

Laurence Sterne – Thomas Hesilrige Correspondence

Laurence Sterne, widely known as author of the comedic satirical novel, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (first volume 1759) and other literary works, and Thomas Hesilrige were good friends during the latter part of Sterne's life (1713-1768). Their correspondence was apparently rather frequent, but most of it has not survived. The following letter, dated 5 July 1765, is one of the survivors.

Before turning to the letter itself, which is reproduced from Lewis Perry Curtis' 1935 edition of the *Letters of Laurence Sterne* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, pages 252-53), some background will be helpful. Little need be said about Sterne: he lived most of his life in Yorkshire, until fame following publication of the first volume of *Tristram Shandy* took him to London. The novel was a sensation, both because of the delightful storyline and because Sterne was an experimentalist (with technique, print format, and related matters, as well as plot) in ways that now often lead people to nominate him a major forerunner of such twentieth-century stars as Thomas Pynchon and Jacques Derrida.

Thomas Hesilrige is of course less well known. From all evidence, he was a consumer, not a producer, of works of literary art. Born in 1741, he was the third son of Arthur (7th Bt) and Hannah (Sturges) Hesilrige, who were models of the two principals of Samuel Richardson's novel, *Pamela*, which was published the previous year. Being third-born left Thomas with little prospect of inheriting any of the family estates, and so he was faced with the usual challenge of how to make his way in the world. Little is known of the success of his early efforts in that regard, but such successes as he did have were probably not great. His eldest brother, Robert, became the 8th Bt when their father died in 1763. Robert married Sarah Waller of Roxbury, Massachusetts (see chapter 2 of the book, *Hazelrigg Family History* [2007]), and their only son, Arthur, succeeded as 9th Bt when Robert died. Arthur's life came to an end while serving His Majesty's government in the British Army in Bengal, India, 1805. Suddenly Thomas found himself heir to the Hesilrige estates, becoming the 10th Bt. Six years later he remarried, this time to Letitia, daughter of John Wodehouse, 1st Baron Wodehouse, of Kimberley, Norfolk.¹

In the meantime, Thomas had benefited from another family connection. His grandfather Robert Hesilrige (1668-1721) had married well—Dorothy, the daughter of Banaster Maynard, the 3rd Baron Maynard, and his wife Elizabeth (daughter of Henry Grey, 10th Earl of Kent). Their son Charles succeeded as the 6th Baron Maynard, and when he died in 1775 Thomas, having been in service to the Maynard family, inherited the estate of Hoxne Manor in Suffolk, taking the Maynard name (i.e., thereafter Thomas Maynard Hesilrige) and incorporating the Maynard arms.²

¹ John Wodehouse's younger brother, the Rev. Philip Wodehouse, was direct ancestor of the inventor of Bertie Wooster and Jeeves, P.G. Wodehouse (1881-1975).

² The Maynard barony passed from Banaster to each of three sons in turn, the first (Henry) and second (Grey) dying without issue. Charles (c1690-1775) was created the 1st Viscount Maynard in 1766. The Maynard family traces its English beginning to the invasion from Normandy in 1066.

Thus, from rather dim prospects at the beginning of his life Thomas enjoyed handsome circumstances during his last three decades. (He died 24 April 1817 in Upper Brook Street, London.) As a young man he had frequented some of the literary circles of London. Perhaps he devised means of income from those associations, although there is no evidence that he engaged in either technical aspects of literary production (e.g., as a printer) or in the commercial trade. In any case, his economic circumstances well prior to 1775 were good enough that he was one of Sterne's faithful subscribers. As he says in the letter, Sterne had hoped that Thomas would prevail with his employer also to be a subscriber, but apparently Thomas has not successful in his appeal.

145. *To* THOMAS HESILRIGE¹

York. July 5 [1765].

My dear dear Sir

I made a thousand enquiries after you all this last winter and was told I should see you some part of it, in town—pray how do you do? and how do you go on, in this silly world? have you seen my 7 & 8 graceless Children—but I am doing penance for them, in begetting a couple of more ecclesiastick ones—which are to stand penance (again) in their turns—in Sheets² ab^t the middle of Sept^r—they will appear in the Shape of the 3^d & 4 Vol^s of Yorick. These you must know are to keep up a kind of balance, in my shandaic character, & are push'd into the world for that reason by my friends with as splendid & numerous a List of Nobility &c—as ever pranced before a book, since subscriptions came into fashion—I should grieve not to

have your name amongst those of my friends—& in so much good company as it has a right to be in—so tell me to set it down—and if you can—Lord Maynards^s—I have no designe my dear Hesselridge upon y^r purse—tis but a crown—but I have a design up[on] the credit of L^d Maynard's name—& that of a person I love & esteem so much as I do You. If any occasions come in y^r Way of adding 3 or 4 more to the list; y^r friendship for me, I know will do it—N. B.—You must take their crowns—& keep them for me till fate does me the courtesy to throw me in y^r Way. This will not be, I fear, this year—for in September, I set out *Solus* for Italy—& shall winter at Rome & Naples: L'hyvere <de> a Londres ne vaut pas rien, pour les poumones—a cause d'humidité et la fumè dont l'aire est chargée—Let me hear how you do soon—and believe me ever your devoted & affect^{te}.

friend & wellwisher
L. STERNE

[Addressed:]

To — Hesselridge Esq^{re} at Lord Maynards Essex