

Faith and Fun

Memoirs, biographies, and autobiographies reveal that evangelicals gained much pleasure from what they described as ‘domestic intercourse,’ but they yield only sparse information about their enjoyment of more specific forms of recreation. In many cases consideration of leisure pursuits was irrelevant, or at best peripheral, to the writer’s main theme, the depiction of the inner or public life of his subject. In other instances, however, absence of description may well testify to absence of activity for many evangelicals accorded recreation a low priority.

Andrew Fuller is an archetype of an evangelical whose religious interests caused him to despise all else. Escorted round the principal buildings of Oxford, he

viewed them with little emotion; and on being requested to notice one object of peculiar interest, he said ‘Brother I think there is one question, which, after all that has been written on it, has not yet been well answered . . . What is justification?’ It was immediately proposed to return to the fireside and discuss the subject; to which Mr F. gladly acceded saying ‘That inquiry is far more to me than all these fine buildings.’¹

The tendency to depreciate non-religious matter in order to emphasise the overriding importance of things spiritual may have been more common among dissenters than Anglicans but parallel instances can be cited from within Evangelicalism. ‘There is a beautiful Cathedral in this city,’ Edward Bickersteth wrote from Lincoln, ‘and a little company that love our Saviour, far more beautiful in Papa’s eyes than all the beautiful cathedrals and churches in the world.’² The most striking example is Richard Cecil, concerning whom Daniel Wilson commented ‘Though his relish for the arts was exquisite, he had such infinitely more sublime interests before him, that they were forgotten in the comparison.’³ Notwithstanding his love of art, music, and literature, Cecil dismissed these and all other non-religious pursuits as ‘vanity.’⁴

Another, equally important, factor militating against evangelical enjoyment of recreational activities was the belief that ‘serious Christians’ both could and should be identified by their ‘gravity’ and ‘soberness.’ The antitheses of these qualities were not only ‘levity’ and ‘frivolity’ but even ‘vivacity’ and ‘vitality.’ John

¹ J. Ryland, *The Work of Faith . . . in the Life and Death of the Rev. Andrew Fuller* (1816), p. 574.

² Birks, *Bickersteth*, ii, pp. 52–53.

³ D. Wilson, *The Blessedness of the Christian in Death* (1810), p. 28.

⁴ Pratt, *Remains of Cecil*, pp. 28 145. Cf. pp. 90–91.

Satchell's heroine, Miranda, had once been 'too vivacious,' but her growing 'sense of eternal things' had given her 'a becoming gravity.'⁵ According to Hannah More, Wilberforce had 'as much wit as if he had no piety.'⁶ Jabez Bunting was anxious lest his wife's vitality should cause her to become a 'trifler,' and both his biographer and Isaac Milner's took pains to show that in these rare instances wit and light-heartedness in no way impaired religious seriousness.⁷

Suspicion of light-heartedness and trifling was inevitably accompanied by suspicion of amusement, which evangelicals tended to equate with a hedonistic disregard for matters of eternal moment. 'Whatever dreams the votaries of amusement and pleasure may cherish,' John Pearson commented,

It may be seasonable to remind them that . . . nothing can be more stupid and senseless, than to live and act as if the world were made for intelligent beings as we are told the sea was for the Leviathan, 'that he might take his pastime therein.'⁸

The *Christian Observer* stressed that the Christian would be divinely protected in the course of duty, but not of pleasure. It maintained that, 'The *good* like the *great* man . . . will ever seek his pleasures in the field of his duties, and though he suffers mere amusement will seldom court it.'⁹

The emphasis upon duty recurs in all discussions on the place of leisure activities in evangelical living. Some, finding full satisfaction in family life and religious calling, denied that Christians needed any more specific forms of recreation.¹⁰ Others, however, believed that 'innocent amusements' might properly be followed – in order to equip evangelicals the better to perform their various responsibilities: 'There can be no dispute,' wrote Wilberforce, 'concerning the true end of recreations. They are intended to refresh our exhausted bodily or mental powers, and restore us with renewed vigour, to the more serious occupations of life.'¹¹ But even those who legitimised some leisure pursuits were anxious lest they trespass upon time which should be devoted to duty: 'How hard it is for corrupt creatures to enjoy the most lawful pleasure in a lawful degree,' lamented Daniel Wilson.¹² Hannah More's exemplary heroine delighted in gardening, that most innocent of evangelical pleasures, supposedly sanctioned by Milton's Eve, but Lucilla was nevertheless aware that 'An enjoyment which assumes a sober shape may deceive us, by making

⁵ Satchell, *Thornton Abbey*, ii, p. 256; iii, p. 11.

⁶ Roberts, *Memoirs of Hannah More*, ii, pp. 140–41.

⁷ Bunting, *Jabez Bunting*, i, pp. 180, 340; Milner, *Isaac Milner*, p. 419.

⁸ Pearson, *William Hey*, ii, pp. 241–42.

⁹ *CO* vi (1807), p. 669; xii (1813), p. 145.

¹⁰ See for example *EM* i series xxii (1814), p. 175, where students were advised to use any intervals from study to instruct the ignorant, to encourage those on the brink of Christian commitment, and to reclaim backsliders.

¹¹ Wilberforce, *Practical View*, p. 453.

¹² Bateman, *Wilson*, i, p. 90.

us believe we are practising a duty when we are only gratifying a taste.’¹³ Her mother dissuaded her from giving up ‘so pure a pleasure,’ and elsewhere in the novel the author inveighed against excessive asceticism, but Lucilla’s qualms of conscience were obviously designed to endear her not only to *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* but also to an evangelical readership. It was altogether in accordance with evangelical priorities that she should compromise by hanging her watch upon a tree, a constant reminder to limit the time spent in the garden.¹⁴

Unease about their use of time impinged even upon the recreation of those evangelicals most confident of the value of leisure. Fowell Buxton both worked hard and played hard, but occasionally wondered whether he was right to do so:

The world and the spirit of the world are very insidious, and the older we grow the more inclined we are to think as others think, and act as others act; . . . I speak here feelingly, for the world has worn away much of the little zeal I ever had . . . I have more game and better horses and dogs than other people, but the same energy disposed of in a different way, might have spread Bible and Missionary Societies over the Hundred of North Erpingham . . . No man has a surplus of power – time, talents, money, influence . . . It is therefore, arithmetically true, that so much as he devotes to the secular object he withdraws from the spiritual.¹⁵

Notwithstanding such qualms, Buxton continued both to support the Bible and Missionary Society auxiliaries he had been influential in establishing near his holiday home, and to shoot with immense glee and exuberance. Moreover, within clearly defined limits, he was prepared to justify his activity:

I feel about shooting that it is not time lost if it contributes to my health and cheerfulness. I have many burthens, and it is well to cast them off, lest they should so dispirit and oppress me that I become less capable of active exertion. But now my holiday is nearly ended; shooting may be my recreation, but it is not my business.¹⁶

Attitudes such as Buxton’s were perhaps more common within Anglicanism, natural home of the more leisured classes, than within dissent. Any meaningful comparison, however, is made impossible by the shortage of biographies of dissenting laymen, and the total absence of biographies of lay Anglicans of similar social status to the average dissenter. Whereas biographers of Evangelical clergymen occasionally describe the hobbies of their subjects, their dissenting counterparts rarely refer to any ‘recreational’ pursuit other than reading. The difference may partly be due to differences in opportunity. Many Anglican incumbents could, if they wished, make time for leisure activity. The demands of the Methodist preaching plan left some Wesleyan preachers with little time even to read. The contrasting workloads may reflect not only the demands which Wesley made

¹³ More, *Coelebs*, ii, pp. 49ff, 109, 115.

¹⁴ More, *Coelebs*, i, pp. 215–22; ii, pp. 112–13.

¹⁵ Buxton, *Memoirs of Thomas Fowell Buxton*, pp. 187–89.

¹⁶ Buxton, *Memoirs of Thomas Fowell Buxton*, p. 281.

upon his followers but also the secular work experience of the classes from which Anglican clergy and Wesleyan preachers were drawn. Congregationalists and Baptists were depicted as deploying their spare time in much the same way as Methodists. It seems probable that the congregations for whom dissenting biographers were writing, if not also the ministers themselves, were less ready than Evangelicals to grant recreation a place in ministerial and hence in lay Christian living. This impression is reinforced by the *Christian Observer's* critique of *Lawful Amusements*, a work by the editor of the *Evangelical Magazine*, George Burder. As his Anglican critic rightly suggested, Burder might more appropriately have called his book 'Unlawful Amusements,' for he always found it easier to condemn than to recommend leisure pursuits. The reviewer criticised Burder for being too censorious and for lacking discrimination. He warned *Christian Observer* readers against the dangers of over-seriousness: those who opposed 'amusements' should be careful that they did not also condemn cheerfulness and 'rational enjoyment.'¹⁷

While any denominational comparison remains highly tentative, it is clear that Evangelicals often shared the positive attitude towards recreation practised by Buxton and recommended by the *Christian Observer's* reviewer. Unpublished papers reveal not only the liveliness of their writers, but in some cases categoric approval of 'amusement': Mrs Henry Thornton told Charemile Grant that she 'took courage and told Mrs. R that she and her friend would be more amiable if they amused themselves a little, and I hope in time to convince her of it.'¹⁸ Her sentiments, if not her tendency gratuitously to proffer advice, were shared by Charles Hoare, Vicar of Blandford Forum, who told J. W. Cunningham

I think we want amusement. In fact every thing is so, that is not business; and all work and no play makes Jack etc. In fact Jack has been a dull boy many a day for wanting . . . a good game at chess. The mind covets occupation and is not always able to rouse itself. The Quakers admit their poetry, gardening etc. and even condescend as we know from Nancy to joke – and all these are but modes of amusement: and I cannot think that real bona fide amusement for amusements' sake would be often carried to excess, by those who have any rational pursuits besides. If they have not these we must not attack their amusements but their want of rational pursuits.¹⁹

Evangelicals may have been more guarded when they wrote for publication but the importance of 'rational' pursuits and enjoyments was emphasised in published writings as well as in private letters. It was widely acknowledged that those who condemned the pernicious play of the world had to provide some acceptable alternative. The availability of other forms of recreation, which were deemed to be both innocent and rational, was a powerful argument against fashionable amusements. It was, moreover, an argument employed by Anglicans and dissenters

¹⁷ *CO* iv (1805), pp. 234, 306.

¹⁸ Letter dated January 1807, Thornton papers, Cambridge University Library.

¹⁹ Letter dated 16 January 1817, Cunningham papers, Dorset Record Office.

alike. The dissenting press was just as anxious as the Evangelical to urge what it regarded as rational recreations upon its readers.

Reading was universally regarded as the most rational and enjoyable of leisure pursuits, while other cultural activities such as music and art were also recommended. Evangelical attitudes to these will be explored in subsequent chapters. The concern of this chapter is to outline those recreations which cannot properly be classified as either cultural or purely academic, but which a number of evangelicals regarded as both innocent and rational – and thoroughly enjoyed.

‘Bodily exercise’ was one of the few *Lawful Amusements* recommended by George Burder.²⁰ It appears similarly to have been encouraged by some Sunday Schools. Whit Walks, which date from the turn of the century, were designed to distract lower-class Sunday School scholars from the attractions of wakes, fairs and races. Thomas Laqueur records how by the 1830s and 1840s they had expanded into full-scale excursions, incorporating boat trips and sports days.²¹ Higher up the social scale, Thomas Babington organised long walks and excursions for his children, and, according to a mid-Victorian chronicler, sought to prevent pusillanimity by encouraging sea and river swimming, ‘manly sports,’ and ‘active exercises.’²² Charles Simeon, mentor of generations of Evangelical students, maintained that ‘exercise, constant regular and ample, is absolutely essential to a reading man’s success.’ He was himself an enthusiastic horseman and went out for a ride every day ‘unless my work or the weather render it particularly inconvenient.’ He recommended tennis, as well as riding to his students, and a daily six-mile walk, a practice followed by Lord Teignmouth, independent of Simeon’s advice, as late as his eightieth year.²³ One of Simeon’s students, who needed little encouragement, was the young Edward Hoare. As a school boy he had been taught by John Venn’s nephew, Henry Venn Elliott, who was himself an enthusiastic athlete. Hoare, however, complained that ‘as he only took six pupils there was the same difficulty that we found at home in getting good play, first class cricket,’ a defect removed when he went to Cambridge, ‘although I could not play much of it, as it took too

²⁰ G. Burder, *Lawful Amusements* (1805), pp. 30ff. Burder also cited intellectual exercise, music (in moderation), occasional conversation with the intelligent and pious, philanthropic activity. The *CO* (iv 1805, p. 234) denied that the last was an ‘amusement,’ and expressed surprise at his omission of drawing and gardening: the classes for which Burder was primarily writing may not have had the opportunity to garden, or to take drawing lessons.

²¹ T. Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and working class culture 1780–1850* (1976), pp. 235–36.

²² J. C. Colquhoun, *William Wilberforce: his friends and his times* (2nd edn 1867), pp. 222ff.

²³ Hennell and Pollard (eds.), *Charles Simeon*, pp. 105, 145; Teignmouth, *Memoir*, ii, p. 525.

long a time.’ Like John Venn before him, whose passion afforded him the nickname ‘the admiral of the Cam,’ Hoare had no difficulty in finding time for boating.²⁴

A love of sport, if sometimes indulged more excessively than was strictly necessary for bodily health, could always be justified on those grounds. Isaac Milner’s scrupulously honest but highly defensive biographer had a more difficult task when she attempted to vindicate her uncle’s enthusiasm for scientific experiment. But Milner, who adopted a different ‘hobby horse’ each year, inventing a lamp in 1808 and a water-clock in 1810, experienced no such qualm about his activity. Nor apparently did many other evangelicals who like him played around with mechanical devices and were fascinated to understand how things worked.²⁵ The extent of the interest is indicated by the periodicals, for both the *Record* and the *Christian Observer* regularly listed recent inventions, while brief reports on curious scientific happenings were common.

One of the most enthusiastic was again John Venn, whose early diaries refer to the machines he assembled, and who combined his mechanical with his sporting interests when he built a boat in his student rooms, which he was sadly unable to get out of the door. According to a descendant he lacked ‘philosophical capacity’ but ‘had a decided taste for trying practical experiments’: both the taste and, from time to time, the incapacity, were reflected in the introduction of the latest domestic equipment into Clapham rectory.²⁶ Venn’s student notebooks contain details and diagrams about optics and hydrostatics, mechanics and astronomy, about which subject he later corresponded with his former boating companion, the evangelical scientist Francis Wollaston.²⁷ Astronomy was also the hobby of John Russell, who from 1785 spent time delineating a lunar map, and in 1797 patented a selenographia for exhibiting lunar phenomena.²⁸ Daniel Wilson developed an interest in chemistry during his final year at Oxford, while the particular interest of Legh Richmond and his son was mineralogy: when the boy’s lessons were over they would frequently engage in scientific study and experiment.²⁹

Richmond was one of a number of evangelicals to take full advantage of the sight-seeing opportunities provided on journeys of evangelical duty. During a preaching tour in the summer of 1814, he went to see his host’s

²⁴ Townsend (ed.), *Edward Hoare*, pp. 9–10, 19, 22–23; J. Bateman, *The Life of Rev. Henry Venn Elliott* (1868), pp. 109–10; J. Venn, *Annals of a Clerical Family* (1904), p. 122; M. M. Hennell, *John Venn and the Clapham Sect* (1958), pp. 42–43, 52.

²⁵ Milner, *Isaac Milner*, pp. 51–52, 325, 364–65, 416. Isaac Taylor junior like Milner provided himself with a workshop: Taylor (ed.), *The Family Pen*, i, p. 72.

²⁶ Venn, *Annals*, pp.121–24, where reference is also made to Venn’s interest in heraldry and antiquarian research.

²⁷ Hennell, *John Venn and the Clapham Sect*, pp. 42, 52. Venn’s interests were inherited by his son Henry who introduced popular scientific lectures on subjects such as astronomy to St John’s Holloway (W. Knight, *Memoir of Henry Venn* (1882), p. 76).

²⁸ Williamson, *John Russell*, ch. xiii.

²⁹ Bateman, *Wilson*, i, p. 62; Grimshawe, *Legh Richmond*, p. 602.

great iron-works, near Rotherham. Saw a cannon cast, and went through the whole manufactory. It is most ingenious and interesting. Saw the rolling mill and manufacture of tin plates. Observed on our return in the evening, the effect of the many surrounding blazing furnaces.

A week later he saw ‘the ruins of Fountains Abbey; it far exceeds everything I have seen or shall see; imagination is filled, and more than filled.’³⁰ Richmond’s ecstasy and obvious enjoyment was matched by that of the most constitutionally curious of Methodists, Adam Clarke. The journals of his tours show that he was fascinated by history, antiquities, monuments, geography, agriculture, mode of life – indeed by everything relating to the places he visited. He wrote to his wife after a visit to Warwick Castle:

I saw some bronze cups, from the ruins of Herculaneum, some of which I found cost 150 guineas . . . We likewise got into the armoury, where . . . I was permitted to fit on some of the armour, and felt almost the spirit of a knight errant coming upon me. In short, we went through all this interesting and magnificent place; but I must reserve till I get home, to tell of Guy, Earl of Warwick’s sword, which I endeavoured to wield, twenty pounds weight; also of his spear, his shield, his breast-plate, his tilting pole, &c. all enormously gigantic; nor can I wait to mention particularly the rib of the dun cow; the shoulder blade, and back-bone of the wild-boar, all of which I suspect are bones of large fish.³¹

Visiting Stonehenge some years later, he took pains to ascertain its original formation and marvelled over the ingenuity of our ancestors who transported such huge stones of a rock that he identified as not being local. On an Irish tour he visited the Giant’s Causeway ‘one of the most celebrated basaltic formations perhaps in the universe,’ and, as ever, recounted the history of all the places he visited, imaginatively reconstructing the events at the battle of the Boyne. Intrigued by the Round Towers, he requested permission to visit one, made deductions from it about their origins and purpose, and sought to confirm his conclusions by inspections of several more. Far from criticising historical monuments and antiquities as the mere products of fallen man, Clarke delighted in them and was properly concerned for their preservation. Enraptured by the extensive collection of antiques at Wilton House he was horrified

at seeing many of these invaluable relics of antiquity injured . . . by the joiners, plasterers, &c. &c., who had even erected their benches against some of the finest productions of the sculptors of ancient Greece.³²

The curiosity of most evangelicals had of necessity to be restricted to the sights and monuments of England, but a few had the opportunity to visit Europe on

³⁰ Grimshawe, *Legh Richmond*, pp. 235–36.

³¹ Clarke (ed.), *Account of Adam Clarke*, ii, p. 28.

³² Clarke (ed.), *Account of Adam Clarke*, ii, pp. 125–28, 132–33, 255–75.

holiday, Bible Society or other philanthropic business. ‘Cross a river, or a mountain, or an arm of the ocean, and a new and unexpected system of manners, – new modes of life, – and a new series of conventional usages burst upon you,’ wrote an *Eclectic Review* contributor:

All is surprise and delight, as soon as this new world reveals itself in its first gloss and freshness. It can hardly be conceived by those whom long and frequent wanderings over the continent have deadened to the excitements of curiosity . . . with what a restless, delighted eye and beating and enlivened heart, the untravelled stranger hails the objects that rush upon his senses when he first arrives in a foreign country.³³

Exploration abroad often involved evangelicals in more indiscriminate company than they might otherwise have chosen. Those who holidayed in England immediately sought out fellow evangelicals.³⁴ By contrast, Henry Venn Elliott noted that there was no place in continental travelling society for a religious man as such. But this did not deter him from undertaking a three-year grand tour of the continent, a sure sign of his interest in matters other than the purely religious. Venn Elliott was an inveterate, and often extravagant, collector of medals and rare coins. Enamoured by the Venus de Medici, he was anxious to view not only the arts and the antiquities but also the people and customs of the countries he visited. In this respect he differed from some other evangelical travellers, who abstained in principle from society. By involving himself in fashionable company

I saw many things that I would not have seen, and heard much that I would have rejoiced not to hear. But if my intention in travelling was to see not merely things, but men and manners, there was no alternative. I must have done, as I did. Whether this speculation has been injurious to me, is a question as yet unsolved.³⁵

As pragmatic in his attitude to the church as to the world, he attended mass and joined in the psalms and the prayers, although he refused to prostrate himself at the elevation of the host. He frequently stayed in monasteries and developed an affection and respect for his Catholic hosts. In no doubt where he stood in a courteous dispute with a Roman Catholic priest, he was far from exhibiting the horror and hysteria of some Protestants at the slightest sight or mention of anything Catholic.³⁶

By no means all Evangelicals, however wide their interests, condoned such exposure to things continental and Catholic. J. W. Cunningham believed that it was detrimental for Englishmen to stay on the continent long enough to be infected by

³³ *ER* ii series xxiii (1825), p. 332.

³⁴ Clarke (ed.), *Account of Adam Clarke*, ii, p. 129, records how when the Clarkes and Butterworths went on holiday together in 1806 ‘almost our first enquiry was “are there any religious people here?”’ They immediately went to find the evangelical baker who so pleased them as to be invited back to supper at the inn.

³⁵ Bateman, *Venn Elliott*, p. 80.

³⁶ Bateman, *Venn Elliott*, pp. 53–54, 59, 61–62, 71–72, 88.

foreign manners and religion.³⁷ Hannah More was fearful lest the habit of much travelling should cause dissatisfaction with the plainer pleasures of country living and encourage further absenteeism.³⁸

Evangelicals had no doubt that there were real religious advantages to be gained from living in the countryside.³⁹ Rural Christians were removed from the worst temptations of fashionable life, and were able to develop domestic predilections.⁴⁰ They also benefited because they had abundant opportunity to study the works of God. Their faith might curtail some pleasures but evangelicals of all schools agreed that it enhanced delight in the natural world. It was repeatedly argued that Christians enjoyed nature more than their unconverted neighbours, for it was their privilege to look ‘through nature up to nature’s God.’ Lines from William Cowper’s popular poem, *The Task*, were quoted time and time again: the natural scenes which surrounded the believer were

his to enjoy
With a propriety which none can feel
But who with filial confidence inspired,
Can lift to heaven an unpretentious eye,
And smiling say – ‘My Father made them all.’⁴¹

The appreciation of nature was the one pleasure in whose innocence all evangelicals believed, and which many happily indulged. Jane Taylor, enraptured by Devon, wrote exuberantly to Josiah Conder

I promise not to detain you with descriptions of the scenery around us . . . it is not the most agreeable thing to be told that ‘you can form no idea – you can’t imagine – you never saw anything like it’ &c. So then to do the thing more politely, I must tell you that I had formed no idea of the kind of scenery with which we are surrounded; and that I had never before seen anything like it . . . Ilfracombe is situated in a deep valley, surrounded on one side by barren hills, and on the other by stupendous rocks which skirt the sea . . . Our rambles among the rocks I enjoy most; though at first they excited new sensations of awe and terror, rather than pleasure. But now we climb without fear amid a wilderness of rocks where nothing else can be seen, and nothing heard but the roar of the distant sea.⁴²

Some evangelicals felt obliged to turn their enjoyment of the world around them to religious use, but many others were genuine nature lovers and, like Jane Taylor,

³⁷ J. W. Cunningham, *Cautions to Continental Travellers* (1823)

³⁸ H. More, *Moral Sketches* (1819), pp. viif.

³⁹ Country life was also recommended as a means of preserving the old rural patriarchal society, the peace and well-being of which depended upon resident local gentry. See R. I. and S. Wilberforce, *Correspondence*, i, p. 219.

⁴⁰ Gisborne, *Female Sex*, pp. 112–13.

⁴¹ Cowper, *The Task*, book v, 743–47.

⁴² Taylor (ed.), *The Family Pen*, i, pp. 260–61.

delighted in what they could actually feel and smell, hear and see. The pleasure gained from the natural world, as well as from sport, scientific experiment, and sight-seeing, may have been enhanced by the knowledge that such recreations were conducive to health and education, but the enthusiasm with which they were described suggests that they were thoroughly enjoyed not just as means to ends but in their own right.

While some evangelicals condemned all pursuits but the purely religious, and all were liable to occasional qualms about their use of time, a number – and certainly more than can be listed – threw themselves wholeheartedly into those recreations which could be labelled ‘innocent’ and ‘rational.’ Evangelicals were not alone in recommending ‘rational recreation.’ Many socially-minded people, who had little time for evangelical religion, were no less keen to promote ‘rational’ leisure pursuits in place of recreations which they deemed irrational, demoralising, and socially dangerous. In an attempt to wean the lower orders from ‘low and debasing pleasures,’ the 1833 Select Committee on Public Walks recommended the provision of open spaces and bathing facilities, so that working people could walk, play games and swim, and thereby improve their health and their respectability.⁴³ Brougham and others involved in Mechanics’ Institutes sought to provide the poor with opportunities of understanding the world about them. They were particularly concerned that workers should acquire ‘useful knowledge,’ an appreciation of those scientific and mechanical principles, which so fascinated John Venn and his early industrial contemporaries.⁴⁴ The provision of libraries at Mechanics’ Institutes and the creation of Literary and Philosophical Societies, at which intellectual matters could be discussed, reflects the prevalent belief in an increasingly literate society that reading was the most rational of all recreations.

Where evangelicals perhaps differed from other early advocates of rational recreation was in the extent to which they found it necessary to urge such pursuits upon the upper as well as the lower classes. Public walks and Mechanics’ Institutes were in time to become the preserve of the growing middle orders, but they were explicitly designed for the working classes, to deal with what J. F. C. Harrison has described as ‘a new and unfamiliar problem,’ the imperative need to fill the leisure hours of those who might otherwise resort to idleness and dissipation.⁴⁵ Evangelicals, who condemned and shunned ‘fashionable amusements,’ believed that idleness and dissipation were problems at all levels of society. While money, time, and opportunity obviously influenced the choice of leisure activities by evangelicals of different classes, recreation was perhaps less influenced by class within evangelicalism than without. The musical, artistic, literary, and intellectual pursuits

⁴³ *Report from the Select Committee on Public Walks with the Minutes of Evidence* (1833, IUPS edn 1968), pp. 8–9, 52, 58.

⁴⁴ Altick, *English Common Reader*, pp. 188–204; J. F. C. Harrison, *Learning and Living 1790–1960* (1961), pp. 62–74.

⁴⁵ Harrison, *Learning and Living*, p. 76.

which are the subject of the remaining chapters of this book were, in varying degrees, recommended to and followed by rich and poor alike.

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