

SHORTER NOTICE

A Dark Portrait: John Britton's Denunciation of John Soane

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ABSTRACT

This article presents hitherto overlooked documents at Vassar College in the United States relating to the character and reputation of the architect John Soane (1753–1837). The antiquarian and topographic author John Britton (1771–1857), a lifelong friend and associate of Soane, planned to write a ‘tell-all’ biography in which he would reveal the malicious nature of the architect, and his obsession with remembrance and veneration, to scandalous effect. The scope and purpose of Britton’s intended exposé are established here through notes and correspondences that describe the resentful microclimate of the architects, writers, employees and family members in Soane’s orbit. A further manuscript by Britton, which satirises his devotion to Soane and the architect’s house museum, is also analysed. In the process, the article broaches the role of architectural journalism in fashioning the reputations of architects and their private and public personas in early Victorian London. It also considers the relationship of temperament to architectural invention and historiographic permutations in the controversial appraisal of Soane.

Writing in 1846, the acerbic architectural journalist W. H. Leeds railed about one of his favourite targets, the architect John Soane. He was delighted that Soane’s public architecture in London was gradually being erased and would soon be lost to history:

Poor Soane! not only has the exterior of his ‘Board of Trade’ been so completely refashioned, as to be metamorphosed into a different piece of architecture, but his Scala Regia and Gallery, and his Law Courts—on which he prided himself so especially, are doomed to pass away, without leaving a wreck behind [...] Poor Soane! too, it will be doubly [a pity], if Britton should now pass by him without mention, when recording the other distinguished patrons and persons of talent whom it has been his good fortune to attract to himself during his long and industrious career. Will he now cut ‘his esteemed friend Sir John Soane,’ or will he recant,—at least qualify his former admiration by giving a dark *à la* Rembrandt portrait of him?—*Nous verrons*.¹

Leeds had referred before to the fraught relationship between the elderly antiquarian John Britton (Fig. 1), who was compiling his autobiography, and the by then deceased Soane. The second edition of John Britton and Augustus Pugin’s *Illustrations of the Public Buildings of London* (1838), published a year after Soane’s death, contained an



Fig. 1. Portrait of John Britton from the frontispiece of his *Autobiography*, 1850, engraved by Charles Edward Wagstaff after the painting by John Wood of 1845

irreverent analysis by Leeds of Soane's house museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields. In a brief psychological profile of the prickly architect, Leeds noted his 'fretful impatience of criticism [...] a morbid appetite, a rabid *bulimia* for praise'.² Giving the basic details of his birth and death, Leeds added in a note: 'Even this brief tombstone-record is more than he has obtained at the hands of his attached and devoted friend Mr. Britton [...] Alas! that it should come to this after so many public professions of regard and veneration [...]!'³ Pathologising Soane had become commonplace in architectural journalism, especially around the time of his death. Observing this trend in 1844, one writer justified praise for Soane on the grounds of having 'a prophetic sense of the influence which his works may have when "the world has done hating him"'.⁴

Leeds evidently expected that Britton would publish a revelatory biography of Soane. The prospect of the shadowy aspects of the architect being brought further to light by his erstwhile promoter and friend was tantalising. Britton's public renunciation never came to pass, but there is evidence for what it might have entailed. Among the papers in the Artistic Autographs Collection in the Archives and Special Collections Library at Vassar College in the United States are the fragments that constitute Britton's projected biography of Soane.⁵ There are two brief manuscript texts and sundry

letters in which Britton is seen gathering information from surviving family members, professional colleagues and former employees of Soane and his household.

As a prominent antiquarian, publisher, cultural promoter and educator, Britton was especially attuned to the challenge of building and maintaining a reputation in the jostling London art world.⁶ Much of his association with Soane was predicated on his role in securing the reputation of the mercurial architect in the public domain of press coverage and critical opinion. Soane often called on him to intervene in his many skirmishes with the press — no architect of the period (not even the scandal-plagued John Nash) was more sensitive to his own professional stature and integrity.⁷ These manuscripts by Britton may be mainly about angry old men, personal vendettas and unsettled scores, but within his fixation on the character of Soane, and on the quality of Soane's architecture and its place in history, was a deeper concern with the verifiable power of personal remembrance and its capacity to amend and authenticate the historical record. The work of Soane and its critical appraisal during the early Victorian period represents a remarkable instance in which the psychology and character of the architect were seen as constitutive of the design statements and anticipated memory and reception of his architecture. Britton recognised this, and it was his intention to ensure that a shadow hung over future estimations of Soane's work and persona.

STRAINED RELATIONS

Soane biographers Arthur Bolton and Gillian Darley have documented the vicissitudes of Britton's long relationship with Soane, which stretched from 1799 until 1836.⁸ 'A tireless fixer', as Darley has described him, Britton advised Soane on his collecting habits, on public relations strategies with the press and government commissions, and on the cultivation of clients and patrons. Early on in their friendship, Britton presumed to serve as a personal counsellor to the already temperamentally troubled architect. In October 1809, he warned Soane about his tendency towards 'hippishness [...] with a feverish thirst for fame, in yourself and family [...] bordering on delirium'.⁹ These aspects of Soane's personality and his familial struggles only intensified over the next three decades.

Earning and sustaining the friendship of Soane could be trying. The correspondence between Britton and Soane vacillates between sentimental declarations of mutual devotion and angry recriminations of ingratitude. On 16 July 1829, Soane inscribed a letter to Britton, 'a dream, Monday night', in which he accused the antiquarian of failing to recognise 'the depression of my spirits [...] the gloom under which I was suffering', and cast doubt on whether Britton was 'a friend in actions as well as in words'.¹⁰ Britton sought to appease Soane by qualifying this 'dream' as 'a baseless fabric' (a nod to Prospero) and 'a chimera of avid fancy'.¹¹ He often felt compelled to reaffirm the constancy of his friendship. Faced with financial difficulties, which was often the case with Britton, he wrote to Soane in 1831: 'Whatever may be my losses, I trust the loss of your friendship will not be among them.'¹²

Soane was generous to Britton in both financial and personal terms, but his generosity carried with it expectations of loyalty and subservience that were sorely tested. The liberal intermingling of the private and the professional, of friendship and finances, often determined and eventually poisoned many of Soane's relationships

with colleagues, among them the architect/surveyor James Spiller, the architectural artist Joseph Gandy and the history painter Benjamin Haydon, all of whom were at times financially beholden to Soane. On rare occasions, Soane suspected Britton of thwarting his ambitions and blamed him for unfavourable press coverage. In June 1821, the *Guardian* published anonymous reviews of the Royal Academy exhibition in which Soane's architectural designs were harshly criticised.¹³ Soane was convinced that Britton was familiar with the anonymous reviewers and insisted that their identities be disclosed so that legal action could be initiated. Britton claimed that he was unable to do so and tried to appease Soane by assuring him that, to his knowledge, it had nothing to do with George Soane, the architect's estranged son, who struggled as a journalist and Drury Lane hack.¹⁴ Six years earlier, in 1815, George had defamed his father's work in an anonymously published essay in the *Champion*. The emotional stress from this public embarrassment, Soane believed, had tragically hastened the death of Mrs Soane later that year.¹⁵ In Soane's mind, negative press was forever cleaved to family trauma. In this instance, he abandoned his inclination to bring a libellous suit against the *Guardian*. Although soured by what he saw as Britton's reticence over the matter, Soane nevertheless entrusted him with the first publication about his house museum, entitled *The Union of Architecture, Painting, and Sculpture* (1827). However, with florid passages ghostwritten by Leeds before his antipathy towards Soane took hold, the guide satisfied no one, especially its patron. What was to have been the summa of Britton's published accolade for Soane resulted in commercial and critical disappointment, and further convinced Britton that there was no satisfying Soane's ego.¹⁶

Yet he kept trying. Britton's *Brief Memoir of Sir John Soane* appeared in *Fisher's National Portrait Gallery* in 1834.¹⁷ A rote panegyric typical of Britton's literary formula, it acclaimed Soane as the only true heir of Vitruvius and Christopher Wren, and sought to divert attention away from biographical questions and recent controversies over the Act of Parliament that allowed for the public bequest of Soane's house museum. However, Britton alluded to the ongoing struggle between Soane and the press, noting that the architect's 'public character' had been often 'assailed by the satiric writer'.¹⁸ Soon after Soane's death, Britton's secretary and bibliographer T. E. Jones recalled: 'I have reason to believe that this memoir, though sufficiently complimentary for any reasonable man, so displeased him [Soane], that he was never afterwards cordial, and scarcely courteous toward its writer.'¹⁹ In late 1835 and early 1836, Britton's letters to Soane were strained and unpredictable in tone. A final break occurred on 2 February 1836, when Britton brazenly declared: 'I must therefore say on parting, I wish you may meet with a better and more sincere friend, than those you have insulted and driven from your door.'²⁰

During the 1820s and 1830s, it often fell to Mary Britton to act as a conciliator between her husband and Soane. In the five years leading up to the death of Soane's wife in 1816, the Brittons and Soanes were frequent social companions. Writing to Britton in 1822, Soane voiced his respect for 'Mrs. Britton, to whom I offer my best regards, who has no common mind and will readily enter into my feelings'.²¹ She was especially attentive to Soane with respect to his protracted mourning over the loss of his wife and anxiety over his failing eyesight. After her husband's intemperate letter of February 1836, Mary responded warmly to Soane's hope that the 'Temple of Friendship' would be

restored after this 'accidental passion-quake'.²² What Britton thought of this saccharine rapprochement between Soane and his wife is not known, but it is telling that Soane remembered her in his 1833 will with a modest lifetime annuity of £30 'for her sole and inalienable use', while her husband was bequeathed a considerably more modest £5 for a mourning ring.²³ Even after death, Soane reminded Britton of his obligations to his memory. Because Britton was never afforded any role in the future custodianship of Soane's museum, he could only take solace in the legal quagmire surrounding its early history after Soane's death, as claims and suits brought by former employees (or their families) and the architect's own disinherited family members began to mount.²⁴

GATHERING TESTIMONY

Britton's intention to set the record straight about Soane emerged soon after the latter's death on 20 January 1837. In a letter marked 'not sent', Britton offered editorial advice to the architect Thomas Donaldson, who had delivered a commemorative address to the Institute of British Architects two weeks after Soane's death. Preparing this address for publication, Donaldson sent a draft to Britton for comments. Britton's annotation was unsparring: 'leave out those encomiums on his learning, writing, generosity; for he could not write 3 sentences in sequence correctly — and he was the *worst* man I have ever known. This will soon be rendered public [original emphasis].'²⁵ Even Donaldson's circumspect overview of Soane's professional life touched on the architect's personality: 'In temper, he was irritable, impetuous, and intractable—he could not bear contradiction—and opposition induced in him the idea of personal hostility.'²⁶

The depth of Britton's hostility grew from both his pent-up resentment towards Soane and the larger tribulations of his own career. The threat of bankruptcy had chased him since the late 1820s, and his investments in railway construction projects foundered.²⁷ The ambitious serial surveys of medieval antiquities that he directed for over two decades were either scaled back or abandoned for more commercially viable publishing projects concerned with contemporary architecture and the urban picturesque. Moreover, his reputation as an overly prolific topographic scholar desperately in search of financing and subscriptions had become the subject of literary satire. Richard Harris Barham's immensely popular *The Ingoldsby Legends* (1837–47) — a compendium of humorous ghost stories and whimsical doggerel — lampooned Britton in the guise of the ponderous antiquary Mr Simpkinson, and in a nonsensical nursery rhyme chided him for his preening subservience to Soane:

Below stairs John Britton
Is teaching a kitten
To lap all the cream in the dairy, the dairy,
And tells Sir John Soane
That her mother is grown
A profound antiquary, profound antiquary!²⁸

Britton's immediate revenge on the recently deceased Soane is evidenced by his rallying to the aid of the black sheep of the family, George. Despite his prodigious literary output,

George Soane succumbed often to insolvency and periods of incarceration in debtors' prison. Writing to Britton in August 1838 for support in his application to the Royal Literary Fund (of which Britton was a prominent patron and member, as had been the senior Soane), George painted a melodramatic picture of his circumstances: 'A near and dear relation within these few hours died — my favourite daughter, the pride of my heart, ill — and myself in a prison! It is almost too much for human endurance.'²⁹ Throughout Britton's notes for his biography of Soane, a repeated theme is 'his rancorous enmity to his son George'; his 'persecution of his son George, so he was not his son'.³⁰ Britton failed to mention the role of George's own personal failings (adultery, domestic abuse, habitual financial malfeasance) in resurrecting the fierce antagonism between father and son. He also implied that Soane was in large measure an absent father who 'dined with all his family only once'.³¹ Rather than rely solely on his own reminiscences, Britton sought confirmation from others who had intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the Soane household. Sarah (Sally) Smith had been hired as a nursemaid and domestic servant in the mid-1790s, when she was a teenager, and she was secretly enlisted to care for the infant illegitimate son that George had fathered in 1824.³² Evidently Britton contacted her, for in a letter dated 19 January 1847 she promised to be in London soon and would 'brush up my memory for our meeting', adding that 'I shall be most happy to give you all the information in my power respecting that diabolical wicked old man — I could fill a book'.³³

Certain notorious episodes from Soane's life assumed a symbolic significance for Britton, notably the destruction in 1836 of the portrait of the architect by Daniel Maclise. When the Royal Literary Fund commissioned this honorary portrait by the young Irish painter to adorn the society's quarters, Britton promoted the proposal, but he later observed that Soane's 'enmity to me arose on this acc[oun]t'.³⁴ Displeased with the result, Soane offered to have a copy made of his earlier portrait by Thomas Lawrence to replace the gaunt, unsparing likeness by Maclise, which *Fraser's* later published in ironic commemoration of Soane's death (Fig. 2). William Jerdan, editor of the *Literary Gazette*, resented Soane's meddling to the extent that he 'cut Soane's portrait into ribbands, and carried the slip of canvas with the eyes on it to [...] the Opera'.³⁵ Barham declared it an extraordinary act of 'picture-cide'.³⁶

Britton viewed this turn of events as evidence of Soane's insatiable vanity and controlling temperament, encouraged by, as he phrased it, 'female influence'.³⁷ He was alluding to the friends and caregivers who helped the elderly Soane conduct his life during the 1830s — Sally Conduitt, Barbara Hofland and Britton's own wife. In sketching his character study of Soane, Britton insisted that a climate of irrationality and indulgence surrounded the architect, his vanity and demanding nature having created a collective madness. On a slip of paper, Britton listed the casualties: 'cruelty to servants — one deranged in consequence and henceforth; Gandy — driven to madness; one clerk kept in a secret room in Chelsea, reminds one of the secretary to Mortimer in the *Iron Chest*'.³⁸ The last reference was to George Colman's play *The Iron Chest* (1796), a popular adaptation of William Godwin's Jacobin-tinged novel *Things As They Are, or the Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794). Both dwelt on the dynamics of a master-slave relationship between an irascible wealthy antihero and his persecuted, imprisoned servant. Britton imagined Soane as a worthy equivalent to the 'Don Melancholy' in



Fig. 2. Portrait of John Soane from *Fraser's Magazine*, 14 (August 1836), p. 202

Colman's play, a character whose repressed secrets eventually consume and destroy all who come into his service.

There were survivors, however, such as the architect George Wightwick, who had briefly served as Soane's amanuensis in 1826. Unable to withstand the demands of his employer, he resigned after six months. Soane asked Britton to inquire after Wightwick and the reasons for his sudden departure. Wightwick replied on 25 May 1827: 'The matter is simply this. He is irritable and I am nervous. I respect Mr. Soane as a man of highest integrity and talent [...] but I must be allowed to say that he gives way too much to a capricious severity which only tends [...] to intimidate genius.'³⁹ Britton approached Wightwick again in 1839, requesting his recollections of Soane and sharing his vituperations about 'one of the eccentrics—the anomalies—the monsters of the human race, by his death and bequests he has left lasting tokens of his malignant spirit'.⁴⁰ Wightwick had reconciled with Soane in 1836, and in 1852 would publish his recollections of the Soane office.⁴¹ His architectural criticism of Soane's work remains some of the most insightful and trenchant, and he regretfully acknowledged the public pillorying of the architect. 'Sir John Soane was continually subject to the censure of the press,' Wightwick wrote, 'and was occasionally attacked with much more cruelty

than criticism.⁴² At the same time, he mercilessly described Soane's museum as 'the most unique and costly toy that the matured man-baby ever played withal'.⁴³ Elsewhere Wightwick offered a more compassionate and balanced view that emphasised the symbiotic idiosyncrasy of temperament and architectural invention, with the beleaguered Soane portrayed as 'a passive slave of his own mannerism'.⁴⁴

This self-defeating, tortured aspect of Soane is also indicated by Britton's use of an epigram from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* in his undated prefatory manuscript, 'Anecdotes of the late Sir John Soane'. Britton quoted from Duke Vincentio's cautionary speech to Claudio:

Happy thou are not,
For what thou hast not, still thou strivest to get;
And what thou hast, forget'st.⁴⁵

Admitting to 'painful emotions' elicited by this 'literary investigation', Britton expressed a moral obligation to reveal the hidden truths behind Soane's 'public and private character', describing him as this 'most accomplished intriguer in his professional and private relations'.⁴⁶ While claiming that 'I will not extenuate myself', Britton did little else throughout the seven-page preface, insisting that he had been anxious for patronage and too easily seduced by notice from such an eminent person; that the many pages he wrote in praise of Soane relied on 'generalities'; that he was following the expert opinion of others; and so on. Ultimately Britton admitted to 'having bent the knee to Mammon'.⁴⁷ Entering into the twilight of his own career, Britton wished to expunge the architect's name from his own literary works. Only then could the compromised author extricate himself from the published falsehoods that he had earlier propagated about Soane and that stood as an affront to 'public taste'.

While proclaiming Soane to be 'one of the most extraordinary men that ever lived [original emphasis]', Britton promptly seized on his most fundamental human flaw: 'Never was a man more covetous of contemporary and posthumous fame than Sir John Soane; never was [a] man more favorably circumstanced to secure both; and never was a man more completely a victim to a capricious and perverse temper, which counteracted all his aspirations, and was in perpetual conflict with his most sanguine wishes.'⁴⁸ This tragic disjunction between the inner, destructive nature of Soane and the outward accomplishments of his architectural career (including what Britton referred to Soane's 'splendid and unique museum') is what warranted the public exposé.

Admitting to his own complicity in 'pamper[ing] a diseased mind' and 'palliating the aberrations of genius', Britton sought to legitimise his inquiry by resorting to medical and political analogies. The outward success of Soane exemplified to Britton how eccentricity and delusional behaviour could flourish within public life, which, he argued, may be 'injurious to the welfare of society'. The version of Soane that Britton was preparing to reveal was one that defied 'a sound state of corporeal and mental organisation' — a terminology common in theological and physiological accounts of insanity during the early nineteenth century.⁴⁹ Closing with Hamlet's ambivalent estimation of man as 'the paragon of animals', Britton concluded that eccentrics such as Soane may be best understood as 'a pest to society, a diseased member of the body

politic'.⁵⁰ The excision of Soane from Britton's own literary corpus became synonymous with the necessary excision of the architect (or of his memory and reputation) from the social body at large.

ST JOHN OF SOANIA

Britton was struggling to mitigate his earlier efforts on behalf of Soane by now assuming the role of a social reformer. In undertaking his biography of this ostensibly corrupt architect, Britton explained that he felt the remedial call of 'an imperious duty' — a phrase commonly found in political and religious debates of the period.⁵¹ In 1833, the parliamentary reformer William Cobbett (who, coincidentally, opposed the terms of the national bequest of Soane's museum in the House of Commons) declared his dedication to 'the most complete enjoyment of civil liberty', arguing that 'it is our imperious duty to lay aside all selfish and local considerations and be guided by a lofty spirit of devotion to the great principles on which our institutions were founded'.⁵² By employing the rhetorically charged phrase of 'an imperious duty', Britton was broadening the scope of his exposé of Soane by casting himself as a public-minded intellectual. Without these disclosures, he wondered, 'is not the united cause of justice, honesty, and philosophy endangered, if not really injured'?⁵³ In a related commentary, he also mused: 'how can reform be effected if faults not pointed out—if error be not corrected, if vice be not reformed, apply to Soane'?⁵⁴ In posing these questions to himself, Britton was defending the incentive for this proposed biography and its promotion of exemplary moral and political values that he believed transcended the personal and professional foibles of its degraded subject.

Such high-handed posturing is notably absent in another of Britton's manuscripts about Soane presented here, the earlier mock-confessional text dedicated to 'St. John of Soania'.⁵⁵ Its history spans a couple of decades. Two versions of the manuscript survive. The original version, now in the Soane Archive, was presented to Soane by Britton as a mordant Christmas present in 1829, and Britton explained the occasion of its creation in an accompanying dedication: 'The inclosed may be deposited in one of your reliquaries, among the numerous objects of virtue—rarity—art—monkery—antiquity, &c.—as a memento of a pleasant day—combined with grateful recollections of past times.'⁵⁶ The second version, now at Vassar, is inscribed 'R Copy/Ins. To J. Soane/Saints, Sinners/JB'. It is undated, though the unsteady handwriting is very close to that found in Britton's correspondence after 1850. Was Britton revisiting this very personal document at the close of his life? It is impossible to know. But in light of Britton's decade-long deliberation over his planned biography, this fanciful and even jocular literary experiment, written seven years before his final break with Soane, nevertheless bears a sense of resentment and animosity that surfaced more emphatically as he came to reassess his previous commitment to Soane.

Derisively invoking both Catholic piety and Methodist enthusiasm, the manuscript is described by its author as 'a confidential and earnest communion with my own conscience'. Inspired by the legends of penitent saints and religious pilgrims, Britton was 'determined to abstain from the vanities and follies of this world [...] and make a pilgrimage to the revered and sacred shrine of St. John of Soania [original emphasis]'.⁵⁷

Soane's house museum, which Britton and his contemporaries often interpreted as a monument to Soane's overriding desire for commemoration in perpetuity, is recast as a religious site of salvation and reckoning. Acknowledging St John as his 'patron and mediator', Britton offered a startling confession: 'I have foolishly, vainly, and wantonly written and published many works on those useless and nonsensical things called antiquities, topography, the fine arts, and such like gee-gaws [...] architecture, pictures, and books have engrossed all those thoughts which ought to have been directed to things above.'⁵⁸ St John and his shrine are initially made to signify an ill-spent life devoted to architecture and the arts, and also to stand as the means of expiation for the penitent antiquarian returning, like a prodigal son, to the landmark of his original sin.

This text participated in the rueful sanctification of Soane's museum and the peculiar rituals of melancholy and mourning that the architect had staged there. In acknowledging receipt of Britton's manuscript, Soane indicated that it would be placed beneath a crucifix in the Monk's Parlour — the centrepiece of the gothic follies and maudlin scenography in the basement of the museum, which was more or less completed in 1824 (Fig. 3). In *The Union of Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting*, Britton had compared this chamber and its adjacent courtyard to 'the cell of a religious recluse [...] and a ruined cloister'.⁵⁹ Soane and the writer Barbara Hofland grafted a fictional narrative on to this subterranean pseudo-medieval hodgepodge in their 1835 guide to the museum, in which Padre Giovanni, a hermit monk (and Soane's alter ego), was claimed as the resident genius loci.⁶⁰ Britton's penitent saint was perhaps Giovanni's immediate forebear. The moody, recessive aspect of the Monk's Parlour was commented on by contemporary visitors. Writing soon after Soane's death, a journalist observed that 'the monastery and Monk's abode savour not a little of that trifling spirit which creates mimic waterfalls and builds interesting ruins. Yet one almost fancies that the venerable architect, so sensitive about his character and fame, frowns on any attempt to apologise for any creation of his.'⁶¹

Darley has indicated that the Brittons took tea with Soane in this lugubrious precinct of the museum and also speculated that, 'For Soane's closest circle, the knowledge that George [Soane] was pouring out plays and novels in a similar vein of pastiche medievalism, must have added to the unsettling feeling'.⁶² Britton's diatribe on St John of Soania echoes the literary voice of George Soane. His play *The Hebrew* (1820) bore a dedication to his estranged father in which he proffered a conflicted message of contrition and accusation: 'Our religion teaches us, that repentance of error, is the most pleasing offer to Heaven—pleasing beyond the rectitude that never sins—will it be less so to a father?'⁶³ In 1848, George maintained this histrionic strain by comparing a preface 'to the confessional, wherein the public listens and absolves, while the author plays the part of penitent [...] notwithstanding the rebukes of some of my critics [...] I feel in the happy plight of one more sinned against than sinning [...]'.⁶⁴ The only traits George shared with his father were a persecution complex and a well-founded dread of the press. He never relinquished the oppressive paternal spectre, recalling shortly before his death in 1860 that 'My father's rancour has been the deadly Upas-tree, spreading its noxious shade over me, and blighting every prospect'.⁶⁵ These stale gothic tropes of family curses and penitential confessions similarly pervaded Britton's meditation on the Soane shrine.

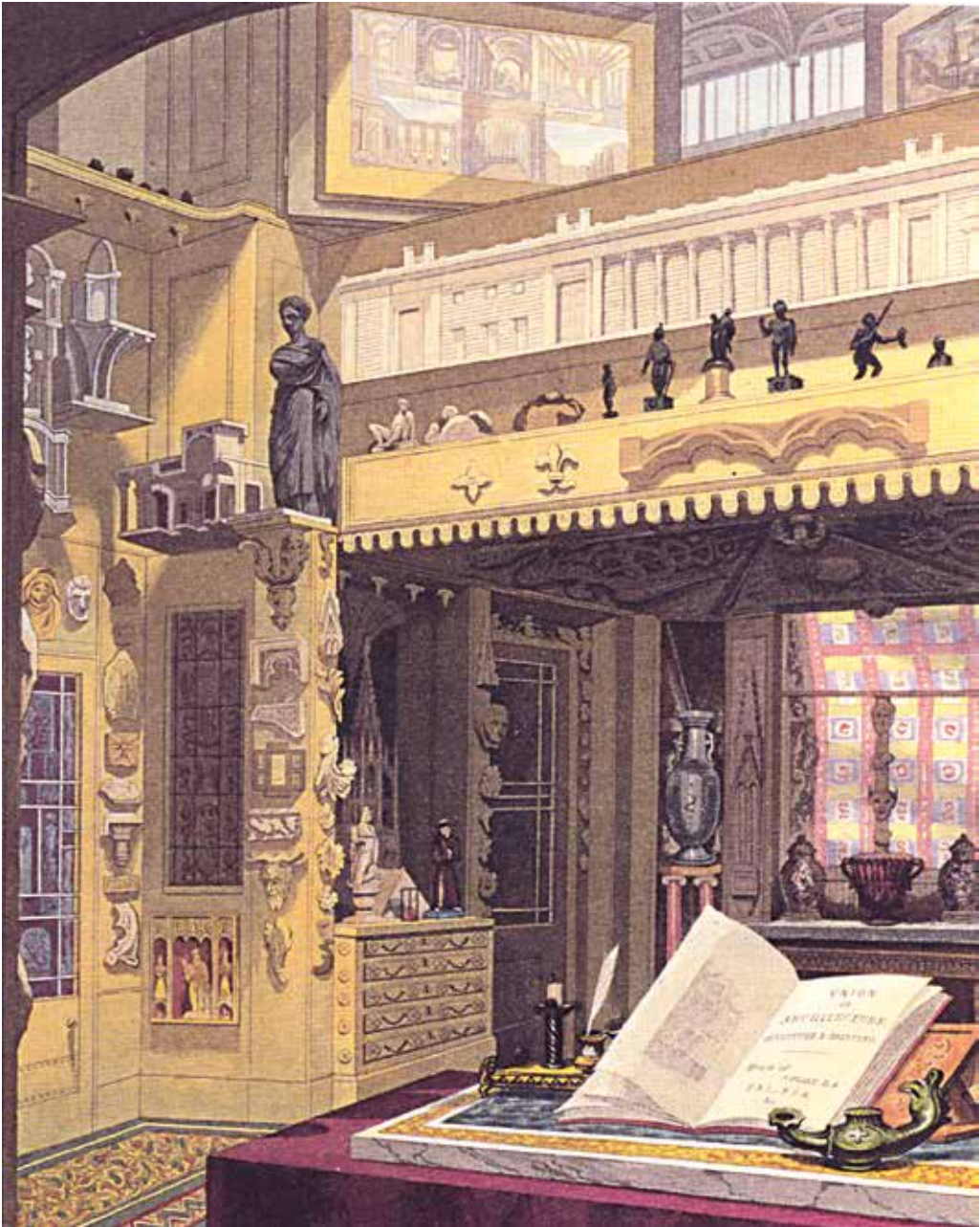


Fig. 3. *The Monk's Parlour* in John Soane's house museum, aquatint by Robert Havell after a drawing by Penry Williams, from John Britton, *The Union of Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting*, 1827

The religious theme of Britton's literary satire is also attributable to his recognition that his own contribution to the gothic revival was being superseded by a new generation of antiquarian research, in part informed by the Catholic polemic of the ecclesiastical gothic revival emerging in the 1820s and 1830s. Late in his career, Britton believed that his lifelong antiquarian pursuits were undervalued and that France was overtaking England in its national attention to the architectural documentation and preservation of the medieval past.⁶⁶ Britton was in contact with the younger Pugin during the 1830s, but religious prejudice flared between them, with the latter promising to write a rebuke of 'this Protestant antiquary'.⁶⁷ In turn, Britton had no sympathy for Pugin's fanatical devotion to 'restoring Catholic antiquity'.⁶⁸ Pugin's transformative book *Contrasts* (1836) was everything that Britton's lifework as an antiquarian was not — pithy, incisive and single-mindedly argumentative (it also savaged Soane's 'mixed style'), yet Britton may have had a formative influence on the work.⁶⁹ Describing 'the adventures of Architecture' in *The Union of Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting*, Britton exalted 'the rapidity of enchantment' associated with the gothic style while observing that, in the wake of the dissolution of the monasteries, the ambition of architecture 'shifted about from prisons to hospitals and thence to workhouses [...] well-adapted to the wants and habits of modern times'.⁷⁰ The bold oppositions between medieval and industrial Britain illustrated in Pugin's *Contrasts* were here prefigured in Britton's paean to Soane's museum.

THE CAPTIOUS ANTIQUARIAN

It is difficult to pinpoint when Britton abandoned the idea of writing and publishing his denunciation of Soane. Documents from the 1840s show him nursing his grudge — for example, his transcription of the lengthy title page of Soane's early publication *Plans, Elevations, and Sections of Buildings* (1788) with this ruthless annotation added at the foot of the page: 'tasteless—insipid—bad | ignorant of all the requirements for persons in good the higher ranks of life'.⁷¹ Soane's extensive publication record and literary legacy was particularly galling to Britton. He would surely have been one of the recipients of Soane's compilation of family letters and grievances privately published in 1835, which recounted the feckless careers of Soane's sons and their innumerable personal failings.⁷² The vindictive tone of this volume suggests that Soane had both accurately anticipated and perversely invited scandal-mongering in the wake of his death. As Leeds had predicted, Britton's compendious autobiography of 1849–50 was devoid of any pointed recollections of his former friend's many misdeeds. Britton made one bibliographic note to Soane's 'suppressed' pamphlet of 1812, which addressed the controversy over the suspension of Soane's Royal Academy lectures after he publicly criticised Robert Smirke's Covent Garden Theatre. Referring to 'the singularly captious temperament of its late Architectural Professor', Britton showed exceptional restraint by merely commenting: 'I wish it were in my power, conscientiously, to compliment the Author, or the Man, in this *en-passant* remark.'⁷³

Britton's act of self-censorship with respect to the Soane biography was perhaps a stroke of wisdom. Throughout the thousands of pages that Britton had authored over the course of his career, the prevailing tenor of his writing was that of laudatory veneration: literary, theological and architectural 'worthies' were lionised; praise was lavished

on learned patrons and entrepreneurial sponsors; and the creation and enlargement of a civic community of learning and knowledge through serial topographic surveys was unremittingly pursued. His complicated association with Soane came to be seen by himself and others as a compromising and guilt-ridden exception to his own professional standards of conduct that undermined the reliability of printed matter and the integrity of authorship. His account of Soane would have stood as an embittered brand of reverse hagiography, in which the emerging category of the celebrity architect was configured in exclusively disapproving terms. Britton believed that unwarranted professional jealousy was one of Soane's chief failings, and his proposed biography would have responded in kind with its litany of jealous recriminations against his former colleague and friend. The 'truth' about Soane was too corrupted by deeply held resentments and self-disclosures that Britton could not bear to see brought to light. How was he to distill an instructive lesson from Soane's dark biography that would make its telling meaningful or even intelligible to the reading public of the 1840s? He was aware that Soane's reputation was already greatly diminished. Within a couple of decades, Soane's museum would be judged in the Victorian press as 'one of the most useless institutions ever attached to any profession'.⁷⁴ Even with the twentieth-century recovery of John Soane in modern architectural history, the idiosyncratic and cathartic side of the architect was not overlooked. In 1953, Soane's primary interpreter John Summerson wrote of 'a temperamental factor' inherent in Soane's architecture.⁷⁵ And in 1981, Pierre de la Ruffinière du Prey tartly observed that Soane's museum 'owes its existence at least as much to selfish spite as to selfless generosity'.⁷⁶ Britton would have agreed.

That the truculent Leeds continued taunting Britton for not going forward with his exposé was perhaps enough to make Britton wary. Suggesting that the architectural profession provided conveniently scandalous fodder for the modern novelist, Leeds singled out Soane as 'the perfect God-send'. As he explained, 'What a rich subject for such purpose was that most incomprehensible oddity Sir John Soane [...] Oh that our friend M----- would but give the world his reminiscences as he once promised us to do of that unrivalled original! They would horrify one half the world, and kill the other half with laughter.'⁷⁷ Britton had presumably come to the same conclusion, and remained quiet. In 1838, when Britton was most passionate about desecrating the memory of Soane, Thomas Carlyle declared: 'How delicate, decent is English Biography, bless its mealy mouth! A Damocles sword of Respectability hangs forever over the poor English Life-writer [...] and reduces him to the verge of paralysis.'⁷⁸ The papers relating to Britton's unrealised biography of Soane promised to violate the cautious literary politesse that Carlyle lamented. But paralysis ruled the day, and the memory of St John of Soania was temporarily spared these revelations.

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BIOGRAPHY

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NOTES

- 1 'Candidus's Note-Book', *Civil Engineer and Architect's Journal*, 9 (1846), pp. 233–34 (p. 233).
- 2 *Illustrations of the Public Buildings of London [...] by Pugin and Britton. Second edition, greatly enlarged, by W. H. Leeds*, 2 vols (London: Weale, 1838), II, pp. 316–27 (p. 327). Leeds had begun his journalistic assault on Soane in 1835 in his 'Remarks on the Architectural Museum of Sir John Soane, By Candidus', *Architectural Magazine*, 2 (June 1835), pp. 247–49.
- 3 *Illustrations of the Public Buildings of London*, p. 319.
- 4 [Anon.], 'On the Present Condition and Prospects of Architecture in England', *Quarterly Papers on Architecture*, 4 vols (London: Woodfall & Son, 1844–45), II, p. 5. The biblical allusion is to John, 15.18.
- 5 Poughkeepsie, NY, Vassar College, Archives and Special Collections Library, Artistic Autographs Collection [hereafter AAC]. When John Britton's estate was auctioned in May 1857, large lots of books, drawings, letters and manuscripts were purchased for the American collector and Baptist minister Elias Magoon. Magoon was on the first board of trustees at Vassar Female College and sold his collection to Matthew Vassar, the college's founder, in 1864. This became the inaugural collection of the Vassar College Art Gallery. The papers relating to Soane, catalogued as lots 929 and 930, were described as 'Soane, (Sir John), a large collection consisting of Autograph letters to Mr. Britton—Mr. Britton's answers—his Memoranda for a Memoir of Sir John Soane. Papers relating to the Antiquarian and Literary Collections, now forming the Soane Museum, in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and many other interesting papers, which, if arranged and bound, would add much to their value, as a memorial of the eminent Architect': *Catalogue of the Architectural, Archaeological and Topographical Library of the Late John Britton, Esq.* (London: Sotheby and Wilkinson, 1857), pp. 62–63. The engraver John H. Le Keux, who acted on Magoon's behalf at the Britton auctions, wrote to Magoon on 8 May 1857: 'in the case is a lot of MSS I bought at the Britton Sale. It relates to Soane and his museum [...] I thought it would interest you' (AAC, 7.9).
- 6 For overviews of Britton's career and multifarious pursuits, see J. Mordaunt Crook, 'John Britton and the Genesis of the Gothic Revival', in *Concerning Architecture: Essays on Architectural Writers and Writing, Presented to Nikolaus Pevsner*, ed. by John Summerson (London: Allen Lane, 1968), pp. 98–119; Brian Lukacher, 'Britton's Conquest: Creating an Antiquarian Nation', in *Landscapes of Retrospection: The Magoon Collection of British Drawings and Prints 1739–1860*, exhibition catalogue, Lehman Loeb Art Center at Vassar College (Poughkeepsie, NY, 1999), pp. 1–40; and the forthcoming monograph by Stephen Daniels.
- 7 These issues are astutely summarised and studied in Timothy Hyde, 'Some Evidence of Libel, Criticism, and Publicity in the Architectural Career of Sir John Soane', *Perspecta*, 37 (2005), pp. 144–63. Also see Gregory Dart, *Metropolitan Art and Literature, 1810–1840: Cockney Adventures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 176–94.
- 8 Arthur Bolton, *The Portrait of Sir John Soane* (London: Sir John Soane's Museum Publication, 1927), pp. 106–08, 345–48, 413–23, 503–07; Gillian Darley, *John Soane: An Accidental Romantic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 163–64, 208–09, 242–43, 264–65.
- 9 Bolton, *Portrait of Sir John Soane*, p. 107.
- 10 AAC, 2.20.
- 11 AAC, 2.20.
- 12 London, Sir John Soane's Museum, Soane Archive, private correspondence, letters from Britton to Soane, 3 September 1829 and 11 February 1831.
- 13 Extracts from the offending *Guardian* reviews are found in Bolton, *Portrait of Sir John Soane*, pp. 340–43.
- 14 Bolton, *Portrait of Sir John Soane*, p. 345.
- 15 On these articles as the 'death blow' to Mrs Soane, see Darley, *Accidental Romantic*, pp. 234–36.
- 16 See Darley, *Accidental Romantic*, pp. 285–86.
- 17 [William Jerdan], *National Portrait Gallery of Illustrious and Eminent Personages of the Nineteenth Century; with Memoirs*, 5 vols (London: Fisher, Son & Jackson, 1830–34), V, pp. 1–12.
- 18 John Britton, *Brief Memoir of John Soane* (London: privately published, 1834), p. 7.
- 19 T. E. Jones, *A Descriptive Account of the Literary Works of John Britton [...] Being a Second Part of His Autobiography* (London: Printed for the Subscribers to the Testimonial, 1849), p. 101.

- 20 Bolton, *Portrait of Sir John Soane*, p. 504. Bolton notes that there may have been some perceived insult over a prospective appointment at the Royal Academy, for which Britton was applying.
- 21 AAC, 2.25.
- 22 Bolton, *Portrait of Sir John Soane*, p. 505.
- 23 Susan Palmer, archivist and head of library services at Sir John Soane's Museum, London, email to the author, 9 June 2014.
- 24 For example, see the case brought by the Conduits and the family of Joseph Gandy against the Soane estate, *Conduit v Soane*, 29 November 1840, in *The English Reports, Chancery*, 27 vols (London: Stevens and Son, 1905), XLVII, p. 1128. In 1838, a petition was introduced in parliament on behalf of 'the family of the late Sir John Soane, praying for leave to bring in a bill so far to amend the act of 1833, as to allow a portion of the money appropriated for the maintenance of the museum, to be applied to the support of the family of Sir J. Soane's son, who are at present in a state of destitution': quoted in Samuel Maunder, *Select British Biography: From the Rude and Warlike Days of Boadicea, to the Victorian Era* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1839), p. 263.
- 25 AAC, 1.13.
- 26 Thomas Leverton Donaldson, *A Review of the Professional Life of Sir John Soane* (London: John Williams, 1837), p. 25.
- 27 See Britton's letters to Soane cited in note 12.
- 28 *The Life and Letters of the Rev. Richard Harris Barham*, 2 vols (London: Richard Bentley, 1870), I, p. 303.
- 29 AAC, 2.11.
- 30 AAC, 1.36 and 2.13.
- 31 AAC, 1.36.
- 32 Darley, *Accidental Romantic*, pp. 111, 233–34, 310–11.
- 33 AAC, 2.12.
- 34 AAC, 1.36.
- 35 *The Autobiography of William Jerdan*, 4 vols (London: Arthur Hall, 1852–53), IV, p. 402. Further background on this event is found in Bolton, *Portrait of Sir John Soane*, p. 440, and Helen Dorey, 'A Notorious Portrait of Sir John Soane: Discovery of a Surviving Fragment', *Sir John Soane's Museum Newsletter*, 14 (Spring 2007), [n.p.].
- 36 *Life and Letters*, I, p. 285.
- 37 AAC, 1.23.
- 38 AAC, 2.13.
- 39 AAC, 2.8.
- 40 AAC, 1.22.
- 41 They appeared in a series of articles entitled 'The Life of an Architect' in *Bentley's Miscellany* and anthologised in Bolton, *Portrait of Sir John Soane*, pp. 395–413. Wightwick recalled Britton's literary reference to Godwin's novel in describing his persecution at the hands of Soane.
- 42 George Wightwick, *The Palace of Architecture: A Romance of Art and History* (London: James Fraser, 1840), p. 192.
- 43 Bolton, *Portrait of Sir John Soane*, p. 396.
- 44 Here Wightwick referred to 'my old friend John Britton': Bolton, *Portrait of Sir John Soane*, p. 409.
- 45 AAC, 1.30.
- 46 AAC, 1.30.
- 47 AAC, 1.30.
- 48 AAC, 1.30.
- 49 AAC, 1.30. The prominent Royal College of Surgeons anatomist Sir William Lawrence warned in his *Lectures on Physiology, Zoology and the Natural History of Man* (1819) of those who disassociate the mental and physical in seeking to explain the 'mental operations of the deranged', and 'thus disconnect the sound state of the mind from its own organization [...] disjoining insanity also from the corporeal structure, and in representing it as a disease not of the brain but of the mind'. Quoted in Andrew Scull, *The Most Solitary of Afflictions: Madness and Society in Britain, 1700–1900* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 191, n. 58.
- 50 AAC, 1.30.
- 51 AAC, 1.30.
- 52 [William Cobbett], *Cobbett's Political Register* 79, 12 January 1833, p. 121.
- 53 AAC, 1.30.

- 54 AAC, 1.37.
- 55 AAC, 1.39.
- 56 Soane Archive, 7/N/8/1, letter from Britton to Soane, 26 December 1829. My thanks to Gerald Beasley for pointing out the importance of this dedication. The original manuscript reference is Soane Archive, 7/N/8/2.
- 57 AAC, 1.39.
- 58 AAC, 1.39.
- 59 John Britton, *The Union of Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting* (London: The Author, 1827), p. 42.
- 60 Helen Dorey has described this 1835 account of the Monk's Parlour as 'a Gothic novel in miniature': *Visions of Ruin: Architectural Fantasies and Designs for Garden Follies*, ed. by Christopher Woodward, exhibition catalogue, Sir John Soane's Museum (London, 1999), p. 51.
- 61 'The House and Museum of Sir John Soane', *Penny Magazine*, 30 November 1837, p. 464. For the merging of public and private performance in the 'basement gothic' of the Soane Museum, see Helene Furján, 'Scenes from a Museum', *Grey Room*, 17 (Fall 2004), pp. 65–81. For the gothic aspect of the Soanes' own writings, both father and son George, and of nineteenth-century accounts of the museum, see Nicole Reynolds, 'The Literary Lives of Sir John Soane's Museum', *Genre*, 41 (Spring 2008), pp. 39–74. Also Sophie Thomas, 'A "Strange and Mixed Assemblage": Sir John Soane, Archivist of the Self', *Studies in Romanticism*, 57 (Spring 2018), pp. 121–42.
- 62 Darley, *Accidental Romantic*, p. 269.
- 63 George Soane, *The Hebrew, A Drama* (London: Lowndes, 1820), n.p.
- 64 George Soane, *New Curiosities of Literature and Books of the Months*, 2nd edn, 2 vols (London: E. Churton, 1849), I, p. 1.
- 65 Quoted in Sir Bernard Burke, *Vicissitudes of Families*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, 1859), II, pp. 404–05.
- 66 Rosemary Hill, *Time's Witness: History in the Age of Romanticism* (London: Allen Lane, 2021), p. 273.
- 67 *The Collected Letters of A. W. N. Pugin*, 5 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press), ed. by Margaret Belcher, I, pp. 80–81.
- 68 Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, *Contrasts: or, a Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages, and Corresponding Buildings of the Present Day*, 2nd edn (London: Dolman, 1839), p. 19.
- 69 See Rosemary Hill, *God's Architect: Pugin and the Building of Romantic Britain* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 145–61. Leeds also attacked Pugin's Catholic-inspired gothic programme for modern architecture: see W. H. Leeds, 'Architectural Revivalism and Puginism', *Fraser's Magazine*, 28 (November 1843), pp. 593–606.
- 70 Britton, *The Union of Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting*, pp. x–xi.
- 71 AAC, 1.25. Stephen Daniels kindly alerted me to this detail. The verso of the sheet has an engraved view of the church of St Mary Radcliffe, Bristol, 'as it appears in 1842'.
- 72 *Memoirs of Mr. John Soane, Mrs. Soane, Miss Soane and Mr Chamier* (London, 1835). On Soane's compulsion to organise his private archive, especially with respect to family transgressions, and the resulting publications, see Susan Palmer, 'Sir John Soane: Rewriting a Life', *Libraries and the Cultural Record*, 44 (2009), pp. 65–81, and Gillian Darley, 'John Soane and House Autobiography', in *Lives of Houses*, ed. by Kate Kennedy and Hermione Lee (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), pp. 246–56.
- 73 John Britton, *Appendix to Britton's Auto-Biography* (London: Britton Testimonial, 1850), p. 167.
- 74 'Mr. Sharpe's Annual Excursion', *Architect*, 10 (August 1873), p. 99. See Oliver Bradbury, *Sir John Soane's Influence on Architecture from 1791: A Continuing Legacy* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 237–98.
- 75 John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain, 1530–1830*, 4th rev. edn (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1963), p. 287.
- 76 Pierre de la Ruffinière du Prey, *John Soane: The Making of an Architect* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. xxii.
- 77 Candidus, 'A Codicil to a Chapter about boutiques &c.', *Fraser's Magazine*, 23 (March 1841), pp. 330–31.
- 78 Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus, and Essays on Burns and Scott* (London: Cassell, 1908), p. 291. On the conventions of Victorian biographical writing and their transgression, see Juliette Atkinson, *Victorian Biography Reconsidered: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Hidden Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) and David Amigoni, *Victorian Biography: Intellectuals and the Ordering of Discourse* (London: Routledge, 2014).