belief in internal evidence it must be his'), observes that she thought Pride and Prejudice 'extremely good', recommends Sarah Burney's Traits of Nature, condemns Anna Seward, praises Joanna Baillie and - perhaps most significantly as far as her prose sketches are concerned - is enraptured by Isaak Walton's Compleat Angler.¹ I regard the later years at Bertram House as more than 'seven years ... of hibernation, during which no progress was made in her literary career'.² They were years in which her taste and her judgement developed and in which she acquired - largely through her prolific letter-writing - a facility in prose that was to enable her to embark, when necessary, on the next phase of her literary career.

The distinctive quality of the Our Village sketches derives in part from the intensification between 1810 and 1820 of Mary Mitford's early interest in the visual arts. Up to 1810 her letters reveal a strong interest in painting with representations of landscape particularly appealing to her country-loving taste. While in London in 1806 she visited the second annual exhibition of the Old Water Colour Society³ which she enthusiastically described as 'even better worth seeing than last year'⁴ and later that year she was introduced to Claude

1. L'Estrange, I, 292-4.

2. Watson, p. 109.

3. Held in Brook St from 21 April to 14 June 1806.

4. Letter to Mrs Mitford, 12 May 1806. L'Estrange, I, 33.

Lorraine's Liber Veritatis¹ when on her visit to Northumberland with Dr Mitford.² In 1809 she appears to have been left unmoved by the portraits she encountered at the Royal Academy, preferring 'Wilkie's two paintings ... a few of Westall's ... and some very fine marine landscapes by Louthembourg'.³ A more significant indication of her artistic predilections is the fact that 'after our three hour's squeeze' in the Academy, she and her companions then proceeded to the 'exhibition of Water Colours in Spring Gardens'. There, she says, 'I was indeed delighted'.⁴ Watercolour painting at that time was, of course, almost exclusively devoted to representations of landscape.

Mary Mitford's love of the countryside and landscape-painting was undoubtedly a significant factor in the ripening of her friendship with Sir William Elford who was probably the most important influence of her life as regards the development of her prose style. At the time of their meeting she was twenty-three and Sir William sixty-three. Besides being a banker, a Member of Parliament and Recorder of Plymouth, Sir William was also an amateur poet and a landscape painter of sufficient

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1. '[We] amused ourselves in the evening with the "Liber Veritatis", which is, as you may remember, a very expensive collection of two hundred of Claude Lorraine's sketches, published by Boydell.' Letter to Mrs Mitford, 8 Oct. 1806. L'Estrange, I, 44. The Liber Veritatis was produced by Richard Earlom in 2 vols (1777).
 2. See above, p. 16.
 3. Letter to Mrs Mitford, 23 May 1809. L'Estrange, I, 76. The two paintings exhibited by David Wilkie that year were 'The cut finger' (123) and 'The rent day' (129); Richard Westall exhibited five portraits, two historical scenes and 'Inside of a cottage near Blackpool, Lancashire' (131); P. J. De Louthembourg exhibited four landscapes.
 4. Letter to Mrs Mitford, 23 May 1809. L'Estrange, I, 76.

talent to be an honorary exhibitor at the Royal Academy.¹ He was a friend of Dr Mitford and in 1808 he had written to Mary Mitford requesting a copy of her verses.² She sent him a copy, but it was not until their meeting in 1810 that they began to correspond regularly. On this occasion he promised her one of his landscapes and, in return, she sent him a copy of her first volume of poems.³ In 1811 she dedicated Christina to him and some time before or during 1812 she wrote a eulogy celebrating his dual talents as a poet and a painter.⁴

The relationship between literature and art was to become an increasing preoccupation with her over the next few years. This was initially due to her contact with Sir William, although she would in fact have seen very little of his work. They rarely met and Sir William exhibited only one landscape a year (at the Royal Academy) between 1810 and 1821. Nevertheless, their exchange of views on a variety of cultural topics is extremely well documented in the hundreds of their letters that have survived.

1. Between 1810 and 1824 Sir William exhibited the following works at the Royal Academy:

- 1810 A landscape
- 1811 View on the River Tay
- 1812 View in Devonshire
- 1813 Landscape: a summer's noon
- 1814 View of the Castle of Bury Pomeroy
- 1815 A landscape near Buckland, a seat of Mr. Bastards
- 1816 A landscape
- 1817 A landscape
- 1818 View on the River Plym
- 1819 A landscape
- 1820 A landscape
- 1821 A landscape
- 1822 A retired glen
- 1824 Landscape: a shower

2. See her letter to Dr Mitford, 7 June 1808. L'Estrange, I, 67.

3. Poems (1810).

4. 'To Sir William Elford, Bart.' Quoted in Ch. 3, Section II.

The development of Mary Mitford's taste over these years can be clearly charted and will be examined in Chapters 3 and 4.

It was through Sir William that she met another literary-minded artist who was also to be a friend and correspondent for many years. In 1814 Sir William had combined with another Plymouth banker, a Mr. Tingecombe, to buy for six hundred guineas The Judgement of Solomon, the first major work of their countryman, B. R. Haydon (1786-1846).¹ The picture was exhibited at the Water Colour Society at Spring Gardens and it was there, when visiting the picture on the recommendation of Sir William, that Mary Mitford first discovered Haydon's work and, according to the account given by L'Estrange in Friendships, met Haydon himself:

She went with a friend, but arriving late in the day was refused admission. A silver key, however, procured entrance to the room whence all had departed, except a bright, dapper, little man in a sailor's jacket and white trowsers. He pointed out to them the best position for seeing the picture. It was Haydon himself, who afterwards became one of Miss Mitford's most constant correspondents.²

This meeting (of which I can find no direct account in Mary Mitford's letters) would have taken place shortly before 18 June 1814 when Mary wrote to Mrs Mitford:

Did I tell you that the Water Colour Exhibition was closed when we went to see Haydon's picture, and that they had the uncommon civility to admit us alone?³

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1. This account is based on Haydon's 'Autobiography', reprinted in The Autobiography and Journals of Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786-1846), edited by Malcolm Elwin (1950), pp. 197-8. The sum quoted in Friendships, I, 106, is only 300 gns, probably based on the amount contributed by Sir William alone. The sum of 600 gns is also given by J. L. Roget in A History of the Old Water-Colour Society, 2 vols (1891), I, 393.
 2. Friendships, I, 106.
 3. L'Estrange, I, 278.

In a letter to Sir William written on 5 July 1814 she says that the picture represents to her 'the beau idéal of royalty':

I saw it to the greatest possible advantage with the mellow evening light full upon it, and not a soul in the room but our own party ... Perhaps I did not like it the less because you have purchased it.¹

She goes on to express an interest in the artist with a naivete that would suggest she was certainly not aware of having met him. By 1818, however, she was corresponding with him quite regularly and in the section of his 'Autobiography' devoted to that year he describes her as

One of my pleasantest and most constant correspondents at this time, and indeed for long before this, and one of my truest and kindest friends ... God bless her warm heart!²

It is probable that their correspondence had begun in 1817 when Mary Mitford was deeply impressed at the Royal Academy exhibition by a chalk drawing of Haydon's 'taken, as he told me, from a mother who had lost her only child'.³ So deeply was she moved by this drawing that she was inspired to write a sonnet⁴ on the piece and send it to the artist.

Over the following years their friendship ripened: in 1819 she sent him a volume of her poems,⁵ in April 1820 he sent her his study for the head of St. Peter⁶ and later that year presented her with a greyhound puppy for herself and her

1. L'Estrange, I, 287.
2. Elwin, ed. cit. (1950), p. 327.
3. Letter to Sir William Elford, 23 May 1817. L'Estrange, II, 6. Mary Mitford's italics.
4. Probably 'On a "Study from Nature" by Mr. Haydon', published in The Museum, I (21 Dec. 1822), 566.
5. L'Estrange, II, 53-4. It was either Poems, 1810 or 1811.
6. She thanks him in a letter dated 1 May 1820. L'Estrange, II, 95.

father.¹ She seems to have adopted an almost maternal attitude to him and confessed in September 1820:

... except my own dear family and dear Miss James, there is no one whom I regard with such admiring and respectful interest, or of whose kindness I am half so proud.²

Another artist with whom she was in contact at this time was T. C. Hofland (1777-1843), whose wife, Barbara (1770-1844) became a close friend. Hofland was a prolific artist and his wife a prolific writer who also added descriptions to her husband's engraved sketches and in the early 1820s wrote a regular Fine Arts feature for The Lady's Magazine in his name.³ Mary Mitford began to correspond with Mrs Hofland shortly after their first meeting which took place some time before or during September 1817. The Hoflands had been employed in the autumn of that year to take views of Whiteknights, the residence of the Duke of Marlborough just outside Reading. Mary Mitford speaks of the couple to Sir William Elford in the following terms:

I have been hearing and seeing a good deal of pictures lately, for we have had down at Reading Mr. Hofland, an artist whom I admire very much (am I right?), and his wife, whom, as a woman and an authoress, I equally love and admire ... His Grace of Marlborough ... is employing Mr. Hofland to take views of Whiteknights - where there are no views; and Mrs. Hofland to write a description of Whiteknights - where there is nothing to describe.⁴

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1. She thanks him for the puppy in a letter dated 4 Nov. 1820. MS Reading Reference Library. The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford in 6 vols, f. 421.
 2. Letter to Haydon, 15 Sept. 1820. L'Estrange, II, 109.
 3. See Mary Mitford's letter to Talfourd, 16 May 1823. Correspondence, p. 281. MS Harvard.
 4. 11 Oct. 1817. L'Estrange, II, 14.

Mary Mitford's friendship with the Hoflands lasted many years and she often stayed at their house in Newman Street during her visits to London in the 1820s. The implications for her writing of these early artistic contacts will be more fully discussed in Chapter 3.

Section III - Early Prose Career

The Mitford family moved to Three Mile Cross, a hamlet three miles outside Reading on the Basingstoke Road,¹ on

5 April 1820. Mary Mitford's diary entry for that day reads:

... heard from Sir William Elford - went firtopping - left Bertram House & went to live in Mr. Body's cottage² at the Cross - very sorry to go - in a great skirmish all day - very miserable indeed.

The cottage was small and cramped by comparison with Bertram House, a perpetual physical reminder of the family's reduced circumstances. But whatever the incidental humiliations involved in this move, Mary Mitford's essentially cheerful, hopeful disposition sustained her, and her day-to-day pursuits continued ostensibly as before, reflecting the activities that were later to be recreated in the Our Village sketches:

- 9 April: ... planted out flowers in our garden here ...
- 12 April: ... went violeting with Lucy to Mr. Body's fields.
- 17 April: At home - went to Penge Wood with Lucy got a great deal of wood sorrel & some white violets ...

1. See Appendix B, Map 1.

2. Two fields, also belonging to Bernard Body, were attached to the property. See Shinfield Tithe Award and Maps. Berks C.R.O. D/P 110 27 A, B, C.

A further disruption in her life came when on 7 August Lucy, the 'very faithful and favourite female servant',¹ who later features in 'Lucy' (OV 1) and 'A Visit to Lucy' (OV 2) was married.² The diary entry is incorrectly dated 'Mon. 8 Aug.':

... poor dear Luce was married from our house at Shinfield Church to Mr. Hill ... they went off to drink tea at her mother's & so home at night to Silchester - God bless her poor dear thing! She lived with us twelve years - a most faithful affectionate creature as ever lived upon earth ...

Despite these radical changes in her home life, Mary Mitford's cultural contacts remained. She was still at this time an avid letter-writer and she frequently visited Haydon and the Hoflands in London. It was during a stay in London at the end of 1820 that she was inspired to embark on the next phase of her literary career. On 6 December she records:

Went to the play - Covent Garden - 'Wallace & that [illeg.] both by young Walker³ - liked Macready's⁴ acting very much.

Over the next few days she saw Julius Caesar, The Spoilt Child and Wild Oats at Drury Lane and, on returning to Three Mile Cross, began her own first play:

Wed. 20 Dec. ... began Fiesco - God grant we may make money of it.

With their finances reappraised following the sale of Bertram House, it is clear that the Mitfords were again virtually ruined and, in addition to their other outstanding

1. OV 1.58.
2. The banns of Charles Hill, Bachelor of the Parish of Silchester and Lucy Sweetser were published on 2, 9, 16 July. Shinfield Register of Banns 1797-1848. Berks C.R.O. D/P 110/1A/1.
3. The second play was probably The Warlock of the Glen by C. E. Walker, first performed at Covent Garden on 2 Dec. 1820.
4. W. Macready (1793-1873).

debts, they were now faced with enormous legal costs.¹ The rent of the cottage was £20 a year and there were still living expenses to be found and servants to be paid. The only property left was three fields,² retained so that Dr Mitford would still qualify for the magistracy.³ The income from the trust funds appears to have been mortgaged for debts⁴ and it was evident that any new income would have to come from one of the family's taking up some kind of employment. Mrs Mitford was seventy by this time, and in failing health, Dr Mitford was sixty and clearly disinclined to work. At thirty-three, Mary Mitford was still relatively young and had had experience of making money through her earlier slight literary successes. Moreover, just as in former years she had been inspired by the example of Fanny Rowden, now she had other writer and artist friends seeking to make a living by their creative talents.

Given her lifelong interest in the theatre, and the fairly generous payment⁵ that successful playwrights received at that time, the drama seems an obvious choice of medium for her first serious literary venture. She was encouraged in this by Talfourd who was then paying for his legal studies⁶ by

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1. Estimated at £11,000. See Watson, p. 108.
 2. The fields are all within West Shinfield and designated Great Lea Common piece, Brook Pightle and 'noadesses in small mead'. See Shinfield Tithe Award and Maps. Berks C.R.O. D/P 110 27 A, B, C.
 3. The question of his qualification is discussed in Mary Mitford to Dr Mitford, 26 Sept. 1832. L'Estrange, II, 331.
 4. 'I am quite sure that the pittance in William Harness's hands would be found to be mortgaged for different debts. My father does not tell me so - but I feel that it is so.' Mary Mitford to Talfourd, undated. MS John Rylands, Eng. MS 665.
 5. For example, for an eight-day run of Julian (1823) she was paid £200.
 6. He was called to the bar on 10 Feb. 1821.

publishing essays and reviews. He was a drama critic for The New Monthly Magazine from 1820 until 1831 and generously assisted Mary Mitford throughout her dramatic career by reading her manuscripts, suggesting amendments and negotiating with the theatres on her behalf. Dr Mitford meanwhile assisted him in his early endeavours to establish a legal practice.¹

On 30 January 1821 Mary Mitford notes in her diary 'Sent Fiesco to Mr. Talfourd'. He returned the play, evidently suggesting some alterations, and she sent it back on 14 February. On 4 March she notes, 'Heard through Mr. Talfourd that my play now in the hands of Mr. Macready'. The play was not finally rejected until the end of June, by which time she had already begun work on Foscari. Fiesco was neither performed nor published; Foscari was not performed until 5 November 1826. Her third play, Julian, begun on 30 December 1821, fared better and was performed on 16 March 1823. It is on the strength of its success that, on the title page of the first volume, Our Village (1824) is described as 'by Mary Russell Mitford, Author of Julian, a Tragedy'.

Mary Mitford's dramatic career was fraught and complicated, a source of endless frustration to her as each new play was passed from theatre-manager to principal actor, returned to her for alterations, possibly several times, before being again delayed or rejected. The following table illustrates the lapse in time between composition, performance and publication of the various plays:

1. See, for example, Mary Mitford to Talfourd, 24 March 1821. Correspondence, pp. 14-15. MS Harvard.

	date composition began	date of first performance ¹	date of publication
<u>Fiesco</u>	20 Dec. 1820	-	-
<u>Foscari</u>	20 June 1821	4 Nov. 1826	1826
<u>Julian</u>	30 Dec. 1821	15 March 1823	1823
<u>Rienzi</u>	May 1822	9 Oct. 1828	1828
<u>Charles the First</u>	summer 1823	2 July 1834	1834
<u>Gaston de Blondeville</u>	1826	-	-
<u>Inez de Castro</u>	1827	28 Feb. 1831	1854
<u>Otto of Wittelsbach</u>	1828/9	-	1854

The delay between composition and performance in the case of Charles the First was occasioned by the fact that the Lord Chamberlain refused to license the play owing to the delicacy of its subject. It was eventually performed at the Victoria Theatre which, being on the Surrey side of the Thames, did not come under his jurisdiction. Usually, however, the delays involved in the production of the plays were the result of conflict between actors and theatre-managers and squabbles between the actors themselves over parts. Mary Mitford travelled frequently to London to discuss the plays and inevitably became embroiled in the various conflicts. On 24 April 1823, for example, she wrote despairingly to Talfourd:

... there is nothing sure in this world but disappointment. - As to the Theatre, I seem through my own weakness and folly & most blameable unguardedness to have contrived, God knows unintentionally, to offend everybody - 2

The next day she wrote to Sir William Elford, comparing her past idleness with her present cares:

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1. This information is taken from Allardyce Nicoll, A History of English Drama 1660-1900, second edition, 5 vols (Cambridge, 1960), IV, 357-8.
 2. Correspondence, p. 268. MS Harvard.

Alas! the free and happy hours, when I could read and think and prattle for you, are past away. Oh! will they ever return? I am now chained to a desk, eight, ten, twelve hours a day, at mere drudgery. All my thoughts of writing are for hard money. All my correspondence is on hard business. Oh! pity me, pity me! My very mind is sinking under the fatigue and the anxiety.¹

Such pressure and care were partly compensated for by the triumph of the plays' performances, particularly that of Rienzi which was widely acclaimed. The failure of three of her plays, however, and the disastrous performance of her opera, Sadak and Kalasrade,² combined to make her abandon the dramatic form altogether.

It was against a background of financial anxiety and the many frustrations of her dramatic career that Mary Mitford's early prose sketches were written. It was probably at Talfourd's instigation that she decided to supplement her anticipated income from the theatre with a steadier income from writing for the magazines. At first she submitted poetry, sending Talfourd in March 1821 a selection of sonnets and an earlier poem, 'Weston Grove', reassuring him 'there is no danger that I should again pour out such a flood of verse'.³ It appears that she did not seriously contemplate taking up poetry again and most of the sonnets appear originally to have been written without a view to publication. Among the pieces to be submitted at that time were sonnets inspired by the work

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1. 25 April 1823. L'Estrange, II, 162.
 2. The music to this was written by Charles Parker. It failed after one performance at the Lyceum Theatre on 20 April 1835.
 3. 9 March 1821. Correspondence, p. 2. MS Harvard.

of Hofland¹ and Haydon.² Under Talfourd's auspices some of these poems were published in The New Monthly Magazine. Those that were rejected were published in The Museum³ between 1822 and 1823 and many subsequently re-printed in Dramatic Scenes, Sonnets and Other Poems in 1827. A few poems appear in both magazines.

Mary Mitford's earliest ventures into prose were reluctantly made. Writing to Talfourd on 9 March 1821 she explains:

I am almost as much afraid of attempting any thing in prose as I should be of examining a witness - I had rather write ten Tragedies - nevertheless I shall try & may probably send you my failure in a week or two.⁴

Had it not been for Talfourd's encouragement it is unlikely that she would have persevered in these early attempts. She was clearly dissatisfied with her two earliest productions, 'Field Flowers' and 'On the Comedies of Thomas May', and in the letter which accompanies their submission to Talfourd, she is full of doubts and misgivings:

Ah, my dear Mr. Talfourd, I shall never make anything of prose! Do you think I shall? ... The real truth is I believe I have been for many years a most egregious letter-writer, & have accustomed myself to an incorrect and gossiping rapidity which does very well in writing to indulgent friends but will by no means suit that tremendous Correspondent the Public - so that in addressing that high

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1. 'Sonnet. On a Landscape by Mr. Hofland.' Published in The New Monthly Magazine, I (1821), 387. Reprinted in The Museum, I (21 Dec. 1823), 566 as 'On Leaving a Favourite Landscape'. Reprinted in Dramatic Scenes (1827) as 'On Leaving a Favourite Picture'.
 2. 'On a "Study from Nature", by Mr. Haydon.' Published in The Museum, I (21 Dec. 1822), 566. See above, p. 27.
 3. The Museum was published by John Valpy, son of the Mitfords' old friend, Dr Valpy, headmaster of Reading School.
 4. Correspondence, p. 2. MS Harvard.

personage I am frightened out of my wits - ponder over every phrase, disjoint every sentence, & finish by producing such marvellous lumps of awkwardness as those which I have the honour to send you.¹

In 1815 she had confessed to Sir William that she was unable to write a novel for fear of venturing from 'the leading strings of metre'.² By 1821 her main fear concerning prose composition is of a different nature: that of uncertainty concerning the correct tone to adopt in addressing an unknown readership - 'that tremendous Correspondent the Public'.

The nature of these early pieces and their relationship both to Mary Mitford's life and to the Our Village sketches will be discussed in Chapter 4. 'Field Flowers', her earliest prose piece, was written between 10 and 14 March 1821 and the critique on the dramatist Thomas May (1595-1650) on 15 March. These essays were submitted to Talfourd on 16 March and were followed by 'Richmond' (on which she was working on 8 and 10 April) and 'On Letters and Letter-Writers' (begun 24 April). All four items were published in The New Monthly Magazine between June and August 1821.³ None of them was re-published in Our Village except 'Richmond', which appears in considerably altered form in volume 4 as 'A Visit to Richmond'. On 8 June she sent Talfourd the original 'Our Village' sketch which she had completed on 5 June. On the strength of this and two sketches completed on 19 and 30 August respectively, 'Boarding School Recollections No. 1. The French Teacher' and 'Lucy', Talfourd tried to

1. 16 March 1821. Correspondence, p. 7. MS Harvard.

2. 24 Dec. 1815. L'Estrange, I, 321.

3. 'Field Flowers', I, 648-50; 'Richmond', II, 56-59; 'On the Comedies of Thomas May', II, 70-75; 'On Letters and Letter-Writers', II, 142-146. See Appendix A.

negotiate for her a series of prose sketches in The New Monthly Magazine and Blackwood's Magazine.¹ His lack of success in all directions led him to dissuade Mary Mitford in December 1821 from sending any more prose pieces for the time being. On 27 December he writes:

I still hope something may be done by way of moving the Editors to attention; but I would not have you write any more fugitive pieces till these are disposed of.²

The fact that Talfourd was unable to find a publisher for these three sketches is probably less a reflection of their intrinsic merit than of the nature of the literary magazines to which they were initially submitted. Mary Mitford herself had doubts about the suitability of 'Our Village' for publication alongside 'those eternal Essays' whose 'respectable formality' she felt to be characteristic of The New Monthly Magazine,³ while in November 1821 she describes The London Magazine as 'a place for my betters' and admits that she had always felt neither her prose nor her verse 'had any business' there.⁴

The three sketches were laid aside until July 1822 when Talfourd confessed to Mary Mitford that he had recently agreed to write dramatic criticism for 'no more elevated a work than' a new series of The Lady's Magazine. He is entirely contemptuous of the publication, but aware of advantages in its lowliness:

1. On 3 Nov. 1821 she apologizes for the trouble she is causing by her 'trumpery articles' but adds, 'Yes - if the others fail do try Blackwood's'. Correspondence, p. 102. MS Harvard.
2. Correspondence, p. 150. MS John Rylands.
3. 8 June 1821. Correspondence, p. 42. MS Harvard.
4. 3 Nov. 1821. Correspondence, p. 102. MS Harvard.

... the reputation is, of course, nothing and the gain is not, in sound, large - but the Articles take so much time less than those which are composed to suit the loftier periodicals, that I find it answer [sic] very well.¹

He argues that if neither the London nor the New Monthly will take her essays 'after another effort' on his part, then she would be well advised to allow him to submit them to Mr Hamilton, editor of The Lady's Magazine.

She agreed to this proposal and in September writes 'A thousand thanks for your kindness in arranging with Mr. Hamilton'.² In that month both 'Lucy' and a dramatic sketch entitled 'Claudia's Dream' appeared in The Lady's Magazine. These were followed by 'Boarding School Recollections' numbers I and II in September and October, while in December 'Our Village' made its first appearance.

It was at this time, the end of 1822, that Mary Mitford began to write prose on a regular basis, producing at least one sketch a month for The Lady's Magazine. Of the twenty-four sketches which were to constitute the first volume of Our Village in 1824, all but two were originally published in The Lady's Magazine between September 1822 and January 1824.³

She continued to write for The Lady's Magazine until August 1824. She was, by her own account, their 'strong writer',⁴ and claimed to have increased the sales of the magazine from two

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1. Vera Watson, 'Thomas Noon Talfourd and his Friends - II', TLS, 27 April 1956, p. 260.
 2. 27 Sept. 1822. Correspondence, p. 211. MS Harvard.
 3. See Appendix A. The exceptions, whose original publication, if any, I have not been able to locate, are 'An Old Bachelor' and 'A Village Beau'.
 4. Letter to Talfourd, 23 April 1823. Correspondence, p. 265. MS Harvard.

hundred and fifty to two thousand copies by May 1823.¹ Apart from some concern over the possible closure of the magazine in the spring of 1823, her association with it was, on the whole, fairly tranquil and provided her and her family with a regular, though modest, income.²

The Lady's Magazine at that time consisted of a fairly undemanding array of poetry, serials, reviews and fashion items. Mary Mitford contributed a few poems and dramatic scenes as well as the prose articles detailed in Appendix A. Undoubtedly the comparative lowliness of the magazine enabled her to develop without fear of censure from an over-critical audience the relaxed kind of writing that she had established in the 'Our Village' sketch. The sense of ease evident in her work during these years was probably also facilitated by the fact that the articles appeared either anonymously or simply initialled 'M'.³

The material that she chose to form the substance of the 'village' sketches consisted of the people and the countryside in and around Three Mile Cross. She never intended that her neighbours should know of their translation into print and to this end she set the original 'Our Village' in Yorkshire. Despite this precaution and the conviction that the people she lived amongst were unlikely even to know 'what a magazine looks like', the factual basis of the sketch troubled her considerably when she submitted it to Talfourd on 8 June 1821:

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1. Letter to Sir William Elford, 13 May 1823. L'Estrange, II, 163.
 2. It is conjectured that her income from this source was about £260 a year. Watson, p. 157.
 3. 'Our Village' is the only exception (which is initialled 'K').

I have great qualms of conscience about [it] - because it is true almost to the letter - only as I have posted it in Yorkshire & I don't think there is a soul in Three Mile Cross who knows what a magazine looks like I should hope it might pass unsuspected. But if you think it at all improper, or liable even by possibility to hurt anyone's feelings pray send it back to me.¹

Although it will be argued in Chapter 5 that Mary Mitford's portrayal of rustic society is verisimilitude rather than absolute truth, it is nevertheless clear that she was in an excellent position for observing at first hand the social reality of village life. The family did not live in quiet obscurity within the village. Dr Mitford continued his activities as a magistrate, now in much closer geographical contact with the rustic poor in whose lives he had been administratively involved since his qualification in 1804. Describing the family's adaptation to their changed circumstances in April 1820, Mary Mitford writes:

We are all beginning to get settled and comfortable, and resuming our usual habits. Papa has already had the satisfaction of setting the neighbourhood to rights by committing a disorderly person, who was the pest of the Cross, to Bridewell.²

Now, just as Dr Mitford was in closer contact with his charges, so, with their more cramped living conditions, his wife and daughter were increasingly aware of the nature of his judicial responsibilities. The following anecdote in a letter from Mary Mitford to Talfourd gives an indication both of the Mitfords' cramped domestic arrangements and of Dr Mitford's - and his daughter's - attitude to the poor:

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1. Letter to Talfourd, 8 June 1821. Correspondence, pp. 40-42. MS Harvard.
 2. Letter to Sir William Elford, 8 April 1820. L'Estrange, II, 92.

On looking up this page it seems dictated by the Daemon of Tautology - But it's all my Father's fault - I have been writing all this time in the room where he is settling a matrimonial difference between a young couple in our neighbourhood (Dear me - I never saw a finer man or a prettier woman - to think that they should fight! Oh dear!) - And Papa is haranguing & the husband explaining & the wife crying - I wonder that I can write a word - Besides I am curious as to the termination - they came desiring to be parted, never to look at one another again - but there is a relenting I think - a touch of the old love - Yes they will certainly make up.¹

Dr Mitford's active and practical involvement in the lives of the poor, manifested by the appearance of his name on constables' bills,² warrants to apprehend putative fathers³ and in the minutes of a meeting to discuss the building of a local house of confinement,⁴ is matched by a general benevolence of attitude that was shared by his daughter. Both had a particular affection for the village children and an interest in promoting the more innocent rustic pastimes that are celebrated in the sketches. In June 1823, for example, Mary and Dr Mitford were watching a Sunday cricket match when 'a sudden irruption of Methodists'⁵ tried to stop the game. Dr Mitford, taking the part of the

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1. 21 June 1821. Correspondence, p. 51. MS John Rylands.
 2. e.g. 'Fetching Frances Eeley, William Andrews, Charles Palmer from Mr. Corbert [?] before Dr Mitford 3/='; 'For taken [sic] Darius [?] Smith, Mr William Shackle's man to Dr Mitford and taken him to prison - 6/='. Shinfield Constable's Bills 1821-1828. Berks C.R.O. D/P 110 9/4.
 3. e.g. '1 July 1826 - Mary Allwright, father Robert Green - warrant sent by G. Mitford to apprehend Robert Green'. Shinfield Warrants to apprehend putative fathers. Berks C.R.O. D/P 110 15/3.
 4. The notice of this meeting is signed G. Mitford. It was held on 1 Dec. 1828 at the workhouse and it was agreed to build a roundhouse (7' diameter) for the parish of Shinfield. Berks C.R.O. D/P 110 7/3.
 5. Mary Mitford to Talfourd, 22nd June 1823. Correspondence, p. 295. MS Harvard.

cricketers, chased off the Methodists and the game continued.

Mary Mitford observes in her account of the episode to

Talfourd:

Papa and all the Magistrates have always countenanced this innocent and healthful recreation, which besides being that precious thing a poor man's pleasure, is really a safeguard and protection to the peace and morals of the parish - if the young men are not on the cricket ground they will be at the Public house.¹

This and the two previous extracts from letters to Sir William and Talfourd reveal Mary Mitford's awareness of the more distressing areas of rustic life. There was, as we shall see in Chapter 5, quite a considerable criminal element in the neighbourhood. There was also, as she suggests, a local drinking problem. Neither of these issues is ever openly confronted in the early sketches and, indeed, the existence of a blacker side of 'our village' is hardly even acknowledged. The exclusion of such material was a deliberate choice, coloured partly by Mary Mitford's awareness of literary tradition but also by the affection and goodwill towards the poor that is equally evident in her letters. She was concerned to promote liking and sympathy for the poor, to foster her belief in the value of 'innocent and healthful recreation' in their lives rather than to expose their vices. That 'a poor man's pleasure' is 'a precious thing' is one of the basic convictions of the early sketches, underlying, for example, her presentation of a country cricket match in the sketch of that name where an 'innocent spirit of party'² is vividly and enthusiastically

1. Correspondence, p. 296. MS Harvard.

2. 'A Country Cricket Match'. OV 1.153.

recreated and nowhere is it hinted that 'the peace and morals of the parish' might need protecting by such diversions.

At the height of her achievement Mary Mitford's portrayal of village life was based on first-hand observation. This observation would not have been so close nor her social attitudes so well considered had it not been for Dr Mitford's active role within the community and the sympathetic understanding of the poor that he tried to foster.

Section IV - 1824-1855

The best of Mary Mitford's prose sketches had been written by the summer of 1824 when her reputation in this medium was established by the publication of a selection of The Lady's Magazine articles as the first volume of Our Village in May.¹ The circumstances of her domestic life and the nature of her literary and artistic contacts had coincided with financial need and a burst of creative energy to give rise to a sequence of strikingly original essays.

The very popularity of the volume, however, brought new problems in its wake. Although it was, on the whole, critically well-received and the first edition sold out by August, Mary Mitford seems to have gained very little from the venture. Her payment for the first edition she described as 'trifling'²

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1. It was advertised in the Morning Chronicle on 17 May as 'published this day'. This approximate date is corroborated by a letter from Mrs Franklin dated 19 May thanking Mary Mitford for a presentation copy of the volume. Friendships, I, 151-153.
 2. Letter to Talfourd, 23 Sept. 1824. Correspondence, p. 416. MS Harvard.

while its success led the proprietors of The Lady's Magazine to refuse her copyright of future articles. She decided to stop writing for them, encouraged in this move by Talfourd's belief that her new-found literary reputation would be harmed by continued association with a lightweight popular magazine. In September 1824 she writes:

... your opinion of the discredit attached to writing for that trumpery work is decisive.¹

Her last piece appeared in The Lady's Magazine in August and, apart from two articles published through William Harness's influence, in The New Monthly Magazine in October and December 1824,² Mary Mitford's regular employment with the magazines effectively ceased until 1826 when she began to contribute to The Monthly Magazine.³

The tranquil phase of her prose career was over. Despite her early doubts as to her ability, she was by April 1823 reasonably happy with her essays and had confessed to Talfourd 'I begin not to dislike that sort of writing'.⁴ Now, in the summer of 1824, she had to reconsider the direction of her career. The drama, as she well knew by this time, was not a sufficiently reliable source of income. She found herself debilitated by the sustained hard work of recent years and further exhausted from nursing Dr Mitford, who had fallen dangerously ill in June.⁵

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1. Letter to Talfourd, 4-7 Sept. 1824. Correspondence, p. 411. MS Harvard.
 2. 'The Touchy Lady', XI, 348-51 and 'Rosedale and its Tenants', XI, 521-28. These were re-published in OV 2 and 4 respectively.
 3. See Appendix A.
 4. Letter to Talfourd, 24 April 1823. Correspondence, p. 267. MS Harvard.
 5. His illness was inflammation of the perinium. Letter to Talfourd, 5 June 1824. Correspondence, p. 382. MS Harvard.

Her letters throughout the summer are characterized by confessions of 'incurable idleness'¹ and admissions of bewilderment as to what to write next:

Should I alter Charles?² - Do you think as ill of it as I do? or should I try this Second Series?³ or a novel?⁴

Her next serious venture was in fact a novel, which she began to write in the spring of 1825.⁵ She was much hampered in this enterprise by her lack of confidence in her own ability, convinced that she had 'no inventive faculty whatever'.⁶ Her friend, Miss James, had supplied her with plots for her early plays, but no such assistance was available with the novel. It was eventually laid aside for nearly thirty years before its completion and publication as Atherton in 1854.

Towards the end of 1825 the Mitfords again faced a severe financial crisis. The depressed state that Mary Mitford had reached by this time is described in a letter to Talfourd of 4 December 1825:

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1. Letter to Talfourd, 4-7 Sept. 1824. Correspondence, p. 408. MS Harvard.
 2. Charles I.
 3. Of Our Village.
 4. Letter to Talfourd, 23 Sept. 1824. Correspondence, p. 417. MS Harvard.
 5. See letter to William Harness, 22 April 1825. L'Estrange, II, 203-205. Also letter to Miss Jephson, 27 May 1825. L'Estrange, II, 207. The idea of a novel is also discussed in Correspondence, pp. 263, 366, 396, 402, 412, 417, 450, 454, 458, 520, 521, 527, 533.
 6. Letter to Talfourd, 9 March 1821. Correspondence, p. 3. MS Harvard.

I really am so worn down by fruitless exertion so heartsick with perpetual anxiety & constant disappointment that it would be a relief & a comfort to me to escape from these hopeless efforts ...¹

By this time it is clear that Mrs Mitford was no longer a source of support owing to 'a deplorable failure of faculty and memory'.² She presumably remained in this state until her death in 1830.

This latest crisis was averted by the sudden and intensive resumption of Mary Mitford's prose career when she started writing regularly for The Monthly Magazine in January 1826. She continued to write for the magazine until December 1828 and it was also at this time that she began to write for the various annuals that were then coming into fashion. Her association with the annuals, 'exquisitely got up & ornamented so that every body buys them'³ lasted for many years. Her opinion of them was low and it is clear from the following remarks in a letter to Sir William Elford that she produced her prose articles by this time without enthusiasm, regarding them chiefly in terms of financial reward:

You are so good as to enquire after my present occupation - I am writing a Tragedy on the subject of Inez de Castro, for Covent Garden next season - or rather I ought to be writing my Tragedy, but am perpetually hindered by applications from Magazines & Annuals - which however is not quite time

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1. Correspondence, p. 516. MS John Rylands.
 2. Correspondence, p. 515. MS John Rylands. See also letter to Harness, 1 Dec. 1825. L'Estrange, II, 216.
 3. Letter to Talfourd, 15 Dec. 1825. Correspondence, p. 523. MS Harvard.

thrown away, since beside the present pay, I reserve the copyright & shall collect the papers next year into another Vol. of Our Village. Nevertheless these interruptions are tiresome ...¹

This kind of constraint and pressure that she wrote under by the late 1820s and early 30s is well illustrated in a letter from S. C. Hall, editor of The Amulet.² The Amulet for 1831 is described on its title page as 'A Christian and Literary Remembrancer' and it was evidently because of the annual's Christian bias that Hall felt one of Mary Mitford's contributions to be unsuitable:

When your first two sheets came, I sent them to the printer and had them set. When the last arrived, I felt that I should incur much danger in publishing it, because of its want of moral, or, rather, its prejudicial effect - which I knew well my readers would charge upon it. I, of course, allude to the conclusion, which describes a young couple as having deceived their parents, privately married, and pursued a course of deception. Now you will believe me, I know, when I state how deeply it distresses me to write thus ... but I have a very peculiar class to cater for, and this year there is a rival religious annual ... I dare not run any risk ...

Can you then, within ten days give me half a dozen pages of a village sketch?³

The nature of Mary Mitford's prose was by this time, it seems, determined by the tastes of the reading public whose affection she had won by her more original early work. Although it was

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1. 12 May 1827. MS Reading Reference Library. The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford in 6 vols, f. 556.
 2. See above, p. 7 and Appendix A.
 3. S. C. Hall to Mary Mitford. Undated, probably late 1830. Friendships, I, 210-211. Hall's italics.

undoubtedly true that her name would 'sell anything',¹ she had become the servant of the second-rate to an unacceptable degree. It is not surprising that her distaste for such a manner of producing work should lead her towards the end of her life to confuse the early with the later sketches in collective disparagement. In the same letter where she insists that the 'true portrait of [her] mind' is to be found in 'the Tragedies and Dramatic Scenes' she concludes:

The fact was that, by the terrible uncertainty of the acted drama, and other circumstances, I was driven to a trade when I longed to devote myself to an art.²

The rest of Mary Mitford's prose career may be seen in the terms in which she saw it herself, as a trade, a series of money-making ventures in which she capitalized on the achievement of the earlier essays.

The remaining Our Village volumes were published in 1826, 1828, 1830 and 1832 and were made up, as can be seen in Appendix A, from articles previously printed in the magazines and annuals. In 1827 her publisher, George Whittaker, produced another selection of her earlier works in Dramatic Scenes, Sonnets and Other Poems. Although she received no payment for the publication of her material in America, it was on the strength of her popularity there that she was asked to edit

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1. Mrs Trollope to Mary Mitford, 23 April 1832. Friendships, I, 233. The phrase is quoted in the Preface to this thesis.
 2. Letter to Charles Boner, 5 Sept. 1854. Lee, p. 281. Mary Mitford's italics. See also above, p. 2.

four selections of American stories for English readers. These appeared in 1830, 1831, 1832 and 1835.¹

In 1835 she published Belford Regis, three volumes of tales (some of which had been previously published elsewhere)² based on aspects of life in Reading. It was here, in the invention of Stephen Lane, the butcher who features in several of the tales, that Mary Mitford at last felt she had proved her ability to create fictional continuity of character.³ In Country Stories (1837), however, she reverts more to the style and content of Our Village.

As editor of Finden's Tableaux she was presented by Finden⁴ with a set of engravings which it was her task to distribute amongst a selection of writers for them to compose poems or stories appropriate to the content of the illustrations. Contributors included her closest friend at that time, Elizabeth Barrett (1806-1861), also John Kenyon (1784-1856), Mary Howitt (1799-1888) and R. H. Horne (1803-1884); Mary Mitford also inserted several tales of her own. There were altogether four volumes of Finden's Tableaux: the 1838 volume represents 'A Series of Picturesque Scenes of National Character, Beauty and Costume'; the second (1839) illustrates 'the womanly virtues'; the third (1840) deals with more general themes, while the 1841

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1. Stories of American Life by American Writers, 3 vols (1830), American Stories for Little Boys and Girls, Intended for Children under 10 Years of Age, 3 vols (1831), Lights and Shadows of American Life, 3 vols (1832), and Tales for Young People above Ten Years of Age, 3 vols (1835).
 2. See Appendix A.
 3. Mary Mitford to Talfourd, April 1835. MS John Rylands. Eng. MS 661.61.
 4. William Finden (1787-1852).

volume is devoted to rural life. Again it is clear that the tales Mary Mitford wrote during her four years' editorship were produced in unfavourable conditions. Seven of them¹ were later reprinted with the novel, Atherton, as Atherton and Other Tales (1854) and in the Preface to this work she acknowledges that there are many defects in the tales, explaining that

... they were called for in furious haste and were sometimes illustrations of distant ages and distant countries, conditions hardly favourable to a writer so slow and so home-loving as myself.

A revealing example of her contemporaries' attitude to her involvement in this kind of work is found in a letter from Amelia Opie (1769-1853), who contributed to the 1839 Tableaux:

The design I wrote to is the best save one in the collection, in my opinion; but I do wonder that such a superior writer as thyself, one who has so high a name, should condescend to write to a design given ...

But the book is a beautiful book, and but for the true love and fealty I owe thee, I could not find fault, but I think the task beneath thee, and to thee it is a waste of time.²

It is not evident whether Mary Mitford is here considered a 'superior' writer on the strength of her earlier prose or her dramatic works, but her own view of the inferior nature of her prose at this time is certainly vigorously corroborated by Mrs Opie's remarks.

In 1837 her literary income was supplemented by the award of a Civil List pension worth £100 a year, but despite this and the income she received from editing Finden's Tableaux, on her

1. See Appendix A.

2. Mrs Opie to Mary Mitford, 28 Nov. 1838. Friendships, II, 40-41. Mrs Opie's italics.

father's death in 1842 she found herself heavily in debt, probably due to the expenses of her father's illness and her inability to work while nursing him. A public appeal was made on her behalf in The Times and The Morning Chronicle and in response a sum of more than £1,600 was raised, adequately covering the debts and leaving an additional sum to be invested. The success of the subscription testifies to her more widespread popularity by this time and it is clear that within the local community both she and Dr Mitford were highly regarded. The day after his death she describes her neighbours' reaction to the event:

Everybody is so kind! The principal farmers are striving who shall carry the coffin. Surely this is not common - to an impoverished man - one long impoverished - one whose successor is utterly powerless! This is disinterested, if ever anything were so, and therefore very touching, very dear.¹

She herself was exhausted from nursing her father through his long last illness and his death came as a relief as well as a great sorrow to her. The cottage, meanwhile, by this time had fallen into the hands of Wards of Chancery and was in need of repair and redecoration. For a while Mary Mitford was forced to contemplate moving house, but eventually the agent of the Court of Chancery agreed to lower her rent and carry out the necessary repairs. These were made while she stayed at Bath ('a disappointment - cold, monotonous, bald, poor, and dead')² and subsequently nearby in 'a real labourer's cottage',³ in her servant's mother's

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1. Letter to Elizabeth Barrett, 12 Dec. 1842. L'Estrange, III, 167.
 2. Letter to Miss Jephson, ? June 1843. L'Estrange, III, 177.
 3. Letter to Miss Jephson, ? June 1843. L'Estrange, III, 177.

bedroom. To her great relief, she was able to remain, for a few more years at least, in what she affectionately described by this time as 'my own dear village'.¹

From now on there was no need for her to work so intensively. She contributed poems to Schloss's Bijou Almanack for 1843 and also edited Fragments des oeuvres d'Alexandre Dumas choisies à l'usage de la jeunesse in 1846. In 1851, crippled by rheumatism from the increasing damp of her cottage, she moved to nearby Swallowfield and there she gathered together and expanded a series of lively semi-autobiographical essays written, for Henry Chorley's The Lady's Companion, to publish Recollections of a Literary Life in 1852. In 1854 she published her collected dramatic works as well as Atherton and Other Tales. She died on 10 January 1855 and is buried in Swallowfield churchyard.

The compensations of Mary Mitford's later life remained those of her youth: her love of literature and art, her contact with her many friends, her love of the countryside and the simple pleasures of village life. In later years the preoccupations of contemporary literature changed, Sir William Elford, Haydon and the Hoflands were replaced in her affections by such figures as Elizabeth Barrett and John Ruskin. But her love of the countryside and what she termed 'mere country pleasures'² remained unchanged and her delight in these is still reflected in her letters. For a brief period in her early prose career she successfully communicates her delight to a public readership and it is with the nature of this communication that the rest of this thesis is concerned.

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1. Letter to Miss Jephson, ? April 1843. L'Estrange, III, 173.
 2. Letter to Elizabeth Barrett, 17 Oct. 1836. L'Estrange, III, 63. See Chapter 2, Section I.

Chapter Two

The Nature of Mary Mitford's Early Prose

It will become increasingly clear in subsequent chapters that Mary Mitford was writing fairly directly from her own experience in her early sketches. What I am concerned to examine in this chapter is, firstly, the nature of the human response that lies behind the conception of 'our village' and, secondly, the way in which Mary Mitford sought to communicate her perception of village life to her readers.

'Our village' is a literary world that is closely based on reality. It represents a harmonious reconciliation of its creator's day-to-day experience of her surroundings with a literary and artistic awareness that enabled her to invest geographical and social reality with an appealing cultural significance. In the early 1820s the village of Three Mile Cross became for Mary Mitford a pastoral retreat set against her recent experience of worldly care. Throughout the various trials of the next thirty years or so village life never lost this significance for her. In Section I I am concerned to demonstrate that the response underlying the 'village' works is a genuine one, based on their author's profound conviction of the remedial powers of the countryside and of the benefit to be derived from participation in the life of the local rustic community. Her method of presenting her material will also be briefly considered prior to the more detailed examination of a typical sketch in Sections II and III where it will be seen that the harmonious reconciliation of diverse material that is integral to the sketches as a whole is reflected in the subtle harmonies

of their prose. In Section III I shall also consider briefly the complementary role of children in the sketches and the way in which Mary Mitford tacitly invites her readers to become themselves as children in yielding to the random delights of her fancifully-created world. Her published work, as can be demonstrated through specific examples of her prose, essentially involves the transformation of an idiosyncratic interpretation of 'my village' into the shared therapeutic experience that constitutes Our Village.¹

Section I - Mary Mitford's Response to Village Life

A few days before Mary Mitford began work on the original 'Our Village' sketch in 1821 she wrote to Talfourd, 'I like everything & everybody', meaning everything and everybody associated with what she affectionately termed 'my own city of Three Mile Cross'.² By this time she had lived in Three Mile Cross for just over a year³ and was never to lose the deep affection for the surrounding countryside and its inhabitants that is evident throughout the entire sequence of country sketches. This response, first defined in 'Our Village' and most clearly discernible in the early sketches, can equally be traced in her

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1. A consciousness of this transformation is implied by the substitution of 'my village' in the opening paragraph of the Lady's Magazine version of the title sketch by 'our village' in the 1824 volume.
 2. 25 May 1821. Correspondence, pp. 27-28. MS Harvard.
 3. She moved there on 5 April 1820.

diary for 1819-23 and in her letters to her friends throughout her life. Walking in the countryside was one of the chief pleasures of her existence. Her enjoyment was focussed on small-scale objects and events rather than distant prospects or the grandeur of nature and she often recreated the life that surrounded her in loving detail in her letters to her friends.

Throughout the various crises of her life her pleasure in the countryside sustained her. During Dr Mitford's last illness,¹ for example, she wrote to Elizabeth Barrett:

Nothing keeps me alive but air - my evening walk up the hill and through the trees (an avenue of splendid oaks three quarters of a mile long), then down another turfy hill, to an open grove of oak on one side, on the other a patch of varied groups of tall trees and underwood, hawthorn, wild rose, and holly; the holly rising into the forest trees, and yet fencing round the different clumps, so various in size and shape, with a short uniform hedge about three feet high, most peculiar in its effect and most beautiful ... imagine the comfort I find in the absolute solitude, the repose, the silence of such a walk!²

The method of this description - written spontaneously to the person with whom she was most self-revelatory at that time - is a less polished version of the method she had earlier employed in her published work: her own movements - 'up the hill ... down another ... hill' - are outlined, but it is the life of the landscape that takes over. The active verbs of the central part of the sentence are given to the holly 'rising' and 'fencing', while a sense of admiration at the phenomenon of its growth is implied in the linking of the two verbs by the slightly surprised 'and yet' and in the musingly appended 'most peculiar in its

1. He died on 11 Dec. 1842.

2. 17 Sept. 1842. Friendships, II, 76-77.

effect and most beautiful'. 'The absolute solitude, the repose, the silence' of the walk, the 'comfort' - indeed, the life-giving quality - that it offers are inextricable from the sense of wonder that is evoked by an idiosyncrasy of natural growth. Here, as throughout her early sketches, Mary Mitford is concerned not merely to summarize the pleasure and the comfort that she found in the landscape, but also to take pains to re-create her experience for her reader. She sets the scene in general terms and then fills in more detail, evoking in words a striking picture of a vividly-remembered image. Though the scene, in this instance, is almost certainly recollected at home late at night (consistent with her letter-writing habits during Dr Mitford's illness), it is described, in the present tense, as it arises again before her mind's eye. She re-lives her experience through the act of communicating it in writing. Both the original experience and its memory are pleasurable and therapeutic for her and, through the immediacy of the writing, the reader is able to participate in the scene's effect as a present experience.

A firm belief in the beneficence of nature underlies Mary Mitford's response to the countryside. To her, every aspect of nature was good and worthy of attention, no object was beneath her consideration. A few days before her own death, when she had for many months been confined to her room, she describes with affection the birds outside her window:

This very day, not only my common pensioners, the dear robins, but a saucy troop of sparrows, and a little shining bird of passage, whose name I forget, have all been pecking at once at their tray of bread-crumbs outside the window. Poor pretty things! how much delight

there is in those common objects, if people would but learn to enjoy them ...¹

Her impulse here - as throughout her letters and her published work - is to recall the details of the natural world as well as the response that it evokes in her. In this respect, as I shall argue more extensively in Chapter 3, she differs significantly from her close contemporary, Jane Austen (1775-1817), but her statement regarding the benefit of giving attention to 'those common objects' nevertheless recalls Fanny Price's authorially-endorsed conviction in Mansfield Park (1814) that there would be less "'wickedness and sorrow"' in the world

'if the sublimity of nature were more attended to, and people were carried more out of themselves by contemplating such a scene.'²

This essentially Romantic view of nature lies at the heart of all Mary Mitford's country writings. A self-effacing love for her subject is evident throughout her work as she strives to evoke the particulars of the landscape, re-creating (an always beneficent) nature through a detailed perception of its activity. Her method is similar to Cowper's method in The Task (1785) as seen by George Eliot in her essay 'Worldliness and Other-Worldliness'.³ Eliot illustrates the effect of Cowper's poem by contrasting it with the factitious sentiment and barely covert egoism of Young's Night Thoughts, a poem that Mary Mitford

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1. Published variously as i) To a friend of Mrs Hoare's, 7 Jan. 1855. L'Estrange, III, 305-6. ii) extract of a letter to Mrs Crowther, copied by Miss Jephson for Mr Starkey, 1 Jan. 1855. Friendships, II, 306-7. The first version has been reproduced here.
 2. Mansfield Park, edited by R. W. Chapman, third edition (1934), p. 113.
 3. 'Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: the Poet Young', Westminster Review, LXVII (Jan. 1857), 1-42.

As in Mary Mitford's description in her letter to Elizabeth Barrett, the life of Cowper's landscape is presented through its own activity: although 'deform'd' it yet has 'its bloom' and is even endowed with a kind of vanity as it 'decks itself with ornaments of gold'; the lowly turf meanwhile is paradoxically seen as 'rich', capable of evoking a sense of 'luxury'. Cowper's description works through sharper, more startling images and is clearly a far better, more consciously elevated and infinitely more polished piece of writing than either of the Mitford extracts. Yet in all three pieces we can see a similar temporary loss of self as the writer strives to communicate a sense of the life of the landscape.

Although, as I will argue in Chapter 4, it is impossible to extract from the complex web of possibilities any one writer as a particularly significant influence on Mary Mitford, it seems likely that her admiration for The Task may have inspired her to adapt the 'walk' as the structuring device of many of the early essays. Her comments on his letters, meanwhile, in her early article 'On Letters and Letter-Writers' (begun 24 April 1821) anticipate George Eliot in their perception of and admiration for the quality of Cowper's mind. They also reveal what she regards as an area of deficiency in his poetry. The letters, she claims,

throw open so charmingly his most charming character, and ... have all the peculiar merits of his poetry, with a tenderness and sweetness, a spirit of indulgence and love to his kind, which his poetry has not.¹

1. The New Monthly Magazine, II (Aug. 1821), 144.

In her own presentation of the countryside, first brought to literary fruition shortly after the writing of this article, in the original 'Our Village' sketch,¹ Mary Mitford sought to convey not only her affectionate regard for nature but also her love for the human inhabitants of the countryside, thus supplying what she regards as Cowper's deficiency in her own work.

To present the rustic poor in terms calculated to inspire affection in her readers involved Mary Mitford in a considerable amount of distortion. As Cowper's letters incidentally reveal, the reality of village life was often made sordid by what he terms 'the brutality of the lowest order'.² It is clear that a certain amount of 'brutality' also existed in Three Mile Cross and the question of the kind of material Mary Mitford felt obliged to suppress will be more fully discussed in Chapter 5. As we have already seen, however, she had a genuine enthusiasm for the more innocent of her villagers' recreations.³

Appropriately, having quoted Cowper's description of his common in 'The Visit', she laments the fact that it lacks the 'finishing grace' (l.260) of a cricket-ground. Cricket was undoubtedly her favourite rustic pastime and, while she may represent the game to Talfourd as 'a safeguard to the peace and morals of the parish',⁴ it is in another letter to Elizabeth Barrett that she is more revelatory about her own response:

1. Completed on 5 June 1821.
2. Letter to the Rev. John Newton, 24 June 1788. Selected Letters of William Cowper, selected and arranged by W. Hadley (1926), p. 216.
3. See Ch. 1, pp. 41-42.
4. 22 June 1823. Correspondence, p. 296. MS Harvard. See Ch. 1, p. 42.

I am made for mere country pleasures, rather than for those of literature. I was this afternoon for an hour on Heckfield Heath ... On an open space, just large enough for the purpose, a cricket match was going on - the older people sitting by on benches; the younger ones lying about under the trees; and a party of boys just seen glancing backward and forward in a sunny glade, where they were engaged in an equally merry and far more noisy game. Well there we stood, Ben and I and Flush, watching and enjoying the enjoyment we witnessed. And I thought if I had no pecuniary anxiety, and if my dear father were stronger and our dear friend well, I should be the happiest creature in the world, so strong was the influence of that happy scene.¹

It is important to remember this response to her villagers' pastimes when considering Mary Mitford's presentation of rustic life. Her role in relation to the villagers as defined in this letter is the role in which she often presents herself in her published work - that of a spectator, an onlooker, an enjoyer of other people's enjoyment: '... there we stood ... watching and enjoying the enjoyment we witnessed'. Rustic games and pastimes were to her a diversion, a distraction through which she could lose herself for a while just as she could momentarily forget her worldly cares in her perception of the life of nature.

Another important point that emerges from this letter is the distinction that Mary Mitford makes between 'mere country pleasures' and 'those of literature'. An awareness of her sense of this disjunction again seems crucial to an understanding of her work. I believe that the world she established in her early sketches represents in part a personal endeavour to reconcile literature and life, to enrich her new, materially impoverished existence by idealizing life into art. The irony of her achievement lies in the

1. 17 Oct. 1836. L'Estrange, III, 63. Ben is the Mitfords' servant, Flush their spaniel, 'our dear friend' presumably Elizabeth Barrett herself.

fact that, because of the strong cultural awareness that enabled her to achieve this act of reconciliation in the first place, Mary Mitford was never able to rid herself of the sense that 'mere country pleasures' were inappropriate material for 'literature'. Our Village was, therefore, because of as well as despite its self-conscious literariness, a lowly work in the eyes of its creator. This lowliness is, however, inextricable from its understated method and calm unpretentiousness, qualities, as I shall try to demonstrate, that are integral to the nature of its success.

In this section we have seen how Mary Mitford in her informal letters attempts to bring her own experience of the countryside to life, demonstrating her response partly through an observant re-creation of the life of animate and inanimate nature. We have also seen how she regarded the brighter surface of rustic life as complementary to the goodness of nature, equally capable of lifting the spirits and exerting a soothing and curative influence on the world-weary individual. In her unpublished writing these views emerge quite clearly. As we shall see, her early sketches, although far more complicated in their aims and effects, are likewise inspired and unified by a deeply-felt response, aptly summarized by one contemporary reviewer as a quality of 'intense personal love'.¹

1. Review of OV 1 in the Somerset House Gazette, and Literary Museum, II (22 May 1824), 104.

Section II - 'The Cowslip Ball'

That the 'love' which permeates Mary Mitford's published work relates to her own experience is confirmed by the fact that strong autobiographical elements can be traced throughout the early sketches. Certain autobiographical details can be clearly identified in 'The Cowslip Ball', the sketch I have chosen to discuss as representative of the early work. It was first published as number five of the 'Walks in the Country' series in The Lady's Magazine in June 1823 and re-printed with only minor alterations in the first volume of Our Village. Consistent with Mary Mitford's practice during 1823 and the first half of 1824, it was probably written in the month preceding its publication, probably begun on 16 May, the date given at the beginning of the sketch. The qualities that it reveals are typical of the other country sketches dating from this period and it is therefore possible to draw certain general conclusions about Mary Mitford's literary method, as well as her use of autobiographical material, from this specific example.

'The Cowslip Ball', in common with 'Our Village' and all the sketches from the 'Walks in the Country' series, is an account of one of the author's walks in the countryside surrounding Three Mile Cross. In this particular sketch she is accompanied by Lizzy, the carpenter's daughter who features in 'Our Village' and Mayflower, the white greyhound 'who resembles [Lizzy] in beauty and strength, in playfulness, and almost in sagacity'.¹ Lizzy and May are her usual companions on these walks and almost

1. 'Our Village' 1.10-11.

certainly relate directly to living originals. Lizzy, called 'Eliza' at one point in the original version of the sketch,¹ is probably 'little Eliza' whose third birthday is noted in Mary Mitford's diary on 1 February 1821 and who is appropriately presented as 'three years old according to the register' when the 'Our Village' sketch was written in May/June 1821. By the time of 'The Cowslip Ball' and the majority of the sketches in which she appears she would have been five. May, meanwhile, was probably one of several pet greyhounds that accompanied Mary Mitford on her country walks throughout the early 1820s.²

Certain geographical particulars in the early sketches can also be identified, although Mary Mitford was careful at this stage of her career to disguise the names of local towns and villages, presumably from the same discretion that had led her to name her local county as Yorkshire in the magazine version of the 'Our Village' sketch.³ Nevertheless, the water-meadows which form the destination of the walk in 'The Cowslip Ball' are recognisably in West Shinfield.⁴ One of them was one of

1. The Lady's Magazine, IV (June 1823), 328. 'Eliza' becomes 'Lizzy' in OV 1.

2. The actual existence of both May and Lizzy is confirmed by Mary Mitford's note to the niece of the American novelist, Catherine Sedgwick in 1830:

'May' was a real greyhound, and everything told of her was literally true; but, alas! she is no more; she died in the hard frost of last winter. 'Lizzy' was also true, and is also dead.

6 Sept. 1830. L'Estrange, II, 306.

3. See Ch. 1, p. 40.

4. See Appendix B, Map 1.

the fields retained for Dr Mitford's qualification for the magistracy¹ and the fact that it belonged to the family is made clear in the sketch when Mary Mitford acknowledges that 'we ourselves possess one of the most beautiful [of the meadows]' (1.137).

In common with the other 'Walks', 'The Cowslip-Ball' begins with a day, 'May 16th', a diary-like exactness which suggests that a personal experience or event is about to be recorded. After that, however, it reaches beyond the particular to make certain generalizations about 'life':

May 16. - There are moments in life, when, without any visible or immediate cause, the spirits sink and fail, as it were, under the mere pressure of existence: moments of unaccountable depression, when one is weary of one's very thoughts ... (1.133)

The generality of the writing - 'life', 'the spirits', 'the mere pressure of existence', the repeated use of 'one' is far removed from the 'I' of the letters, reminding us that we are now in the shared world of 'our village' where, particularly in these early sketches, Mary Mitford is reaching out to her audience, trying to establish common ground. She rarely expresses her awareness of the depressing nature of human existence in her published work but the opening of 'The Cowslip Ball' recalls the sophisticated sense of the worldly care that characterizes many of her personal letters.

In 'The Cowslip-Ball', in fact, Mary Mitford makes explicit a curative process that is generally left implicit in her

1. The field was probably Brook Pightle. See Shinfield Tithe Award and Maps. Berks C.R.O. D/P 110 27A, B, C. It again features in 'The Haymakers' (OV 5). See also Ch. 1, p. 31.

published work. Her apparently simple celebrations of rural life often belie the personal significance that they held for her. This significance, however little acknowledged, cannot be divorced from her consciousness of the pastoral tradition, her sense of how the city-dweller may be restored to sanity through yielding to the simple pleasures of the countryside. The nearest parallel to the opening of 'The Cowslip-Ball' is the introduction to 'Violeting' where she speaks of a desire to obliterate 'the heat, the glare, the noise and the fever of London' by plunging 'into the remotest labyrinths of the country' (1.100). A desire to forget underlies the conception of Our Village: Mary Mitford is concerned throughout to invite those similarly oppressed by worldly care to participate briefly in the 'mere country pleasures' that were capable of alleviating her own anxieties. Her success in achieving this aim is recognized by a review of the first volume of Our Village in The London Literary Gazette:

... it is ... a book to make us forget the hurry, the bustle, the noise around, in the leaves, tall old trees, and rich meadows of her delightful Village.¹

Despite this underlying aim and effect in her work, Mary Mitford's use of the pastoral tradition is by no means straightforward. She shared the cultural confusion that characterizes the early 1820s, and her country sketches, as I shall demonstrate in Chapters 3 and 4, are in many respects an expression of that confusion. We have already seen how, for example, she regarded the pleasures of 'literature' as somehow more elevated than

1. This extract from the original review is quoted in A Critical Dictionary of English Literature and British and American Authors by S. Austin Allibone, 5 vols (1897-8), II, 1331.

'mere country pleasures'.¹ Nevertheless, in her own work she sought to bring the two together, endeavouring to make what she regarded in many respects as a culturally unworthy pastoral retreat appealing to her cultivated readers.

At the outset of the sketch she explicitly dismisses as inadequate other potential cures for 'unaccountable depression', again conveying her sense of audience by her reference to needlework as 'that grand soother and composer of woman's distress' (l.133). This is one of the many reminders present throughout the early sketches that most of them² were written for The Lady's Magazine, much of which was devoted to fashion and other items of traditionally feminine interest. Although she disparagingly refers to the magazine as 'that trumpery work',³ she nevertheless sought to give her sketches a feminine appeal and here perpetuates a conscious femininity in outlining the prospective cure for her malady:

I fancy that exercise, or exertion of any kind, is the true specific for nervousness ...
I will go to the meadows, the beautiful meadows! and I will have my materials for happiness, Lizzy and May, and a basket of flowers, and we will make a cowslip-ball.
(l.133-4)

'Materials for happiness' suggests the idea of gathering one's materials for needlework or perhaps for painting; Lizzy and May, a little girl and an elegant greyhound, are acceptable company for a lady on her walk, while the gathering of a basket

1. See above, p.61. My italics.
2. See Appendix A.
3. Letter to Talfourd, 4-7 Sept. 1824. Correspondence, p. 411. MS Harvard. See Ch. 1, p. 44.

of flowers is a suitably 'feminine' pastime. At the same time, the general 'unaccountable depression' that was described at the beginning of the sketch now becomes 'nervousness', a common contemporary female complaint. Appropriately, it was only a few months prior to the composition of 'The Cowslip Ball' that Mary Mitford had written to Sir William Elford:

I am worn out with mental labour & hope deferred - & begin for the first time in my life to know what the ladies' complaint called nervous means ...¹

At the probable time of writing 'The Cowslip Ball' (May 1823) her 'nervousness' was exacerbated by the fact that she was then both engaged in a complicated dispute over the performance of her second play, The Foscari, and very alarmed at the prospect of the possible closure of The Lady's Magazine.² At that time, the magazine's proprietors simply could not afford to pay her, therefore depriving her and her family of their only source of regular income. It is characteristic of her published work that no hint of the nature of her more serious personal anxieties is given. The causes of psychological suffering are universalized, even though the cure is presented in individual terms.

From this point onwards the sketch focusses on an evocation of the curative experiences that constitute the substance of Mary Mitford's country writings. We are led into

1. 13 Jan. 1823. MS Reading Reference Library. The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford in 6 vols, f. 463. Mary Mitford's italics. A fellow-sufferer from the malady was Jane Austen's Mrs Bennett who 'when she was discontented ... fancied herself nervous'. Pride and Prejudice (1813), edited by R. W. Chapman, third edition (1932), p. 5.

2. See Ch. 1, p. 39.

a world where the city becomes obliterated by the distractions of the moment, their immediacy reinforced, as in the letters, by a frequent use of the present tense. We are immediately plunged in the second paragraph of the sketch into vigorous physical exertion:

And on we go, fast, fast! down the road,
 across the lea, past the workhouse, along
 the great pond, till we slide into the
 deep narrow lane, whose hedges seem to
 meet over the water, and win our way to
 the little farm-house at the end.

(1.134)

The way that this extract works upon the reader is typical of Mary Mitford's method: the effect is created through an accumulation of small, underlying details. It is subtly persuasive without making any explicit claims for itself. The rapid movement of the run is mirrored in the rhythm and syntax of the first part of the sentence. The repetition of 'fast' and the exclamation make it seem as if the writer is exhorting her companions (and so implicitly her readers) to faster and faster activity, while its effect seen in conjunction with the next sequence of phrases - each introduced by a preposition that implies movement ('down', 'across', 'past', 'along') - suggests a gathering of momentum that does not cease until the word 'till' when 'we slide' (as if unable to stop from the run) into a 'deep, narrow lane'. The lane appears to be deep in water and the effort implied in passing it is suggested by the use of the expression 'win our way'. Both the writer and her readers have therefore been roused from the depressive languor of the introductory sentences by losing themselves in activity. It is a device commonly repeated throughout the 'Walks in the

Country' series: vigorous physical exertion is the necessary first stage in the curative process, both in literally taking us out into the countryside and in preparing us mentally for the loss of self that comes with true receptivity to the sights and sounds of nature.

A further distraction is offered at this stage in the walk by the innocently mischievous activities of May and Lizzy. These are described at some length and broken by direct addresses to them that reinforce the immediacy of the experience that the reader is being tacitly invited to share. This evocation of playfulness is followed by a coming to rest in the meadows - a psychological as well as a literal arrival at the first stage of our destination. The change at the end of the third paragraph is clear as we move in direct speech to a more contemplative tone:

'Come along, Lizzy. Across this wheat-field, and now over the gate. Stop! let me lift you down. No jumping, no breaking of necks, Lizzy! And here we are in the meadows, and out of the world. Robinson Crusoe, in his lonely island, had scarcely a more complete, or a more beautiful solitude.' (1.135)

The 'And' that links the idea of Lizzy with the arrival in the meadows is a slight but important prefiguration of similar links that are to follow. Yet it is already clear that the quiet appreciation of solitude expressed in the two final sentences is the implied consequence of giving one's mind over to 'mere country pleasures', here in the shape of the harmless activities of May and Lizzy as described over the preceding two paragraphs. We have now achieved our pastoral retreat -

'out of the world' - and the impression of unworldly isolation is reinforced by the allusion to Robinson Crusoe, a literary figure earlier employed by Mary Mitford in an attempt to give definition to the isolated quality of the community in 'Our Village':

... how much we dread any new comers, any fresh importation of savage or sailor! We never sympathise for a moment in our hero's want of company, and are quite grieved when he gets away. (1.2)

The nature of the meadows' solitude is further enriched by a densely evocative description of 'a little nameless brook' that winds through them:

Never was water more exquisitely tricky:- now darting over the bright pebbles, sparkling and flashing in the light with a bubbling music, as sweet and wild as the song of the woodlark; now stretching quietly along, giving back the rich tufts of the golden marsh-marygolds which grow on its margin; now sweeping round a fine reach of green grass, rising steeply into a high mound, a mimic promontory, whilst the other side sinks softly away, like some tiny bay, and the water flows between, so clear, so wide, so shallow, that Lizzy, longing for adventure, is sure she could cross unwetted; now dashing through two sand-banks, a torrent deep and narrow, which May clears at a bound; now sleeping half-hidden beneath the alders and hawthorns and wild roses, with which the banks are so profusely and variously fringed, whilst flags, lilies, and other aquatic plants, almost cover the surface of the stream.
(1.136-7)

In this long sentence the author as an explicit presence retreats from the narrative. As in her account of the holly bushes or the birds outside her window,¹ she presents her

1. See above, p. 55 and pp. 56-57.

perception of the stream as a direct experience to be shared by the reader. The sentence works in a variety of ways, each finally contributing to an all-encompassing sense of the harmony and tranquillity of nature. Tranquillity is achieved, however, through a presentation of life and liveliness - here implied by the opening adjective 'tricksy' which, as something 'full of or given to tricks' (OED), recalls the activities of Lizzy and May earlier in the sketch and elsewhere in the series.

As the allusion to Robinson Crusoe reinforces the appeal of her pastoral world on a literary level, so the extraordinary range of the water's movement is presented through a vivid sequence of adjectival verbs which not only evoke movement but also a number of enriching secondary ideas. 'Sparkling' and 'flashing', for example, following 'bright pebbles' suggests the idea of jewellery. Associations of material wealth are thus introduced into the sentence, later developed by the adjectives 'rich', 'golden' and 'fine'. The use of adjectival verbs here, as so often in her work, permits Mary Mitford to convey in an understated way both what she saw and the kind of pleasure that it evoked in her. This understated association of the beauty of the countryside with a new and (implicitly) more valuable kind of riches is developed more explicitly later in the sketch. The author's delight in the scenery that she is surveying is then enhanced by the fact that the field in which she stands belongs to her family.¹ She observes that it is 'a strange pleasure ... when one so poor as I can feel it!' (1.138).

1. See above, p. 65.

Though her poverty hardly compares with that of the rustic poor it creates a peculiar and (in this context) enviable bond between them:

Perhaps [the pleasure of property] is felt most by the poor, with the rich it may be less intense - too much diffused and spread out, becoming thin by expansion, like leaf-gold; the little of the poor may be not only more precious, but more pleasant to them: certainly that bit of grassy and blossomy earth, with its green knolls and tufted bushes, its old pollards wreathed with ivy, and its bright and babbling waters, is very dear to me. (1.138)

In a writer with close first-hand knowledge of the reality of rustic poverty this is evidently a deliberate inversion of conventional notions regarding material wealth. The property of the rich assumes the quality of 'leaf-gold', something precious but fragile and destructible. The central statement of the sentence follows the semi-colon: the little of the poor 'may be more precious' and 'more pleasant' than (implicitly) this gold. The sentence ends with a grammatical sleight of hand: 'the little of the poor' is linked by the use of the colon with the beauty of the countryside as perceived by the author. The question of what constitutes this 'little' is thus side-stepped by the introduction of a casually-constructed but nevertheless idyllic landscape picture whose value is reinforced by the author's admission that it 'is very dear to me'. The potential but wholly unacknowledged double meaning of the word 'dear' in this context reinforces the basic anti-riches tendency of the sentence as the dearness associated with things is superseded by the dearness associated with persons: Mary Mitford's landscape (we presume) is 'regarded with esteem and

affection; loved' rather than 'high-priced; costly, expensive' (OED). At the same time, the implications of material value that the word contains reveal Mary Mitford's own preoccupation with money. Her speculations about the pleasure of the poor remain tentative ('Perhaps it is most felt by the poor') but what is clear is her own response ('Certainly ... is very dear to me'). As readers, we are invited to respond to the associative significance of poverty as perceived by the author, side-stepping with her the potentially disturbing question of what does actually constitute 'the little of the poor'.

This method of presenting landscape and rural life is typical of Mary Mitford's best work. She evokes her own response by a selective, understated juxtaposition of what she actually sees with certain pleasurable ideas. The associations are sometimes explicit, sometimes - as in the use of adjectival verbs - implicit, made often at speed within sentences so that they remain unforced and tacitly unacknowledged. In this way Mary Mitford avoids making excessive claims for her pastoral world, relying instead on the reader's subtle perception and appreciation of her own responses.

In Coleridgean terms this is a technique of the 'Fancy' rather than the 'Imagination':

Fancy ... has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally

with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.¹

We remain throughout Mary Mitford's sketches in a literal, minutely describable landscape but the 'choice' she exercises in selecting the images through which that landscape is to be described is determined by the associative power of her own memory. The associations that she selects to enhance her reader's sense of pleasure are inevitably the associations that gave her pleasure. The generally understated way in which they are presented, meanwhile, reinforces the overall sense of calm that characterizes the sketches.

As the description of the stream proceeds, a wide and startling juxtaposition of ideas is carefully balanced:

... now sweeping round a fine reach of green grass, rising steeply into a high mound, a mimic promontory, whilst the other side sinks softly away, like some tiny bay, and the water flows between, so clear, so wide, so shallow, that Lizzy, longing for adventure, is sure she could cross unwetted; now dashing through two sand-banks, a torrent deep and narrow, which May clears at a bound; now sleeping half-hidden beneath the alders and hawthorns and wild roses, with which the banks are so profusely and variously fringed, whilst flags, lilies, and other aquatic plants, almost cover the surface of the stream.

(1.136-7)

The implications of dignity or majesty evoked by 'rising steeply into a high mound' are reinforced by the associative quality of 'fine' in the expression 'a fine reach of green grass'. The latter is a doubly evocative image as not only does 'fine' echo

1. S. T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, edited by J. Shawcross, 2 vols (Oxford, 1907), I, 202.

the sense of majesty implied in 'sweeping', but 'reach' effectively mirrors the section of the stream then being described, namely 'that portion of a river ... which lies between two bends' (OED). Just as the stream in the previous section 'gives back' the image of the golden marygolds, here the 'reach' of 'green grass' 'gives back' the image of the water. This idea is further developed when the stream is presented in terms of the landscape, rising into a 'high mound, a mimic promontory' - a land mass, rather than a gathering of water. The juxtaposition of land and water is developed into an opposition of large and small as rising turns to sinking and the 'high mound' is balanced by a 'tiny bay'. The pleasure which the reader experiences from this description is what Wordsworth expresses as 'the pleasure which the mind derives from the perception of similitude in dissimilitude'.¹ It is enhanced in this particular case by the careful - and yet apparently effortless - balancing of images. The process by which the river mirrors the landscape and vice versa is extended in the reader's perception to suggest a potential infinity of reflected images. Despite this immense richness, the prose flows quietly, adding to the sense of tranquillity that derives from the harmonious balancing of ideas.

Mirroring the development of the preceding paragraphs of the sketch, the introduction of the idea of innocent zest for

1. Preface to the Lyrical Ballads (1800) in The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, edited by W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols (1974), I, 148.

life, embodied in May and Lizzy, is followed by an image of idyllic repose:

In good truth it is a beautiful brook, and one that Walton himself might have sitten by and loved, for trout are there; we see them as they dart up the stream, and hear and start at the sudden plunge when they spring to the surface for the summer flies. Isaac Walton would have loved our brook and our quiet meadows; they breathe the very spirit of his own peacefulness, a soothing quietude that sinks into the soul. (1.137)

The reference to Isaak Walton recalls, in this context, his Compleat Angler (1653), a currently highly popular work¹ whose success at that time is indicative of the feeling of the age for evocations of the peace and beauty of the English countryside. Here the implied reference makes the purpose of the foregoing description more explicit: the innocent activity of the stream has led to its true repose just as in The Compleat Angler it is the activity of angling that leads to its protagonists' quiet and peaceful contentment. More than this, the reader, having been invited to respond to the activity of the brook through the exertion of the fancy is now explicitly led into a state of tranquillity that has up to now only been implied through the harmonious balancing of images. Isaak Walton 'would have loved' the brook and 'quiet' meadows and therefore (implicitly) we are justified in doing so (because) 'they breathe the very spirit of his own peacefulness, a soothing quietude that sinks into the soul'. The final sentence also works on another level, bringing together the preceding images while adding a new dimension in 'spirit' and 'soul'. The use

1. Nine editions were brought out in the 1820s alone.

of the word 'sink' recalls the earlier activity of the water which has already operated on the fancy of the writer and the reader. Having been led through the narrative into a state of receptivity, the reader is prepared to absorb this peacefulness, to allow it to 'sink' into his consciousness. The aesthetic pleasure involved in the explicit achievement of this state is reinforced by a reminder of the earlier perception of tranquillity-within-activity as the interchange of abstractions 'peacefulness', 'quietude' and 'soul' reflects the earlier mingling and mirroring of water and landscape.

The ordering of the images through which the associative patterns of Mary Mitford's work are constructed is a subtle and understated process. While patterns can be seen to emerge under close scrutiny of her writing, the overall structure of the sketches is one of apparent randomness. The narrative proceeds by a process of digression, what she endearingly calls 'my evil habit of digressing'.¹ The journey to the meadows in 'The Cowslip-Ball' has, as we have seen, been a meandering process, with the playful activities of May and Lizzy distracting us from the mechanical activity of walking as well as from the state of psychological depression outlined at the beginning of the sketch. The 'evil habit' is in fact integral to Mary Mitford's art. The linear movement of the walk is superseded by the activity of the landscape and the figures that inhabit it. In the passage describing the stream it is, as we have seen, the life of the landscape that has taken over: the water 'sparkling', 'flashing', 'stretching', 'sweeping', 'rising', 'sleeping'

1. 'The Incendiary' 5.14.

with Lizzy 'longing for adventure' and May 'clear [ing]' the torrent 'at a bound'. In order to perceive and respond to this life we need to adopt with the author a state in which we can 'enjoy the enjoyment that we witnessed'¹ which finally leads to a deeper kind of receptivity or what Wordsworth describes in 'Expostulation and Reply' as "'a wise passiveness"'. 'We' actively only 'see', 'hear' and 'start' but the significance of the passage lies in what has been received:

'The eye - it cannot choose but see;
We cannot bid the ear be still;
Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
Against or with our will.

'Nor less I deem that there are Powers
Which of themselves our minds impress;
That we can feed this mind of ours
In a wise passiveness.'²

Mary Mitford has effectively led her readers into a state where conscious mental activity has ceased and the mind - in a state of unconscious wisdom - is 'fed' by the activity, and ultimately the tranquillity, of nature. Although her work is undoubtedly permeated by Wordsworthian views of nature, her landscapes are, nevertheless, comparatively speaking, small-scale landscapes just as the country pleasures she delights in are often self-confessedly trivial. Consonant with this general smallness of scale, the 'powers' of nature are not acknowledged as 'powerful' in her work. Nature is perceived through the activity of the landscape, not as a strong impersonal force, and what the mind receives from its workings is left characteristically open, hinted at but not directly explained.

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1. Letter to Elizabeth Barrett, 17 Oct. 1836. L'Estrange, III, 63. See above, p. 61.
 2. 'Expostulation and Reply' (1798), 11.17-24.

The subtlety of Mary Mitford's writing derives partly from a cultural diffidence. In her published work she strives to reach out to an unknown audience most obliquely but perhaps most persuasively through an understated associative method of bringing divergent material together. It is this technique that forms the essence of her prose, her defence against as well as her response to, the cultural climate of the early 1820s. Precisely why Mary Mitford was so defensive will be more fully explored in Chapters 3 and 4, but what is characteristic in her work, the unforced accumulation of associative detail within each paragraph of every one of her early sketches, undoubtedly derives from her unwillingness to force or confront cultural issues in a work that she could not help but regard in terms of taste and content as trivial and second-rate. Yet the unforced quality of her writing serves to enhance not only the richness of Mary Mitford's experience of the countryside but also the quiet tone of achieved harmony that represents her - and her reader's - restoration to psychological well-being.

Section III - 'The Cowslip Ball': Childhood and Fancy

As we have already seen, Mary Mitford praises Cowper's letters for revealing 'a spirit of indulgence and love to his kind'¹ that is not present in his poetry. In her presentation of Lizzy in 'The Cowslip Ball' she reveals an affection that she extends to all her rustic characters. There is more to

1. See above, p. 59.

Lizzy's presentation, however, than mere affection and the diversion that her innocent activities provide. Through an examination of her role within the sketch, I believe that we can come to an understanding of the fanciful and artistic significance that all the rustic characters hold within Mary Mitford's literary world.

Throughout her country sketches, as I have suggested, Mary Mitford may be regarded as writing for a sophisticated city-dwelling audience, re-creating the therapeutic effect that the countryside had on her own world-weary consciousness. This point is recognised by John Constable in the ironic context of a disparaging dismissal of the first volume of Our Village:

Too childish and immature for me - it seems done by a person who had made a visit from London for the first time and like a cockney was astonished and delighted with what she saw.¹

Apart from recognizing the important city-country opposition within the sketches, he also points to the centrality of childishness and its attendant sense of wonder - concepts that are again integral to Mary Mitford's vision of her 'country' world.

Constable's disparagement of Our Village as 'childish' is matched in an assessment of the first volume by George Procter in The Quarterly Review of April 1824:

1. Letter to Maria Constable, 2 June 1824. John Constable's Correspondence, edited with an introduction and notes by R. B. Beckett, 6 vols (Ipswich, 1962-8), II, 323.

We like the conceit of pastoral infantine simplicity as little as the assumption of coarseness ... Miss Mitford's greyhound, May, and her little spoiled favourite, Lizzy, the carpenter's daughter, are tedious beyond endurance; and the repetitions of her chidings and caresses to the one, and of her colloquies with the other, is sadly puerile and unmeaning.¹

What both Constable and George Procter fail to recognize is that, within Mary Mitford's artistic frame of reference, what, put pejoratively, is 'puerile' is not necessarily 'unmeaning'.

I have already tried to demonstrate how May and Lizzy operate in juxtaposition with the landscape to represent another form of innocent life. In the passage describing the stream, for example, associations of majesty and riches are finally displaced by Lizzy.² A possible interpretation of this displacement is suggested later in the sketch, in two separate incidents.

Having described the meadows, Mary Mitford reinforces the idyllic image she has created by repeating Shakespeare's Song of Spring. While doing so she is interrupted by Lizzy:

'Cuckoo! cuckoo!' cried Lizzy, breaking in with her clear childish voice; and immediately, as if at her call, the real bird, from a neighbouring tree ... began to echo my lovely little girl ... (1.138)

Lizzy's interruption - another form of digression - is a natural echoing response to the line 'The cuckoo then on every tree'. Its innocent spontaneity is reinforced by the response that she herself prompts in the cuckoo in a nearby tree. A dialogue is therefore set up between poetry, childish innocence and the

1. The Quarterly Review (April 1824), XXXI (1825), 166-174 (p. 169).
2. See above, p. 71.

natural world - with Lizzy as the unconscious mediator between art and nature. Lizzy has an implied affinity with the cuckoo just as she was earlier seen in relation to the 'clear ...wide ... shallow' brook. Here 'her clear childish voice' recalls the earlier image and thus her closeness to inanimate as well as animate nature is reinforced.

Mary Mitford later challenges Lizzy to a cowslip-gathering for the making of the cowslip-ball that forms the title of the sketch. The gathering of the flowers and the making of the ball is a noisy and disorganized event with May oversetting a full basket of flowers and Lizzy dropping the ribbon, and so all the flowers, to chase a butterfly. Their happy exuberance is left entirely unchecked and once the cowslip-ball is made it is given to Lizzy:

What a concentration of fragrance and beauty it was! golden and sweet to satiety! rich to sight, and touch, and smell! Lizzy was enchanted, and ran off with her prize, hiding amongst the trees in the very coyness of ecstasy, as if any human eye, even mine, would be a restraint on her innocent raptures. (l.140-1)

Lizzy's direct ecstatic response to the flowers is recognised and valued for its own sake, even though it is acknowledged as beyond the comprehension of the adult mind. Her running away from the 'restraint' of 'any human eye' is a natural childish response that may be invested, if the reader is so inclined, with deeper significance. The meaning is, however, left entirely open. Mary Mitford no more seeks to impose direct constraint on her reader's responses than on her characters' actions; one may perceive the action as purely trivial or, in its very triviality, an expression of thoughtless happiness

that is the direct antithesis to the nervous depression outlined at the beginning of the sketch. At the same time, one may infer that it is Lizzy alone who can truly appreciate a prize of such incalculable worth: 'golden and sweet to satiety! rich to sight, and touch and smell!' On the one hand so familiar and appealing, Lizzy may also be regarded as in a state of unconscious grace. Here Mary Mitford is perhaps attributing to '[her] lovely little girl' an elusive power that relates her in literary terms to Wordsworth's rustic children, a connection suggested by Ruskin in tracing the origins of what he calls 'child benediction' in literature:

... I am disposed to assign in England much value to the widely felt, though little acknowledged, influence of an authoress now forgotten - Mary Russell Mitford. Her village children in the Lowlands - in the Highlands, the Lucy Grays and Alice Fells of Wordsworth - brought back to us the hues of Fairy Land.¹

Mary Mitford would not, however, have been particularly interested in the notion of Fairy Land. She was concerned with what could be directly perceived and understood rather than with the remote or mystical. As Elizabeth Barrett was later to write of her friend to Robert Browning:

She walks strongly on her two feet in this world - but nobody shall see her (not even you) fly out of a window. Too closely she keeps to the ground, I always feel.²

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1. Lecture IV - Fairy Land: 'Mrs Allingham and Kate Greenaway' (delivered 26 and 30 May 1883) in The Works of John Ruskin, edited by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (1903-12), XXXVIII, 339.
 2. 3 July 1846. The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning 1845-46, edited by Robert Weidemann Barrett Browning, 2 vols (1899), II, 292. Elizabeth Barrett's italics.

It is this keeping closely to the ground, dealing in 'fixities and definites'¹ - as she does throughout her work - that makes Mary Mitford predominantly a writer of the fancy rather than the imagination. Lizzy's 'power' is therefore comprehensible in human terms, whatever more obscure cultural significance the reader may choose to attach to it.

The basis of her 'power', as far as Mary Mitford is concerned, is in fact defined in the original 'Our Village' sketch:

Her chief attraction lies in her exceeding power of loving, and her firm reliance on the love and indulgence of others. How impossible it would be to disappoint the dear little girl when she runs to meet you, slides her pretty hand into yours, looks up gladly in your face, and says, 'Come!' You must go: you cannot help it.
(1.10)

In 'The Cowslip Ball' - as throughout the early sketches - this 'power of loving' extends on one level to a communion with nature akin to the 'delight in objects for their own sake' identified by George Eliot as a manifestation of the 'genuine love' that underlies Cowper's presentation of nature in The Task.²

It is interesting that Mary Mitford should choose to reinforce her own loving receptivity to nature through using Lizzy in this particular way. Thus, the little girl whose birthday is recorded in her diary is, in this respect, a literary device, enabling her to present one aspect of her own response

1. See above, p. 74.

2. See above, p. 58.

in simplified and consequently heightened form. The totality of her response, however, is more complex and sophisticated, influenced by other associations to which her adult readers can equally respond. Therefore while Lizzy indulges in 'innocent raptures' over her 'prize' we are left with Mary Mitford to share in other pleasures:

In the mean while I sat listening ... to a whole concert of nightingales, scarcely interrupted by any meaner bird, answering and vying with each other in those short delicious strains which are to the ear as roses to the eye; those snatches of lovely sound which come across us as airs from heaven. Pleasant thoughts, delightful associations awoke as I listened; and almost unconsciously I repeated to myself the beautiful story of the Lutist and the Nightingale, from Ford's Lover's Melancholy.
(1.141)

There is nothing mystical about this, the aesthetic climax of the sketch. It is an image of achieved harmony, presented initially through the song of the nightingales as the response of the birds to each other reflects the pattern of receptivity and interchange of response that forms the basic structure of the sketch. This is also mirrored by the mingling of the senses of taste (implied in 'delicious'), hearing ('which are to the ear') and sight ('as roses to the eye'). It is receptivity to this total experience that allows still more 'pleasant thoughts, delightful associations' to overtake us.

Recalling her earlier use of Isaak Walton, the piece ends with a reference to another work of literature, the memory of which arises 'almost unconsciously' in the author's mind as an implied consequence of her achieved state of mental tranquillity. This allusion and the quotation that follows it both enrich the

sketch on an associative level while enabling Mary Mitford to avoid pushing her own writing into the more elevated realms she would undoubtedly have felt to be more appropriate as an aesthetic climax. As so often throughout her work, literary allusion serves to elevate the tone of the writing by association if not by direct quotation. This frees her from the need to make too extreme shifts of tone in her prose while enabling her to convey the full range of the play of her own fancy from the lowly and trivial to the high and 'literary'.

The sketch concludes with a brisk return to everyday life as the author and her companions are soaked in a sudden shower. It concludes with the following humorous observation:

How melancholy I was all the morning! how cheerful I am now! Nothing like a shower-bath - a real shower-bath, such as Lizzy and May and I have undergone, to cure low spirits. Try it my dear readers, if ever ye be nervous - I will answer for its success. (1.145)

All that has gone before - the restorative experience of the countryside, the rich layers of association that give definition to that experience - is half-laughingly thrown away in such a conclusion. It is as if Mary Mitford is deliberately denying any shred of pretension that might be attached to her work.

Mary Mitford's early sketches, conceived and written when she was still in a state of general good spirits, are, I believe, a kind of game in which she plays with different aspects of her own experience. The high and the low, the serious and the humorous are brought together through the unconstrained wanderings of her fancy. In this and in the spontaneous joy of her responses she becomes herself as a child, yielding, apparently

unconsciously, to every new experience. As readers, we are invited to participate in the game, to lose ourselves in the prose, to respond directly to what is being described and to as many of the potential layers of association as we are able. Life, in Our Village, ceases to be serious and depressing. Like Lizzy, we can wander where we choose, trusting that our guide will keep us from harm and enable us to discover only fresh sources of delight.

In Mary Mitford's early sketches we find a cleverly-constructed pastoral retreat, set, not in the more usual golden age of 'backward reference',¹ but firmly in the present and appropriately often described in the present tense. In this chapter I hope to have identified some of the characteristic features of this retreat and demonstrated how the intermingled layers of reality and fancy that constitute the texture of each sketch are built up within individual units of calmly unpretentious, but nevertheless richly evocative prose.

Man and nature co-exist in Mary Mitford's village world in a reciprocal interchange of remedial goodness. This interchange is mirrored in the subtle harmonies of her prose which may be regarded as the creative expression of her own therapeutic experience of village life. The entirety of the early sketches are related to a central idea of being restored to a state of

1. Raymond Williams, The Country and the City, Paladin edition (1975), p. 48.

mental tranquillity by responding to nature and innocence. The play of the fancy, the balancing of associations that are involved in the evocation of a personal idyll take precedence over all other considerations. The early Our Village sketches represent a harmonious reconciliation of the diverse and at times conflicting material that will be examined in the following chapters.

Chapter Three

Nature and Art

A central dilemma of Mary Mitford's early sketches arises from her desire to translate the image of familiar scenes into artistic shape. Her belief in the beneficence of nature and the intrinsic goodness of rustic life was shared by many of her contemporaries and found expression in various literary forms. What was lacking, however, was an adequate literary precedent for the detailed depiction of the narrow lanes and quiet meadows which she regarded with such affection and in which she found her own sense of nature. Similarly, she lacked a suitable literary model for the good-humoured yet vivid depiction of every day scenes of rustic life. These deficiencies were supplied in some measure by her knowledge of the visual arts whose influence on her work is most immediately suggested by the sub-titling of Our Village as 'Sketches of Rural Character and Scenery'.¹

Section I of this chapter explains Mary Mitford's attitude to nature more fully; in Section II I shall try to demonstrate how the landscape image that she sought to represent was, according to the artistic canons of the age, unfashionable and unacceptable; in Section III I hope to indicate how her awareness of painting might have assisted her in making her descriptions; in Section IV I suggest how the effect of verisimilitude in her work answered a growing taste of the age for realism in literature as well as in painting.

1. My italics.

Section I - Nature

Mary Mitford's attitude to nature was at once typically Romantic and deeply idiosyncratic. She believed without question that nature was capable of exerting a soothing and moral influence on man. She would have found an exposition of such ideas in Rousseau and Wordsworth and been familiar with their adoption in closer contemporary writers such as Jane Austen. Fanny Price's eulogy on nature in Mansfield Park (1814) is a typical example of the contemporary view:

'Here's harmony! ... Here's repose! ... Here's what may tranquillize every care, and lift the heart to rapture! When I look out on such a night as this, I feel as if there could be neither wickedness nor sorrow in the world; and there certainly would be less of both if the sublimity of Nature were more attended to, and people were carried more out of themselves by contemplating such a scene.'¹

A similar response to landscape is evident in Marriage (1818), the novel by Susan Ferrier that Mary Mitford notes in her diary for 1819 as 'very good':²

How delicious to the feeling heart to behold so fair a scene of unsophisticated nature, and to listen to her voice alone, breathing the accents of innocence and joy!³

Both novels attempt to define character in terms of response to landscape. Fanny's intrinsic sensitivity and goodness is suggested by her response; in Marriage, meanwhile, Susan Ferrier

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1. Mansfield Park, edited by R. W. Chapman, third edition (1934), p. 113. See Ch.2, p. 57.
 2. See Ch. 4, Section I.
 3. (Oxford English Novels, 1971), p. 94.

implicitly condemns her fashionable characters for their indifference to the 'scene of unsophisticated nature':

But none of the Party who now gazed on it, had minds capable of being touched with the emotions it was calculated to inspire.¹

As Mary Mitford makes clear in her Preface to the first volume of Our Village, the manifest goodness of her rustic characters springs from her conviction

... that in every condition of life goodness and happiness may be found by those who seek them, and never more surely than in the fresh air, the shade, and the sunshine of nature.
(1.v-vi)

The question of nature's influence in shaping character is most fully explored in one of the sketches of fashionable life, 'Cousin Mary' (OV 1). Here, as in Susan Ferrier's novel, the advantages of a childhood spent in seclusion from fashionable society are explored through the presentation of the central character. 'Cousin Mary' herself bears a distinct, though unacknowledged, resemblance to Mary Douglas, the heroine of Marriage: both girls have been brought up at liberty in the countryside and as a result have developed a powerful love of nature and a concomitant 'innocence of heart' (1.95). Nature not only fosters innocent goodness but also takes on a more formally educative role:

[Cousin Mary] was an excellent and curious naturalist, merely because she had gone into the fields with her eyes open ... (1.94)

... she was fanciful, recollective, new; drew her images from the real objects, not from their shadows in books. (1.94)

The essential quality of Mary's approach to life is its freshness: she is theoretically 'unaccomplished' in an 'accomplished age'

1. (Oxford English Novels, 1971), p. 94.

(1.94), but her 'ignorance' (1.92) is rated higher than the kind of knowledge acquired by contemporaries who 'had trodden the education-mill till they all moved in one step, had lost sense in sound, and ideas in words' (1.94). The presentation of Cousin Mary is a variation on the idea contained in Wordsworth's 'Expostulation and Reply' and 'The Tables Turned', that nature is a better and wiser teacher than man or his books:

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife,
Come, hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet his music; on my life
There's more of wisdom in it.¹

The role of nature as educator is not made explicit anywhere else in Mary Mitford's work but the setting of closeness to nature above the accomplishments of a fashionable education is a predictable corollary to the pastoral superiority of the country over the city apparent throughout her work.

Although Mary Mitford's belief in the goodness of nature was by no means unusual among her contemporaries, her taste in country scenes was inevitably determined by her personal circumstances. Apart from her childhood stay at Lyme Regis,² her trip to Northumberland in 1806³ and a visit to Bath in 1843,⁴ she never left the south-east of England. Her experience of nature was chiefly confined to her garden and to the lanes and meadows of

1. 'The Tables Turned; An Evening Scene on the Same Subject.' First published in the Lyrical Ballads (1798).
2. See Ch. 1, p. 15.
3. See Ch. 1, p. 16.
4. This was following the death of Dr Mitford. See Ch. 1, p. 51.

south Berkshire and north Hampshire. Her only area of expertise was on the subject of flowers and, though she was later to claim that she was no botanist,¹ one of her earliest essays was on 'Field Flowers'.² Her love of flowers in general is everywhere apparent in her writing, emerging through detailed descriptions and also through the recurrence of flowers in associative imagery. In 'Hannah' (OV 1), for example,

... the sweetest flower of the garden,
and the joy and pride of her mother's
heart, was her daughter Hannah. (1.19)

In the original 'Our Village' sketch, meanwhile, the goodness of the shoemaker's daughter is reinforced by her taste in flowers:

She ... has a profusion of white stocks
under her window, as pure and delicate as
herself. (1.5)

In the opening sentences of 'Field Flowers', the love of wild flowers is presented specifically as a pleasure of association:

The love of wild flowers is purely romantic,
founded on hereditary reverence and old
association. Children soon learn that
violet and primrose are not common words;
and men and women love them, from the
mingled recollections of childhood and of
poetry.³

Characteristically, the broader implications that the world of flowers held for Mary Mitford are left implicit in her published work, but their significance is made clear in a letter to her friend, Miss Jephson, in 1845:

... that little world of flowers is, in its
sweetness and innocence and peace, the truest
and best example of what we ought to try to
be ourselves; opening our hearts as best we

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1. See letter to Mrs Stoven, 28 Oct. 1824. Houghton Library, Harvard University. bMS Eng. 1155 (29). Quoted in Section II below.
 2. Published in June 1821. See Appendix A.
 3. The New Monthly Magazine. I (1821), 648.

may, to the bright sunshine and the pure
 air of heaven; and sweetening and
 beautifying, to our fellow-creatures,
 the path of life along which we dwell.¹

This significance of the 'little world of flowers' is a clear example of the kind of meaning that Mary Mitford attached to the natural world: 'sweetness', 'innocence' and 'peace' are all concepts central to the early sketches. As humans, meanwhile, we have to 'try' to emulate qualities that arise spontaneously in nature.

Mary Mitford's affection for her local scenery seems to have grown particularly strong around the time of her move to Three Mile Cross. Attachment to a local landscape is identified by J.R. Watson as a phenomenon common amongst the early Romantics, for example, Wordsworth, Scott and Constable are all strongly identified with a particular region.² In each of their cases the attachment originates in childhood, but with Mary Mitford this is not so. She did not live in the country until the move to Bertram House in about 1804³ and her attachment to the Berkshire countryside seems to have grown steadily from that time onwards. By 1820 the familiarity of local scenes was very important to her and, writing to Sir William Elford shortly after the move to Three Mile Cross, she expresses her sense of loss in the following terms:

The trees, and fields, and sunny hedgerows,
 however little distinguished by picturesque
 beauty, were to me as old friends ...⁴

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1. Autumn 1845. L'Estrange, III, 202.
 2. J. R. Watson, Picturesque Landscape and English Romantic Poetry (1970), pp. 186-7.
 3. See Ch. 1, p. 16.
 4. 8 April 1820. L'Estrange, II, 91.

Three Mile Cross was, however, within easy walking distance of Bertram House and it seems that what she was really afraid of at this time was the prospect of having to move to Reading:

Last, and best of all, we are three good miles from Reading. You will easily understand, my dear friend, that I have been terribly afraid of being planted in that illustrious town, and am quite enchanted at my escape ... Oh! my dear Three Mile Cross, how much I prefer you! I am not quite rid of my Reading-phobia yet; for this place is considered as a mere pied à terre ...¹

In addition to this 'phobia' relating to her personal circumstances Mary Mitford's love of her local countryside was also sharpened by a fear that was shared by many of her contemporaries - that the familiar face of the English landscape was threatened by Enclosure Bills. Although Spencer's Wood Common, the common most frequently described in Our Village, was not in fact enclosed until 1863,² Mary Mitford's anxiety about the impending demise of this ancient feature of the countryside is evident in another letter to Sir William of 1820:

I have a passion for commons. Those pretty irregular green patches, with cottages round them, and dipping ponds glancing so brightly, and crossing footpaths among the scattered trees; seem to me the characteristics of English scenery. Ah! they are passing away! We shall soon see nothing but straight hedgerows and gravelled lanes.³

This combination of old affection and anticipated loss seems to have heightened Mary Mitford's response to nature throughout 1820 and the following year, when the Our Village sequence was first

1. 8 April 1820. L'Estrange, II, 93.

2. W. E. Tate, A Domesday of English Enclosure Acts and Awards (Reading, 1978). See also below Ch. 5, Section II.

3. 24 Aug. 1820. L'Estrange, II, 107.

conceived by the writing of the original sketch.¹

Just as Constable is reputed to have said that his affection for his native Suffolk "'made him a painter"',² so on one level Mary Mitford's affection for contemporary Berkshire may be said to have 'made her a writer' - at least a writer of the village sketches for which she is best remembered. She wanted to bring her local scenes to life with what George Eliot identifies in Cowper's poetry as 'all the fond minuteness of attention that belongs to love'.³ Yet there was no established precedent of detailed prose landscape description in literature at that time. While both Jane Austen and Susan Ferrier, as we have seen, define character in terms of response to landscape, neither is concerned to re-create in any detail the respective scenes that have inspired these responses. Fanny Price's eulogy on nature, for example, is elicited by her contemplating an image of

... all that was solemn and soothing, and lovely ... in the brilliancy of an unclouded night, and the contrast of the deep shadow of the woods.⁴

Apart from giving a sense of the contrast of light and dark and the presence of woods, there is little here to help the reader visualize the scene. The emphasis rests on the emotive adjectives 'solemn and soothing, and lovely'. Jane Austen is more concerned with Fanny's response to the scene than the exact visual or sensory experience that prompted it. Similarly, in

1. Completed on 5 June 1821. See Ch. 1, p. 36.

2. C. R. Leslie, Memoirs of the Life of John Constable, edited by J. Mayne (1951), p. 1.

3. Essays of George Eliot, edited by Thomas Pinney (1963), p. 382.

4. Mansfield Park, edited by R. W. Chapman, third edition (1934), p. 113.

Marriage the Scottish highland scene that is capable of evoking pleasure in 'the feeling heart' is presented only in generalized terms:

All around, rocks, meadows, woods, and hills,
mingled in wild and lovely irregularity.¹

The emotive qualities of landscape were taken for granted by Mary Mitford's literary contemporaries and her impulse to give stronger visual definition to the scenes that particularly moved her was matched only in the world of contemporary painting.

Section II - Landscape Painting

Mary Mitford's close involvement in the world of contemporary painting undoubtedly fostered in her a more precise way of seeing and a desire to re-create verbally the landscape scenes and natural objects that particularly moved her. In Section III the more positive side of her visual awareness will be discussed, but her detailed presentation of certain aspects of the landscape cannot be considered in isolation from her understanding of the precedents available to her in early nineteenth century landscape painting.

Landscape art was in a state of transition in the 1810s and 1820s, with old ideas persisting alongside the development of newer trends. The difficulty of Mary Mitford's position derives from the fact that her own experience of the countryside drew her to representations of what she described as 'close shut-in scenes' while her knowledge of artistic tradition and Academic hierarchy led her to believe that her taste for these scenes was both 'wrong'

1. Susan Ferrier, Marriage (Oxford English Novels, 1971), p. 94.

and 'ignoble'.¹ Her anxiety to conform to artistic tradition in her written descriptions gives rise to evident confusion and at times actually stands in the way of her desire to 'paint' what she saw with accuracy and precision. It also leads to a use of association as diversion, an indication in this particular case of her reluctance to confront a cultural issue that frankly bewildered her.

She belonged to the first generation to benefit in England from a variety of public art exhibitions. The Royal Academy of Artshad been founded in 1768 for the annual exhibition of works by contemporary artists and continued to dominate the art world throughout the nineteenth century. During the first decade of the century, however, two rival institutions were also established. From 1805 the Old Water Colour Society held an annual London exhibition, bringing landscape, the predominant subject of watercolour painting at that time, to a much wider audience. In 1806, meanwhile, the British Institution opened its first exhibition in Pall Mall. It was set up as an alternative to the Royal Academy with a more deliberate bias towards the sale of paintings. From 1805 onwards Mary Mitford regularly travelled to London and frequently visited the exhibitions when she was there.²

Her interest in contemporary painting was probably at its height between 1810 and the early 1820s. In 1810 she began to correspond regularly with Sir William Elford, an honorary

1. Letter to Sir William Elford, 23 Nov. 1821. L'Estrange, II, 139. Quoted more extensively at the end of this section.

2. See Ch. 1, pp. 23-4.

exhibitor at the Royal Academy, and by 1818 she was also in close contact with Haydon and Hofland, both of whom were endeavouring at that time to establish their separate artistic reputations.¹ Through these contacts she became increasingly aware of establishment views about painting and of the frustrations that these views were capable of creating for practising artists.

Landscape was as late as the 1820s regarded in official Academic circles as essentially an inferior branch of painting. This view originated in the eighteenth-century conviction that as a genre it was incapable of imparting noble or moral sentiments to the mind of the viewer. The point is made clear in an essay first published in 1719:

A History is preferable to a Landscape, Sea-piece, Animals, Fruit, Flowers or any other Still-Life, pieces of Drollery, &c.; the reason is, the latter Kinds may Please ... but they cannot Improve the Mind, they excite no Noble Sentiments ...²

'History' at that time meant depictions of either Biblical or mythological subjects and later came to encompass representations of more recent historical events.

Eighteenth-century didacticism and preoccupation with ideal form led to an established hierarchy of styles within the landscape genre itself. Classical landscape - depictions of scenes from classical mythology within an idealized landscape setting - was considered to be the highest form of landscape art because of

1. See Ch. 1, pp. 26-29.

2. Jonathan Richardson, 'An Essay on the whole Art of Criticism as it relates to Painting' in Two Discourses (1719), pp. 44-45.

its supposed ability to transport the mind beyond the imperfections of the present world to the tranquillity of Arcadia. Sir Joshua Reynolds' pronouncements on the subject of landscape painting were as familiar to early nineteenth century artists as to the generation of artists who were taught during his time as President of the Royal Academy (1768-1789). He believed that essentially the arts should be seeking to express 'ideal beauty',¹ and 'to supply the natural imperfection of things'.² In order to achieve 'ideal beauty' in painting, the artist must not endeavour 'to amuse mankind with the minute neatness of his imitations' but 'to improve them by the grandeur of his ideas'.³ This ideal in landscape was generally felt to be achieved in the paintings of Claude Lorrain (1600-1682) and Nicholas Poussin (1593/4-1665) whose atmospheric representations of the Roman countryside formed the most acceptable model for English landscape artists well into the nineteenth century. A comparison between the theory of Reynolds in the late eighteenth century and Hazlitt in the 1820s shows only a very slight shift on the subject of landscape representation which is indicative of the extent to which old ideas persisted in artistic circles during Mary Mitford's formative years:

Claude Lorrain ... was convinced that taking nature as he found it seldom produced beauty. His pictures are a

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1. Discourse III in Discourses delivered at the Royal Academy, 2 vols (1820), I, 40.
 2. Discourse XIII in Discourses delivered at the Royal Academy, 2 vols (1820), II, 116.
 3. Discourse III in Discourses delivered at the Royal Academy, 2 vols (1820), I, 36.

composition of the various draughts which he had previously made from various beautiful scenes and prospects.

(Reynolds, Discourse IV)¹

To give us nature, such as we see it, is well and deserving of praise; to give us nature, such as we have never seen, but have often wished to see it, is better, and deserving of higher praise.

(Hazlitt, 'On a Landscape of Nicholas Poussin')²

The step forward that is helpful as far as Mary Mitford is concerned is Hazlitt's admission that to give us nature 'as we see it' is 'well' while Reynolds endorses Claude's view that copying nature 'seldom produced beauty'. Both are, however, convinced that it is better to create an improved, idealized version of nature. It is ironic that Hazlitt, associated by Marilyn Butler with the literary avant-garde of the period,³ should declare himself in 1820 to be 'irreclaimably of the old school in painting'.⁴

The general conservatism that prevailed in Academic artistic circles during the 1810s and 1820s meant that most aspiring artists were still encouraged to copy from old masters rather than to paint direct from nature and to compose even English landscapes along classical lines. This meant incorporating into the composition a framing coulisse of foreground trees, the implementation of an aerial perspective and an attempt to reproduce the golden light of a Claude or a Poussin landscape.

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1. In Discourses delivered at the Royal Academy, 2 vols (1820), I, 67.
 2. The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, Centenary Edition, edited by P. P. Howe, 21 vols (1930-34), VIII, 169.
 3. In Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries (Oxford, 1981). e.g. pp. 144-5.
 4. 'On the Pleasures of Painting' (Dec. 1820) in The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, Centenary edition, edited by P. P. Howe, 21 vols (1930-34), VIII, 14.

The manifest unsuitability of much of English landscape to these features had already led to the development of variant forms of landscape representation but the classical influence remained strong. Mary Mitford is undoubtedly appealing to the taste of her age when she explains that Cousin Mary who 'loved landscape best, because she understood it best' (1.93) particularly appreciated the landscapes of Claude and those of 'our English Claudes Wilson¹ and Hoffland [sic]' (1.93). There is no sense of conscious irony in the expression 'our English Claudes': Mary Mitford accepted the supremacy of Claude in landscape representation and no more questioned the practice of imitating him than Reynolds would have done.

There is no evidence to suggest that she ever read the works of William Gilpin (1724-1804) or Uvedale Price (1747-1829) or any other late eighteenth-century expositor of Picturesque theory, but it seems that she possessed at least a general understanding of the theories of the English Picturesque tradition. These theories² include the belief that roughness is the most essential quality in the subject of a painting, lending variety of texture and also breaking up the light and shade of the composition. Some objects were therefore considered to be more suitable than others for inclusion in a picture. Although, Gilpin says, we may admire a fine horse in nature,

... as an object of picturesque beauty, we admire more the worn-out cart-horse, the cow, the goat, or the ass; whose harder lines, and rougher coats, exhibit more the graces of the pencil.³

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1. Richard Wilson (1714-1782).
 2. Defined in such works as Gilpin's Three Essays on Picturesque Beauty (1794) or Price's An Essay on the Picturesque as compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful, 2 vols (1794-8).
 3. Essay on Picturesque Beauty (1792), p. 14.

It is under the influence of such thinking that Mary Mitford shared the apparently heartless visual predilection of her age for such features of the landscape as broken-down rustic dwellings.¹ This taste, censured by Ruskin later in the century for reasons of social and political conscience, is defined by him as a pleasure of association:

The essence of picturesque character is a sublimity not inherent in the nature of the thing, but caused by something external to it; as the ruggedness of a cottage roof possesses something of a mountain aspect, not belonging to the cottage as such.²

Perhaps surprisingly in a writer to whom this kind of associative perception is so important, Mary Mitford, for reasons that will become evident, does not go beyond the simple presentation of 'roughness' or 'irregularity' in describing Picturesque features within her landscapes.

Her familiarity with eighteenth century Romantic as opposed to classical landscape is equally evident throughout her work. This type of landscape was identified with the feeling for the sublime in nature and exemplified particularly in the work of Salvator Rosa (1615-1673). It is clear from her specific allusion to Rosa in 'Tom Cordery'³ that Mary Mitford was directly familiar with his paintings.

The unsuitability of classical, Picturesque or Romantic landscape in imaging scenes typical of early nineteenth-century Berkshire led Mary Mitford to turn to Dutch and Flemish landscapes

1. See Ch. 5, Section III.

2. 'Of the Turnerian Picturesque' (Modern Painters IV) in The Works of John Ruskin, edited by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (1903-12), VI, 10.

3. OV 1.173.

as more appropriate precedents. The more general influence of Dutch painting on Mary Mitford's work will be discussed in Section IV but it is perhaps worth mentioning at this stage that she does on occasion refer specifically to Dutch artists by name to reinforce and enrich her landscape descriptions, for example:

A deep, woody, green lane, such as Hobbema¹
or Ruysdael² might have painted ... forms
one boundary of the garden ...³

There was no established tradition in English painting in the early nineteenth-century of depicting more homely landscape scenes - Gainsborough's landscapes are a rare exception - and it is not surprising that Mary Mitford should find in terms of artistic precedent that her local landscapes were often theoretically unsuitable for a picture. The Lake District and North Wales traditionally attracted travellers in search of the Picturesque but the 'trees, and fields, and sunny hedgerows' that she regarded as 'old friends'⁴ were held in little cultural esteem. Her desire to make them acceptable is evident in many of the landscape descriptions she wrote for Sir William Elford between 1810 and the early 1820s.

It was undoubtedly her friendship with Sir William that made her begin to experiment with the creation of detailed verbal landscape pictures. Sir William, being an amateur poet as well

1. Meindert Hobbema (1638-1709).
2. Jacob van Ruysdael (1628/9-1682).
3. 'Hannah'. OV 1.17.
4. Letter to Sir William, 8 April 1820. *L'Estrange*, II, 91. Quoted above, p. 95.

as a landscape painter, personally embodied the traditional inter-relation between poetry and painting. This conception of him is central to the poetic tribute Mary Mitford addressed to him in 1812:

The sister-arts at Nature's Shrine
In generous rivalry combine;
Her charms the Painter's soul inspire,
And wake the Bard's immortal fire.
O doubly blest! to you are given
These varied powers by favouring Heaven!
The poet's blissful fairyland,
The Charms that wit and sense impart
And, rarer still, a feeling heart.¹

'Nature', in Sir William's case, does not only kindle the 'feeling heart' of a poet, but also the vision of a painter. Mary Mitford, as we have seen, was moved by her own experience of nature and although by her own admission she 'could neither paint nor draw',² she became increasingly fascinated by the possibilities of what she was later to term 'word-painting'.³

Her observation was precise and her concern for accuracy consonant with recent developments in scientific knowledge. As Hugh Honour remarks,

... the great recent advances in scientific knowledge profoundly interested and moved most of the Romantics by their revelation that the universe was more, rather than less, mysterious than had previously been supposed.⁴

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1. 'To Sir William Elford, Bart.', The Poetical Register (1812), VII, 211.
 2. Letter to Haydon, c. June 1829. MS Reading. The Letters of Mary Mitford in 6 vols, f. 573.
 3. 'John Ruskin ... produces morsels of word-painting that it would be difficult to exceed.' Letter to Miss Jephson, 12 Jan. 1853. Friendships, II, 243.
 4. Romanticism, Pelican edition (1981), p. 65.

While her contact with Sir William as a landscape painter undoubtedly sharpened her visual awareness, the concern for accuracy that is evident in her more detailed descriptions was also probably heightened by his strong interest in natural history. He was, for example, a Fellow of the Royal and Linnean Societies. In April 1812 he recommended to her Gilbert White's Natural History of Selborne (1789),¹ which she had already read several times and had been impressed by 'the air of reality in [White's] descriptions'.² He had also, according to Mary Mitford, "'painted nearly every British bird"³ and in December 1812 he offered to lend to Dr Mitford A Short Essay on the Propagation and Dispersion of Animals and Vegetables which he had written and published in 1786.⁴

Though Mary Mitford was later to claim that she was no botanist, 'never having got beyond the rudiments of that beautiful science',⁵ it was in this area of natural history, as I have suggested in Section I, that her most detailed knowledge and her greatest enthusiasm lay. In the letter to Sir William in which she says that she has read The Natural History of Selborne several times she combines enthusiasm with an evident degree of observation on the subject of flowers:

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1. He recommends the work on 9 April 1812. Friendships, I, 81.
 2. Letter to Sir William Elford, 15 April 1812. L'Estrange, I, 186.
 3. See Friendships, I, 78. No letter reference given.
 4. He offers to lend the essay in a letter to Mary Mitford of 23 Dec. 1812. Friendships, I, 98.
 5. Letter to Mrs Stoven, 28 Oct. 1824. Houghton Library, Harvard University. BMS Eng. 1155 (29).

... nothing can be more vulgar than my taste in flowers, for which I have a passion. I like scarcely any but the common ones. First and best I love violets and primroses, and cowslips, and wood anemones, and the whole train of field flowers; then roses of every kind and colour, especially the great cabbage rose; then the blossoms of the lilac and laburnum, the horse-chestnut, the asters, the jasmine, and the honeysuckle; and to close the list, lilies of the valley, sweet peas, and the red pinks which are found in cottagers' gardens.¹

She was equally observant of the more general features of familiar countryside and in the literary criticism that appears in her letters to Sir William it is evident that she held a strong regard for truthful representations of landscape. In 1814 she ridicules Maria Edgeworth's most recent novel Patronage (1814) for placing 'gushing streams and rocky mountains' in north Hampshire.² Her contempt for this particular inaccuracy inspires her to create for Sir William a visual image of her own recollection of the district:

... woods opening into sweet irregular glades, with a white cottage peeping through the shades, and a long vista of hills seen through some irregular arch formed by a turn of the winding road - such a home scene, with its catching lights and its lovely tranquillity, as Gainsborough might have painted. In other spots, the woods seem closing irregularly round a green common, a village church at the summit, surrounded with pretty cottages and quiet farms, with its tiny stream and wooden bridge dividing the straggling houses. This is perhaps too tame for painting; but its effect in sunlight is exquisitely soothing and sweet.³

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1. 15 April 1812. L'Estrange, I, 187-188.
 2. Letter to Sir William Elford, 4 June 1814. L'Estrange, I, 269.
 3. Letter to Sir William Elford, 4 June 1814. L'Estrange, I, 269-70.

The two pictures contained in this passage are not the first nor the most detailed of the landscapes that Mary Mitford had begun to make for Sir William in the early years of their correspondence. They are, however, typical of her scenes at this time in that her feeling for the soothing qualities of nature, her concern for accuracy and her rapidly developing interest in painting are united in perceptible confusion. This extract is, as her later descriptions were to become, essentially an associative piece of writing. Yet the repetition of variations of the adjective 'irregular' three times within two sentences suggests perhaps an over-emphatic appeal to the Picturesque tradition; at the same time, the evocative reference to Gainsborough may also imply a characteristic anxiety to validate the description by invoking the work of a highly-regarded artist. A sense of unease with her description can finally be seen in her admission that 'This is perhaps too tame for painting', recalling by contrast the contemporary feeling for Romantic landscape, 'the exhilarating terror inspired by rushing torrents, roaring waterfalls, precipitous crags and unattainable mountain peaks'.¹ Mary Mitford's own response to these scenes is assured: to her, the first is an image of 'tranquillity' and the second is 'exquisitely soothing and sweet'. And yet there is evident within her description a sense of different traditions in landscape representation warring with her deeply-felt personal response.

In another letter to Sir William she experiments with the creation of a picture of the water meadows near her home. Her

1. Hugh Honour, Romanticism, Pelican edition (1981), pp. 57-58.

introduction to the scene betrays an irreconcilable sense of paradox:

... the meadows in which I have been walking are nothing less than picturesque. To a painter they would offer no attraction - to a poet they would want none.¹

The bewilderment expressed here recalls the central irony of her description of her Hampshire common: the meadows are again 'too tame for painting'. Yet to Mary Mitford's eye - and to her poet's 'feeling heart'² - they are picturesque in the most literal sense: 'fit to be the subject of a picture; possessing pleasing and interesting qualities of form and colour' (OED, first usage 1703). The description continues:

It is a meadow, or rather a long string of meadows, irregularly divided by a shallow winding stream, swollen by the late rains to unusual beauty, and bounded on the one side by a ragged copse, of which the outline is perpetually broken by sheep walks and more beaten paths, which here and there admit a glimpse of low white cottages, and on the other by tall hedgerows, abounding in timber, and strewn like a carpet with white violets, primroses, and oxlips.³

Again she presents her scene in the language of the Picturesque tradition: the meadows are 'irregularly divided'; the stream is 'winding'; the copse is 'ragged' and its outline 'perpetually broken'. As if uncertain of her success in conveying the beauty of the particulars of the scene by associative means alone, the description closes in a gush of enthusiastic exclamations:

1. Letter to Sir William Elford, 5 April 1812. L'Estrange, I, 181.
2. See above, p. 106.
3. Letter to Sir William Elford, 5 April 1812. L'Estrange, I, 181.

Oh how beautiful [the meadows] were today, with all their train of callow goslings and frisking lambs and laughing children chasing the butterflies that floated like animated flowers in the air, or hunting for birds' nests among the golden-blossomed furze! How full of fragrance and melody! It is when walking in such scenes, listening to the mingled notes of a thousand birds, and inhaling the mingled perfume of a thousand flowers, that I feel the real joy of existence.¹

The device of closing a passage of landscape description with a flood of exclamations, adopted here in 1812, is one that she was to rely on a great deal in the early Our Village sketches, particularly in the 'Walks in the Country' series: in a rapturous crescendo of pleasing images of sight, smell and sound, she introduces her own response to the landscape that she has just described. The reader's attention is gently but firmly deflected from a scene which is perhaps pictorially unworthy to images of children and young animals and their associative implications of innocent happiness. Mary Mitford's own response is admitted only after this distraction and an exaggerated evocation of the landscape - 'full of fragrance and melody', 'a thousand birds', 'a thousand flowers' - so that the original image of the meadows is finally lost in the wanderings of the fancy that culminate in the final sense of joy. The use of association here as in 'The Cowslip Ball', serves both to enrich Mary Mitford's description and to prevent her from having to give too stark an image of familiar scenes. In this sense association becomes a defence against the visual conservatism of an age that was reluctant to acknowledge the intrinsic beauty of landscape that bore neither classical, Picturesque nor Romantic frame of reference.

1. Letter to Sir William Elford, 5 April 1812. L'Estrange, I, 181-2.

Had Mary Mitford's cultural contacts been different she might have been less hesitant. As it was, her artist friends can only have increased her confusion. Sir William's art was rooted in the eighteenth century and the known titles of his landscapes suggest that they were chiefly general prospects.¹ Haydon, meanwhile, was not concerned with landscape and would almost certainly have regarded it as an inferior genre. Mary Mitford's own awareness of the current Academic hierarchy of painting styles is suggested by a question in a letter to Sir William in 1814 about the creator of Solomon:²

Is he likely to obtain employment in his own high sphere, or will he - like Sir Joshua - sink into portrait painting?³

When she first came to know Haydon he was a historical painter of extraordinary ambition and it was not until the late 1820s that he finally 'sank' into portraiture and the painting of burlesque scenes out of financial necessity. In my view, her close contact with Haydon at the outset of her mature literary career - when she deliberately divided her talents between blank-verse tragedy and light-hearted prose sketches - led Mary Mitford to regard her sketches as the second-rate side of her own creativity, something to be 'sunk' into. This impression would have been reinforced at the outset of her career by her sense of the lowliness of The Lady's Magazine⁴ and her belief, to be discussed in Chapter 4, in the inferiority of prose as a

1. See Ch. 1, p. 25 for a list of his exhibits between 1810 and 1824.
2. See Ch.1, p. 26 for details of Sir William's purchase of Haydon's Solomon.
3. 5 July 1814. L'Estrange, I, 288.
4. See Ch.1, pp. 37-38 and 44.

literary medium.¹ At the same time, her sense of lowliness led her to present the totality of her response to village life in a deliberately understated and unthreatening way. Her consciousness of inferiority thus becomes a strength, underlying the steady, quiet flow of her early prose in which a wide array of ideas and images are harmoniously brought together for the contemplation of her reader.

Hofland, who was a far more prolific landscape painter than Sir William, might reasonably be supposed to have most influenced Mary Mitford's understanding of the branch of painting with which she was most concerned. Like Haydon, Hofland tried to live by his painting and throughout his lifetime he presented 72 works at the Royal Academy, 141 at the British Institution and 118 at the Royal Society of British Artists.² Apart from what appears to have been an uncharacteristic foray into the realms of historical painting with his Jerusalem,³ Hofland was largely occupied during the early years of his friendship with Mary Mitford on Thames-side scenes. She would certainly have been familiar with many of these paintings, either from visiting his studio at Richmond or attending the exhibitions in which his work was shown. She certainly regarded him as a talented artist, describing him to Sir William as 'a man eminently accomplished and intellectual, whose conversation is singularly rich and delightful - who talks pictures and paints poems'.⁴

1. See Ch. 4, Section III.

2. This information is taken from A Dictionary of British Landscape Painting by Col. Maurice Harold Grant (Leigh-on-Sea, 1952). The Royal Society of British Artists (of which Hofland was a founder member) was established in 1824 and set up in direct opposition to the R.A.

3. Jerusalem at the Time of the Crucifixion (1823).

4. 17 July 1818. L'Estrange, II, 34.

Hofland was, however, also a well-known copyist and imitator. His reputation is now at a singularly low ebb and his name in danger of becoming a by-word for the unimaginative early nineteenth century artist who devoted his creative talents to a slavish imitation of old master paintings. He merely sought to make money by his copies but also earned in the process the displeasure of more ambitious and original artists such as Constable and Turner who violently objected to the practice. In a 1980 Burlington Magazine article¹ Kathleen Nicholson argues that Turner's picture, Appulia in Search of Appulus, a deliberate imitation of a well-known Claude, was entered in the British Institution annual competition in 1814 as a direct challenge to the established view regarding the value of copying old masters. Ironically, the winner of the hundred guinea prize that year was Hofland with a composition (now lost) entitled Storm off the Coast of Scarborough, apparently an imitative work, which, according to Hunt's review in The Examiner, was 'too much like Vernet'.² That same year, during the British Institution retrospective exhibition of Richard Wilson, Hofland 'produced five or six copies [of Wilson] and was rewarded by having them purchased as a lot, with the buyer telling him to name his own price'.³ Constable's opinion of this manner of producing art and of Hofland in particular is made clear in a letter of 1822:

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1. 'Turner's "Appulia in Search of Appulus" and the dialectics of the landscape tradition', Burlington Magazine, 122, No. 931 (Oct. 1980), 679-686.
 2. Ibid., p. 684. Based on The Examiner, 17 April 1814, p. 254.
 3. Ibid., p. 680. Based on W. G. Constable, Richard Wilson (London and Cambridge, Mass., 1953), p. 134.

W. Vanderveld - and Gaspar Poussin - and Titian - are made to spawn millions of abortions ... only to serve the purpose of sale - to bring a penny into the hands of ... frauds. Hofland has sold his Shadow of Gaspar Poussin - for 80 gns - it is nothing more like Gaspar than the shadow of a man like himself on a muddy road.¹

Although Mary Mitford would have been familiar with Hofland's Thames-side scenes and his views of Whiteknights she would also have been familiar with his landscape copies and their explicit reference back to a landscape tradition felt by greater artists to be outmoded. The truth is that Hofland painted in a wide variety of derivative landscape styles,² with even his Thames-side scenes referring back implicitly to an earlier tradition. His view of Richmond Hill (fig. 1),³ for example, contains recognisably Claudian elements in its panoramic sweep and its alternating diagonal planes of light and shade receding to a concentrated point of light at the horizon. It is an English scene, but tacitly validated as a composition by an established mode of landscape representation. Hofland's example, I think it is reasonable to conclude, was not likely to inspire Mary Mitford to make bold and non-referential landscape pictures of her own.

She seems to have been unaware of the emergence of an alternative mode of landscape representation during the early years of the nineteenth century. Constable, Turner and the

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1. Letter to John Fisher, 31 Oct. 1822. John Constable's Correspondence, edited by R. B. Beckett, 6 vols (Ipswich, 1962-8), VI, 101.
 2. The variety of Hofland's landscape styles is exemplified by the illustrations to an article by J. C. Wood, 'Thomas Christopher Hofland, Painter and Angler, 1777-1843', The Connoisseur 195, No. 785 (July 1977).
 3. All illustrations are given in Appendix C.

Norwich School artists, for example, were making increasingly detailed studies of natural phenomena and producing representations of the kind of scenes to which she could readily respond. De Wint, another contemporary landscape artist, was lavishly praised by John Clare for his truth to nature at this time.¹ John Linnell, meanwhile, inspired by his religious conversion in 1811 and influenced by William Paley's Natural Theology (1802), sought to give detailed representation of nature as proof of God's existence. His River Kennet, near Newbury (1815) (fig. 2) is a meticulous representation of a Berkshire scene that evokes a sense of the harmony of nature through the balance of its composition: the landscape and the figures on the bridge are reflected in the water; the rustic characters are quietly absorbed in their respective occupations, apparently motionless, in keeping with the tranquillity of the natural scene. The groups of figures are subtly but harmoniously balanced against each other - one figure turns towards the mother and child, another turns away; one group of three are facing us while another group of three have their backs to us; two separate figures face each other across the river. The dog in the foreground is engaged in innocent play whilst serving formally to unite the group of three to the left with the man fishing in the foreground, thus enhancing the unity of the figure grouping within the composition as a whole. Taken as separate entities the individual components of the scene are at first sight insignificant, but the whole scene is a formal expression of the artist's perception of the tranquillity of nature. There is, I believe, a clear parallel between such a

1. 'Essay on Landscape' in The Prose of John Clare, edited by J. W. and Anne Tibble (1951), pp. 211-214.

painting and Mary Mitford's evocation of nature and innocent life exemplified in 'The Cowslip Ball', where disparate elements are brought together to create an overall impression of unity, tranquillity and - implicitly - the beneficence of nature. Mary Mitford did not seek God in nature but the restorative experience that she found there clearly answered something akin to a spiritual need in her.

In Constable's landscapes the balance of his composition in the representation of a natural scene similarly underlines a perception of the tranquillity of nature and it was in his work that Mary Mitford, towards the end of her life, discovered at last an image of the kind of scene that held particular meaning for her. Speaking in 1851 of the situation of her new home at Swallowfield (within walking distance of both Three Mile Cross and Bertram House) she writes:

The valley of the Loddon ... is more exquisitely rich, and soft, and pastoral, with its lovely water-meadows, its bright winding stream, and its magnificent timber, than anything you can imagine. There are bits in it worthy the pencil of Constable, and it is just the scenery in which he delighted.¹

This realization of there being an alternative tradition in landscape painting much more akin to the scenes that she was enthusiastically re-creating during the 1810s and 1820s was something that did not apparently occur to her until long after the composition of her prose sketches.

In July 1820 Mary Mitford observed to Sir William, 'You will think me picture mad'.² Picture mania coincided with the

1. Letter to Charles Boner, 27 Nov. 1851. Lee, p. 193.

2. 5 July 1820. L'Estrange, II, 103.

intensified love of the countryside that is evident at the time of her move to Three Mile Cross,¹ but she was no nearer in 1820 than she was in 1812 towards reconciling her awareness that meadows 'nothing less than picturesque' would 'to a painter offer no attraction'.² 'Trees and fields and sunny hedgerows' may have been as 'old friends', but they were still to her rather unhappily tutored eye 'little distinguished by picturesque beauty'.³

At the onset of her career in the 1820s she seems to have been blinded by her admiration for the work of her friends and confused by her realization that their pictures did not represent her conception of the countryside. Writing to Sir William in November 1821, she makes what is perhaps her most explicit admission of this confusion:

I have always had a preference for close, shut-in scenes, both in a landscape and in nature, and prefer the end of a woody lane, with a rustic bridge over a little stream, or a bit of an old cottage and farmhouse, with a porch and a vine and clustered chimneys peeping out amongst trees, to any prospect I ever saw in my life. I dare say this taste of mine is as wrong as I confess it to be ignoble, for I never met anyone who agreed with me in my opinion.⁴

Her early landscape descriptions for Sir William are characterized by admissions of self-doubt, by the implementation of a distracting array of associations or by anxious borrowings from

1. See above, pp. 95-96.

2. See above, p. 110.

3. See above, p. 95.

4. 23 Nov. 1821. L'Estrange, II, 139. See also above, pp. 98-99.

the language of established landscape traditions. In her published work self-doubt is not admitted, but in addition to the other levels of association that characterize her writing her pictures of local scenes are often tacitly validated by appeal to received traditions. This appeal may take the form of allusive language, direct reference to the work of particular artists or an attempt to make specific scenes fall within a recognisable tradition. How this works in a typical sketch will be examined in the following section, but it is clear from the extracts from her letters quoted in this section that her knowledge of received tradition probably stood in the way of her desire to paint a full and precise image of the natural scenes that inspired a strong response in her. As a woman, with built-in cultural inferiorities of position in her friendships with Haydon, Hofland and Elford, she was perhaps reluctant to question their practices or beliefs. It was not her role to overthrow the conventions of a medium that was not her own, however frustrating she may at times have found them.

Section III - 'graphic description'

Although Mary Mitford may have been prevented by her knowledge of tradition from giving extended and non-associative pictures of her landscapes, the visual sensitivity cultivated by her knowledge of art nevertheless gave rise to a greater precision in the description of individual natural features than was usual in her contemporaries. Her achievement in this respect is identified by Harriet Martineau (1802-1876) in her Autobiography:

I ... have always regarded [Miss Mitford] as the originator of that new style of 'graphic description' to which literature owes a great deal ... In my childhood, there was no such thing known as 'graphic description:' and most people delighted as much as I did in Mrs. Radcliffe's gorgeous or luscious generalities, - just as we admired in picture galleries landscapes all misty and glowing indefinitely with bright colours, - yellow sunrises and purple and crimson sunsets, - because we had no conception of detail like Miss Austen's in manners, and Miss Mitford's in scenery ... Miss Austen had claims to other and greater honours; but she and Miss Mitford deserve no small gratitude for rescuing us from the folly and bad taste of slovenly indefiniteness in delineation. School-girls are now taught to draw from objects: but in my time they merely copied their masters' vague and slovenly drawings; and the case was the same with writers and readers. Miss Mitford's tales appealed to a new sense, as it were, in a multitude of minds ...¹

This summary of Mary Mitford's achievement is interesting both in the parallels that it draws between the state of literature and painting in the early nineteenth century and in the distinction that it makes between Jane Austen's detailed observation of 'manners' and Mary Mitford's in 'scenery'. Jane Austen, as I suggested in Section I, was not interested in re-creating the details of a landscape while her lesser contemporary was growing increasingly impatient with landscape copies and 'generalities'.

The importance of the visual arts in bringing about the more widespread change in contemporary taste that Mary Mitford exemplifies is made clear by Hazlitt in his essay 'Mr. Campbell and Mr. Crabbe' where he traces the origins of the desire for greater realism in literature back to the more systematized study

1. Autobiography, 3 vols (1877), I, 418-9.

of painting that developed in England in the late eighteenth century. He explains that Crabbe's earliest poem The Village (1783) 'was recommended to the notice of Dr. Johnson by Sir Joshua Reynolds' (Reynolds was of course at that time President of the newly-established Royal Academy).¹ He suggests that

... a taste for that sort of poetry, which leans for support on the truth and fidelity of its imitations of nature, began to display itself much about that time, and, in a good measure, in consequence of the direction of the public taste to the subject of painting. Book-learning, the accumulation of wordy common-places, the gaudy pretensions of poetical fiction, had enfeebled and perverted our eye for nature. The study of the fine arts ... would tend imperceptibly to restore it. Painting is essentially an imitative art; it cannot subsist for a moment on empty generalities: the critic, therefore, who had been used to this sort of substantial entertainment, would be disposed to read poetry with the eye of a connoisseur, would be little captivated with smooth, polished, unmeaning periods, and would turn with double eagerness and relish to the force and precision of individual details, transferred, as it were, to the page from the canvas.²

Mary Mitford was, as we have seen, heavily influenced by the contemporary 'direction of the public taste to the subject of painting'. For all her uncertainty as to the 'correctness' of her own particular taste, her exposure to even inferior or unsympathetic landscapes clearly gave rise to a more precise way of looking at objects.

In her early letters to Sir William Elford she continually strove for greater precision in her evocations of familiar scenes. One such description appears in a letter dated 4 January 1814:

1. Founded in 1768.

2. The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, Centenary edition, edited by P. P. Howe, 21 vols (1930-34), XI, 165-6.

Here the scene has been lovely beyond any winter piece I ever beheld; a world formed of something much whiter than ivory - as white, indeed, as snow - but carved with a delicacy, a lightness, a precision to which the massy, ungraceful, tottering snow could never pretend. Rime was the architect; every tree, every shrub, every blade of grass was clothed with its pure incrustations; but so thinly, so delicately clothed, that every twig, every fibre, every ramification remained perfect; alike indeed in colour, but displaying in form to the fullest extent the endless, infinite variety of Nature. This diversity of form never appeared so striking, as when all the difference of colour was at an end - never so lovely as when breaking with its soft yet well-defined outline on a sky rather gray than blue.¹

Her picture-consciousness appears in the opening sentence in the reference to a 'winter piece', but in concentrating on the general effect of the frost rather than on shaping the actual components of the landscape, Mary Mitford displays an evocative precision of language. As one would expect from her descriptions elsewhere, her own artifice is concealed, this time by her apparent deference to the personified rime - 'Rime was the architect'. The changing rhythms of the passage as she strives to convey the delicate covering of the rime, suggest its 'infinite variety' as the creative agent of nature. She appears in the process of describing its activity to negate her own part as the real architect of the passage. Colour is, for once, expelled: the prose is allowed to trace the shapes within the landscape, mirroring the effect of the rime itself. The images of rime 'whiter than ivory' and snow 'massy, ungraceful, [and] tottering' have an aptness, an originality - and in the human association of 'tottering' a quiet humour - which suggests both careful observation and an ability to translate

1. Letter to Sir William Elford. L'Estrange, I, 253.

visual into verbal effect. Mary Mitford has here created a true 'winter piece' - a picture in which form is traced in monochrome, against a sky 'rather gray than blue'.

In the original 'Our Village' sketch the passages of landscape description are characterized by the mixture of precise observation and distracting association that persists throughout Mary Mitford's work from this time onwards. In the three distinct landscape scenes that appear at the end of the sketch we receive a sense both of certain details of the scenes and of the associations that they evoke in her.

The choice of a thorn for her first picture can be related to an enthusiasm she expresses for 'the May-bushes' in her letter to Talfourd of 25 May 1821:

... how graceful they are with their long flowery sprays - waving & bending like a lady's feathers - & how pretty they look in the water ...¹

In the essay, which was begun a few days later, these observations have been worked into a more polished description, enhanced by a vivid sense of colour and composition:

On the outer edge of the paling, hanging over the bank that skirts the road is an old thorn - such a thorn! The long sprays covered with snowy blossoms, so graceful, so elegant, so lightsome, and yet so rich! There only wants a pool under the thorn to give a still lovelier reflection, quivering and trembling, like a tuft of feathers, whiter and greener than the life, and more prettily mixed with the bright blue sky. There should indeed be a pool; but on the dark green grass-plot, under the high bank, which is crowned by that magnificent plume, there is something that does almost as well, - Lizzy and Mayflower in the midst of a game at romps ... Lizzy rolling, laughing, clapping

1. Correspondence, p. 28. MS Harvard.

her hands, and glowing like a rose;
 Mayflower playing about her like summer
 lightning ... What a pretty picture they
 would make; what a pretty foreground
 they do make to the real landscape:
 (1.13-14)

The precision of observation lies in the evocation of the feather-like white blossom set against the green and blue of the landscape, but the passage also works powerfully - and distractingly - on an associative as well as a visual level: the blossom borrows qualities from both snow and feathers, but finally it is linked, not with its own reflection (as in the letter to Talfourd), but with the image of Lizzy and May, characters whose appeal has been established earlier in the sketch. The pattern of interchange between their innocence and the world of nature is still further enriched by the likening of Lizzy to 'a rose' and May to 'summer lightning'. This is Mary Mitford's first published attempt at uniting landscape with the world of human love that Lizzy comes to epitomize throughout the early sketches. It appears that she was trying to express partly through association the nature of the appeal of a familiar 'shut-in'¹ scene.

The 'real landscape' to which May and Lizzy form the 'foreground' is the second scene of the paragraph - a retrospective survey of Three Mile Cross that extends to encompass Reading ('B—') and the more distant woods and hills of the Thames valley:

... the village street, peeping through the
 trees, whose clustering tops hide all but
 the chimneys and various roofs of the houses,

1. See above, p. 118.

and here and there some angle of a wall:
 farther on, the elegant town of B——,
 with its fine old church-towers and spires;
 the whole view shut in by a range of chalky
 hills; and over every part of the picture
 trees so profusely scattered, that it appears
 like a woodland scene, with glades and villages
 intermixed. The trees are of all kinds and all
 hues, chiefly the finely-shaped elm, of so deep
 and bright a green, the tips of whose high
 branches drop down with such a crisp and
 garland-like richness, and the oak, whose
 stately form is just now so splendidly
 adorned by the sunny colouring of the young
 leaves. (l.15)

Here again it is the detail of the varying shades of green that has captured Mary Mitford's imagination and, ironically, although this is the most explicit prospect of the sketch, it is in fact a prospect of 'shut-in' scenes: the village is seen as protectively enclosed, its rooftops 'peeping' through the 'clustering' trees; 'the elegant town of B——' is 'shut-in' by the surrounding hills and the entire view is presented as an alternation of 'glades' and 'villages'. Any vistas and horizons in the scene are ignored: we are brought back to the details of the landscape rather than led away from them.

The final description is of the common, a representative of 'that peculiar charm of English scenery' (l.15) for which Mary Mitford had confessed to Sir William in August 1820 that she had 'a passion'.¹ Like many of her earlier scenes, however, it is presented in terms traditionally associated with the Picturesque tradition:

... the right side [is] fringed by hedgerows
 and trees, with cottages and farmhouses
 irregularly placed ... the left, prettier
 still, dappled by bright pools of water,
 and islands of cottages and cottage-gardens,

1. 24 Aug. 1820. L'Estrange, II, 107. See above, p. 96.

and sinking gradually down to corn-fields
and meadows, and an old farm-house with
pointed roofs and clustered chimneys ...
(1.15)

The presentation of its individual features takes us beyond the particular not merely into the realms of the Picturesque ('farmhouses irregularly placed', 'pointed roofs and clustered chimneys') but also into a harmonious interchange of land and water similar to that observed in 'The Cowslip Ball':¹ the cottages and cottage-gardens appear as islands amidst the 'bright pools of water' and the whole of the left side of the common takes on a watery aspect as it 'sinks gradually down' to 'corn-fields and meadows'. Nevertheless, the scene is one that can be readily visualised, the cottages dotted at intervals along the edge of a sloping common with pools of water in their midst and an old farm-house set against corn-fields and meadows at the bottom. Looking at Map 1,² we can see that we have been led in the course of the 'Our Village' sketch along the main street of Three Mile Cross southwards up the hill to Spencers Wood Common. Hill House on the map may well be 'the old farm-house with pointed roofs and clustered chimneys' that concludes this section of the description.

For all the evidence of uncertainty and confusion in her published as well as her unpublished prose, it is nevertheless clear that Mary Mitford was in advance of her literary contemporaries as regards the detailed delineation of landscape. The confusion that is evident in her work mirrors the extent to which she was a

1. See Ch. 2, p. 76.

2. Appendix B.

victim of the cultural transitions of the 1820s. While feeling that her taste in landscape was 'wrong' and 'ignoble',¹ she nevertheless embodies through her own experience the new 'direction of the public taste to the subject of painting'² that Hazlitt identifies in 'Mr. Campbell and Mr. Crabbe' as such a significant factor in the recent development of a taste for greater realism in literature. Undoubtedly it was for her ability to transfer detail 'as it were, to the page from the canvas'³ that her writing appealed, in Harriet Martineau's terms, 'to a new sense, as it were, in a multitude of minds'.⁴ This she achieves, yet, because of her uncertainty and confusion, she does it in the quietest and most understated way, half-concealing her achievement by her associative method of presenting her material, but in the very process of understatement conveying her sense of the soothing qualities to be found in familiar English countryside.

Section IV - 'Dutch picture finishing'

While Mary Mitford achieves a new kind of graphicness in her writing that was generally welcomed, she does not push her observations of reality beyond certain currently-acceptable limits. We have seen how she holds back in her presentation of landscape, making concessions to contemporary taste by her use of association. In her presentation of rustic life she again

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1. See above, pp. 98-99 and 118.
 2. See above, p. 121.
 3. See above, p. 121.
 4. See above, p. 120.

harnesses her perception of reality to her awareness of what was both pleasurable and culturally acceptable. Hazlitt gives a good indication of what was not considered acceptable by the development of his argument in 'Mr. Campbell and Mr. Crabbe'. Having observed that a more graphic style of description was welcomed by readers discontented with 'smooth, polished, unmeaning periods', he goes on to observe:

Thus an admirer of Teniers or Hobbima might think little of the pastoral sketches of Pope or Goldsmith ... but the adept in Dutch interiors, hovels, and pig-styes must find in Mr. Crabbe a man after his own heart.¹

It is indicative of the general confusion of the age that Hazlitt's distaste for the more sordid kind of realism in Crabbe's poetry co-exists without any apparent sense of self-contradiction with his recognition of a growing impatience with vague, 'unmeaning' descriptive writing. The difficulty for the writer dealing with contemporary social reality was therefore how to answer an increasing desire for verisimilitude without offending the sensibilities of the reader. In Chapter 5 I shall give an outline of social conditions in Three Mile Cross in the early nineteenth century and consider to what extent social reality is reflected in Mary Mitford's writing. In this section, however, I want briefly to consider the qualified enthusiasm of the age for Dutch genre painting as it is important background for the understanding of the influence of contemporary theory on her presentation of village life.

1. The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, Centenary edition, edited by P. P. Howe, 21 vols (1930-34), XI, 166.

The widespread influence of seventeenth-century Dutch painting on early nineteenth-century English art and literature is beyond question. The enclosed, wooded landscapes of such artists as Hobbema and Ruysdael were a significant and acknowledged precedent for, most obviously, the early Norwich School painters, as well as for Constable and other contemporary landscape artists.¹ Of equal significance, however, was the current taste for seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish rustic genre paintings, with their detailed depictions of everyday scenes of domestic life, typically represented by the work of David Teniers the Younger (1610-1690). In the early years of the nineteenth century, as Hazlitt's remarks suggest, the taste for such scenes - at times realistic to the point of grotesqueness - was not universal. Haydon, for example, in a letter to Mary Mitford dated 5 June 1821, expresses his response to the current fashion in the following terms:

... an ugly Dutch boor, laughing and shewing his horrid gums above his horrid teeth, and squeezing up his pug nose and squinting eyes, is a thing of all others peculiarly satisfying to his Grace [the Duke of Wellington], especially if such features are rendered doubly amiable by drunkenness and appetite. How the nobility and the King, how he can fill his drawing-rooms with such boors, when in real life he would feel disgust at finding himself at table vis-à-vis with such companions, is to me extraordinary.²

Haydon, as one would expect, is deprecating the taste for a kind of painting so far removed from his own more elevated historical

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1. The relationship between Dutch Cl7th and early Cl9th English landscape was explored in the Arts Council exhibition, Shock of Recognition (The Mauritshuis, The Hague 24 Nov. 1970 - 10 Jan. 1971; The Tate Gallery, London 22 Jan. - 28 Feb. 1971).
 2. Haydon's Correspondence and Table-Talk, with a memoir by F. W. Haydon, 2 vols (1876), II, 73.

scenes, but the extreme nature of his reaction to these Dutch boors is an interesting one given the closeness of his relationship with Mary Mitford in the early 1820s. She would have received the above letter within days of completing the original 'Our Village' sketch¹ and it is not surprising that neither there nor in her later sketches did she ever aim at the kind of realism that would be likely to arouse the disgust of her contemporaries.

The distaste evident in Hazlitt's and Haydon's response to Dutch painting - which in Hazlitt's case is extended to the poetry of Crabbe - is perhaps partly explicable in terms of a feeling that such pictures leave nothing to the imagination. Such an idea is expressed by Coleridge:

The presence of genius is not shown in elaborating a picture: we have had many specimens of this sort of work in modern poems, where all is so dutchified ...²

'Dutchified' is again used pejoratively. Hazlitt's charge against Crabbe is further illuminated by Wordsworth's comment that he finds in Crabbe 'a general dryness and knottiness of style and matter which it does not soothe the mind to dwell on'.³ The desire to be 'soothed' was common in the early nineteenth century: Hugh Honour observes, for example, that 'soothing' was one of Constable's favourite words and quotes Keats as a literary parallel in his description of poetry as

1. Sent to Talfourd on 8 June.
2. Shakespearean Criticism, edited by T. M. Raysor, 2 vols (1960), II, 134.
3. Quoted in the Familiar Letters of Sir Walter Scott, edited by David Douglas, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1834), II, 343. My italics.

a friend
To soothe the cares, and lift the
thoughts of man.¹

Graphic realism taken to extremes evidently threatened to disturb the kind of pleasure then expected from literature or art. Mary Mitford aptly summarizes the general feeling of the day in a letter to Mrs Hofland, probably of 1819:

Everybody likes Mr. Crabbe to a certain point, and only to a certain point. He is the only poet going of whom everybody thinks alike. Those Dutch picture-poems, which say everything to the eye and nothing to the fancy, command one sort of admiration, but not the best.²

It is interesting that she should observe that Crabbe is the 'only poet going of whom everybody thinks alike'. It seems that while greater realism was regarded as desirable it was felt that the pleasurable operations of the fancy - or, indeed, the imagination - must not be suspended in the process of apprehending that reality.

As will be seen in Chapter 5, Mary Mitford's own solution to the question of verisimilitude was a compromise. It is, however, relevant at this point to mention her use of a reference to Teniers to reinforce the impression of reality in one of her most striking images of rustic enjoyment. At the end of 'Bramley Maying' she describes the groups outside a May-house, while inside - a rare but significant reminder of the 'city' world - pretension and decorum have spoilt the proceedings:

It was quite like a ball-room, as pretty and almost as dull. Outside was the fun. It is the outside, the upper gallery of the world, that has that good thing. There were children laughing, eating, trying to

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1. Romanticism, Pelican edition (1981), p. 91.
 2. Chorley, I, 73-74. No date is given but the letter appears within a sequence dated 1819.

cheat, and being cheated, round an ancient and practised vender [sic] of oranges and gingerbread; and on the other side of the tree lay a merry groupe [sic] of old men, in coats almost as old as themselves, and young ones in no coats at all, excluded from the dance by the disgrace of a smock-frock ... That groupe would have suited Teniers; it smoked and drank a little, but it laughed a great deal more. (1.89-90)

As in 'The Cowslip Ball', poverty is again set above riches.

We know that the characters are poor because they wear old coats and smock frocks not because they are dirty or offensive.

Furthermore, free from the restraints - and the dullness - of the civilized world, they are enjoying themselves. They are 'laughing' and 'merry', the children eating, harmlessly cheating, the old men smoking and drinking only 'a little' but laughing 'a great deal more'. The harmless cheating of the children is an appropriate activity in a world of such innocence that deceit is as excusable as Mary Mitford's own authorial disingenuousness in quietly yoking together disparate and sometimes contradictory images and ideas. We collude in the deception and therefore accept in good faith the implications of the introduction of Teniers at the end of the passage. We understand that what Mary Mitford is saying in early nineteenth-century terms is that this image of rustic life is one that we may accept as real. The point is made doubly clear by the fact that the sketch is introduced by the words:

Mr. Geoffrey Crayon¹ has, in his delightful but somewhat fanciful writings, brought into general view many old sports and customs ...
(1.81)

1. The pen-name of Washington Irving (1783-1859).

The significant words here are 'delightful but somewhat fanciful'. Crayon's Sketch-Book does not, Mary Mitford suggests, present wholly accurate pictures - 'delightful' though they may be. The custom that she has chosen to devote her sketch to is, on the other hand, one 'which prevails in the north of Hampshire' (1.81) at Bramley - a geographically-known place.¹ Much of the sketch is devoted to the journey to Bramley (via a detour to Silchester) with incidental description of, for example, the amphitheatre at Silchester and Bramley Church. We are in England in the 1820s and yet, it is equally insisted, journeying to 'a sort of modern Arcadia' (1.82). Geoffrey Crayon's accounts can be dismissed as 'fanciful' - he is an American, an outsider - but Mary Mitford is arguing from evident first-hand knowledge that Arcadia is here in south-east England. Her own writing, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, is 'fanciful' in that it is 'characterized by the possession of fancy' (OED); her description of Crayon's writing as 'somewhat fanciful' implies the second meaning of the word, 'in disparaging sense: disposed to indulge in fancies; whimsical' (OED).

The appeal to Teniers is, strictly speaking, a misleading one, for, as I shall try to demonstrate in Chapter 5, Mary Mitford's own image of rural life is real only up to a point. What she is trying to achieve in her sketches can perhaps best be suggested by the parallel between her presentation of rustic character and the genre scenes of David Wilkie (1785-1841). In his chapter on George Morland in The Dark Side of the Landscape John Barrell demonstrates how engraved versions of some of

1. See Appendix B, Map 1.

Morland's paintings tend to mitigate harsh social comment in the originals.¹ Barrell suggests that these modifications arose as a concession to early nineteenth-century taste, which, he suggests, demanded only a limited degree of social realism in its representations of rustic life. He argues that a generally palatable image of the agricultural labourer is to be found in the work of David Wilkie, for example his Village Politicians (fig. 3). He explains:

The customers at Wilkie's alehouse are grotesquely and condescendingly portrayed, in what we are clearly invited to regard as the 'realistic' manner of Teniers or Ostade, so that the painting was much admired for the truth of its representation.²

The villagers, he suggests, are presented as merely comic and so as 'politicians' they pose no social threat. It is an image of village life to reinforce a belief in the harmless ignorance of the rustic community. This may be true, but the painting may also be regarded as an affectionate portrayal of the villagers whose potential dignity - particularly that of the woman to the left and the seated old man in the centre - is equally acknowledged. The image, one could argue, is calculated to inspire interest and concern in rustic life. It is also visually more pleasing than a graphic evocation of squalor or depravity - and this, given the early nineteenth-century desire to be 'soothed' by art, is an important point to bear in mind when considering its contemporary popularity. The ideas that Wilkie's picture suggests, the play of the fancy that it invites, is into

1. See Ch. 3, pp. 107-122.

2. The Dark Side of the Landscape (Cambridge, 1980), p. 114.

such harmlessly pleasurable realms as those we explore in Mary Mitford's sketches.

Mary Mitford was, predictably, a great admirer of Wilkie's genre scenes. She frequently mentions his work in her accounts of the London exhibitions¹ and her interest in his painting at the time of the composition of the early sketches was heightened by the fact that he was a friend of Haydon's, featuring significantly in Haydon's letters to her. Wilkie's success in the 1820s is indicated by Haydon's account of the exhibition of Village Politicians in 1828:

... if you had only seen [Wilkie] on the morning we walked into the Exhibition where the people stood crowding around his 'Village Politicians', you would never have forgotten it: His red hair uncombed, his light eyes staring, nervous, heated, wondering, and yet simple-hearted, exclaiming every five minutes, 'Dear, dear!'²

Two points emerge from this account: while the popularity of a representation of harmlessly comic village politics may say much about dismissive popular attitudes to the rustic poor on the eve of the 1830 agricultural riots,³ it is clear that the fastidious Haydon found nothing offensive in his friend's kind of realism. Haydon was in fact bitter at Wilkie's success with his scenes of low life and it is ironic that Mary Mitford should eventually encourage him to abandon his aspirations as a historical painter in favour of genre scenes:

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1. e.g. Letter to Mrs Mitford, 23 May 1809. L'Estrange, I, 76 and letter to Sir William Elford, 27 June 1813. L'Estrange, I, 232.
 2. Haydon to Mary Mitford, 28 Oct. 1828. Haydon's Correspondence and Table-Talk, with a memoir by F. W. Haydon, 2 vols (1876), II, 128-9.
 3. See Ch. 5, Section IV.

History never will sell so well as more familiar and smaller subjects - I want you to try large merry rustic groupes [sic] - I could make twenty pictures (only that I can neither paint nor draw) full of fun & incident & character ... a statute or hiring fair with its pretty lasses & awkward bumpkins - a Revel - a Maying - Hop-picking - Harvest home! These are subjects in which even daubers please - they are so genial & so English - Only think what you would make of them!¹

The widespread popularity of such scenes 'in which even daubers please' is revealing, as is Mary Mitford's summary analysis of what underlies their success: 'they are so genial & so English'. 'Genial' I take in the sense of 'Cheering, enlivening, inspiriting' (OED) and the linking of this quality with what is 'so English' points to what underlies Mary Mitford's own success with her contemporaries.

Her scenes are recognisably 'English' in content and the word appears almost insistently throughout the sketches as an adjective: Lizzy's complexion is 'purely English' (1.10);² the common is 'that peculiar charm of English scenery' (1.15);³ a forest would be more suitable than a village green to 'the spirit of old English merriment' (1.82);⁴ Joel Brent is the appropriate foreground staffage of 'some English landscape, where nature is shewn in all her loveliness' (1.189).⁵ Although confused in her sense of the correctness of delineating English

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1. Letter to B. R. Haydon, c. June 1829. MS Reading. The Letters of Mary Mitford in 6 vols, f. 573.
 2. 'Our Village'.
 3. 'Our Village'.
 4. 'Bramley Maying'.
 5. 'A Village Beau'.

landscape scenes, Mary Mitford is in no doubt of the appeal of the word 'English' in her more general evocations of the 'charm', the 'merriment' or the 'loveliness' of her experience of rural life. Whether the appeal is to the patriotic sense of a nation complacent in its recent defeat of Napoleon or to the desire of the city-dweller to find pastoral ease in 'real' countryside near at hand, contemporary reviews confirm that the success of her works derives in considerable measure from its 'Englishness':

Miss Mitford's elegant little volume [OV 1] is just in unison with the time: it is a gallery of pictures, fresh, glowing, and entirely English; portraits, likenesses, we doubt not, - all simply but sweetly coloured ...¹

'Miss Mitford ... excels [Washington Irving] in vigorous conception of character, and in the truth of her pictures of English life and manners. Her writings breathe a sound, pure, and healthy morality, and are pervaded by a genuine rural spirit - the spirit of merry England.'²

Both reviews seem to accept without question that the pictures are 'likenesses' or 'truth'.

The popularity of Mary Mitford and David Wilkie in the 1820s is undoubtedly related to the fact that both appealed to a qualified desire for realism, by creating graphic pictures of English rural life devoid of disturbing ugliness. Mary Mitford's sense of her achievement in this respect is aptly summarized in a phrase that appears in a letter to Talfourd of 13 April 1823. She was then contemplating gathering her early sketches into a

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1. The London Literary Gazette. Quoted in A Critical Dictionary of English Literature and British and American Authors by S. Austin Allibone, 5 vols (1897-8), II, 1331.
 2. Noctes Ambrosianae No. xxiv. Blackwood's Magazine, XX (Nov. 1826), 780.

volume and suggests that she should include the best of those to have appeared in The Lady's Magazine '& others of the same sort with as much Dutch picture finishing as possible'.¹ The term 'Dutch picture finishing' reveals an implicit desire not so much to be entirely - and perhaps distressingly - realistic but to convey a pleasing yet graphic image of her experience of Three Mile Cross and its surrounding countryside.

Underlying Mary Mitford's presentation of her 'village' world is the deep affection for her subject examined in Chapter 2 and her Romantic conviction of the beneficence of nature discussed in Section I of this chapter. In creating Our Village from a careful blend of her own experience of reality, and a strong sense of love and trust, Mary Mitford also gives expression to her belief in the intrinsic goodness of rural life. We soon learn that we can move in her village world without fear of disturbance or distress and in constant expectation of innocent pleasure. We encounter the real only lightly enough to support pleasurable meanderings of the fancy. By this means she encourages her reader into a receptivity to the good feeling that permeates her writing. Thus Blackwood's Magazine can praise her both for the 'truth of her pictures' and for her communication of 'a sound, pure, and healthy morality'.²

Mary Mitford creates a vivid visual image of rural life throughout the medium of words. In achieving this she was undoubtedly assisted by her knowledge of painting. While, on the one hand, her knowledge of the tradition of landscape painting

1. Correspondence, p. 262. MS Harvard.

2. See above, p. 137.

both assisted and confused her, the contemporary response to Dutch genre scenes was one that she endorsed without any sense of conflict. Her success in the 1820s must rest to a considerable extent in her ability to meet a growing desire for realism whilst maintaining an image of rural life that remains 'soothing' and redolent of good feeling.

Chapter Four

The Literary Context

Parallels between Mary Mitford's attitude to nature and those of Cowper, Wordsworth, Jane Austen and Susan Ferrier have been touched on in Chapters 2 and 3. For reasons that will be explained in Section I, it is misleading to lay any exclusive stress on Mary Mitford's relationship with specific writers. This chapter is instead mainly devoted to the genres of letter-writing and the conversational essay. These bear most relevance to Mary Mitford's practice of writing directly from her own experience in the relaxed, colloquial style that is an apt expression of her literary personality and also facilitates the 'habit of digressing'¹ that is integral to her meandering, associative method of presenting her material. Section II will consider her opinions on and practice in letter-writing while Section III will endeavour to establish the status of prose in the early 1820s and the probable influence on her of the emergence of the conversational essay as a popular literary form.

Section I - Imitators and Antecedents

Two theses have been written relating and comparing Mary Mitford as a prose writer to specific individuals: in 1953 Graham Owens discussed the presentation of town and country in

1. 'The Incendiary' 5.14. See Ch. 2 above, p. 78.

Mrs Gaskell and Mary Mitford;¹ in 1968, meanwhile, Sheila Rausch proposed that Mary Mitford was indebted in her choice of medium to the periodical essays of Addison, Steele and Goldsmith and in the realistic treatment of her subject to Crabbe.²

The question of Mary Mitford's impact on successive generations of writers is vast and complex: Ruskin in 1883 summarized her influence as 'widely felt, though little acknowledged'³ and, while it can be argued that later writers such as Elizabeth Gaskell or, perhaps more obviously, George Eliot are affected by her example, no direct influence can be proved. There is no doubt, however, that Mary Mitford did inspire certain of her lesser contemporaries to write in the style of Our Village. She is, for example, directly acknowledged by Mrs S. C. Hall, who explained that she was prompted to write Sketches of Irish Character (1829) by a desire 'to do for my native BANNOW, what Miss Mitford had done for her "Village"'.⁴ Her influence is also evident in Mary Howitt's Wood Leighton (1836) where her name appears in a passage of literary invocation that recalls her own practice of enriching description through allusion to earlier country writers:

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1. Graham Owens, 'Town and Country in the Life and Work of Mrs. Gaskell and Mary Russell Mitford' (unpublished M.A. thesis, University College of North Wales, Bangor, 1953).
 2. M. Sheila Rausch, 'Mary Russell Mitford and Regional Realism' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Minnesota, 1968).
 3. Lecture IV - Fairy Land: Mrs Allingham and Kate Greenaway (delivered 26 and 30 May 1883) in The Works of John Ruskin, edited by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (1903-12), XXXIII, 339. See also Ch. 2 above, p. 84.
 4. Dedicatory letter to 5th (enlarged) edition (1855). See Ch. 1 above, p. 7.

Yes, it was, and is a thorough old English lane: the very haunt made for a poet, or poetical naturalist; for a Gilbert White, or Bewick, or Evelyn, or a Goldsmith - for Miss Mitford, Bloomfield or Clare to stroll in ...¹

Her more effusive manner is also recalled in occasional passages of William Howitt's The Rural Life of England (1837) and her more general influence can be discerned in Henry Chorley's Sketches of a Sea Port Town (1834). Although John Dix's assertion that 'hundreds of imitators sprung up'² is difficult to prove, Elizabeth Barrett suggests that imitations of her work were certainly common by the early 1840s when she tells her friend:

... your own Village and Belford Regis are original - and if others write in your manner, they Mitfordize ...³

It is likely that the original impact of Mary Mitford's early sketches was soon lost in these imitations and by the inferior quality of her own later work. Although it is important to bear in mind Harriet Martineau's view that her sketches appealed to 'a new sense, as it were, in a multitude of minds',⁴ speculations about her unacknowledged influence on later generations are outside the scope of this thesis. It is, however, perhaps relevant to mention at this stage that her 'Dora Cresswell' (OV 2) is acknowledged by Tennyson as having suggested the subject of his poem 'Dora'; 'The Queen of the Meadow' (OV 3) is also

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1. Wood Leighton; or, a Year in the Country, 3 vols (1836). I, 181.
 2. Pen and Ink Sketches (1852), p. 50.
 3. Letter to Mary Mitford, 14 Jan. 1843. Elizabeth Barrett to Miss Mitford, edited by Betty Miller (1954), p. 168. Elizabeth Barrett's italics.
 4. Autobiography, 3 vols (1877), I, 419. See Ch. 3 above, p. 120.

acknowledged as an influence on two other of his 'English Idyls', 'The Brook' and 'The Miller's Daughter'.¹

The question of Mary Mitford's literary antecedents, meanwhile, is complicated by a surplus rather than an absence of evidence. Her reading was vast and is extremely well documented in her own works and letters. Known in her youth as "'the clever Mary Mitford",² and characterized towards the end of her life by an intelligence that made her, in the opinion of Elizabeth Barrett, 'superior to her own books',³ she was a critical and sensitive reader. In 1819 she explained to Sir William Elford:

Next to reading with an undivided and enthusiastic admiration ... the greatest pleasure in reading is to be critical and fastidious, and laugh at and pull to pieces.⁴

A younger contemporary recollected her in the following terms:

Miss Mitford lived and breathed and moved in an atmosphere of books; and when she was not writing books, she was writing about them.⁵

Mary Mitford almost certainly wrote about books so extensively because her opportunities for exchanging ideas about them were limited. After her time at school in London⁶ she lived for most

1. See Longman's Annotated English Poets, The Poems of Tennyson, edited by Christopher Ricks (1969), pp. 371, 641 and 1025.
2. Mary Mitford to Mrs Mitford, 29 May 1809. L'Estrange, I, 82. See also Ch. 1 above, p. 22.
3. Elizabeth Barrett to Robert Browning, 3 July 1846. The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett 1845-46, edited by Robert Weidemann Barrett Browning, 2 vols (1892), II, 292.
4. 8 June 1819. L'Estrange, II, 60.
5. James Payn, Some Literary Recollections (1884), pp. 81-2.
6. 1798-1802. See Ch. 1, p. 18.

of the year in comparative isolation with her parents and servants, enjoying the pleasures of county society and 'mere country pleasures',¹ but relying increasingly on more geographically remote friends for an exchange of ideas about literature and art. Her letters from the early 1800s until the early 1820s, when her literary career began in earnest,² are full of references to books. When considering possible literary debts to Mary Mitford's early work, therefore, one is faced by an embarass de choix.

Contemporary reviewers of the first volume of Our Village quite reasonably comment upon its resemblance to Washington Irving's Sketch-Book (1820).³ Mary Mitford had read The Sketch-Book - and so had she read Crabbe's poetry and the essays of Addison, Steele and Goldsmith. However, she was equally familiar with Cowper's Task (1785), Gilbert White's Natural History of Selborne (1789), the Lyrical Ballads (1798), Maria Edgeworth's Popular Tales (1804) and the works of Scott and Jane Austen. One could argue a convincing case for her indebtedness in her country writings to any of these authors and many more besides, for she was not only an extensive reader but also a self-confessed plagiarist. Her letters to Talfourd about her plays are punctuated by such injunctions as 'pray mark as many parts that occur to you as borrowed',⁴ 'Pray notice any imitations or thefts that you may observe',⁵ and in later life she comments that her indulgence

1. Mary Mitford to Elizabeth Barrett, 17 Oct. 1836. L'Estrange, III, 63. See Ch. 2 above, p. 61.
2. See Ch. 1, Section III.
3. e.g. The Examiner, 23 May 1824, p. 332. See Ch. 5, Section VI.
4. 31 July 1821. Correspondence, p. 61. MS John Rylands.
5. 13, 14 Dec. 1822. Correspondence, p. 224. MS Harvard.

towards 'borrowings in general' derives from her having been

... for years ... tormented by constant
fear that every line of tragedy less bad
than the next was stolen from my betters.¹

Her fears about unconscious plagiarism in her tragedies together with her extensive use of literary and artistic allusion throughout the sketches point to a certain habit and quality of mind - to a general receptivity that she herself described as 'an intense impressibility'.² It is this quality that undoubtedly underlies her sensitivity to the cultural climate of the early 1820s and determines her ability to synthesize a wide range of experience in her writing.

Although Mary Mitford had been an avid reader from her school-days, the years that led up to the publication of the early Our Village sketches in The Lady's Magazine (from September 1822) were particularly rich in terms of her cultural awareness. Her friendship and correspondence with Sir William Elford was by this time of several years' standing; she now wrote to him with confidence and freedom, discussing literature and the latest London exhibitions with evident knowledge and discernment. Her other chief influences from 1817 onwards were Hofland, his novelist wife Barbara, Haydon and Talfourd.³

Through Talfourd and Haydon in particular, Mary Mitford came to a greater understanding of current trends and conflicts in contemporary literature. Talfourd greatly admired Wordsworth

1. Letter to Digby Starkey, 9 Feb. 1852. Friendships, II, 168.
2. Letter to Talfourd, 8 May 1825. Correspondence, p. 443. MS Harvard.
3. Mary Mitford's meetings with Haydon and the Hoflands is discussed in Ch. 1, pp. 26-29.

and knew him personally. He was also a close friend of Charles Lamb, whose biographer he later became, and on familiar terms with such leading literary figures of the day as Coleridge and Hazlitt. Haydon, meanwhile, was also acquainted with Wordsworth as well as being the friend and admirer of Keats.

Marilyn Butler in Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries identifies the years 1817-20 as a period of literary radicalism, partly characterized by conflict between the older and younger generations of writers. Following their more active support for the radical uprisings of the immediate post-war years, writers such as Hunt, Keats, Shelley and Peacock became preoccupied with 'alternative imaginative worlds', possibly as a covertly-expressed 'counter-attack' on the repressive political conservatism of the day.¹ Identified with these younger writers were Hazlitt and Byron, while Southey, Wordsworth and Coleridge were associated with more establishment christian-conservative views.

It is difficult to ascertain to what extent Mary Mitford was aware of these divisions or where her sympathies lay, but it is clear that from 1817 onwards she was living - albeit vicariously - on the fringe of literary debate and controversy. Yielding to the direction of her new friends, she became widely read in contemporary literature, overcoming her reservations about Wordsworth under Talfourd's guidance, and, in the general enthusiasm of this time, even persevering with authors who were manifestly not to her taste. Shelley, for example, she never cared for, observing in 1852 that she 'ought to have liked him better':

1. Butler, Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries (Oxford, 1981), p.139.

But I have a love of clearness - a
perfect hatred of all that is vague
and obscure -1

The lifelong hatred of vagueness and obscurity is a significant comment on her own literary practice, pointing to what Elizabeth Barrett described as her tendency to keep always 'closely ... to the ground'.² In these terms Shelley was clearly anathema to her. Nevertheless, she tackled The Revolt of Islam in its year of publication (1818), summarizing its obscurity for Sir William Elford by analogy with Benjamin West's painting, The Women at the Sepulchre, that she had just seen at the Royal Academy Exhibition³ - an incidental example of her habit of cross-referencing the media of poetry and painting at this time.

Mary Mitford's diary for 1819 - the year before her removal to Three Mile Cross - is revealing about the extent and variety of her reading. In addition to a host of travel books and old favourites such as Emma (1816), Waverley (1814), The Antiquary (1816) and Maria Edgeworth's Popular Tales (1804), she also read, apparently for the first time, Sense and Sensibility (1811), noting that it was 'very good',⁴ 'Schlegel on Literature' ('good'),⁵ Maria Edgeworth's Moral Tales (1801) ('very pretty'),⁶ Susan Ferrier's Marriage (1818), of which she noted 'liked it very much - made me laugh',⁷ and Peacock's Nightmare Abbey (1818).

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1. Letter to Mrs Hoare, Autumn 1852. L'Estrange, III, 241.
 2. 3 July 1846. The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, edited by Robert Weidemann Barrett Browning, 2 vols (1892), II, 292. Quoted in Ch. 2, p. 84.
 3. 8 March 1818. L'Estrange, II, 27-8. West (1738-1820) was at this time President of the R.A.
 4. 28 Nov. 1819.
 5. 17 Aug. 1819.
 6. 30 May 1819.
 7. 13 March 1819.

Of works actually published in 1819 she read a new volume of Horace Walpole's letters ('delightful')¹ and Crabbe's Tales of the Hall ('liked them').² Current literary magazines feature quite significantly. She refers to the Eclectic and British Critic reviews as well as to Blackwood's Magazine and The Examiner.³ Her opinion of all the works she read during 1819 are elaborated in her letters, in particular those to Mrs Hofland and Sir William Elford. It is not surprising that it was in 1819 that she defined her two greatest pleasures as 'reading with an undivided and enthusiastic admiration' and 'reading [and being] critical and fastidious, and laugh at and pull to pieces'.⁴

In this section I have given a deliberately brief indication of the nature of Mary Mitford's literary experience at the outset of her prose career. The very breadth of her reading and the variety of literary models that were theoretically available to her could lead to much speculation about specific influences which would be obfuscating rather than illuminating. The point is that, as far as she was concerned, there was no clear answer as to whom she might emulate in the early 1820s. What she sought to convey in her early sketches was her own interpretation of village life, a self-expressive response to the subject for which there was no direct precedent. Our Village, as I have already suggested, is a

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1. 23 April 1819.
 2. 28 July 1819.
 3. A copy of The Examiner was sent to her by Haydon on 19 March.
 4. Letter to Sir William Elford, 8 June 1819. L'Estrange, II, 60. See also above, p. 143.

fanciful creation whose quality is determined by a subtle amalgamation of different aspects of its author's experience. This includes her wide-ranging literary experience, some aspects of which have been covered in Chapters 2 and 3. In the two following sections I am concerned to examine Mary Mitford's awareness of two literary forms that depend for their success on the expression of the idiosyncracies of individual experience, for it is from such roots that her own literary world is made.

Section II - Letter-writing

As Mary Mitford's interest in botany is revealed by her choice of 'Field Flowers' as the subject for her earliest essay,¹ so another of her enthusiasms is suggested by her article 'On Letters and Letter-Writers', published in The New Monthly Magazine in August 1821.² This article was probably written shortly after the original 'Our Village' sketch³ and offers a revealing insight into the literary style and personality that Mary Mitford was striving to establish in her prose at this time. Describing the pleasure of writing a letter, she observes:

How delightful it is to sit down and prattle
to a dear friend just as carelessly as if we
were seated in real talk, with our feet on
the fender, by that glimmering fire-light
when talk comes freest ...⁴

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1. See Appendix A.
 2. See Appendix A.
 3. Completed on 5 June 1821.
 4. The New Monthly Magazine, II, 143.

To this idea that the style of letters should evoke the fireside talk of old friends is added the view that we should receive from letters a strong impression of the personality of the author. She praises Cowper, as we have seen in Chapter 2, both for the informality of his epistolary style and for the sense of personality that his letters reveal:

[Cowper's] letters have all the peculiar merits of his poetry, with a tenderness and sweetness, a spirit of indulgence and of love to his kind, which his poetry has not. That love returns with interest upon its author. No one can read his happier letters without feeling almost a personal affection for the man who wrote them ...¹

I have already discussed how Mary Mitford sought to convey her own 'spirit of indulgence and love to [her] kind' in her published work. What is interesting in the context of this chapter is her developing consciousness of the effect on the reader of such manifestations of affection - 'that love returns with interest upon its author'.

She was undoubtedly helped in the development of her prose style and the establishment of a literary persona by the practice of her own letters - in particular those to Sir William Elford. She was fully aware of her debt to Sir William in this respect, observing to a friend in 1840 that the correspondence was of 'no small use' in

... giving me a command of my pen, and the habit of arranging and expressing my thoughts.²

To Sir William himself she wrote in 1832:

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1. The New Monthly Magazine, II, 144. See Ch. 2, p. 59.
 2. Letter to Miss Jephson, 19 Feb. 1840. L'Esrange, III, 107.

I have an internal persuasion that that [sic] correspondence with a man of so much liveliness & talent & such an appreciation of dawning talent in another was of the greatest possible service in ripening the power of writing such as it is, which I have since found so useful.¹

Mary Mitford scarcely knew Sir William when she began to write to him in 1810. They met only infrequently thereafter and the growth of their friendship is mirrored in the 'ripening' of her 'power of writing' over the ten years (1810-1820) that marks the height of their correspondence.

The early letters are mainly devoted to literary criticism and personal anecdote. Initially uneasy in expressing literary judgements to an elderly baronet 'of so much liveliness & talent' and self-conscious in her own status as a young poetess, the literary part of the letters is often characterized by a curious blend of deference and literary dignity. 'I quite agree with you in your admiration of Miss Edgeworth', she writes ingratiatingly to Sir William in 1810:

She and Miss Baillie and Mrs. Opie are three such women as have seldom adorned one age and one country. Of the three, I think I had rather (if such a metamorphosis were possible) resemble Miss Baillie.²

It is in the anecdotal side of the letters that Mary Mitford writes at her freest and, in relating diverse stories about her neighbours and school-fellows, she begins to develop a more informal side to her epistolatory personality. In July 1812, for example, she describes an encounter with an itinerant preacher:

1. 1 Jan. 1832. MS Reading Reference Library. The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford in 6 vols, f. 598.

2. 20 Sept. 1810. L'Estrange, I, 108.

I was very quietly gathering roses and honeysuckles in the garden ... when all on a sudden there issued from a large barn, nearly opposite, a full chorus of voices ... This was absolutely astounding. It quite startled my poor old dog, who is as deaf as a post, and would have frightened me too if I had not guessed what it was. This burst did not last long - it could not - and was succeeded by a sermon, which if I had not known it must be a sermon, I should undoubtedly have taken for the violent swearing of a man in a passion.¹

Quite distinct from the aspiring poetess, this Mary Mitford is much more akin to the personality who later emerges in the Our Village sketches. She is beginning to write of herself as audience, prefiguring the way in which she presents herself in relation to her villagers in her published work. We see her here as a quiet, curious observer of life, harmlessly gathering flowers in her garden, surprised, but not alarmed, at the sudden intrusion into her peaceful world of the loud rantings of a visiting preacher. Her response is an amused, distanced one: it is the deaf dog rather than she who is 'quite startled'; she expresses a sense of humour rather than outrage by the explicit contrast she makes between her awareness that she was listening to a sermon and her confession that she might otherwise have taken it 'for the violent swearing of a man in a passion'.

This anecdote typifies how Mary Mitford later stands firmly and calmly at the centre of her 'village' world, ordering her reader's perceptions through the medium of a distinct personality. In her letters she reveals herself to Sir William irritatingly as an aspiring poetess and endearingly as a lover of the countryside and village life, retaining this latter side of her personality

1. 12 July 1812. L'Estrange, I, 206.

in her published prose. The effect of a kindly narrative personality on the presentation of her material in the Our Village sketches will be discussed in Chapter 5, but the fact remains that this personality would not have been so coherent a presence without the long practice of her correspondence with Sir William.

Between 1810 and 1820, as Mary Mitford gradually shed her poetic aspirations, so her theory of letter-writing became more informal. In 1811 she writes to Sir William:

... letters should assimilate to the higher style of conversation, without the snip-snap of fashionable dialogue, and with more of the simple transcripts of natural feeling than the usage of good society would authorize. Playfulness is preferable to wit, and grace infinitely more desirable than precision. A little egotism, too, must be admitted; without it a letter would stiffen into a treatise, and a billet assume 'the form and pressure' of an essay.¹

By 1819 her ideas about letter-writing are less high-flown:

I do dearly love this desultory sort of disjointed letter writing - always supposing that one's correspondent is so much [two words illegible] indulgent & kind - It is the pleasantest kind of chat - a little more prepared & excited than one is in spoken conversation - & only a little - but quite as free from form or fear or the restraints of fine writing.²

The comparatively cooler tone, the contrived balance of phrase in the earlier letter is appropriate to the belief that letters should resemble 'the higher style of conversation'. The second extract with its dashes and digressions is much more akin to her

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1. Letter to Sir William Elford, 18 Aug. 1811. L'Esrange, I, 149.
 2. Letter to Sir William Elford, 31 Jan. 1819. MS Reading Reference Library. The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford in 6 vols, f. 398.

notion of 'this desultory sort of disjointed letter writing' as 'the pleasantest kind of chat'. Pleasant 'chat' - 'talking ... to you' is the expression she uses in another letter of 1819¹ - as opposed to the 'higher style of conversation', is what she eventually set out to achieve in her published prose.

It was not easy for her to reach a degree of informality in her earliest pieces. Her anxiety seems to have been how to relate to an audience on whose indulgence and kindness she could not necessarily rely.

Her earliest prose pieces were 'Field Flowers', 'Richmond', 'On the Comedies of Thomas May' and 'On Letters and Letter-Writers' which all appeared in The New Monthly Magazine between June and August 1821.² 'Field Flowers' and 'On the Comedies of Thomas May' were the first to be written and they were sent to Talfourd on 16 March 1821. Mary Mitford was clearly unhappy with both essays, describing them in the accompanying letter to Talfourd as 'marvellous lumps of awkwardness' and, revealingly, expressing her doubts about the correct style of address for 'that tremendous Correspondent the Public'.³ Four days later she echoes these sentiments in a letter to Sir William, again making use of the same descriptive phrase:

You would laugh if you saw me puzzling
over my prose. You have no notion how
much difficulty I find in writing anything
at all readable. One cause of this is, my
having been so egregious a letter-writer.
I have accustomed myself to a certain

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1. Letter to Sir William Elford, 27 Feb. 1819. L'Estrange, II, 56-7.
 2. See Appendix A.
 3. 16 March 1821. Correspondence, p. 7. MS Harvard. See Ch. 1 above, p. 35.

careless sauciness, a fluent incorrectness, which passed very well with indulgent friends, such as yourself, my dear Sir William, but will not do at all for that tremendous correspondent, the Public.¹

She then proceeds to ask him to return any of her letters that he has kept, with the excuse that she is intending to write an essay on Jane Austen and, having recorded her early impressions of the novels in letters to him, wants to remind herself of the impact they first made on her.² Sir William did not return the letters until he had been asked again on 4 April 1821, when it is clear that the idea of an essay on Richmond was in Mary Mitford's mind:

I want to write an article on Richmond, & if I remember right I wrote you an account of the impression which that beautiful and elegant place made on me when I was there last year.³

The letters were apparently returned by 20 April 1821,⁴ probably on 18 April when she records in her diary that she has heard from Sir William that day. The effect of the return of these letters on her work was enormous. They served not only to provide her with material for her essays but also with extended examples of her own relaxed letter-writing style. Thus we can see how her published prose springs directly from anterior writing not meant to be published.

'Richmond' is the first article to have been written in the light of the return of the letters. It offers a revealing insight into quite how directly Mary Mitford was writing from

1. 22 March 1821. L'Estrange, II, 126-7.
2. I can find no trace of an essay on Jane Austen.
3. MS Reading Reference Library. The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford in 6 vols, f. 434. The letter in which the description of Richmond appears was written on 5 July 1820 (see L'Estrange, II, 102-4).
4. She thanks Sir William in a letter dated 20 April 1821. L'Estrange, II, 130.

her own experience in her earliest essays. 'Richmond' is directly based on a visit she had made from 30 June to 4 July 1820, staying with her friend Miss James at Bellevue, Lower Road, Richmond. A summary account of the visit is given in her diary:

Friday 30 June: Went with Drum [Dr Mitford] today to stay at the James's & he went home - walked with Miss James and Miss Emily & Miss Newman to Lord Dysart's - very pleasant day.

Saturday 1 July: At Richmond - went to see Pope's place - nothing left of his but the grotto - & walked round Strawberry Hill - went by water - in the evening walked in the meadows to hear music on the water - delightful day ...

Sunday 2 July: At Richmond - Mr Haydon came & spent the day with us - read Mrs Hofland's tales ...

Monday 3 July: At Richmond - went by water to see Hampton Court - delightful place - enchanting Cartoons - beautiful portraits of Titian by himself - returned at 6 to dine ... a charming day.

Tuesday 4 July: At Richmond - went by water to Kew - called on Mrs Nooth & went over the palace - most lovely little place with fine [illeg.] & pictures - left my dear friend & went home ...

It is probable that it was on the basis of these diary entries that she began her 'Richmond' article. The diary certainly seems to have provided her account of a journey along the river, the leisurely pace of the prose recalling the measured syntax of the original account of this even succession of genteel pleasures:

... listening, half unconsciously to Emily I's sweet snatches of Venetian songs ... just roused as we passed Pope's grotto, or the arch over Strawberry Hill; then landing

at Hampton Court, the palace of the Cartoons,
and coming home with my whole mind full of
the divine Raphael, and of that glorious
portrait of Titian by himself ... (57)¹

I believe that the article was begun before Sir William returned the letters (the diary reveals that she was working on it on 8 and 10 April 1821) and completed after her rediscovery of the account she wrote for him immediately on her return. Her intention had been to take advantage of passages in the letters 'which would dovetail ... with great ease and some effect'² into an article designed for publication, and this is clearly what she set about doing.

The influence of her letter to Sir William of 5 July 1820 on the 'Richmond' article is unquestionable. There she writes:

Do you know much of that fairy land, which has so little to do with the work-a-day world, and seems made for a holiday spot for ladies and gentlemen - a sort of realization of Watteau's picture!³

In the introductory paragraph of 'Richmond' phrases and images used in the letter are repeated verbatim:

... to the casual visiter [sic] Richmond appears a sort of fairy-land - a piece of the old Arcadia, a holiday spot for ladies and gentlemen, where they lead a happy out-of-door life, like the gay folks in Watteau's pictures, and have nothing to do with the work-a-day world. (56)

However, the published version also shows even stronger evidence of possible borrowing from a letter to Haydon written in November 1820. Haydon had remarked that Richmond was like a faded beauty

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1. This and all subsequent page references to 'Richmond' are to The New Monthly Magazine, II, vii.
 2. 4 April 1821. MS Reading Reference Library. The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford in 6 vols, f. 434.
 3. L'Estrange, II, 102.

and Mary Mitford had replied with the characteristic criticism that Richmond is not 'that ... homely delightful thing the Country':

It is rather a holiday spot for ladies and gentlemen where they lead a happy out-of-door life like the gay folks in Watteau's pictures and have nothing to do with the work a day world.¹

The fact that the published article follows the wording of the Haydon letter verbatim from 'a holiday spot' to the end of the sentence suggests that it is very likely that Mary Mitford had also asked Haydon to return her letters to him. There is no direct evidence of such a request but the close resemblance of phrases both in 'Field Flowers' and 'Richmond' to expressions and images used in letters to Haydon cannot be entirely coincidental.

The sentences that follow the above prefatory observations in the published version of 'Richmond' represent an amalgamation of images and ideas apparently derived from both letters. To Sir William she writes:

The Hill is grown rather too leafy - too much like Glover's² pictures - too green; it wants crags, as Canova says; and really looked better when I saw it last in the winter.³

In writing to Haydon she displays even more strikingly an awareness of the elements of pictorial composition:

But I should have thought that the view from the hill would have been improved by the rich tints of autumn which would break the

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1. 4 Nov. 1820. MS Reading Reference Library. The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford in 6 vols, f. 421.
 2. John Glover, 1767-1849. Elected President of the Old Water-Colour Society in 1815.
 3. 5 July 1820. L'Estrange, II, 102.

uniformity of those heavy masses of foliage - since to confess the truth I have often been tempted to agree with the American criticism & so [sic] think the view wanted 'clearing'.¹

The published article elaborates observations made in both accounts:

The principal ingredient in this powerful charm is the river, the beautiful river, for the hill seems to me overrated. The prospect is too woody, too leafy, too green. There is a monotony of vegetation, a heaviness. The view was finer as I first saw it in February, when the bare branches admitted frequent glimpses of houses and villages, and the colouring was left to the fancy, than when I last beheld it, all pomp and garniture, 'in the leafy month of June'. Canova said it only wanted crags; I rather incline to the old American criticism and think that it wants clearing. (56)

It is evident in each of the three versions that Mary Mitford considers the scene to be deficient as a picture. In explaining this to Sir William she alludes to the work of the contemporary landscape artist, John Glover, while she expresses herself to Haydon in jargon familiar to the artist or art-critic ('the rich tints of autumn ... would break the uniformity of those heavy masses of foliage'). The third version, while borrowing from the earlier accounts, is more explicit and adapted to the understanding of a less specialist audience. It is also a more highly-wrought piece of writing, incorporating the expression 'too leafy ... too green' in the more insistent triple repetition ('too woody, too leafy, too green') and combining Canova's observation that the view wanted crags with her own revealing belief that it wants clearing in the antithesis of the final sentence. The idea that a view is finer for the colouring being left 'to the fancy' is particularly interesting in the light

1. 4 Nov. 1820. MS Reading Reference Library. The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford in 6 vols, f. 421.

of Mary Mitford's earlier complaint that Crabbe's poetry 'says everything to the eye and nothing to the fancy'.¹

The above extracts from 'Richmond' demonstrate how specifically useful Sir William's (and probably also Haydon's) returning of her letters was to Mary Mitford. Elsewhere in the article she has borrowed from her basic account of the visit to Sir William and elaborated episodes and observations for the published version, borrowing, where appropriate, chance words or expressions from the original.

Less obviously apparent, but no less important, was the reminder that her letters provided of the easy familiarity of her more recent epistolary style. The subject of 'Richmond' lends itself to a relaxed development as it is essentially a direct account of a vividly remembered visit to an unfamiliar part of the world. Although it begins and ends with a formal opposition of town and country, the structure of the article is derived from the sequence of places visited: we move along the river from Hampton Court to Kew, from Ham House to Richmond Park and there is throughout the article a strong sense of the presence and personality of the author.

The happiest hours I ever passed in my life
were spent ... (56)

I shall never forget that morning. How
delightful it was to glide along through
those beautiful scenes with those dear
companions ... (56)

Amongst the many superb villas round Richmond,
none attracted me so much as Ham House ... (57)

1. Letter to Miss Hofland, 1819. Chorley, I, 74. See Ch. 3, p. 131.

Elsewhere the colloquial ease of the passage is enhanced by the introduction of such familiar and characteristic asides as 'It is quite refreshing to think of royalty so comfortable' (57) or 'Those iron railings seem to have been erected for no other purpose than to divide Lovelace from Clarissa' (58) - observations borrowed directly (though not, in these two cases, verbatim) from the Elford letter.

The extent of Mary Mitford's debt to her own letters is, in many ways, incalculable - but it is possible to point to a number of precise examples of early Our Village pieces by her that are derived very closely from the letters that Sir William returned in April 1821. The earliest example is, of course, 'Richmond' which was later reproduced in part as 'A Visit to Richmond' in volume 4 of Our Village (1830). Although entire passages are taken from the earlier piece, there are considerable additions - including a description of Sir Joshua Reynolds's villa. The opening paragraph of the original appears later in the text and the original conclusion has been entirely omitted. The alterations not only reflect Mary Mitford's wider experience of the delights of Richmond over the intervening years, but also include a frank acknowledgement of the fact that her home is a country village within thirty or forty miles of Richmond on the other side of Windsor Forest. Three Mile Cross had by this time become a place of literary pilgrimage and she is undisguisedly making capital out of her readers' knowledge of and interest in her domestic situation.

There are other examples of direct borrowings from Mary Mitford's letters to Sir William in the earlier Our Village

volumes. 'Boarding School Recollections. No. 1. The French Teacher' (published in The Lady's Magazine, III, 545-551 and in volume 2 of Our Village (1826)) is based on the account written for Sir William on 5 January 1812 (see L'Estrange, I, 167-170) and follows the original account very closely. A looser borrowing appears in 'The English Teacher' (OV 2) where an account of her school's production of Hannah More's The Search after Happiness is taken from a letter to Sir William written on 3 December 1813 (see L'Estrange, I, 244-246).

Elsewhere in the letters there are countless examples of passages that may well have provided the inspiration for individual sketches - an account of a walk through the meadows,¹ a description of frost² may have inspired 'The Cowslip Ball' or 'Frost' in the 'Walks in the Country' series (both in OV 1), while a reference to a cricket match with neighbouring Swallowfield³ could well have given Mary Mitford the idea for her sketch 'A Country Cricket Match' (OV 1).

The original 'Our Village' sketch was written within two months of Sir William's return of the letters as well as chronologically close to 'On Letters and Letter-Writers' where Mary Mitford makes explicit her preference for informality in letter-writing. It is clear from a comparison between the letter Mary Mitford wrote to Sir William on 8 April 1820 (three days after the family's arrival in Three Mile Cross) and the 'Our Village' sketch that she was writing as directly about her own life in

1. 5 April 1812. L'Estrange, I, 181. See Ch. 3, pp. 110-111.

2. 4 Jan. 1814. See Ch. 3, p. 122.

3. 31 August 1816. L'Estrange, II, 334-335.

the sketch, as in the letter. The letter not only reminded her of the freshness of her first impressions but also provided her with phrases that would evoke its colloquial style. She describes her new surroundings to Sir William in the following terms:

Our residence is a cottage - no, not a cottage - it does not deserve the name - a messuage or tenement, such as a little farmer who had made twelve or fourteen hundred pounds might retire to when he had left off business to live on his means. It consists of a series of closets, the largest of which may be about eight feet square, which they call parlours and kitchens and pantries; some of them minus a corner which has been unnaturally filched for a chimney; others deficient in half a side, which has been truncated by the shelving roof. Behind is a garden about the size of a good drawing-room, with an arbour which is a complete sentry-box of privet.¹

The phrase 'messuage or tenement' is repeated in the opening of 'Our Village':

Of all situations for a constant residence, that which appears to me most delightful is a little village far in the country; a small neighbourhood, not of fine mansions finely peopled, but of cottages and cottage-like houses, 'messuages or tenements,' as a friend of mine calls such ignoble and nondescript dwellings ... (1.1)

Later in the essay, in the presentation of what is clearly the author's home, phrases that recall her words to Sir William again appear. Her reluctance to describe the house as a cottage is repeated:

A cottage - no - a miniature house, with many additions, little odds and ends of places, pantries and what not; all angles and of a charming in-and-outness ... (1.7)

1. 8 April 1820. L'Estrange, II, 91-2.

The words 'A cottage - no - a miniature house' represent a deliberate hesitation, an interruption of the rhythm as well as of the sense of the prose to give the impression of direct speech, recalling the spontaneity of the original letter. Her direct borrowing of the interruption 'no -' from the letter is a characteristic example in miniature of Mary Mitford's ability to create a sense of naturalism through subtle and unacknowledged artifice.

'Our Village' develops to a much greater extent than 'Richmond' both the anecdotal side of Mary Mitford's letters and the sense of personality that is revealed in them. Quirks of imagery from the letter to Sir William are repeated. For example, when she describes her garden in the sketch she adapts the exaggerating metaphor used in the letter, 'an arbour which is a complete sentry box of privet' to speak of 'an arbour of privet, not unlike a sentry-box' (1.7). A more extensive kind of adaptation can be seen in the published version of the following account of a local illumination on the acquittal of Queen Caroline. It appears in a letter to Sir William dated 27 November 1820:

Ah! my dear Sir William, we were forced to illuminate. Think of that! an illumination at Three Mile Cross! Forced to put up two dozen of candles on pain of pelting and rioting and all manner of bad things. So we did. We were very shabby, though, compared to our neighbours. One, a retired publican, just below, had a fine transparency, composed of a pocket handkerchief with the Queen's head upon it - a very fine head in a hat and feathers cocked very knowingly on one side.¹

1. L'Estrange, II, 114-15.

Apart from the concluding observation which implies the condemnation for the queen that Mary Mitford certainly felt,¹ the impression created by this anecdote is one of herself as a slightly reluctant participator in village life whose enjoyment in this particular event appears to derive from her amusement at the excessive zeal of her neighbour, the retired publican. It recalls her earlier presentation of herself as audience in her description of the ranting preacher: her account of both is non-judgemental, their slightly bizarre activities are merely presented for the amusement of the reader. In the published account of the illumination (which is also briefly mentioned in her diary)² she again appears as an amused observer, though her participation in the illumination is less humorously 'forced' and the sharper note of her implied condemnation of the queen omitted:

[A retired publican] introduced into our peaceful vicinage the rebellious innovation of an illumination on the queen's acquittal. Remonstrance and persuasion were in vain; he talked of liberty and broken windows - so we all lighted up. Oh! how he shone that night with candles, and laurels, and white bows, and gold paper, and a transparency (originally designed for a pocket-handkerchief) with a flaming portrait of her Majesty, hatted and feathered, in red ochre. (1.3)

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1. Later in the same letter she describes the queen as 'bad' (L'Estrange, II, 115). She also supported Mrs Hofland who wrote a public letter to Hannah More 'endeavouring to prevail on decent ladies not to idolize the Queen' (letter to Sir William Elford, [30] Sept. 1820. L'Estrange, II, 111).
 2. Friday, 17 Nov. 1820: 'Three Mile Cross was illuminated in honour of the Queen ... as Reading had been the night before - we were very gay - so were Body, [illeg.] & Wheatley - The Cross looked very pretty ...'

The very real social threat involved in this 'rebellious innovation' is greatly mitigated by the humorous zeugma of the expression 'he talked of liberty and broken windows' and in the wry mockery of a transparency being 'originally designed for a pocket handkerchief'. Just as Mary Mitford diverts the reader by means of association in the varying contexts mentioned in Chapters 2 and 3, here she uses the humour that a colloquial style permits to deflect us from dwelling on the social and political threat implied by the publican's action. The political conservatism that characterizes her presentation of village life will be more fully discussed in Chapter 5, but here we can see how the informality of the prose permits both the diversion of humour and the rapid movement from one - in this case, potentially difficult - subject to another as we are carried on by the momentum of the prose to learn 'how he shone that night'.

What also emerges from this description of the publican - an impression that is by no means contradicted by the letter, despite her disapproval of his activities - is the tolerance and affection that characterize Mary Mitford's presentation of her villagers. As I suggested in Chapter 2, she embodies as narrator the quality that she presents for our admiration in Lizzy, an 'exceeding power of loving' (1.10).¹ Our Village is everywhere pervaded by the 'homely friendly presence'² of an

1. See Ch. 2, p. 85.

2. Anne Thackeray Ritchie, Introduction to Our Village (1893), p. vii.

authorial voice that is also the voice of her own informal letters.¹ The effect on the reader is akin to what she identifies as the effect of Cowper's letters: the love that she shows for her subject 'returns with interest upon its author'.² It is indicative of her success that by the time she came to close the Our Village sequence in 1832, 'that tremendous Correspondent',³ had become 'my singular good friend the public'.⁴

Her letters, then, provided Mary Mitford with a suitable literary persona and also with a model of early colloquial writing that she was able to incorporate in her published work. The apparently unforced meandering of her prose from one subject to another enabled her to present a wide range of images and ideas without explicit comment, thus inviting an open-ended response on the part of her reader to the various levels of association conveyed. Of equal importance is the pleasant, friendly tone established in the letters. In bringing the good-humoured friendliness of her letters to her published prose Mary Mitford invites her reader to participate in the general good-feeling that is present in her correspondence with Sir William. The warmth and kindness that permeates and characterizes Our Village is specifically related to the precedent of the letters.

1. One of her friends revealingly remarked on the publication of OV 1:

The first thing which struck me in your essays was the exact accordance between your printed and epistolary style. Are you aware how very little the idea of writing for the public changes your mode of expression?

Mrs Franklin to Mary Mitford, 19 May 1824. Friendships, I, 152.

2. See above, p. 150.

3. See above, p. 155.

4. 'A Moonlight Adventure' 5.327.

Section III - The Conversational Essay

The unforced open-endedness of construction and interpretation in Our Village undoubtedly had many advantages in the confused cultural climate of the early 1820s. It enabled Mary Mitford, quite uncontroversially, to say a great deal while appearing to say very little. Her work is deliberately and ostensibly lowly and trivial and yet, as we have seen, it is also permeated with a rich artistic and literary awareness. In 1825 she deprecatingly observed, 'It is mere accident which has put my prose into fashion at present',¹ and in 1830 she speaks of the 'over-estimation' of her 'literary efforts'.² This modest assessment of her success fails to acknowledge the extent to which her writing formed part of a wider cultural phenomenon: her unpretentious prose not only gave expression to a variety of emerging cultural trends but also caught exactly what Marilyn Butler defines as 'the humble, modest, quietist tone of the counter-revolution' which took place in English literature in the early 1820s.³

It is important to remember that Mary Mitford's early prose sketches were written concurrently with her blank verse tragedies.⁴ Her later feeling that she was driven by financial necessity to 'a trade' when she longed to devote herself to 'an art'⁵ is one

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1. Letter to Talfourd, 15 Dec. 1825. Correspondence, p. 522. MS Harvard.
 2. Letter to R. Davenport, 19 May 1830. MS British Museum. Add. MS 35, 341. 16.
 3. Butler, Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries (Oxford, 1981), p. 183.
 4. See Ch. 1, pp. 30-34.
 5. See Ch. 1, p. 48.

indication of her sense of a hierarchy of literary genres parallel to those in contemporary painting. She subscribed to the widely-held belief of the age that prose was an inferior medium to poetry. Consequently, she compliments Hofland by likening him to Claude¹ and also by saying that he 'talks pictures and paints poems';² 'the sister arts'³ in her tribute to Sir William Elford are painting and poetry, not painting and prose. In the early years of her correspondence with Sir William she expresses a qualified hope that she might come to 'resemble' Joanna Baillie⁴ and writes proudly about what 'we poets'⁵ think and feel. In 1815 she confesses that she is unable to write a novel for fear of venturing from 'the leading strings of metre'.⁶ By 1819, however, in the light of modified literary views, she seems embarrassed by her earlier work. Sending Haydon a volume of her poems in February she explains:

It was written when extreme youth and haste might apologize for the incorrectness, the silliness and the commonplace with which it abounds.⁷

In July she confesses to Sir William, 'I write verses so seldom now that I have lost the little power I once possessed'.⁸

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1. See Ch. 3, p. 103.
 2. See Ch. 3, p. 113.
 3. See Ch. 3, p. 106.
 4. See above, p. 151.
 5. 15 April 1812. L'Estrange, I, 186.
 6. Letter to Sir William Elford, 24 Dec. 1815. L'Estrange, I, 321.
 7. 13 Feb. 1819. L'Estrange, II, 53.
 8. 28 July 1819. L'Estrange, II, 63.

Although she continued to write short poems - mainly sonnets - well into the 1820s, her poetic energies were henceforth concentrated on the tragedies which it was her hope contained 'the true portrait of [her] mind'.¹

Verse, at the time of the composition of the early sketches and tragedies, was regarded as the appropriate medium for the expression of noble sentiments. Washington Irving concludes in his Sketch Book essay 'The Mutability of Literature' that the poet has of all writers the best chance of immortality because 'he writes from the heart, and the heart will always understand him'.² The poet's medium is appropriate to the expression of his thoughts:

... with the true poet everything is terse, touching, or brilliant. He gives the choicest thoughts in the choicest language. He illustrates them by everything that he sees most striking in nature and art.³

Prose writers, on the other hand, are 'voluminous and unwieldy':

... their pages are crowded with commonplaces and their thoughts expanded into tediousness.⁴

Prose is equated with prolixity and the 'prosaic', defined (with usage in this sense dating from 1813) as: 'Unpoetic, unromantic; commonplace, dull, tame' (OED). Charles Lamb, meanwhile, whose 'Essays of Elia' Mary Mitford read avidly from the time of their first appearance in The London Magazine, adopts this usage in his essay 'Witches, and other Night-fears' where he deprecates

1. Letter to Charles Boner, 5 Sept. 1854. Lee, p. 281. See Ch. 1 above, p. 2.
2. Everyman Edition (1906), p. 128.
3. The Sketch Book, Everyman Edition (1906), p. 128.
4. The Sketch Book, Everyman Edition (1906), p. 128.

his own dreams as 'tame and prosaic',¹ and regards them as indicative of his own lack of poetic ability. 'I ... subside into my proper element of prose',² he concludes at the end of the essay, in a phrase which recalls Mary Mitford's question about Haydon:

Is he likely to obtain employment in his own high sphere, or will he ... sink into portrait painting?³

It is evident that in literature as much as in painting there was a sense of hierarchy and therefore interesting that Hazlitt, himself a painter and as much aware of trends and theories in art as in literature, should conclude that poetry is more 'poetical' than painting:

Painting gives the object itself; poetry what it implies. Painting embodies what a thing contains in itself; poetry suggests what exists out of it, in any manner connected with it.⁴

The superiority of 'poetry' in Hazlitt's terms depends on its openness to interpretation; 'painting' in this context is seen as inferior because it does not leave room for imaginative or fanciful manoeuvre in the mind of the beholder. This implies that by 'painting' he means the graphically realistic kind that 'says everything to the eye and nothing to the fancy'.⁵ Nevertheless, Hazlitt's deprecation of excessive Dutch realism in 'Mr. Campbell and Mr. Crabbe' coexists with his recognition

1. 'Witches, and other Night Fears' in The Life, Letters and Writings of Charles Lamb, edited by Percy Fitzgerald, 6 vols (1892), III, 237.
2. Ibid., p. 239. My italics.
3. Letter to Sir William Elford, 5 July 1814. L'Estrange, I, 288. See Ch. 3, p.112. My italics.
4. 'On Poetry in General' (1818) in The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, Centenary edition, edited by P. P. Howe, 21 vols (1930-34), V, 10.
5. See above, p. 160.

of the growing impatience of the age for 'empty generalities' and 'smooth, polished, unmeaning periods'.¹ There appears to be some confusion or contradiction here, suggestive again of the fact that both Hazlitt and Mary Mitford were giving expression to feelings about painting - and realism in general - that were currently in a state of transition. Mary Mitford resolves the dilemma in her own work, as I suggested in Chapter 3, by confining graphic description to the pleasanter side of rustic life, thus meeting a growing desire for realism while retaining the all-important appeal to the fancy. Although she herself managed to get round the problem, the fact remains that prose was considered a lowly medium in the early 1820s and its inferior status may well have been related to a fear of its threateningly realistic graphic potential.

Mary Mitford would certainly have been conscious of the inferior status of prose, although, unlike Irving or Lamb, she does not make any explicit statement on the subject. It is nevertheless highly appropriate that she should have chosen prose to describe scenes, her taste for which she felt to be 'as wrong as it [is] ignoble'.² Neither is it surprising that this belief, coupled with her opinion of The Lady's Magazine as 'that trumpery work',³ should lead her in later life to speak of 'the heresy of preferring Our Village to the tragedies'.⁴

1. See Ch. 3, p. 121.

2. Letter to Sir William Elford, 23 Nov. 1821. L'Estrange, II, 139. See Ch. 3, p. 118.

3. Letter to Talfourd, 4-7 Sept. 1824. Correspondence, p. 411. MS Harvard. See Ch. 1, p. 44.

4. Letter to W. C. Bennett, 1 Sept. 1854. MS British Museum. Egerton MS 3774. f.84. My italics.

Mary Mitford's decision in 1821 to supplement the income from her plays by writing essays rather than fiction derives, I believe, partly from her own lack of fictive imagination ('I have no inventive faculty whatever')¹ and from the inspiration that she received from such contemporaries as Hazlitt and Lamb to reproduce for publication some of the ideas and experiences that had formed the substance of her recent informal letters.

Between 1817 and 1821 both authors formed a significant part of her reading. Hazlitt she admired initially for his critical works. She recommends him to Sir William Elford in two letters dated December 1818 and December 1819:

I have just been reading Hazlitt's 'View of the Stage' ... I had seen most of them before, but I could not help reading them all together; though so much of Hazlitt is dangerous to one's taste - rather like dining on sweetmeats and supping on pickles. So poignant is he, and so rich, everything seems insipid after him.²

By-the-way, I never hear you talk of Hazlitt. Did you never read any of his works? ... I am sure you would like them; they are so exquisitely entertaining, so original, so free from every sort of critical shackle; the style is so delightfully piquant, so sparkling, so glittering, so tasteful, so condensed ...³

It is clear that by this time Mary Mitford was far ahead of her old friend in her awareness of contemporary literature. Her appreciation of Hazlitt was probably encouraged by Haydon, to whom she writes in February 1824 'I have an admiration for

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1. Letter to Talfourd, 9 March 1821. Correspondence, p. 3. MS Harvard.
 2. 28 Dec. 1818. L'Estrange, II, 47.
 3. 28 Dec. 1819. L'Estrange, II, 79.

[Hazlitt] which has the force of personal regard,¹ and to whom she confessed on the publication of the first volume of Our Village, 'I should value [Hazlitt's] approbation more than almost anyone's'.² Hazlitt's opinion of Our Village is not known; neither is Mary Mitford's detailed opinion of his sequence of essays collectively entitled Table-Talk (1820-22) which, in their more homely subject-matter, have clearly more in common with her sketches than the earlier literary essays referred to in her letters to Sir William of 1818 and 1819. She was, however, certainly familiar with the Table-Talk essays when she embarked on the main body of Our Village sketches in 1822.

The Hazlitt essay that seems to bear most direct relation to Mary Mitford's sketches - and particularly to the 'Walks in the Country' series - is 'On Going a Journey', first published in January 1822,³ just over a year before her first 'Walk' appeared in The Lady's Magazine in February 1823.⁴ The central idea of 'On Going a Journey' is the same as that described in Mary Mitford's 'Walks': of losing oneself and restoring peace of mind by experience of the countryside. However, the method of Hazlitt's essay and Mary Mitford's 'Walks' could scarcely be more different. Where the underlying purpose is explicit in only two of Mary Mitford's essays - 'Violeting' and 'The Cowslip Ball' - Hazlitt's intention is firmly stated at the outset:

1. 16 Feb. 1824. MS Reading Reference Library. The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford in 6 vols, f. 482.
2. 14 June 1824. MS Reading Reference Library. The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford in 6 vols, f. 487.
3. In The New Monthly Magazine.
4. 'Frost'. See Appendix A.

We go a journey chiefly to be free of all impediments and all inconveniences; to leave ourselves behind, much more to get rid of others. (181)¹

The assertiveness of this statement highlights the very different literary personality of Mary Mitford's sketches. Her writing, even at its most direct, is diffident by comparison:

I must go violeting - it is a necessity -
and I must go alone. (1.100)²

I will go out into the air this cool pleasant
afternoon, and try what that will do. (1.133)³

She is simply saying that a walk in the country is potentially a restorative experience for her alone rather than a general panacea. Her diffidence, meanwhile, is mirrored in the broken syntax of the first extract and the vague hopefulness of 'try what that will do' in the second. Her 'Walks' - as I have tried to illustrate in Chapter 2 - involve the demonstration of a sequence of perceptions and related associations that the reader is tacitly invited to share. The process is one of showing rather than telling, of journeying rather than arriving. In Hazlitt's essay, by contrast, we are suddenly plunged into the middle of a conjectural landscape:

Give me the clear blue sky over my head, and the green turf beneath my feet, a winding road before me, and a three hours' march to dinner - and then to thinking! It is hard if I cannot start some game on these lone heaths. I laugh, I run, I leap, I sing for joy. From the point of yonder rolling cloud, I plunge into my past being, and revel there, as the sun-burnt Indian plunges headlong into the wave that wafts him to his native shore.

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1. This and all subsequent page references to 'On Going a Journey' are to The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, Centenary Edition, edited by P. P. Howe, 21 vols (1930-34), VIII.
 2. 'Violeting'.
 3. 'The Cowslip Ball'.

Then long-forgotten things, like 'sunken wrack and sumless treasures', burst upon my eager sight, and I begin to feel, think, and be myself again. (182)

This is an explicit condensation of a process that remains largely implicit in Mary Mitford's work. Both the landscape and the physical activity that it inspires are briefly outlined before the writer brings us to the real activity of the passage, the plunge into 'my past being' and the 'eager' seeing of 'long-forgotten things'. This is a much more introverted kind of writing than Mary Mitford's. She rarely defines the psychological effect of a walk in the country - 'What a renewal of heart and mind!' (1.106) is a rare exception in 'Violeting' - but Hazlitt leaves us in no doubt as to the purpose of his journey. Like Jane Austen or Susan Ferrier, he takes the beneficent powers of nature for granted; Mary Mitford shows how they work in her own experience. She could describe 'the trees, and fields, and sunny hedgerows' that were to her as 'old friends'¹ with the authority of intimacy. Hazlitt is a city-dweller who snatches at the countryside, finding in it the same restorative qualities but never quite able to elude the town. 'I absent myself from the town for awhile' (181), he writes at the beginning of the essay, but it is never far away, intruding throughout in analogies and comparisons, perpetual reminders of its society, 'the trammels of the world and of public opinion' (185) that he is ostensibly seeking to forget. He is pre-eminently a city writer. Appropriately, the essay ends with a return home:

1. Letter to Sir William Elford, 8 April 1820. L'Estrange, II, 91. First quoted Ch. 3, p. 95.

Those who wish to forget painful thoughts,
do well to absent themselves for a while
from the ties and objects that recal [sic]
them; but we can be said only to fulfil
our destiny in the place that gave us birth.
I should on this account like well enough
to spend the whole of my life in travelling
abroad, if I could anywhere borrow another
life to spend afterwards at home! (189)

Mary Mitford, however, absented herself only 'for a while' from the country to make trips to town. The country was her home and it is clear that her writing - which is of as well as about the country - held a deep appeal for city readers who sought occasionally to lose themselves in scenes that she regarded with everyday familiarity.

Although 'On Going a Journey' prefigures in general terms the subject and pattern of Mary Mitford's 'Walks in the Country', its importance to her was probably that of the entire Table-Talk sequence - the setting of an immediate precedent for the re-creation of personal thoughts and experience in prose. In a different age, even in a different decade, Mary Mitford would have been less confused as to how she should channel her literary talents but also may well never have found the courage to extend the practice of her own letters into her published work. In the early 1820s the time was ripe: the public expression of personal experience is integral not only to Hazlitt's Table-Talk but also to Lamb's Essays of Elia and De Quincey's Confessions of an English Opium-Eater. These all made their first appearance between 1820 and 1822 in The London Magazine - a publication which held a particular interest for Mary Mitford. While Talfourd was offered - but declined - its editorship in April 1821, she herself published two dramatic sketches there in September of that year.¹ In

1. 'Claudia's Dream' and 'Theodore and Bertha, a Dramatic Sketch'.

April 1822 she wrote to Sir William Elford:

By-the-by, do you ever see the 'London Magazine?' Charles Lamb's articles, signed 'Elia', are the finest specimens of English prose in the language. The humour is as delicate as Addison's, and far more piquant. Oh! how you would enjoy it! Do borrow or hire all the numbers of Taylor and Hessey's 'London Magazine', and read all Elia's articles, as well as the 'Table Talks', and the 'Confessions of an English Opium Eater', and the 'Dramatic Sketches', and tell me how you like Charles Lamb.¹

This predilection for the figure whom she had described a month earlier as 'the matchless Elia'² is significant. Elia is a modest, self-deprecating figure whose 'little sketches' are 'anything but methodical',³ who has 'tame and prosaic' dreams and in consequence feels that his 'proper element' is 'prose'.⁴ If the lowliness of the medium aptly reflects the modesty of the character, it is also true that Elia is a more coherent, if less assertive, literary personality than either the Hazlitt of Table-Talk or the De Quincey of the Confessions. He is engaging, humorous and unthreatening, his prose flows easily and with apparent aimlessness. Of all the early nineteenth century essayists, Elia was probably the most encouraging precedent to a rather uncertain female writer trying to establish herself in a new medium. She was certainly heartened by his praise when he read the first volume of Our Village prior to its publication:

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1. 28 April 1822. L'Estrange, II, 151. Mary Mitford's italics. The 'Dramatic Sketches' are presumably her own.
 2. Letter to Talfourd, 31 March 1822. Correspondence, p. 173. MS Harvard.
 3. 'The Old and the New Schoolmaster' in The Life, Letters and Writings of Charles Lamb, edited by Percy Fitzgerald, 6 vols (1892), III, 217.
 4. See above, pp. 170-171.

Charles Lamb ... says that nothing so fresh and characteristic has appeared for a long while. It is not over modest to say this; but who would not be proud of the praise of such a proser?¹

Mary Mitford's consciousness of her debt to the essayists of The London Magazine is implied by her observation in November 1821 that the London 'is a place for my betters'.² The New Monthly, by comparison, then under the editorship of Thomas Campbell, she felt to be the home of essays of 'respectable formality'³ - a view that is incidentally corroborated by Talfourd in his Memoirs of Charles Lamb.⁴ The Lady's Magazine was undoubtedly an unthreatening alternative whose lowliness would not check the expression of personality or the relaxed, meandering style that characterized her recent letters.

Given Mary Mitford's acknowledgement that her correspondence with Sir William Elford was 'of the greatest possible service in ripening [her] power of writing',⁵ it is appropriate that Sir William should have expressed the opinion in 1824 that Our Village would have been better written in the form of letters. Mary Mitford's reply to his criticism offers a revealing commentary on her awareness of how she has adapted the style and form of an essentially private mode of communication to a public audience:

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1. Letter to Sir William Elford, 5 March 1824. L'Estrange, II, 176. Mary Mitford's italics.
 2. Letter to Talfourd, 3 Nov. 1821. Correspondence, p. 102. MS Harvard.
 3. Letter to Talfourd, 8 June 1821. Correspondence, p. 42. MS Harvard.
 4. Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd, Memoirs of Charles Lamb (1894), pp. 90-91.
 5. Mary Mitford to Sir William Elford, 1 Jan. 1832. MS Reading Reference Library. The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford in 6 vols, f. 598. See above, p. 151.

... we are free and easy in these days, and talk to the public as a friend. Read 'Elia', or the 'Sketch Book', or Hazlitt's 'Table Talk', or any popular book of the new school, and you will find that we have turned over the Johnsonian periods and the Blair-ian formality to keep company with the wigs and hoops, the stiff curtseys and low bows of our ancestors. In short, my dear friend, letters are now-a-days more the vehicles of kindness, and less of wit than they used to be. It was very convenient, when people who wrote books were forced to put stiff stays on them, to have a sort of dishabille for the mind as well as for the body, and to write a letter as they put on a robe de chambre. But now the periodical press takes charge of those bursts of gaiety and criticism which the post. was wont to receive; and the public - the reading public - is, as I said before, the correspondent and confidant of everybody.¹

It is clear that by this time Mary Mitford had a firm understanding of what constituted a 'popular book of the new school'.

The years 1817-1820, as suggested in Section I of this chapter,² were characterized by a radicalism that was expressed both directly and covertly in the literature of the period. A change in the political climate around 1820 led to a general change in the direction of literature. E. P. Thompson identifies the period 1820-1825 as marking 'the onset of the years of general prosperity':

Falling prices and fuller employment took the edge off Radical anger. And, at the same time, the surviving Radical journalists settled ... upon a new cause - the agitation on behalf of the honour and regal rights of Queen Caroline, whom George IV wished to set aside for misconduct ...³

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1. 23 June 1824. L'Estrange, II, 179-180.
 2. See above, p. 146.
 3. The Making of the English Working Class, Pelican edition (1980), p. 778.

Mary Mitford's good-humoured dismissal of her radical publican's support of the queen in 'Our Village' is, on the one hand, indicative of the mild conservatism that pervades her writings, but it is also clear that by the time of the composition of the early sketches the social unrest of the late 1810s had - for a time at least - settled down, paving the way for a quieter, more private and contemplative kind of writing. Marilyn Butler observes that

Literature, which up to about 1820 had so angular a political content, blurred and became ideologically apathetic or confused.¹

'Such a period', she goes on to suggest, 'is fertile ground for the cult of the isolated, introverted literary personality'.²

Less self-consciously isolated, less introverted than her 'betters'³ in The London Magazine, Mary Mitford nevertheless emerges as a distinct literary personality through her Our Village sketches, offering her own well-defined and idiosyncratic brand of escapism. She creates an 'alternative imaginative world',⁴ not out of political radicalism, but as a form of self-expression. If 'Lamb's ordinariness made him in the 1820s'⁵ it is reasonable to assume that the same is true of a writer to whom he was so clearly a significant stylistic precedent. For all the cultural awareness that is present in her work, Mary Mitford was nevertheless writing in a consciously

1. Butler, Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries (Oxford, 1981), p. 173.
2. Butler, Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries (Oxford, 1981), p. 174.
3. See above, p. 179.
4. See above, p. 146.
5. Butler, Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries (Oxford, 1981), p. 177.

ordinary way, appealing to her audience partly through the endearing personality traits that are manifested in her letters. As her letters are essentially an informal means of communication, dealing with the diverse realities of her everyday existence, so her village sketches overlap with them in their material, their benevolent tone and in their apparently random drift from one subject to another. She avoids confronting or making much of potentially controversial material, although she incidentally tells us a great deal about contemporary art and literature. As will be demonstrated in Chapter 5, she also tells us much about English rural life in the early nineteenth century. Consonant with the taste of the age, however, she does not wish to tell us too much and it is in this avoidance of the more painful reality of village life that a meandering associative technique - fostered by her adoption of her own colloquial style of letter-writing - enables her to cover with impunity some of the more disturbing social issues of the day.

Chapter Five

Rural Life

Mary Mitford had no more intention of giving a definitive picture of agricultural conditions in Berkshire in the early 1820s than she had of making definitive statements about contemporary literature or art. There is nevertheless strong evidence to show that the early sketches are firmly rooted in contemporary social reality and are in many respects a direct expression of her everyday experience of village life. Her work reveals as much about local agricultural conditions as it does of the cultural taste of an age that wished to avoid the more painful side of social reality. At the same time, the details of the lives of the rustic poor with whom she was in contact become an instrument of her fancy rather than material for social criticism and, as such, create an image of village life that was not only palatable but pleasing and even flattering to the majority of her contemporaries.

In Section I Mary Mitford's views on politics and politically-motivated literature will be briefly summarised as background to her own presentation of politically controversial issues. In Sections II and III the various manifestations of local agricultural conditions in Our Village will be considered. The careful control of this material that characterizes Mary Mitford's early work will, in Section IV, be set against her failure to maintain authorial control in 'The Incendiary' (OV 5). Sections V and VI will consider the aims that determine the nature of Mary Mitford's presentation of rural life and those areas of her experience that most readily lend themselves to the artistic conception of Our Village.

Section I - Politics and Literature

Mary Mitford's political views are characterized by a benign conservatism to which it would be inappropriate to attach any party label. Her father was a Whig, a friend of Cobbett in the early 1800s, and an ardent election campaigner throughout his life in Berkshire. Whilst sharing Dr Mitford's sympathetic concern for the plight of the poor and theoretically regarding herself as a Whig, Mary Mitford hated the clamour and self-importance of party politics,¹ and in 1828 confessed to Sir William Elford:

As to politics my dear friend I dare say we are pretty much alike I who am a whig & you who are a tory - I don't much care for any of them ...²

A fairly predictable corollary to this aversion was her dislike of overtly politically-motivated literature. She deplored Cobbett's post-war radicalism, commenting to Sir William in 1817 on 'that great and dangerous violence to which he has latterly abandoned himself'.³ Nevertheless, in the same letter she praises Cobbett's sense of the beauty of landscape and wonders, very characteristically, why this 'strong, though probably unconscious power' did not 'burst through the dreary desert of his political writings'.⁴ In her opinion, he seemed to despise 'the graces of composition and fancy' and, in his recent works, she observes,

... so much of bitterness and bile has mingled with his thoughts, that the sweet pictures of Nature were probably banished from them.⁵

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1. See, for example, letter to Sir William Elford, 25 May 1832. MS Reading Reference Library. The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford in 6 vols, f. 601.
 2. 16 March 1828. MS Reading Reference Library. The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford in 6 vols, f. 560.
 3. 19 March 1817. L'Estrange, II, 2.
 4. L'Estrange, II, 2-3.
 5. L'Estrange, II, 3.

Here she reveals her own taste for 'graces' and 'sweet pictures' above 'bitterness and bile'. She is repelled by the tone of Cobbett's writing and this makes her unreceptive to the humane concern that underlies his radicalism. While both Cobbett and Mary Mitford deplored rustic poverty, their literary approach to the subject could scarcely have been more different. Writing in 1821, the year of the original 'Our Village' sketch, Cobbett observes:

Instead ... of applauding 'happy poverty,' which applause is so much the fashion of the present day, I despise the man that is poor and contented; for such content is a certain proof of a base disposition ...¹

Such a view clearly poses a threat to the harmony of village life as Mary Mitford chose to see it. The wording of Cobbett's attack is also startlingly direct and aggressive, suggesting that it would repel so subtle and benign a writer as herself. Her own presentation of poverty was to depend not only on her ability to reconcile potentially disturbing social detail with an idyllic image of village life but also on her ability to maintain throughout her prose an even tone of benevolence. It is clear that she felt the literary expression of good feeling was more likely to promote good feeling in a reader than any expression of 'bitterness and bile'.

It is perhaps worth mentioning at this stage that Mary Mitford never deviated from her antipathy to writing that was overtly concerned with exposing social or political evils. She found, for example, the increasing social preoccupations of the English novelists of the 1840s and 50s incomprehensible. In 1852 she praises George Sand's play, Claudie (1851), for being

1. William Cobbett, Cottage Economy (Oxford, 1979), p. 3.

free ... from all that vile design of doing good, or making out this to be wrong, and that to be right, which I hold ... to be the most fatal fault of all fiction now-a-days.¹

Dickens, by comparison, she regarded as 'essentially exaggerated and false',² and considered his Hard Times (1854) 'objectionable for its tendency to set class against class'.³ Thackeray, meanwhile, was 'most painfully fine but hard and heartless' and Elizabeth Gaskell's novels 'so painful that it is like a nervous fever to read them'.⁴ It is not surprising that in 1850 she should yearn for the less painfully graphic days of the 1810s and 1820s:

Dear me when will people learn to be cheerful and hopeful and to write healthily like dear Miss Austen and Sir Walter?⁵

Mary Mitford's sentimental novel, Atherton, published in 1854, was first conceived in the 1820s⁶ and is as much of that period as any of the tales from the later Our Village volumes. The early sketches differ from the tales in that they are less overtly fictional and convey a greater sense of verisimilitude. Their tone, nevertheless, is almost invariably 'cheerful' and 'hopeful', an apt reflection of their author's conviction that 'graces' and 'sweet pictures' should predominate in any presentation of social reality.

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1. Letter to Digby Starkey, 24 Sept. 1852. Friendships, II, 223.
 2. Letter to W. C. Bennett, 17 April 1850. B.M. Egerton MS 3774.
 3. Letter to W. C. Bennett, 23 Oct. 1854. B.M. Egerton MS 3774.
 4. Letter to W. C. Bennett, 17 April 1850. B.M. Egerton MS 3774.
 5. Letter to W. C. Bennett, 17 April 1850. B.M. Egerton MS 3774.
 6. See Ch. 1 above, p. 45.

Section II - Agricultural Conditions around Three Mile Cross in the Early Nineteenth Century

Although the early 1820s were free from social and political agitation by comparison with the immediate post-war years, it was at this time that a period of severe agricultural depression became established in England. This depression particularly affected the south-east, the region in which 'our village' is geographically located. Despite her aversion to politically-motivated writing, in giving what emerges as a reasonably accurate picture of local farming Mary Mitford was obliged to consider the contemporary economic phenomenon of the depression and its social consequences. The evasiveness that she shows in the process reveals her genuine lack of economic understanding or political concern; this is the corollary to the more blatant avoidance of specific social ills that will be discussed in Section III. Her overriding concern throughout her country writings was to give pleasure to her readers whatever distortion this might involve.

Three Mile Cross is a small village three miles to the south of Reading within the parish of Shinfield.¹ In the early nineteenth century Shinfield was divided (together with the neighbouring parish of Swallowfield) between the counties of Berkshire and Wiltshire (see Appendix B, Map 3). Three Mile Cross fell within the Wiltshire section of the parish and for administrative purposes was regarded as Shinfield West Side. The detached part of Wiltshire was not transferred to Berkshire until 1844, but this division is generally ignored in Mary Mitford's works beyond a passing comment on the absurdity of the existence of 'a bit of Wiltshire plumped

1. See Appendix B, Map 2.

down in the very middle of Berkshire'.¹ She generally refers to her local county as Berkshire, although the proximity of the county boundary to Three Mile Cross means that a number of sketches also relate to north Hampshire: for example, 'Bramley Maying' (OV 1) involves an excursion to Silchester, Bramley and Bramley Green, which are all in the neighbouring county (see Map 3).

At the time that Mary Mitford was writing her country sketches most of Berkshire was devoted to wheat cultivation. The area around Three Mile Cross, however, being close to Reading and within easy access of London, was an area of mixed farming, supplying the city with fruit, vegetables and dairy produce as well as with grain. The water-meadows of the Loddon and Kennet provided rich pasture-land while the 'light dry gravelly soil'² of the uplands was ideal for wheat cultivation, yielding a higher crop output than heavier clay soils.

The most accurate contemporary picture of local agriculture is to be found in documents relating to the redistribution of tithes in 1838.³ Of 4,230 acres subject to tithes in the parish of Shinfield 2,021 acres were arable land, 600 acres pasture land, 35 acres woodland and 600 acres common land. The varied nature of local farming suggested by this distribution clearly emerges from the sketches, reflected, more often than not, in landscape descriptions whose concern with agriculture is only incidental:

1. 'The Black Velvet Bag'. 2.189.
2. Introductory letter to OV 4.3.
3. Berks C.R.O. Shinfield Tithe Award, D/P 110 27A; Shinfield Tithe Maps (1842), D/P 110 27B,C.

Few things are more delightful than to saunter along these green lanes of ours in the busy harvest-time; the deep verdure of the hedge-rows, and the strong shadow of the trees, contrasting so vividly with the fields, partly waving with golden corn, partly studded with regular piles of heavy wheat-sheaves.

('Dora Creswell' 3.242)

[The] meadows consist of a double row of small enclosures of rich grass-land, a mile or two in length, sloping down from high arable grounds on either side to a little nameless brook.

('The Cowslip Ball' 1.135)

Apart from the produce suggested by descriptions of orchards 'full of fruit',¹ and farmyards and gardens swarming with pigs, ducks, geese and chickens,² another aspect of local agriculture, suggested by the 1838 assessment of 35 titheable acres of woodland, was timber production:

Up-hill or down, these quiet woody lanes scarcely give us a peep at the world, except when, leaning over a gate, we look into one of the small enclosures ... so closely set with growing timber, that the meadowy opening looks almost like a glade in a wood ...

('Nutting' 1.242)

It is clear from the sketches that most of the farmland in the area was enclosed, despite the misleading statement in 'Violeting' that 'We have the good fortune to live in an unenclosed parish' (1.101). By 1807, in fact, most of the cultivated land of Shinfield and its neighbouring parish Swallowfield was enclosed³ and the 'unenclosed' areas rejoiced in by Mary Mitford were actually commons or waste land. Spencer's Wood Common, the common most frequently described in Our Village, was not enclosed until 1863. Meanwhile an enclosure for 312 acres of Shinfield Green was not awarded until

1. 'Nutting' 1.243.

2. e.g. Hannah Bint's garden (4.109).

3. William Mavor, A General View of the Agriculture of Berkshire. Drawn up for the consideration of the Board of Agriculture and Internal Improvement (1809), p. 149.

1856 with a further 182 acres added within the parish in 1858.¹ The face of the countryside around Three Mile Cross would therefore have remained effectively unchanged to Mary Mitford from the time of her first residence there in 1820 until her death in Swallowfield in 1855.

Against this picture of local farming may be set evidence that, following a long period of prosperity, the 1820s and 30s were a time of general agricultural depression. During the eighteenth century a steady growth had taken place in English farming. This was accelerated during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars when food shortages, caused by bad harvests and an increase in population,² stimulated farmers to experiment with more intensive methods of production. Crop rotations became more sophisticated, with ley-farming replacing the older method of fallowing in many areas, while during the period 1793-1815 it has been estimated that 2,000 Acts of Enclosure were passed, a figure which accounts for approximately half the total number of Enclosure Acts passed in England between 1750 and 1850.³ Farmers were particularly anxious to stimulate wheat production since grain prices were high and soaring to unprecedented levels. More land,

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1. W. E. Tate, A Domesday of English Enclosure Acts and Awards (Reading, 1978).
 2. The economic blockade imposed by France on England during the Napoleonic Wars appears to have had little effect. Concessions were allowed and grain imports actually increased. See J. D. Chambers and G. E. Mingay, The Agricultural Revolution 1750-1880 (1966), pp. 115-6.
 3. Chambers and Mingay, p. 77. The Enclosure Acts account for only part of the total number of enclosures taking place at this time: many more were negotiated by private agreement.

particularly that recently enclosed, was given over to wheat and, as long as grain remained in short supply, prices remained high and farmers prospered. After 1815, due to increased output and a series of good harvests plus a surplus of recently-imported foreign corn, the price of grain began to fall. A series of Corn Laws was passed in an attempt to protect the home market by restricting imports. Fluctuations did occur, but basically the trend in prices was downward so that between 1818 and 1822 the price of wheat sank continuously from 86s 3d to 44s 7d a quarter.¹ Those farmers with the greatest percentage of land devoted to wheat production were hardest hit; livestock farmers suffered least and even benefited from the fall in grain prices. Geographically, the arable lands of southern and eastern England were most affected by the depression. Farmers here had to cope with increased costs - higher rent, higher food prices, a higher outlay in wages - with little chance of recovering their wartime prosperity. In 1821 a return to the gold standard and a recall of paper money issued during the war meant that a number of small owner-occupiers working on borrowed capital were forced to sell up. Many small farmers who rented land were also ruined, unless, as appears to have happened in a number of cases, landowners were willing to reduce rents to tide tenants over the years of distress.²

The comparatively varied nature of agriculture around Three Mile Cross suggests that, despite the general state of agricultural depression, the immediate 'our village' area cannot have suffered to the same extent as areas in the west of Berkshire which were

1. Chambers and Mingay, p. 125.

2. Chambers and Mingay, p. 129. See 'Hannah Bint' (OV 4) for an example of this practice.

devoted to intensive wheat cultivation. Nevertheless, an awareness of the depression is strongly evident in the early sketches:

These are bad times for farmers.
('A Great Farm House' 1.48)

They are the most prosperous pair in the parish ... affording a proof, even in this declining age, when the circumstances of so many worthy members of the community seem to have 'an alacrity in sinking,' that it is possible to amend them by sheer industry.
('The Hard Summer' 1.211)

... good management and good principles, and the assistance afforded them by an admirable son ... have enabled them to overcome all the difficulties of these trying times, and they are now enjoying the peaceful evening of a well-spent life ...
('The Dell' 2.204-5)

The recognition of 'this declining age' and 'these trying times' is balanced by the view that difficulties can be overcome by 'sheer industry', 'good management and good principles'. This belief that any kind of misfortune can be overcome by determined hard work is integral to Mary Mitford's conception of rustic character but it characteristically ignores the wider implications of precisely why these are 'trying times'.

Nevertheless, the consequence to farmers of the wartime period of prosperity and the subsequent years of distress are clearly reflected in a variety of contexts within the volumes of Our Village and even in Country Stories (1837). Given the sudden reversal of agricultural fortunes, the fact that 'in the period 1814-1816 the agricultural industry passed suddenly from prosperity to extreme depression',¹ it is not surprising to discover that a simple

1. Lord Ernle (R. E. Prothero), English Farming Past and Present (1912), sixth edition (1961), p. 322. All subsequent references are to this edition. Ernle's view is maintained by more recent agricultural historians.

opposition of past and present operates throughout these works. 'A Great Farm House' 'ten or twelve years ago' (i.e. 1811-13) was a place 'where pride could not live, and poverty could not enter' (1.48); the meadow and the farm-yard 'swarmed with inhabitants of the earth and of the air' while the farm business 'seemed to go on like machinery, always regular, prosperous and unfailling' (1.50). By contrast, in more recent times farms had fallen into disrepair or disuse: 'the old farm-house' in 'Violeting', for example, is 'little else but a picture ... The very walls are crumbling to decay under a careless landlord and ruined tenant' (1.105). The old farm-house in 'Jessy Lucas', meanwhile, is left in the care of a labourer and his wife with its outbuildings unused, presenting 'a peculiarly forlorn and deserted appearance' (3.153). Similarly in 'Jesse Cliffe' in Country Stories, Moors Farm, originally 'calculated for the convenient accommodation of the patriarchal family of sons and daughters, man-servants and maid-servants, of which a farmer's household consisted in former days' (p. 46) is now occupied by 'one solitary labourer' with its large outbuildings sinking into a state of 'gradual decay' (p. 45).

As her more general conservatism would lead one to suppose, Mary Mitford has a distinct predilection for the old-fashioned methods of farming associated with the earlier period of prosperity.¹ This is exemplified in the presentation of Mrs Sally Mearing, who flourished through 'excellent times' despite a stubborn rejection of all agricultural improvements, but who was forced to give up on

1. An exception to this prejudice is Edward Grey, an agricultural innovator sympathetically presented in 'The Queen of the Meadow' (OV 3), the tale which influenced Tennyson's 'The Miller's Daughter' and 'The Brook'. See Ch. 4 above, pp. 142-3.

finding 'rent rising and prices sinking both at the same moment'.¹
 A preference for the small-scale and domestic in farming meanwhile causes her to lament the passing of the "'little bargain'", a type of farm 'which once abounded, but [is] now seldom found, in Berkshire'.² The "'little bargain'" she defines in 'The Dell' as

... thirty or forty acres, perhaps, of arable land, which the owner and his sons cultivated themselves, whilst the wife and daughters assisted in the husbandry, and eked out the slender earnings by the produce of the dairy, the poultry-yard, and the orchard;- an order of cultivators now passing rapidly away, but in which much of the best part of the English character, its industry, its frugality, its sound sense, and its kindness might be found.
 (2.204)

Small farms may have been falling into disuse and decay, but, through the survival of common rights in the Three Mile Cross area, there was still adequate scope for less prosperous rustic individuals to achieve a modest degree of independence. I suggested in Chapter 3 that Mary Mitford's love of her local countryside was sharpened by a fear of the impending enclosure of the local commons.³ They had for her not only visual importance as 'delicious green patches, the islets of wilderness amidst cultivation'⁴ but also a social and historical significance.

It has been argued by twentieth-century historians that the loss of common rights effectively proletarianized the rural working classes - the bleakest picture of the post-enclosure labourer emerging from the Hammonds' study, The Village Labourer:

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1. 'The Copse' 2.53.
 2. 'The China Jug' 4.153.
 3. Ch. 3, p. 96.
 4. 'Violeting' 1.101.

In an unenclosed village ... the normal labourer did not depend on his wages alone. His livelihood was made up from various sources. His firing he took from the waste, he had a cow or pig wandering on the common pasture ...

In an enclosed village ... the position of the agricultural labourer was very different. All his auxiliary resources had been taken from him, and he was now a wage-earner and nothing more.¹

The Hammonds have been criticized for exaggerating and distorting certain aspects of the consequences of enclosure² but their general view is still maintained. E. P. Thomson, for example, argued that

Enclosure ... was the culmination of a long secular process by which men's customary relations to the agrarian means of production were undermined. It was of profound social consequence because it illuminates ... the destruction of the traditional elements in English peasant society.³

Pamela Horn has summarized the position of the post-enclosure labourer in broadly similar terms by observing that 'to those cottagers who lost out by the changes enclosure meant the end of independence'.⁴ There is also sufficient evidence from contemporary local historical sources to prove that the Berkshire labourer with common rights was, generally speaking, better off than the labourer without any independent means of support beyond his wages. Even William Mavor, whose General View of the Agriculture of Berkshire (1809) shows a strong bias in favour of enclosure, agrees that 'the pride of independence' is essential to the morale of the agricultural poor and that, their independence once lost, they

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1. J. L. and Barbara Hammond, The Village Labourer 1760-1832 (1911), revised edition (1920), p. 82. All subsequent references are to this edition.
 2. See, for example, Chambers and Mingay, Ch. 4 and E. J. Hobsbawm and George Rudé, Captain Swing (1969), pp. 15-16.
 3. The Making of the English Working Class, Pelican edition (1980), p. 239.
 4. The Rural World 1780-1850: Social Change in the English Countryside (1980), p. 53.

quickly become 'careless and improvident, clamorous and dissatisfied'.¹ One solution to the plight of the poor who lost common rights by enclosure was to award them allotments of land for their own cultivation, a plan favoured by Mary Mitford who makes a direct plea in Belford Regis that the system should be extended for the 'putting down of vice and misery, and the diffusion of happiness and virtue'.²

In Our Village she makes no such direct statement on the social benefits of common rights, but their existence is often integral to the kind of small-scale rustic prosperity she is fond of depicting:

She then went to the lord of the manor, and ... begged his permission to keep her cow on the Shaw common ...

[Since then] her cow, her calves, her pigs, her bees, her poultry, have each, in their several ways, thriven and prospered.
('Hannah Bint' 4.106-109)

In one of the recesses of the wood ... stands a real cottage ... with its hedged-in garden, and its well-stocked orchard; all evidently cribbed from the waste, and sufficiently spacious to give an air of unusual comfort to the rural dwelling.

('The Tenant of Beechgrove'
2.23-24)

He lives on the edge of a pretty bit of woodland scenery, called the Penge, in a snug cottage of two rooms, of his own building, surrounded by a garden cribbed from the waste, well fenced with quickset, and well stocked with fruit trees, herbs, and flowers.

('The Mole Catcher' 3.292)

This industrious implementation of common rights is used to exemplify 'the sturdy independence of English character' (4.105) exhibited by Hannah Bint and other semi-prosperous rustic individuals held up for our admiration in Our Village. Cobbett

1. Mavor, p. 474.

2. Belford Regis (1835), p. 61.

would have endorsed this admiration. He deplored the transformation of the poor into 'passive slaves' by recent changes in agricultural society and by what he regarded as the pernicious promulgation of doctrines which 'teach men to be content with poverty'.¹ While Mary Mitford may in her writings have incidentally promoted the notion of contented poverty, she nevertheless recognised the value of some independence amongst her villagers. This view was also promoted by Coleridge and Southey in their political essays of the late 1810s² and it is evident that at this time conservatives and radicals alike deplored the current erosion of the independence of the rural labourer.

Nevertheless, an important feature of Mary Mitford's presentation of rustic prosperity is that there is clearly a level above which she does not wish that prosperity to rise. Excessive wealth would admittedly destroy the pastoral simplicity of her 'village' world, but there is also present in her condemnation of social pretension a strong element of the snobbishness that characterizes her friend Mrs Hofland's rustic tales. One of the incidental consequences of the prosperity that some farmers had achieved during the wars was a new aspiration to culture and accomplishment amongst their children.³ Mrs Hofland reflects this trend in The Blind Farmer and his Children (1819) when she holds up for ridicule the daughters of a nouveau-riche farmer who "play duets on the pianoforte, jabber execrable French, and draw

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1. Cottage Economy (Oxford, 1979), p. 2.
 2. See Brian Inglis, Poverty and the Industrial Revolution (1971), pp. 177-181.
 3. e.g. Ernle, p. 322: '... farmers and their wives had either altered their simpler habits, or brought with them into their new business more luxurious modes of life'.

more execrable flowers".¹ In Mary Mitford's 'A Great Farm House' the former occupants were content with their station in contrast to the upstart pretensions of the new generation:

There were no fine misses sitting before the piano, and mixing the alloy of their new-fangled tinsel with the old sterling metal ...
(1.56)

Indications of such disturbing displacements are in fact rare in Mary Mitford's 'village' world and where they appear they are condemned. She feared rather than wished for agricultural or social change, but was conscious of the fact that she was writing at a time when both agriculture and rural society were evidently in a state of transition. However, enough remained of the 'old' to be presented for the pleasing contemplation of a conservative readership. Her pictures are strengthened by her evident first-hand knowledge of local agriculture and the same air of conviction underlies her presentation of rustic prosperity. The implication is that, though life could be hard for the rustic inhabitants of 'our village', their difficulties could be transcended by determined frugality and industry. The limitations of this perspective are clear, but Mary Mitford was a consciously limited writer and she was not concerned to discuss either economic or social injustices at any length or in any depth. The fact remains that injustices - and, indeed, great hardship - did exist and the following section is specifically concerned with how Mary Mitford came to terms in her published work with the blacker side of village life.

1. The Blind Farmer and his Children (1819), p. 94.

Section III - Rustic Poverty

Poverty is an aspect of rural life that is particularly susceptible to distortion and it is useful that Mary Mitford's pictures can be set against two near-contemporary accounts: William Mavor's A General View of the Agriculture of Berkshire (1809) and Henry Russell's letter in The First Report of the Commission for Enquiring into the Administration and Operation of the Poor Laws in 1834 in which, as magistrate for Swallowfield (Berkshire), he describes in some detail the condition of a selection of labourers from the parish adjacent to Mary Mitford's own Shinfield. The account of Henry Russell¹ - Mr Russell as he is called in the Poor Law Report - is particularly interesting since, as a fellow-magistrate, his degree of knowledge can reasonably be assumed to be on a par with Dr Mitford's.

There can be little doubt that Mary Mitford must have had a clear understanding of the various manifestations of poverty within the surrounding district. Inevitably, the period of agricultural depression in England hit the poor hardest of all. During the wars agricultural workers had benefited from the general shortage of labour, but, although their wages rose on average 75% between 1793 and 1815, prices were rising so rapidly that by the end of the war they were in real terms worse off than they had been before. After the war average wages fell significantly, from between 12s. and 15s. a week in 1814 to

1. Later Sir Henry Russell, Bart (1783-1852). He had married in 1816 a Frenchwoman, Marie Clotilde, later Lady Russell, who became a close friend of Mary Mitford after the latter's move to Swallowfield in 1851. The Russells lived at Swallowfield from 1821.

between 9s. and 10s. in 1822.¹ The labourers' distress was further exacerbated by a sharp rise in unemployment after 1815, partly created by the return of soldiers from the wars, but also by the continuing growth in population. Farmers tended increasingly to employ labour on a casual weekly or daily basis which meant that unemployment was particularly severe in winter. Labour-saving machinery was not widely used in agriculture until much later in the century, but in the south of England threshing machines were introduced on a considerable scale as early as the 1820s, thus providing a focal point for discontented labourers who felt the machines were depriving them of work at the very time of year when they needed it most.

Distress was most acute amongst agricultural labourers in the south of England partly because there was no alternative employment, no industry that could absorb surplus labour as in the industrial cities of the north. Wages were lower in the south, on average 7s. - 10s. per week as opposed to an average of 12s. 6d. per week in, for example, the midland county of Nottinghamshire.² Wages in Berkshire varied according to distance from London so that labourers might be paid 10s. in the Windsor and Henley district and only 7s. on the Wiltshire border.³ Wages around Three Mile Cross, it would therefore be reasonable to assume, were fairly high in relation to the western part of Berkshire, and a recently-discovered account book for a farm

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1. Pamela Horn, The Rural World 1780-1850 (1980), p. 85.
 2. The Nottinghamshire figure given is for 1833, though wages fluctuated very little in the decades following the end of the wars. Chambers and Mingay, p. 137.
 3. N. Gash, 'The Rural Unrest in England in 1830 with special reference to Berkshire' (unpublished B.Litt. thesis, St John's College, Oxford, 1934), p. 23.

near Wokingham (see Appendix B, Map 3) corroborates this by suggesting that men were there paid an approximate average wage of 2s. per day.¹ The Wokingham account book also, incidentally, testifies to the casual nature of employment in the area with such entries as '3 men one day - 6s', 'Allen 3 days - 6s' and so on.

With seasonal fluctuations in work available a large proportion of the agricultural population was wholly or partly dependent on parochial relief. In Berkshire in 1815 17% of the total number of inhabitants were classified as paupers and by the early 1830s family allowances were given to 73% of the population. During the period of the Our Village sketches parish relief in most southern counties was administered according to the Speenhamland system which had been originally devised by local magistrates at Speenhamland in Berkshire in 1795. The magistrates had there fixed a minimum level of subsistence by ordering that each man should be allowed the price of up to three gallon loaves per week plus the equivalent of a gallon loaf and a quarter to a gallon loaf and a half for his wife and each additional member of the family.² If wages fell below this minimum standard then the parish undertook to make up the difference. The system spread rapidly during the wars as prices fell so that in Swallowfield (Berkshire) in the early 1830s 'bread money', as it was there called, was calculated at the price of two gallon loaves for the husband, one for the wife and one for each of the children. To whatever

1. The account book is held by Reading Reference Library.

2. J. D. Marshall, The Old Poor Law 1795-1834 (1968), p. 13.

extent the wages of the family fell short of that level the difference would be made up in money.¹ The system varied from parish to parish: in some cases relief began only with the third, fourth, fifth or sixth child, encouraging early marriage and large families and consequently aggravating general distress and unemployment. Another unfortunate result of the system was that farmers were able to keep wages low and no matter whether a man worked or not he could be sure of receiving the same amount of money each week. Nothing could obtain for the labourer more than the official minimum of subsistence and the demoralization which resulted was widely remarked in the Poor Law Report of 1834, while The Times, in an article published during the agricultural riots of 1830, summarized the position of the Speenhamland labourer in the following terms:

... he considers himself as a pauper dependent on the will of the overseer, because the overseer enables him to live. He loses all motive to exertion, by seeing that exertion would only lessen his allowance in proportion as it increased his wages.²

It appears that the national controversy over Poor Law reform in the 1820s became focussed in Berkshire on the personalities of Henry Russell and another county magistrate, who was also proprietor of The Times, John Walter³ of Bear Wood. It was under Henry Russell's auspices that in 1829-30 a Select Vestry was established in Swallowfield with the aim of promoting

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1. The First Report of the Commissioners for Enquiring into the Administration and Operation of the Poor Laws in 1834 (1834), p. 24.
 2. The Times, 25 December 1830.
 3. John Walter II (1776-1847), M.P. for Berkshire 1832-37.

independence amongst the poor by tightening up the system of poor relief (as distinct from 'bread money' which was regarded as a necessary supplement to wages). A series of resolutions was passed by which the able-bodied poor were to be forcibly employed in hard physical labour while within the poor-house they were to receive lower rations than the other inmates, consisting of only one gallon loaf of second bread and a pound of cheese a week. Similarly harsh measures had succeeded in reducing the number of paupers in nearby Cookham (see Appendix B, Map 3) and it was such measures that the New Poor Law (1834) sought to implement. John Walter opposed Henry Russell's measures on humanitarian grounds, believing that poverty was the result of circumstances rather than flawed character and that it was therefore misguided to apply punitive measures to the able-bodied poor.

Where did Dr Mitford and his daughter stand in this debate? Unfortunately there is no documentary evidence to give any precise indication of Dr Mitford's views. John Walter was, however, 'his intimate friend'¹ and it is clear that in general terms Dr Mitford shared his friend's humanitarian attitudes. In an undated letter to Elizabeth Barrett, Mary Mitford speaks of her father's unflinching goodness to the poor:

1. This phrase appears in 'The Incendiary' to describe 'the then high sheriff, with whom it is every way an honour to claim acquaintance' (5.10). The sheriff of Berkshire for 1831, the year in which the trial in 'The Incendiary' took place, was John Walter. Further evidence of his and his family's friendship with the Mitfords appears in an account of Mrs Mitford's last illness dated 10 Jan. 1830 when Mary Mitford speaks of the kindness of 'the Walters' (L'Estrange, II, 292) and in an unpublished section of a letter dated 15 Nov. 1832 which is partly reproduced in L'Estrange, II, 337-8 where she suggests to her father that 'Perhaps ... Mr. Walter could take you some day to London'. MS Reading Reference Library. The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford in 6 vols, f. 605.

Poor as he has lately been, he has done so much good - good that mere money could not do - by uncompromising, unflinching justice. Whoever was oppressed had a friend - whoever sought aid in any proper object had a zealous, hearty advocate ... There is not a poor person within ten miles who does not bless my dear father ...¹

Mary Mitford's later friendship with Henry Russell's wife should not be taken as indicative of her views on the Poor Law debate. The friendship developed from a common love of literature and did not really deepen until after Sir Henry's death in 1852. From the general tenor of Mary Mitford's writings, however, it is probable that she would have favoured the retention of the old system of relief, based as it was on principles of general benevolence and administered on a local basis. It is clear from J. D. Marshall's summary of the broad effect of the Old Poor Law that it was very much in tune with the concept of 'our village':

The ultimate result of the Old Poor Law was the creation of a vast but rather inefficient system of social welfare, based on the close relationships of the village and hamlet ...²

With Dr Mitford administering benign justice at the heart of her beloved local community it is unlikely that his daughter would regard with much sympathy the stringent reforms advocated by her Swallowfield neighbour.

The only immediate resemblance that Mary Mitford's presentation of rustic character bears to Henry Russell's account of his fifteen selected parishioners is in the appearance of common local family names in the early sketches. Shortly after the appearance of the first volume of Our Village in 1824 Mary Mitford told Sir William

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1. Friendships, II, 74.
 2. The Old Poor Law 1795-1834 (1968), p. 10.

Elford that 'the names of the villagers are true',¹ and there is indeed a distinct general correlation between the family names that appear in Our Village and the family names that appear in the Shinfield birth and marriage registers between 1800 and 1830.² Occasionally it is possible to identify specific individuals: Lucy Sweetser, married to Charles Hill of Silchester on 7 August 1820, is the Mitfords' servant who features in 'Lucy' (OV 1) and 'A Visit to Lucy' (OV 2);³ Joel Brent, hero of the cricket field in 'A Country Cricket Match' (OV 1) and Harriet's suitor in 'A Village Beau' (OV 1), could well be the same Joel Brent who was born on 20 April 1800, which would make him appropriately in his early twenties at the time of the sketches in which he appears. Similarly Ben Kirby, born on 7 July 1811, would be around the right age to take over the boys' cricket team from his older brother Joe in 'A Walk through the Village' published in the 1826 volume. Elsewhere in the records names from Our Village appear, but obvious discrepancies in age or occupation would suggest that there is no direct correlation: a Hannah Bint was born, for example, on 16 September 1804, daughter of Thomas and Sarah Bint, and might conceivably be the original of the Hannah Bint in the sketch of the same name that appears in volume 4 (1830). However, the Our Village Hannah Bint not only has a father called Jack rather than Thomas, but is only 17 at the time of the composition of the sketch. It was first published in The Monthly Magazine in December 1828 and was probably

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1. 23 June 1824. L'Estrange, II, 181.
 2. While birth and marriage records for Shinfield exist, there is no register of deaths within the parish for this period.
 3. See Ch. 1, p. 30.

written shortly before its magazine publication; by this time the Hannah Bint whose birth appears in the parish records would have been 24. It is probable that many of the rustic characters in the first two or three volumes of Our Village were taken directly from life, but given, as Mary Mitford explains in her Preface to volume 1, 'a brighter aspect ... than is usually met with in books' (l.v). In the locally-based tales of the later volumes, however, the proportion of villagers whose names can actually be traced back to the parish records diminishes considerably.

Henry Russell's account of his villagers is intended to demonstrate the amendment wrought in their lives as a result of the new system of poor relief. As such, it concentrates on the more depraved areas of their former existence and his villagers appear to have very little in common with Mary Mitford's rustic characters. In this light it is surprising to find common Our Village names amongst his case-histories, for example there is one Wheeler and also two Corderys. The two following case histories are a good indication of Henry Russell's attitudes whilst their common name invites comparison with Mary Mitford's presentation of a local character of her own acquaintance:

James Cordery is an instance of the dissolute habits into which ingenuity too often betrays persons in low life. By trade he is a hurdle-maker; he is also a carpenter, chairmender, and tinker, and used to play the violoncello [sic] in church, and to teach the parish children to sing. But the more money he was able to earn, the more he was given to squander; he wasted his time at the alehouse and among prostitutes, and was never off the parish. Since the vestry refused to maintain him, he had had no difficulty in maintaining himself. He provided himself with

a set of implements, and now lives in Reading, and earns an ample livelihood in grinding knives, and mending pots and pans.¹

Charles Cordery, no relation of the foregoing, is a married man with four children, of whom the eldest is under fifteen. He is so skilful and diligent a workman, that it must be his own fault if he is ever out of employ. Yet, under the former system, he was almost always dependent upon the parish; his wife and children were as idle and ragged as himself; and so bad was their character for pilfering and depredation, that they were successively turned out of every cottage that was occupied by them. At last they were absolutely without a roof to shelter them, and the vestry refused to support them any longer out of the rates. I was always disposed to think the man better than he appeared to be; and on his promise of amendment, I consented to place his family in a cottage belonging to my father, notwithstanding the remonstrance of the farmer on whose land it stood. Except in one instance, just before they had taken possession, I have had no complaint from their neighbours. The man is in constant work; his family seems to be in comfort, his rent his [sic] regularly paid; and his garden has been so well cultivated that I am now enlarging it to such an extent as, I hope, will enable him to grow vegetables enough for his consumption.²

Whatever her opinion of his methods, Mary Mitford would, as we have seen, undoubtedly endorse Henry Russell's intention of promoting independence amongst the poor. Her belief in this quality underlies all her sketches of rural life and is evident in her presentation of her own 'Tom Cordery' (OV 1) who, having been accustomed to a free and independent life, languishes and dies in the confinement of the workhouse. However, her presentation of Tom involves much more than simple social commentary.

He is - appropriately, given the nature of his Swallowfield namesakes - the blackest of Mary Mitford's rustic characters:

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1. Poor Law Report (1894), p. 207.
 2. Poor Law Report (1894), p. 207.

He was as if born without nerves, totally insensible to the recoils and disgusts of humanity. I have known him take up a huge adder, cut off its head, and then deposit the living and writhing body in his brimless hat, and walk with it coiling and wreathing about his head, like another Medusa, till the sport of the day was over, and he carried it home to secure the fat. (1.167)

This incident is based on fact. Mary Mitford recounts it in a letter to Talfourd in July 1823, shortly after the sketch had appeared in The Lady's Magazine:¹

No - I am not at all afraid of snakes - I have sat a hundred times on a bank where I knew them to be & really like to see them ... Your aversion is probably from some early impression, & certainly not universal. A friend of mine, an old poacher, once as we were coursing on Mortimer Common succeeded in cutting off the head of a huge adder & then took up the beautiful creature, full 3 feet long, & very quietly put it in his hat to carry home to preserve the fat.²

It had clearly been necessary to modify the anecdote for the genteel, predominantly female magazine readership. Mary Mitford's own fascination with the snake implied in her description of it as a 'beautiful creature' is omitted in the published version, where the incident is also immediately qualified by an assurance that Tom was of 'a most mild and gentle demeanour, had a fine placidity of countenance, and a quick blue eye beaming with good humour' (1.167). Nowhere in the sketch is there any indication that the incident took place while 'we were coursing' nor is it openly admitted that Tom was 'an old poacher': he is described as a 'rat-catcher, hare-finder, and broom-maker' (1.165-6), although some degree of

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1. See Appendix A. There is no significant variation between the magazine version and that to appear in OV 1.
 2. 3 July 1823. Correspondence, p. 302. MS Harvard.

ambivalence is implied by the admission 'Never did any human being look more like that sort of sportsman commonly called a poacher' (my italics, 1.167). Mary Mitford's concern as a writer is to make Tom appealing to her readers and so, rather than being dismissed in Henry Russell's terms as 'idle and ragged',¹ his appearance is idealized:

His costume was generally a smock-frock of no doubtful complexion, dirt-coloured, which hung round him in tatters like a fringe, rather augmenting than diminishing the freedom, and, if I may say so, the gallantry of his bearing. (1.168)

This idealization of dirty rags, the transformation of 'an old poacher' into a character of gallant bearing whose dubious occupation is regarded as 'a grand profession' (1.166) cannot be explained in terms of any simple political aim.

Mary Mitford sought to please her readers and in this portrait of Tom we can see how she has softened the truth and presented her character with lady-like restraint. Tom is both as convincing and as harmless as one of Wilkie's Village Politicians.² In describing his appearance, she allows him to be ennobled by a manifestation of his poverty. This is consistent with the basic pastoral tenor of the sketches, but the conclusion that rags are conducive to 'gallantry' is rendered less bizarre by the admission that the association is explicitly Mary Mitford's responsibility. The distinct narrative personality fostered in her letters enables her to present potentially disturbing material in an entirely unthreatening way.

1. See above, p. 207.

2. See Appendix C, fig. 3. The picture is discussed in Ch. 3 above, pp. 134-5.

Later in the sketch similar lady-like restraint is perceptible in her account of Tom's ascendancy in the ale-house which is presented through an alternation of direct statement (he 'was of the first authority'; certain qualities 'made' him 'an absolute ruler' (1.169, my italics)) and more tentative speculation:

Perhaps the effect of these causes might be a little aided by the latent dread which that power inspired in others. Many an exploit had proved that Tom Cordery's one arm was fairly worth any two on the common. The pommelling of Bob Arlott, and the levelling of Jem Serle to the earth by one swing of a huge old hare, (which unusual weapon was by the way the first-slain of Mayflower, on its way home to us in that walking cupboard, his pocket, when the unlucky rencontre ... broke two heads, the dead and the living,) arguments such as these might have some cogency at the Red Lion. (1.169-70)

To relate this foundation of Tom's ascendancy in acceptable terms involves Mary Mitford in implementing an array of devices that serve to mitigate the impact of the brutality in his character. The effect of the central incidents of the passage is modified by the tentativeness of 'perhaps', 'might be' and 'a little' in the first sentence and 'might have' in the last sentence. This tentativeness distances the account while disengaging Mary Mitford from too close an understanding of the politics of the ale-house. Her disengagement is also underlined by the comparative restraint of the terms 'pommelling' and 'levelling' and (to the reader familiar with her other work) by the gossiping aside which, in its reference to Mayflower, redirects our attention to the safer realms and more innocent pleasures of the 'Walks in the Country' series. The unpleasantness of the idea of breaking a man's head with that of a dead hare is also softened by the incidental humour of the image 'that walking cupboard, his pocket', recalling the humorous presentation of the radical publican in the 'Our Village'

sketch.¹ The movement of the prose as Mary Mitford shifts with gossiping rapidity from one idea to another in this last sentence further prevents us from dwelling on the implications of this momentary revelation of brutality in her 'village'world.

The indivisibility of the narrator's genteel, affectionate, humorous personality from her subject-matter is an important factor in her mitigation of the harsher side of rustic life. At the same time, her presentation goes beyond simple mitigation. She strives to make us like Tom, to share her genuine affection for her 'friend'.² One method of achieving this is to unite social reality with certain cultural associations. Tom's essential goodness, for example, is reinforced by his responsiveness to the natural landscape. In the following extract, Mary Mitford first outlines her own feelings about a landscape she has just described in some detail:

I have stood there in utter oblivion of greyhound or of hare, till moments have swelled to minutes, and minutes to hours; and so has Tom, conveying, by his exclamations of delight at its 'pleasantness', exactly the same feeling which a poet or a painter ... would express by different but not truer praise. (1.172-3)

Tom, like Lizzy in 'The Cowslip Ball', is here shown in direct, unselfconscious communion with nature. The nature of his response is implied by association with Mary Mitford's own response and its worth enhanced - in cultural terms - by being presented as 'exactly the same' as that of a poet or painter. Later in the sketch the image of the wild landscape around Tom's home is enriched by being likened to a scene by Salvator Rosa (1.173).

Mary Mitford presents her character Tom Cordery in acceptable post-Romantic cultural terms. He is a type of noble savage, an

1. See Ch. 4 above, pp. 165-6.

2. See above, p. 208.

emanation of 'the wild North-of-Hampshire' (1.165) countryside which he inhabited. Just as Lizzy in her childish innocence is implicitly set apart from her more sophisticated companion in 'The Cowslip Ball' so Tom's intrinsic worth is implied by the fact that he not only responds to nature with sensitivity but is also actually part of the landscape. He is variously presented as a 'human oak' (1.165), an 'emblem of the district in which he lived' (1.165) and, in these terms, it is appropriate that he should die when removed to 'a tidy, snug, comfortable room in the workhouse' (1.175). Unless seen in this light, the concluding sentences of the sketch might appear either callous or naive:

Alas, poor Tom! warmth and snugness, and
 comfort, whole windows, and an entire
 ceiling, were the death of him. Alas,
 poor Tom! (1.176)

Although Tom is, in terms of raw material, one of the less attractive of her rustic characters, he is transformed by Mary Mitford's artistic vision into something appealingly far removed from Henry Russell's accounts of James and Charles Cordery. The sketch is evidently based on fact but the details of Tom's life are not regarded as material for social criticism. He is presented to the reader through a series of pleasing associations, facilitated by a relaxed, conversational style that permits the easy movement from one idea to another and enables the narrator to avoid dwelling on any potentially disturbing aspect of her character's life. In an entirely unforced and understated way, Mary Mitford has conveyed to her reader a sense of the actual existence of a rustic character who is also an embodiment of contemporary ideas about nature and the virtue of living close to nature.

Mary Mitford's 'village' world, although based on social reality, was in fact predominantly conceived in cultural terms. Her portrayal of Tom is deeply sympathetic insofar as it evokes affection and even reverence for an old poacher, but it is entirely free from what she describes as 'all that vile design of doing good'.¹ Any explicit social concern would have involved a very different presentation of her material, placing her portrait of Tom much closer to the disturbing realms of a painfully graphic Dutch painting which, in her view, like Crabbe's poetry, have said 'nothing to the fancy'.²

The creation of freedom for manoeuvres of the fancy is an integral part of Mary Mitford's descriptions. Consequently the various aspects of rustic poverty to be found in her sketches are in general presented in conjunction with evocative images or associations from literature and art. Although the landscape around his home might recall Salvator Rosa, Tom Cordery's cottage is presented as 'thoroughly national and characteristic':

... a low, ruinous hovel, the door of which was fastened with a sedulous attention to security, that contrasted strangely with the tattered thatch of the roof, and the half broken windows. (1.173)

Social criticism may be intended here, but, at the same time, the image would almost certainly have been found pleasing by many contemporary readers. Rambling and ruined cottages were, as suggested in Chapter 3, currently fashionable, and such dwellings are frequently described in detail in Mary Mitford's work:

Another turn in the lane, and we come to the old house standing amongst the high elms ... It is a long, low, irregular building, with one

1. See above, p. 186.

2. Mary Mitford to Mrs Hofland, 1819. Chorley, I, 74. First quoted Ch. 3, p. 131.

room, at an angle from the house, covered with ivy, fine white-veined ivy; the first floor of the main building projecting and supported by oaken beams, and one of the windows below, with its old casement and long narrow panes, forming the half of a shallow hexagon. A porch, with seats in it, surmounted by a pinnacle, pointed roofs and clustered chimneys, complete the picture.
(*'Violeting'* 1.104-5)

This predilection for the rough and irregular in rustic dwellings was to be censured later in the century by Ruskin,¹ but Mary Mitford was writing at a time when many existing cottages had been designed for their appearance with little consideration for the comfort of their inmates:

... the period between 1780 and 1815 ... saw the publication of a number of cottage pattern books whose influence on the taste of the upper classes was perhaps greater than on the comfort of their dependants. The attitude of their writers was both condescending and unrealistic, and many of the resultant buildings were fanciful rather than comfortable.²

The degree of squalor and discomfort endured inside Berkshire cottages obviously varied enormously, but an interesting comment made by William Mavor suggests that conditions generally were rather poor:

Of the Berkshire village cottages in general ... I cannot speak in terms of high commendation. The broken window which 'admits the wind, and yet excludes the day', the ragged thatch, or the broken tiles, the floor of earth, the walls brown with smoke, and frequently only one bed-chamber for a numerous family, raises painful emotions which I cannot repress or conceal.³

The interior of Tom's cottage is briefly outlined as 'one long, straggling, unceiled, barn-like room, which served for kitchen,

1. See Ch. 3 above, p. 104.

2. Enid Gauldie, 'Country Homes' in The Victorian Countryside, edited by G. E. Mingay, 2 vols (1981), II, 535.

3. Mavor, p. 72.

bed-chamber, and hall' (1.174). Beyond the fact that the place is swarming with animals, we are given no further details. Yet this is virtually the only squalid cottage interior we are permitted to visualize in the entirety of Mary Mitford's works. She avoids interiors in general, preferring to concentrate on landscape and rustic figures in relation to landscape, and, where the inside of a dwelling is described, it is generally to create an idealized picture of rustic simplicity and comfort:

The little chamber glittering with whiteness; its snowy dimity bed, and 'fresh sheets smelling of lavender', the sitting room, a thought larger, carpeted with India matting, its shining cane chairs, and its bright casement wreathed, on one side, by a luxurious jessamine, on the other by the tall cluster musk-rose, sending its bunches of odorous blossoms into the very window; the little flower-court underneath, full of holly-oaks, cloves, and dahlias, and the large sloping meadow beyond, leading up to Farmer Bell's tall irregular house, half-covered with a flaunting vine ... all this formed an apartment too tempting to remain long untenanted, in the bright month of August ...

(*'Hay-Carrying'* 3.183)

The rooms here described are those of a shop-keeper, Judith Kent, and on the few other occasions where interiors are described they are again those of the comparatively affluent.¹ It is interesting that one of the charms of the view from Mrs Kent's sitting room is the irregular, typically Picturesque farmhouse, while the scent of flowers and the use of terms like 'glistening', 'shining' and 'bright' in describing the interior implies that the room is simply an idyllic extension of the summer landscape.

Mary Mitford's eye for the Picturesque is again evident in her description of rural dress - though in rather modified form. Rags are, generally speaking, regarded as a decorative essential for

1. e.g. the Shores' kitchen and parlour in *'Matthew Shore'* in OV 4.

gipsies: the 'tattered red cloak' (2.269), for example, is integral to the mysterious charm of 'The Old Gipsy'. But rags are permissible only in the socially dubious - the old gipsy, Tom Cordery - or the harmlessly pitiable - children such as Joe Kirby, hero of the cricket field in 'The Hard Summer' (OV 1). More often than not the poor are praised for patching their rags: the young gipsy in the sketch of that name (OV 2) is distinguished by the neatness of her appearance:

... the young girl was tidy; not only accurately clean, and with clothes neatly and nicely adjusted to her trim little form, but with the rents darned, and the holes patched in a way I should be glad to see equalled by our own villagers.
(2.301)

This gently condescending, self-consciously philanthropic concern is a rare note in Mary Mitford's writings, but it reinforces our sense of her as a writer with 'safe' and conventional social attitudes. She needed to make her portrayals palatable even if this process involved her in probably unconscious self-contradiction. She is, as I have tried to demonstrate throughout this thesis, very much a writer of her age and it is an irony of the time that ruined cottages were fashionable from the outside but not the inside and that rags were visually acceptable at a distance but not close to. An apt commentary on Mary Mitford's practice in this respect is the disparity between the original and engraved versions of George Morland's¹ rustic scenes: in William Ward's² engravings the expression of the foreground characters are generally 'softened', but while their clothes are made less ragged, the buildings that they inhabit often appear to be more dilapidated

1. George Morland (1763-1804).

2. William Ward (1761-1826) was the brother-in-law of George Morland.

than in the original painting.¹ These changes were made in concession to popular taste - a taste which Mary Mitford evidently endorsed.

Perhaps the most striking area of omission in Mary Mitford's portrayal of village life is that of local crime. It has been estimated that in Berkshire between 1810 and 1826 there was a 255% increase in commitments for criminal offences.² One of Dr Mitford's first actions on his removal to Three Mile Cross was to send to prison 'a disorderly person, who was the pest of the Cross',³ and in 1828 he chaired a meeting at the local workhouse where it was decided to build a house of confinement for the parish of Shinfield - a roundhouse of seven feet in diameter.⁴ This decision suggests that the parish was having its own difficulties in coping with the increase in crime reflected in statistics for the county as a whole.

Henry Russell's report gives a fascinating insight into criminal activities within the neighbouring parish and, indeed, the incidence of crime amongst the inhabitants of Swallowfield before 1829 appears to have been high. Organized poaching, for example, was evidently common:

A gentleman who has for many years farmed largely in this parish told me that before the select vestry was established [1829] he frequently saw the labourers, in parties

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1. The changes evident in a selection of Morland engravings are discussed by John Barrell in The Dark Side of the Landscape (Cambridge, 1980), Chapter 2.
 2. Gash, p. 28.
 3. Mary Mitford to Sir William Eford, 8 April 1820. L'Estrange, II, 92.
 4. The notice of this meeting is signed 'G. Mitford'. It was held on 1 Dec. 1828. Berks C.R.O. D/P 110 7/3. See Ch. 1, p. 41.

of 12 or 14, sauntering along the streams, in pursuit of moorhens, and of course, poaching fish, when it was not the season to poach game.¹

In the individual case histories five of the 15 men described have either been convicted for theft or they and their families have a reputation for dishonesty: John Oakley 'absconded to avoid a warrant which was issued against him for theft';² the whole family of Charles Cordery had a character 'for pilfering and depredation';³ James Deane 'was some time ago imprisoned for robbing his master's garden';⁴ while James David, one of only two thatchers in the parish, had such a reputation for dishonesty that 'nobody will trust him out of sight with their straw'.⁵ Another man, David Read, belonging to a family of notoriously 'loose character and habits', was imprisoned for deserting his family.⁶ One third, therefore, of the selection of men whose case-histories are detailed by Mr Russell are guilty of indictable criminal offences.

A very different picture emerges from the pages of Our Village. Poaching is presented as a 'grand profession'⁷ and the threat of gipsies, main perpetrators of petty thefts in the locality, is dismissed by an apparently unshakeable confidence in the powers of justice:

We have a snug brood of vagabonds and poachers of our own, to say nothing of their regular followers, constables and justices of the peace:- we have stocks in the village, and a treadmill in the

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1. Poor Law Report (1894), p. 209.
 2. Ibid., p. 206.
 3. Ibid., p. 207.
 4. Ibid., p. 207.
 5. Ibid., p. 208.
 6. Ibid., p. 208.
 7. 'Tom Cordery' 1.166.

next town; and therefore we go gipsyless - a misfortune which every landscape painter, and every lover of that living landscape, the country, can appreciate the extent.¹

Vagabonds and poachers are rendered harmless by the term 'snug brood' while again it is the decorative qualities of gipsies that are stressed. The disturbing undercurrents of rural life are quickly passed over in favour of the tranquil vision of the landscape painter.

Elsewhere in Our Village² gipsies do appear as a more convincing social threat, but they remain distant and anonymous thieves, quite distinct from the full-length portraits of 'The Old Gipsy' and 'The Young Gipsy' (OV 2), the latter of whom is eventually claimed by society through her marriage to a respectable young gamekeeper.

The only two crimes ever mentioned in the country works apart from the rick-burning and machine-breaking of 'The Incendiary',³ are poaching and petty theft. Such indications of the more anti-social consequences of poverty occur in Mary Mitford's writing only rarely and in very minor form:

[Dick Crosby] had also a pet donkey ... for whose better maintenance he was sometimes accused of such petty larceny as may be comprised in stealing what no other creature would eat, refuse hay, frosty turnips, decayed cabbage leaves, and thistles from the hedge.

('Grace Neville' 3.17)

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1. 'The Old Gipsy' 2.266.
 2. e.g. in 'Wheat-Hoeing' OV 3.
 3. See Section IV below.

[Jesse Cliffe] at little more than twelve years of age ... began a course of lonely, half-savage, self-dependent life, such as had been rarely heard of in this civilised country. How he lived is to a certain point a mystery. Not by stealing. That was agreed on all hands - except indeed, so far as a few roots of turnips and potatoes, and a few ears of green corn, in their several seasons may be called theft.¹

Dick Crosby is a model of childish altruism and Jesse Cliffe an embodiment of Rousseauesque theory, his intrinsic goodness gradually manifesting itself with his increasing closeness to and dependence on the natural environment. There is no ambiguity in the presentation of either character and moral judgements are forestalled by the authorial insistence that the 'petty larceny' in both cases can scarcely be regarded as criminal.

The fact remains that the incidence of crime within the immediate vicinity of Three Mile Cross was high. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, Dr Mitford's day-to-day involvement is evident from the frequent appearance of his name on documents varying from filiation acts and warrants to apprehend putative fathers to bills drawn up by the local Constable. Mary Mitford was undoubtedly aware of the existence of dishonesty in her village. She admitted in 1830 to a 'habitual fear of thieves and pilferers'² and, through her father's involvement, she would also have learnt of more serious criminal tendencies amongst the local population. Crime is nevertheless an area of rural life that she simply chose not to portray.

1. 'Jesse Cliffe', Country Stories (1837), p. 55.

2. Letter to Talfourd, 8 Nov. [1830]. MS John Rylands. Eng. MS 665.50:

Mary Mitford does not deny the existence of poverty, but she tacitly denies the existence of the blacker side of rustic life that is inevitably bound up with poverty. Poor housing, ragged clothes, local crime are acknowledged but so presented as not to threaten the pleasant surface of rustic life. In her early sketches Mary Mitford is firmly in control of her 'village' world, blending fact with fancy to create an appealing picture of contemporary social reality. In later years she was less successful in combining her knowledge of village life with a pleasing fanciful vision and this is indicated by her gradual retreat into fiction. She was, as will be demonstrated in the following section, unable to maintain artistic control of her material when, in the early 1830s, she endeavoured to deal with the agricultural riots that had recently taken place in the south-east of England.

Section IV - 'The Incendiary'

As I suggested in Chapter 1, the early, most enthusiastic phase of Mary Mitford's prose career was over by 1825. During the late 1820s she was writing mostly for the annuals, operating under the various constraints imposed by their editors,¹ as well as with a continuing awareness that 'the taste of the age requires lightness'.² Regardless of the taste of the age, her own spirits were low by the end of 1829 as she explains, very movingly, to Haydon in a letter evidently prompted by some slight quarrel:

1. See, for example, Ch. 1, p. 47.

2. Letter to Miss Jephson, ? Sept. 1829. MS Reading Reference Library. The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford in 6 vols, f. 580.

Be quite assured that my sympathy with you and with art is as strong as ever, albeit the demonstration have lost its youthfulness and its enthusiasm,¹ just as I myself have done. The fact is that I am much changed, much saddened - am older in mind than in years - have entirely lost that greatest gift of nature, animal spirits, and am become as nervous and good-for-nothing a person as you can imagine.²

Her 'nervousness' at this time, it appears, was beyond the cure that in earlier - and, indeed, later - years could be effected by a walk in the country. Matters became worse over the next two years as the cumulative effect of a sequence of personal stresses and misfortunes made themselves felt: Mrs Mitford died in 1830 after a long and trying period of debilitation;³ the family's devoted servant Harriet became seriously ill and died, probably early in 1831; Mary Mitford's own relations with Dr Mitford were distressingly strained during much of 1830 and 1831, largely on account of her involvement with a young actor named Cathcart whose career she sought at that time to promote. In April 1830 she speaks in a letter to Talfourd of Dr Mitford's 'aversion' to Cathcart 'which is always breaking out in some form or other & makes at present the torment of my life'.⁴ Later in the year she describes her father behaving towards her 'like a madman' over Cathcart - a state of hostility that appears to have continued for some time. Very few of her letters for 1831 have survived but in 1832, when preparing the fifth volume of Our Village for the press, she speaks of 'the miserable drudgery

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1. 'Enthusiasm' replaces 'charm' in the original MS. Reading Reference Library. The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford in 6 vols, f. 590.
 2. 12 Dec. 1829. L'Estrange, II, 283.
 3. See Ch. 1, p. 46.
 4. ? 30 April 1830. MS John Rylands. Eng. MS 665.

of writing gay prose whilst in such bad spirits'.¹ It is to this particularly depressed phase of her life that 'The Incendiary', written late in 1831, belongs.

It is a disturbing piece of writing because in it Mary Mitford gives expression, for the only time in her published work, to the fact that all was far from well in rustic society. In taking social disruption as her main subject she is unable to skirt round the issues and seems to have lacked the creative energy to distract herself and her reader in a web of literary or artistic associations. The first part of 'The Incendiary' is a fairly straightforward and - as available evidence would suggest - accurate account of the Berkshire riots of the winter of 1830; the second part, far more in keeping with most of Mary Mitford's country writings by this time, is a sentimental love story about a falsely-accused incendiary. The abandonment of social issues in this conclusion is, however, too late to obliterate the sense of heartfelt alarm and sadness conveyed by the opening pages.

The 1830 riots represented the inevitable culmination of bitterness amongst the rural labourers at years of poverty, unemployment and - in some areas - the petty tyranny of ruthless and unsympathetic parish overseers. The trouble had begun in Kent on 28 August 1830 when threshing machines were destroyed at Lower Hadres, near Canterbury. Rioting spread rapidly throughout the southern counties, reaching Berkshire on 15 November with an uprising in the village of Thatcham (see Appendix B, Map 3). Labourers marched through the surrounding

1. Letter to Sir William Elford, 28 May 1832. MS Reading Reference Library. The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford in 6 vols, f. 601.

district collecting supporters, breaking threshing machines (which were regarded as the main cause of winter unemployment), demanding higher wages and extorting food, money or drink from their victims, who were mainly local farmers. From Thatcham the riots spread rapidly, particularly in western Berkshire (see Map 3), but the labourers' demands were everywhere the same: higher wages and the destruction of threshing machines.

As can be seen in the map indicating the areas of unrest in Berkshire in 1830 (Map 3) there were comparatively few instances of incendiarism in the county and they were mainly confined to the Windsor Forest area where the poor were described by one newspaper as being 'a set of miserable creatures, under-fed, feeble, without shoes and altogether in a shocking plight'.¹ Incendiarism, it appears, was regarded with horror by the majority of the rioters and was generally committed as an act of personal malice or by an isolated individual without sufficient following to raise a riot.²

Most of the Berkshire riots had been suppressed by 24 November and many of the leaders imprisoned to appear before a Special Commission which opened at Reading on 27 December, moving to Abingdon on 6 January. The riots had been mainly peaceful, but, despite the leniency of the public prosecutor and the notable impartiality of the judges,³ 78 Berkshire men were jailed, 45 sentenced to transportation, and 27 sentenced to death, although only one execution actually took place.

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1. The Morning Chronicle quoted in Gash, p. 57. No date given.
 2. Gash, p. 56.
 3. The Times published a leading article on 1 Jan. 1831, pointing out that the Berkshire Commission was 'a merciful contrast' to that recently held at Winchester.

Dr Mitford is named among the Grand Jurors sworn in both at Reading and at Abingdon and Talfourd is reported examining witnesses at both sessions.¹ John Walter was 'the then high sheriff, with whom it is every way an honour to claim acquaintance', mentioned in the introduction to the trial in 'The Incendiary' (5.10). Dr Mitford, 'a very old magistrate', is described in the same paragraph as being 'chairman of the bench, as well as one of the grand jury' (5.10). Through these connections, therefore, Mary Mitford came to be present at the trials:

I saw and knew more of the proceedings of this stirring time than usually falls to the lot of women, and took a deep interest in proceedings which had in them a thrilling excitement, as far beyond acted tragedy as truth is beyond fiction. (5.10)

In addition, of course, she had lived through the unrest, at least insofar as it had touched her locality. It is clear from Map 3 that Three Mile Cross itself was unaffected by the troubles, although disturbances were experienced nearby. Perhaps most effectively she conveys the panic and fear experienced amongst local people at the threat of violence and the wild rumours that were circulated:

Not an hour passed, but, from some quarter or other, reports came pouring in of mobs gathered, mobs assembled, mobs marching upon us. Now the high roads were blockaded by the rioters, travellers murdered, soldiers defeated, and the magistrates, who had gone out to meet and harangue them, themselves surrounded and taken by the desperate multitude. (5.7)

Her representation of the activities of the rioters - their 'sallying forth in small but resolute numbers to collect money or destroy machinery, and compelling or persuading their fellow-

1. The Times, 28 Dec. 1830 and 7 Jan. 1831.

labourers to join them at every farm they visited' (5.5) - is corroborated by contemporary newspaper reports, while her account of the cutting of fire-engine pipes by secret abettors of the incendiaries (5.8) could derive from her understanding of events at nearby Burghfield (see Map 3) where a barn containing the produce of four acres of barley and a waggon in which stood a threshing machine were completely destroyed. 'From the bad conduct of many of the labourers who openly rejoiced at the lamentable event', ran The Times report, 'there is too much reason to believe that it was the act of some residents in the parish'.¹ The incendiaries in this case are therefore very likely to be 'our north-western neighbours, the men of B.' (1.148) - the challengers of 'our parish' in 'A Country Cricket-Match'.

The startling effect on the reader of this evidence of discontent within the environs of the peaceful world of Our Village is strengthened by the expostulations of fear, disappointment and disapproval which punctuate Mary Mitford's account of the riots:

Shocking it was to behold the peasantry of England becoming familiarized with this tremendous power of evil - this desperate, yet most cowardly sin! (5.9)

The men are at best 'misguided' (5.5) or 'misled' (5.13); at worst 'rogues' (5.7) whose midnight visits to lonely houses are likened to 'the descent of pirates, or the incursions of banditti' (5.6). There is no question of sympathy with the rioters, of feeling for their grievances. Fear seems to have overcome all other emotions:

1. The Times, 14 Dec. 1830. Quoted in Gash, p. 58.

They made us fear (and such fear is a revengeful passion, and comes near to hate) the larger half of our species. They weakened our faith in human nature. (5.9)

The world of trust and good feeling that 'our village' rests upon has entirely broken down. Mary Mitford does not appear to understand that the labourers did have genuine grievances - a lack of comprehension which is predictable from her presentation of class relations throughout the country writings. She might lament the existence of absentee landlords¹ but is unquestioning in her endorsement of the privileges of the wealthy, neatly symbolized in 'Our Maying' where, after a game of cricket, the gentlemen dine at one end of the table off 'a round of beef, which made the table totter', while the players have to content themselves at the other end with 'a gammon of bacon' (3.205).

Despite a harsh government line on the rioters, there is evidence to suggest that there was a great deal of sympathy for the labourers elsewhere. Farmers and even landowners who had themselves been badly hit by the general agricultural depression realized in many cases the truth of the labourers' grievances and readily acceded to their demands.² Meanwhile the uprisings were given much sympathetic coverage in the press, notably - and predictably - by The Times, whose reports of the Berkshire disturbances incidentally corroborate events outlined in 'The Incendiary':

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1. e.g. 'The Tenants of Beechgrove' 2.18.
 2. A view put forward by Hobsbawm and Rudé, p. 16 and also by Horn, pp. 92-93.

Reading, 24 November [1830].

Affairs are daily assuming, in this part of the county, a more serious aspect. The conduct of the men is more outrageous, and their proceedings discover a greater degree of organisation than heretofore; whilst their system of levying contributions on the gentry, the tradespeople, and passengers on the highway, by the display of sledge-hammers, and other formidable weapons, by threats and even by violence, threaten the country, unless some decisive measures be instantly adopted, with that most horrible of all civil dissensions - a servile war.

The inhabitants of those districts of Berkshire and Hampshire, which have been the theatre of the late commotions, are in as much alarm as if a civil war were really raging there.¹

The report goes beyond a straightforward account of what took place to try to come to terms with the grievances that led to the uprising, incidentally corroborating by its analysis, E. P. Thomson's view of The Times at this period as 'the organ of middle-class Radicalism':²

... it is unfortunately too true, that whatever may have been the exciting cause of the explosion, the remote and primary causes are to be found in the depressed condition of the labouring poor in this country, and the grinding system to which they have been for a considerable time exposed.³

No such analysis of the probable origins of the riots is given in 'The Incendiary'.

Assuming that conditions in the Shinfield/Swallowfield area were not vastly better than those nearby areas in which rioting did occur, it is surprising that there were no disturbances

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1. The Times, 25 Nov. 1830.
 2. The Making of the English Working Class, Pelican edition (1980), p. 250.
 3. The Times, 25 Nov. 1830.

closer than Burghfield. One decisive factor in determining the absence of riots in Three Mile Cross - and, indeed, the absence of riots within the entire parishes of Shinfield and Swallowfield - may well have been the smallness of the settlements there.

There appears to have been a distinct correlation in Berkshire, as elsewhere, between size of village and incidence of rioting: it seems that rioting broke out only in villages where there was a large enough labouring population to combine in effective resistance against established authority. Of 167 rural parishes in Berkshire rioting occurred in only 50, but, as Norman Gash explains:

Not the most discontented but the most populous villages began the riots. The labourers had long nursed their grievances, but before they dared vent them in open acts of violence, they required the material force of numbers and the moral force that comes from a consciousness of united purpose.¹

This view is substantiated by an incident which Henry Russell describes in relation to one of Swallowfield's case-histories:

At the time of the riots, in the winter of 1830, [Thomas Davis] was the only man in the parish who offered any objection to being sworn in as a special constable. He endeavoured to make terms for the compliance of the labourers, and was beginning to advocate the alleged grievances, but he was soon put down by the spirited interposition of a gentleman who was present.²

Mr Russell relates this incident to indicate that Davis is potentially 'a dangerous man',³ but here we can also see in

1. Gash, p. 43. The more widespread incidence of this correlation between riots and size of settlement is indicated by Horn, p. 91 and by Hobsbawm and Rudé, p. 180.
2. Poor Law Report (1894), p. 208.
3. Ibid., p. 208.

operation the forces of repression that worked against the labourers' interests within a small community - the solitary voice of dissent is totally ineffectual against the unquestioned authority of 'a gentleman'. The same kind of repression must have operated within Three Mile Cross, which was in size little more than a hamlet. Indeed, there were no significantly large villages in either parish of Shinfield or Swallowfield at this time.

'The Incendiary' was, as I have suggested,¹ probably written towards the end of 1831. It first appears in the 1832 Friendship's Offering² which would have been brought out near Christmas 1831. In her opening sentence Mary Mitford speaks of the events of 'the last winter' (5.5) and the sketch may well have been prompted by a resurgence of local incendiarism which evidently took place in November 1831. On 11 November Mary Mitford wrote to her friend Miss Jephson:

Are not these fires frightful? They began hereabouts; but I hope that the example of Bristol will frighten ministers into some discretion, and force them to discourage political meetings of all sorts. The cholera will certainly do great good in enforcing cleanliness where it never otherwise would have found its way; and, if it do take hold of some of our overcrowded cities, it will be a blessed dispensation. I am sick of the wickedness of this dense population.³

The limitations of Mary Mitford's social perspective are evident from these comments. She is clearly frightened by the fires in her own locality and also alarmed by the power of the mob within the cities. She has no sympathy for either urban or rustic poor

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1. See above, p. 223.
 2. See Appendix A.
 3. L'Estrange, II, 326.

as an anonymous, potentially threatening mass. Her ignorance of their sufferings at times verges on callousness, as in her remarks about the 'blessed dispensation' of cholera in overcrowded cities.

The same limitations are evident in her account of the rioters in the first part of 'The Incendiary'. What is striking, however, is the sense that she conveys of what is actually being threatened by the riots - effectively, the elements of village life that she has deliberately emphasized in her earlier writings. She speaks, for example, of the riots bringing 'close to us a state of things which we never thought to have witnessed in peaceful and happy England' (5.6). Appropriately, 'our village' remains untouched by the riots:

... our village, though in the centre of the insurgents, continued uncontaminated - 'faithful amidst the unfaithful found', - and was, therefore quite a rallying point for loyal men and true ... (5.6-7)

The established purity and innocence of 'our village' is implied in the phrase 'continued uncontaminated' and the patriotic note of 'peaceful and happy England' is extended in the suggestion that in 'our village' alone were to be found the "'faithful"' and 'loyal men and true'. This is a touching endeavour on Mary Mitford's part to evoke a sense of the peace and order that her readers had come to expect in her village world, but in this case it cannot stand up against her vivid descriptions of the alarm felt locally and particularly within her own household, where 'the nightly collecting of arms and armed men ... kept up a continual sense of nervous inquietude' (5.7). Although riots did not take place in Three Mile Cross itself, Mary Mitford's village world, both literal and literary, was evidently very much shaken by the threat of violence and disturbance.

As one would expect from her treatment of crime elsewhere in her writings, the rioters are not portrayed in any detail. Indeed, her sense of outrage and fear was evidently such as to make a close sympathetic portrayal of any particular rebel impossible. But her sadness at what had taken place is brought out in her description of the prisoners at the trial, where she speaks of them as

... belonging mostly to the younger classes of the peasantry, such men as one is accustomed to see in the fields, on the road, or the cricket-ground, with sunburnt faces, and a total absence of reflection or care, but who now, under the influence of a keen and bitter anxiety, had acquired not only the sallow paleness proper to a prison, but the look of suffering and of thought, the brows contracted and brought low over the eyes, the general sharpness of feature and elongation of countenance, which give an expression of interest, a certain momentary elevation, even to the commonest and most vacant of human faces.

(5.11)

This account makes it clear that the prisoners are not far removed from those carefree individuals her readers have grown accustomed to discovering at work or at play in the earlier sketches. The irony is that within Mary Mitford's village world they can be looked at closely only while they remain characterized by 'a total absence of reflection or care'. A contradiction in her own attitude is evident, however, in her recognition of 'a certain momentary elevation' that suffering has brought to the faces of the prisoners. The interest shown in their changed expressions betrays a more psychologically sophisticated response to rustic character than is usual in her country writings. The implication that the same faces in one context may be described as showing 'a total absence of reflection or care' and in another as appearing 'common' or 'vacant' is revealing. The rarity of

such pejorative observations points to the generally idealized nature of the rustic portraits we find in Mary Mitford's work and to the way in which she usually masks any negative personal response in her descriptions. Certainly it would be unthinkable in her earlier work to find rustic simplicity equated with the uninspiring attribute of 'vacancy'. The careful control of material that enables her to give an air of verisimilitude to an idealized portrait of Tom Cordery has broken down.

By the time of writing 'The Incendiary' Mary Mitford's spirits were too low and her weariness with her prose writing too intense for her successfully to turn reality into something lighter. Riots and incendiarism are subjects that she would simply not have dealt with in earlier years and, in concluding 'The Incendiary' with a weak and sentimental love story, she deliberately casts aside a social issue that was too strong and too threatening to be modified by the fanciful vision that shapes the early sketches. It is revealing that early in 'The Incendiary' she remarks that 'truth is beyond fiction' (5.10).¹ Appropriately, in the light of this comment, the first part of the essay comes to life in a way that the second part does not. This is typical of how in general her earlier work, based more closely on the reality of village life, has an air of conviction that is lacking in her more purely fictional tales.

I hope to have demonstrated in this and the preceding section how it was only when writing in relatively good spirits, with sufficient energy and skill, that Mary Mitford was able to incorporate the more painful side of social reality into an

1. Quoted above, p. 225.

appealing artistic vision. It is a predictable corollary to this that her prose comes most vividly and happily to life when she is describing her experience of the brighter side of 'our village' - the rustic games and pastimes that constituted one of the chief pleasures of her own day-to-day existence.

Section V - Play and Work

In Chapter 2 I suggested that the deeply-felt human responses that underlie Mary Mitford's early sketches are a love of the countryside and an ability to 'enjoy the enjoyment'¹ of her villagers at play. Her love of the countryside, as I have tried to indicate in Chapter 3, involved her in certain confusion regarding the correctness of her taste in landscape; her ability to derive enjoyment from harmless rustic games and pastimes - 'mere country pleasures'² - involved no such confusion and meant that there was at least one area of rustic life that she could portray without modification. Our Village effectively disproves the Hammonds' assertion that by 1830 'the games had almost disappeared from the English village'.³ At the same time, it inevitably suppresses the less idyllic side of village pleasures and, by various twists of the fancy, extends the concept of play in to the working lives of the rustic community.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Mary Mitford's belief that 'a poor man's pleasure' is 'a precious thing' led her to endorse the local

1. Letter to Elizabeth Barrett, 17 Oct. 1836. L'Estrange, III, 63. Quoted Ch. 2, p. 61.

2. Ibid.

3. J. L. and B. Hammond, p. 218.

promotion of such 'innocent and healthful' recreations as games of cricket.¹ She was aware that the poor needed at times to escape from the drudgery and anxiety of their everyday lives and deplored the fact that increasingly they were seeking the oblivion of drink. In a letter to Talfourd of June 1823 she observes that 'if the young men are not on the cricket ground they will be at the Public house'² and expresses similar concern in a letter to William Harness dated 2 May 1834:

... our wise legislators think of the rural districts - never. They legislate against gin-shops, which are the evil of great towns, and encourage beer-shops, which are the pest of the country; the cause of half the poverty and three-fourths of the demoralization.³

Her view is shared by Henry Russell whose report confirms the prevalence of heavy drinking in the Shinfield/Swallowfield area. Of the new beer-shops - 'beerhouses' as he calls them - which were gradually displacing respectable inns as social centres for the very poor, he expresses unqualified disapproval:

Richard Read's wife was the first person from whom I had a complaint of the distress occasioned to herself and her children by her husband's frequenting the new beer-houses ... The more I see of these houses, the more I am convinced that they have done and still are doing more to impoverish and corrupt the English labourer than all the mal-administration of the Poor Laws for the last 50 years put together.⁴

Mary Mitford, as we have seen, is not concerned in her published work with exploring demoralization or corruption but, so strong were her feelings on the subject, that there are

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1. Letter to Talfourd, 22 June 1823. Correspondence, p. 296. MS Harvard. See Ch. 1, p. 42.
 2. 22 June 1823. Correspondence, p. 296. MS Harvard.
 3. L'Estrange, III, 11. Mary Mitford's italics.
 4. Poor Law Report (1894), p. 208.

occasions where her concern for the specific effects of extensive drinking is evident. The Rose Inn next door to the Mitfords' cottage is respectable enough - a convivial and well-regulated hostelry presided over by a landlord who 'no more thinks of drinking beer, than a grocer of eating figs'.¹ The more ruinous effects of drink are glimpsed elsewhere, for example among the very poor in 'Hay-Carrying' whose pleas for bread are irresistible to the impoverished shop-keeper:

She could not say, no! to the poor creatures who came to her on a Saturday night, to seek bread for their children, however deep they might already be in her debt, or however certain it was that their husbands were, at that moment, spending, at the Chequers or the Four Horse Shoes, the money that should have supported their wives and families ...
(3.179)

Closer to home, but in a slightly higher level of rural society, Hannah Bint's father 'a drover of high repute' (3.103) reduces his family to a state of destitution by throwing away his money on gin, while the village's drunken blacksmith occasions general rejoicing among his family and friends when he brings about his own untimely death by overturning his cart on the return from a revel.² The passage devoted to his demise and its happy consequences for his widow and family concludes with an arch warning:

My dear village-husbands, if you have a mind that your wives should be really sorry when you die, whether by a fall from a cart or otherwise, keep from the alehouse!
('A Parting Glance at Our Village' 1.286)

Later, in Country Stories, where Mary Mitford's touch is arguably less subtle, the heroine of 'The Beauty of the Village' is struck

1. 'Our Maying' 3.197.
2. This incident anticipates the death of Seth Bede in Ch. IV of George Eliot's Adam Bede (1859).

down by her gambling lover in a moment of drunken rage and carried into the Foaming Tankard only to be infected by small-pox. The Foaming Tankard is a caricature of evil and the fate of the heroine a heavy-handed symbolic gesture of condemnation for the 'obnoxious beer-house, the torment and puzzle of the magistrates, and the pest of the parish' (p. 182).

Henry Russell believed that excessive drinking was one unfortunate consequence of the generous distribution of 'bread money' in the locality and reasoned that a more stringent regulation of relief would ameliorate the problem. Mary Mitford's philosophy is less coherent but more humane. She believed that rustic games were an innocent form of diversion, a view evidently shared by Dr Mitford, her usual companion at the local gatherings that she describes in the sketches. Their standing in the community is clear from the gestures of deference and polite responses about health and family that 'I' or 'we' meet throughout the country writings. One such instance of the reciprocal affection that existed between them and the village poor appears in 'The Hard Summer':

It is astonishing how sensible [country-boys] are to notice from their betters, or those whom they think such ... a word, a nod, a smile, or the mere calling of them by their names, is enough to insure their hearts and their services. Half-a-dozen of them, poor urchins, have run away now to bring us chairs from their several homes.
(1.204-205)

It was undoubtedly this affection and a genuine enjoyment of the pleasures of the poor that led Mary Mitford to write about village pastimes with such enthusiasm. These pastimes range from the impromptu display of skating with which the lieutenant

entertains a gathering of children in 'Frost and Thaw' (1.31) to the more organized cricket matches, mayings, fairings and parties that are scattered throughout the country works and the early Our Village volumes in particular.

An interesting common feature of Mary Mitford's descriptions of these events, though evidently based on first-hand knowledge, is the comparative lack of detail given to the technicalities of the various proceedings. This is in striking contrast to the meticulous evocation of landscape elsewhere in her work. The reason for this particular deficiency lies, I believe, in the fact that her overriding concern was to convey her sense of 'enjoying the enjoyment' of her villagers. Her writing, as I suggested in Chapter 2, is itself a kind of game that she plays with her readers and in describing village pastimes the play of her own fancy is of supreme importance. Enjoying enjoyment is a vicarious pleasure but, as readers, we can respond directly to the evocative meanderings of the prose. It is thus that we are invited to participate in a more sophisticated version of the games that lie at the heart of Mary Mitford's 'village' world.

'Bramley Maying', the sketch mentioned in Chapter 3 in relation to Mary Mitford's use of Teniers,¹ begins, for example, with a generalized, tantalizing definition of a maying:

A country Maying is a meeting of the lads
and lasses of two or three parishes, who
assemble in certain erections of green
boughs called May-houses, to dance and -
but I am going to tell all about it in due
order and must not forestall my description.
(1.81-82)

1. See pp. 131-33.

Phrases such as 'a sort of modern Arcadia' and 'our English merriment' bring an associative richness to the introductory paragraphs of the sketch; even the weather is presented in suitably evocative terms:

Never was a day more congenial to a happy purpose! It was a day made for country weddings and dances on the green - a day of dazzling light, or ardent sunshine falling on hedge-rows and meadows fresh with spring showers. (1.82)

The journey to Bramley is presented in enthusiastic detail - beautiful scenery, helpful rustics, a detour to Bramley Church - until finally there is only one paragraph left to describe the maying. The dancing itself is rather a disappointment - the girls danced like ladies and their partners were 'as decorous and indifferent as real gentlemen' (1.89) - and it is only outside the may-houses that we discover the kind of spirited enjoyment we have been led to expect. Laughing children, a 'merry groupe of old men [that] would have suited Teniers', younger men in smock-frocks, women with infants and 'ragged boys peeping through the boughs at the dancers' are all carefully displayed to create an idyllic picture of 'innocent happiness' (1.90). Despite the promise of the introductory paragraph, very little has actually been said of the maying itself but, through a sequence of evocative associations and a heavy reliance on busy adjectives suggesting happiness and laughter, a vivid sense of idyllic rustic enjoyment has been conveyed.

Similarly in 'Our Maying' much greater space is given to the preparation than to the actual festivities which are again crammed into an impressionistic, quasi-pictorial image of rustic enjoyment:

Fiddlers, ballad-singers, cake baskets -
 Punch - Master Frost, crying cherries - a
 Bavarian woman selling brooms - half-a-
 dozen stalls with fruit and frippery -
 boys throwing at boxes - girls playing at
 ball - gave to that assemblage the bustle,
 clatter, and gaiety of a Dutch fair, as one
 sees it in Teniers' pictures. (3.205)

As in 'Bramley Maying', Teniers is again used to reinforce a sense of the truth of an image of rustic enjoyment. Paradoxically, however, what we are being asked to believe in is less a visual scene than a concentration of pleasurable ideas. The important truth is that of Mary Mitford's own response.

Amongst popular sports, her greatest enthusiasm was for cricket and an amusing corollary to this predilection is that throughout her work she tends to define character in terms of fondness for the game:

Note, that your good cricketer is commonly
 the most industrious man in the parish;
 the habits that make him such are precisely
 those which make a good workman - steadiness,
 sobriety, and activity ...

('A Country Cricket Match' 1.151)

Again, Bill, the sly and insolent 'thorough town boy' (2.9) who persuades the Mitfords' boy to run away to London in 'A Walk through the Village', never went near the cricket ground (2.10), while the village favourites - Joel Brent, Ben and Joe Kirby - are all skilled players. Nevertheless, despite her fondness for cricket there is very little technical description of the game itself: 'A Country Cricket Match', for example, is largely devoted to the choosing of players and the match is dealt with rather summarily in the last three paragraphs. Once again, it is more a general sense of enjoyment that is conveyed.

One interesting underlying purpose of these technically vague but pleasurably evocative descriptions of rustic pastimes is

implied by a comment that appears in the original version of the 'Our Village' sketch. In 1822 the sketch ends with a brief but enthusiastic account of 'our' recent cricketing victory over a neighbouring parish. This is followed by the revealing observation:

I wonder that painters and poets do not make more use of cricket; that picturesque and various game, so full of life, and gaiety and good-humour, so preferable to the rare and questionable and make-believe pleasure of a dance on the green, which they like so much to paint and talk about. Cricket is a most thoroughly English diversion; the game of a free country; a bond of union and sympathy between the high and the low ...¹

This suggestion points to the fact that, despite her overt dislike in literature of 'all that vile design of doing good',² Mary Mitford was herself writing with limited but conscious didacticism. She implies by her remarks that art should not only be concerned with the real as opposed to 'make-believe' - as we have seen, an increasingly-held contemporary conviction³ - but also that the artist should be concerned with such issues as promoting 'a bond of union and sympathy between the high and the low'. She wrote her sketches not merely in the consciousness that 'the taste of the age requires lightness',⁴ but with a sense that her own affectionate concern could be conveyed by literary or artistic means. She was not blind or callous about the sufferings of the poor, but felt that sympathy for them could best be promoted by making them appealing rather than distressing

1. The Lady's Magazine, III (1822), 650.
2. See above, p. 186.
3. See Ch. 3 above.
4. Letter to Miss Jephson. ? Sept. 1829. MS Reading Reference Library. The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford in 6 vols, f. 580. See above, p. 221.

to her readers. Her evocative description of their pleasures was one effective way by which to achieve this aim.

Work in Our Village is also presented as a pleasurable idea. In fact, it is virtually indistinguishable from play, although Mary Mitford's awareness of the drudgery involved in some aspects of rustic labour is suggested in a passage in 'Violeting' where she describes the process of bean-setting:

What work bean-setting is! What a reverse of the position assigned to man to distinguish him from the beasts of the field! Only think of stooping for six, eight, ten hours a day, drilling holes in the earth with a little stick, and then dropping in the beans one by one ...
(1.104)

At the same time, she is careful to make the scene in which the bean-setters appear an appealing one and so stresses their decorative qualities in the foreground of the landscape:

... fields of arable land, more lively still with troops of stooping bean-setters, women and children, in all varieties of costume and colour ... (1.104)

In general her accounts of rustic labour are characterized by visual liveliness and a sense of noisy enjoyment. In contemporary genre painting and, indeed, in the genre scenes of the late eighteenth century English landscape painters, manual labour is presented as effortless and even enjoyable. Despite the fact that haysel was one of the most gruelling times in the rural calendar, it is usually depicted in painting in idyllic terms - and so it is in Mary Mitford's 'The Haymakers' (OV 5) where the overriding impression is one of sunshine and noisy rustic merriment. The distortion involved in such idyllic representations is suggested by comparison with the more disturbing contemporary account to appear in John Clare's The Shepherd's Calendar and it is an appropriate indication

of the taste of the age that this was entirely suppressed on the poem's first appearance in 1827.¹

The parallel between Mary Mitford's predominantly decorative outdoor scenes and contemporary rustic genre painting can be seen in the following description of the ploughman, Joel Brent:

Really to see Joel walking ... by the side of his bell-team, the fore-horse decked with ribbons and flowers like a countess on the birth-day, as consciously handsome as his driver, the long whip poised gracefully on his shoulder, his little sister in his hand, and his dog Ranger ... frisking about them:- to see this group, and to hear the merry clatter formed by Lizzy's tongue, Joel's whistling, and Ranger's delighted bark, is enough to put an amateur of pleasant sounds and happy faces in good humour for the day.
(*'A Village Beau'* l.188-9)

As in her presentation of rustic games Mary Mitford is concerned to evoke a sense of harmless and boisterous enjoyment through such phrases as 'merry clatter', 'pleasant sounds', 'happy faces'. It is an image of innocent pleasure based on adjectival summary which has little to do with the everyday reality of a ploughman's work. There is no immediate reason why Joel's horse should be decked with ribbons and flowers or why his sister Lizzy, should be holding his hand and his dog ('a beautiful red and white spaniel' (l.189)) at his side. The aim is rather to create a pleasing visual image, a rustic idyll appropriate to the beauty of the landscape:

It is a grateful sight in other respects, for Joel is a very picturesque person, just such an one as a painter would select for the foreground of some English landscape, where nature is shown in all her loveliness.
(l.189)

1. See Introduction to *The Shepherd's Calendar*, edited by Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield (1964), p. ix.

In this context, Joel, probably one of the villagers taken directly from life,¹ is given a decorative two-dimensionality. His function at this point in the sketch is to complement the 'loveliness' of nature with which he is so closely associated and it is therefore appropriate that his decorative rather than his labouring qualities should be stressed. Both his appearance and his being surrounded by 'pleasant sounds' suggest the reciprocal interchange between man and a beneficent natural environment that was defined in Chapter 2 as integral to Mary Mitford's literary conception of her 'village' world. The fact that he is theoretically ploughing a field is thus of minimal importance by comparison with his broader associative function.

It is probably a similar desire to focus on the more appealing side of her villagers and to reinforce our sense of the harmony of the village world that also leads Mary Mitford to give an idealized image of labour relations. Servants are consistently uncomplaining, and farm labourers submit unquestioningly to the authority of the farmer. Perhaps the most bizarre example of contented servitude appears in the description of the laying of a new road in 'A Parting Glance at Our Village':

1. See above, p. 205 and Mary Mitford to Sir William Elford, 23 June 1824:

'The great danger would be that my dear friend Joel might be spoilt; but I take care to keep the book [OV1] out of our pretty Harriette's way; and so I hope that that [sic] prime ornament of our village will escape the snare for his vanity which the seeing so exact a portrait of himself in a printed book might occasion.'

L'Estrange, II, 180-181.

How often have I seen the surveyor on a cold winter morning, with a face all frost and business, great-coated up to the eyes, driving from post to post, from one gang of labourers to another, praising, scolding, ordering, cheated, laughed at, and liked by them all! (1.277)

Given the fact that road-laying was one of the lowest forms of rural labour, probably enforced by the parish overseer, the cheerfulness and goodwill of the labourers seems unlikely, particularly in such harsh weather conditions, where the great-coated cosiness of the surveyor tacitly raises questions about just how well-clad or comfortable his charges were. If such questions were present in Mary Mitford's mind, the liveliness of the prose, mirroring the brisk drive of the surveyor from 'post to post', and the apparent contentment and anonymity of the labourers diverts the reader's attention from more disturbing issues. She quickly speeds us on to a new idea in the next sentence: 'Well, once the hill is finished, we shall have done with him for ever ...' (1.277). The focus throughout has remained on the comfortable figure of the surveyor and the potentially threatening reality of the gang of labourers is firmly kept at bay.

Where Mary Mitford was able to give the truth of village life without distortion she does so. Her own enthusiasm for village games is evident throughout her letters and in her published work they feature significantly, an appropriate analogue of her literary world. Where truth might become painful within that world she is still guided by a desire to please and an impulse to convey to her readers the genuine affection she held for her villagers. As such, as I suggested in Section III, it is the artistic conception of

'our village' that determines the quality and the degree of social reality that it contains. We therefore learn no more of the distressing side of rustic labour than we do of such evils of rural poverty as bad housing or inadequate diet. It belongs to the negative side of rustic life with which Mary Mitford had no artistic concern.

Section VI - The Aims and Effects of Mary Mitford's Presentation of Rustic Life

Mary Mitford's early sketches are the product of a confused and confusing decade. Her views were often uncertain and at times contradictory, so that, for example, although she deprecated literature with an overt political concern, a limited but significant political stance nevertheless emerges from her own work. Her portrayal of village life is a conscious amalgamation of truth and fancy. It is prompted by hesitant literary aims and love for her subject rather than well-defined social objectives. It is characterized by an evasiveness that enabled her to capture the tone of the age without exploring or confronting issues in a direct and potentially disturbing way. This left her writing open to a variety of interpretation and response and it is with the response of her contemporaries, fellow-victims of the cultural and social confusions of the 1820s, that I am specifically concerned in this section.

I suggested in Chapter 2 that, in terms of her own life, Three Mile Cross represented to Mary Mitford a pastoral retreat set against her recent experience of worldly care. One of the

features of this retreat identified in 'The Cowslip Ball' was her idealization of 'the little of the poor' (1.138), an idealization probably strengthened by her own attempts to come to terms with her family's recent loss of fortune.¹ Poverty in the context of Our Village is theoretically a desirable state. This idea is made clear at various points throughout the sketches. The ragged condition of Joe Kirby in 'The Hard Summer' is lightly dismissed in the question 'But why should I lament the poverty that never troubles him?' (1.206) and George Coper, the ploughboy in 'The Shaw', is presented as an object of envy: 'Oh, to be as cheaply and as thoroughly contented as George Coper!' (4.87-8).

Mary Mitford was not concerned to deny the existence of poverty but to ignore or minimize the suffering that poverty could lead to. Therefore it is presented both as something that can be overcome by 'good management and good principles',² and as a state which carries a range of inestimable rewards, evocatively suggested by the presentation of certain areas of the lives of the rustic poor in fanciful association with pleasing ideas and images taken from literature and art. Her meandering, digressive method of narration enables Mary Mitford to side-step any issue that might become painful as she moves perpetually between reality and the enriching realms of the fancy, re-creating for her readers her own sense of love and trust in the goodness of rural life.

The exclusion process that is integral to maintaining the pleasing surface of the 'village' world can be most directly

1. See Ch. 2, p. 73.

2. 'The Dell' 2.204. See above, p. 192.

perceived by the fact that, considering the comparatively wide-ranging geographical area covered by the sketches as a whole, the only row of habitations and occupants fully described are those of a small selection of dwellings - those of the more affluent sector of rural society who actually lived in the village itself. With a few generally prosperous exceptions, we learn little of the class that made up the greater part of the rural community, or their homes, 'the poor men's cottages and cabins, which grew up throughout the area of even a nucleated parish'.¹ Within the eastern section of the parish of Shinfield (Berkshire) in 1831, of 114 families registered in the census return for the district 98 were employed in agriculture, nine in 'trade, manufacture or handicrafts' and seven families fell into neither of the two categories. The village of Three Mile Cross itself fell into the western, Wiltshire section of the parish (see Appendix B, Map 1) where the returns show a higher concentration of the trade and manufacturing class (18 out of a total of 29 families).² Nevertheless, within the area covered by the sketches as a whole the vast majority of inhabitants clearly fell into the agricultural labouring class, a class where standards typified by Hannah Bint's 'horror of accepting parochial relief' (4.105) had effectively ceased to operate and which is glimpsed only at a distance in the fields or on the roads.

Mary Mitford was quite aware that her image of village life gave only a part of the truth. Writing to Sir William Elford shortly after the publication of volume 1 of Our Village she

1. Hobsbawm and Rudé, p. 58.

2. Enumeration Abstract (of 1831 Census Returns), 1833.

explains that the characters and descriptions are 'As true as is well possible':

You, as a great landscape painter, know that in painting a favourite scene you do a little embellish, and can't help it; you avail yourself of happy accidents of atmosphere, and if anything be ugly, you strike it out, or if anything be wanting, you put it in. But still the picture is a likeness ...¹

The same admission that her picture is not entirely truthful is made in the preface to volume 1 of Our Village:

The following pages contain an attempt to delineate country scenery and country manners, as they exist in a small village in the south of England. The writer may at least claim the merit of a hearty love of her subject, and of that local and personal familiarity, which only a long residence in one neighbourhood could have enabled her to attain. Her descriptions have always been written on the spot and at the moment, and in nearly every instance with the closest and most resolute fidelity to the place and the people. If she be accused of having given a brighter aspect to her villagers than is usually met with in books, she cannot help it, and would not if she could. She has painted, as they appeared to her, their little frailties and their many virtues, under an intense and thankful conviction, that in every condition of life goodness and happiness may be found by those who seek them, and never more surely than in the fresh air, the shade, and the sunshine of nature. (l.v-vi)

A striking fact to emerge from both pieces of writing is the explicitness with which Mary Mitford presents herself as a painter, taking sketches 'on the spot, and at the moment' and working up her images into something deliberately 'brighter' than life. We have already seen how her knowledge of painting has given a visual emphasis to her presentation of certain aspects of rural character and scenery, but there is another and more general parallel to be inferred from her statement that 'a great landscape

1. 23 June 1824. L'Estrange, II, 180.

painter' would 'strike out' what was 'ugly' and 'put in' anything that was 'wanting'. It is clear that in her experience it was common practice for painters to create likenesses from a pleasing distortion of the truth. The development of this practice of creating a modified illusion of reality in contemporary English landscape and genre painting is explored by John Barrell in The Dark Side of the Landscape. He argues that, while presenting 'a more and more actualised image'¹ of rural life, the art of the period at the same time aims to represent the poor of England as happy as the swains of Arcadia. The anomalies that arise from these often contradictory aims are as apparent in Mary Mitford's village sketches as in any of the paintings discussed by Barrell.

She was striving to create in her village writing a persuasive image of a contemporary pastoral world deliberately opposed to 'the heat, the glare, the noise, and the fever of London'.² Her England is, to borrow her own phrase, 'a sort of modern Arcadia',³ combining a geographical and historical accuracy with a deliberate emphasis on the sunnier and more festive side of village life. The reviews of the early volumes divide their praise between these two aspects of her work. Her sketches are favourably compared by several reviewers with Washington Irving's Sketch-Book:

Mr. Irving's [sketches] always appeared to us as painfully laboured ... and, though professing to be English, certainly give a very erroneous notion of the present habits and pursuits of our countryman. Miss Mitford's Sketches are undoubtedly sufficiently flattering; but ... what she does portray, she portrays with truth.⁴

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1. The Dark Side of the Landscape (Cambridge, 1980), p. 5.
 2. 'Violeting' 1.100.
 3. 'Bramley Maying' 1.82. See above, p. 239.
 4. The Examiner, 23 May 1824, p. 332. Reviewer's italics.

'Miss Mitford has not, in my opinion either the pathos or humour of Washington Irving; but she excels him in vigorous conception of character, and in the truth of her pictures of English life and manners.'¹

Mary Mitford's great advantage over Washington Irving, an American writer, was that she was in a position to write with first-hand knowledge of English village life whereas he could view it only as an outsider. It is striking that both reviewers comment on the 'truth' of her portrayal, the first explicitly and second implicitly censuring Irving for his inaccuracies.

A desire for greater verisimilitude in the portrayal of rural life in literature was, as discussed in Chapter 3, a feature of the 1820s. What was also apparently required was an image of England that was, as the first of the above reviews phrases it, 'sufficiently flattering'. The point is made clearer in a review of the first volume of Our Village in The Somerset House Gazette where Mary Mitford's sketches are this time compared with Crabbe's portrayal of village life:

The difference ... between the prose sketches of Miss Mitford and Mr. Crabbe is - that the former has given a portrait of particular localities, and has sketched it in a spirit of kindness and love; nothing sarcastic, severe or repulsive, enters into her delineations.²

The exclusion of the 'sarcastic, severe or repulsive' in Mary Mitford's work is regarded as a good thing and at a later stage in the article, when likening the 'minuteness and fidelity' of one of the sketches to that of Teniers, the writer praises Mary

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1. Noctes Ambrosianae No. xxiv, Blackwood's Magazine, XX (Nov. 1826), 780. See Ch. 3, p. 137.
 2. The Somerset House Gazette and Literary Museum, II (22 May 1824), 104.

Mitford for including in her work 'an occasional dash of sentiment which Teniers never had'.¹

It is again for its presentation of reality in a 'flattering' light that the first volume of Our Village is praised in The London Literary Gazette:

Miss Mitford's elegant little volume is just in unison with the times: in it is a gallery of pictures, landscape, fresh, glowing, and entirely English ... all simply but sweetly coloured: in short a book to make us forget the hurry, the bustle, the noise around, in the leaves, tall old trees, and rich meadows of her delightful village.²

The pastoral implications of the second part of this statement, discussed in Chapter 2, reinforce the point that Mary Mitford was writing of the country specifically for a city audience, inviting her readers to share the experience that restored her own peace of mind. Part of the appeal of the sketches lies in the fact that this escape can be found in landscapes that are not remote or insubstantial, but 'entirely English'.

Another contemporary verdict on Mary Mitford's sketches was that they "'breathe ... the spirit of merry England"',³ an expression which more immediately evokes a sense of an England of the past rather than the present. Her real debt to Washington Irving lies, I think, in her sharing of his insistence that the old-fashioned rural virtues are still to be found in contemporary England - or, at least, in her case, in one isolated corner of

1. The Somerset House Gazette and Literary Museum, II (22 May 1824), 105.
2. The London Literary Gazette. Quoted in A Critical Dictionary of English Literature and British and American Authors by S. Austin Allibone, 5 vols (1897-8), II, 1331. See Ch. 3 above, p. 137.
3. Noctes Ambrosianae No. xxiv, Blackwood's Magazine, XX (Nov. 1826), 780. See Ch. 3, p. 137.

southern Berkshire. She is appealing to a sense of nostalgia - without acknowledging that it is nostalgia - in an age when industrial expansion had already begun to threaten the English landscape and mechanization and capitalism to shake the foundations of rural society.

Mary Mitford's veneration for the past manifests itself throughout her work in a profound conservatism. 'I hate all innovation', she writes in 'A Parting Glance at Our Village', 'whether for better or worse' (1.275). At a time when peasants were becoming wage-labourers she was concerned to display 'the sturdy independence of English character'¹ which was fostered by the old-fashioned organic rural community. It is predictable, therefore, that she should openly declare herself in favour of such features of the old order as common rights and small farms, and equally that she should dislike manifestations of change, for example, any kind of social pretensions among the farming or labouring classes that might threaten that order. In these terms, it would have been impossible for her to show sympathy for rioting labourers: the whole fabric of the society she loved and attempted to re-create in her work was threatened by their action.

The irony of Mary Mitford's achievement in her presentation of village life lies in the fact that, while writing without any but the vaguest kind of political motivation, her pictures present a powerful, if tacit, argument against social change in rural society. In this sense Our Village falls into a category of writing censured by Peacock in 1818 in his 'Essay on Fashionable

1. 'Hannah Bint' 4.105. See above, p. 196.

Literature':

... the best recommendation that a work of fancy can have is that it should inculcate no opinions at all, but implicitly acquiesce in all the assumptions of worldly wisdom. The next best is that it should be well-seasoned with petitiones principii in favour of things as they are.¹

What is given in Mary Mitford's early 'work[s] of fancy' - admittedly the product of a politically quieter phase than the late 1810s - is an unquestioning idealization of 'things as they are'. It is appropriate in the light of Peacock's view that it is the present tense that is most frequently used in the early sketches.

At the same time, as suggested in Section V, Mary Mitford was concerned to promote good relations between classes and it is this aspect of her work that was vigorously seized on by such figures as the Howitts in the 1830s. 'Go on, dear Miss Mitford, with your writings, which are so entirely English, which do our English hearts good to read ...' writes an enthusiastic Mary Howitt in 1835.² William Howitt, meanwhile, is rather more explicit as to his opinion of the socially beneficial effects of her work. Describing a cricket match that he has just seen, he reflects on the change that has taken place in rural society over the past twenty years,

What a contrast is this play to bull baiting, dog and cock fighting! So orderly, so manly, so generous in its character ... There is something very beautiful in one distant country sending its peaceful champions to contend with another in a sport that has no drawback of cruelty or vulgarity in it, but

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1. Halliford Edition of the Works of Thomas Love Peacock, edited by H. F. B. Brett-Smith and C. E. Jones, 10 vols (1924-34), VIII, 274. Quoted by Marilyn Butler in Peacock Displayed: A Satirist in his Context (1979), p. 285.
 2. Letter to Mary Mitford, 17 April 1835. Friendships, I, 272.

has every recommendation of skill, taste, health and generous rivalry. You, dear Miss Mitford, have done a great deal to promote this better spirit, and you could not have done more had you been haranguing Parliament, and bringing in bills for the purpose.¹

The Howitts' philosophy was a paternalistic one, as is made clear in William Howitt's introduction to a collection of short stories based on the theme of The Hall and the Hamlet, in 1848:

The Hall may, and must, do much to elevate the Hamlet, and the Hamlet, in a more enlightened and prosperous condition, can add much to the interest of living at the Hall.

Although Mary Mitford avoids such prescriptive writing, the kind of paternalism suggested here underlies her own presentation of class relations and was undoubtedly the reason why her work appealed so strongly to the more politically-motivated Howitts. It seems very likely that her beliefs were influenced by her day-to-day experience of Dr Mitford's magisterial role within the community, a role that she probably took so much for granted as to endorse its underlying social assumptions without question.

Whatever is unconsciously revealed about Mary Mitford's political views in her country sketches, she was concerned with celebrating, rather than offering a balanced social critique of, village life and was quite aware of her limitations in this respect. As she explains in her Preface to volume 1 of Our Village, her aim was to portray the 'goodness and happiness' which are fostered by 'the fresh air, the shade, and the sunshine of nature'. Evil and misery do not form part of her literary village world and the contemporary critical reaction to her

1. Letter to Mary Mitford, 10 Sept. 1835. Friendships, I, 294.

country writings shows that in the 1820s at least her public was content that the blacker side of its social reality should remain unexplored. The success of the early sketches probably derives quite substantially from the fact that Mary Mitford presented her reading public with an image of rustic life that satisfied a growing desire for realism as effectively as it perpetuated the comforting and pleasure-giving myths of established literary and artistic tradition.

Conclusion

Mary Mitford's early Our Village sketches were, in the words of one contemporary reviewer, 'just in unison with the time'.¹ They are both the product and a reflection of a transitional decade, at once an expression of their author's immediate experience of village life and of her cultural response to her age. The particular nature of their success derives from her ability to encapsulate so much that was appealing to her contemporaries in calmly unpretentious prose. In its effect her writing is both soothing and pleasing, an apt expression of her belief in the tranquillity and goodness of nature and of life lived close to nature. The apparent simplicity of her prose belies the complexity of shifting images and ideas within the structure of every sentence of her work. These images and ideas are held together by an all-pervading sense of good feeling through which Mary Mitford wins our trust as readers. By this means she encourages us to share in unconstrained fanciful wanderings through a world that is both graphically real and a source of perpetual delight. Our Village celebrates Mary Mitford's experience of the life that surrounded her; her writing is a therapeutic game in which we are invited to participate and from which we emerge restored and enriched.

Mary Mitford's significance for her contemporaries lies in the fact that her sketches appealed 'to a new sense, as it were,

1. The London Literary Gazette. Quoted in A Critical Dictionary of English Literature and British and American Authors by S. Austin Allibone, 5 vols (1897-8), II, 1331. See Ch. 3, p. 137 and Ch. 5, p. 252.

in a multitude of minds'.¹ While giving expression to widely-held views about the beneficence of nature and the intrinsic goodness of rustic life, she brought to her work an unprecedented graphicness, a visual vividness that derives from her considerable experience of the visual arts. She embodies the growing taste of the age for a more colourful and more detailed kind of descriptive writing that grew out of what Hazlitt identifies as the recent 'direction of the public taste to the subject of painting'.² At the same time, she shares and embodies the widespread contemporary aversion to the painful in art and literature. Thus, as many reviewers commented, she combines the realism of Teniers or Crabbe with the pleasing image of rural society to be found in the comparatively ill-defined 'sketches' of her American contemporary, Washington Irving. She creates an image of rustic life that answers a need for greater realism while defending the current conviction that literature should also soothe and please.

The limitations of Mary Mitford's presentation are most evident when set against accounts of the social reality of contemporary village life. Her political perspective was a narrowly paternalistic one and, for all her affectionate concern for her villagers, her idealization of English rural society is also a tacit argument against social change. In this light, her persuasive image of a contemporary pastoral retreat was well received in the comparatively peaceful interval between the

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1. Harriet Martineau, Autobiography, 3 vols (1877), I, 419. See Ch. 3, p. 120.
 2. The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, Centenary edition, edited by P. P. Howe, 21 vols (1930-34), XI, 166. See Ch. 3, p. 121.

political and social unrest of the late 1810s and the agricultural riots and Reformist agitation of the late 20s and early 30s. The taste of the age, as she herself observed in 1829, 'require [d] lightness',¹ and literature at that time was not yet ripe for the radical exploration of social issues that was to manifest itself in subsequent decades. As early as 1833 Thomas Crofton Croker satirically observed that 'village life is not all à la Mitford',² and by the 1840s and 50s "'graphic description",³ was serving such writers as Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell to expose rather than to conceal social evils.

Mary Mitford's sketches are shaped by a love that attaches itself to particulars rather than by broader political considerations. As such, her limited perspective becomes her major strength. Her skill lies in the loving, detailed re-creation of her own experience of village life. Presenting her perception through the medium of a kindly narrative personality, she brings to life that which inspired affection in her, compromising the real with the fanciful in a perpetual round of pleasurable association.

Our Village is very much a product of the 1820s: each sketch is a series of impressions which cumulatively not only create a rich and evocative image of contemporary Berkshire

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1. Letter to Miss Jephson, ? Sept. 1829. MS Reading Reference Library. The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford in 6 vols, f. 580. See Ch. 5, pp. 221 and 241.
 2. 'Frontispiece' to My Village versus 'Our Village' (1833).
 3. Harriet Martineau, Autobiography, 3 vols (1877), I, 418.- See Ch. 3, p. 120.

village life but also act as a touchstone to the cultural and political climate of the age. Ultimately, however, it is the love that gives coherence to Mary Mitford's fanciful vision that enables her as a writer to transcend her age. The experience of reading Our Village remains a pleasurable and restorative one, in which both author and reader share in the loving interchange of remedial goodness that lies at the heart of the work.

Appendix A

A Selective Chronology of Prose Articles by Mary Mitford

This chronology relates specifically to Mary Mitford's presentation of her local surroundings and her prose fiction. Therefore it does not include any dramatic scenes, the charades Mary Mitford collaborated with William Harness to publish in Blackwood's Magazine, nor her contributions to The Ladies' Companion which were later included in Recollections of Literary Life (1852).

Mary Mitford's contributions to The New Monthly Magazine (NMM), The Lady's Magazine (LM) and The Monthly Magazine (MM) are generally initialled 'M.', although a few pieces remain unsigned. The 'Our Village' sketch is initialled 'K.' and two pieces, 'The Touchy Lady' and 'Rosedale and its Tenants', which appeared in The New Monthly Magazine in 1824 are initialled 'R.' and 'L.' respectively.

The titles of the annuals to which Mary Mitford contributed are given in full. They are placed before the magazine articles for each given year on the assumption that they would in fact have been submitted for publication at the end of the preceding year. The annual contributions are generally attributed either to 'Miss Mitford' or to 'Miss Mary Russell Mitford'.

Additional abbreviations used in the table below are:
BR for Belford Regis (1835); CS for Country Stories (1837) and
A for Atherton (1854).

<u>Title</u>	<u>Where first published</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Where re-published</u>	<u>Date</u>
'Field Flowers'	<u>NMM</u> , I, 648-50	June 1821	-	-
'Richmond'	<u>NMM</u> , II, 56-59	July 1821	<u>OV</u> 4 (re-written as 'A Visit to Richmond')	1830
'On the Comedies of Thomas May'	<u>NMM</u> , II, 70-75	July 1821	-	-
'On Letters and Letter-Writers'	<u>NMM</u> , II, 142-46	Aug. 1821	-	-
'Lucy'	<u>LM</u> , III, 478-83	Sept. 1822	<u>OV</u> 1	1824
'Boarding-School Recollections, No. I. The French Teacher'	<u>LM</u> , III, 545-51	Oct. 1822	<u>OV</u> 2	1826
'Boarding-School Recollections, No. II. My School-Fellows'	<u>LM</u> , III, 600-605	Nov. 1822	<u>OV</u> 2	1826
'Our Village'	<u>LM</u> , III, 645-50	Dec. 1822	<u>OV</u> 1	1824
'Boarding-School Recollections, No. III. The English Teacher'	<u>LM</u> , III, 672-77	Dec. 1822	<u>OV</u> 2	1826
'The Talking Lady'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 16-19	Jan. 1823	<u>OV</u> 1	1824
'Hannah'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 25-28	Jan. 1823	<u>OV</u> 1	1824
'Walks in the Country, No. I. Frost'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 92-94	Feb. 1823	<u>OV</u> 1	1824
'A Great Farm-House'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 102-105	Feb. 1823	<u>OV</u> 1	1824
'Modern Antiques'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 142-45	Mar. 1823	<u>OV</u> 1	1824

'Walks in the Country, No. II. The First Primrose'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 161-63	Mar. 1823	<u>OV</u> 1	1824
'Aunt Martha'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 214-15	Apr. 1823	<u>OV</u> 1	1824
'Walks in the Country, No. III. Violeting'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 229-31	Apr. 1823	<u>OV</u> 1	1824
'Cousin Mary'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 237-40	Apr. 1823	<u>OV</u> 1	1824
'Louisa'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 254-57	May 1823	-	-
'Tom Cordery'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 259-62	May 1823	<u>OV</u> 1	1824
'Walks in the Country, No. IV. Wood-Cutting'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 273-74	May 1823	<u>OV</u> 2 (as part of 'The Wood')	1826
'Bramley Maying'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 280-83	May 1823	<u>OV</u> 1	1824
'Walks in the Country, No. V. The Cowslip Ball'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 327-30	Jun. 1823	<u>OV</u> 1	1824
'The Black Velvet Bag'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 378-81	July 1823	<u>OV</u> 2	1826
'A Country Cricket Match'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 386-91	July 1823	<u>OV</u> 1	1824
'Walks in the Country, No. VI. The Ruined Mansion House'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 425-28	Aug. 1823	<u>OV</u> 2 (as 'The Old House at Aberleigh')	1826
'Harry L., or the Talking Gentleman'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 429-31	Aug. 1823	<u>OV</u> 1	1824
'Ellen'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 489-94	Sept. 1823	<u>OV</u> 1	1824

'Walks in the Country, No. VII. The Hard Summer'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 501-505	Sept. 1823	<u>OV</u> 1	1824
'Christian Names'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 559-62	Oct. 1823	<u>OV</u> 4 (as 'Cottage Names')	1830
'Walks in the Country, No. VIII. Nutting'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 609-12	Nov. 1823	<u>OV</u> 1	1824
'More of Our Village'	<u>LM</u> , IV, 665-67	Dec. 1823	<u>OV</u> 1 (as 'A Parting Glance at Our Village')	1824
'A Remarkable Character of the Old School'	<u>LM</u> , V, 1-7	Jan. 1824	<u>OV</u> 1 (as 'Mrs Mosse')	1824
'Walks in the Country, No. IX'	<u>LM</u> , V, 34-39	Jan. 1824	<u>OV</u> 1 (as 'The Visit')	1824
'French Emigrants, No. I'	<u>LM</u> , V, 55-61	Feb. 1824	<u>OV</u> 2	1826
'Walks in the Country, No. X. The Copse'	<u>LM</u> , V, 231-36	May 1824	<u>OV</u> 2	1826
'Dr. Casden'	<u>LM</u> , V, 287-90	June 1824	<u>OV</u> 2 (as 'Dr. Tubb')	1826
'Miss Fanny'	<u>LM</u> , V, 343-49	July 1824	<u>OV</u> 2 (as 'Marianne')	1826
'Lucy Revisited'	<u>LM</u> , V, 399-404	Aug. 1824	<u>OV</u> 2 (as 'A Visit to Lucy')	1826
'The Touchy Lady'	<u>NMM</u> , XI, 348-51	Oct. 1824	<u>OV</u> 2	1826
'Rosedale and its Tenants'	<u>NMM</u> , XI, 521-28	Dec. 1824	<u>OV</u> 4	1830
'The Vicar's Maid; A Village Story'	<u>The Amulet</u> , pp. 130-46	1826	<u>OV</u> 2	1826
'A Village Sketch'	<u>Forget-me-not</u> , pp. 304-15	1826	<u>OV</u> 2 (as 'Jack Hatch')	1826

'The Lady of Beechgrove'	<u>Friendship's Offering</u> , pp. 91-101	1826	<u>OV 2</u> (as 'The Tenants of Beechgrove')	1826
'My Godfather'	<u>The Literary Souvenir</u> , p. 393 ff.	1826	<u>OV 2</u>	1826
'An Old Gipsy: A Village Sketch'	<u>MM</u> , I, 13-17	Jan. 1826	<u>OV 2</u> (as 'The Old Gipsy')	1826
'The Young Gipsy: A Village Sketch. No. II'	<u>MM</u> , I, 129-34	Feb. 1826	<u>OV 2</u>	1826
'Old Neighbours, No. I. An Admiral on Shore'	<u>MM</u> , I, 377-85	April 1826	<u>OV 3</u>	1828
'Village Sketches, No. III. The Seventh Son of a Seventh Son'	<u>MM</u> , I, 575-80	June 1826	<u>OV 3</u> (re-written as 'Lost and Found')	1828
'Old Neighbours, No. II. A Quiet Gentlewoman'	<u>MM</u> , II, 274-79	Sept. 1826	<u>OV 3</u>	1828
'Village Sketches, No. IV. A New-Married Couple'	<u>MM</u> , II, 584-87	Dec. 1826	<u>OV 3</u>	1828
'The Chalk Pit. (A true story)'	<u>The Amulet</u> , pp. 145-53	1827	<u>OV 3</u>	1828
'Grace Neville'	<u>Forget-me-not</u> , pp. 57-68	1827	<u>OV 3</u>	1828
'Hay-Carrying'	<u>Friendship's Offering</u> , p. 160 ff.	1827	<u>OV 3</u>	1828
'The Queen of the Meadow: A Country Story'	<u>The Literary Souvenir</u> , pp. 177-88	1827	<u>OV 3</u>	1828

'Village Sketches, No. V. A Christmas Party'	<u>MM</u> , III, 46-51	Jan. 1827	<u>OV</u> 3	1828
'Village Sketches, No. VI. The Two Valentines'	<u>MM</u> , III, 263-66	March 1827	<u>OV</u> 3	1828
'Country Rambles, No. I. Wheat-Hoeing'	<u>MM</u> , III, 484-88	May 1827	<u>OV</u> 3	1828
'Village Sketches, No. VII. Whitsun-Eve'	<u>MM</u> , IV, 65-78	July 1827	<u>OV</u> 3	1828
'Village Sketches, No. VIII. Our Maying'	<u>MM</u> , IV, 155-59	Aug. 1827	<u>OV</u> 3	1828
'Fanny's Fairings'	<u>The Amulet</u> , pp. 246-52	1828	<u>OV</u> 3	1828
'The Village Schoolmistress'	<u>The Amulet</u> , pp. 53-68	1828	<u>OV</u> 3	1828
'Jessy of Kibe's Farm'	<u>The Bijou</u> , pp. 65-75	1828	<u>OV</u> 3 (as 'Jessy Lucas')	1828
'A Country Apothecary'	<u>Forget-me-not</u> , p. 113 ff.	1828	<u>OV</u> 3	1828
'The Last of the Barbers'	<u>The Literary Souvenir</u> , pp. 148-60	1828	<u>OV</u> 3 (as 'A Country Barber')	1828
'Mademoiselle Therese'	<u>The Literary Souvenir</u> , pp. 207-13	1828	<u>OV</u> 3	1828
'Olive Hathaway'	<u>The Pledge of Friendship</u> , p. 95 ff.	1828	<u>OV</u> 3	1828
'Village Sketches, No. IX. The Bird-Catcher'	<u>MM</u> , V, 130-34	Feb. 1828	<u>OV</u> 3	1828

'Village Sketches, No. X. The Mole-Catcher'	<u>MM</u> , V, 365-68	April 1828	<u>OV</u> 3	1828
'Village Sketches, No. XI. The Shaw'	<u>MM</u> , VI, 387-90	Oct. 1828	<u>OV</u> 4	1830
'Village Sketches, No. XII. Hannah Bint'	<u>MM</u> , VI, 572-6	Dec. 1828	<u>OV</u> 4	1830
'Little Moses'	<u>The Amulet</u> , pp. 380-92	1829	<u>OV</u> 4 (as 'The China Jug')	1830
'Going to the Races'	<u>The Anniversary</u> , pp. 46-57	1829	<u>OV</u> 4	1830
'Pretty Bobby: a True Story'	<u>The Christmas Box</u> , p. 140 ff.	1829	<u>OV</u> 4 (as 'The Robins')	1830
'Lost and Won. A Village Sketch'	<u>Forget-me-not</u> , pp. 217-28	1829	<u>OV</u> 4	1830
'Patty's New Hat'	<u>Friendship's Offering</u> , pp. 256-62	1829	<u>OV</u> 4	1830
'Amy and her dog Floss'	<u>Juvenile Forget-me-not</u> , p. 109 ff.	1829	<u>OV</u> 4 (as 'Amy Lloyd')	1830
'The General and his Lady. A Sketch'	<u>The Literary Souvenir</u> , pp. 204-18	1829	<u>OV</u> 4	1830
'The Young Cricketers; or Pride shall have a Fall'	<u>New Year's Gift</u> , p. 92 ff.	1829	<u>OV</u> 4	1830
'A Castle in the Air'	<u>The Amulet</u> , p. 347 ff.	1830	<u>OV</u> 4	1830
'Little Miss Wren'	<u>The Gem</u> , p. 125 ff.	1830	<u>OV</u> 4	1830

'The Cobbler over the Way'	<u>Friendship's Offering,</u> p. 99 ff.	1830	<u>OV 4</u>	1830
'The Two Dolls'	<u>Juvenile Forget-me-not,</u> p. 57 ff.	1830	<u>OV 4</u>	1830
'The Magpies'	<u>Juvenile Keepsake,</u> p. 95 ff.	1830	<u>OV 4</u>	1830
'A Village Romance'	<u>The Literary Souvenir,</u> pp. 105-119	1830	<u>OV 4</u> (as 'Hopping Bob')	1830
'The Two Sisters'	<u>Winter's Wreath,</u> p. 42 ff.	1830	<u>OV 4</u>	1830
'The Residuary Legatee. (A true story)'	<u>The Amulet,</u> pp. 230-40	1831	<u>OV 5</u>	1832
'The Rat- Catcher'	<u>The Gem,</u> pp. 201-13	1831	<u>OV 5</u>	1832
'The Cousins'	<u>Friendship's Offering,</u> pp. 1-13	1831	<u>OV 5</u>	1832
'The Haymakers'	<u>Remembrance,</u> p. 36 ff.	1831	<u>OV 5</u>	1832
'Caroline Cleveland: a School-day Anecdote'	<u>Ackermann's Juvenile Forget-me-not,</u> p. 81 ff.	1832	<u>OV 5</u>	1832
'A Day of Distress'	<u>The Amulet,</u> pp. 163-174	1832	<u>OV 5</u> (as 'The Lost Keys')	1832
'Young Master Ben'	<u>The Comic Offering,</u> p. 55 ff.	1832	<u>OV 5</u>	1832
'The Incendiary'	<u>Friendship's Offering,</u> pp. 1-17	1832	<u>OV 5</u>	1832

'The Runaway'	<u>The Literary Souvenir,</u> pp. 312-24	1832	<u>OV</u> 5	1832
'Match-making, a Sketch'	<u>Friendship's Offering,</u> pp. 1-15	1833		
'Dolly and her Beaux'	<u>New Year's Gift,</u> p. 163 ff.	1833	<u>A</u>	1854
'Inhabitants of a country town (No. I): a great man in retirement'	<u>NMM, XXXIX, 152-59</u>	Oct. 1833	<u>BR</u> (as 'Stephen Lane, the butcher')	1835
'Inhabitants of a country town (no. II): Peter Jenkins, the poulterer'	<u>NMM, XXXIX, 278-85</u>	Nov. 1833	<u>BR</u>	1835
'The Will. A Story founded on Fact'	<u>Forget-me-not,</u> pp. 177-91	1834	<u>BR</u> (as 'Belles of the Ball-room: the Will')	1835
'The Carpenter's Daughter. A Country Tale'	<u>Friendship's Offering,</u> p. 80 ff.	1834	<u>BR</u>	1835
'Inhabitants of a country town (no. III); Mrs. Duval and her lodgers - the old emigré'	<u>NMM, XL, 223-33</u>	Feb. 1834	<u>BR</u>	1835
'Inhabitants of a country town (No. IV, concl.): the dissenting minister'	<u>NMM, XLI, 171-80</u>	June 1834	<u>BR</u>	1835
'The Absent Member'	<u>The Amulet,</u> p. 97 ff.	1835	<u>BR</u>	1835
'The Beauty of the Village'	<u>Friendship's Offering,</u> pp. 160-76	1835	<u>CS</u>	1837

'The King's Ward'	<u>Finden's Tableaux,</u> p. 4 ff.	1838	<u>A</u>	1854
'The Cartel'	<u>Finden's Tableaux,</u> p. 39 ff.	1839	<u>A</u>	1854
'The Roundhead's Daughter'	<u>Finden's Tableaux,</u> p. 32 ff.	1840	<u>A</u>	1854
'The Beacon'	<u>Finden's Tableaux,</u> p. 46 ff.	1840	<u>A</u>	1854
'The Woodcutter'	<u>Finden's Tableaux,</u> p. 63 ff.	1840	<u>A</u>	1854
'The Gleaner'	<u>Finden's Tableaux,</u> p. 44 ff.	1841	<u>A</u>	1854
'The Village Amanuensis'	<u>Finden's Tableaux,</u> p. 55 ff.	1841	<u>A</u>	1854

Appendix B

Maps

- Map 1 - Map of Three Mile Cross and Surrounding Area.
Ordnance Survey 1" 1 : 63,360
(1817), Sheet 12.
- Map 2 - Map of the Parishes of Berkshire pre-1974.
Reproduced from the Berkshire Family History
Society booklet, Parish Registers of the
Archdeaconry of Berkshire (amended reprint,
1981), pp. 8-9.
- Map 3 - Map indicating Areas of Agricultural Unrest in
Berkshire during the Winter of 1830.
Adapted from N. Gash, 'The Rural Unrest in
England in 1830 with special reference to
Berkshire' (unpublished B.Litt. thesis,
St John's College, Oxford, 1934), p. 97c.

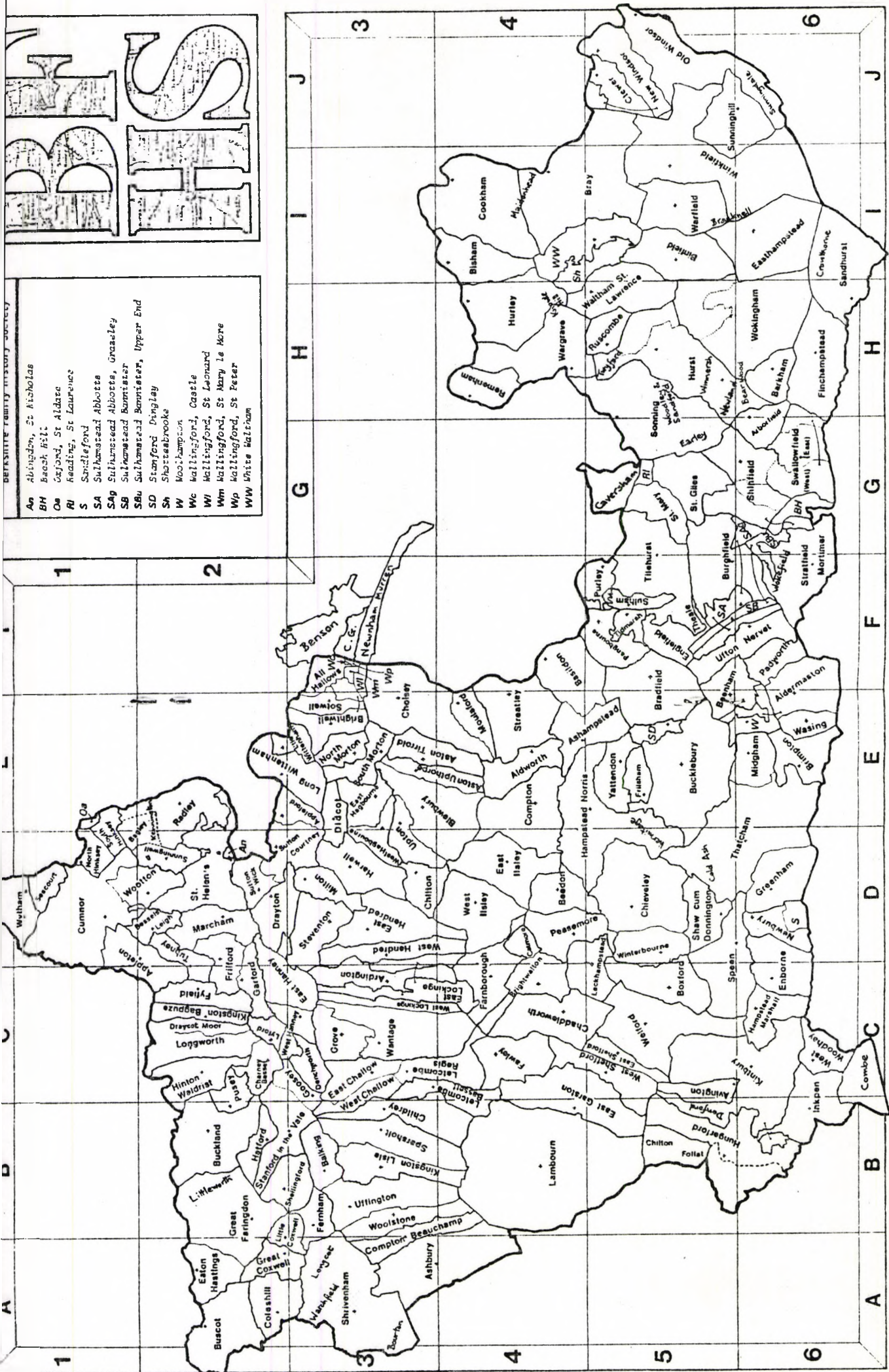


Map 1

BRIS

DEKSHITE FAMILY HISTORY SOCIETY

Ab	Abingdon, St Nicholas
BH	Beech Hill
Os	Oxford, St Aldate
Ri	Reading, St Laurence
S	Sandleford
SA	Sulhamstead Abbotta, Grassley
SAG	Sulhamstead Abbotta, Grassley
SB	Sulhamstead Bunnister
SBU	Sulhamstead Bunnister, Upper End
SD	Stanford Dingley
Sh	Shottesbrooke
W	Woolhampton
Wc	Wallingford, Castle
WI	Wallingford, St Leonard
Wm	Wallingford, St Mary Le Mare
Wp	Wallingford, St Peter
WW	White Waltham

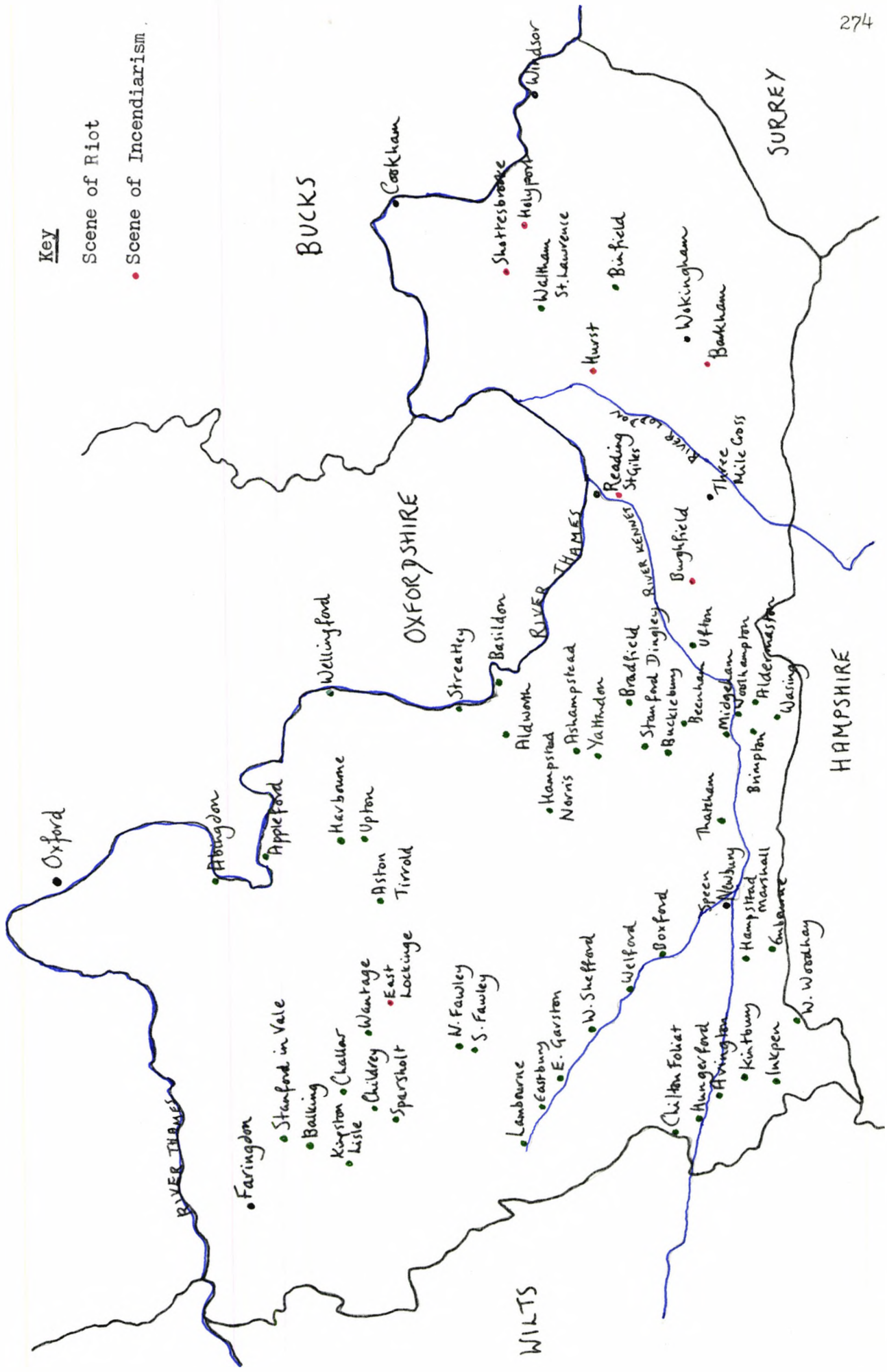


Map 2

Key

Scene of Riot

• Scene of Incendiarism



Map indicating areas of agricultural unrest in Berkshire in 1830.

Appendix C

Illustrations

- Fig. 1 - Thomas Christopher Hofland (1777-1843)
A View from Richmond Hill, c. 1820
Oil on canvas
Lot 29, Christie's sale, 17 March 1967.
- Fig. 2 - John Linnell (1792-1882)
The River Kennet, near Newbury, 1815
Oil on canvas on wood
Collection: Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.
- Fig. 3 - David Wilkie (1785-1841)
Village Politicians, 1806
Oil on canvas
Collection: The Earl of Mansfield.



Thomas Christopher Hofland (1777-1843)
A View from Richmond Hill, c. 1820

Fig. 1



John Linnell (1792-1882)

The River Kennet, near Newbury, 1815

Fig. 2



David Wilkie (1785-1841)
Village Politicians, 1806

Fig. 3

Select Bibliography

Sections I - IV of this bibliography cover Mary Mitford's life and work and sources concerning her immediate local surroundings. Sections V - VII relate to the contextual material dealt with in Chapters III - V of the thesis. Section VIII lists general works of reference consulted.

For a complete list of all editions of Mary Mitford's published works I refer the reader to Richard Hart's unpublished bibliography,¹ a copy of which is held by Reading Reference Library. This also gives a more exhaustive, though not complete, list of the locations of Mary Mitford's manuscript letters. In Section I.ii below I have given a selection of what I regard as the most interesting and important later editions of Our Village. In Section II.i, although I cite only those manuscripts I have consulted, including copies of certain letters in American collections, I believe these to be the major holdings. I have listed Mary Mitford's works in chronological order but have excluded the magazine publications detailed in Appendix A. Manuscript letters are listed, as far as possible, in chronological order and the local archive material in Section IV.i is given in the catalogue chronology of the Berkshire County Records Office. Articles are listed first alphabetically by author and then chronologically where the author is unknown.

In Sections V - VII I list only those works which are referred to in the body of the thesis and a selection of works that I have found most useful in creating an overall picture of the age.

1. R. J. Hart, 'Mary Russell Mitford; A Bibliography' (unpublished thesis submitted for Fellowship of the Library Association, 1981).

I The Works of Mary Russell Mitfordi. Original WorksPoems (1810).Poems (1811).Christina, The Maid of the South Seas, a poem (1811).Ode to Genius, a poem (1812).Watlington Hill, a poem (1812).Narrative Poems on the Female Character, in the Various Relations of Life (1813).Julian, A Tragedy (1823).Our Village: Sketches of Rural Character and Scenery, 1 (1824).Foscari, A Tragedy (1826).Our Village: Sketches of Rural Character and Scenery, 2 (1826).Dramatic Scenes, Sonnets and Other Poems (1827).Our Village: Country Stories, Scenes, Characters, etc., etc., 3 (1828).Rienzi, A Tragedy (1828).Our Village: Sketches of Rural Character and Scenery, 4 (1830).Our Village: Sketches of Rural Character and Scenery, 5 (1832).Charles the First, an Historical Tragedy (1834).Belford Regis; or Sketches of a Country Town, 3 vols (1835).Sadak and Kalasrade or the Waters of Oblivion: A Romantic Opera (1835).Country Stories (1837).Inez de Castro (1841).Recollections of a Literary Life, 3 vols (1852).Atherton and Other Tales, 3 vols (1854).Dramatic Works, 2 vols (1854).

ii. Selected Later Editions of 'Our Village'

Our Village, Sketches of Rural Character and Scenery, with engravings by Baxter, 3 vols (1835).

Our Village: Sketches of Rural Character and Scenery, 2 vols (Bohn's Standard Library edition, 1848).

Our Village, ed. with an introduction by Ernest Rhys (1891).

Our Village, with an introduction by Anne Thackeray Ritchie and one hundred illustrations by Hugh Thomson (1893).

Our Village, with coloured illustrations by C. E. Brock (English Idylls Series, 1904).

Sketches of English Life and Character, with sixteen reproductions from the Paintings of Stanhope A. Forbes, A.R.A. (Edinburgh, 1909).

Mitford, M. R., and Walton, Izaak, Two Prose Idylls: Abridgements of 'The Compleat Angler' by Izaak Walton, and 'Our Village' by Mary Russell Mitford. Arranged and edited by J. Edward Mason, M.A. (1930).

Our Village, ed. with an introduction by Sir John Square (Everyman edition, 1936).

Our Village, with an introduction by William J. Roberts and wood engravings by Joan Hassall (1947).

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