ESSAYS OF ELIA

CHARLES LAMB

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Charles Lamb

EDITED WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY

N. L. Hallward, M.A. Cantab.

AND

S. C. Hill, B.A., B.Sc. Lond.

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INTRODUCTION

Section I

Charles Lamb was the seventh and youngest child of John and Elizabeth Lamb. Of his brothers and sisters only John Lamb, born June 5th, 1763, and Mary Anne Lamb, born December 3rd, 1764, survived childhood. Charles himself was born on the 10th February, 1775, in Crown Office Row, Inner Temple, in the house of Samuel Salt, one of the Benchers. Salt was his father's employer.

Life

As a mere child Lamb appears to have attended, in company with his sister Mary, schools kept by a Mr. Bird and a Mrs. Reynolds, but his school-life really began with his admission to Christ's Hospital. To this school he was presented by one of the Governors, Mr. Timothy Yeates, a friend of Mr. Salt, and was entered, on the 9th October, 1782, as the son of " John Lamb, scrivener, and Elizabeth his wife." He thus passed, as he himself says, " from cloister to cloister," and all his youth was spent under the influence of old associations.

One of his old school-fellows, Charles Valentine Le Grice, has left us the following description of him as

a boy: "An amiable, gentle boy, very sensible and keenly observing, indulged by his school-fellows and by his master on account of his infirmity of speech. His countenance was mild, his complexion clear brown, with an expression which might lead you to think he was of Jewish descent. His eyes were not both of the same colour, one was hazel, the other had specks of grey in the iris, mingled as we see in the red spots of the blood-stone. His step was plantigrade, which made his walk slow and peculiar, adding to the staid appearance of his figure. I never heard his name mentioned without the addition of Charles, although, as there was no other boy of the name of Lamb, the addition was unnecessary, but there was an implied kindness in it, and it was a proof that his gentle manners excited that kindness."

For seven years Lamb remained at Christ's Hospital, and during this period began many of those friendships—notably that with Coleridge—which were to form the chief solace and pleasure of his after-life. He left school in November, 1789, from the lower division of the second class, partly because his infirmity of speech made it impossible for him ever to hope to take orders, as was expected from boys sent on from the school to the University, and partly because the poverty of his family rendered it necessary that he should begin to earn his own living as soon as was possible.

For a short time he was employed in the South-Sea House, in which establishment his brother John held a good appointment, but in April, 1792, he obtained a clerkship in the Accounts Office of the East

India Company, in whose service he continued till the year 1825, his salary gradually rising to about £700 a year.

Living in London, he naturally kept up his school friendships. His chief intimate was James White, author of *Letters of Sir John Falstaff*, to which work he is supposed to have written the preface; but the object of his greatest admiration was Coleridge, to whose influence we must, at least in part, ascribe his earliest attempts at verse. His holidays he spent generally, as in childhood, at Blakesware, in Hertfordshire, where his maternal grandmother, Mrs. Field, was housekeeper to the family of the Plumers, and it was in one of these visits that he fell in love with a young lady, whom in his Essays he calls Alice Winterton, though in his Poems he refers to her as Anna. Canon Ainger has identified this lady with Ann Simmons, who married subsequently a pawnbroker named Bartram, residing in Prince's Street, Leicester Square. It is probably to Ann Simmons that Lamb refers in a letter to Coleridge, May 27th, 1796: "My head ran on you in my madness, as much almost as on another person, who, I am inclined to think, was the more immediate cause of my frenzy." He had spent six weeks in a madhouse at Hoxton, but we have no information as to whether his madness was the cause or the result of the breaking off of his courtship.

At this time the Lambs were living at 7 Little Queen Street, Holborn.

Shortly after his recovery from madness Lamb made his first appearance in print, four sonnets being introduced by Coleridge, in a volume entitled *Poems on*

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Various Subjects, with the remark, "The effusions signed C. L. were written by Mr. Charles Lamb of the India House. Independently of the signature their superior merit would sufficiently have distinguished them."

Lamb's father had now fallen into a state of dotage, his mother was a confirmed invalid, and his brother John, who alone of the family was in comfortable circumstances, lived apart from them. The hardships of such a life, acting upon hereditary weakness, resulted, in the case of Mary Lamb, in a violent outburst of insanity, in which, on the 22nd September, 1796, she killed her mother and wounded her father, the fatal knife being snatched from her hand only when too late by Charles Lamb himself. This terrible shock, instead of destroying his mind, strengthened it. He had no recurrence of his first attack, but his sister's life was poisoned by the constant dread and frequent attacks of madness.

Acquitted by a jury, Mary Lamb was confined for some time in a madhouse, and Lamb's only consolation was in the society of his faithful friends, Le Grice and Lloyd. On his father's death, in 1797, Lamb determined to devote the rest of his life to the care of his sister, and it appears that he entered into a formal engagement to that effect. John Lamb, considering it wiser that Mary should remain in an asylum, strongly disapproved of this arrangement, and, though he did not break off friendly relations, left the whole cost of her support to Charles, who had little beyond his salary and a small annuity possessed by his aunt, his father's sister, who lived with them. This latter they soon lost by his aunt's death, and the

fatigue and anxiety of nursing her in her last illness caused a temporary return of Mary's insanity.

About this time Lamb began that study of the Elizabethan dramatists which was to have so much effect upon his style, and, through his works, upon later English writers and scholars. Coleridge now proposed to Lamb a joint publication of their poems, and a volume was brought out in 1797 by Coleridge, Lloyd, and Lamb, together. This, however, led to some misunderstanding between the three authors, and in the next year Lloyd and Lamb republished their poems separately. To Lamb's circle of friends were now added Wordsworth, of whom he was one of the earliest admirers, and Dyer, an old Christ's Hospital boy, whose learning he admired, but whose absent-mindedness was a constant source of kindly amusement. In 1797 he paid, in company with Lloyd, a visit to Southey.

In 1798 Lamb published his pathetic story of *Rosamond Gray*, which has been, not inaptly, described as "a miniature romance." The *Monthly Review*, which had laughed at his poems, condescended to praise his story most warmly.

Though Lamb cared little for politics, his connection with Coleridge and Southey drew upon him the wrath of the *Anti-Jacobin*, which, however, did not prevent him from making the acquaintance of Godwin, a man, politically, much more objectionable to the Tory party. Another friendship formed at this period was with Manning, who communicated to him the story from which he drew his amusing account of the origin of *Roast Pig*.

In 1800 Lamb and his sister removed to Chapel Street, Pentonville, and, with an introduction from Coleridge to Mr. Daniel Stuart, editor of the *Morning Post*, he began his connection with the Press. The death of an old servant, Hetty, caused a recurrence of Mary's madness. On her recovery they moved to Mitre Court Buildings in the Temple. In the same year Lamb wrote a preface to Godwin's play, *Antonio*. This play was hopelessly "damned," whilst a play of his own, *John Woodvil*, which contains some very fine lines and passages, but is quite unfit for the stage, was refused by Kemble, who was then manager of Drury Lane Theatre. Lamb published *John Woodvil* in 1802, together with his *Fragments of Burton* and some poems by himself and his sister.

In 1803 he wrote a very beautiful little poem on Hester Savory, a Quaker girl whom he met occasionally in his walks at Pentonville. Some suppose that Lamb was actually in love with her, but he never spoke to her during her life, and his sensitiveness to sweetness and goodness in the faces of people he met sufficiently accounts for the warmth of feeling displayed in the poem.

In 1804 he was introduced to Hazlitt, and that great critic, who had not yet entirely given up painting, painted his picture. Lamb frequently refers to Hazlitt in his writings, but, as we see in *Some Sonnets of Sir Philip Sidney*, does not always agree with him in his literary opinions.

In 1806 Lamb's farce, *Mr. H——*, was accepted at Drury Lane. It was unsuccessful, and it is said that Lamb, who was present at its representation, joined

in the hissing. The disappointment, however, caused him to devote himself more seriously to the Press. In 1807, with his sister, he published a series of stories founded on Shakespeare. He always maintained that those written by his sister were by far the best. A change of houses, first to Southampton Buildings, Chancery Lane, and then to 4 Inner Temple Lane, brought on another attack of Mary's insanity. On her recovery they paid a short visit to Hazlitt, but the excitement was too much for Mary, and they had to return to London. Lamb's next productions were *The Adventures of Ulysses* and *Specimens of Dramatic Poets who lived about the time of Shakespeare*. Both of these were published in 1808. In 1809 he and his sister brought out another joint work entitled *Poetry for Children*.

In 1810 Leigh Hunt started the *Reflector*, and, as was natural, his old school-fellow, Lamb, assisted him with various articles, *e.g.*, the Essays on *Garrick* and *Hogarth* and a few poems, amongst which we may mention his *Farewell to Tobacco*.

In the December number of the *Quarterly* for 1811, Mr. Gifford made an unfortunate reference to some notes of Lamb's as the "ravings of a poor maniac." It appears that, at the time, he was entirely unacquainted with Lamb, and ignorant of his family misfortunes, and Lamb, though deeply hurt, accepted the explanation, and shortly after wrote for the magazine a review of Wordsworth's *Excursion*. The original of this review has, unfortunately, been lost, and the article was so "mangled" by the editor before insertion in the magazine that Lamb requested Wordsworth not to read it.

The next few years of Lamb's life were spent very happily in the Temple. Talfourd, who was introduced to him about this time by Mr. Barron Field, thus describes his appearance: "A light frame, so fragile that it seemed as if a breath would overthrow it, clad in a clerk-like black, was surmounted by a head of form and expression the most noble and sweet. His black hair curled crisply about an expanded forehead; his eyes, softly brown, twinkled with varying expression, though the prevalent feeling was sad; and the nose, slightly curved and delicately carved at the nostril, with the lower outline of the face regularly oval, completed a head which was finely placed on the shoulders, and gave importance and even dignity to a diminutive and shadowy stem." "His personal appearance and manner are not unfitly characterized by what he himself says, in one of his letters to Manning, of Braham—'a compound of the Jew, the gentleman, and the angel.'" Lamb's salary was now quite adequate to his wants, his literary abilities were acknowledged, and he was surrounded by a circle of congenial friends. At his informal receptions on Wednesday evenings might be seen, amongst many others, Hazlitt, Kean, Kemble, Godwin, Coleridge, and sometimes even Wordsworth. The only subjects not discussed at these meetings were those connected with politics.

In 1817 the Lambs removed to Russell Street, Covent Garden. This brought them near the theatres, and Lamb, who already knew Elliston, added to the number of his friends many theatrical personages of importance—Miss Kelly, Miss Burrel, Munden, Mac-

ready, and Ayrton, director of the music at the Italian Opera. Other new friends of this date were Barry Cornwall and Charles Ollier. The latter, a young bookseller, proposed a collected edition of Lamb's works, which was published in 1818. Lamb's visitors were now so numerous that he was forced to take lodgings at Dalston, to which he retreated from time to time for the sake of rest.

In 1820 Lamb began to write for the *London Magazine* under the name of Elia. He gradually wearied of this signature, and in his later essays gave it up.

In 1821 John Lamb died. In spite of his apparent carelessness as to the comfort of his brother and sister, Charles had always retained a strong affection for him. This is most pathetically expressed in *Dream Children*.

Next year the Lambs visited France. The excitement was again too much for Mary, but Charles went on to Paris, where he was introduced to the great actor, Talma. Lamb's acquaintance with French was insufficient to enable him to appreciate his acting. He did not love foreigners. On his return Lamb made the acquaintance of the Quaker poet, Barnard Barton.

In 1823 Messrs. Taylor and Hessey, proprietors of the *London Magazine*, published some of his Essays under the simple title of *Elia—Essays that have appeared under that signature in the London Magazine*. The Lambs now moved to Colebrook Row, Islington.

Southey, writing to the *Quarterly Review* for January, 1823, referred to the *Essays of Elia* as wanting only

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"a sounder religious feeling to be as delightful as they are original," and proceeded to attack the principles of some of Lamb's friends. This greatly excited Lamb, and he expressed his feelings of resentment in a *Letter of Elia to R—— S——, Esq.*, which appeared in the *London Magazine* for October, 1823. The misunderstanding, however, was but short-lived, and Lamb was overjoyed to be reconciled to a man whom he loved and esteemed most highly. The conclusion of the letter is retained in *The Last Essays*, under the title of *Tombs in the Abbey.*

Whilst living at Islington the Lambs informally adopted Emma Isola, who in 1833 married Mr. Moxon, the publisher. Lamb also at this time formed the acquaintance of Hood, Hone, editor of the *Every-Day Book*, and Harrison Ainsworth, the novelist. In 1824 his friend Munden retired from the theatre, and Lamb's active interest in theatrical matters came to an end.

A new series of the *London Magazine* was commenced in 1825. Amongst Lamb's contributions was his *Memoir of Mr. Liston*, of which he writes to Miss Hutchinson, "Of all the lies I ever put off, I value this the most. It is from top to toe, every paragraph, pure invention, and has passed for gospel; has been republished in newspapers and the penny play-bills of the night as an authentic account." The same year Lamb retired from the India House. Though by no means the indifferent man of business he represents himself to be in *The South-Sea House*, he had long been oppressed by the drudgery of office-work, and he records both his sense of relief and his gratitude for

the handsome pension allowed him in *The Superannuated Man.*

At Islington the Lambs had been living in their own house, but the cares of house-keeping were too much for Mary Lamb, so in 1826 they took lodgings at Enfield. The same year they suffered a great loss in the death of Mr. Randal Norris, "for many years sub-treasurer and librarian of the Inner Temple." The Norrises had long been their neighbours in the Temple, and Mrs. Norris was a native of Widford, where Mrs. Field, Lamb's grandmother, was buried.

In 1830 Mr. Moxon published a small volume of poems by Lamb, under the title of *Album Verses.* The same year Hazlitt died.

In 1833 the Lambs made their last move—to Edmonton—and Moxon published the second series of the Essays as *Last Essays of Elia.* They were favourably noticed in the *Quarterly.* Coleridge's death, which occurred in this year, affected Lamb very deeply; in fact, he never recovered from the shock, and would constantly, in the midst of conversation, exclaim pathetically, "Coleridge is dead." In December, 1834, he had a slight fall, which brought on erysipelas, and on the 27th of this month he died. His sister was ill at the time, and seems never to have fully realized her loss. She died in 1847. Hazlitt said of her, she was the wisest and most rational woman he had ever known.

His heroi

In so brief a recapitulation of the chief events of Lamb's life it has been impossible to do justice to the heroic determination of his character, but in the

history of our literary men there are recorded few, if any, incidents so noble as that of the poor, struggling clerk, who devoted his whole life with unrepining cheerfulness to the care of a sister afflicted with a malady so terrible and dangerous that her companionship made marriage impossible for him. Similarly no mention has been made of his weakness for wine. Of this it is sufficient to say that it could never have affected his intellect and constitution in the way he describes in his *Confessions of a Drunkard*, for that essay, written as we know for a definite purpose, precedes by many years much of his most beautiful writing.

His weakness for wine.

His religion.

It is perhaps hardly fair to judge of Lamb's religious opinions from his writings, and especially from his Essays, for these were artistic productions intended to present a particular view rather than an exhaustive treatment of a subject; yet, taking his works as a whole, we observe resignation rather than hope, an abhorrence of death rather than the Christian anticipation of immortality. This may be accounted for by the morbid taint in his mind, it being well known that the subject of Death, whilst it fascinates such minds, has peculiar horrors for them. Lamb has also been accused of a somewhat irreverent use of Biblical phraseology and allusion. In general it would appear that his use of Biblical expressions is, as with many English writers, almost unconscious, but there are one or two allusions which admit of no excuse. On the other hand, in the practical duties of the Christian life—in his devotion to his sister, his forbearing affection for his brother John, in his steadfast loyalty to his friends and kindly judgment

of them, in his charity to the distressed, and in his love for all classes of humanity—he showed a living example which we should all do well to imitate.

Section II

Love for London.

Born in the Temple, educated at Christ's Hospital, *and spending the whole of his life in London*, we can well understand Lamb's affection for "the great city." To him the city was the place for a man to *live* in. The whole of his writings are pervaded, as Ollier says, with the feeling of "a *city* man (not in the commercial sense), of one accustomed to view things from that intellectual and contemplative side which is favoured by the intense concentration of vitality observable in great capitals, and by the facilities for bookish culture which they afford." In fact London was Lamb's country and his university.

Dislike of commerce.

It happened that he had to make his living as a clerk, but he had a strong dislike for things commercial and for what he calls the "desk's dead wood."

Love of reading.

His natural bent was towards books and reading, and his want of a university education was a source of constant regret in after life. How pathetic is his account of his vacation visits to Oxford! What pictures would he have given us of university life had his lot been different! But, living in London, he observed in it whatever was old or quaint, and whatever was so interested him. He tells us of the South-Sea House, in which for a short time he had been a clerk, and of the strange men who lived and worked there, who "partook of the genius of

the place" and whose "importance was from the past." He tells of his old school in which so many distinguished men had been brought up as his school-fellows, and into which the modern taint had not yet entered. He tells us of the play-houses and the actors, of the chimney-sweepers and the beggars, of the tombs in the Abbey, of the mode of life amongst the writers for the Press. "No one," says Hazlitt, "makes the tour of our southern metropolis, or describes the manners of the last age, with such vivid obscurity, with such arch piquancy, such picturesque quaintness, such smiling pathos." "The streets of London are his fairy-land, teeming with wonder—with life and interest to his retrospective glance, as it did to the eager eye of childhood: he has contrived to weave its tritest traditions into a bright and endless romance."

Indifference to politics.

To one chief feature of city life, Lamb was indifferent. He took no interest in politics. Not only in his Essays, begun only five years after the close of the great Napoleonic wars, but even in his Letters there are hardly any references to politics. Politics were excluded from the subjects of conversation at his Wednesday evening assemblies. Procter supposes that his abstention from subjects connected with the great world was due to modesty, but it was so complete that one can hardly ascribe it to anything but indifference. It was, however, this avoidance of the ephemeral that has given him his continued popularity, for there are but few readers who take much interest in even the best political writers of a by-gone age. Still it is interesting to note that he owes his existence, as it were, to an

ephemeral form of literature, the periodical magazine, which owes its origin so largely to politics. Hazlitt points out that Lamb, "from the peculiarity of his exterior and address as an author, would probably have never made his way by detached and independent efforts," but that, once brought before the public, the beauty of his writing and the nature of his subjects attracted and compelled admiration.

His attitude to the country.

It is curious that at the very moment when Wordsworth was originating a new nature-worship, one of his earliest and warmest admirers should be, so decidedly as Lamb was, a worshipper of the town. Wordsworth called him "a scorner of the fields," and his own words do much to justify the accusation. In a letter to Wordsworth (January 30th, 1801), he writes: "Separate from the pleasure of your company, I don't much care if I never see a mountain in my life. I have passed all my days in London, until I have formed as many and intense local attachments as any of your mountaineers can have done with dead nature"; and, again (January 22nd, 1830), "O, let no native Londoner imagine that health and rest and innocent occupation, interchange of sweet and recreative study, make the country anything better than odious and detestable! A garden was the primitive prison till man, with Promethean felicity and boldness, luckily sinned himself out of it. Thence followed Babylon, Nineveh, Venice, London, haberdashers, goldsmiths, taverns, play-houses, satires, epigrams, puns—these all came in on the town part and the thither side of innocence." While such passages as these contain much and evident exaggeration, they mark very decidedly

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