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ESSAYS

THE ESSAYS OF ELIA
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
AUGUSTINE BIRRELL

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INTRODUCTION

No apology is needed, and certainly no preface is required, for or to another edition of "The Essays of Elia." They have, to use their author's own words, joined the class of "perpetually self-reproductive volumes, Great Nature's Stereotypes." All that an editor of them has to do is to see that work so delicate, so conscientious, so elaborate, is neither insulted with bad type or ill-tempered paper, nor injured by careless printing. Having done this, he has done his duty. There is no need to praise what all the world praises. Sometimes (it is just possible) an author may slip his hold on men's fancies and fall into a state of neglect, and, so far as human memories are concerned, of ruinous decay, which yet may be removed, and the author's fame judiciously restored by the kindly enthusiasm of some critic, at whose bidding we turn to the forgotten volumes, and try to make up for past neglect by present rapture. But this (it must be owned) is rare. There are, indeed, more discoverers than discoveries; more bold travellers than new continents; more critics dinning the air with their joyful shouts over forgotten poets and disused dramatists than there prove to be poets and dramatists whom it is good to remember, or possible to use. These recovered creatures lead but a blinking kind of existence for a very short time, and then, even though their works may have been reprinted on Whatman paper, sink back into oblivion, and rest for ever on the shelves of that great library, the pride of Limbo, which is made up of the books that no man can read, even though he were to be paid for doing so. This repose is not unkindly. An author who is entirely forgotten is, at all events, never mispraised. Nothing, we may feel well assured, could cause the Author of the "Essays of Elia" more genuine annoyance than to be clumsily praised, or raised with shouting to a higher pedestal than the one in the possession of which his own ripe judgment could confirm him. And yet, if we are not to praise "The Essays of Elia," what is there for us to do?

And who can insure us against doing so clumsily? Happily it is not necessary to praise them at all.

The lives of authors, if only written with a decent measure of truthfulness and insight, are, generally speaking, better reading than their works. It would be hard to explain why the lives of men so querulous, so affected, so centred in self, so averse to the probing of criticism, so blind to the smallness of their fame as most authors stand revealed in their biographies and letters to have been, should yet be so incessantly interesting. They succeed one another quickly enough—these biographies; doing each one of them its bit of iconoclastic work: yet the reader never tires of them, nor, unless he is very young, does he wreak an empty wrath upon the fragments of another broken idol. Far otherwise: he picks up the pieces reverently, and remembering how hard and self-engrossing is the labour of carrying out any high plan of literary excellence, how furious the fever occasioned by the thought of perfection, how hot the hell of failure,—puts them carefully away, and thanks God his mother bore him as destitute of genius as of clothing.

But none the less we pine after the ideal. We want our favourite authors to be our best-loved men. Smashing idols is an irreverent occupation endurable only in our wilder hours. A time comes in most men's lives when the bell rings for prayer, and unhappy are they who, when it does, have nowhere to carry their heart's supplications.

It is, therefore, a pleasant thing when we find ourselves saying of Charles Lamb, that it is impossible to know whether we most admire the author, or love the man. The imaginary Elia, sitting by the side of his Cousin Bridget, playing sick whist, whilst the pipkin which was to prepare a gentle lenitive for his foot is bubbling in the fire, "and as I do not much relish appliances, there it should ever bubble—Bridget and I should be for ever playing," makes a picture which will never need retouching; but when we read in the "Life and Letters" how reality outdoes imagination, and learn that the pen of Elia, so wisely human, so sweetly melancholy, told only but a few of the secrets of a brave heart and an unselfish life, we feel we have saved something out of the wreck.

Lamb, like his own child-angel, was "to know weakness, and reliance, and the shadow of human imbecility." He

went with a lame gait. He used to get drunk somewhat too frequently. Let the fact be stated in all its deformity—he was too fond of gin-and-water. He once gave a lady the welcome assurance that he never got drunk twice in the same house. Failing all evidence to the contrary, we are bound to believe this to be true. It is a mitigating circumstance. Wordsworth's boundless self-conceit, Coleridge's maddening infirmity of purpose, Hazlitt's petulance, De Quincey's spitefulness, knew no such self-denying ordinance. Lamb was also a too inveterate punster, and sometimes, it may be, pushed a jest, or baited a bore, beyond the limits of becoming mirth. When we have said these things against Lamb we have said all. Pale Malice, speckled Jealousy, may now be invited to search the records of his life, to probe his motives, to read his private letters, to pry into his desk, to dissect his character. Baffled, beaten, and disappointed, they fall back. An occasional intoxication which hurt no one but himself, which blinded him to no duty, which led him into no extravagance, which in no way interfered with the soundness of his judgment, the charity of his heart, or the independence of his life, and a shower of bad puns—behold the faults of Elia! His virtues—noble, manly, gentle—are strewn over every page of his life, and may be read in every letter he ever wrote.

Charles Lamb was born in Crown Office Row in the Temple, on the 18th of February, 1775. His father, John Lamb, was a barrister's clerk. The lots of barristers' clerks vary as widely as the habits of their employers. Some make fortunes for themselves; others only tea for their masters. Their success in life is not wholly dependent upon their own exertions. Rewarded as they are by a kind of parasitical fee growing out of those paid to the barrister they serve, they wax or wane—grow fat or lean along with their chief. Theirs is thus a double dependence. From a herd of the newly-called, how is the fledgling clerk to single out a Scott, a Palmer, or a Cairns? John Lamb was clerk to Mr. Samuel Salt, who, albeit a Bencher of his Inn, does not seem ever to have enjoyed, if that be the right word, a practice in the Courts. You may search the Law Reports of his period in vain for his name. The duties of John Lamb were rather those of a private secretary, or confidential upper servant, than of a barrister's

clerk, properly so called. He collected his master's dividends—a more gentlemanlike occupation than dunning attorneys for fees, marked but not paid. Salt was a man of ample fortune and of kind heart. He is immortalised in the Essay on "Some of the Old Benchers of the Inner Temple." It was he who procured for Charles a nomination to Christ's Hospital, whither the boy proceeded on the 9th of October, 1782, and where he remained until November, 1789, when he left school for good, being then only in his fifteenth year. At Christ's Lamb received a purely classical education of the old-fashioned type. "In everything that relates to *science*," so he writes with obvious truthfulness, "I am a whole encyclopædia behind the rest of the world. I should scarcely have cut a figure amongst the franklins or country gentlemen of King John's days. I know less geography than a schoolboy of six weeks' standing. To me a map of old Ortelius is as authentic as Arrowsmith. I do not know whereabout Africa merges into Asia; whether Ethiopia lies in one or other of those great divisions; nor can form the remotest conjecture of the position of New South Wales or Van Dieman's Land." A civil servant of to-day could hardly afford to make such pleasant confessions. No boy ever profited more, or lost less, by an old-fashioned education than Lamb. His head, so he tells us, had not many mansions, nor spacious, but he had imagination, taste, and spirit, and he imbibed the old humanities at every pore. He never could have written "The Essays of Elia," or anything like them, had he been robbed of the birthright of every man of letters. He is not a cheap and easy author. Leaving school as he did before he was fifteen, he never proceeded beyond the vestibules of the ancient learning; and this, perhaps, was also well. His stutter saved him from the Universities, and he was thus enabled through life to preserve a romantic attachment for these seminaries of sound learning and true religion. Literature has no reason to deplore that Lamb never, save in his imagination, proceeded a Master of Arts. Some portion—it would be impossible to say what—of his charm proceeds from the fact of his having been a lettered clerk in the mercantile rather than the ecclesiastical sense of the term. He has thus become the patron saint, the inspiring example, of those whom fate, perhaps not so unkind as she seems, has condemned to know "the irksome

confinement of an office," and who have left to them but the shreds and patches of the day for the pursuits in which their souls rejoice.

After leaving Christ's, Lamb spent a little more than two years in the South Sea House, where his elder and only brother John had a clerkship; but in April, 1792, through the influence probably of Mr. Salt, he obtained a place in the Accountant's Office of the East India Company, at whose desks he sat until 1825, when, to use his own celebrated phrase, he went home—for ever. His salary went on slowly increasing from something under £100 to £600 a year. Apart from the old and probably fictitious story about his coming late and going home proportionately early, there is no reason to suppose that Lamb was otherwise than an efficient public servant, as that class of person goes. He did no more than was expected of him, and had no scruples about conducting his private correspondence on office paper. He wrote a very clear hand, and was in all business matters a precise and punctual person. His code of honour was the highest, and through life he maintained a curious and passionate hatred of bankrupts.

He had been three years in the service of the Company when the great tragedy—Elizabethan in its horror—of his life befell him. Old John Lamb and his wife, their daughter Mary, an aunt, and Charles, were living huddled together in an obscure lodging in Little Queen Street, Holborn. An exceedingly ugly church now stands upon the site of the houses. Mary Lamb, who was ten years her younger brother's senior, was a dressmaker on a small scale. She always had what her mother, who does not seem greatly to have cared for her, called "moithered" brains, and on this fateful day, the 23rd of September, 1796, just before dinner, she seized a case-knife which was lying on the table, and pursued a little girl, her apprentice, round the room, hurled about the dinner-forks, and finally stabbed her mother to the heart. When Charles came into the room, and snatched the knife out of her hand, it was to find his aunt lying apparently dying, his father with a wound on his forehead, and his mother a murdered corpse. He was then twenty-one years of age, and had spent some weeks of this very year in the Hoxton Lunatic Asylum. His elder brother John, who had a comfortable place in

the South Sea House, did nothing but look after his own leg, which one is thankful to believe gave him a good deal of pain. The whole weight of the family fell upon Charles. His love for his sister manifested itself in his determination that as soon as possible she should be released from confinement and live at home, he undertaking ever to be on the watch for the fits of frenzy he was assured only too truthfully would necessarily be recurrent. For his father and his aunt, so long as they lived, he maintained a home. Poor Mary in her asylum was often heard to say that she had one brother who wished her to remain all her days in a madhouse, but another who would not have it so. Charles succeeded in obtaining her discharge upon entering into a solemn undertaking to take care of her for ever thereafter. At first he provided lodgings for her at Hackney, and spent all his Sundays and holidays with her, but soon after he took her to live with him altogether. Mr. Procter (Barry Cornwall), from whose account the above facts are taken in their entirety, says: "Whenever the approach of one of her fits of insanity was announced by some irritability or change of manner, he would take her under his arm to Hoxton Asylum. It was very affecting to encounter the young brother and sister walking together (weeping) on this painful errand, Mary herself, although sad, very conscious of the necessity of a temporary separation from her only friend. They used to carry a strait waistcoat with them."

These terrible events for a time greatly quickened the religious side of Lamb's character. His letters to Coleridge are severe, ascetical. He forswore poetry and amusements, even such as were in the reach of a poor boy of twenty-one maintaining a household on an income of £180. This wore off, and Lamb became in men's hasty judgments one of the profane—a trifler, a jester. Carlyle, we know only too well, met him once, and dismissed him with a sulphureous snort. My belief is that Lamb, feeling his own mental infirmity, and aware of the fearful life-long strain to which he was to be subjected, took refuge in trifles seriously, and played the fool in order to remain sane.

For many long years Charles and Mary Lamb lived together on narrow means and humble surroundings. Friends indeed they had—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Hazlitt,

Manning, Rickman, Barton, Burney, Carey—of whom anyone might be proud. Their poverty was of the noble order. In manly independence he towers above his contemporaries. He hated a close bargain almost as much as he did a bankrupt. Prudent and saving, he could be generous and (as it is called) princely when occasion arose. He was ever a helper, seldom one of the helped. Both he and his sister eked out their slender means by literary work, humble in design, but honest in accomplishment. Save for the newspapers, to which Charles contributed doleful jests, they wrote nothing save their best.

In 1818, when Lamb's poetry and prose was collected and dignified, much to his amusement, with the title "Works," he became more widely known, and was recognised, by at all events a few, as a man with a gift. In 1820 "The London Magazine" was established, and in its columns first appeared "The Essays of Elia." In 1823 the first series appeared in a separate volume, and ten years later the last essays.

The joint lives of Charles and Mary Lamb are best read in the former's letters, though Canon Ainger's "Life" should be kept by their side.

It was the wish of both that Charles should be the survivor; he would thus have seen his task complete. But it was not to be. He died at Edmonton on the 27th of December, 1834; Mary lived on till the 20th of May, 1847,—weary years, spent for the most part under the care of a nurse, and with but a "twilight of consciousness." Lamb had saved £2000, which, after his sister's life-interest ceased, was vested in trustees for the benefit of Mrs. Moxon, whom Mary and he had in a kind of way adopted.

In this edition I have followed the text of the two original editions of the Essays. The spelling is often quaint, sometimes wrong, but always Lamb's, and therefore better than anybody else's.

AUGUSTINE BIRRELL.

The following is a list of the works of Charles Lamb:—

Poems on Various Subjects, by S. T. Coleridge, late of Jesus College, Cambridge, 1796, contains four sonnets by Lamb, signed "C. L.," referred to by Coleridge in his preface as by Mr. Charles Lamb of the India House; Poems, by S. T. Coleridge, 2nd Edition, to which are now added Poems by Charles Lamb and Charles Lloyd, 1797.

Blank Verse by Charles Lloyd and Charles Lamb, 1798; A Tale of Rosamund Gray and Old Blind Margaret, 1798; John Woodvil, a Tragedy, 1802; Mrs. Leicester's School, 1807, by Charles and Mary Lamb; Tales from Shakespeare, 1807; The Adventures of Ulysses, 1808 [B. M. 1810?]; Specimens of English Dramatic Poets, 1808; Poetry for Children: Prince Dorus, 1811; The Works of Charles Lamb, 2 vols., 1818; Elia Essays, 1823; Album Verses, 1830; Satan in Search of a Wife, 1831; The Last Essays of Elia, 1833.

Works, 2 vols. (C. & J. Ollier), 1818; Works (E. Moxon), 1840, 1859, 1870; Works (edited and prefaced by R. H. Shepherd), 1875. Works (edited with biographical introduction and notes by C. Kent), 1876; Life (by Sir T. N. Talfourd), Letters, and Writings, 6 vols. (E. Moxon & Co.), 1876; Life (by Sir T. N. Talfourd), Letters, and Writings (edited by Percy Fitzgerald), The Temple Edition (printed from the stereotype plates of Moxon's Edition), 6 vols., 1895; Life and Works, introduction and notes by A. Ainger, 12 vols., 1899-1900; Works, edited by W. Macdonald, 1903.

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THE ESSAYS OF ELIA

THE SOUTH-SEA HOUSE

READER, in thy passage from the Bank—where thou hast been receiving thy half-yearly dividends (supposing thou art a lean annuitant like myself)—to the Flower Pot, to secure a place for Dalston, or Shacklewell, or some other thy suburban retreat northerly,—didst thou never observe a melancholy looking, handsome, brick and stone edifice, to the left—where Threadneedle Street abuts upon Bishopsgate? I dare say thou hast often admired its magnificent portals ever gaping wide, and disclosing to view a grave court, with cloisters, and pillars, with few or no traces of goers-in or comers-out—a desolation something like Balclutha's.¹

This was once a house of trade,—a centre of busy interests. The throng of merchants was here—the quick pulse of gain—and here some forms of business are still kept up, though the soul be long since fled. Here are still to be seen stately porticos; imposing staircases; offices roomy as the state apartments in palaces—deserted, or thinly peopled with a few straggling clerks; the still more sacred interiors of court and committee rooms, with venerable faces of beadles, door-keepers—directors seated in form on solemn days (to proclaim a dead dividend) at long worm-eaten tables, that have been mahogany, with tarnished gilt-leather coverings, supporting massy silver inkstands long since dry;—the oaken wainscots hung with pictures of deceased governors and sub-governors, of Queen Anne, and the two first monarchs of the Brunswick dynasty;—huge charts, which subsequent discoveries have antiquated;—dusty maps of Mexico, dim as dreams,—and soundings of the Bay of Panama!—The long passages hung with buckets, appended, in idle row, to walls, whose substance might

¹ "I passed by the walls of Balclutha, and they were desolate."

defy any, short of the last, conflagration:—with vast ranges of cellarage under all, where dollars and pieces of eight once lay, an “unsunned heap,” for Mammon to have solaced his solitary heart withal,—long since dissipated, or scattered into air at the blast of the breaking of that famous BUBBLE.—

Such is the SOUTH-SEA HOUSE. At least, such it was forty years ago, when I knew it,—a magnificent relic! What alterations may have been made in it since, I have had no opportunities of verifying. Time, I take for granted, has not freshened it. No wind has resuscitated the face of the sleeping waters. A thicker crust by this time stagnates upon it. The moths, that were then battenning upon its obsolete ledgers and day-books, have rested from their depredations, but other light generations have succeeded, making fine fretwork among their single and double entries. Layers of dust have accumulated (a superfoetation of dirt!) upon the old layers, that seldom used to be disturbed, save by some curious finger, now and then, inquisitive to explore the mode of book-keeping in Queen Anne’s reign; or, with less hallowed curiosity, seeking to unveil some of the mysteries of that tremendous HOAX, whose extent the petty speculators of our day look back upon with the same expression of incredulous admiration, and hopeless ambition of rivalry, as would become the puny face of modern conspiracy contemplating the Titan size of Vaux’s superhuman plot.

Peace to the manes of the BUBBLE! Silence and destitution are upon thy walls, proud house, for a memorial!

Situated as thou art, in the very heart of stirring and living commerce,—amid the fret and fever of speculation— with the Bank, and the ’Change, and the India-house about thee, in the hey-day of present prosperity, with their important faces, as it were, insulting thee, their *poor neighbour out of business*—to the idle and merely contemplative,—to such as me, old house! there is a charm in thy quiet:—a cessation—a coolness from business—an indolence almost cloistral—which is delightful! With what reverence have I paced thy great bare rooms and courts at eventide! They spoke of the past:—the shade of some dead accountant, with visionary pen in ear, would flit by me, stiff as in life. Living accounts and accountants puzzle

me. I have no skill in figuring. But thy great dead tomes, which scarce three degenerate clerks of the present day could lift from their enshrining shelves—with their old fantastic flourishes, and decorative rubric interlacings—their sums in triple columniations, set down with formal superfluity of cyphers—with pious sentences at the beginning, without which our religious ancestors never ventured to open a book of business, or bill of lading—the costly vellum covers of some of them almost persuading us that we are got into some *better library*,—are very agreeable and edifying spectacles. I can look upon these defunct dragons with complacency. Thy heavy, odd-shaped ivory-handled penknives (our ancestors had everything on a larger scale than we have hearts for) are as good as any thing from Herculaneum. The pounce-boxes of our days have gone retrograde.

The very clerks which I remember in the South-Sea House—I speak of forty years back—had an air very different from those in the public offices that I have had to do with since. They partook of the genius of the place!

They were mostly (for the establishment did not admit of superfluous salaries) bachelors. Generally (for they had not much to do) persons of a curious and speculative turn of mind. Old-fashioned, for a reason mentioned before. Humorists, for they were of all descriptions; and, not having been brought together in early life (which has a tendency to assimilate the members of corporate bodies to each other), but, for the most part, placed in this house in ripe or middle age, they necessarily carried into it their separate habits and oddities, unqualified, if I may so speak, as into a common stock. Hence they formed a sort of Noah's ark. Odd fishes. A lay-monastery. Domestic retainers in a great house, kept more for show than use. Yet pleasant fellows, full of chat—and not a few among them had arrived at considerable proficiency on the German flute.

The cashier at that time was one Evans, a Cambro-Briton. He had something of the choleric complexion of his countrymen stamped on his visage, but was a worthy sensible man at bottom. He wore his hair, to the last, powdered and frizzed out, in the fashion which I remember to have seen in caricatures of what were termed, in my young days, *Maccaronies*. He was the last of that race of

beaux. Melancholy as a gib-cat over his counter all the forenoon, I think I see him, making up his cash (as they call it) with tremulous fingers, as if he feared every one about him was a defaulter; in his hypochondry ready to imagine himself one; haunted, at least, with the idea of the possibility of his becoming one: his tristful visage clearing up a little over his roast neck of veal at Anderton's at two (where his picture still hangs, taken a little before his death by desire of the master of the coffee-house, which he had frequented for the last five-and-twenty years), but not attaining the meridian of its animation till evening brought on the hour of tea and visiting. The simultaneous sound of his well-known rap at the door with the stroke of the clock announcing six, was a topic of never-failing mirth in the families which this dear old bachelor gladdened with his presence. Then was his *forte*, his glorified hour! How would he chirp, and expand, over a muffin! How would he dilate into secret history! His countrymen, Pennant himself, in particular, could not be more eloquent than he in relation to old and new London—the site of old theatres, churches, streets gone to decay—where Rosomond's pond stood—the Mulberry Gardens—and the Conduit in Cheap—with many a pleasant anecdote, derived from paternal tradition, of those grotesque figures which Hogarth has immortalised in his picture of *Noon*,—the worthy descendants of those heroic confessors, who, flying to this country, from the wrath of Louis the Fourteenth and his dragoons, kept alive the flame of pure religion in the sheltering obscurities of Hog Lane, and the vicinity of the Seven Dials!

Deputy, under Evans, was Thomas Tame. He had the air and stoop of a nobleman. You would have taken him for one, had you met him in one of the passages leading to Westminster Hall. By stoop, I mean that gentle bending of the body forwards, which, in great men, must be supposed to be the effect of an habitual condescending attention to the applications of their inferiors. While he held you in converse, you felt strained to the height in the colloquy. The conference over, you were at leisure to smile at the comparative insignificance of the pretensions which had just awed you. His intellect was of the shallowest order. It did not reach to a saw or a proverb. His mind was in its original state of white paper. A sucking babe