



2015

Religious Dissent and the Aikin-Barbault Circle 1740-1860: Book Review

Nigel Aston
University of Leicester

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rae>



Part of the [History Commons](#), [Other English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Aston, Nigel (2015) "Religious Dissent and the Aikin-Barbault Circle 1740-1860: Book Review," *Religion in the Age of Enlightenment*: Vol. 5, Article 21.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rae/vol5/iss1/21>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion in the Age of Enlightenment by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Religious Dissent and the Aikin-Barbauld Circle 1740–1860

A Review by Nigel Aston
University of Leicester

There has been a remarkable rise of interest during the last decade in Anna Letitia Barbauld's (née Aikin) significance in the formation of Romantic literature, and *Religious Dissent and the Aikin-Barbauld Circle 1740–1860* places her appropriately within the thriving nexus of her intellectually creative Dissenting family. This volume of nine essays has its origins in a conference at Dr. Williams's library, currently the engine room of many initiatives into British dissenting history. The Aikins were a talented, hardworking, group of men and women down several generations, sparking off each other, inspired by their non-trinitarian Christian faith, and making complex contributions to British culture for more than a century. In the first chapter, Felicity James introduces the "Circle": men and women of sensibility and aimiable conversation at one level, but not in the least escapist; they were ready to stand up for the ideals of the French Revolution as well as for scientific advance. David L. Wykes then treats the, as it were, founding father of the Circle, John Aikin senior (1713–80). John was a product of Philip Doddridge's Academy in Northampton and King's College in Aberdeen. In time, he set up his own school at Kibworth Harcourt in Leicestershire. Before he moved on to teach at that celebrated flagship of Rational Dissent,

Warrington Academy, John had built up a formidable pedagogical reputation for Kibworth and connected it fully into the nationwide Dissenting network. Wykes argues forcefully for seeing John's school years rather than his Warrington years as making "the greater contribution to Dissent and education" (43).

In chapter 3, William McCarthy, her biographer, discusses "How Dissent made Anna Letitia Barbauld, and what she made of Dissent." McCarthy insists, plausibly enough, on the importance of her father's liberal and didactic parenting, as well as pointing to the lifelong impact on Anna of friendship with Joseph and Mary Priestley at Warrington in the 1760s. McCarthy, unsurprisingly, finds feeling rather than doctrine supremely present in Anna's life and works, as he trawls through her much reprinted *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781); she reads at times as more pantheist than Christian.

Kathryrn Ready chooses to present John Aikin junior as a literary physician. Ready looks through the prism of his various writings and his own educational formation as a surgical apprentice and a student at both Edinburgh and Leiden. The result of John's development was "a medico-moral discourse" (85) that was as unsettling for establishment politicians as it was for establishment physicians. The many-sided John Aikin junior is also the principal subject for Stephen Daniels and Paul Elliott in chapter 5. They consider John's geographical imagination by focusing on *England Delineated* (1788) and *Geographical Delineations* (1806) as cultural texts. Daniels and Elliot view John's perspective as a progressive landscape, quietly patriotic, proud of commercial circulation, and rising above narrowly Dissenting geographies.

The last four chapters deal with the less familiar later Aikins. In chapter 6, Ian Inkster considers Arthur Aikin (1773–1854) and the character of English industrialization. This Aikin was Secretary of the Royal Society of Arts between 1817 and 1839, keen to publicize inventions and technical discoveries and disseminate useful information on industrial technology. Inkster shows how Arthur's achievement can be understood only within the integrated contexts of progressive Unitarianism and science in the 1790s and 1800s. In chapter 7, Michelle Levy recovers and reassesses Lucy Aikin's history writings, three two-volume court histories

on Elizabeth I, James I, and Charles I, published between 1818 and 1833. These histories were much valued in their day for Lucy's lively writing and her willingness to identify what was wrong about past regimes. Lucy spared neither Mary I nor Elizabeth I from criticism for their attacks on religious freedom, and she cast archbishop Laud as the archvillain. In chapter 8, Felicity James looks at Lucy Aikin's *Memoirs* in a narrative that "to some extent resists Barbauld's achievements as woman writer" (185). Lastly, Anne F. Janowitz offers an extended retrospective on the Aikin family in the light of the previous contributions.

The whole volume is nicely balanced in its coverage and shows a critical awareness of the Aikin family's self-presentation that was less evident in earlier treatments, notably Betsy Rodgers's *Georgian Chronicle: Mrs Barbauld and her Family* (1958). Without exception, the contributors are alert to the nuances of Rational Dissent and its capacity for strenuous but enlightened outreach to those in wider society who were broadly in sympathy with its progressive agendas. The Aikin-Barbauld Circle was an important site of religious sociability, but that religious dimension kindled those other varied forms of creativity over several generations that this volume illuminates. One would hope that the model of study deployed here could be adapted for wider use, for instance for Anglican familial networks.

James, Felicity, and Ian Inkster, eds. *Religious Dissent and the Aikin-Barbauld Circle 1740–1860*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xiii + 257.