

# GEORGE HERBERT

## THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

Edited by C. A. Patrides



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## General Editor's Preface

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The reception given to a writer by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries is evidence of considerable value to the student of literature. On one side we learn a great deal about the state of criticism at large and in particular about the development of critical attitudes towards a single writer; at the same time, through private comments in letters, journals or marginalia, we gain an insight upon the tastes and literary thought of individual readers of the period. Evidence of this kind helps us to understand the writer's historical situation, the nature of his immediate reading-public, and his response to these pressures.

The separate volumes in the *Critical Heritage Series* present a record of this early criticism. Clearly, for many of the highly productive and lengthily reviewed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, there exists an enormous body of material; and in these cases the volume editors have made a selection of the most important views, significant for their intrinsic critical worth or for their representative quality—perhaps even registering incomprehension!

For earlier writers, notably pre-eighteenth century, the materials are much scarcer and the historical period has been extended, sometimes far beyond the writer's lifetime, in order to show the inception and growth of critical views which were initially slow to appear.

In each volume the documents are headed by an Introduction, discussing the material assembled and relating the early stages of the author's reception to what we have come to identify as the critical tradition. The volumes will make available much material which would otherwise be difficult of access and it is hoped that the modern reader will be thereby helped towards an informed understanding of the ways in which literature has been read and judged.

B.C.S.

for  
Ted-Larry Pebworth and Claude J. Summers

ὁ μὲν κάλος ὅσον ἴδην πέλεται κάλος  
ὁ δὲ κάγαθος αὐτίκα κῦστερον ἔσσεται κῦστερον

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# Introduction

## I HERBERT PAST AND PRESENT

'George Herbert is one of the best English lyric poets.' The considered judgment of Joseph H. Summers at the very beginning of his study of Herbert in 1954 (1) is by no means representative of critical attitudes up to that time. On the contrary, Herbert's reputation has fluctuated greatly since his major work, 'The Temple', was first published soon after his death in 1633. Indeed, the eventual 'discovery' of Herbert - more properly, perhaps, his 're-discovery' - was not even the direct consequence of the meteoric rise earlier in our century of the poet with whom he has been most persistently associated, John Donne.

The critical heritage of George Herbert was initially determined by a gathering reputation centred largely on his piety. As the publication of 'The Temple' in 1633 appeared to confirm that piety, it should not surprise us that scarcely any surviving opinion values its poetry as poetry. So far, certainly, Walton's hagiography of Herbert - the one literary masterpiece within the canon of Herbert's critical fortunes - reflects perfectly the tendencies shared by any number of seventeenth-century readers whether Anglican or Puritan. At the same time, however, the intrinsic merits of Herbert's poetic practice were recognised by some of the numerous poets who strove to imitate him, especially where such imitators possessed the talents of Henry Vaughan and, in New England, Edward Taylor.

Changes in critical taste during the eighteenth century dictated a radical change in the attitude toward Herbert's poetry ('gothic and uncouth'). But the ensuing century reversed this judgment, especially once Coleridge in England and Emerson in America expressed their enthusiastic approval on a number of occasions. Yet opinions favourable