Writing on the Wall

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Graffiti, Rebellion and the Making of Eighteenth-Century Britain

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Profile Books

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by
Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London ECIA 7JQ

www.profilebooks.com

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset and designed by James Alexander/Jade Design

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 80081 199 7
eISBN 978 1 80081 201 7

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

The word 'graffiti' did not appear until the mid-nineteenth century, when archaeologists excavating the ancient ruins at Pompeii developed the term to describe writings on the wall left by the city's residents in the days before the catastrophic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. Instead, those in eighteenth-century Britain made use of a broad set of terms when referring to marks – some textual and others pictorial – across their environments. 'Inscription', 'device', 'hieroglyph', 'glyph', 'chalk', 'lines', 'manuscript', 'diamond-' and even 'diary-' writing were all used with varying regularity. Here, unless dealing with a specific semantic peculiarity, I use these labels interchangeably and alongside the more modern 'graffiti'. In doing so, I hope to evoke something of the wide-ranging points of reference that many in Georgian Britain employed in articulating the varied, often ephemeral and unruly scribblings that shaped their age.

In a period characterised by a revolution in print media and the power of words in public life, the question of how to record graffiti on the page was especially pertinent. Experiments in representing the unique material qualities of each mark – the depth to which it was gouged, the style of the individual scribe, its relation to the physical environment – abounded. Although far from

comprehensive in portraying the sheer variety and complex material dimensions of marks made in Britain, many chose, when dealing with textual graffiti (as opposed to those depicting symbols or images), to render them in italics on the page in order to distinguish them from other printed prose. Here, I follow their lead.

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Would it not be a great Pity, that the profound Learning and Wit of so many illustrious Personages, who have favoured the Publick with their Lucubrations in Diamond Characters upon Drinking-Glasses, on Windows, on Walls, and in Bog-houses, should be lost to the World? Consider only, Gentlemen and Ladies, how many Accidents might rob us of these sparkling Pieces, if the industrious Care of the Collector had not taken this Way of preserving them, and handing them to Posterity.

Hurlothrumbo, *The Merry-Thought; or, The Glass-Window and Bog-House Miscellany*, 1731

INTRODUCTION

Lost Voices

In the first hot days of June 1780, London was in chaos. As sticky heat broke into rolls of thunder and angry flashes of lightning illuminated the city below, its inhabitants cowered in their barricaded homes, too afraid to step outside. In the streets, wreckage from week-long violent protests was strewn across filthy pavements. The remains of bonfires smouldered, some piled as high as the houses whose contents had provided the kindling. Everywhere, the incendiary slogans of the mob had been daubed in large painted letters, else scribbled in thick chalk – the voices of the angry and the fearful writ large for all to see. The phrase *No Popery*, a common anti-Catholic message, appeared on the sides of buildings and across doorways and window shutters, its letters dripping and smudged in an eerie quiet now punctuated only by patrolling soldiers. Figures flitted back and forth through the destruction, attempting to salvage or loot anything of value. Lone carriages ferried nervous passengers to the safety of their pre-arranged destinations. Men armed with rifles had laid siege to the Bank of England and, to the east, Newgate prison had been emptied of its prisoners, their liberators supposedly writing across its fortress-like frontage in bold, angry letters the phrase *His Majesty King Mob*. Hundreds were dead. The events leading

to this moment had brought the city to its knees and Britain dangerously close to revolution. As one observer had it, this was a 'metropolis in flames, and a nation in ruins'.[1]

But despite the seriousness of events in the summer of 1780, afterwards known as the Gordon riots for the MP Lord George Gordon charged with inciting them, the shocking and powerful graffiti that surfaced throughout were hardly unique in the eighteenth-century world. Across walls, windows, doorways, wooden panels, fireplace surrounds, carriage sides, coins, weapons, the margins of books and many other pliable canvases, Britain's surfaces glistened and buzzed with words and symbols put there by its inhabitants, though most remain overlooked by historians today. Many were overtly political and produced to spread ideas, intolerance and as a call to arms. Others were more discreet, though no less important, detailing personal relationships and grievances. All invited reassessment of place, time and power, as eighteenth-century Britons looked to redefine themselves and their nation. Here, an aristocrat heated with drink and taking up the point of his diamond ring to carve into a tavern window a satirical poem criticising a rival in Parliament, or a shopkeeper's daughter sitting in a doorway and sketching with a coal from the fire her father's clients as they descend from sedan chairs and into his establishment. There, the deeply carved initials of a condemned highwayman, rendered on the inside of a cell door in the desperate hours before his public hanging, or an angry review written in chalk on the wall of a London brothel by a disgruntled and infected customer. All gave voice to a riotous and shifting society, not only reflecting change but driving it.

When we think of the eighteenth century today, it is difficult to reconcile the apparently distinct and often conflicting worlds handed down to us through museum and heritage collections, country houses and period dramas. On the one hand, we might imagine imposing Palladian mansions and cool marble colonnades, exquisite aristocratic portraits backed with sweeping

landscapes, glittering ballrooms and candlelit experiments, all jewels in an age of wealth, elegance and so-called Enlightenment progress. This was, after all, the era of Handel and Mozart, Reynolds and Gainsborough, Pope and Austen, measured in reason, scientific rigour and artistic prowess. On the other hand, there is the grimy, lusty squalor immortalised by William Hogarth and others, in which the impoverished victims of imperial expansion and capitalist growth fight for survival in sprawling urban landscapes steeped in vice and populated by any number of ne'er-do-wells. It is hard to picture the occupants of one world setting foot in the other. And yet, for those who lived through the long eighteenth century – a favourite designation by historians, which runs roughly from the Glorious Revolution of 1688 to the accession of Queen Victoria in 1837 – and left their mark, the definition between the spheres was far from clear. Power was all to play for, its hierarchies and boundaries constantly challenged and redrawn during decades of immense and often violent change. In this time, monarchs were toppled, else ran mad. The 1707 Act of Union brought England and Scotland together and in doing so sought to forge a united kingdom, while, in the second half of the century, revolution in America and France sent shock waves across the world. Writing on its surfaces helped navigate and even prompted these changes and, today, offers unique and compelling insight to the experiences of those who witnessed them.

Ideas of civilisation and personal freedom, of individuals' relationship to the city, to nature and the landscape, to the past and the future were all reassessed in the eighteenth century. At home, antiquaries looked enthusiastically to historic relics – from stone circles to Roman villas to bog bodies – to comprehend, and politicise, the history of the British Isles, uncovering its secrets in dusty vaults and beneath the earth and using them to justify contemporary power structures as they did so. In Europe, Britain's wealthiest sons and daughters toured Italy, Greece,

Switzerland and the Low Countries to inspect the remnants of the ancient and Renaissance worlds, bringing back traded and stolen fragments and, with them, new ideas of taste and beauty. Eighteenth-century Britons even reimagined themselves in time and space. The 1750 Calendar Act saw a switch from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar so that when the clock struck midnight on 2 September 1752, eleven days disappeared and Britain and its colonies awoke not to the third of the month, but to the fourteenth. Just as time itself was seemingly curtailed, the British landscape was also reshaped. Successive Enclosure Acts granted landowners the right to shut off pastures traditionally shared by rural communities and which had, for centuries, provided the poor with the opportunity to graze animals and gather firewood. Faced with this disastrous severance from vital resources, many were driven towards growing towns and cities, where new work under the ever-loudening groan of mechanised industry awaited them. As Britain was carved up and reassigned, its empire overseas was busy expanding at a phenomenal rate. By the end of the century, the global imperial project, underpinned and financed by the trade in enslaved human beings, had generated unimaginable wealth and was responsible for the deaths of millions. Port cities like Bristol, Glasgow, Liverpool and London all grew rich on the spoils. From the sugar-laden tea tables of the aristocracy to the investment prospects of the lowliest widow, all were implicated in this system of exploitation and brutality.

In London, the Gordon riots of June 1780 were part of a long list of protests enacted on city streets and which brought to the fore a pressing question over which many agonised, debated, romanticised, brutalised and died; who was entitled to liberty, and who was not? Attempts to answer it came as much at the point of the pen as at the end of the musket. Indeed, the most unifying characteristic of this complex and messy age was, arguably, its sheer wordiness. Rising literacy rates within a rapidly growing population and a boom in print culture ensured that

words were as ubiquitous as they were powerful; printed in pamphlets, books and magazines, scribbled in journals and shared in letters, embroidered in samplers, shouted in the streets and carved, scratched and gouged into the fabric of everyday life, the voices of high and low were hard to escape, though of course rarely given equal footing. Across Europe and beyond, networks of communication between intellectual communities shared new thinking on science, philosophy and natural history. In Britain, taverns and coffeehouses became centres for lively and sometimes adversarial discussion of religion, art and sex, while printing presses ran hot with fervent political treatises and biting satire. The so-called Enlightenment was, in many respects, forged by the inky fingers of seditious printers, loquacious orators and, this book argues, provocative graffitists. While the printed word was subject to establishment censorship, and its authors subject to gender and racial bias, writing on the wall offered a seemingly more inclusive and democratic mode of expression. Anyone able to wield a stick of chalk, a coal, pencil or other sharp implement could add their voice to a growing public sphere and drive, as well as reflect, attempts to define who exactly Britons were and what it was they stood for.

*

Telling history with graffiti is, for a historian, a tricky business. It can prove something of a treasure hunt, with each new discovery bringing heart-thumping excitement and an intense feeling of proximity to the past beyond the traditional order of the paper archive. Such marks are highly tangible, often uncatalogued and ripe for discovery by any who happen upon them. Access can be difficult, physical work, requiring an able body and a sharp eye, not to mention an adventurous spirit in climbing ladders, squeezing into tight tunnels and shuffling through long-neglected passageways. A complete record of graffiti made in the past can

never be attained, and for all they are carved into stone or wood, graffiti can be surprisingly fragile. Many have been lost over time; they are routinely painted or wallpapered over, built upon, erased, chipped or weathered away, else lost to demolition and urban development.

We might see graffiti as part of the library of irresistible and ephemeral objects that defy standard definition in some way – a lock of hair lovingly tied with ribbon, a doodle on the edge of a diary page, the hastily ripped wax seal on a love letter – and which have captivated historians engaged in what has become known as the 'material turn'. And yet, while archaeologists have been enthusiastically uncovering, recording and interpreting graffiti for years, cultural historians have been slow to consider the potentially rich and unique information that such marks hold. We might attribute this deficit to simple practicalities. There is no centralised or institutional catalogue recording messages carved or scribbled on Britain's aged and crumbling surfaces, nor any standardised practice for flagging their mention in written and visual sources. And yet, for those who do look closely, the compellingly human traces of the past are all around. Each offers a powerful – and unique – insight into how people before us thought and expressed themselves. Free from curatorial strategy or historical collecting tastes, they remain a largely unfiltered and immediate record of voices from the past, though we must consider with careful scrutiny the processes by which some survive while others do not. Most were intended by their original makers to be seen, and as well as retaining crucial data on intimate and personal moments – from grief to lust to anger – they can reveal how the historical built environments we have inherited were used by their original occupants and invite us to imagine those long reduced to rubble. They are at once deeply evocative and strikingly immediate, challenging in their strange codes and languages and comforting in their evidence of continued human presence.

My own entry point into studying graffiti in any serious way came not with one major discovery, but several smaller ones; the names of generations of clockmakers, starting in 1788 and scratched into the reverse side of a grandfather clock face won at auction; the small, carved head of a nineteenth-century policeman, complete with helmet and metal collar number, peeping from the mouth of a passageway in the town I used to live in; a deeply incised Edwardian *fuck* cut into the brick wall of an old outdoor privy at my parents' house. In isolation, such marks can appear nothing more than the miniature and quotidian traces of the everyday, idle doodles and irreverent exclamations made by the anonymous in moments of vulnerability, pride or boredom. But, when taken together, this remarkable record of human existence in all its honest, grimy and unguarded glory can bring the past to life, raise ghosts and give them back their voices. It can recapture flashes of anger and longing from individuals otherwise lost from the historical record, and put flesh back on the bones of men, women and children barely visible in birth, marriage and death records and reduced elsewhere to statistical data.

But what exactly is graffiti and where do we draw the line, as it were? We know it when we see it and yet it is difficult to define. The use of the term itself reflects something of its tendency to shapeshift and adapt; 'graffiti' is used both in its plural sense to refer to multiple marks and in the singular to describe a whole genre of communication. Definition of graffiti is as difficult to pin down as the language around it is flexible. It is, perhaps, the contents of its messages that makes it what it is. Or maybe it's the surface on which it is written. Or it might be the medium or tool with which it is created. It can be all of these. It can be illicit, spontaneous and provocative. It can be art. How we define and value graffiti, and who we assign to do so, says as much about a society as it does about the mark makers themselves. Today, our relationship with graffiti is complex. We are, on the one hand,

fascinated by the anarchic, radical aesthetic of graffiti, and even look to commodify it. Luxury fashion brands including Gucci, Louboutin and Balenciaga are no strangers to replicating spray-painted tags and images on their products and in their marketing campaigns, borrowing graffiti's rebellious and anti-classical connotations to underscore – and sell – innovative new designs. Likewise, artworks by Banksy and Jean-Michel Basquiat – one half of the 1970s New York graffiti duo SAMO – routinely sell for millions at the world's leading auction houses. But beyond the world of luxury goods, the romance of graffiti's ability to speak truth to power is far less accepted. Its presence in our towns and cities frequently prompts negative assumptions about the economic and social status of both its creators and its environmental setting. It is, more often than not, viewed as a nuisance and hurriedly cleaned away or painted over by local councils at the taxpayers' expense. The act of graffitiing is criminalised in Britain. In England, Scotland and Wales, where damage to property is alleged, those accused of leaving their mark can face hefty fines along with community service and even prison.[2] For damage amounting to more than £10,000, the Crown Court has the power to detain graffitists for up to ten years – one year for every thousand pounds of reported destruction.

And yet, from the earliest human history, the compulsion to leave one's mark appears to have been accepted with very little controversy. From prehistoric cave paintings to the pornographic sketches found in an Ancient Egyptian temple to the violent boasts of Roman gladiators to Aboriginal rock art, marking on the wall and other surfaces can be found across human cultures. In Europe in the Middle Ages, scratching, burning, drawing on and carving into buildings were already centuries-old traditions that acted to record human lives, bind communities and ward off evil. Graffiti in churches, private homes and market halls allowed for the articulation of both social and spiritual customs.

Such marks regularly shaped, as well as reflected, people's lives. In Britain, local congregations would scrape away the painted surfaces of church walls, tombs and effigies to reveal bright stone beneath, carving a spectrum of religious and lay symbols. Most common among them were simple crosses and '*VV*'s, often drawn overlapping to appear as a '*W*' and thought to refer to Mary, mother of Jesus and her moniker as the 'virgin of virgins'.[3] Births, deaths, marriages and business deals were all routinely documented using these signs, the participants bound together through the act of marking. Alongside these inscriptions were more elaborate carvings of ships, windmills, farmhands, soldiers and more, all of which relayed the hopes and fears of entire communities dependent on the well-being of their ventures on land and sea.[4]

In the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century homes of early modern Britons, quotations from the Bible and other, original compositions were painted on the walls and ceilings, intended as moralising, semi-public messages reminding all who read them – from the master and mistress of the house to their children and servants – to behave according to the laws of God.[5] At Pirton Grange in Hertfordshire, for example, lines from Thomas Tusser's *A Hundred Good Pointes* (1570), framed in an elaborately painted border, ran: *Pray to god continually: And learne to know him rightfullie*.[6] Fear of the Devil was very real and, alongside these bold and instructive mottoes, were more discreet apotropaic marks. Carved symbols, today sometimes anachronistically known as 'witch marks', appeared around windows, chimneys, doors and other portals between the domestic interior and the outside – all, it was believed, with the power to ward off evil spirits. Among them (and there are many) were hexafoils, or daisy wheels, featuring a petal-like design within an outer ring. Others took on a form known as Solomon's knot, a seemingly unending tangle of lines that, it was believed, would entice

1. Pieter Saenredam, *The Interior of the Buurkerk at Utrecht*, 1644. In the foreground, a young boy draws in chalk on the wall of a church. Across Europe, graffiti was commonplace in such spaces, and its practice widely accepted.

and trap demons in its unyielding coils. Such marks possessed immense, even supernatural, strength, the rhythm of carving them akin to the repetitive utterance of a prayer or spell.

Graffiti scratched with nails and knife points, else written in coal, chalk or red ochre, also recorded more earthly concerns. They were practised by rich and poor, adult and child. In 1585, Elizabethan playwright Samuel Daniel observed how 'men all naturally take delight in pictures, and even little children as soon as they can use their hands at libertie, goe with a cole to the wall, indeavouring to drawe the forme of this thing or that'.[7] On the lintels above doorways, occupants of houses from cottages to moated manors regularly scratched their initials while, in the rafters, carpenters might record the dates on which they completed their work. Recipes, games, memorials, erotica and slander all found their place on the plaster, stone walls, wooden beams and glass panes of pre-modern Britain. In 1595, the same year that likely saw the first performance of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Edmund Spenser described how, at the court of Elizabeth I, poetic notes scrawled by lovelorn English nobles covered every surface:

> For all the Walls and Windows there are writ
> All full of Love, and Love, and Love, my Dear,
> And all their Talk and Study is of it.[8]

None of this was considered particularly dangerous. In fact, it was rather mundane. While the spiritual and supernatural power attributed to mark making was certainly believed to yield some real-world repercussion, the practice of graffiti hardly informed public life at a national level or influenced political policy beyond the hierarchies and tensions of local communities. Going into the eight-eenth century, it was an accepted part of domestic and ecclesiastical life, done by many and remarked on by few. But by the dawn of the Victorian era, it had gained a reputation as

uniquely dangerous, volatile and insidious, with measures beginning to be put in place for its eventual criminalisation. So what happened in the decades in between to change how people saw such works and, in turn, left their own marks? In a period shaped by revolution across the globe, graffiti would undergo its own revolutionary transformation, both on the wall and in the hearts and minds of the people.

*

While superstition and religious devotion hardly disappeared with the advent of eighteenth-century Britain, population growth, increased literacy and the movement of people beyond local parishes and established trade and pilgrim routes all meant that the marks left on urban and rural landscapes had greater reach and potency than ever before. A fast-growing economy and a correspondingly expanding population triggered a boom in both buildings and things – from coins to weapons to carriages – coupled with the construction of an increasingly secular public sphere all worked to provide new spaces and surfaces on which to write. And there was motivation to do so. In the context of growing attempts to censor the printed word, and free from meaningful regulation itself, graffiti offered an alternative and apparently democratic mode of expression as inequalities became ever more apparent. Those who needed to could use it to declare political allegiance, shame, organise and provoke, as well as to double down, counter attack and even romanticise. Among the most common marks to emerge were initials and dates, a genre of graffiti that had only begun to appear with any regularity at the end of the seventeenth century and which now became widespread as people began to mark themselves present in both time and space, asserting their own existence and relationship to a changing world. As Britain expanded through empire and shook with the threat of rebellion, graffiti, as we know it today, was born.

Although the ephemeral marks left across London in the hot summer of 1780 have since been lost, washed away in the catastrophic aftermath of the riots, many of the graffiti made by eighteenth-century Britons are still visible today. Sliced into church columns and dank castle cells, scratched in alleyways and carved in the windows of country houses, the pliable wooden tops of illustrious school tables, lead rooftops, tunnels and rocky outcrops, these marks are, for those prepared to look, everywhere.

It would be impossible to track and record here every piece of eighteenth-century graffiti that survives in Britain, and indeed a growing interest in this area across heritage and academic institutions means new discoveries are constantly being made. Similarly, what does survive can hardly be considered a complete record. What has been lost, washed away, painted over, scratched out or destroyed through fire and demolition is just as important as what has remained. Luckily, many in the eighteenth century turned their energy to recording the graffiti around them, conscious like never before of this unruly and shapeshifting media and the need to preserve and disseminate further the messages of their authors. This book owes much to those pioneers; among them printers, editors, anthologists, letter writers, diarists, artists and even curious passers-by.

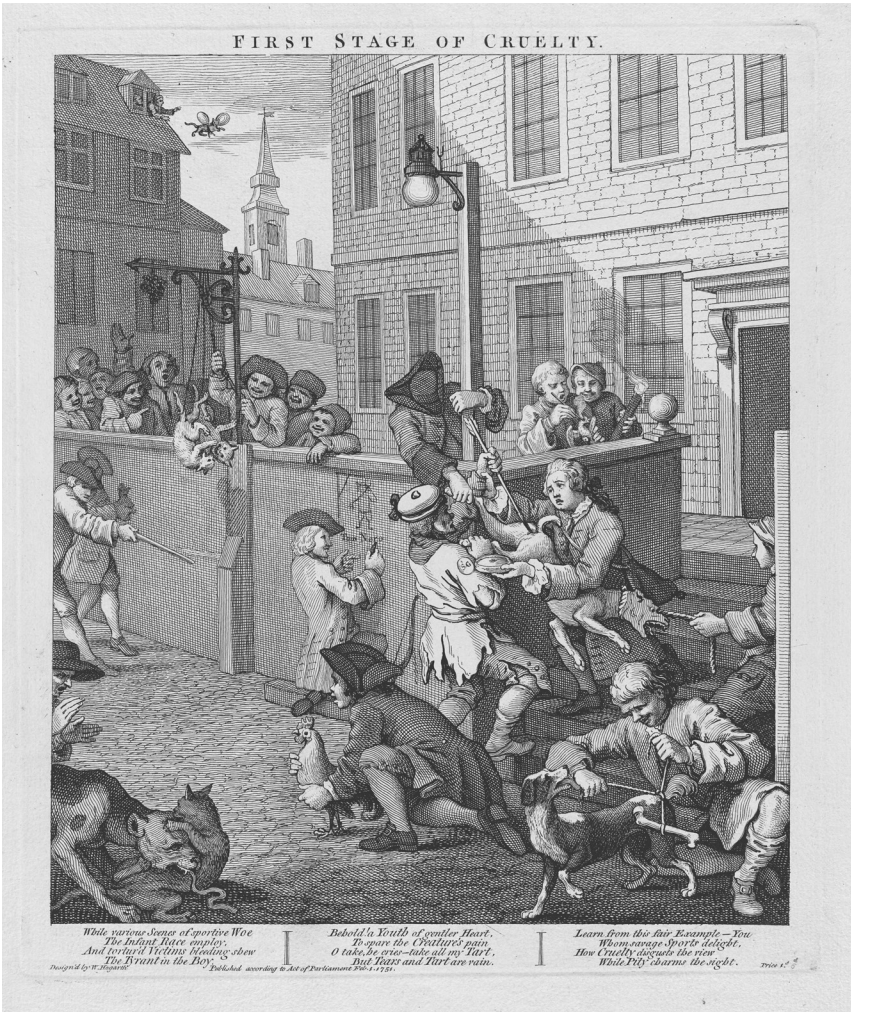
Writing on the Wall traces extraordinary ordinary people through the century's biggest moments (as well as some of its smallest, since lost to history) to reveal how the marks they left echoed, and even drove, the changes happening all around them. Across the rotting wooden cells of London prisons, the stone walls of a Scottish castle and the riotous streets of the capital, it brings into focus lost voices, from prestigious court circles to the humblest debtor. The story told here begins in London, at the heart of a growing British empire, before working outwards to its perceived edges, both in the British Isles and beyond. It follows individuals into battle, to court, prison, Parliament and sea, to

secret society meetings and into rebellion on the factory floor. It retraces the steps of tourists on turnpike roads, revolutionaries captured as prisoners of war, the suicidal confessions of an alleged industrial spy and the last, panicked days of a murderer.

This book is, on the one hand, a history of the eighteenth century via the lost voices of those who lived through it. But equally, it is a history of graffiti itself and the revolution it underwent in this most vibrant of centuries – its role in defining Britain and Britons, in shaping history, fighting wars, subverting power and rethinking what it meant to be a citizen of polite society. It explores the moment in which leaving a mark went from popular pastime to something more incendiary; a driving force behind the struggle for power bubbling beneath Britain's surfaces which, as people quite literally scratched, gouged and burned into it, transformed to a litmus paper for unstoppable change. Beginning on the eve of the overthrow of King James II and VII in 1688, I excavate the archives alongside surviving historic buildings to tell remarkable stories of oppression and the fight for liberty in Britain. Documented here are the lives, loves, triumphs and failures of real people who felt it necessary to leave to posterity some small evidence of their experiences, and the power that such acts can carry.

Outlining Britain

*c.*1688–1740



2. William Hogarth, *First Stage of Cruelty*, 1751. At the centre of the scene, Tom Nero abuses a dog while, to his left, another man draws a hanged man and gallows in coal on the wall.

In William Hogarth's *The Four Stages of Cruelty*, a series of engraved images narrating the life of the thuggish Tom Nero, we first meet our antihero in a crowded London street filled with some of the city's poorest. All around, the inhabitants of the metropolis are engaged in vile acts – cock fighting, hanging cats by their tails, burning out the eyes of birds. In the centre of the scene, Tom himself is inserting an arrow into the rectum of a dog. Another boy, a lone, cherubim figure, his face a close likeness of the young George, Prince of Wales (afterwards King George III), attempts to wrestle the beast free. Alongside this combative encounter between perceived high and low life, royal morality and plebeian baseness, a third man is writing on the wall. Using a piece of coal between his fingers, he completes the name *Tom Nero* beneath an image of a hanged man, pointing to Tom himself for good measure. The message is clear; Tom's crimes will only escalate, leading him inevitably to the gallows. And indeed, his story's ending, depicted in the final image of the series, comes on the surgeon's table as a dissected cadaver executed for murder.

And yet all is not as it seems. Tom's tattered coat bears a badge with the letters 'St. G', indicating his authorisation as a beggar of the parish of St Giles, an infamous London slum. The

figure who, with one hand, tries to rescue the abused dog, offers Tom a pie with the other. Starvation, we are invited to consider, or want of employment, has led him to commit such a horrible act. The scene is cut through with criticism of the inequalities and brutalities Hogarth and his contemporaries witnessed all around them in the eighteenth century. Were those born to a life of poverty and crime destined to perpetuate it? Was it possible to reconcile the grim realities faced by so many of the nation's poor with contemporary, fashionable ideas of Enlightenment rationalism and so-called civilisation that emerged in these early years? And what role did writing on the wall play in this debate?

These were questions that concerned others as well as Hogarth. The hanged man seen in the *Four Stages* was one of many staple motifs to emerge on the surfaces of the world in which the era's best-remembered illustrator of ordinary lives lived and worked. Such marks – some hieroglyphic, others poetic, and some distinctly less salubrious compositions – entered public life in the earliest decades of the eighteenth century with remarkable, though today overlooked, potency. Each was created by rich and poor alike as, while literacy increased among the population at large, their practitioners sought to join in new conversations. As a public sphere began to emerge, one defined by evolving spaces – coffeehouses, taverns, drinking clubs, brothels – and powered by debate, writing on the wall and other surfaces offered a relatively unpoliced and unrestricted way of making oneself heard amid the clatter of printing presses, the cries of political orators and the chatter of men and women on the street. Political slogans, comic poems, love letters, declarations of disgust and joy, reviews of sex workers, libellous accusations, prophetic claims and terrifying warnings all appeared with an unprecedented regularity, moving from the religious and domestic settings they occupied in previous centuries to a broadening and complex world. While the heart of early eighteenth-century Britain was transforming, driven by

cultures of borrowing and debt, vast and corruptible justice and penal systems, gender, religious and racial inequality and issues of parliamentarian representation, so too was the nation's face. Now, anyone able to wield a sharp knife or diamond point, stick of charcoal or chalk, might take to the surfaces around them to express their presence and, crucially, their opinion.

But the story of graffiti's transformation in Georgian Britain does not begin with Hogarth, nor indeed with the accession of King George I in 1714. Instead, its origins lie almost thirty years earlier, in 1688. In that year, two important events took place, interconnected and both central to the story told here. The first was the so-called Glorious Revolution, in which the Protestant William of Orange and his wife Mary deposed her father, the Catholic King James II and VII of Scotland, and took the English throne. Although hardly without its own seventeenth-century context, this moment of constitutional crisis would cast a lasting shadow over the next hundred years or so, looming large in the memories and imaginations of Britons. At its heart were questions about the religious character of the nation and just where the power of the monarch ended and that of Parliament began. Its legacies were far-reaching and continued to spark fierce and violent argument well into the Georgian age that followed. From exile in Europe, James' descendants – his son James Edward Francis Stuart and grandson Charles Edward Stuart – would stake their claim to the throne, supported back in Britain by those loyal to the deposed Catholic king and known as Jacobites. The resulting struggle, played out in graffiti across the country as well as on the battlefield, would prove a brutal and costly stain on the century's earliest decades.

It was in the earliest days of this crisis point of 1688 that the second event to shape the story of graffiti took place, though smaller in scale than the deposing of a king – but in the context of our subject, no less pivotal. Just months before James was outmanoeuvred by his daughter and son-in-law, during which

animosity towards Catholics was growing, a piece of graffiti was held up as evidence of a gruesome crime perpetrated, it was alleged, by a Popish midwife. The result was a fevered hunt for a killer and nationwide panic, as stories of regicidal plots and insidious women began to spread. In this moment, an otherwise innocuous and everyday message, scribbled in chalk on a slum door, was translated from its original surface and transferred to print, reproduced on the page and circulated across the country in a bloody and salacious account of unfolding events. Entering the public conversation with previously unseen potency, graffiti had begun a relationship with print media that would, in many ways, define how we understand it today.

In the decades that followed, Britons' passions and displeasures, resistance and ruin were all carved into and scribbled on walls, windows, doors and alleyways with increasing regularity. In these years, towns and cities grew rapidly, driven by a growing population fed on the wealth of an expanding empire and enthusiastically rebuilt after the civil war, plague and, in the case of the capital, the fire of the previous century. There were not only more surfaces than ever before, but more hands to mark them. The results would be mixed. Some marks were deeply carved, others were temporary and easily washed away. Some underscored elite culture and aristocratic power. Others wallowed in the grimy realities of city life. The question of how to value graffiti in this newly minted world garnered the interest not only of artists, but also of writers, satirists, politicians, law makers, beggars, musicians, judges, debtors, printers, newspaper reporters, diarists and letter writers. It could, they soon discovered, provoke anger, cement love, transgress moral and physical boundaries and even prove crimes. Its ubiquity, if nothing else, was hard to ignore. 'Whether this way of writing was ever in vogue with the ancients', posed one author, 'I cannot pretend to say; but those beautiful turns of thought and expression we behold on the bulks and shutters of this great Protestant city, are evident tokens of it being much in esteem with the moderns.'

'I cannot but think', he wrote, a little tongue in cheek, 'that the writings of such men as have done honour to the nation, ought to be kept, and regarded, with the same care as is usually taken in preserving the worlds of a great master, either in painting or sculpture, whether they be exhibited on paper or plaistering, boards, or bog houses.'[9] Whether the object of humour or the serious study of power, writing on the wall held real sway for early eighteenth-century Britons. It allowed the otherwise voiceless to pin their grievances and their hopes to the same surfaces as society's most influential, converting the nation's surfaces to crucial battlefields in which class, sex, money and power could all be negotiated and fought over. As this strange and unruly medium began its transformation from popular pastime to something more potent, the stakes could not be higher.

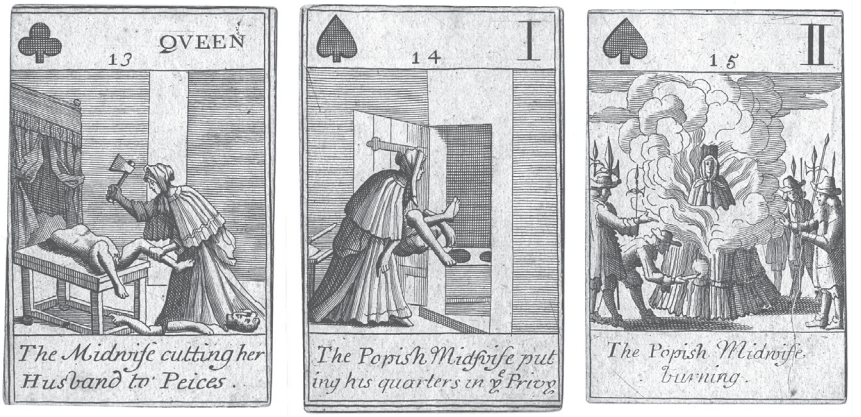
CHAPTER ONE

Catching a Killer

When, in the cold winter of 1688, the French surgeon James Lorraine took a piece of chalk from his pocket and pressed its tip against the tired wooden door of a London boarding house, he cannot have known the impact the message he wrote would have on his life, and on the lives of those around him. Such an act was fairly typical and yet, just days later, it would become a key piece of evidence in a dark crime spreading panic through the city. The supposed perpetrator of this crime was Mary Aubry, a French Roman Catholic midwife, accused of murdering her husband Dennis, before distributing his disembodied remains in the backstreets and privies around Covent Garden. Having endured years of abuse, Aubry would eventually confess to strangling her husband in his drunken sleep before using the tools of her trade to disarticulate his limbs and head and setting out into the night to hide the evidence. The case, although largely forgotten today, sent shock waves across Britain at a moment in which fear of Catholic tyrants – both in the home and on the throne – seemingly threatened the stability of the nation. As one pamphleteer put it, it 'put more freaks and crotchets into the heads and minds of the common people, than any story of that size perhaps ever did in this world before'.[10]

The note written by James Lorraine at the heart of this case marked a sea change in public understanding of graffitiing, though its author could not have known it at the moment he set chalk to wood. By the time the bloody events of 1688 were in motion, something of this change was already underway, in which the marking practices of ordinary folk had begun to leave behind old medieval traditions in favour of more politically engaged etchings and daubings. For the previous three or four hundred years, writing on walls and windows (much rarer in the medieval and early modern periods compared with the eighteenth century due largely to the cost and scarcity of glass) had functioned to underscore religious devotion, to perform piety and to confirm political allegiance. In elite homes, it was didactic, designed not so much to reflect individual personalities but to contribute to the moral well-being of society at large. Prayers and proverbs were copied from vellum pages onto plaster walls and scratched into the thick, dimpled windowpanes of churches and elite homes as a form of instruction. This was an intellectual, as well as spiritual, exercise. The patron of the arts Lady Anne Clifford, for example, was described on her death in 1676 as having 'frequently [brought] out of the rich store-house of her memory, things new and old, sentences and sayings of remark, which she had read or learned out of authors and with these her walls, her bed, her hangings and furniture must be adorned'.[11] But for all its conservatism and performance of pious gentility, writing on the wall was changing.

The rhythms and hierarchies that had provided order to the medieval world, centred on local communities and rendered in familiar pathways, rituals and well-trodden pilgrim routes, were violently upended in the decades leading to the murder of Dennis Aubry and the arrest of his wife. Years of civil war between 1642 and 1651, and the ravages of bubonic plague a decade later, had seen families torn apart and their political allegiances tested. Across society, men and women had been displaced by chaos



3. Anonymous, *Playing cards*, *c.*1700–25. Three playing cards from an incomplete set of fifty-one, all depicting events in the reign of King James II. Here, Mary Aubry is shown cutting up her husband, Dennis, disposing of the body and later being burned at the stake for her crimes.

and forced to share the spaces familiar to them with new, sometimes adversarial strangers. A profusion of new graffiti followed. In centres close to encampments and battlefields, soldiers on both sides of the English civil wars left initials, symbols and the names of battles fought on the walls of grand houses, cathedrals and minor parish churches as conflict tore through the countryside. At St Mary's church in Hickling, Norfolk, seventy miles east of Oliver Cromwell's childhood home at Ely, one Parliamentarian soldier proudly carved *ROUNDHEADE 1645* into the side of a marble tomb. At Cambridge, King's College Chapel became a training ground for occupying Parliamentarians who drew irreverently upon its walls, depicting the tools with which they asserted their new power: a sword, armour, pikes, a rider on horseback. Such transgressions were deeply objectionable. 'Whether in policy', one author afterwards wrote, Cromwell's troops sought to 'betray their ignorance, or on purpose to shew their soldiers how little god[']s house was to be regarded, let the world conjecture'.[12] When one royalist in Hampshire took

his diamond ring to the windows of his mansion to inscribe his family motto – *Love Loyalty* – on each pane in a kind of apotropaic ritual against Cromwellian troops, it 'provoked the enemy' so much that they took a torch to the house and 'burnt it to the ground'.[13]

Lorraine's scrawled message, the work of a mere moment in the freezing winter of 1688, was relatively mundane compared with the highly charged marks of previous decades, and yet it would surpass its predecessors in one crucial respect by finding its way into the public conversation to become one of the earliest examples of graffiti recorded in print. This quotidian scribble, generally unremarkable in its make-up and notable only for its chance implication in a horrific crime, was about to leap from its location in an obscure corner of the city and onto the page before finding its way into the hands, and anxieties, of citizens across the nation. As it did so, graffiti would emerge to new and powerful prominence in public affairs as evidence of the lives of the otherwise voiceless, and as part of a story of anti-Catholic paranoia that would change the course of British history.

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When Mary Aubry came to London from Paris sometime before 1688, she arrived to a city teeming with writing on its many surfaces. This was the London of Christopher Wren and Samuel Pepys, one humming with activity, commerce and construction. The Rebuilding Act of 1667 dictated that the predominantly wooden structures destroyed in the Great Fire a year earlier be remade with stone and brick. The first stone of St Paul's Cathedral was laid in 1675 and everywhere the clinks of masons' hammers and tradesmen's chatter filled the air. Narrow and gloomy passageways were slowly being transformed to open piazzas, while an influx of immigrants from across Europe brought merchants and artisans.

All this could not hide the scars of turbulence and trauma left by the events of the preceding decades, nor prevent those still to come. Beneath its emerging and bold veneer, London's religious tensions and political intrigue bubbled. The execution of Charles I in 1649, followed swiftly by plague, fire and ongoing conflict with the Dutch and French, had taken its toll on the city's inhabitants. Although the restoration of the monarchy under Charles II in 1660 had promised a new stability for many, when fire spread through the city's streets six years later, it ignited with it existing xenophobia and religious intolerance. As whole districts became engulfed in flames, rumours of European spies, Catholic conspiracies and the threat of an imminent invasion spread. Angry mobs took to the burning streets to root out anyone deemed alien or suspicious. When a Dutch nobleman left the protection of the king's troops at Westminster and braved the fire to visit his mistress, a group seized him and set about trying to hang him.[14] Elsewhere, a woman carrying chicks away from the smoke and carnage in her apron was mistaken for a terrorist transporting incendiaries. A crowd attacked her and, in the process, cut off her breasts.[15]

Six months after the fire, as Samuel Pepys noted in his diary, London was still smouldering. From its wreckage, suspicion and fear emerged renewed. By 1681, the country was gripped by a new hysteria, this time finding its origins in a fictitious conspiracy by Catholics to assassinate the king. Growing anti-Catholic feeling, propagated by an explosion in print media, would also have more tangible effects. In the aftermath of this so-called Popish Plot, the country was divided by the introduction of the Exclusion Bills, aimed at preventing Charles' brother James, the Duke of York, who had converted to Catholicism, from taking the crown. That same year, a sign erected in Pudding Lane, the apparent source of the fire, attributed the disaster to Catholic spies. On London's streets, neighbours turned informants and soon the city's prisons were filled with those accused of plotting to overthrow the state.

When, in 1685, Charles died, the Exclusion Bills failed, leaving the crown to James, now King James II of England and VII of Scotland. His reign would be short lived. By Aubry's arrest three years later, events were already in motion that would ultimately lead to the new king's downfall and the unseating of a dynasty whose claims to the throne would play out over the next century across European courts and bloody battlefields. As the king stood on the precipice of disaster in the early months of 1688, the crimes of an immigrant woman of the Popish faith proved irresistible to a volatile public. In a period in which a husband's rule in the home was analogous with the king's over his subjects, a woman who disrupted patriarchal authority was a danger to both.

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Aubry spoke no English and relied on others in her circle for translation. As well as her husband Dennis, she had a young son, John, and an adult daughter – now a married woman known as Mary Pottron – from at least one previous relationship. Together, this small family joined a growing community of French immigrants in the city. Tens of thousands had settled in pockets from Soho to Spitalfields, bringing with them specialist artisanal trades. Among them were Huguenot refugees (Protestants fleeing persecution under the French Catholic state), while the area around the Savoy and Covent Garden was known as a predominantly Catholic district. The antiquary William Maitland would later remark, not with a little hostility, that, on walking the streets there, it was an 'easy matter for a stranger to fancy himself in France'.[16]

Whether Aubry married Dennis for love, security or the chance of a new life in London is not clear. It is probable he worked as part of a ship's crew engaged in transporting goods to the continent. Among the list of his associates who testified against Aubry after Dennis' death were James Richards, a

victualler or supplier of provisions, Phillip Yard, a cook, and the surgeon Lorraine. With her adult daughter already established in a separate household and her son living as a resident apprentice nearby, it is unlikely that Aubry was looking for a father figure for her children, while her own midwifery would have provided her with a small income. Whatever her reasons, she would soon come to regret them. In her testimony, gathered, translated and published after her execution by the royalist pamphleteer and press censor Sir Robert L'Estrange, Aubry claimed that, immediately following their union, Dennis revealed an altogether darker and unpleasant character. He denied their marriage, and instead uttered 'all sorts of infamous reproaches' when his new bride 'would not submit to a compliance with him in villainies contrary to nature', a phrase that commonly referred to rape.[17] In the three months that followed, Aubry was subjected to 'beatings and revilings', and believed herself 'going every day in danger of her life'.[18] Terrified, she fled from their lodgings and went into hiding for several months, until she heard news that Dennis had left London for France. During this period, in which she worked to build a clientele of pregnant women, she routinely changed the location of her lodgings, no doubt terrified that Dennis would return and discover her. Tellingly, when she worked, she went by Madame Defermeau, the family name used by her son.

For two years, Aubry lived and worked undisturbed. But, by 1686, Dennis was back in London and lost no time in locating her. When he did so, however, he proclaimed himself a changed man. His time in France, he said, had given him opportunity to reflect and now he was back to make amends. Having 'confess'd his sins to almighty God', Dennis now promised to 'be another man' and live 'kindly' with his wife.[19] Aubry's options were limited. He had found her and could do so again. But she was determined to protect herself as much as she was able, and demanded that Dennis declare before a priest, one Father

Gaspar, and witnesses that she was his legal wife and that he sign his mark in a register to confirm it. Dennis agreed and once again the pair took up residence together.

Just two days into their new life, however, Aubry discovered just how fickle her husband's resolve really was. The violence she had experienced before, fuelled by drink, started again. This time there was no escape, only short periods of respite in which Dennis would travel back and forth across the Channel. Utterly trapped, Aubry afterwards recalled 'frequent temptations of putting some violent end to her misfortunes'.[20] She resisted where she could, contemplatively taking up a sharp blade and warning Dennis 'she would kill him' or herself if he continued in this vein. She told her troubles to anyone who would listen, and indeed her son later stated he had heard her proclaim that Dennis had 'threatened her several mornings, when he had been all night at a debauch'.[21] With divorce a religious impossibility, and no laws around domestic violence to protect her, Aubry was quite alone.

In late January 1688, Dennis was back from France for the final time. The pair were lodging in a boarding house run by Tobias and Mary Hope near Covent Garden and no more than ten minutes' walk from the site of Aubry's later arrest. Eminently interested in the activities of her lodgers, the landlady Hope afterwards provided crucial evidence on the comings and goings of the couple. One day towards the end of January, Aubry returned to the lodging house after a day of work. She found Dennis was not there and so, assuming he planned to return later in the evening, left the door ajar and went to bed. At around five in the morning, she awoke suddenly when Dennis' fist connected with her head.[22] According to the testimony taken by L'Estrange, Dennis, drunk and looming over her, shouted 'I have been among bougres [sic] and rogues, that have made me mad, and you shall pay for't!' He hit her again, this time across her breast, and then proceeded to sexually assault his wife, pressing her into

the bed 'so hard that [she] could not fetch her breath, and that the blood started out of [her] mouth'.[23] Crying out to no avail, Aubry tried to fight him off, but he bit her 'like a dog'. Finally, he relinquished his hold on her and, rolling over, fell asleep.[24]

Lying in the dark on the bed beside her now-unconscious abuser, Aubry despaired for the inescapability of her situation. Despite attempts to defend herself, the real and pervasive danger posed by men like Dennis must have seemed bleak. Four years earlier, around the time of Aubry's marriage, the body of Joan Kirk had been discovered in a field near Paddington, 'her throat cut and her head and eye miserably beat and bruised'.[25] Kirk's husband was convicted. In 1698, Mary Duckenfield would be killed in Castle Street at the back of Long Acre, not far from the site of Aubry's arrest, after attempting to lead her husband home from a brothel.[26] For Aubry, this was a matter of life and death. Taking care not to wake Dennis, she reached out into the darkness and began to untie a garter fastened on his leg and made from strong packthread, more commonly used to tie bundles of cloth for transportation. Turning slowly to her sleeping and intoxicated husband, she 'put it double about his neck' and pulled. Whether he stirred at this first tightening or not, she was determined. In fifteen minutes, he was dead.

Seconds after Dennis breathed his last, Aubry's mind flooded with panic. She ran to fetch brandy to revive him, pressing it to his still-warm lips. He did not wake. Unsure of how to proceed, she stepped from the bed and drew across it the heavy fabric of a curtain to hide the body from view. With no one to confide in and no feasible means or strength to hide the remains, Aubry had little choice but to go about her normal routine and attempt to allay any suspicion long enough to work out a more permanent solution. Almost immediately, however, the pressure of protecting her secret was near-overwhelming. A day or two after Dennis' murder, Aubry's daughter Mary Pottron visited her at home. In later testimonies, Pottron denied any knowledge of

Dennis' killing, claiming never to have seen the body.[27] The communication in that first meeting between mother and daughter is now lost to history but, when Aubry's landlady Mrs Hope enquired about Dennis' absence, the pair told her he was hiding under the threat of an arrest warrant and that Pottron's husband had arranged for a payment of thirty shillings for new clothes and passage with his employer, a nobleman, to New England. Not content with this explanation, Mrs Hope's suspicions were heightened when Aubry requested new sheets for her bed and inexplicably fitted a new lock to the door of her rooms where there had previously been none.

Aware of the dangerous suspicions mounting around her and the now-festering body lying unmoved in her rooms, Aubry made a practical and fateful decision. A full week after Dennis' death, she went to the Strand and the house of weaver Martin Dubois, to whom her young son John was apprenticed. Under the pretext of requiring him to translate between her and one of her pregnant patients, she brought her son to the lodgings. There, she reluctantly drew back the curtain to reveal the corpse of John's deceased stepfather laid out on the bed. The boy, just thirteen years old, sank to the floor 'at the spectacle'. Paralysed and unable to help his mother in the task that lay ahead, he sat in an adjoining room as Aubry turned to the body, knife in hand, and began the gruesome work of cutting it into pieces. When she was done, she wrapped the parts in cloth and, over the following nights, set out under the cover of darkness to dispose of them in the surrounding streets.

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The first sign that a crime had occurred came at the end of January in Parkers Lane, north of Covent Garden and near to Lincoln's Inn Fields. The lane ran along the back of Great Queen Street, which in turn looked out over Weld House, then occupied

by the Spanish Ambassador and which, later that same year, would be sacked by a mob following the Glorious Revolution and King James' flight to France. Most of the two-storey buildings in Parkers Lane served the larger houses in front as stables and so must have appeared to Aubry as a suitably discreet location to hide evidence. Between nine and ten at night on 30 January, two men were walking the street when they noticed a bundle wrapped in 'old course Cloath' and discarded 'upon a small Dunghill'.[28] On tentative inspection, they discovered Dennis' torso, cut at the shoulders and thighs, the head removed and only his 'Privy-members' remaining. The pair took up the remains and carried them to a tavern, the Coach and Horses, where they were promptly arrested on suspicion of committing the crime themselves before later being released.

News of the grisly find travelled fast. One London gentleman, William Westby, recorded in his diary entry for 30 January 'a great buzz and noise in the City & whole Kingdome'.[29] Almost immediately, fears of a Catholic plot began to surface, as locals speculated on the identity of the man whose remains had been so unceremoniously discarded. 'The humour of the Town', Westby wrote, had darkened and false reports of missing or brutalised Protestant leaders abounded. 'There was', he reported, 'not a noted protestant divine whose head was not fitted to these shoulders.'[30] The news-sheet *Publick Occurrences Truely Stated* captured the city's panic, and dubbed the discovery 'the Bloody Prologue to some greater Tragedy'.[31] One particularly swift pamphleteer went to press the day after the discovery by the Coach and Horses, but not before Dennis' disarticulated arms and legs were found over a mile away in a privy at the Savoy Palace on the Strand. *A True and Full Relation of a Most Barbarous and Inhuman Murder* described how, following this latest development, the body parts were now laid out in the tavern and 'visited by crouds [sic] of Spectators, who all with horror relate the detestableness of the fact'.[32] 'Let every

Christian pray', it warned readers, 'that God by his preventing grace will keep him from the power of an over-swaying appetite, which when left to itself and the suggestions of the devil, we may hereby see, will not stick at the horridest Wickedness.'[33] Whether the work of Catholic spies or the Devil himself, the murder soon came to the attention of the highest authorities who looked to track and contain the escalating rumours. The news would reach the continent when, on 31 January, the *London Gazette*'s James Vernon wrote to the royal ambassador Ignatius White, Marquis d'Albeville, at the Hague with an account of the preceding days' events. Vernon, who had previously served as ambassador to France, to the Duke of Monmouth and even William of Orange and made it his study to appear politically neutral, informed White that, although the limbs and torso were indeed on display to the public, the head had not yet been found. 'It is not knowne', he concluded, 'who this murther'd person is or who did it.'[34]

As government officials circulated news of the murder, and the city's presses ran hot with speculation over the killer's identity, associates of Dennis had begun to notice his absence. James Richards, the victualler, remarked on it when visiting Phillip Yard, the cook. The pair later swore under oath that, in the preceding weeks, they had each heard Aubry profess disappointment in her husband and that she would gladly be rid of or 'dispatch' him. Prompted by the concerns of his associate, Yard visited Aubry and challenged her to explain Dennis' absence. '"Tis not a thing to be talk'd of in the street,' she reportedly told him. 'Let it alone for five or six days, and I'll tell you.'[35] 'Why, we speak French,' he pressed. 'No body understands us!'[36] But Aubry refused. Back at her lodgings, she deflected questioning by her landlady over whether she had been to view the infamous spectacle at the Coach and Horses, having the presence of mind to reply she 'did not love such sights' before retreating to her rooms.[37]

Although the location of Aubry's lodging house is not documented in any of the reports published after her execution, the door to the rooms she rented would prove a key site in her story; a boundary between public and private, the respectable life she presented on one side of it and the violence of her domestic situation on the other. It had proved the boundary of her prison with Dennis, behind which his abuses went unchecked, and a shield used to conceal the evidence of her crime. It would also prove her undoing. While Richards and Yard continued their search for Dennis, unconvinced by Aubry's response to their questioning, it was another of the deceased man's associates whose enquiries would bring danger of discovery directly to her threshold. James Lorraine had worked with Dennis in France and, at the end of January 1688, was looking for him again, likely with an offer of fresh employment. A little investigation led Lorraine to Aubry's lodgings but, when he arrived there, he found the door barred and no one at home. Taking a chalk from his pocket, he brought it up to the wooden panels of the door and began to write. The resultant message informed Dennis that its author was looking for him and gave details of where to meet.

That Lorraine carried chalk on his person is unsurprising. A commonly available material in seventeenth-century Britain, it was already used as the quick means of note making, to settle debts and arguments and to communicate amid the city's shifting topographies, winding passageways and short-term lodgings. Indeed, chalk appeared in the common language, as well as the pockets, of Londoners, from the highest to the lowest in society. To 'chalk out' meant to explain, to instruct or to lay out an argument. In taverns and ale houses, it would record customer tabs behind the bar, with patrons and landlords alike regularly tampering with the amount owed by simply adding an additional line, else smudging it to invisibility. In 1729, the landlady of an establishment on Fleet Street testified at the Old Bailey against a patron accused of stealing a silver tankard and who had used

4. L. Truchy, after Francis Hayman, *The Wapping Landlady*, *l'hotesse des matelots*, 1767. Behind the bar, a chalk tally is used to keep track of client tabs.

chalk as a useful accomplice to his crime. While a party of friends, including the landlady herself, had 'sat drinking' and playing cards late into the night, the thief had rubbed out the chalk score being kept on the wall. A violent brawl over who was winning ensued, providing him with the perfect cover to flee with his gleaming prize.[38] Chalk was a tool for negotiation, a mode of articulation and, in less trustworthy hands, a weapon with which to cheat one's neighbour. It was a way of calculating one's place in the world, and one's progress. Time, space, money, loyalties, missteps, labour and favours could all be measured out with chalk. For Aubry, the note scrawled hurriedly on her door would have seemed innocuous enough and she saw no harm in answering it.

It was to Lorraine's surprise when, the next day, Aubry and not Dennis responded to the chalk. When Lorraine asked why