

Essays of Elia

Charles Lamb



Essays of Elia

Charles Lamb

CONTENT

1	DETACHED THOUGHTS ON BOOKS AND READING	1
2	OLD CHINA	10
3	CONFESSIONS OF A DRUNKARD	18
4	THE TWO RACES OF MEN	29
5	A DISSERTATION UPON ROAST PIG	37
6	SANITY OF TRUE GENIUS	47
7	THE CHILD-ANGEL, A DREAM	51
8	THE SUPERANNUATED MAN	55
9	ALL FOOLS' DAY	65
10	MRS. BATTLE'S OPINIONS ON WHIST	70
11	NEW YEAR'S EVE	79
12	A BACHELOR'S COMPLAINT OF THE BEHAVIOUR OF MARRIED PEOPLE	88
13	THE SOUTH-SEA HOUSE	97
14	THE OLD AND THE NEW SCHOOLMASTER	107
15	DREAM-CHILDREN; A REVERIE	118
16	DISTANT CORRESPONDENTS	123
17	MY FIRST PLAY	131

18	A COMPLAINT OF THE DECAY OF BEGGARS IN THE METROPOLIS	137
19	THE PRAISE OF CHIMNEY-SWEEPERS	148
20	MACKERY END, IN HERTFORDSHIRE	158
21	THE CONVALESCENT	165
22	NEWSPAPERS THIRTY-FIVE YEARS AGO	171
23	POPULAR FALLACIES	181

4	THE TWO RACES OF MEN	28
5	A DISSERTATION UPON ROAST MEAT	31
6	SAVANTY OF TRUE GENIUS	41
7	THE CHILD ANGEL, A DREAM	51
8	THE MANIPULATED MAN	58
9	ALL FOOLS' DAY	69
10	MRS. BATTLE'S OPINIONS ON WHIST	70
11	NEW YEAR'S EVE	75
12	A BACHELOR'S COMPLAINT OF THE BEHAVIOUR OF MARRIED PEOPLE	86
13	THE SOUTH-SEA HOUSE	97
14	THE OLD AND THE NEW SCHOOLMASTER	107
15	DREAM CHILDREN / REVERIE	118
16	DISTANT CORRESPONDENTS	129
17	MY FIRST PLAY	131

1

DETACHED THOUGHTS ON BOOKS AND READING

To mind the inside of a book is to entertain one's self with the forced product of another man's brain.

Now I think a man of quality and breeding may be much amused with the natural sprouts of his own. Lord Foppington in the Relapse.

AN ingenious acquaintance of my own was so much struck with this bright sally of his Lordship, that he has left off reading altogether, to the great improvement of his originality. At the hazard of losing some credit on this head, I must confess that I dedicate no inconsiderable portion of my time to other people's thoughts. I dream away my life in others' speculations. I love to lose myself in other men's minds. When I am not walking, I am reading; I cannot sit and think. Books think for me.

I have no repugnances. Shaftesbury is not too genteel for me, nor Jonathan Wild too low. I can read any thing which I call a book. There are things in that shape which I cannot allow for such.

In this catalogue of books which are no books-biblia a-biblia-I reckon Court Calendars, Directories, Pocket Books, Draught Boards bound and lettered at the back, Scientific Treatises, Almanacks, Statutes at Large; the works of Hume, Gib-

bon, Robertson, Beattie, Soame Jenyns, and, generally, all those volumes which "no gentleman's library should be without ;" the Histories of Flavius Josephus (that learned Jew), and Paley's Moral Philosophy. With these exceptions, I can read almost any thing. I bless my stars for a taste so catholic, so unexcluding.

I confess that it moves my spleen to see these things in books' clothing perched upon shelves, like false saints, usurpers of true shrines, intruders into the sanctuary, thrusting out the legitimate occupants. To reach down a well-bound semblance of a volume, and hope it is some kind-hearted play-book, then, opening what "seem its leaves," to come bolt upon a withering Population Essay. To expect a Steele, or a Farquhar, and find-Adam smith. To view a well-arranged assortment of blockheaded Encyclopaedias (Anglicanas or Metropolitanas) set out in an array of Russia, or Morocco, when a tithe of that good leather would comfortably re-clothe my shivering folios; would renovate Paracelsus himself, and enable old Raymund Lully to look like himself again in the world. I never see these impostors, but I long to strip them, to warm my ragged veterans in their spoils.

To be strong-backed and neat-bound is the desideratum of a volume. Magnificence comes after. This, when it can be afforded, is not to be lavished upon all kinds of books indiscriminately. I would not dress a set of Magazines, for instance, in full suit. The dishabille, or half-binding (with Russia backs ever) is our costume. A Shakespeare, or a Milton (unless the first editions), it were mere foppery to trick out in gay apparel. The possession of them confers no distinction. The exterior of them

(the things themselves being so common), strange to say, raises no sweet emotions, no tickling sense of property in the owner. Thomson's Seasons, again, looks best (I maintain it) a little torn, and dog's-eared. How beautiful to a genuine lover of reading are the sullied leaves, and worn out appearance, nay, the very odour (beyond Russia), if we would not forget kind feelings in fastidiousness, of an old "Circulating Library" Tom Jones, or Vicar of Wakefield! How they speak of the thousand thumbs, that have turned over their pages with delight! -of the lone sempstress, whom they may have cheered (milliner, or harder-working mantuamaker) after her long day's needle-toil, running far into midnight, when she has snatched an hour, ill spared from sleep, to steep her cares, as in some Lethean cup, in spelling out their enchanting contents! Who would have them a whit less soiled? What better condition could we desire to see them in?

In some respects the better a book is, the less it demands from binding. Fielding, Smollett, Sterne, and all that class of perpetually self-reproductive volumes-Great Nature's Stereotypes-we see them individually perish with less regret, because we know the copies of them to be "eterne." But where a book is at once both good and rare-where the individual is almost the species, and when that perishes,

We know not where is that Promethean torch

That can its light relumine -

such a book, for instance, as the Life of the Duke of Newcastle, by his Duchess-no casket is rich enough, no casing suffi-

ciently durable, to honour and keep safe such a jewel.

Not only rare volumes of this description, which seem hopeless ever to be reprinted; but old editions of writers, such as Sir Philip Sydney, Bishop Taylor, Milton in his prose-works, Fuller-of whom we have reprints, yet the books themselves, though they go about, and are talked of here and there, we know, have not endenized themselves (nor possibly ever will) in the national heart, so as to become stock books-it is good to possess these in durable and costly covers. I do not care for a First Folio of Shakspeare. I rather prefer the common editions of Rowe and Tonson, without notes, and with plates, which, being so execrably bad, serve as maps, or modest remembrancers, to the text; and without pretending to any supposable emulation with it, are so much better than the Shakspeare gallery engravings, which did. I have a community of feeling with my countrymen about his Plays, and I like those editions of him best, which have been oftenest tumbled about and handled. -On the contrary, I cannot read Beaumont and Fletcher but in Folio. The Octavo editions are painful to look at. I have no sympathy with them. If they were as much read as the current editions of the other poet, I should prefer them in that shape to the older one. I do not know a more heartless sight than the reprint of the Anatomy of Melancholy. What need was there of unearthing the bones of that fantastic old great man, to expose them in a winding-sheet of the newest fashion to modern censure? what hapless stationer could dream of Burton ever becoming popular? -The wretched Malone could not do worse, when he bribed the sexton of Stratford church to let him white-wash the painted effigy of old Shakspeare, which stood there, in

rude but lively fashion depicted, to the very colour of the cheek, the eye, the eye-brow, hair, the very dress he used to wear-the only authentic testimony we had, however imperfect, of these curious parts and parcels of him. They covered him over with a coat of white paint. By -, if I had been a justice of peace for Warwickshire, I would have clapt both commentator and sexton fast in the stocks, for a pair of meddling sacrilegious varlets.

I think I see them at their work-these sapient trouble-tombs.

Shall I be thought fantastical, if I confess, that the names of some of our poets sound sweeter, and have a finer relish to the ear-to mine, at least-than that of Milton or of Shakspeare? It may be, that the latter are more staled and rung upon in common discourse. The sweetest names, and which carry a perfume in the mention, are, Kit Marlowe, Drayton, Drummond of Hawthornden, and Cowley.

Much depends upon when and where you read a book. In the five or six impatient minutes, before the dinner is quite ready, who would think of taking up the Fairy Queen for a stopgap, or a volume of Bishop Andrewes' sermons ?

Milton almost requires a solemn service of music to be played before you enter upon him. But he brings his music, to which, who listens, had need bring docile thoughts, and purged ears.

Winter evenings-the world shut out-with less of ceremony the gentle Shakspeare enters. At such a season, the Tempest, or his own Winter's Tale-

These two poets you cannot avoid reading aloud-to your-

self, or (as it chances) to some single person listening. More than one-and it degenerates into an audience.

Books of quick interest, that hurry on for incidents, are for the eye to glide over only. It will not do to read them out. I could never listen to even the better kind of modern novels without extreme irksomeness.

A newspaper, read out, is intolerable. In some of the Bank offices it is the custom (to save so much individual time) for one of the clerks-who is the best scholar-to commence upon the Times, or the Chronicle, and recite its entire contents aloud pro bono publico. With every advantage of lungs and elocution, the effect is singularly vapid. In barbers' shops and public-houses a fellow will get up, and spell out a paragraph, which he communicates as some discovery. Another follows with his selection. So the entire journal transpires at length by piece-meal. Seldom-readers are slow readers, and, without this expedient no one in the company would probably ever travel through the contents of a whole paper.

Newspapers always excite curiosity. No one ever lays one down without a feeling of disappointment.

What an eternal time that gentleman in black, at Nandu's, keeps the paper! I am sick of hearing the waiter bawling out incessantly, "the Chronicle is in hand, Sir."

Coming in to an inn at night-having ordered your supper-what can be more delightful than to find lying in the window-seat, left there time out of mind by the carelessness of some former guest-two or three numbers of the old Town and Country Magazine, with its amusing tete-d-tete pictures-"The Royal Lover and Lady G-;" "The Melting Platonic and the old

Beau,"-and such like antiquated scandal? Would you exchange it-at that time, and in that place-for a better book?

Poor Tobin, who latterly fell blind, did not regret it so much for the weightier kinds of reading-the Paradise Lost, or Comus, he could have read to him-but he missed the pleasure of skimming over with his own eye a magazine, or a light pamphlet.

I should not care to be caught in the serious avenues of some cathedral alone, and reading Candide.

I do not remember a more whimsical surprise than having been once detected-by a familiar damsel-reclined at my ease upon the grass, on Primrose Hill (her Cythera), reading-Pamela. There was nothing in the book to make a man seriously ashamed at the exposure; but as she seated herself down by me, and seemed determined to read in company, I could have wished it had been any other book. We read on very sociably for a few pages; and, not finding the author much to her taste, she got up, and-went away. Gentle casuist, I leave it to thee to conjecture, whether the blush (for there was one between us) was the property of the nymph or the swain in this dilemma. From me you shall never get the secret.

I am not much a friend to out-of-doors reading. I cannot settle my spirits to it. I knew a Unitarian minister, who was generally to be seen upon Snow-hill (as yet Skinner's-street was not), between the hours of ten and eleven in the morning, studying a volume of Lardner. I own this to have been a strain of abstraction beyond my reach. I used to admire how he sidled along, keeping clear of secular contacts. An illiterate encounter with a porter's knot, or a bread basket, would have quickly put

to flight all the theology I am master of, and have left me worse than indifferent to the five points.

There is a class of street-readers, whom I can never contemplate without affection—the poor gentry, who, not having wherewithal to buy or hire a book, filch a little learning at the open stalls—the owner, with his hard eye, casting envious looks at them all the while, and thinking when they will have done. Venturing tenderly, page after page, expecting every moment when he shall interpose his interdict, and yet unable to deny themselves the gratification, they “snatch a fearful joy.” Martin B-, in this way, by daily fragments, got through two volumes of Clarissa, when the stallkeeper damped his laudable ambition, by asking him (it was in his younger days) whether he meant to purchase the work. M. declares, that under no circumstances of his life did he ever peruse a book with half the satisfaction which he took in those uneasy snatches. A quaint poetess of our day has moralised upon this subject in two very touching but homely stanzas.

*I saw a boy with eager eye
Open a book upon a stall,
And read, as he'd devour it all;
Which when the stall-man did espy,
Soon to the boy I heard him call,
“You, Sir, you never buy a book,
Therefore in one you shall not look.”*
The boy pass'd slowly on, and with a sigh
He wish'd he never had been taught to read,
Then of the old churl's books he should have had no need.

*Of sufferings the poor have many,
Which never can the rich annoy:
I soon perceiv'd another boy,
Who look'd as if he'd not had any
Food, for that day at least-enjoy*

*The sight of cold meat in a tavern larder.
This boy's case, then thought I, is surely harder,
Thus hungry, longing, thus without a penny,
Beholding choice of dainty-dressed meat:
No wonder if he wish he ne'er had learn'd to eat.*

2

OLD CHINA

I have an almost feminine partiality for old china. When I go to see any great house, I inquire for the china-closet, and next for the picture gallery. I cannot defend the order of preference, but by saying, that we have all some taste or other, of too ancient a date to admit of our remembering distinctly that it was an acquired one. I can call to mind the first play, and the first exhibition, that I was taken to; but I am not conscious of a time when china jars and saucers were introduced into my imagination.

I had no repugnance then-why should I now have? -to those little, lawless, azure-tinctured grotesques, that under the notion of men and women, float about, uncircumscribed by any element, in that world before perspectives-a china tea-cup.

I like to see my old friends-whom distance cannot diminish-figuring up in the air (so they appear to our optics) yet on terra firma still-so we must in courtesy interpret that speck of deeper blue, which the decorous artist, to prevent absurdity, has made to spring up beneath their sandals.

I love the men with women's faces, and the women, if possible, with still more womanish expressions.

Here is a young and courtly Mandarin, handing tea to a lady from a salver-two miles off. See how distance seems to set off respect! And here the same lady, or another-for likeness is identity on teacups-is stepping into a little fairy boat, moored

on the hither side of this calm garden river, with a dainty mincing foot, which in a right angle of incidence (as angles go in our world) must infallibly land her in the midst of a flowery mead-a furlong off on the other side of the same strange stream!

Farther on-if far or near can he predicated of their world-see horses, trees, pagodas, dancing the hays.

Here-a cow and rabbit couchant, and co-extensive-so objects show, seen through the lucid atmosphere of fine Cathay.

I was pointing out to my cousin last evening, over our Hyson (which we are old fashioned enough to drink unmixed still of an afternoon) some of these speciosa miracula upon a set of extra-ordinary old blue china (a recent purchase) which we were now for the first time using; and could not help remarking, how favourable circumstances had been to us of late years, that we could afford to please the eye sometimes with trifles of this sort-when a passing sentiment seemed to overshadow the brows of my companion. I am quick at detecting these summer clouds in Bridget.

"I wish the good old times would come again," she said, "when we were not quite so rich. I do not mean, that I want to be poor; but there was a middle state"-so she was pleased to ramble on,-"in which I am sure we were a great deal happier. A purchase is but a purchase, now that you have money enough and to spare. Formerly it used to be a triumph. When we coveted a cheap luxury (and, O! how much ado I had to get you to consent in those times!) we were used to have a debate two or three days before, and to weigh the for and against, and think what we might spare it out of, and what saving we could hit upon, that should be an equivalent. A thing was worth buying

then, when we felt the money that we paid or it.

“Do you remember the brown suit, which you made to hang upon you, till all your friends cried shame upon you, it grew so thread-bare-and all because of that folio Beaumont and Fletcher, which you dragged home late at night from Barker’s in Covent-garden? Do you remember how we eyed it for weeks before we could make up our minds to the purchase, and had not come to a determination till it was near ten o’clock of the Saturday night, when you set off from Islington, fearing you should be too late-and when the old bookseller with some grumbling opened his shop, and by the twinkling taper (for he was setting bedwards) lighted out the relic from his dusty treasuries and when you lugged it home, wishing it were twice as cumbersome-and when you presented it to me-and when we were exploring the perfectness of it (collating you called it-and while I was repairing some of the loose leaves with paste, which your impatience would not suffer to be left till day-break-was there no pleasure in being a poor man? or can those neat black clothes which you wear now, and are so careful to keep brushed, since we have become rich and finical, give you half the honest vanity with which you flaunted it about in that over-worn suit-your old corbeau-for four or five weeks longer than you should have done, to pacify your conscience for the mighty sum of fifteen-or sixteen shillings was it? -a great affair we thought it then-which you had lavished on the old folio. Now you can afford to buy any book that pleases you, but I do not see that you ever bring me home any nice old purchases now.

“When you come home with twenty apologies for laying out a less number of shillings upon that print after Lionardo, which

we christened the 'Lady Blanch;' when you looked at the purchase, and thought of the money-and thought of the money, and looked again at the picture-was there no pleasure in being a poor man? Now, you have nothing to do but to walk into Colnaghi's, and buy a wilderness of Lionardos. Yet do you?

"Then, do you remember our pleasant walks to Enfield, and Potter's Bar, and Waltham, when we had a holyday-holidays, and all other fun, are gone, now we are rich-and the little hand-basket in which I used to deposit our day's fare of savory cold lamb and salad-and how you would pry about at noon-tide for some decent house, where we might go in, and produce our store-only paying for the ale that you must call for-and speculate upon the looks of the landlady, and whether she was likely to allow us a table-cloth-and wish for such another honest hostess, as Izaak Walton has described many a one on the pleasant banks of the Lea, when he went a fishing-and sometimes they would prove obliging enough, and sometimes they would look grudgingly upon us-but we had cheerful looks still for one another, and would eat our plain food savorily, scarcely grudging Piscator his Trout Hall? Now, when we go out a days pleasuring, which is seldom moreover, we ride part of the way-and go into a fine inn, and order the best of dinners, never debating the expense-which, after all, never has half the relish of those chance country snaps, when we were at the mercy of uncertain usage, and a precarious welcome.

"You are too proud to see a play anywhere now but in the pit. Do you remember where it was we used to sit, when we saw the battle of Hexham, and the surrender of Calais, and Bannister and Mrs. Bland in the Children in the Wood-when we