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TRIAL BY LAUGHTER

by Ian Hislop and Nick Newman

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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ISBN 978-0-573-11595-0

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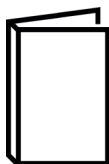
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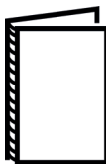


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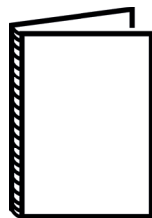
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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

IAN HISLOP

Ian Hislop is a writer and broadcaster and has been editor of *Private Eye* since 1986. He has been a columnist for *The Listener* and the *Sunday Telegraph*, and TV critic for *The Spectator*. As a scriptwriter with Nick Newman, his work includes five years on *Spitting Image*, *Harry Enfield and Chums*, and *My Dad's the Prime Minister*, as well as the films and plays *A Bunch of Amateurs* and *The Wipers Times*. He has written and presented many documentaries for TV and radio including: Radio 4's *The Real Patron Saints*, *A Brief History of Tax*, *Are We Being as Offensive as We Might Be*, *Lord Kitchener's Image*, *The Six Faces of Henry VIII* and *I've Never Seen Star Wars*. He also presented TV's *Great Railway Journeys – East to West*, *Scouting for Boys*, *Not Forgotten*, *Ian Hislop Goes off the Rails*, *Ian Hislop's Changing of the Bard*, *Age of the Do-Gooders*, *When Bankers Were Good*, *Stiff Upper Lip: An Emotional History of Britain*, *Ian Hislop's Olden Days* and *Victorian Benefits: Workers and Shirkers*. In 2018 he co-curated the British Museum's exhibition *I Object: Ian Hislop's Search for Dissent*. He has appeared frequently on *Question Time* and since 1990 has been team captain on BBC's *Have I Got News For You* – which has won many awards including the BAFTA for Best Comedy 2016. Most recently he and Nick Newman wrote the critically acclaimed 2016 Radio 4 comedy drama *Trial by Laughter*. In 2016 their play *The Wipers Times* was premiered and had a successful run at the Watermill Theatre, before a sell-out tour and transfer to the West End.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

NICK NEWMAN

Nick Newman is an award-winning cartoonist and writer. He has worked for *Private Eye* since 1981 and has been pocket cartoonist for the *Sunday Times* since 1989. His cartoons have appeared in many other publications including the *Guardian*, *Punch* and the *Spectator*. He was The Cartoon Art Trust's Pocket/Gag Cartoonist of the Year in 1997, 1998, 2005 and 2016. He won the Sports Journalists' Association's Cartoonist of the Year award in 2005, 2007 and 2009. In 2013 he edited the humour bestseller *Private Eye: A Cartoon History*. His scriptwriting career with Ian Hislop began with *Spitting Image*, and continued with Dawn French's *Murder Most Horrid* and *The Harry Enfield Show* – with the creation of Tim Nice-But-Dim. They also wrote the BBC1 film *Gobble* and the sitcom *My Dad's the Prime Minister*. In 2008 their film *A Bunch of Amateurs* starring Burt Reynolds was chosen for the Royal Film Performance, before being adapted for the stage at the Watermill Theatre. In 2014 their film *The Wipers Times* won the Broadcast Press Guild Award for best single drama, and was nominated for a BAFTA, before its stage adaptation and sell-out tour. Radio credits include many series of *Dave Podmore* for Radio 4 with Christopher Douglas and Andrew Nickolds, along with *Mastering the Universe*, starring Dawn French. With Ian Hislop, he also wrote Radio 4's *Gush*, *Greed All About It*, *What Went Wrong with the Olympics?* *The News at Bedtime* and *Trial by Laughter* – dramatised on stage by the Watermill Theatre in 2018, before touring.

AUTHORS' NOTE

Trial by Laughter is a story about the battle for press freedom and free speech. Set in December 1817, it is the true story of the trials of William Hone, a shy, unassuming bookseller and publisher of cartoons and satirical pamphlets. He was taken to court by the Regency government on a charge of seditious libel and blasphemy in an attempt to stifle jokes and criticism of the Tory government and the monarchy. It is both the story of a real life David versus Goliath and a courtroom thriller – with jokes. Or, as we once tried to sell it, *The Madness of King George meets Crown Court*.

We are indebted to Janice Hadlow, the former controller of BBC2 for introducing us to the case. Fresh off the back of our BBC2 film *The Wipers Times* Janice enquired if we had heard of a man called William Hone. We both said “Who?” – which is often a good starting point for a story. If a subject is very familiar there may be little new to say. Janice is an expert on Regency history and directed us towards this extraordinary man, who, we discovered, was not only a champion of civil liberties but was also a campaigner for the reform of lunatic asylums and the jury system, an investigative journalist and an ardent supporter of universal suffrage. He lived in poverty with his wife Sarah and (then) eight children (later twelve) and was supported by such literary luminaries as Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt. His partner in crime was the great political cartoonist George Cruikshank, with whom he collaborated on numerous pamphlets and satirical prints.

The persecution of Hone was played out against a rich backdrop of civil unrest, fear of revolution and the wanton licentiousness and corruption of the Regency government. The future George IV was later dubbed the worst king in British history – no mean achievement – and was widely seen as a figure of malevolent fun and ridicule. All these ingredients led us to believe that the trials of William Hone were ripe for dramatization. We began by pitching the idea of a radio play to Radio 4, but with the thought of a stage play firmly in the back of our minds. The courtroom is a natural theatre for drama, and based on the original transcripts of the case, *Trial by Laughter* starring Robert Wilfort and Arthur Bostrom was broadcast in 2016. The reception was favourable enough to encourage us to

pitch it as a stage play. We were delighted that the Watermill Theatre in Newbury responded so enthusiastically.

Wherever possible we have tried to maintain historical accuracy – and would plead “artistic licence” in the instances where liberties have been taken. One can only speculate on the nature of the relationship between the Prince Regent and his mistresses – and our characterisation owes much to the political cartoons of the period. We were lucky not only that Hone produced a detailed account of his trials – but also that he wrote a memoir in 1835 which he amended shortly before his death in 1842. What became clear was that although history condemned him to obscurity, he was at the time an immensely popular figure – not just with his literary colleagues such as the caustic critic Hazlitt, who liked few of his contemporaries. “The public befriended me,” wrote Hone, whilst trying to explain to that public his motivation behind his highly controversial religious parodies – some of which he later regretted publishing. “For a short time, in my early years, I was a believer in all unbelief,” he wrote in 1838. His apologia for his life’s mistakes concluded “I have been a lover of the world and its pleasures, a curious observer of men and manners; an insatiable reader in search of truth; an anxious inquirer after happiness.” William Hone’s liberal humanity shines throughout his autobiography.

The Wipers Times, our previous play for the Watermill was largely about using humour as a coping mechanism. *Trial by Laughter* is more about humour as a weapon, and questions what we should and should not be allowed to make jokes about. Should one be able to make jokes about religion? At what point do those jokes become blasphemy? Where do you draw the line with satire, when poking fun at religion, politics, corruption and immorality? To argue his case Hone sought to reduce the court to tears – not of pity, but of laughter. This was perhaps unique in legal history.

The issues raised by Hone in his trials have not gone away – which is why the story of *Trial by Laughter* is as relevant today as it was in 1817. In an age of gagging orders, celebrity injunctions, D-Notices and fake news, the questions Hone raised about our right to hold authority to account are as pertinent as they were 200 years ago. We will always be in debt to the unsung hero of free speech.

HONE, DRAWN AND COURT

William Hone's battles with the Regency government were inextricably linked to the cartoons of the period – but cartooning as a profession does not come out particularly well from the story. Although Hone and his cartoonist friend and collaborator George Cruikshank worked together to formulate Hone's defence, the cartoons cited in his trials revealed the dependency of cartoonists on patronage – and their willingness, perhaps borne out of desperation, to do their masters' bidding.

In December 1817 the satirist and bookseller William Hone was subjected to three trials on three successive days. He was charged with seditious libel and blasphemy – Hone had dared to attack the Prince Regent and his ally, the Tory government, by parodying the Lord's Prayer and Ten Commandments – among other biblical tracts. In fact, what was on trial was free speech and press freedom – and the cartoonist George Cruikshank was to prove vital to its defence.

Born twelve years after Hone in 1792, Cruikshank was a friend and key collaborator of the older man, who often kept him alive with food and drink. And there was a lot of drink – as Cruikshank said, "I live on gin and water. My mouth lets the gin in, and my boots the water." Together, in the inns and coffee shops around Fleet Street they formulated Hone's defence – based on historical precedent, and citing previous religious parodies in literary and cartoon form. Cruikshank would have been an expert in the latter, coming from a family of cartoonists – his father and brother were noted caricaturists.

However, George was the most celebrated cartoonist of the day, penning scabrous and scatological attacks on the folly and vices of the Prince Regent George, and his ministers. He and his older colleagues Thomas Rowlandson and James Gillray were the equivalent of TV's *Spitting Image* – rude, crude and lavatorial. Many of their cartoons probably wouldn't be published today, so graphic were they. Gillray's image of the Prince Regent as a "voluptuary" suffering "the horrors of digestion" features an overflowing piss-pot in the background – which might make today's editors blanch.

Rowlandson, as well as being a political cartoonist and keen observer of town and country life, was also the author of

extremely pornographic cartoons which would make a sailor blush. Cruikshank himself drew the future King's mistress Lady Hertford riding upon him as if he were a coach in a cartoon entitled "Royal Hobby's (sic) or The Hertfordshire Cock Horse".

Cruikshank also collaborated with Hone to depict George as a giant cannon (then called a bomb, pronounced "bum"), with ministers and mistresses queuing up to kiss his "bomb". The accompanying rhyme left little to the imagination:

"...And Castlereagh will low beseech
To kiss a corner of the breech;
And next will come old Georgy Rose
And in the touch-hole shove his nose!"

But as well as highly personal attacks on the prince regent, he also drew attention to the great civil liberty causes of the day, such as the suspension of habeas corpus – or detention without trial – drawing the figure of Liberty herself being hung from a printing press.

Cruikshank and Hone were more than just comic collaborators responsible for what is now seen as a golden age of satire. Hone also sold Cruikshank's prints in his tiny Fleet Street shop, where vast crowds would gather to see the latest attacks on their leaders. They were the standard-bearers for political and judicial reform. It was hardly surprising that Hone's trials became the great *cause célèbre* of the day. A thousand spectators crammed into London's Guildhall to witness Hone defend himself, by making jokes. It was the nut taking on the sledgehammer as Hone faced the combined might of the Crown and government, battling nobbled juries and an overtly biased judge. Cruikshank depicted Hone as the Gamecock of Guildhall, standing up to the turkeys of the law.

Cartoonists might be seen to be standing up to the establishment, but in reality this was not always the case. Much was made in Hone's trial of the fact that Cruikshank's brother brush James Gillray had accepted a pension from the Crown in order to divert his satirical attention from the Prince Regent and the Tory government to Napoleon and the French threat. Essentially he was bought off – and one might justifiably question his moral flexibility.

Cartoonists have always been subject to financial pressures and the consequent demands of their employers. Most cartoonists today have worked for ogres of the press – for the Regency government read the press barons and their political will. Many cartoonists today have been subjected to either knowing or unwitting editorial control. The Danish cartoonists who incurred death threats for drawing images of the Prophet Mohammed did so because they were commissioned to do so – and feared the financial consequences if they did not. I remember one of today’s most eminent and caustic cartoonists being forced to “remove the turds” from a political cartoon by his liberal editor. I myself worked for Robert Maxwell’s *London Daily News* – and while I never experienced direct censorship, I had no idea whether the cartoons published were subject to a grander Maxwellian plan. And the same is true of the Murdoch press.

So Gillray took the government’s shilling to live (and drink) and his great work was compromised as a result. It was lucky for Hone that he did – as it opened up a rich seam of argument in Hone’s defence case, as he fought for free speech and the liberty of the press. It should be added that Hone himself was made of sterner stuff – his moral probity was never in doubt – as his numerous bankruptcies and the poverty of his family testified.

The battle for press freedom continues around the world. Recently the Malaysian cartoonist Zunar faced nine charges of sedition – carrying a sentence of forty-three years in jail – for attacking the Malaysian prime minister Najib Razak and his wife. When Razak fell from power earlier in 2018, Zunar said, “I’ll miss him.”

The torch for free speech lit by William Hone and George Cruikshank still burns brightly.

Nick Newman
September 2018

WRITER IN THE DOCK

Hone's battle in court made legal history. Since I have been the defendant in a few libel trials over the years (well quite a few actually) the producers thought I might be able to give an expert view on libel. Given that I have lost nearly all of these cases I am not sure that I count as an "expert" though I suppose I do know what it is like to pay out large amounts in damages and even larger amounts in lawyers' fees. And there was one case in which a massive figure of £600,000 damages was awarded to the plaintiff, which resulted in a brief period of fame for me in the *Guinness Book of Records*. As I left the court I was so stunned I complained to the waiting reporters, "If that is justice..." and then I couldn't think of anything to say so I concluded "...I am a banana." I was clearly thinking that the justice system was bananas but it came out as nonsense. It will probably be my epitaph.

It did however look as if I had just bankrupted the magazine I was meant to be editing, so the situation was quite serious. I was also once prosecuted for contempt of court, which has a potential custodial sentence, but was cleared by the very wise and brilliant Justice Popplewell. For some reason the Attorney General at the time decided that he was not happy with this obviously sensible verdict and went to the Court of Appeal asking them to overturn the lower court's decision and to consider putting me in jail. I remember standing in the dock looking very nervous as the Appeal Court Judges announced their decision, well aware that this might be my last day of liberty for anything up to two years. I had my toothbrush in my top pocket and was feeling rather nervous. My wife, who was pregnant at the time, was sitting in the court behind trying to look like a suitable object for judicial pity. There were three men in wigs presiding over the case and the senior judge told me that their Lordships had considered the case closely and come to the conclusion that I was, after all, guilty of contempt of court. The fiercest looking man in a wig looked directly at me and added that they were considering the Attorney General's request for a committal. He then took a very long pause, worthy of Simon Cowell at his hammiest on *The X Factor* on television, before eventually saying "...but in this case we have decided on a fine". I was very relieved. To put it mildly.

This is the most threatening it has got for me but it was absolutely nothing compared to what Hone was facing. Two hundred years ago, after publishing satirical versions of the texts that people heard in church, he was charged not just with libel but with the really serious charge of “blasphemous libel”. He had already been imprisoned and made bankrupt preparing for the trial and was facing either a long jail sentence or being transported to the colonies – which for many prisoners turned out to be a death sentence. And yet Hone was fearless and managed to conduct his own legal defence and do it brilliantly.

In one of my first trials I listened to the advice of our barrister, who said it would be better if, when I was called by the other side, I did not give evidence. He did not think I would come across well under questioning and thought that my silence would be a safer option. When the time came the prosecuting barrister was delighted and launched into a long speech which began, “In refusing to take the stand Mr Hislop has displayed all the courage of a frozen chicken...” I learned that particular lesson but in subsequent trials when I did take the stand I was frequently told by barristers, “Do not lose your temper and do not under any circumstances try and be funny.” I tried to follow the advice but usually ended up getting cross or making jokes and neither was terribly effective.

What is so impressive about Hone is that he spoke for himself for hours, ignored the legal advice and did the opposite, got furious with the injustice meted out to him and was very, very funny indeed. Newton’s famous quotation was originally meant to describe the advances in science but it is equally true about journalists and satirists. We stand on the shoulders of giants. Hone’s trial was a defining moment for the freedom of the press in this country and if it all seems a long time ago and if it feels as if these battles have largely been won in Britain, I think it is still worth being grateful (and vigilant) about this legacy. It is also worth remembering that the policy of prosecuting your critics for blasphemy, when you really want to stop them criticizing your politics, is still being enthusiastically used by repressive governments all around the world.

*Ian Hislop
September 2018*

TRIAL BY LAUGHTER

Trial by Laughter was first presented at the Watermill Theatre, Newbury, on 20 September 2018, with the following cast:

LADY HERTFORD	Helena Antoniou
SIDMOUTH	Philippe Edwards
PRINCE REGENT	Jeremy Lloyd
CRUIKSHANK	Peter Lossasso
JUSTICE ABBOTT/DUKE OF YORK	Nicholas Murchie
WILLIAM HONE	Joseph Prowen
SARAH/LADY CONYNGHAM	Eva Scott
LORD ELLENBOROUGH	Dan Tetsell

Other parts were played by members of the company.

Director	Caroline Leslie
Designer	Dora Schweitzer
Lighting Designer	Matt Leventhall
Sound Designer	Steve Mayo
Musical Director	Tom Attwood
Video Projection Designer	Louise Rhodes-Brown
Movement Director	Emily Holt
Voice Coaching	Elsbeth Morrison

Produced by David Parfitt & Bob Benton

A Trademark Touring Ltd & Watermill Theatre Production

*This script went to print during rehearsals, and may differ
from the text in performance.*

CHARACTER NOTES

WILLIAM HONE – thirty-seven. Shy, mild-mannered and genial bookseller and satirist who has the inner steel to take on the Crown and government.

GEORGE CRUIKSHANK – twenty-five (fifty in last scene). The scabrous cartoonist and Hone's partner in crime. Penniless, drunk and dissolute, he renounces booze by the end of the play.

SARAH HONE – thirty-five. Hone's long-suffering but fiercely loyal wife, who is mother to their eight children while running Hone's shop and business when he's in jail.

LORD ELLENBOROUGH – sixty-seven. Hone's nemesis. The bullying Cumbrian Lord Chief Justice who will stop at nothing to win the case.

SIR SAMUEL SHEPHERD – fifty-seven. Crown Prosecutor. Incapable of keeping the trials serious.

LORD SIDMOUTH – sixty. Home Secretary. Keen to pass the buck for the government's failure to stop Hone.

JUSTICE ABBOTT – sixty. Judge in the first trial. Powerless to stop the courtroom descending into farce. Makes the cardinal error of acting constitutionally.

GEORGE, PRINCE REGENT – fifty-four. None too bright and renowned for his debauchery, mistresses and excess, the Prince Regent sided with the Tories to stamp on press freedom.

LADY HERTFORD – fifty-seven. Prince George's mistress, who is a figure of fun in the press and mercilessly (and no doubt unfairly) attacked for her appearance.

LADY CONYNGHAM – thirty-seven. Lady Hertford's love rival in Court. Smarter than Lady Hertford, and considerably more waspish.

DUKE OF YORK – fifty-three. The Prince Regent's brother, who is equally as debauched, and the source of ridicule through the "Grand Old Duke of York" song – which he will never live down.

WILLIAM HAZLITT – thirty-eight. A caustic wit and essayist, Hazlitt despised almost all humanity – but admired Hone.

MR SOUTHALL – thirties. An admirer of Mr Hazlitt.

MARY – thirties. A visitor to Hone while he is in jail, Mary may tempt him, but is not all who she seems.

CLERK IN COURT – twenties. Can't contain his fits of the giggles.

OFFICER – twenties. Initially aggressive, he gets to like and sympathise with Hone.

SHERIFF – twenties. Officious, but unable to control the court.

ELIZA FENNING – twenty. One of Hone's many causes. Hanged for allegedly putting arsenic in dumplings, and victim of a miscarriage of justice – proved by Hone.

MOURNER – thirty. A young writer who admired Hone, but only met him as he was dying.

YOUTH BY BOOKSHOP – seventeen.

CUB REPORTER – twenties.

WEATHERILL – twenty-five. A student who is arrested at Hone's trial.

FOREMAN OF JURY – forties. (may just be a voice off).

FLUNKY – twenties. Cocky and grovelling in equal measure.

TAVERN REVELLER – singer of bawdy songs.

YOUTH

FEMALE ADMIRER/VIEWER

MAN IN CROWD

BALLADEER/TAVERN REVELLER

ACT ONE

Scene One

*Royal Apartments. We hear glorious Handel music.
Outside the Royal Apartment, LORD ELLENBOROUGH
and LORD SIDMOUTH are rapping at the door.*

LORD ELLENBOROUGH We must see His Majesty!

A cocky FLUNKY appears.

FLUNKY I am afraid that is not possible.

LORD ELLENBOROUGH What do you mean it's not possible?

FLUNKY His Highness the Prince Regent is indisposed.

LORD SIDMOUTH This is a matter of the utmost importance!

FLUNKY I am afraid I cannot disturb His Highness.

LORD ELLENBOROUGH Why?

FLUNKY He is asleep.

LORD SIDMOUTH It's three o'clock.

FLUNKY Indeed.

LORD SIDMOUTH It's three o'clock *in the afternoon*. Are you telling me he is still in bed?

FLUNKY Who shall I say called?

LORD ELLENBOROUGH Damn your impudence, you toad eater –
I am the Lord Chief Justice and this is the Home Secretary.
It is imperative that we have his signature on this warrant,
so wake him up or he will be very, very displeased indeed.

FLUNKY I really cannot...

A door opens. PRINCE REGENT appears, wearing a nightgown and hastily putting on a wig.

PRINCE REGENT What is this commotion? Ah, Lord Ellenborough, Lord Sidmouth I was just busy reading some er...official papers...

We hear the voice of LADY HERTFORD off.

LADY HERTFORD Georgie-Porgie...come back to bed...

PRINCE REGENT Lady Hertford was assisting me...

LORD ELLENBOROUGH Of course. We wanted you to know that at last we have him!

PRINCE REGENT Who?

LORD SIDMOUTH William Hone, sire. The scurrilous and traitorous publisher of filth.

LORD ELLENBOROUGH He's overreached himself this time.

PRINCE REGENT What has he done now?

LORD SIDMOUTH He has committed a most heinous and blasphemous libel...

PRINCE REGENT Oh God.

Pause.

Has he suggested that I am *fat* again?

LORD ELLENBOROUGH Worse, sire. He has printed a parody of the Book of Common Prayer, which is a grotesque attack on yourself and your ministers and...

PRINCE REGENT I will not have him suggesting I am fat. In one of his publications I was likened to a whale and indeed he called me the Prince of Whales. That's not funny, is it?

LORD SIDMOUTH Indeed not, sire.

PRINCE REGENT Nor clever. And that damned caricature of oneself looking like a blubbery, spouting, sea monster...

LORD ELLENBOROUGH That was Hone's cartoonist accomplice, George Cruikshank, Your Highness.

The door opens again to reveal LADY HERTFORD also in a nightdress.

LADY HERTFORD Yes, and he turned me into a mermaid. A very fat mermaid.

LORD SIDMOUTH Good afternoon, Lady Hertford.

LADY HERTFORD He always draws me looking fat. I'm not fat, am I, Georgie?

PRINCE REGENT Of course not, my dear. You are no fatter than I.

Embarrassed pause.

LADY HERTFORD It is bad enough that members of society laugh at me behind my back...but to be mocked for the entertainment of the common people is too much...

PRINCE REGENT I'm sure that is not the case, my dear...

LORD SIDMOUTH I'm afraid it *is* the case, Your Highness. You see them massed in Fleet Street around the print shops, guffawing and cackling at the obscene and degrading pictures in the windows! Last week officers had to disperse the mob there were so many! A thousand, they say!

LORD ELLENBOROUGH Which is why it is of the utmost importance that we stamp out this insolence with the full might of the law before this country turns into... France.

LADY HERTFORD (*squeals*) Eeek!

PRINCE REGENT Please refrain from using the "F" word in front of Lady Hertford. I have done my best to remove the offending articles. I have spent a fortune buying up prints.

LORD SIDMOUTH ...which is presumably why they printed more, sire.

PRINCE REGENT (*suddenly touchy*) Are you saying I am, fool?

LORD SIDMOUTH No no, Your Highness.

PRINCE REGENT I am *not* a fool! George Canning told me that he was highly impressed by what he called my “intellectual endowments”.

LORD SIDMOUTH My friend Mr. Canning is a very able and wise minister.

There is an awkward pause.

LORD ELLENBOROUGH The point is, sire, that this time Hone has not only traduced Your Majesty’s good name, not only has he besmirched the reputation of your ministers but he has also committed an offence against Almighty God.

PRINCE REGENT Excellent! Or rather, how appalling.

LORD ELLENBOROUGH Exactly, sire. This gives us the perfect chance to make an example of this troublemaker and to put out the fires of insurrection that he and his like would willingly fan into naked revolution!

PRINCE REGENT Surely you exaggerate, sir?

LORD SIDMOUTH I believe Marie Antoinette said much the same.

LADY HERTFORD (*squeals, whimpers and faints*) Eeek!

PRINCE REGENT Where do I sign?

LORD ELLENBOROUGH Here, sire, it is an ex officio information...

PRINCE REGENT I don’t care what it is, just shut Hone up. I will not be described as a corpulent, licentious, adulterous libertine...

Another door opens. We hear another woman’s voice – it is **LADY CONYNHAM.**

LADY CONYNHAM Where’s my roly-poly Regent?

LORD ELLENBOROUGH Lady Conyngham, good day. I had no idea you were here.

LADY HERTFORD *Neither* had I...

PRINCE REGENT Ah...

Grand, pompous Handel music to denote scene change.

Scene Two

We hear the sounds of Fleet Street in London. Horses and carts, barking dogs, sound of clogs on cobbles. We are outside WILLIAM HONE's print shop. A CROWD jostles to look at the prints. HONE arrives with GEORGE CRUIKSHANK.

HONE Good day to you, sir, good day, madam. What a splendid crowd. Yes, yes, I shall be opening the shop shortly and there are plenty of excellent prints for all to buy and pamphlets starting at a mere tuppence...

CRUIKSHANK ...featuring fine cartoons! By the finest of cartoonists...namely myself.

(to an onlooker) George Cruikshank at your service, madam.

HONE You're too modest, George.

YOUTH Let me see! What's everyone looking at in the window?

HONE That is Mr Cruikshank's latest etching...entitled Liberty Suspended...

CRUIKSHANK And very amusing it is too.

YOUTH Why is the woman being hanged?

CRUIKSHANK It's a joke.

YOUTH Really?

CRUIKSHANK Yes – it's about the suspension of habeas corpus.

YOUTH And what's that?

HONE It is the law that allows the court to determine whether the authorities have the lawful right to detain a prisoner... A right which has recently been viciously and illegally removed...

CRUIKSHANK You see the figure of justice herself being suspended by the very law she has introduced. Clever, eh? And funny.

YOUTH If you say so.

CRUIKSHANK (*tetchy*) You don't like my etching?

YOUTH (*unimpressed*) Not really. I prefer those pictures of Mr Rowlandson...

The rude ones of the ladies with big dugs showing their...

HONE (*interrupting hastily*) Yes, yes... Rowlandson's work is a touch too...graphic for my taste...but we have plenty of other amusing prints...many of them of the amusing Prince...

YOUTH Ha! Good one...

YOUTH *and others laugh.*

HONE A simple pun for which I beg indulgence...

CRUIKSHANK (*annoyed that HONE has got a laugh*) My work is for the discerning viewer...like this charming lady here.

FEMALE VIEWER You young wheedle-cutter...

CRUIKSHANK (*to FEMALE ADMIRER*) Perhaps I could explain the detail of the drawing over a small glass of something medicinal. (*to HONE*) William, I couldn't borrow a few pence, could I?

HONE *fishes out a few coppers for his friend, who exits with FEMALE ADMIRER. Another PASSERBY doffs his hat to HONE.*

PASSER BY Mr Hone...

HONE Yes, all right, you too...

HONE *puts some change in his hat. PASSER BY looks surprised but pockets it.*

HONE *is grasped by an OFFICER.*

OFFICER Are you William Hone?

HONE Yes, and I have no more money today..

OFFICER William Hone, bookseller at 55 Fleet Street?

HONE The same. If you've come from Mr Skeffington, tell him his pamphlets will be ready within the hour.

OFFICER I am an officer of the court and you are my prisoner.

There is a tussle.

HONE Please! Unhand me sir.

CROWD is unhappy with this arrest.

MAN IN CROWD What's going on?

OFFICER You keep out of it. Unless you want to be arrested as well.

HONE By whose authority are you acting?

OFFICER I have a warrant from Lord Ellenborough against you.

HONE On what charge?

OFFICER You will find out in due course.

HONE This is unlawful. It is an outrage.

OFFICER I insist that you accompany me, sir, or I shall be forced to place you in grappling irons.

HONE Where are you taking me?

OFFICER You will find that out in due course as well. Come along.

HONE You must at least let me go home and inform my family.

OFFICER I shall do no such thing.

HONE For pity's sake, let me speak to my wife.

OFFICER No, I am instructed to take you directly to the lock-up.

HONE What about bail?

OFFICER Forget about bail. It has been set so high you can't possibly pay it.

HONE I insist that you let me go home.

OFFICER You are not going home for a long, long time...

Scene Three

The Guildhall. We hear CROWD in the Guildhall in London buzzing in expectation of a trial. We hear a gavel bashing. JUSTICE ABBOTT is presiding. SIR SAMUEL SHEPHERD is prosecuting for the crown.

Perhaps a large clockface behind the courtroom action depicts the progress of time, or in reverse, flashbacks.

CLERK The case of the King against William Hone, bookseller and publisher, commencing this day of the seventeenth of December in the Year of our Lord eighteen hundred and seventeen.

Mr Hone is charged with publishing an impious, blasphemous and profane libel with intent to excite impiety and irreligion in the minds of His Majesty's subjects – by ridiculing and scandalising the Christian religion and thus bringing the catechism into contempt. Mr Justice Abbott presiding and Sir Samuel Shepherd, the Attorney General, prosecuting. How does the defendant plead?

HONE (*weakly*) Not guilty.

JUSTICE ABBOTT You will have to speak up, Mr Hone. You are facing a penalty of lifelong deportation to His Majesty's penal colony in Australia or many years' imprisonment at the very least! So I ask you again, how do you plead?

HONE (*stronger*) Not guilty, my Lord. I am unafraid of the penalty, since I am confident the jury will find me innocent.

JUSTICE ABBOTT We shall see. Sir Samuel, if you would like to proceed?

SIR SHEPHERD Gentlemen of the jury, I shall not occupy you long in showing that the effect of Mr Hone's libel upon the catechism, the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments is to denigrate the Christian religion. It is impossible to read it without reaching such a conclusion. And if the Book of Common Prayer is not to be held sacred from ridicule, what is there that is left safe in the mind of a Christian?

SIR SHEPHERD *waves HONE's pamphlets at the jury.*
We hear anti-HONE reaction from CROWD.

If any of you gentlemen be fathers I would ask you this.
Would you put these profane works in the hands of your children?

Mutterings of "No".

These works were calculated to weaken the reverence for the Christian faith. It may be said that the defendant's object was *not* to produce this effect. I believe that he meant it, in one sense, as a political squib.

HONE *leaps to his feet to interject.*

HONE Indeed, that is exactly right, and my point is that...

JUSTICE ABBOTT Pray do not interrupt the Attorney General.
Your counsel will have the opportunity to present your defence later.

HONE But I have no counsel.

We hear surprise in court.

SIR SHEPHERD You have chosen to dispense with legal representation? Are you now a legal expert as well as an expert blasphemer?

CROWD *laughs with SIR SHEPHERD.*

HONE *(appealing to JUSTICE ABBOTT)* Members of the jury, I am unassisted by counsel not out of choice but out of poverty – as you can see from my shabby appearance I am as destitute as any man in London. These past months I have been prevented from pursuing my business due to my illegal imprisonment, which has reduced me to absolute penury.

This predicament has been forced upon me and my unfortunate wife and innocent children by the machinations of the Attorney General...

SIR SHEPHERD Machinations? Really?

HONE ...the judicial system, and the entire government.

JUSTICE ABBOTT Mr Hone even if you are representing yourself, you are obliged to obey the rules and procedures of the law. You must at this point remain silent and refrain from making such unfounded allegations – not least against myself.

CROWD *laughs with ABBOTT.*

HONE I thank Your Lordship for your advice. I was merely agreeing with Sir Samuel that my intent was always political.

SIR SHEPHERD But it is not the *intent* which is important but the *effect*. And Mr Hone's scandalous parody of the catechism – that sacred summary of the doctrines of the Church of England which are taught to infants so that they might declare their faith – that parody has the unarguable *effect* of bringing the Church into contempt.

Again HONE leaps to his feet.

HONE Not so!

JUSTICE ABBOTT Mr Hone! Your unfamiliarity with the court's procedure is proving tiresome. What is your objection at this point?

HONE *stands. Shuffles papers, drops them, regathers. He starts weakly but grows in confidence.*

HONE Gentlemen of the jury, I am not in the habit of addressing an assembly such as this. Indeed I have never addressed any assembly before so I beg your indulgence. I stand before you as an impoverished bookseller in poor health and threadbare coat, a humble man ill-equipped to face this persecution by the great powers in the land, from whom I have received nothing but abuse and bad treatment since my summary and unconstitutional arrest in May of this year...

Scene Four

Flashback. We are going back in time to before the trial.

A prison cell, the atmosphere damp and echoey. HONE is shouting off.

HONE Release me – I am illegally detained – and I am not a well man.

OFFICER *enters.*

OFFICER Save your breath to cool your porridge! You have a visitor.

Enter SARAH, HONE's wife, carrying a basket with bread and other provisions.

Wait there! I'll have to search your basket for any concealed weapons.

He checks the basket, and nicks a pie.

SARAH That's outrageous! That's theft.

OFFICER What are you going to do about it – put me in jail?

He laughs and eats the pie.

You're clear. Ten minutes.

OFFICER *leaves.*

HONE My darling Sarah...

But instead of a fond reunion, SARAH starts hitting him with a loaf of bread.

SARAH You idiot! You irresponsible, reckless idiot! Why must you continue to test the patience of the law...

HONE But I'm entirely innocent...

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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