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ESSAYS & BELLES-LETTRES

SELECTED ESSAYS  
BY LEIGH HUNT · INTRO-  
DUCTION BY J. B. PRIESTLEY

# SELECTED ESSAYS



LEIGH HUNT

LONDON: J. M. DENT & SONS LTD.  
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*at The Temple Press Letchworth*  
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*for*  
*J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd.*  
*Aldine House Bedford St. London*  
*Toronto . Vancouver*  
*Melbourne . Wellington*  
*First Published in this Edition 1929*

## INTRODUCTION

LEIGH HUNT had a long life and by no means an unhappy one, in spite of the fact that he suffered from various domestic troubles, constant debt, and all the trials of an over-worked editor and journalist. A lover of fine letters, he was the friend and associate of an astonishing number of great writers. The list is almost startling: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lamb, Hazlitt, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Carlyle, Browning, Macaulay, and (unhappily, if we remember *Bleak House*) Dickens; to name only the most important. But this has not been fortunate for his reputation, since it means that, whether as poet, critic, or essayist, he is always to be discovered in the company of men better than he was. Thus, had he not worked side by side, as it were, with Lamb and Hazlitt, he might have enjoyed a greater reputation as an essayist. He has humour and pathos, but they pale before the humour and pathos of Lamb. He has wit and an acute critical mind, but not the wit and acuteness of Hazlitt. Compared with these two great essayists, he seems at first almost a faint figure, like a faded watercolour hanging between two Venetian masterpieces.

The essay in the hands of Lamb or Hazlitt is a piece of creative literature, the prose equivalent of a lyric by a Wordsworth or a Shelley. This creative force, Leigh Hunt rarely, if ever, achieves. He goes to work on a lower level. Lamb and Hazlitt give us table-talk only in the sense in which a poet is said to "sing" his compositions. Nobody—except perhaps the inspired Coleridge—ever talked as well as Lamb and Hazlitt wrote. But Leigh Hunt's essays do seem actual talk captured in print. They really are "causeries," ranging from light chatter to an occasional strain of grave monologue. It would not be impossible to make a distinction between the essay, the creative thing, and what is frequently called "miscellaneous writing." As an essayist, pure and simple, Leigh Hunt is undoubtedly not in the first rank. But as a miscellaneous writer, talking in print on an extraordinary

variety of subjects, a greater variety than you will find in either Lamb or Hazlitt, he has few serious rivals. Because he was far more the journalist than either of his two great contemporaries, his work has one advantage over theirs, namely, that it sketches his world as it passes more surely than theirs do. Some of these papers are like little peepholes through which we may catch a vivid glimpse of the life of the Regency. For a few minutes, we see the old mail-coach rolling down the street, hear the musical cries of the hawkers, and feel upon our faces the sun and wind and rain of a lost world.

There are a few lines about Hunt in Shelley's *Letter to Maria Gisborne* that might be applied to his essays:

. . . His room no doubt  
Is still adorned by many a cast from Shout,  
With graceful flowers, tastefully placed about;  
And coronals of bay from ribbons hung.  
And brighter wreaths in neat disorder flung. . . .

The graceful flowers, tastefully placed about, are the quotations from the poets, superbly chosen, with which Hunt likes to adorn and enrich his essays. In his own work, especially his verse, his taste was never sure; a curious strain of vulgarity peeps out now and again; but his taste in other men's work was excellent, and he presents the reader of his essays with an admirable anthology. His reading was wide, far wider than that of Lamb or Hazlitt—indeed, only Coleridge among his contemporaries had the same range—and he proves again and again his excellence as a critic not merely by making sensible and sometimes very acute remarks, but by fishing out exactly the right quotation. There is too in these essays that suggestion of bright untidiness which Shelley notices. They are an odd but pleasant jumble. There is no attempt to deal with subjects only on one level, or to restrict the treatment to one "key." A paper will begin as a joke and end perhaps as a piece of serious literary criticism or a lay sermon. Another will start its career as a sober little thesis, and then gradually lose itself in a stream of anecdotes. Not a few of these essays are clearly last-minute productions, hastily penned after consulting a reference book or two. Yet the whole medley and motley bears witness to the same personality, and we know we are in the company of Leigh Hunt.

Very good company it is too, in spite of one or two failings. "A matchless fireside companion," Lamb called him; and

though the whole man, with his good looks and gentle high spirits, his quick sympathies and easy manner, has not been captured in cold print, there is enough of him in these essays to make us appreciate Lamb's judgment. Carlyle, in temperament and tastes, had little in common with Hunt; indeed it would be difficult to find two men of letters who were more unlike one another; yet of Hunt, Carlyle could write:

He is a man of the most indisputably superior worth—a man of genius in a very strict sense of that word, and in all the senses which it bears or implies; of brilliant, varied gifts, of graceful fertility, of clearness, lovingness, truthfulness; of childlike, open character; also of most pure, even exemplary, private deportment; a man who can be other than loved only by those who have not seen him, or seen from a distance through a false medium.

We can only see him from a distance, but nobody can read the essays that follow without realising the truth of Carlyle's description. To say "he was a man of genius in a very strict sense of that word," to say that he was a genius in any sense of that word, is to over-estimate him, I must confess; and here, for once, Carlyle was carried away by an affectionate remembrance of a contemporary. But the rest will stand; and "graceful fertility" could hardly be bettered. So too, after reading his essays, we feel the force of that "childlike, open character."

One of the qualities—and it happens to be rare—that mark Leigh Hunt's miscellaneous writing is his sense of fun. You may call it humour if you will, but it seems to me nearer to what we think of as fun. He enjoys larking about with a subject. There is a twinkle in the very first sentence. Lamb's humour, that wild dark jesting of his, is at once terribly intimate and yet universal; but Leigh Hunt's fun is neither one nor the other, but somewhere between, gently domesticated, like the playfulness of an old friend at a family party. Especially does he excel in humorous descriptive papers, such as his *Getting Up on Cold Mornings*, and *A Now—Descriptive of a Hot Day*, and, in a more restrained manner, the essays on an old gentleman and an old lady, which seem to me the best things of their kind we have. I first made the acquaintance of these more playful essays when I was a boy; they captured my imagination then, no doubt because they were so rich in concrete illustrations, exact humorous imagery; and when I turn to them now, they never fail to renew their charm.

There can be no doubt that Leigh Hunt wrote far too many short miscellaneous things. For some time, he actually attempted to write a daily paper by himself. Even some of his reprinted articles suggest a man who has nothing much to say but is only too well aware of the fact that he must say something. Nevertheless, it does not follow, as so many critics have imagined it did, that if he had had more time to think and more time to write, he would therefore have given us a body of work far superior to the one we possess. It is certainly our loss that he never produced any sustained pieces of criticism, for though he had not the subtlety of Coleridge or Lamb, the intellectual drive of Hazlitt, his taste in pure literature was in some respects better than theirs. But it is doubtful if a more leisurely method of production would have made him a better essayist. Temperamentally, he was a genial gossip in literature, a man who does not go deep down into himself for rich hidden treasure of thought and feeling, but who glides gracefully over the surface of life and art, and we must accept the defects of his genuine virtues. Among them is a marked inequality in his writing. These essays are talk; and sometimes in them he talks badly, sometimes merely indifferently, and sometimes superbly well. Apart from an occasional descent into sheer sloppiness—and this was Hunt's greatest weakness, no matter in what capacity—his prose is very pleasant, easy gliding stuff, not very memorable and yet by no means the colourless and toneless writing of the hasty journalist. Indeed, most of it only needs a little stiffening and sharpening to be very good prose, and it always suggests better breeding than his verse.

When he wants to make a phrase, it is always there. Dip into these papers, and you will soon notice that. Thus, in his *Far Countries*, he remarks: "The long-lost voyager must have been like a person consecrated in all the quarters of heaven. His staff and his beard must have looked like relics of his former self." Of Hogarth, he observes: "His very goods and chattels are didactic." Of Lazarillo, hero of one of those Spanish epics of starvation, he remarks: "It is enough for him if, by a train of the most ingenious contrivances, he can lay successful siege to a crust. To rout some broken victuals—to circumvent an onion or so extraordinary—is the utmost aim of his ambition. An ox-foot is his *beau-idéal*. He has as intense and circuitous a sense of a piece of cheese as a mouse at a trap." Of a pompous leg: "It has a large

balustrade calf, an ankle that would be monstrous in any other man, but looks small from the contrast, a tight knee well buttoned, and a seam inexorably in the middle. It is a leg at once gross and symbolical. Its size is made up of plethora and superfluity; its white cotton stocking affects a propriety; its inflexible seam and side announce the man of clock-work. A dozen hard-worked dependants go at least to the making up of that leg. If in black, it is the essence of infinite hams at old ladies' Sunday dinners." All this is very good writing, in which the neat rhythm of the prose aids the wit, as it does in the best artificial comedy. And here is a graver strain:

The remembered innocence and endearments of a child stand us instead of virtues that have died older. Children have not exercised the voluntary offices of friendship; they have not chosen to be kind and good to us; nor stood by us, from conscious will, in the hour of adversity. But they have shared their pleasures and pains with us as well as they could; the interchange of good offices between us has, of necessity, been less mingled with the troubles of the world; the sorrow arising from their death is the only one which we can associate with their memories. These are happy thoughts that cannot die. . . .

And this is prose that is something more than good talk.

Leigh Hunt was not one of those men who hug their delights in secret, who hate to share the pleasures of art. On the contrary, he was for ever running to spread the good news of literature. He was one of the first of our democratic bookmen. And that is another reason for welcoming him into the "Everyman's Library." He will feel at home in it, and is perhaps even now rejoicing in the shades, just as many thousands of readers will soon rejoice in the companionship of his essays.

J. B. PRIESTLEY.

Born at Southgate, Middlesex, 19 October, 1784. Went to Christ's Hospital School, 1792. "Juvenilia" published by subscription, 1801, which reached fourth edition in 1804. Began writing for *The Traveller*, under pseudonym of Mr. Town, Junior; contributed theatrical criticism to his brother's paper, *The News*, 1805. Selections published under name of "Critical Essays on the Performers of the London Theatres"; "Classic Tales, Serious and Lively" (an anthology), 1807. Obtained clerkship in War Office under patronage of Addington, the premier, but abandoned it in order to edit *The Examiner*, 1808. Married Marianne Kent; "An Attempt to Show the Danger and Folly of Methodism" (reprint from *Examiner*), 1809. Editing *The Reflector*, 1810. Imprisoned for two years and fined



£500 for an outspoken article on the Prince Regent in *Examiner*, 1812. Continued to edit *The Examiner* while in prison. Left prison in February 1815. "The Story of Rimini" (greater part written in prison), 1816. "Foliage: or Poems, Original and Translated," 1818. "The Literary Pocket-book"; "Hero and Leander"; and "Bacchus and Ariadne"; "The Indicator" commenced in October, 1819. "Amyntas" (a trans.), 1820. Sails for Italy with wife and seven children, 15 November, 1821. After tremendous storm vessel driven into Dartmouth, where the Hunts land and pass on to Plymouth. Sails for Leghorn, May 1822. Joined by Shelley and moves to Pisa, occupying the ground floor of Byron's house; wrote epitaph for Shelley's tomb, July 1822. Left Pisa for Genoa with Byron, September 1822. Conducted *The Liberal* with Byron. Removed to Florence, 1823. Wrote "Ultra-Crepidavius," "Bacchus in Tuscany" (a trans.), "The Wishing Cap." Returns to England, September 1825. Settles at Highgate Hill; "Lord Byron and Some of his Contemporaries"; issues *The Companion*, a weekly periodical; settles at Epsom 1828; starts another periodical, *The Chat of the Week*, 1830. Issues daily literary paper of four pages entirely written by himself, *The Tatler*, 1830-32. "Sir Ralph Esher"; "Christianism" (later expanded to "The Religion of the Heart"), published by subscription, which lead to a life-long friendship with Carlyle; Collected Edition of his poems, also by subscription; Preface to Shelley's *Masque of Anarchy*, 1832. "The Indicator and the Companion" (selected articles), 1834. Articles to *Tail's Magazine*, *True Sun*, and *Monthly Chronicle*, 1833-41. *Leigh Hunt's London Journal*, 1834-5. Pension of £120 settled on him by Sir Percy Shelley, 1844. "Wit and Humour" (anthology); "Stories from the Italian Poets," 1846. Articles to the *Atlas*, published afterwards as "A Saunter through the West-End"; "Men, Women, and Books," 1847. "A Jar of Honey from Mount Hybla" (selected papers from *Ainsworth's Magazine*); "The Town" (from the *London Journal*), 1848. "A Book for a Corner"; "Readings for Railways," 1849. "Autobiography," 1850. *Leigh Hunt's Journal* (in which were printed "The Descent of Liberty," "A Legend of Florence," "Lovers' Amazements"), 1850-1. "Table-Talk," 1851. Youngest son, Vincent, dies, 1852. "The Old Court Suburb"; "Beaumont and Fletcher" (anthology); "Stories in Verse," 1855. Wife died, 1857. Papers to *Spectator*, 1859. Contributed occasionally to *The Court Magazine*, *Household Words*, and *The Musical Times*. Died at Putney, 28 August, 1859.

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## FAR COUNTRIES

IMAGINATION, though no mean thing, is not a proud one. If it looks down from its wings upon common places, it only the more perceives the vastness of the region about it. The infinity into which its flight carries it might indeed throw back upon it a too great sense of insignificance, did not beauty or Moral Justice, with its equal eye, look through that blank aspect of power, and reassure it; showing it that there is a power as much above power itself, as the thought that reaches to all, is to the hand that can touch only thus far.

But we do not wish to get into this tempting region of speculation just now. We only intend to show the particular instance, in which imagination instinctively displays its natural humility: we mean, the fondness which imaginative times and people have shown for what is personally remote from them; for what is opposed to their own individual consciousness, even in range of space, in farness of situation.

There is no surer mark of a vain people than their treating other nations with contempt, especially those of whom they know least. It is better to verify the proverb, and take everything unknown for magnificent, than predetermine it to be worthless. The gain is greater. The instinct is more judicious. When we mention the French as an instance, we do not mean to be invidious. Most nations have their good as well as bad features. In Vanity Fair there are many booths.

The French, not long ago, praised one of their neighbours so highly, that the latter is suspected to have lost as much modesty, as the former gained by it. But they did this as a set-off against their own despots and bigots. When they again became the greatest power in Europe, they had a relapse of their old egotism. The French, though an amiable and intelligent people, are not an imaginative one. The greatest height they go is in a balloon. They get no farther than France, let them go where they will. They "run the great circle and are still at home," like the squirrel in his rolling cage. Instead of going to Nature in their poetry, they would make her come to them, and dress herself at their last new toilet. In philosophy and metaphysics,

they divest themselves of gross prejudices, and then think they are in as graceful a state of nakedness as Adam and Eve.

At the time when the French had this fit upon them of praising the English (which was nevertheless the honester one of the two), they took to praising the Chinese for numberless unknown qualities. This seems a contradiction to the near-sightedness we speak of: but the reason they praised them was, that the Chinese had the merit of religious toleration; a great and extraordinary one certainly, and not the less so for having been, to all appearance, the work of one man. All the romance of China, such as it was—anything in which they differed from the French—their dress, their porcelain towers, their Great Wall—was nothing. It was the particular agreement with the philosophers.

It happened, curiously enough, that they could not have selected for their panegyric a nation apparently more contemptuous of others; or at least more self-satisfied and unimaginative. The Chinese are cunning and ingenious, and have a great talent at bowing out ambassadors who come to visit them. But it is somewhat inconsistent with what appears to be their general character, that they should pay strangers even this equivocal compliment; for under a prodigious mask of politeness, they are not slow to evince their contempt of other nations, whenever any comparison is insinuated with the subjects of the Brother of the Sun and Moon. The knowledge they respect in us most is that of gun-making, and of the East-Indian passage. When our countrymen showed them a map of the earth, they inquired for China; and on finding that it only made a little piece in a corner, could not contain their derision. They thought that it was the main territory in the middle, the apple of the world's eye.

On the other hand, the most imaginative nations, in their highest times, have had a respect for remote countries. It is a mistake to suppose that the ancient term barbarian, applied to foreigners, suggested the meaning we are apt to give it. It gathered some such insolence with it in the course of time; but the more intellectual Greeks venerated the countries from which they brought the elements of their mythology and philosophy. The philosopher travelled into Egypt, like a son to see his father. The merchant heard in Phœnicia the far-brought stories of other realms, which he told to his delighted countrymen. It is supposed, that the mortal part of Mentor in the *Odyssey* was drawn from one of these voyagers. When

Anacharsis the Scythian was reproached with his native place by an unworthy Greek, he said, "My country may be a shame to me, but you are a shame to your country." Greece had a lofty notion of the Persians and the Great King, till Xerxes came over to teach it better, and betrayed the softness of their skulls.

It was the same with the Arabians, at the time when they had the accomplishments of the world to themselves; as we see by their delightful tales. Everything shines with them in the distance, like a sunset. What an amiable people are these Persians! What a wonderful place is the island of Serendib! You would think nothing could be finer than the Caliph's city of Bagdad, till you hear of "Grand Cairo"; and how has that epithet and that name towered in the imagination of all those, who have not had the misfortune to see the modern city! Sindbad was respected, like Ulysses, because he had seen so many adventures and nations. So was Aboulfaouris the Great Voyager, in the Persian Tales. His very name sounds like a wonder.

With many a tempest had his beard been shaken.

It was one of the workings of the great Alfred's mind, to know about far-distant countries. There is a translation by him of a book of geography; and he even employed people to travel: a great stretch of intellectual munificence for those times. About the same period, Haroun al Raschid (whom our manhood is startled to find almost a less real person than we thought him, for his very reality) wrote a letter to the Emperor of the West, Charlemagne. Here is Arabian and Italian romance, shaking hands in person.

The Crusades pierced into a new world of remoteness. We do not know whether those were much benefited, who took part in them; but for the imaginative persons remaining at home, the idea of going to Palestine must have been like travelling into a supernatural world. When the campaign itself *had* a good effect, it must have been of a very fine and highly-tempered description. Chaucer's Knight had been

Sometime with the lord of Palatie  
Agen another hethen in Turkie:  
And evermore he had a sovereign price;  
And though that he was worthy, he was wise,  
And of his port as meek as is a mayde.

How like a return from the moon must have been the

reappearance of such travellers as Sir John Mandeville, Marco Polo, and William de Rubruquis, with their news of Prester John, the Great Mogul, and the Great Cham of Tartary! The long-lost voyager must have been like a person consecrated in all the quarters of heaven. His staff and his beard must have looked like relics of his former self. The Venetians, who were some of the earliest European travellers, have been remarked, among their other amiable qualities, for their great respect for strangers. The peculiarity of their position, and the absence of so many things which are commonplaces to other countries, such as streets, horses, and coaches, add, no doubt, to this feeling. But a foolish or vain people would only feel a contempt for what they did not possess. Milton, in one of those favourite passages of his, in which he turns a nomenclature into such grand meaning and music, shows us whose old footing he had delighted to follow. How he enjoys the distance; emphatically using the words *far*, *farthest*, and *utmost*!

—Embassies from regions far remote,  
In various habits, on the Appian road,  
Or on the Emilian; some from farthest south,  
Syene, and where the shadow both way falls,  
Meroe, Nilotick Isle; and more to west,  
The realm of Bocchus to the Black-moor sea;  
From the Asian kings, and Parthian among these;  
From India and the golden Chersonese,  
And utmost Indian isle Taprobane.—*Parad. Reg. Bk. IV.*

One of the main helps to our love of remoteness in general, is the associations we connect with it of peace and quietness. Whatever there may be at a distance, people feel as if they should escape from the worry of their local cares. "O that I had wings like a dove! then would I fly away and be at rest." The word *far* is often used wilfully in poetry, to render distance still more distant. An old English song begins:

In Irelande farre over the sea  
There dwelt a bonny king.

Thomson, a Scotchman, speaking of the western isles of his own country, has that delicious line, full of a dreary yet lulling pleasure;

As when a shepherd of the Hebrid isles,  
Placed *far amid the melancholy main*.

In childhood, the total ignorance of the world, especially when we are brought up in some confined spot, renders everything beyond the bounds of our dwelling a distance and a romance. Mr. Lamb, in his *Recollections of Christ's Hospital*,

says that he remembers when some half-dozen of his school-fellows set off, "without map, card, or compass, on a serious expedition to find out Philip Quarll's Island." We once encountered a set of boys as romantic. It was at no greater distance than at the foot of a hill near Hampstead; yet the spot was so perfectly Cisalpine to them, that two of them came up to us with looks of hushing eagerness, and asked "whether, on the other side of that hill, there were not robbers"; to which, the minor adventurer of the two added, "and some say serpents." They had all got bows and arrows, and were evidently hovering about the place, betwixt daring and apprehension, as on the borders of some wild region. We smiled to think which it was that husbanded their suburb wonders to more advantage, they or we; for while they peopled the place with robbers and serpents, we were peopling it with sylvans and fairies.

So was it when my life began;  
So is it now I am a man;  
So be it when I shall grow old,  
Or let me die!  
The child is father to the man;  
And I could wish my days to be  
Bound each to each by natural piety.

## ADVICE TO THE MELANCHOLY

If you are melancholy for the first time, you will find upon a little inquiry, that others have been melancholy many times, and yet are cheerful now. If you have been melancholy many times, recollect that you have got over all those times; and try if you cannot find out means of getting over them better.

Do not imagine that mind alone is concerned in your bad spirits. The body has a great deal to do with these matters. The mind may undoubtedly affect the body; but the body also affects the mind. There is a reaction between them; and by lessening it on either side, you diminish the pain on both.

If you are melancholy, and know not why, be assured it must arise entirely from some physical weakness; and do your best to strengthen yourself. The blood of a melancholy man is thick and slow; the blood of a lively man is clear and quick. Endeavour therefore to put your blood in motion. Exercise is the best way to do it; but you may also help yourself, in moderation, with wine, or other excitements. Only you must take care so to proportion the use of any artificial stimulus,



that it may not render the blood languid by over-exciting it at first; and that you may be able to keep up, by the natural stimulus only, the help you have given yourself by the artificial.

Regard the bad weather as somebody has advised us to handle the nettle. In proportion as you are delicate with it, it will make you feel; but

Grasp it like a man of mettle  
And the rogue obeys you well.

Do not the less, however, on that account, take all reasonable precaution and arms against it—your boots, etc., against wet feet, and your great-coat or umbrella against the rain. It is timidity and flight which are to be deprecated, not proper armour for the battle. The first will lay you open to defeat, on the least attack. A proper use of the latter will only keep you strong for it. Plato had such a high opinion of exercise, that he said it was a cure even for a wounded conscience. Nor is this opinion a dangerous one. For there is no system, even of superstition, however severe or cruel in other matters, that does not allow a wounded conscience to be curable by some means. Nature will work out its rights and its kindness some way or other, through the worst sophistications; and this is one of the instances in which she seems to raise herself above all contingencies. The conscience may have been wounded by artificial or by real guilt; but then she will tell it in those extremities, that even the real guilt may have been produced by circumstances. It is her kindness alone, which nothing can pull down from its predominance.

See fair play between cares and pastimes. Diminish your artificial wants as much as possible, whether you are rich or poor; for the rich man's, increasing by indulgence, are apt to outweigh even the abundance of his means, and the poor man's diminution of them renders his means the greater. On the other hand, increase all your natural and healthy enjoyments. Cultivate your afternoon fireside, the society of your friends, the company of agreeable children, music, theatres, amusing books, an urbane and generous gallantry. He who thinks any innocent pastime foolish, has either to grow wiser or is past the ability to do so. In the one case, his notion of being childish is itself a childish notion. In the other, his importance is of so feeble and hollow a cast, that it dare not move for fear of tumbling to pieces.

A friend of ours, who knows as well as any man how to unite industry with enjoyment, has set an excellent example to those