

Editor Jailed For Seditious

James Montgomery was a prolific poet and composer of over 400 hymns, who in 1794 - aged 23 - became editor of *The Sheffield Iris* newspaper. He soon would serve two prison terms, but eventually became one of the most respected men of his time

Iris will soon be blooming in our gardens, writes Ian Macgill, but this story is about the blossoming of a much older *Iris* — a Sheffield weekly newspaper first published in July of 1794 under the editorship of 23-year-old James Montgomery, a Scots-born young man who was an obsessive writer of poetry but lacking in journalistic experience.

Six months later Montgomery was on trial at Doncaster, accused of 'seditious libel.' He was handed three months in York's Castle Prison, given a £20 fine, and told by one of the magistrates sentencing him that he was lucky not to also suffer 24 hours in the pillory. His offence was to have used *The Sheffield Iris* printing press to republish a song sheet on behalf of a street vendor. Its wording praised the revolution raging in France, which was sending shivers down the spines of Britain's ruling elite. Montgomery said he had not written the tract, and that it had previously been published in three other English newspapers without upsetting the authorities.

A year later he was back in the same prison after publishing a report that was said to have libelled a local militia commander who helped suppress a Sheffield riot in which soldiers fired into the crowd, killing two people. Montgomery's account in *The Sheffield Iris*, presumably written by him, stated that the commander — one of the magistrates who had previously sentenced him to prison — had ridden into the crowd and slashed indiscriminately with a sword. This was denied, and magistrates took only 15 minutes to find Montgomery guilty. He was sentenced to another six months' jail in York, and fined £30.

Both incarcerations seem to have been gendemanly episodes, with Montgomery completing the sentences — occupying a cell of his own — in what he called a 'smooth, easy fashion'. He had a dog as his pet during the second term, and in the prison yard would feed



The *Sheffield Iris* offices in Hartshead. James Montgomery's surname is visible on a sign in the window, but this image will have been taken long after he sold the newspaper

a raven and two deer. Often he gazed upon a windmill from his cell window while composing verses of poetry that would be published in a volume entitled *Prison Amusements*.

James Montgomery was born in Irvine, south-west of Glasgow, on November 4th, 1771, into a family of Moravian missionaries, followers of a Protestant order named for the region in which it was founded: Moravia, in Bohemia (now the Czech Republic). When Montgomery was six, his parents went to preach the Gospel to slaves in the West Indies. He was placed in the care of a Moravian seminary near Leeds, and a few years later learned that his mum and dad had died while on their mission. They hoped their son would become a priest, but his passion was

poetry, which he had been writing since he was a boy. The seminary found Montgomery work in shops and at a bakery, but he kept running away.

Eventually, he came to Sheffield, and in 1792 was taken on as clerk by 31-year-old Joseph Gales, Eckington-born editor of the *Sheffield Register*, which he had founded five years earlier. A section of the newspaper was devoted to poetry, which delighted young Montgomery, who soon had one of his works published, denouncing the slave trade.

Gales was a political radical in tumultuous times. He agitated for constitutional reform, workers' rights, universal male suffrage, emancipation of slaves — and was outspoken in his admiration for the French Revolution, which had begun in 1789 and seemed at first a beacon of hope for downtrodden people in Britain who despaired of ever improving their lot in society. During 1792 Sheffield radicals held public ox roasts to celebrate French military victories over Austria and Prussia, but a year later such behaviour would be regarded as sedition because Britain went to war with France.

James Montgomery certainly had chosen a most exciting and dangerous era to join an anti-establishment newspaper that published articles against the war, and helped organise two peace rallies in Sheffield. At one of the gatherings people sang a pacifist hymn Montgomery had composed, an event that brought him to the attention of the authorities. From that moment he was a marked man, and must have been shocked when in June of 1794 government investigators arrived at the *Sheffield Register's* office in Hartshead with a warrant for the arrest of Joseph Gales.

Fortunately for him, he was in Derby on business, from where he fled to Hamburg, avoiding prosecution for sedition and a lengthy



This edition of *The Sheffield Iris* is dated 1835, ten years after James Montgomery sold the title, which was published every Tuesday. It has a hefty cover price of 'sevenpence', despite each issue offering readers only four pages

prison sentence. With his wife and children he then emigrated to America and settled in Raleigh, North Carolina, where he founded another newspaper: Joseph Gales was twice mayor of Raleigh, and died there aged 80. His son Joseph (also born in Eckington) would become mayor of Washington DC.

After Gales' departure the *Sheffield Register* closed, then quickly reopened as *The Sheffield Iris*, with James Montgomery as editor, a role of which he later said: "No young man ever embarked upon his work with fewer hopes or greater fears."

Within a short while he would serve the two prison terms mentioned earlier. After his second sentence Montgomery became owner of *The Sheffield Iris* (published every Tuesday), and ran it for

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A bronze statue of James Montgomery clutching the Bible stands close to East Parade, at the side of Sheffield Cathedral, where windows over the high altar are dedicated to him (see next page). He died in 1854, and was laid to rest at the General Cemetery in Ecclesall. A few years later Montgomery's admirers raised funds to erect the statue in memory of their 'revered townsman', where since 1861 he has stood high atop a granite obelisk that on three sides is inscribed with verses of his poetry

Photograph by Ian Macgill



MONTGOMERY

JAMES MONTGOMERY

BORN
AT IRVINE SCOTLAND
NOVEMBER 4TH 1771

DIED
AT THE MOUNT SHEFFIELD
(AFTER A RESIDENCE IN THE TOWN OF 62 YEARS)
APRIL 30TH 1854.
IN THE 83RD YEAR OF HIS AGE

THE TEACHERS SCHOLARS AND FRIENDS
OF SUNDAY SCHOOLS IN SHEFFIELD
ASSISTED BY PUBLIC SUBSCRIPTION
HAVE ERECTED THIS MONUMENT
IN MEMORY OF
THEIR REVERED TOWNSMAN
MDCCLXI.

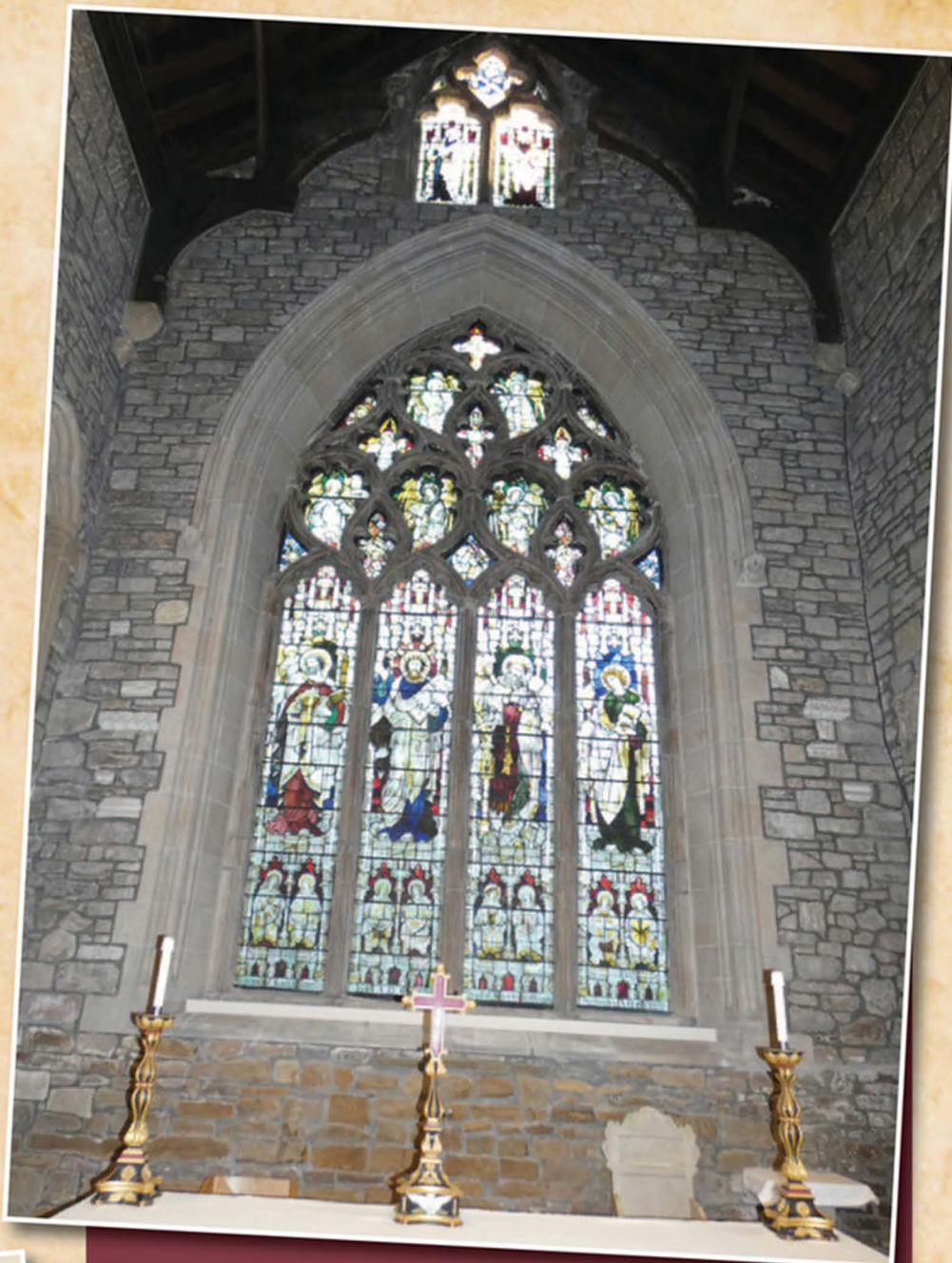
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the next 30 years, until selling the title in 1825. He gradually became more conservative in his views, but still campaigned for abolition of the slave trade and an end to the exploitation of boys as chimney sweeps. His work with Sheffield Sunday schools and churches greatly enhanced his reputation, as did the popularity of 400-plus hymns he eventually composed, which it seems are still sung to this day judging by the comment of an elderly clergyman who approached me while I was photographing Montgomery's statue featured on the previous page. "He was," said the passer-by, "a remarkable fellow, and I like many of his hymns."

I entered the cathedral in search of a window dedicated to Montgomery, expecting to find a small pane, but was astounded to see those magnificent windows above the high altar (collectively the East Window), all of which are dedicated to James Montgomery. It says so in an inscription on the bottom left.

On an adjacent wall is a stone face with a very stoney expression—the Rev. James Wilkinson, a former mayor of Sheffield and one of the magistrates who twice sentenced Montgomery to prison. Mr Wilkinson looks distinctly unhappy at being illuminated by stained-glass dedicated to the man once arraigned before him.

Montgomery's good works on behalf of working people resulted in him being so widely admired that in 1835 he was asked to lay the cornerstone of Sheffield's Cholera Monument, near Norfolk Park, and became the go-to-man when a speaker was needed at civic dinners, or for charring meetings about sanitation, street gas lighting and hospitals. He apparently evolved into an ardent royalist, and gave a public reading of an ode he had penned praising Queen Victoria on the occasion of her 1838 coronation. Commissions flowed in for Montgomery to write



Windows above the high altar at Sheffield Cathedral. An inscription in the bottom left corner says they are dedicated to the memory of James Montgomery. Photograph by Ian Macgill

forewords to books, epitaphs and funerary verses. At one point he was said to be 'half-killed with engagements, and harassed with homage.'

Throughout his later years he often alluded to the two prison terms he served, and complained that he had been arrested on trumped-up charges, which probably was true. He lived in Sheffield for 62 years, and on April, 30th, 1854, died here — 'in the 83rd year of his age,' as it says on the inscription below his statue. It seems he never married.

Montgomery's funeral at the General Cemetery took place on

Drawing of James Montgomery in his younger days

May 11th, and some accounts claim it was attended by thousands of mourners, including religious/civic leaders, and workers whose shops/factories had closed for the day so they could pay their last respects. It was said that he was accorded "such demonstrations of respect as never before were paid to any individual in Sheffield."

Later, local streets would be named after him, and Montgomery Hall/Theatre on Surrey Street.

Those glorious windows dedicated in memory of James Montgomery at Sheffield Cathedral might endure for hundreds of years, gleaming like the Greek goddess in whose honour he named his newspaper — Iris, guardian of rainbows and purveyor of truthful messages to Zeus on Mount Olympus.

The Sheffield Iris ceased publication in 1848.

