Robert Townson (1762–1827): an all too long forgotten Salopian

Hugh Torrens with an introduction by Keith Hotchkiss


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INTRODUCTION

In 1799 Robert Townson privately published “Tracts and Observations in Natural History and Physiology”, printed by J. White of Fleet Street, London. This contained a 48-page section entitled “A Sketch of the Mineralogy of Shropshire”: the earliest substantive description of the geology of the County.

Secondhand copies occasionally come up for sale, but there is also a scanned version available through the Google Books project, which may be accessed by entering the exact title at http://books.google.co.uk. Alternatively this can be obtained in hardcopy using Print on Demand (go to www.AbeBooks.co.uk, search author “Townson”, title “Tracts and Observations”, and choose from the suppliers).

On 26th September 1997 a symposium was held in Debrecen, Hungary, to celebrate Robert Townson. Fifteen of the presentations, some in Hungarian and some in English, were subsequently published in 1999 as a book entitled “Robert Townson’s Travels in Hungary” (Figures 1 and 2).

Torrens’ lecture to the symposium, “Robert Townson (1762–1827): Thoughts on a Polymathic Natural Historian and Traveller Extraordinary”, formed the basis of his subsequent talk to the Shropshire Geological Society (in October 2010). This covered similar ground and so, in the hope of giving Townson both due recognition and raising our awareness of his contribution to our understanding of the local geology, the text of Torrens’ Hungarian chapter, pages 19–26, is reproduced here, with kind permission of the Editor, Dr Péter Rózsa.

Keith Hotchkiss
Figure 1. Frontispiece from “Robert Townson’s Travels in Hungary” edited by Dr Péter Rózsa and published in 1999 by Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, Debrecen.
Robert Townson’s travels in Hungary

Proceedings of the „Townson Symposium” held in Debrecen, 26th September, 1997

Edited by
PÉTER RÓZSA

Debrecen, 1999

Figure 2. Preface by Dr Endre Dudich to “Robert Townson’s Travels in Hungary” edited by Dr Péter Rózsa.
PREFACE
or
Some Words in Praise of Openness

"We're not attached to a particular one,
But would prefer to take a general view."
(Imre Madách: The Tragedy of Man, scene 12
Translation by George Szirtes)

Robert Townson’s book „Travels in Hungary” was published in London in 1797. It is a remarkably sympathetic account of the multicoloured experience gained during a single-man expedition in a country regarded that time as semi-wild and exotic. The openness of the author’s mind and the large amount of his data are well characterised by the fact that now, after two centuries of specialisation (we should say atomisation) of science, to evaluate the content of the work professionally and upon its merits requires contributions by a large international (British, Polish, Hungarian) and interdisciplinary (ranging from petrology-mineralogy to ethnography) team.

The necessary team-work was organised and co-ordinated, under the auspices of the Joint Committee (INHIGEO) of the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) and the International Union of History and Philosophy of Science (IUHPS) and the active personal co-operation of its present chairman, Professor Hugh Torrens, by the Regional Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Debrecen (DAB) and the Science Historical Department of the Hungarian Geological Society. The participants have shown extreme openness and interest in a topic which involves no direct financial gain at present (on the other hand, it usefully contributes to the advancement of knowledge).

The whole-day-long session took place at the headquarters of the Debrecen Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences on 26th September 1997. It is a great pleasure to us now that, thanks to our sponsors, we can present the uncommon spiritual benefits of the meeting to those who were unable to attend it on that rainy autumn day.

Special thanks are due to Dr Péter Rózsa for his dauntlessness and determination, worthy of Mr Townson’s, of which he has given proof in the not so easy task of arranging and organising the meeting and in the no less easy preparation of the manuscripts for publication.

Budapest, 19th June, 1999.

Dr Endre Dudich
Chairman of the Science Historical Department
of the Hungarian Geological Society
Previous Secretary General of INHIGEO
ROBERT TOWNSON (1762–1827): THOUGHTS ON A POLYMATHIC NATURAL HISTORIAN AND TRAVELLER EXTRAORDINARY

Torrens, Hugh

Introduction

Polymaths seem always to suffer in historical analysis. Desmond King-Hele noted how another, Erasmus Darwin (1731–1802) – Charles Darwin’s grandfather – “remains relatively unknown, while specialists who make one appealing discovery enjoy much greater fame. In our increasingly specialised world this attitude is deep-seated. With any creative scientist or artist we seem to need a clear single image as a focus of attention and appreciation: a multidisciplinary mishmash confuses us.... These regrettable human traits also ensure that Erasmus Darwin has little hope of justice. He will continue to be slighted because he shone in too many disciplines and does not even have first claim to his surname”.

Robert Townson

Robert Townson was a Hungarophile polymath who has suffered equally badly in the historical record. This paper will attempt both to discuss his range of activities and list whatever has been written about him. His neglect is only in part because of his polymathy. He was also the youngest, illegitimate, son of a London merchant, which caused him another historical blight through his illegitimacy. He was also a truly remarkable traveller and records of his life were thus being scattered to the winds of history during his own life. In Viennese archives in 1988, I was amazed to find records of his activity there which had been indexed under Thownson as well as his correct name. Clearly the different phonetic renderings of his name (as in the name Thomson) caused new difficulties here. Additionally he wrote in and/or spoke Italian, French, German and Latin. In final assault on the possibility of doing him historical justice, we know he destroyed all his letters in 1805 before his final migration to Australia.

Robert’s father died in January 1773, and his remaining family soon left London and went to live with his sister Ann (1756–1811) and her new husband, from 1774, Rev. John Witts (1750–1816) who was inducted rector of Cardington in Shropshire in October 1777.

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2 CARLYLE, E.I. (1909 – first published 1899): Entry for Robert Townson (fl 1792–1799). Dictionary of National Biography, 19, p. 1060. This „honoured” him with one of the shortest and weakest entries (of 18 lines) in the entire Dictionary, discussing only 7 years of his life!
4 Katherine Plymley diary for 14 December 1805 (Shropshire Record Office, Shrewsbury).
They lived in a house, long demolished (circa 1820), rented from Robert Corbett (earlier Flint – 1726–1804) in the now ‘lost’ village of Lydleys Hayes. This was close to beautiful and highly geological hills which were to inspire not only Townsend but later the geologist Roderick I. Murchison (1792–1871) and the poet A. E. Housman (1859–1936). This move brought the family into contact with the Corbett (or as the head again renamed himself in 1804 Plymley) family of nearby Longnor Hall, whose member Katherine Plymley (1758–1829)’s diaries are now such a vital source for Townshonian research.

Townson, after serving a mercantile apprenticeship in Manchester from about 1776 to 1783, decided that such a life was not going to suit him. In his own words, he now „set to estimate the difference between sacrificing for at least the best years of my life everything that afforded me pleasure to the probable increase of my fortune by continuing in trade; or resolving at once to manage it with such economy as should enable me to pursue the path my inclination pointed out“. He chose the latter course and now determined to become a naturalist. He set off on his first travels late in 1783 largely on foot from Shropshire to Sicily, exploring France and Italy and probably their newly famous volcanoes. Of these travels we only know he stayed some days in the Vivarais and also visited Rome.

On his way home, in 1787, he enrolled as one of the last students of Balthasar Georges Sage (1740–1824), Professor of mineralogy and decimastic metallurgy and founder and first director of the Ecole des Mines, in Paris. A fellow student with him was Matthew Robinson Boulton (1770–1842), son of the English entrepreneur and steam engine maker Matthew Boulton (1728–1809). Townsend returned to Shropshire in 1788, where Robert Corbett’s diary for 29 November 1788 finds him „studying Corbett’s collection of fossils“ [ie then rocks and minerals]. In the autumn of 1789, after another walk through North Wales, he set off, again on foot, to Edinburgh to matriculate in December 1789 as a student of medicine, chemistry and later botany at the famous University there, probably inspired by an earlier student there, Dr Jonathan Stokes (1754–1831). Katherine Plymley described his appearance whilst on these travels: „His pockets contain’d a little linen, a sledge hammer to break rocks in search of fossils, a tin case to preserve the insects he should catch and an instrument for catching Butterflies &c, at his back was slung a large portfolio strapped between two boards to press plants in and a gun in his hand“. At Edinburgh he first intended to become a surgeon but Edinburgh, whose environs had equally inspired James Hutton (1726–1797), one of the founders of modern geology, only confirmed Townsend’s financially precarious career choice. Here Townsend studied the local geology and was taught by some of the most brilliant teachers of medicine, with anatomy and surgery under Alexander Munro (1733–1817) and natural history, with botany from Daniel Rutherford (1749–1819), chemistry from Joseph Black (1728–1799) and natural history from John Walker (1731–1803). Edinburgh was then at the height of its Enlightenment. Townsend in 1790 toured the Scottish Highlands making botanical observations, including the first record of Saxifraga rivularis on Ben Nevis and supplying bo-

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5 Katherine Plymley diary for 5 December 1795.
7 Letter from William Reynolds to M.R. Boulton, 17 December 1795 (Box 4R, Boulton & Watt Collection, Birmingham Public Library).
8 In Shropshire Record Office, Shrewsbury.
9 Op. cit. (5)

tanical specimens to the founder of the Linnean Society of London, James Edward Smith (1759–1828). Townsend read two papers to the student Natural History Society of Edinburgh on the mineralogy and lithology of Edinburgh in 1790 and was elected its president in the same year. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in June 1791 (proposed by Hutton). While at Edinburgh University Townsend also started the voracious reading of which his loan records survive here. Uniquely in his case these also survive for his later reading at Goettingen University and Shrewsbury School.

Now bitten by the travel-bug, in 1791 Townsend sought the post of Government naturalist to the infant colony of Upper Canada under Colonel J.G. Simcoe (1752–1806) but was unsuccessful, despite strong recommendation from Hutton, Rutherford and Walker, as well as from the French zoologist Pierre Broussonet (1761–1809), who had seen much of Townsend while he was in Paris in 1788–9. Townsend had failed in his first attempt to find patronage. He was probably held back by his lack of a medical qualification as he had failed to graduate at Edinburgh. His continuing interest in botany is shown by his paper on the perceptivity of plants read to the Linnean Society of London in December 1792 and published in 1794 and 1799, of which Society he became a member for a short time from 1794 to 1797. He now enrolled on 19 December 1791 as a student of natural history at Goettingen University, travelling there via Sweden (where he visited Uppsala) and Denmark (visiting also Copenhagen). While at Goettingen he took a year off to travel to Vienna where he spent the winter of 1792 and thereafter during the summer of 1793 toured throughout the Hapsburg empire of Austria and Hungary. He returned to Goettingen, where he published his first works, in Latin, on reptilian physiology in two parts in 1794 and 1795, but again he did not, as often claimed, graduate as M.D. here.

Townsend returned first to Scotland in July 1795 and then Shropshire in November 1795 after his second four year absence abroad. Katherine Plymley noted how „his manners having been formed abroad are quite foreign, so is his accent... When he left the continent he carried a bird in each pocket, a Crossbill & a Siskin, in oval tin boxes, with a place to put their heads out. They were his companions at his Inns. He had made them tame & permitted them to come out of their boxes. He carried a Tortoise & a Toad in his portmanteau, the latter he had procured with an intention to dissect but he chanced to grow fond of it & resolved it should live. He brought them all safe to this neighbourhood“. He was soon busy writing his second book, the pioneering travel volume, which this present work honours, Travels in Hungary with a short account of Vienna in the year 1793, which was published in 1797, with editions in French (1799), Dutch (1800) and another in French (1803). This book carried a map showing one of the earliest attempts at mapping „petrography“ by any English scientist. This tour was again largely on foot and
involved speleological investigations\textsuperscript{16} as well as pioneering ascents of the Tatra mountains,\textsuperscript{17} which he had measured barometrically.\textsuperscript{18} His work earned him an LL.D. degree from Edinburgh University in 1796.\textsuperscript{19}

After his return to England, Townson soon sought the patronage of the East India Company to survey the mineralogy and natural history of India, being now convinced, by his experiences in Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empire, of the need for proper encouragement of such sciences, both in Britain and its growing empire. But this application, supported by Alexander Monro,\textsuperscript{20} was again unsuccessful. He was equally unsuccessful at much the same time in an application for a similar post with the Sierra Leone Company, in Africa. Katherine Plymley, whose brother was his sponsor, thought, despite his wanting only the cost of his passage there and back paid, ,\textit{perhaps they did not wish mineralogy to be too much attended to, in an infant colony it has been sometimes thought to prevent the necessary attention to agriculture} .\textsuperscript{21}

Townson now remained in Shropshire and, using the facilities of the library of Shrewsbury School (later attended by Charles Darwin), wrote his remaining three books here which were published between 1798 and 1804. The most important, \textit{Tracts and Observations on Natural History} (1799), contained

1) a first pioneering 45 page description of Shropshire geology, later described as ,\textit{meticulous} and ,\textit{outstanding at this date} .\textsuperscript{22}
2) another on the lithology of Stonehenge,
3) the description of a new mineral, sarcite,
4) an early description of the remarkable action of the Crossbill,\textsuperscript{23} and
5) English versions of his pioneering investigations of reptilian physiology, particularly their respiration and absorption of fluids, with a newly published third part. These have drawn recent high praise from a Danish investigator.\textsuperscript{24} His other books were his important \textit{Philosophy of Mineralogy} (1798) in which he tried to persuade an ignorant British public of the value of a knowledge of, and the need to investigate, the earth’s mineral structure.

\textsuperscript{20} Alexander Monro letter, op. cit. (10).
\textsuperscript{21} Diary for 7 July 1797.
This book was to have been accompanied by actual collections of rocks and minerals. Townson was to have made himself in illustration of this, but this plan was thwarted by insufficient demand. His final book is the previously mis-ascribed *A Poor Man's Moralist* (1798), which went through five editions up to 1804. This last was a collection of moral aphorisms, intended to be sold cheaply to help „improve” the working classes. This work was certainly inspired by his friendship with the more famous aphorist, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742–1799), professor of philosophy and physics at Gottingen, whom Townson met as soon as he arrived there and for whom Lichtenberg wrote a letter of introduction to the Freiberg geologist Abraham Gottlob Werner (1749–1817) in 1792.25

Disillusioned by his failures to obtain patronage to work in Africa, Canada or India, Townson was now tempted to abandon science, writing to John Pinkerton (1758–1826) in June 1800, how „since my disappointment in my projected Survey of India, I have turned my attention to other branches of knowledge”.26 He now became highly itinerant travelling again throughout England (in Liverpool over the winter of 1797/98 and in Birmingham in 1800). In July 1799 he visited the geologist White Watson (1760–1835) at Bakewell in Derbyshire who then sought Townson’s medical advice.27 Townson’s 1798 *Philosophy of Mineralogy* had been dedicated to Georgina, Duchess of Devonshire and he now supplied her with 24 Staffordshire and Shropshire rocks and minerals, which are listed in Watson’s 1804 *Catalogue* and which survive today at Chatsworth House. In 1802 Townson was elected an Honorary Member of the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society,28 having in 1801 moved there. He was soon busy re-organising the Society’s mineral collections and he spent the summer of 1802 in Norway collecting minerals for that Society.29

Between 1802 and 1805 Townson spent much time on a major new project a three volume *County History of Yorkshire*, the largest English county.30 intended to sell for six guineas. The four surviving Prospectuses show how enthusiastically Townson sought subscribers up to Christmas 1803. The first reveals that the „leading subjects” in the novel treatment Townson now planned were to be „Geology, Mineralogy, Natural History, Agriculture, Manufactures and Commerce”.31 But once again insufficient subscribers came forward to allow these volumes to proceed to completion, only 340 having subscribed by January 1805,32 of the 500 needed. Britain was a country both advanced and hindered by its laissez-faire attitude to such projects, especially as then during war-time. Townson’s project was not helped by the activities of a rival, and even less fortunate, naturalist who

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26 TURNER, D.: *The Literary Correspondence of John Pinkerton* (two volumes). London, Colburn & Bentley, 1830 (1, p. 165).
27 WATSON, W. MSS Memorabilia, volume 1, p. 172 (MSS 720) and MSS Commonplace Book, volume 2, Alnwick Castle archives.
30 Gentleman’s Magazine, 72 (2), pp. 702–3 (August 1802) and Monthly Magazine, 14, p. 162 (1 Sept. 1802).
32 Townson to N.J. Winch, letter of 10 January 1805, Linncean Society, London.
worked on a similar project in 1805, Charles Fothergill (1782–1840). His journals provide fascinating, if ill-informed, gossip about Townsend’s activities in Yorkshire.  

Townson’s mother, Sarah nee Shewell, died in Shropshire on 13 May 1805. Her son had, by November 1805, decided to emigrate as a scientific settler to Australia, thus following in the footsteps of his army officer elder brother John (1760–1835), who had been based there in the New South Wales Corps since 1790. With all Robert’s natural history collections carefully gathered together in the care of the Plymley/Corbett family at Longnor, but all his letters burnt before departure, Townsend now set off for the New World of Australia in December 1806 on the store ship Young William, where he arrived in July 1807.  

His new life here, armed with a letter of recommendation from mineralogist Charles Greville (1749–1809), proved equally problematic. Despite having properly approached the British Government who promised him land there and assured him he was the type of settler most needed in the still infant colony of New South Wales, on his arrival here he found the Governor (William Bligh – 1754–1817) of a completely different opinion. Bligh’s attitudes to science of the sort that Townsend hoped to encourage there were wholly negative, and Townsend found early Australian politics impossible. He wrote to Greville in April 1808, “this is the most unhappy country a quiet peaceable Phylosopher could have come to”. Townsend became one of the „Rum Rebels” who helped to depose Bligh from his Governorship in 1808. Bligh, the same man who had earlier „encouraged” the famous Mutiny on the Bounty, must be unique in British history in having helped to „encourage”, or been the „victim” of, two unique insurrections!

In April 1810 Townsend wrote to Joseph Plymley „tell your parliamentary friends that the climate and the soil here are good but the Government wretched”. Promises made to him in London regarding the land he was to be granted had not been kept. Townsend wrote further „I have had no time to collect anything for Katherine [Joseph’s sister] except a few insects... I have really no time to myself. I have never read so little in all my life since childhood as since I came here. There was a time when I should have looked upon people as little better than Barbarians who should be in quiet possession of a very distant Country for twenty years without attempting to explore its interior... We know no more than we did nearly twenty years ago. I do not believe that anybody has gone farther inland than was done a few years after the Colony was established. I hope, but can hardly hope, for better times”. 

In 1811, aged nearly 50, Townsend was at last regranted the land he had been earlier promised and now settled at his farm at Varro Ville, outside Sydney. His scientific aspirations to explore Australia had been put paid to by Bligh’s earlier indifference but he did

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16 Townsend to Greville, letter of 2 April 1808, British Library, Add MS 42071, f.356.
17 Details are given in BLADEN, F. (1898–1901): Historical records of New South Wales, 6, (1806–8) and 7, (1809–11). Sydney, Government Printer.
18 Katherine Plymley diary for 14 November 1810.
become a pioneer in vine growing here, using the scientific methods which proved so uninteresting to his contemporaries. He was involved with the short lived Philosophical Society of Australia (nominated on 7 August 1822) to show some interest in science remained.\(^{39}\) He was also a Vice President of the New South Wales Agricultural Society in the same year.

He was still trying to return to Britain in 1820 but finding his estates impossible to dispose of, he remained there, somewhat embittered, until his death on 27 June 1827. His portrait, with his books clearly visible at his elbow, was painted by Augustus Earle after October 1825,\(^{40}\) and survives in the Mitchell library, Sydney.\(^{41}\) His obituarist noted his „miserly character” but praised his „service to the grazing and agricultural interests of the Colony... [since] no man had accomplished more in the rearing of stock here. His vineyard was only excelled by one other”.\(^{42}\) He was buried at Parramatta Cemetery,\(^{43}\) leaving an estate of under £10,000. Undoubtedly inspired by his earlier frugal and parsimonious life style, his estates were rumoured wrongly to have been worth much more.\(^{44}\)

**Conclusions**

Townson died after a much travelled career, blighted throughout by the problems of finding patronage to support such an experimental life. His career, from a historian’s perspective, is differently blighted, by the loss of his personal papers, which loss such a vagabond existence had long encouraged. His old friend, and Lunar Society member, Dr Jonathan Stokes wrote in 1830 of his hope that Townson’s „heirs will give us the observations he must have made on every branch of natural history”,\(^{45}\) but he left no direct heirs and all trace of his Australian archive and library seems to have disappeared. His fine collections of natural history left behind in Longnor did survive until 1838 when the insects at least were presented to the new (but soon struggling) Natural History Society of Shropshire and North Wales in Shrewsbury, where they have failed to survive.

Peoples opinions of his character were mixed. Katherine Plymley once confided to her diary that „he was one of the most eccentric men I ever knew and one of the most knowledgeable”.\(^{46}\) Her more balanced appraisal called him a „singular character, whose turn for natural history has led him quite out of the beaten track, who guided by his own industry & spirit of research has acquired much scientific knowledge, & made himself known as an able mineralogist & botanist as well as considerably conversant with other branches of natural history & natural philosophy”.\(^{47}\) A fellow scientist, Lichtenberg was more positive, writing in 1795, „Herr Townson ein Mann ist von einem so gesunden Kopf,


\(^{41}\) It is reproduced in colour by Jorgensen (op. cit. 24b).

\(^{42}\) *Sydney Gazette*, 13 July 1827, p. 3.


\(^{44}\) *The Australian*, 29 June 1827, p. 3 and *Gentleman’s Magazine*, 98 (1), p. 94 (January 1828).


\(^{47}\) Diary for 30 October 1811.
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