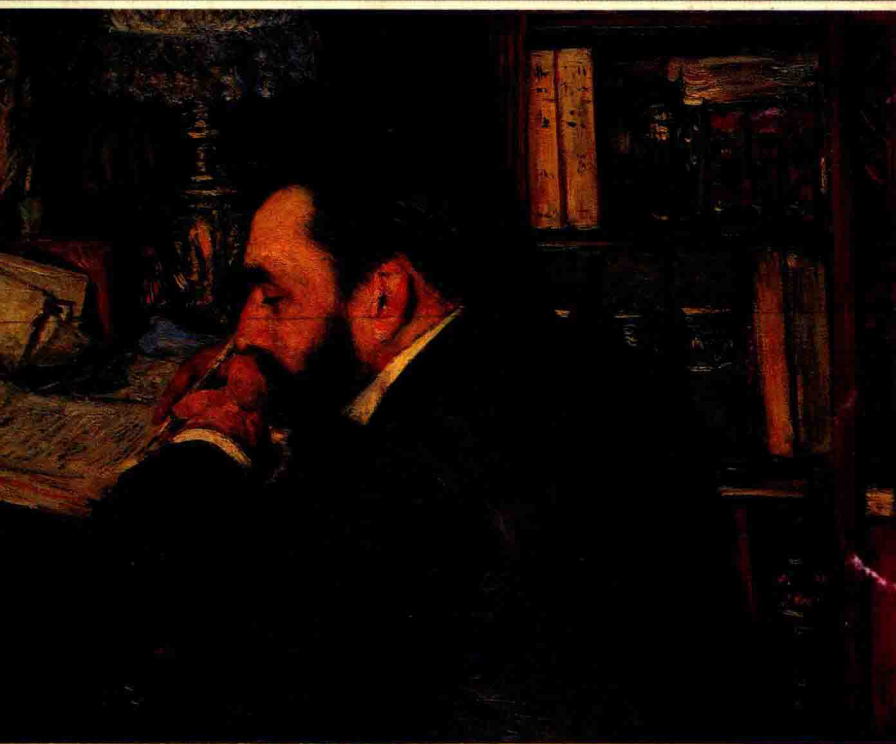


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# *Essays*

— **JOHN GROSS** —

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*Essays*

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## *The Oxford Book of Essays*

JOHN GROSS is the author of *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters* (1969) and editor of *The Oxford Book of Aphorisms* (1983), among other publications. He was editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* from 1974 to 1981, and is currently theatre critic of the *Sunday Telegraph*.

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## Introduction

ESSAYS come in all shapes and many sizes. There are essays on Human Understanding, and essays on What I Did in the Holidays; essays on Truth, and essays on potato crisps (see page 617); essays that start out as book reviews, and essays that end up as sermons. Even more than most literary forms, the essay defies strict definition. It can shade into the character sketch, the travel sketch, the memoir, the *jeu d'esprit*.

Yet amid all this variety there is, or was until recent times, a central tradition of essay-writing—a tradition that looks back to the first and greatest of essayists, Montaigne. Montaigne in his turn could summon up classical precedents (the 'moral essays' of Plutarch, for instance), but for most modern readers he represents a clear point of departure.

No matter how large its subject, the distinguishing marks of an essay by Montaigne are intimacy and informality. In the words of Hazlitt, who was in many ways his nearest English equivalent, 'he did not set up for a philosopher, wit, orator or moralist, but he became all these by merely daring to tell us whatever passed through his mind'. His watchword was 'Que sais-je?'—'What do I know?', not 'What am I supposed to know?'—and in setting down his thoughts, he refused to be hampered by preconceived notions of order and regularity. For Dr Johnson, two hundred years later, the 'irregular' nature of the essay was still its most obvious characteristic: the first definition he gives in his dictionary is 'a loose sally of the mind'.

Not that there was anything notably loose or self-revealing about the first major English essayist, Francis Bacon. Bacon borrowed the term 'essay' from Montaigne, but his own essays aspire to a measured impersonality. They are masterpieces of rhetoric; their glowing commonplaces have never been surpassed. But they have no real literary progeny. It is the character-writers and the more homely moralists of the seventeenth century who point the way forward to the future.

The true familiar essay made a tentative appearance at the Restoration, in the work of Cowley and others, but it needed journalistic outlets and a journal-reading public before it could

come into its own. In due course Addison and Steele's *Tatler* (1709-11) and *Spectator* (1711-13) ushered in a century of 'periodical essayists', and if any one man has a claim to be the father of the English essay, it is surely Addison.

It is a claim that many of his successors would be eager to deny. Judged by the highest or the fiercest standards he seems too worldly, too complacent, too preoccupied with minor social amenities. But his achievements were great. He transformed the essay into a civilizing force, an engine against coarseness and pedantry. What he lacked in depth, he made up for in range of interests and keenness of observation. He taught his readers to appreciate the middle ground of human nature, and fashioned the perfect prose style for the purpose.

The *Tatler* and *Spectator*, bound up as books, were eventually joined on every self-respecting gentleman's shelves by the *Rambler*, the *Adventurer*, the *World*, the *Connoisseur*, the *Mirror*, the *Lounger*. Chalmers' standard collection of *British Essayists*, published in 1808, ran to forty-five volumes. Most of this material has naturally died with the social demand it was designed to serve, but two of the later eighteenth-century essayists survive along with Addison as undisputed classics. Johnson may not have been at home with the lighter kinds of satire, but his finest essays, the ones given over to moral reflection, bear the stamp of his mature wisdom. Goldsmith kept closer to the *Spectator* model, but he wrote with greater freedom than Addison and an easier humour.

It might seem inevitable that the revolutionary upheavals that marked the end of the eighteenth century would produce a new kind of essay. And so they did—but it took time. It was not until the closing years of the Napoleonic wars that the foremost essayists of the Romantic era, Hazlitt and Lamb, began to find their feet.

Both men were better suited to writing essays than anything else. Both of them were masters of the art of talking on paper—unconstrained, independent in their tastes, determined to keep close to the weave and texture of their own experience. But there were big differences between them, too, differences that in the present century have increasingly told in Hazlitt's favour. Hazlitt is forthright and direct; for all his egoism, he has the ability to lose himself in his subject. Lamb, on the other hand, trades much

too heavily on his charm: many of the idiosyncrasies that once seemed endearing now merely irritate. But he was capable of subtle insights, and if you can learn to live with the affectations his most characteristic pieces still have a rare tenderness.

For the Victorians and their American counterparts the essay offered (though not all at once) a pulpit, an extension of the novel, a lecture-platform, a diversion. It also offered space—enough space to accommodate Carlyle's brilliant harangues and Macaulay's incomparable history lessons. Too much space, on occasion. Emerson, with his genius for the aphorism and the pregnant observation, was betrayed into impossible prolixity; lesser men were encouraged to stretch material that was thin to start with even thinner. Yet on the whole, nineteenth-century essays, like the journals in which most of them first appeared, testify to a remarkably rich cultural life. An anthology that was limited to a single decade of the Victorian age, perhaps even a single year, would still be able to draw on work of outstanding scope and quality.

Towards the end of the century a change sets in. As you move forward from the mid-Victorians, you become aware of more and more essays being written for their own sake, rather than for the sake of the subject; there is a shift from matter to manner, from discussion to conversation. The essays of Robert Louis Stevenson are one symptom of the new climate—ethical studies conducted in a vagabond mood; and there were plenty of lesser portents among Stevenson's contemporaries. Augustine Birrell, for example, whose good-humored, whimsical musings, principally among books, can be sampled in *Obiter Dicta* and similar collections. They were popular enough in their day to give rise to a new literary term—'birrelling'.

After Birrell came E. V. Lucas, Maurice Hewlett, 'Alpha of the Plough', Robert Lynd, Christopher Morley in America, and a hundred others. Long rows of little books bear witness to a continuing cult of the familiar essay (with Charles Lamb—who else?—as patron saint). It lasted down to the 1930s, in a few cases even longer.

The essayists who birrelled and whiffled their way through this silver age ultimately helped to give the essay a bad name—not least in the schoolroom, where they were all too often held up as models. (Oh, the horrors of being told to write a light-

hearted essay all about nothing.) Today, on the other hand, they are so hopelessly out of fashion, and out of print, that it is tempting to make out a case for their virtues. They were humane, they thought of literature as a living thing, they wrote a good deal more readably than some of their critics. But they are past reviving, even so: their cosiness and bookishness tell fatally against them.

The real strengths of the twentieth-century essay have been immensely more varied. What generalization can usefully cover Beerbohm and James Baldwin, J. B. S. Haldane and D. H. Lawrence, Mencken and Virginia Woolf? None, except that they all share the old Montaigne virtues of informality and independence. Any of them might have taken as his or her motto the heading under which George Orwell used to contribute his weekly essay to *Tribune*—‘I Write as I Please.’

Today good writers continue to write as they please, although it is true that they are less likely to talk about essays than ‘pieces’. ‘Essay’ has come to sound a little too leisurely: ‘piece’ strikes the required note of journalistic toughness. And the demands of journalism have in fact pushed writers who might once have set up as essayists further and further in the direction of reportage, travel writing, profiles, instant comment. There is less time and scope for the essay proper. But essays still get written, and still force themselves forward when they can (in the guise of book reviews, for example, as they always have). Certainly there is nothing to suggest that the essay is dying; but then perhaps a form that has already led so many lives is virtually unkillable.

When I began putting this anthology together, I decided to exclude essays on literary themes. I had a romantic notion that they belonged in an anthology of criticism, and that this was going to be a collection of essays about Life. But it was a decision that I very soon abandoned. It became clear that I was depriving myself of far too much valuable material: too many indispensable essayists were at their best writing about other writers.

The other self-imposed rule that I started out with seems to me more reasonable. There was to be no cutting: in the phrase that used to adorn Penguin books in their early days, every essay included was to be ‘complete and unabridged’. But this too was a

policy that was eventually abandoned, or at any rate modified. There were a number of major writers—nineteenth-century writers, on the whole—who could only be adequately represented by essays that would have swamped the book if they had been reproduced in their entirety. It became a question of printing either extracts or nothing, and extracts seemed preferable.

Space in general proved a constant problem. Favourite essays had a way of always turning out to be longer than I recalled, never shorter. There were authors who only wrote at a length that would have made them loom disproportionately large, and above all there were far too many well-qualified candidates clamouring for admission. Sacrificing the essayists whom I had originally hoped to include was a painful business; there were many times when I envied Chalmers his forty-five volumes.

In making my final selection I have tried to follow three principles. Some essays are included because they seem to me the best of their kind, some because they particularly appeal to me, a few because they are historically representative (though none, I hope, because they are *merely* representative). In a better world all three categories would no doubt coincide, but in the world as it is this means that there are some inevitable inconsistencies. Most authors are represented by a single item, for instance, but it isn't necessarily meant to sum up their most imposing qualities. In some cases, in order to preserve the balance and variety of the book as a whole, I have simply chosen something I find unusually interesting or entertaining.

The date at the end of an essay is that of its first appearance in print, in either periodical or book form, except in those cases where it seemed more appropriate to give the approximate date of composition instead. In the seventeenth-century essays, most notably Bacon's, spelling and punctuation have been modernized.

JOHN GROSS

# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiv
<i>Introduction</i>	xix
SIR FRANCIS BACON (1561-1626)	
Of Truth	1
Of Revenge	3
Of Boldness	4
Of Innovations	5
Of Masques and Triumphs	6
SIR THOMAS OVERBURY (1581-1613)	
A Chambermaid	9
A Fair and Happy Milkmaid	10
JOHN EARLE (?1601-65)	
An Antiquary	12
A Good Old Man	13
A Pot-Poet	14
OWEN FELLTHAM (?1602-68)	
How the Distempers of these Times should affect wise Men	15
SIR THOMAS BROWNE (1605-82)	
On Dreams	17
THOMAS FULLER (1608-61)	
Of Anger	21
SAMUEL BUTLER (1612-80)	
A Degenerate Noble	23
JEREMY TAYLOR (1613-67)	
Of Charity, or the Love of God	25
ABRAHAM COWLEY (1618-67)	
Of Avarice	27
JOHN DRYDEN (1631-1700)	
'Chaucer' ( <i>from</i> Preface to the Fables)	29

JONATHAN SWIFT (1667-1745)	
Good Manners and Good Breeding	34
A Meditation Upon a Broom-Stick	39
JOSEPH ADDISON (1672-1719)	
Thoughts in Westminster Abbey	41
The Royal Exchange	43
Sir Roger in Westminster Abbey	46
Sir Roger at Vauxhall	50
SIR RICHARD STEELE (1672-1729)	
On Recollections of Childhood	53
LORD CHESTERFIELD (1694-1773)	
Upon Affectation	57
<del>3</del> BENJAMIN FRANKLIN (1706-90)	
The Levee	61
HENRY FIELDING (1707-54)	
The Poor and their Betters	63
SAMUEL JOHNSON (1709-84)	
Dignity and Uses of Biography	68
Conversation	72
Debtors' Prisons (1)	75
Debtors' Prisons (2)	77
DAVID HUME (1711-76)	
Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature	81
OLIVER GOLDSMITH (?1730-74)	
On Dress	87
A Little Great Man	91
On National Prejudices	94
JAMES BOSWELL (1740-95)	
On War	98
CHARLES LAMB (1775-1834)	
Dream Children	104
<i>from</i> On Some of the Old Actors	107
WILLIAM HAZLITT (1778-1830)	
On the Pleasure of Hating	112
Brummelliana	122



LEIGH HUNT (1784-1859)	
Getting Up on Cold Mornings	126
THOMAS DE QUINCEY (1785-1859)	
The Knocking at the Gate in <i>Macbeth</i>	131
THOMAS CARLYLE (1795-1881)	
<i>from</i> Signs of the Times	136
LORD MACAULAY (1800-59)	
<i>from</i> Lord Clive	149
SIR HENRY TAYLOR (1800-86)	
On Secrecy	164
JOHN HENRY NEWMAN (1801-90)	
Secular Knowledge not a Principle of Action	166
RALPH WALDO EMERSON (1803-82)	
The Conservative	171
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE (1804-62)	
The Haunted Mind	187
JOHN STUART MILL (1806-73)	
'Bentham and Coleridge' ( <i>from</i> Coleridge)	192
CHARLES DICKENS (1812-70)	
City of London Churches	196
WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY (1811-63)	
Autour de mon Chapeau	207
ANTHONY TROLLOPE (1815-82)	
The Plumber	217
HENRY DAVID THOREAU (1817-62)	
Night and Moonlight	221
JAMES ANTHONY FROUDE (1818-94)	
The Philosophy of Christianity	229
GEORGE ELIOT (1819-80)	
Thomas Carlyle	239
MATTHEW ARNOLD (1822-88)	
Heine and the Philistines ( <i>from</i> Heinrich Heine)	242