

## *The Columbia Theatre: Thornwell versus Cooper*

JAMES Henley Thornwell was born on 9th December 1812 near Cheraw, South Carolina. His father, a plantation overseer, died when he was eight years old, leaving his mother, a devout Calvinistic Baptist, to raise him and his siblings in relative poverty. From an early age Thornwell demonstrated a tremendous intellectual prowess coupled with remarkable ambition, which drew the attention of many.

James Gillespie, a wealthy planter, and William Robbins, a prominent attorney, especially took an interest in Thornwell. During his teenage years, he lived first with Gillespie and then with Robbins. The two men worked together to mentor him, finance his education, and provide him fatherly direction. However, they offered him two different theological perspectives. Gillespie, a lifelong Episcopalian, was an orthodox Trinitarian. Robbins, who was even more of a moulding influence on Thornwell, was a Unitarian. Originally from Massachusetts, Robbins was reared in the Unitarianism of that region and continued to espouse it during the time Thornwell lived with him. Thus, during his late teens, Thornwell's most influential mentor was an adherent to Channing's Unitarianism.<sup>1</sup>

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1. JHT to Gillespie, 4 March 1837, JHTP, SCL; Michael O'Brien, *Conjectures of*

A few years later, Robbins converted to Trinitarianism through the preaching of evangelist Daniel Baker. He publicly professed his faith in the Trinity and joined Saint David's Episcopal Church in Cheraw. But before his conversion, he sent Thornwell to study under another Unitarian who had likewise relocated to South Carolina: Thomas Cooper, the president of South Carolina College.<sup>2</sup>

### Thomas Cooper's Unitarian Encroachments

Cooper was born in Westminster, London, on 22 October 1759, into a family of significant wealth. He attended Oxford University, but he did not receive a degree because he refused to sign *The Thirty-Nine Articles*, article one of which affirms 'Faith in the Holy Trinity'. He became a barrister, but his wealth enabled him to spend time pursuing his favorite interests: philosophy, theology, science, and, especially, the advancement of political freedoms for those outside the Anglican faith, Unitarians in particular.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas Robbins represented the more Arian-leaning form of Unitarianism, Cooper was a Socinian. He was a close friend and disciple of Joseph Priestley and even named one of his sons Thomas Priestley Cooper after himself and his mentor. Priestley had been raised as a Calvinist and could recite the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* in its entirety at the age of four, but, as we already noted, he became the leading champion for Socinianism in his generation.<sup>4</sup>

Cooper and Priestley worked together to extend the privileges that England's Toleration Act afforded Dissenters, including the

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*Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860*, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), p. 1115.

2. Robbins to JHT, 23 August 1834, JHTP, SCL; Benjamin Palmer, Jr., *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell D.D., LL.D.: Ex-President of the South Carolina College, Late Professor of Theology in the Theological Seminary at Columbia, South Carolina* (Richmond, VA: Whittet & Shepperson, 1875), pp. 2-82.
3. Dumas Malone, *The Public Life of Thomas Cooper* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1926), pp. 4-5.
4. Charles Himes, *Life and Times of Judge Thomas Cooper* (Carlisle, PA: Himes Estate, 1918), p. 35; Steven Johnson, *The Invention of Air: A Story of Science, Faith, Revolution, and the Birth of America* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), p. 70.

right to hold public office, to those who disbelieved the Trinity. The pair became attached to revolution societies in England, formed associations with the Jacobins of France, and published tracts advocating political revolution. Edmund Burke accused Cooper of treason in the House of Commons. In his *Reply to Burke's Invective*, Cooper offered unqualified endorsement of revolutionaries such as Thomas Paine, and the public viewed his pamphlet as a call to revolution.<sup>5</sup>

Cooper and Priestley eventually became disillusioned by the persistent conservatism of England and the turbulent radicalism of France, believing that 'in neither land could one be truly free'.<sup>6</sup> Thus, they immigrated to America in 1794, when Cooper was thirty-four, settling in Northumberland, Pennsylvania, which was a sort of haven for 'fugitives of English persecution'.<sup>7</sup> Priestley conducted Unitarian services each Sunday, which Cooper attended, first at his home and then, as the congregation grew, at a neighboring school.<sup>8</sup>

Cooper remained quiet for a time, but ever the controversialist, he began publishing a newspaper in which he criticized President John Adams. In 1800, Cooper was charged with violating the Sedition Act, which banned the publication of scandalous or malicious writings against the federal government. He was found guilty, sentenced to six months in prison, and fined one hundred dollars. The judge in the case declared, 'Take this publication in all its parts, and it is the boldest attempt I have known to poison the minds of the people.'<sup>9</sup>

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5. Malone, *Cooper*, pp. 20-26; Thomas Cooper, *Reply to Burke's Invective in the House of Commons, on the 30th of April 1792* (London: J. Johnson, 1792), p. 67.

6. Malone, *Cooper*, p. 68.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

8. Thomas Cooper, 'A Review of Dr Priestley's Theological Works.' In Joseph Priestley, *Memoirs of Dr Joseph Priestley*, 2 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1806), p. 824.

9. Thomas Cooper, *An Account of the Trial of Thomas Cooper, of Northumberland: on a charge of libel against the President of the United States, 1800* (Philadelphia: John Bioren, 1800), pp. 6-7, 42.

Some Americans viewed Cooper as a demagogue deserving deportation; others venerated him as a champion for free speech. Priestley wrote his friend Theophilus Lindsey, who had founded Essex Street Chapel, the first Unitarian congregation in England, saying, 'Mr Cooper has been convicted of a libel, on the Sedition Act, and is now in prison; but he has gained great credit by it, and he will, I doubt not, be a rising man in the country.'<sup>10</sup> Priestley's prediction proved to be correct. Overall, the trial raised public opinion of Cooper and, after serving his prison sentence and lying low for a few years, he became a judge in Northumberland in 1804.<sup>11</sup>

One of Cooper's greatest admirers became President Thomas Jefferson, an Anti-federalist and champion of the First Amendment. Jefferson soon became Cooper's closest American friend, and the two corresponded frequently. Like Cooper, Jefferson was a friend and follower of Priestley.

Once, when Jefferson's daughter Martha wrote him asking about his views on theology, he replied, 'I have written to Philadelphia for Doctor Priestley's History of the Corruptions of Christianity, which I will send you, and recommend an attentive perusal, because it establishes the groundwork of my view of this subject.'<sup>12</sup> Jefferson commended the same to his friend Henry Fry:

The work of Dr Priestley which I sent you has always been a favourite of mine. I consider the doctrines of Jesus as delivered by himself to contain the outlines of the sublimest system of morality that has ever been taught but I hold in the most profound detestation and execration the corruptions of it which have been invented by priestcraft and established by kingcraft constituting a conspiracy of church and state against the civil and religious liberties of mankind.<sup>13</sup>

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10. John Rutt, *Life and Correspondence of Joseph Priestley* (London: R. Hunter, 1832), p. 436.

11. Malone, *Cooper*, pp. 145-50.

12. TJ to Martha Jefferson Randolph, 25 April 1803, TJP.

13. TJ to Henry Fry, 17 June 1804, TJP.