

Thomas Love Peacock

By Tony Reeve



Thomas Love Peacock became a resident of Marlow in the summer of 1815 and had a house there until July 1819, a period of four years. During this time, he is best known as a friend and neighbour of the poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley and his wife, Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*, when they also lived in Marlow. Yet, in many ways, it is difficult to understand why they should have been friends.

For example, Peacock was seven years older than Shelley, being born on 18 October 1785 at Weymouth in Dorset, the

son of a London glass merchant. His father died in 1794 when Peacock was only 8 years of age, but in preparation for his death, his father purchased three annuities, which failed many years early. As a result, Peacock had to leave school at eleven years of age and take a job as a lowly clerk in the City of London. He had no secondary education at all, but was clearly of outstanding intelligence and managed to educate himself. He taught himself Latin, ancient Greek, French and Italian and became an expert on philosophy and the classic writers.

Peacock had no expectations of an inheritance; he could not borrow money. When he got into debt, he worried about his bills and did his best to pay tradesmen.

He was not a big man, but was slim and narrow shouldered. He dressed very neatly and conventionally like a clerk, with a hat over a shock of dark hair. He was reserved in manner, although he had a witty sense of humour. This allowed him to be critical or express disagreement, without people taking offence.

In contrast, Shelley was the son of an aristocrat, educated at Eton, could borrow large sums of money, treated tradesmen's bills with cavalier disregard, was flamboyant, argumentative and didn't seem to understand when he caused offence or amusement.

So, if Peacock was so different from Shelley, how did they become such good friends? To understand this, we must look further at Peacock's early life.

For a man like Peacock, with a middle class background, but no family money, the opportunities were limited. There were no jobs advertised with big companies. There were only five ways a man could advance: he could get a job in the church or the armed services; he could open a school; he could seek the patronage of somebody wealthy; he could marry somebody wealthy; or he could join a chartered trading company, such as the East India Company. Peacock tried all of these in turn.

Firstly, the family of Peacock's mother did have connections with the Royal Navy. So Peacock joined the Navy as a clerk for a time, just after the Battle of Trafalgar, but he hated it. He described his ship as "this floating inferno". A small collection of his poems was published in 1806, so he resigned his naval post in 1809, falsely confident that he could earn his living as a writer.

Peacock loved walking over long distances. Later that year, he began a solitary two-week walk, tracing the course of the Thames from its source to Chertsey, a distance of some 180 miles. This enabled him to expand on a poem, which was published the following year as *The Genius of the Thames*. Maybe this was when he got to know and appreciate Marlow for the first time.

He also spent a time in North Wales, when he became familiar with the copper and slate businesses controlled by the Williams family, who had their home in Temple, just across the river, near Marlow.

However, Peacock found it almost impossible to make a living as a poet. His money problems were made worse when his mother suddenly became dependent upon him. He worked very hard at writing poems and plays, which were regarded as very promising, but they produced no income and he was fortunate even to get a little charitable support from The Literary Fund, which, by some coincidence was founded and supported by the Williams family.

Peacock was destitute and close to suicide. He tried opening a school and even contemplated becoming a labourer. What he needed was a powerful patron.

This is where the unlikely figure of Percy Bysshe Shelley enters the picture. As an aristocrat, Shelley had the power of giving recommendation and patronage. Therefore, a mutual friend sent Shelley a copy of Peacock's poems, asking whether he could do something for him.

Shelley realized that Peacock was not only a deserving and talented writer, but was also experienced in the ways of business, which could be useful to him. Peacock demonstrated his keenness by accompanying Shelley and his first wife, Harriet, when they visited the home of friends for several weeks at Bracknell in September 1813. They got on well, although this immediately revealed differences in maturity and worldly experience. Peacock was amused at Shelley's belief in free love, naturism and vegetarianism; he thought they were cranky and said so.

In July the following year, Shelley abandoned Harriet and his children by eloping to the continent with Mary Godwin and her step-sister, Claire Clairmont. He wrote to Peacock to ask him 'to superintend money affairs' in his absence. This would be better described as 'keeping his debtors at bay'. On Shelley's return in September, Peacock helped Shelley to elude bailiffs by hiding him in the rooms he had rented for his mother in Chancery Lane. This is when the two men became good friends. Yet at the same time, it was obvious that Shelley could not be relied on as a patron. Peacock had to find another route to solving his money problems.

Another way that a person like Peacock could progress in life was to marry well. This should not be regarded as a scurrilous ambition; if a father had no sons, he would often be glad to take a son-in-law into his business to make sure it continued after his own death, so that his widow and daughter would be well taken care of. If the prospective suitor could make himself acceptable to the bride-to-be, so much the better, although this was not always regarded as essential.

Therefore in the same year, Peacock proposed marriage to three young ladies, all without success. This was almost certainly because his prospects as a dramatist and poet did not appeal to their fathers, regardless of the ladies' feelings. No doubt they were also aware of his friendship with the free-loving Shelley.

Then Shelley's grandfather suddenly died and Shelley was able to give Peacock a sort of salary, £ 120 a year. Their

relationship resumed, based on patronage as well as friendship.

Peacock was now able to rent a small house for himself and his mother and return to the writing he loved. The place he chose was in Oxford Lane (now renamed Oxford Road), Marlow, backing on to what is now Borlase Field, in the summer of 1815, the year of Waterloo.

Shelley came to stay with Peacock in Marlow, while they looked for somewhere for Shelley and Mary Godwin to live. They found a suitable house near Windsor, to which Peacock walked regularly to converse not only with Shelley and Mary Godwin, but also to renew acquaintance with another old friend, William St Croix, who was in the household of George III at Windsor. Peacock was particularly fond of St Croix's sister, Marianne, and had earlier proposed marriage to her, but nothing came of it, although they became loosely engaged for a time.

Peacock influenced Shelley to take up activities such as long-distance walking and sailing, in which Peacock was proficient. In late August 1815, Peacock, Shelley, Mary and her half-brother made a boating excursion up the Thames from Old Windsor to beyond Cricklade, a similar journey to that Peacock had made on foot six years before.

Peacock's example also encouraged Shelley to spend more time to polish his writing, which contributed to Shelley developing the lyrical style for which he has since become famous. Conversely, Peacock realized he could not match Shelley's genius as a poet, but he could develop a new way of

writing in prose, combining his precise style with his natural sense of humour.

In December that year, Peacock completed the first of the novels for which he is best remembered, *Headlong Hall*, which proved a success. At last, Thomas Love Peacock had achieved a first step up the crowded hill of literary acclaim.

Peacock's novels were satires. *Headlong Hall* parodied the free love, vegetarianism, naturism and inconclusive debates that he had witnessed in Bracknell. The novel was regarded as daring and original, often making farcical situations funnier by describing them with delicate precision, as in the following.

"Several of the ladies shrieked at the sight of the skull; and Miss Tenorina, starting up in great haste and terror, caused the subversion of a cup of chocolate, which a servant was handing to the Reverend Dr Gaster, into the nape of the neck of Sir Patrick O'Prism. Sir Patrick, rising impetuously, to clap an extinguisher, as he expressed himself, on the farthing rushlight of the rascal's life, pushed over the chair of Marmaduke Milestone, Esquire, who, catching for support at the first thing that came in his way, which happened unluckily to be the corner of the table-cloth, drew it instantaneously with him to the floor, involving plates, cups and saucers, in one promiscuous ruin."

Peacock now became respected as an equal by Shelley, although he never ceased to honour his obligations to Shelley. When Shelley went to Switzerland with Mary Godwin and

her step-sister, Claire, Shelley asked him to find another house for them on their return. This proved to be Albion House in West Street, Marlow. Peacock saw to the redecoration, furnishing and laying out of the garden.

Before they moved in, Shelley and Mary, now married, came to stay with Peacock and his mother in Oxford Lane for a few weeks, where she worked on the final draft of *Frankenstein*. However, Mary did not get on with Peacock's mother, nor did she appreciate Peacock's qualities. She announced that 'he morally disgusts me'. This was not only because of the payments he accepted, but also because Peacock had been a friend of Shelley's deserted first wife, Harriet, and refused to be dissuaded from a good opinion of her. Mary was quick to make ill judgements of people who crossed her in some way.

Somebody else who was not acceptable to Mary was Shelley's long-time friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg. So when Hogg came to visit Shelley at his new home in Marlow he tended to stay with Peacock, rather than Shelley. Nevertheless, the three men spent many enjoyable hours together, sailing in Shelley's boat on the Thames or taking long walks to Virginia Water, Chequers or even London, on several occasions.

In the following Spring, 1817, Peacock's second satirical novel, *Melincourt*, was published. In this, he introduces someone called Sir Oran Haut-Ton, an orangutang, who was more successful than many of his human companions, but of course, was unable to speak. He had bought himself a baronetcy and planned to get himself and his joint candidate, Mr Sarcastic, into Parliament by buying votes in the rotten

borough of Onevote. So by carrying accepted conventions to their absurd conclusions, Peacock was demonstrating the evils of corruption and, in effect, appealing for political reform. "*A corrupt administration estimates conscience and Stilton cheese by the same criterion, that its rottenness was its recommendation.*"

Peacock uses debate between characters to satirize many contemporary topics, such as the first use of paper money. It enabled him to make public political comment at a time when any criticism of Government was severely repressed.

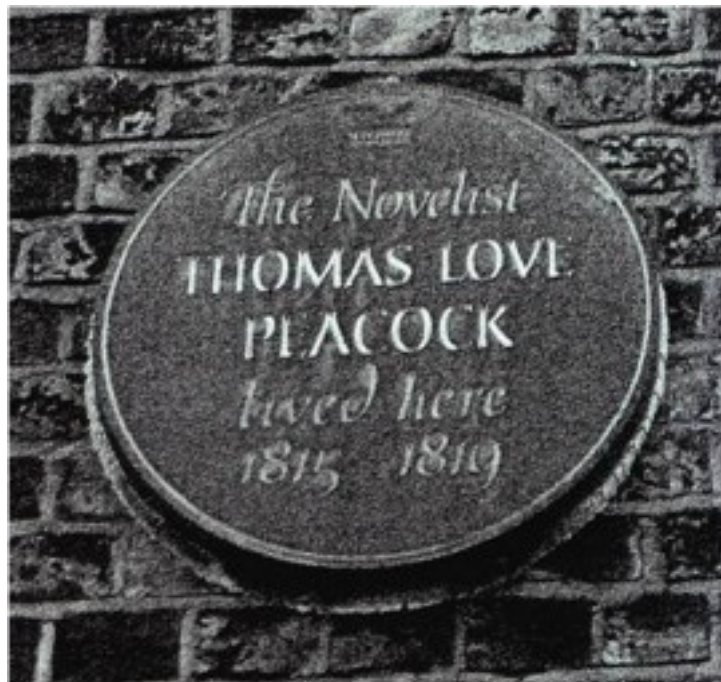
Shelley was desperate to get what he regarded as his own great masterpiece, *The Revolt of Islam*, completed and published. He did eventually do so, but only after Peacock and others altered some 60 lines. After this, Shelley left Marlow for Italy, from which he never returned, leaving Peacock to deal with his possessions. However, just before his patron's departure, Peacock proposed marriage yet again, this time surprisingly to Mary's half-sister, Claire Clairmont, who was clutching the illegitimate child she had recently borne by Lord Byron. By the standards of the time, her history meant she could never have expected to receive a reputable proposal of marriage again, but she still turned Peacock down, preferring to continue tagging along as Shelley's alternative woman..

Meantime, Peacock was working on another satirical novel, *Nightmare Abbey*, in which he gently satirizes some of his friends and ridicules their more extreme ideas. For example, the character, Scythrop, is clearly a caricature of Shelley.

The following is an example of his polished and witty style:

"Mr. And Mrs. Hilary brought with them an orphan neice, a daughter of Mr Glowry's youngest sister, who had made a runaway love-match with an Irish officer. The lady's fortune disappeared in the first year: love, by a natural consequence, disappeared in the second: the Irishman himself, by a still more natural consequence, disappeared in the third."

Nightmare Abbey was published in November 1818.



After Shelley's departure, Peacock had agreed to write to him every fortnight to keep him informed of events in England. In his letter at the end of May, Peacock wrote: *'I have no idea and no wish remaining to leave Marlow, and when you return to England you will find me still here, though perhaps not in the same house. ..'* On 5 July 1818, he wrote: *'We have been very tranquil in our rotten borough amidst the bustle of the general election which has been attended in one or two*

places with very riotous proceedings. .. You will find me on your return to England in the same town but another house...'

He wrote to Shelley again on 19 July 1818, *'I have changed my habitation, having been literally besieged out of the other by horses and children. It is cheap and exceedingly comfortable. It is the one where Major Kelly lived when you were here, facing the Quoiting Place in West Street'*.

The house now bears a grey plaque, recording that Peacock lived there from 1815 to 1819. He did rent houses in Marlow for that period, but he actually lived in that house only for the last six months of 1818.

Peacock was a very private man: he did not keep a diary, except for the last six months he lived in Marlow. Unfortunately, there is very little of interest in it, but he does mention Marlow horse races.

On 23rd July: *'Very ill in the morning ... Marlow Pony Races in Spade Oak Meadow Field, an excellent race ground of considerable note. This year the first experiment to revive the custom. Had a very pleasant day. The races were well-managed, the day beautiful: the scene delightful: the sport good and continued till sunset'*.

The journal ends on Saturday 26th September, but in a letter to Shelley on 29th November 1818, he reported, *'I rise every morning at half past 5 and write before breakfast by lamp-light.'* The result of this was *Maid Marian*, later published by Hookham.

In a further letter to Shelley on 15 December 1818, Peacock talks about his satisfaction with his house in Marlow: *'You can have no conception, from what you have seen of its outside, how comfortable this house is. I never before inhabited [one] so much to my mind, nor in a place so well adapted to all my purposes'*.

Nevertheless, he wrote his next letter from lodgings in Covent Garden, London. After trying over several years, Peacock had found someone to recommend him for a job in the East India Company. On 13th January 1819, he wrote to Shelley from his new lodgings, *'I now spend every morning at the India House from half past 10 to half past four, studying Indian affairs.'*

Consequently, in July of that year, he vacated his house in Marlow and moved his mother to a new home at Stamford Street, Blackfriars, London.

The departure of the Shelleys and later Peacock from Marlow marked the end of a most extraordinarily creative period for all three of them. None of them quite rose again to the same peak that they achieved during those three years of 1816 to 1818. It was a significant period in British literary history.

On the strength of this new security, Peacock once again sought a wife. Her name was Jane Gryffydh, a Welsh parson's daughter, whom he not seen or communicated with since April 1811. She must have been astonished to receive a letter from him after so many years, particularly when she read its contents.

It is even more extraordinary that she wrote back immediately and accepted his proposal, even though, as a parson's daughter, she was worried by his lack of religious belief. They were married four months later in Cardiganshire. Peacock's recent appointment did not permit them to have what we should term 'a honeymoon' but they did go on their first holiday in September the same year to Marlow.

Meantime Peacock had become a practical man of business at the East India Company. He became the Company's acknowledged expert on the new technology of steam navigation. He supervised the design and construction to trials of a new class of iron steamers that had moveable keels so that they could not only be used at sea, but also navigate the shallower reaches of the river approaches to trading posts.

Peacock's satirical novel, *Maid Marian*, was written in Marlow, but was published in 1822, after he had moved. It was actually adapted into a pantomime or operetta, with additional scenes grafted from *Ivanhoe*, and had a long run at Covent Garden. In 1829 and 1831, he produced two more novels, *The Misfortunes of Elphin* and *Crotchet Castle*.

He also began writing reviews of opera performances for *The Globe* and the *Examiner*. He was clearly very knowledgeable and displayed considerable insight, being one of the first to recognize the virtues of Bellini, Paganini and Beethoven.

Peacock and his wife were happy together for a few years and had three daughters and a son, but the second daughter died in

1826 before her third birthday. Peacock's wife became inconsolable after the death; she gradually became a complete invalid and mentally ill. Peacock did everything he could to console her, even to the extent of adopting, Mary Ann Rosewall, the baby daughter of a local labourer; but it did not help: Peacock and his wife became incompatible and they parted. Nevertheless, Peacock continued to provide for all his wife's needs and maintained a house for her in Southend-on-Sea, until she died in 1851.

In the following year, he made yet another extraordinary proposal of marriage; this time to the niece of Claire Clairmont. Although Claire had turned him down herself 32 years earlier, she encouraged Pauline Clairmont to accept, but he was rejected again for the same obvious reason: he was too old for her.

Peacock retired in 1856, at the age of 70, after 37 years service. He then became something of a recluse and rarely left his home in Halliford. His tastes were a good library, a good dinner, a pleasant garden and rural walks.

However retirement did enable him to produce a lengthy poem, *Newark Abbey*, ten articles in *Frasers* magazine (including his memoirs of Shelley) and one last satirical novel, *Gryll Grange*.

In his final years, Peacock was nursed tenderly by Mary Ann Rosewall, his adopted daughter. She was devoted to him and remained a member of his household for 40 years and never

married. When Peacock died in his sleep, aged 80, on 23 January 1866, he left the balance of his estate to her.

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Sources:

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