

# 1. Thomas Spence: His Life and Works

---

## 1.1. THE RADICAL AND HIS PLAN

### 1.1.1. *Family background and influences*

Thomas Spence was born on 21 June 1750 on the Quayside, then one of the poorest areas of Newcastle upon Tyne. His father was a Scot who had settled in Newcastle some eleven years previously, and who had followed the occupations of netmaker and shoemaker, later becoming a hardware dealer. Whatever he earned at these occupations would not have gone far, as there were besides Thomas eighteen other children to support. This places Spence, almost uniquely amongst eighteenth-century orthoepists and grammarians, firmly in the lower classes. Little is known about such formal education as Spence might have received: Ashraf (1983: 12) notes that he ‘began his working life at his father’s trade of netmaking at the age of ten after some schooling’. We do, however, know from Spence’s own account in *The Important Trial of Thomas Spence* that his father had his own method of educating his sons. ‘My father used to make my brothers and me read the Bible to him while working in his business, and at the end of every chapter, encouraged us to give our opinions on what we had just read. By these means I acquired an early habit of reflecting on every occurrence which passed before me, as well as on what I read’ (Spence 1803: 65; quoted from Waters 1917: 65).

Spence’s family moved in radical and dissenting circles: they joined the breakaway Presbyterian congregation of the Revd James Murray, a famous preacher at the time, and described by Ashraf (1983: 19) as ‘well to the left of Whig tradition . . . an egalitarian democrat’. Later, Spence’s father and brother Jeremiah were to join the Glassites, a millennialist Congregationalist group who advocated a return to the communal ownership of property practised by the early church. Bindman (1989: 198) describes the Spence family as ‘leading members of the Glassite congregation at the Forster Street meeting house’. Whether Thomas Spence continued to adhere to this sect or not, he was undoubtedly influenced by their belief in common ownership of property, and Ashraf (1983: 20) suggests that ‘possible Glassite tendencies were reflected in the millennial metaphor of Spensonia’ in Spence’s later writings.

### 1.1.2. *Newcastle in the eighteenth century: a radical city?*

Thomas Spence and his family were poor, but far from being intellectually impoverished. Nor was Spence born into an intellectual backwater: Shields (1973: 5) writes that ‘Newcastle upon Tyne in the eighteenth century was an intellectually stimulating place’. It was a centre for printing and engraving (Thomas Bewick, a close friend of Spence, lived in nearby Cherryburn); it was well known for the production of children’s books and a hotbed of educational publishing. Alston (1965–73: i. 110–11) shows that, in the eighteenth century, more grammars were printed in Newcastle than in any other anglophone city except London. Bookshops such as Barker’s and Charnley’s, and Sand’s circulating library in the Bigg Market, were, according to Horsley (1971: 206), ‘open for twelve hours a day’ and ‘the regular meeting place of the prominent citizens of the town’. There was ample opportunity for political debate in clubs such as the Constitutional Club and the Independent Club, both of which tended to take a reformist, even republican, stance. Newcastle in the eighteenth century was hospitable to radical thinkers: as well as being home to the likes of James Murray and the Glassites, between 1770 and 1773, and again for a brief spell in 1775, it was visited by Jean-Paul Marat, who chose to launch his revolutionary tract *The Chains of Slavery* (1774) in this provincial city.<sup>1</sup> In 1775 the Newcastle Philosophical Society was formed by a group of gentlemen with the intention of encouraging intellectual debate. Members of this Society included Thomas Spence, Thomas Bewick, and the Revd James Murray and, according to Horsley (1971: 206), it was attended by Marat during his visit to Newcastle.

### 1.1.3. *Spence in Newcastle: the birth of the ‘Plan’*

So, by the time he was a young man, Spence was keeping company with the radical intellectuals of the Newcastle clubs. We know that by 1775 he was a schoolteacher, for the title page of *The Grand Repository of the English Language* (Spence 1775: sig. A1<sup>r</sup>) refers to his ‘School in the Keyside’. Indeed, the young Spence already had something of a following in Newcastle, for Bewick in his memoirs (1862: 71, quoted in Robinson 1887: 34) relates how Spence had ‘got a number of young men together and formed into a debating society, which was held in the evenings in his schoolroom in the Broad Garth’. Bewick goes on to relate an entertaining tale about how he

<sup>1</sup> There has been much speculation about Marat’s stay in Newcastle, and we have to be cautious in interpreting material in which the few facts have been embroidered. Horsley (1971), for instance, describes Marat as Spence’s friend, but, as Ashraf (1983: 110) points out, there is nothing to connect Spence with Marat beyond the extraordinary coincidence that these two radical thinkers moved in the same circles at the same time and that in successive years (1774 and 1775) they each published a ‘revolutionary’ tract in Newcastle. I point out the connection here merely to show what a hive of radical activity Newcastle was in the later eighteenth century!

and Spence came to blows over the question of common ownership of the land: Bewick felt that this was impracticable except in a new colony, but Spence was not to be swayed from his firm belief that ‘property in land is everybody’s right’, despite the beating he took at Bewick’s hands.

On 8 November 1775 Spence read to the Newcastle Philosophical Society a paper to which he later (1793) gave the title *The Rights of Man*. Shortly after this, he was expelled from the Society, not, apparently, because of the content of this lecture, but for the heinous offence of having it published and selling it in the streets.<sup>2</sup> This lecture was to be reprinted several times, forming as it did the basis of Spence’s political philosophy for the next thirty-nine years. According to Rudkin (1927: 229–30), the earliest extant version is the 1793 edition mentioned above, which was the fourth edition. It was published again in *Pigs’ Meat* (Vol. 3 (1795)) and as *The Meridian Sun of Liberty* (Spence 1795a), in the Preface of which Spence writes: ‘Read this Lecture which I have been publishing in various editions for more than twenty years.’ The gist of the lecture, and the nub of what the author was to refer to later as ‘Spence’s Plan’, was that, since Natural Right gives everybody an equal claim to what Nature provides, then all land should be the common property of those who live on it.

#### 1.1.4. The Grand Repository of the English Language

In the same year that Spence read his lecture to the Philosophical Society, *The Grand Repository of the English Language* was published. Only two copies of this work survive—one in Boston, Mass., and the other in Newcastle Central Library—but it is also available on microfiche as no. 155 in the *English Linguistics 1500–1800* collection (Alston 1972). The Preface of the *Grand Repository* consists almost entirely of extracts from Thomas Sheridan’s *Dissertation on the Causes of the Difficulties which Occur in Learning the English Tongue* (1761), which is the only source for the *Grand Repository* that is acknowledged by Spence. This Preface is followed by an advertisement for Spence’s *Repository of Common Sense and Amusement*, then comes a very short Grammar (ten pages), almost certainly influenced by the works of the Newcastle grammarian Ann Fisher (see §4.2 for a fuller discussion of Spence’s sources). The Dictionary part of the *Grand Repository* is preceded by three pages, each setting out the ‘New Alphabet’, the first of which is reproduced in Figure 5.1. Then comes ‘An Accurate New Spelling and Pronouncing English Dictionary’, in which the words are first spelt in traditional orthography, with the main stress marked, then in brackets in the

<sup>2</sup> However, the *Newcastle Chronicle* report on 25 November 1775 states that the members of the Newcastle Philosophical Society ‘disclaim all patronage’ of Spence’s lecture, ‘being informed that he . . . became a member, apparently, for the purpose of obtruding upon the world, the ERRONEOUS and dangerous levelling principles, with which the lecture is replete’. An early example of what the modern Labour Party would call ‘entryism’!

capital forms of the new orthography (the first page of the dictionary is reproduced as the frontispiece to this book). This is a relatively short dictionary (14,536 entries on 342 pages), but that it was intended as a dictionary rather than just as a guide to spelling and pronunciation is shown by the fact that definitions, albeit brief ones, are provided.<sup>3</sup> Lastly, there is a section giving a list of ‘Christian Names of Men and Women’, which, like the dictionary entries, are given in both traditional orthography and Spence’s ‘New Spelling’. In the middle of these is placed a page of errata.

*The Grand Repository of the English Language* is, as the title suggests, intended as a guide to various aspects of the language and, given the brevity and simplicity of the grammar and the dictionary definitions, as a practical aid for those to whom Spence refers in the Preface as ‘the laborious part of the people’. However, it is the ‘New Alphabet’ and Spence’s intention to use the *Grand Repository* as a first step towards the reform of English spelling that have attracted such attention as Spence has received from scholars of language (Abercrombie 1948; Shields 1973, 1974) and that played the most important part in Spence’s plans for society as a whole. As a teacher of English, Spence would have had first-hand knowledge of the difficulties which children experienced in learning to read. Just as he proposed a radical solution to the problems of politics in his plan for common ownership of land, his *Grand Repository* set out a radical reform of the alphabet which, like his political views, was in many ways ahead of its time. Although Shields (1973) suggests that Spence’s later works in his phonetic alphabet do show slight alterations which involve a move away from the ‘phonetic’ ideal of the *Grand Repository* and a compromise with the contemporary reverence for ‘correct’ traditional spelling, Spence never abandoned his belief that a reformed alphabet was essential if the lower classes were to become sufficiently educated to gain political awareness.

#### 1.1.5. *Other Newcastle works*

Spence was to remain in Newcastle until 1783. The only works published in Newcastle which are still extant are (apart from the *Grand Repository* itself): *The Real Reading Made Easy*, which illustrates the phonetic alphabet first developed in the *Grand Repository*, and two versions of *A Supplement to the History of Robinson Crusoe*, one in Spence’s alphabet, the other in traditional orthography. All of these were published in 1782. However, we know from later references in *Pigs’ Meat* that he also published a version of his 1775 lecture, entitled *The Poor Man’s Advocate*, in 1779, and a song, *The Rights of Man in Verse*, in 1783. The *Grand Repository* also advertises the first issue of *The Repository of Common Sense and Innocent Amusement*, a

<sup>3</sup> Some of the definitions bear the hallmark of Spence’s political ideas—e.g. *Whig*: ‘a friend to civil and religious liberty’.

sort of Spencean *Readers' Digest*, with 'extracts from the best authors in which every word is spelled according to the best pronunciation by the new alphabet'. Since no copies of this are extant, we can only conclude that Spence was unable to find enough subscribers to make it viable.

Whilst in Newcastle, Spence also made his first attempt at another venture which he was to continue more successfully in London: the stamping of slogans on coins. These were produced to publicize 'Spence's Plan', for all those that have survived bear these words: for instance, a halfpenny is countermarked 'Spence's Plan you Rogues' (see Bindman 1989: 198). These were stamped with punches cut by Thomas Bewick, who also cut the punches for the *Grand Repository*.

#### 1.1.6. *Spence moves to London*

There are no extant publications from Spence between 1783 and 1792, nor do we have any information as to his whereabouts during this period. What we do know is that by 1792 he was in London and already in trouble with weightier authorities than the committee of the Newcastle Philosophical Society, for his first London publication is *The Case of Thomas Spence, Bookseller* (1792), which relates how he was imprisoned for selling Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*. The memoir of Spence in *The Newcastle Magazine*, January 1821, suggests that Spence 'became discontented with Newcastle, and resolved to seek the Metropolis. He was often heard to say that there was no scope for ability in a provincial town, and that London was the only place where a man of talent could display his powers.'

Certainly, Spence arrived at the capital in what were dangerous and exciting times for a man of his convictions: the French Revolution of 1789 had instilled in the Government and its institutions a dread of a similar uprising in Britain, leading to heavy repression of what we might loosely term 'radical' ideas. The works of Thomas Paine were especially singled out as likely to incite the lower orders to revolution and Paine was denounced and caricatured in what amounted to a 'propaganda war' of pamphleteers in the 1790s. More seriously, this decade saw the passing of a series of Acts suppressing freedom of expression: the suspension of Habeas Corpus in 1794, followed by the Two Acts of 1795, which extended the definition of High Treason to include acts of speech or writing, gave the authorities the power to imprison the likes of Spence without trial. Spence, far from being deterred by this danger, used every means at his disposal to propagate his message. He became a member of the London Corresponding Society, which was founded in 1792: according to Bindman (1989: 56), Spence 'was on the radical wing of the LCS; a "violent democrat", in the words of an informer, with "levelling" tendencies that worried the more moderate executive'. (Like Bewick, they disagreed with Spence on the question of common ownership of property and land.)

During his time in London, Spence made his living largely by selling books and pamphlets, as well as a drink called saloup, in the first instance from a street stall. He continued to publish pamphlets on the theme of his Plan, as well as the periodical *Pigs' Meat*. In 1793 Spence opened a shop called 'The Hive of Liberty', and began to sell tokens as well as printed material. Like the early tokens produced with Bewick's help in Newcastle, these always carried a radical message.<sup>4</sup> Bindman (1989: 57) notes that 'the printing of radical texts was always susceptible to laws against sedition; a token, on the other hand, could retain a certain immunity and could pass from hand to hand relatively inconspicuously'. Apart from using these tokens as a means of propagating his Plan, Spence became sufficiently interested in what was at the time the minor 'craze' of token collecting to produce a catalogue, *The Coin Collector's Companion* (1795b).

#### 1.1.7. *Arrests, trials, and political writings*

Spence was arrested three times between 1792 and 1794, when, along with other members of the London Corresponding Society, he was arrested under the Suspension Act, imprisoned for seven months, charged with High Treason, and finally acquitted in December 1794. On his release, Spence resumed the publication of *Pigs' Meat* and went on to publish *The End of Oppression* (1795c), *The Meridian Sun of Liberty* (1795a), *The Reign of Felicity* (1796), *The Rights of Infants* (1797), *The Constitution of a Perfect Commonwealth* (1798), and *The Restorer of Society to its Natural State* (1801). The last-named publication led to Spence's arrest on a charge of seditious libel, for which he was sentenced to a year's imprisonment and a fine of £20. A full account of the trial is provided in *The Important Trial of Thomas Spence*, which Spence published, along with *The Constitution of Spensonia*, first (1803) in a version of the 'Spensonian' alphabet originally developed in the *Grand Repository* and later (1807) in conventional orthography.

#### 1.1.8. *The last years: 'Citizen Spence' and his followers*

After his release from Shrewsbury Jail, Spence continued to promote his Plan through informal meetings. Ashraf (1983: 84–5) refers to a handbill dated 18 March 1801, in which 'well-wishers' are recommended to 'meet frequently . . . after a free and easy Manner to converse on the Subject [of Spence's Plan], provoke investigation, and answer such Objections as may be stated, and to promote the circulation of Citizen Spence's pamphlets'.

<sup>4</sup> Examples of Spence's tokens (described more fully in Bindman 1989) are one displaying a Red Indian with the inscript 'If Rent I once consent to pay, my liberty is passed away'; and Spence's favourite, which was buried with him, bearing on one side a picture of a cat and the inscript 'I among slaves enjoy my freedom' and on the reverse a dog and 'much gratitude brings servitude'.

These small, informal gatherings were difficult for the authorities to suppress and we can assume that ‘Citizen Spence’s’ ideas were indeed being propagated, for Ashraf (1983: 87) points out that ‘the Home Secretary drew the attention of the police to sayings like “Spence’s Plan and Full Bellies” which had appeared on every wall in London’. (McCalman (1988: 3) considers the establishment of Spence’s ‘free and easy’ as marking the beginning of the ‘radical underworld’ which is the subject of his eponymous work, and of which Spence was the father.) Apart from collections of the broadsides and songs sung at the ‘free and easy’, Spence’s only other publication was *The Giant Killer, or Anti-Landlord*, of which three numbers are extant, all dated in August 1814. Spence died on 1 September 1814: at his funeral a week later, friends carried a pair of scales before his coffin, which was bedecked with white ribbons, the intention being to symbolize the justice and purity of Spence’s life and ideas. Ashraf (1983: 92) notes that ‘his tokens were distributed to mourners and onlookers, so that he literally went to his grave still spreading his immortal message’.

After Spence’s death, his followers continued to meet as ‘The Society of Spencean Philanthropists’. Their propagation of Spence’s ideas led to the trial of four of its members on a charge of high treason in 1816, and in 1817 an Act was passed ‘for more effectively preventing seditious meetings and assemblies’, which explicitly prohibited ‘all societies or clubs calling themselves Spencean or Spencean Philanthropists’ (57 George III c. 19, quoted in Ashraf 1983: 98). McCalman (1988: 2) argues that, despite such draconian action on the part of the government, Spence’s followers, ‘a circle of radicals whom a variety of historians have dismissed as harmless cranks or destructive loonies’, may be considered ‘stalwarts of a small but *continuous* revolutionary-republican underground which runs from the mid 1790’s to early Chartism’.

## 1.2. THE GRAND REPOSITORY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE: A RADICAL WORK?

### 1.2.1. *Spence’s two ‘plans’*

The brief account above is sufficient to show that, throughout his adult life, Spence was zealously and fearlessly engaged in promoting the Plan first formulated in that ill-fated lecture to the Newcastle Philosophical Society in 1775.<sup>5</sup> What has been overlooked by some of Spence’s biographers and political commentators is the extent to which Spence’s other ‘plan’, for introducing a reformed system of spelling, was an integral part of Spence’s reform of society and was likewise still being promoted up to the time of his

<sup>5</sup> Butler (1984: 190) comments that Spence was ‘distinguished from other radicals by his single-hearted pursuit of his main doctrine, the parish ownership of land’.

death. Hyndman (1882, quoted in Shields 1973: 22) writes that the young Spence ‘wasted much time and energy in his endeavours to establish a phonetic system of spelling. But the young man was an enthusiast, and soon turned his thoughts to more important matters.’ Likewise Rudkin (1927: 229), whose biography of Spence otherwise has much to commend it, makes the mistake of asserting that ‘except for an occasional broadside, Spence made little use of his phonetics in London’. Spence’s own words give the lie to these dismissive statements. In *The Important Trial of Thomas Spence* (which, as noted in §1.1.4. above, was printed first in the ‘Spensonian’ alphabet), he explicitly links his two ‘plans’: ‘When I first began to study, I found every art and science a perfect whole. Nothing was in anarchy but language and politics. But both of these I reduced to order, the one by a new alphabet, the other by a new Constitution’ (Spence 1803: 59; quoted from Waters 1917: 59). Here we see Spence asserting, with a characteristic lack of false modesty, that in 1775 (at the age of 25) he had already formulated the solution to all society’s ills. The part played by the New Alphabet in Spence’s new society is first hinted at in the preface to the *Grand Repository* itself. Spence envisages his new spelling taking over from the traditional orthography and being used in books: as a start, he proposes a ‘weekly miscellany’, which he thinks should succeed ‘especially among the laborious part of the people, who generally cannot afford much time or expence in the educating of their children, and yet they would like to have them taught the necessary and useful arts of reading and writing’ (1775: sig. B2<sup>r</sup>).

Indeed, the provision of such education was an integral part of his Plan for the reform of society, as becomes evident in Spence’s later political works. In *A Supplement to the History of Robinson Crusoe*, Spence describes how the people of Lilliput, having been given the benefit of a phonetic alphabet (the *Crusonean* being one of Spence’s names for his orthography), find it very easy to learn to read, with revolutionary consequences: ‘As they could now learn as much in a Month, as formerly in a Year, the very poorest soon acquired such Notions of Justice, and Equity, and of the Rights of Mankind, as rendered unsupportable, every species of Oppression’ (1782a: 40, quoted in Shields 1974: 44).

In Spence’s view, the education of the lower classes was the key to the reform of society and the New Alphabet was the key to the education of the lower classes.<sup>6</sup> As well as facilitating literacy, Spence probably intended the *Grand Repository* as a guide to ‘correct’ pronunciation. In *The Giant Killer, or Anti-Landlord* (No. 1 (6 Aug. 1814)), the importance of attaining a

<sup>6</sup> Spence’s opinion may seem naïve, but there are still those who would agree with him: a letter to *The Guardian* on 21 July 1987 puts the question ‘what would be the effects on the distribution of power and influence brought about by large numbers of people suddenly becoming literate?’ The correspondent, an Adult Literacy tutor, goes on to suggest that ‘lots of practice is needed to learn to read and write, and the Establishment controls the subject matter for this’.



‘correct’ pronunciation, or, at least, avoiding a ‘vulgar’ one, is hinted at. ‘Why should People be laughed at all their lives for betraying their vulgar education, when the Evil is so easily remedied. How ridiculous it is to hear People that can read saying *Any Think—A Horange—Idear—Noar.*’ However, to Spence, the acquisition of such a pronunciation was not the only (or even the principal) purpose of his *Grand Repository* and subsequent works in phonetic spelling: he saw it rather as an essential means to the end of opening up education and opportunities for advancement to the lower classes, so that his radical Plan for the reform of society could be achieved. The two reforms, of spelling and of society, had always run parallel in Spence’s thinking.

### 1.2.2. *Eighteenth-century attitudes to ‘correct’ pronunciation*

Spence’s *Grand Repository* was published at a time when interest in fixing a standard for English pronunciation was reaching its height. As Holmberg (1964: 20) points out, ‘it is in the eighteenth century that the snob value of a good pronunciation began to be recognised’. The recognition to which Holmberg refers here was part and parcel of what Leonard (1929) calls ‘The Doctrine of Correctness’: that Augustan emphasis on propriety and politeness which led to the outright condemnation of non-standard usage in all areas of language, and to a huge demand, particularly from the rising middle classes, for explicit and prescriptive guides to correct usage, guides which would help them to avoid betraying their ‘vulgar’ origins. With regard to pronunciation, this demand was largely met, especially in the latter part of the century, by the publication of numerous pronouncing dictionaries, each giving some indication, by the use of diacritics and/or phonetic or semi-phonetic respelling, of the ‘correct’ pronunciation of every single word. Social and political factors such as the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the larger provincial towns and cities; the improvements in communications brought about by, for example, the introduction of the Turnpike trusts in the 1750s; and the Act of Union of 1707; all led to a greater awareness on the part of the middle classes in areas distant from London that their language was doubly damned for being ‘provincial’ as well as ‘vulgar’.

It was by this time generally understood that the pronunciation which should act as a model for such guides was that of genteel society in London: the ‘vulgar’ (i.e. lower-class urban) and the ‘provincial’ alike were almost universally condemned. However, some of the earliest and most influential of these guides to ‘correct’ pronunciation were written by ‘provincials’, such as James Buchanan, who produced the *Linguae Britannicae Vera Pronunciatio* (1757), and Thomas Sheridan, author of the *General Dictionary of the English Language* (1780). As Crowley (1991: 73) points out: ‘Sheridan was Irish, Buchanan was a Scot; it is no small irony that it is from the edges of

the dominant culture that these two prominent elocution masters arrive with their prescriptions for “proper English”.’

Both Sheridan and Buchanan were aware that their own countrymen were particularly in need of guidance in the matter of ‘correct’ pronunciation: Sheridan prefaced his dictionary with a set of ‘Rules to be observed by the Natives of Ireland, in order to attain a just Pronunciation of English’, whilst in the preface to the *Linguae Britannicae Vera Pronunciatio* Buchanan (1757: p. xv) states that ‘the people of North Britain seem, in general, to be almost at as great a loss for proper accent and just pronunciation as foreigners’, but he promises that, after studying his work, ‘they may in a short time pronounce as properly and intelligibly as if they had been born and bred in London’.

Such altruistic concern for their fellow-countrymen earned little credit for these lexicographers: both were castigated for daring to presume that they could teach the English how to pronounce their own language. Sheridan had the dubious honour of being held up to ridicule by no less a man than Dr Johnson, who said: ‘What entitles Sheridan to fix the pronunciation of English? He has in the first place the disadvantage of being an Irishman’ (Boswell 1934: ii 161). Sheridan was able to survive such criticism because of his established reputation as a teacher of elocution. Buchanan, however, enjoyed no such cushioning from the attacks of the English: Sheldon (1947) points out that he was condemned in the *Monthly Review* (18 (1757), 82) because, being a Scot, he did not ‘seem a competent judge of English pronunciation’, and William Kenrick, in the preface to his *New Dictionary of the English Language* (1773: p. i), without mentioning names at this point, states that ‘there seems indeed a most ridiculous absurdity in the pretensions of a native of Aberdeen or Tipperary to teach the natives of London to speak and read’. On the other hand, it was the duty of a well-bred Londoner to teach provincials the correct pronunciation, as can be seen in the announcement on the title page of John Walker’s *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* that it included ‘Rules to be observed by the Natives of Scotland, Ireland and London, for avoiding their respective Peculiarities’. It is worth noting here that Walker saw ‘the peculiarities of (his) countrymen, the Cockneys’ as particularly reprehensible, because they, being ‘the models of pronunciation to the distant provinces, ought to be the more scrupulously correct’ (1791: p. xii). (See §3.3 for an evaluation of these pronouncing dictionaries.)

### 1.2.3. *Reactions to The Grand Repository of the English Language*

How does Spence fit into this picture? Although his *Grand Repository* never excited the attention given to Sheridan or even Buchanan, he was a provincial writer publishing in the most northerly city of England, and speaking a dialect which to the Londoner would probably be indistinguish-

able from Scots. The stigma of ‘provincialism’ must have been keenly felt in what was in the later eighteenth century becoming an increasingly important and wealthy city.<sup>7</sup> Although the *Grand Repository* attracted little or no attention in the press, there is anecdotal evidence that Spence himself encountered, and answered, the same kind of criticism as that extended to Buchanan and Sheridan. Welford (1895: 432–3) relates the following story:

When soliciting subscriptions to this curious work (*The Grand Repository*) he called upon the Rev. H. Moises, master of the Grammar-School, morning lecturer of All Saints’ Church, for the purpose of requesting him to become a subscriber to the work. As Mr. Spence had a strong Northern accent, Mr. Moises enquired what opportunities he had had of acquiring a just knowledge of the pronunciation of the English Language. ‘Pardon me,’ said Spence, ‘I attend All Saints’ Church every Sunday Morning!’

Place’s unfinished and unpublished biography of Spence, which survives in BL Add. MS 27,808, includes several letters from persons acquainted with Spence. The following extract is redolent of the kind of criticism more publicly aimed at Buchanan:

During the whole of his life, he was zealously engaged in propagating his plan of parochial partnership in land. He also published some works in what he termed the Spensonian dialect, being an attempt to render the orthography of the English Language identical with its pronunciation, like the Italian. This orthography was somewhat defective, as he spelled the words according to the Northumbrian idiom, Newcastle on Tyne being his birthplace. (BL Add. MS 27,808, fo. 227)

#### 1.2.4. *Conclusion*

Whether or not Spence ‘spelled the words according to the Northumbrian idiom’, we shall see in Chapter 5. Spence, like Buchanan before him and Sheridan after him, was concerned with ‘correct’ pronunciation, for the full title of his dictionary is *The Grand Repository of the English Language: containing, besides the excellencies of all other dictionaries and grammars of the English tongue, the peculiarity of having the most proper and agreeable pronunciation*. It would, however, be a mistake to think of the *Grand Repository* as just another book designed to help the middle classes in Newcastle to avoid the twin hazards of vulgarity and provincialism. The *Grand Repository* is in some ways in tune with the spirit of its age, but in other ways completely discordant. Whilst other pronouncing dictionaries, like the grammars cited by Leonard (1929), were intended to assist the middle classes and *nouveaux riches* in acquiring linguistic gentility, Spence’s

<sup>7</sup> Horsley (1971: 220) writes that Newcastle in the eighteenth century ‘was . . . a thriving manufacturing town and port, whose population rose during the century from 18,000 to 28,000, with a corresponding increase in revenue from £8,056 1s. 1¼d. to £25,699 0s. 10½d’.

was intended for the education of the lower classes, as the first step in a plan for spelling reform as well as a guide to pronunciation. Just as Spence's Plan was for a Radical reform of society, his *Grand Repository* was intended as part of a 'radical' reform of English orthography.

We shall examine the *Grand Repository* in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5. The question which I would like to pose here is: how is it that such a radical and innovative work as the *Grand Repository* has largely escaped the attentions of historical phonologists, despite Abercrombie's identification of Spence as a 'forgotten phonetician' worthy of serious attention? The answer lies partly in the inaccessibility of the text prior to the production of Alston's microfiche collection *English Linguistics 1500–1800*.<sup>8</sup> However, the scholarly neglect of Spence as a source of information on eighteenth-century pronunciation is part of a wider pattern. I intend to demonstrate in the next chapter that the eighteenth century, and most of all the *phonology* of eighteenth-century English, has been paid so little attention by scholars, at least until relatively recently, that this period can justifiably be termed the 'Cinderella' of English historical linguistics.

<sup>8</sup> It is perhaps significant that the only scholar to attempt a detailed study of the *Grand Repository*, Anthea Fraser Shields (now Gupta), was at the time (1972–3) based in Newcastle and so had access to the copy in Newcastle Central Library.