

# MODERN ESSAYS

SELECTED BY  
CHRISTOPHER MORLEY

*Darlington*



NEW YORK  
HARCOURT, BRACE AND COMPANY

*1921*

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THE QUINN & BODEN COMPANY  
RAHWAY, N. J.

## PREFACE

It had been my habit, I am now aware, to speak somewhat lightly of the labors of anthologists: to insinuate that they led lives of bland sedentary ease. I shall not do so again. When the publisher suggested a collection of representative contemporary essays, I thought it would be the most lenient of tasks. But experience is a fine aperitive to the mind.

Indeed the pangs of the anthologist, if he has conscience, are burdensome. There are so many considerations to be tenderly weighed; personal taste must sometimes be set aside in view of the general plan; for every item chosen half a dozen will have been affectionately conned and sifted; and perhaps some favorite pieces will be denied because the authors have reasons for withholding permission. It would be enjoyable (for me, at any rate) to write an essay on the things I have lingered over with intent to include them in this little book, but have finally sacrificed for one reason or another. How many times—twenty at least—I have taken down from my shelf Mr. Chesterton's *The Victorian Age in Literature* to reconsider whether

his ten pages on Dickens, or his glorious summing-up of Decadents and Æsthetes, were not absolutely essential. How many times I have palpitated upon certain passages in *The Education of Henry Adams* and in Mr. Wells's *Outline of History*, which, I assured myself, would legitimately stand as essays if shrewdly excerpted.

But I usually concluded that would not be quite fair. I have not been overscrupulous in this matter, for the essay is a mood rather than a form; the frontier between the essay and the short story is as imperceptible as is at present the once famous Mason and Dixon line. Indeed, in that pleasant lowland country between the two empires lie (to my way of thinking) some of the most fertile fields of prose—fiction that expresses feeling and character and setting rather than action and plot; fiction beautifully ripened by the lingering mild sunshine of the essayist's mood. This is fiction, I might add, extremely unlikely to get into the movies. I think of short stories such as George Gissing's, in that too little known volume *The House of Cobwebs*, which I read again and again at midnight with unfailing delight; fall asleep over; forget; and again re-read with undiminished satisfaction. They have no brilliance of phrase, no smart surprises, no worked-up 'situations' which have to be taken at high speed to pass without breakdown over their brittle

bridgework of credibility. They have only the modest and faintly melancholy savor of life itself.

Yet it is a mere quibble to pretend that the essay does not have easily recognizable manners. It may be severely planned, or it may ramble in ungirdled mood, but it has its own point of view that marks it from the short story proper, or the merely personal memoir. That distinction, easily felt by the sensitive reader, is not readily expressible. Perhaps the true meaning of the word *essay*—an attempt—gives a clue. No matter how personal or trifling the topic may be, there is always a tendency to generalize, to walk round the subject or the experience, and view it from several vantages; instead of (as in the short story) cutting a carefully landscaped path through a chosen tract of human complication. So an essay can never be more than an attempt, for it is an excursion into the endless. Any student of fiction will admit that in the composition of a short story many entertaining and valuable elaborations may rise in the mind of the author which must be strictly rejected because they do not forward the essential motive. But in the essay (of an informal sort) we ask not relevance to plot, but relevance to mood. That is why there are so many essays that are mere marking time. The familiar essay is easier to write than the short story, but it imposes equal restraints on a scrupulous author. For in

fiction the writer is controlled and limited and swept along by his material; but in the essay, the writer rides his pen. A good story, once clearly conceived, almost writes itself; but essays are written.

There also we find a pitfall of the personal essay—the temptation to become too ostentatiously quaint, too deliberately ‘whimsical’ (the word which, by loathsome repetition, has become emetic). The fine flavor and genius of the essay—as in Bacon and Montaigne, Lamb, Hazlitt, Thackeray, Thoreau; perhaps even in Stevenson—is the rich bouquet of personality. But soliloquy must not fall into monologue. One might put it thus: that the perfection of the familiar essay is a conscious revelation of self done inadvertently.

The art of the anthologist is the art of the host: his tact is exerted in choosing a congenial group; making them feel comfortable and at ease; keeping the wine and tobacco in circulation; while his eye is tenderly alert down the bright vista of tablecloth, for any lapse in the general cheer. It is well, also, for him to hold himself discreetly in the background, giving his guests the pleasure of clinching the jape, and seeking only, by innocent wiles, to draw each one into some characteristic and felicitous vein. I think I can offer you, in this parliament of philomaths, entertainment of the

most genuine sort; and having said so much, I might well retire and be heard no more.

But I think it is well to state, as even the most bashful host may do, just why this particular company has been called together. My intention is not merely to please the amiable dilettante, though I hope to do that too. I made my choices, first and foremost, with a view to stimulating those who are themselves interested in the arts of writing. I have, to be frank, a secret ambition that a book of this sort may even be used as a small but useful weapon in the classroom. I wanted to bring it home to the student that as brilliant and sincere work is being done to-day in the essay as in any period of our literature. Accordingly the pieces reprinted here are very diverse. There is the grand manner; there is foolery; there is straightforward literary criticism; there is pathos, politics, and the picturesque. But every selection is, in its own way, a work of art. And I would call the reader's attention to this: that the greater number of these essays were written not by retired æsthetes, but by practising journalists in the harness of the daily or weekly press. The names of some of the most widely bruited essayists of our day are absent from this roster, not by malice, but because I desired to include material less generally known.

I should apologize, I suppose, for the very informal tone of the introductory notes on each author. But I conceived the reader in the rôle of a friend spending the evening in happy gossip along the shelves. Pulling out one's favorites and talking about them, now and then reading a chosen extract aloud, and ending (some time after midnight) by choosing some special volume for the guest to take to bed with him—in the same spirit I have compiled this collection. Perhaps the editorial comments have too much the manner of dressing gown and slippers; but what a pleasant book this will be to read in bed!

And perhaps this collection may be regarded as a small contribution to Anglo-American friendliness. Of course when I say Anglo-, I mean Brito-, but that is such a hideous prefix. Journalists on this side are much better acquainted with what their professional colleagues are doing in Britain, than they with our concerns. But surely there should be a congenial fraternity of spirit among all who use the English tongue in print. There are some of us who even imagine a day when there may be regular international exchanges of journalists, as there have been of scholars and students. The contributions to this book are rather evenly divided between British and American hands; and perhaps it is not insignificant that two of the most pleas-



ing items come from Canada, where they often combine the virtues of both sides.

It is a pleasant task to thank the authors and publishers who have assented to the reprinting of these pieces. To the authors themselves, and to the following publishers, I admit my sincere gratitude for the use of material copyrighted by them:—Doubleday Page and Company for the extracts from books by John Macy, Stewart Edward White and Pearsall Smith; Charles Scribner's Sons for Rupert Brooke's *Niagara Falls*; the New York *Sun* for Don Marquis's *Almost Perfect State*; the George H. Doran Company for the essays by Joyce Kilmer and Robert Cortes Holliday; Mr. James B. Pinker for permission to reprint Mr. Conrad's Preface to *A Personal Record*; Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., for the essays by H. M. Tomlinson, A. P. Herbert and Philip Guedalla; Lady Osler for the essay by the late Sir William Osler; Henry Holt and Company for Thomas Burke's *The Russian Quarter*; E. P. Dutton and Company for *A Word for Autumn*, by A. A. Milne; the New York *Evening Post* for the essays by Stuart P. Sherman and Harry Esty Dounce; Harper and Brothers for Marian Storm's *A Woodland Valentine*; Dodd, Mead and Company for Simeon Strunsky's *Nocturne*, from his volume *Post-Impressions*; the Macmillan Company for *Beer and Cider*,

from Professor Saintsbury's *Notes on a Cellar Book*; Longmans Green and Company for Bertrand Russell's *A Free Man's Worship*, from *Mysticism and Logic*; Robert M. McBride and Company for the selection from James Branch Cabell; Harcourt, Brace and Company for the essay by Heywood Broun; *The Weekly Review* for the essays by O. W. Firkins, Harry Morgan Ayres and Robert Palfrey Utter. The present ownership of the copyright of the essay by Louise Imogen Guiney I have been unable to discover. It was published in *Patrins* (Copeland and Day, 1897), which has long been out of print. Knowing the purity of my motives I have used this essay, hoping that it might introduce Miss Guiney's exquisite work to the younger generation that knows her hardly at all.

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY

OCTOBER, 1921

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MODERN ESSAYS



## AMERICAN LITERATURE

By JOHN MACY

This vigorous survey of American letters is the first chapter of John Macy's admirable volume *The Spirit of American Literature*, published in 1913—a book shrewd, penetrating and salty, which has unfortunately never reached one-tenth of the many readers who would find it permanently delightful and profitable. Mr. Macy has no skill in vaudeville tricks to call attention to himself: no shafts of limelight have followed him across the stage. But those who have an eye for criticism that is vivacious without bombast, austere without bitterness, keen without malice, know him as one of the truly competent and liberal-minded observers of the literary scene.

Mr. Macy was born in Detroit, 1877; graduated from Harvard in 1899; did editorial service on the *Youth's Companion* and the *Boston Herald*; and nowadays lives pensively in Greenwich Village, writing a good deal for *The Freeman* and *The Literary Review*. Perhaps, if you were wandering on Fourth Street, east of Sixth Avenue, you might see him treading thoughtfully along, with a wide sombrero hat, and always troubled by an iron-gray forelock that droops over his brow. You would know, as soon as you saw him, that he is a man greatly lovable. I like to think of him as I first saw him, some years ago, in front of the bright hearth of the charming St. Botolph Club in Boston, where he was usually the center of an animated group of nocturnal philosophers.

The essay was written in 1912, before the very real reawakening of American creative work that began in the 'teens of this century. The reader will find it interesting to consider how far Mr. Macy's remarks might be modified if he were writing to-day.

*The Spirit of American Literature* has been reissued in an inexpensive edition by Boni and Liveright. It is a book well worth owning.

AMERICAN literature is a branch of English literature, as truly as are English books written in Scotland or South Africa. Our literature lies almost entirely in the nineteenth century when the ideas and books of

the western world were freely interchanged among the nations and became accessible to an increasing number of readers. In literature nationality is determined by language rather than by blood or geography. M. Maeterlinck, born a subject of King Leopold, belongs to French literature. Mr. Joseph Conrad, born in Poland, is already an English classic. Geography, much less important in the nineteenth century than before, was never, among modern European nations, so important as we sometimes are asked to believe. Of the ancestors of English literature "Beowulf" is scarcely more significant, and rather less graceful, than our tree-inhabiting forebears with prehensile toes; the true progenitors of English literature are Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Italian, and French.

American literature and English literature of the nineteenth century are parallel derivatives from preceding centuries of English literature. Literature is a succession of books from books. Artistic expression springs from life ultimately but not immediately. It may be likened to a river which is swollen throughout its course by new tributaries and by the seepages of its banks; it reflects the life through which it flows, taking color from the shores; the shores modify it, but its power and volume descend from distant headwaters and affluents far up stream. Or it may be likened to the race-life which our food nourishes or



impoverishes, which our individual circumstances foster or damage, but which flows on through us, strangely impersonal and beyond our power to kill or create.

It is well for a writer to say: "Away with books! I will draw my inspiration from life!" For we have too many books that are simply better books diluted by John Smith. At the same time, literature is not born spontaneously out of life. Every book has its literary parentage, and students find it so easy to trace genealogies that much criticism reads like an Old Testament chapter of "begats." Every novel was suckled at the breasts of older novels, and great mothers are often prolific of anæmic offspring. The stock falls off and revives, goes a-wandering, and returns like a prodigal. The family records get blurred. But of the main fact of descent there is no doubt.

American literature is English literature made in this country. Its nineteenth-century characteristics are evident and can be analyzed and discussed with some degree of certainty. Its "American" characteristics—no critic that I know has ever given a good account of them. You can define certain peculiarities of American politics, American agriculture, American public schools, even American religion. But what is uniquely American in American literature? Poe is just as American as Mark Twain; Lanier is just as



American as Whittier. The American spirit in literature is a myth, like American valor in war, which is precisely like the valor of Italians and Japanese. The American, deluded by a falsely idealized image which he calls America, can say that the purity of Longfellow represents the purity of American home life. An Irish Englishman, Mr. Bernard Shaw, with another falsely idealized image of America, surprised that a face does not fit his image, can ask: "What is Poe doing in that galley?" There is no answer. You never can tell. Poe could not help it. He was born in Boston, and lived in Richmond, New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia. Professor van Dyke says that Poe was a maker of "decidedly un-American cameos," but I do not understand what that means. Facts are uncomfortable consorts of prejudices and emotional generalities; they spoil domestic peace, and when there is a separation they sit solid at home while the other party goes. Irving, a shy, sensitive gentleman, who wrote with fastidious care, said: "It has been a matter of marvel, to European readers, that a man from the wilds of America should express himself in tolerable English." It is a matter of marvel, just as it is a marvel that Blake and Keats flowered in the brutal city of London a hundred years ago.

The literary mind is strengthened and nurtured, is influenced and mastered, by the accumulated riches of