

**A HAPPY HALF-
CENTURY
AND OTHER
ESSAYS**

**BY
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**TO
J. WILLIAM WHITE**

PREFACE

THE half-century, whose more familiar aspects this little book is designed to illustrate, has spread its boundary lines. Nothing is so hard to deal with as a period. Nothing is so unmanageable as a date. People will be born a few years too early; they will live a few years too long. Events will happen out of time. The closely linked decades refuse to be separated, and my half-century, that I thought so compact, widened imperceptibly while I wrote.

I have filled my canvas with trivial things, with intimate details, with what now seem the insignificant aspects of life. But the insignificant aspects of life concern us mightily while we live; and it is by their help that we understand the insignificant people who are sometimes reckoned of importance. A hundred years ago many men and women were reckoned of importance, at whose claims their successors to-day smile scornfully. Yet they and their work were woven into the tissue of things, into the warp and woof of social conditions, into the literary history of England. An hour is not too precious to waste upon them, however feeble their pretensions. Perhaps some idle reader in the future will do as much by us.

A. R.

B.

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A HAPPY HALF-CENTURY

This damn'd unmasculine canting age!

CHARLES LAMB.

THERE are few of us who do not occasionally wish we had been born in other days, in days for which we have some secret affinity, and which shine for us with a mellow light in the deceitful pages of history. Mr. Austin Dobson, for example, must have sighed more than once to see Queen Anne on Queen Victoria's throne; and the Rt. Hon. Cecil Rhodes must have realized that the reign of Elizabeth was the reign for him. There is a great deal lost in being born out of date. What freak of fortune thrust Galileo into the world three centuries too soon, and held back Richard Burton's restless soul until he was three centuries too late?

For myself, I confess that the last twenty-five years of the eighteenth century and the first twenty-five years of the nineteenth make up my chosen period, and that my motive for so choosing is contemptible. It was not a time distinguished—in England at least—for wit or wisdom, for public virtues or for private charm; but it *was* a time when literary reputations were so cheaply gained that nobody needed to despair of one. A taste for platitudes, a tinge of Pharisaism, an appreciation of the commonplace,—and the thing was done. It was in the latter half of this blissful period that we find that enthusiastic chronicler, Mrs. Cowley, writing in “Public Characters” of “the proud preëminence which, in all the varieties of excellence produced by the pen, the pencil, or the lyre, the

ladies of Great Britain have attained over contemporaries in every other country in Europe.”

When we search for proofs of this proud preëminence, what do we find? Roughly speaking, the period begins with Miss Burney, and closes with Miss Terrier and Miss Jane Porter. It includes—besides Miss Burney—one star of the first magnitude, Miss Austen (whose light never dazzled Mrs. Cowley’s eyes), and one mild but steadfast planet, Miss Edgeworth. The rest of Great Britain’s literary ladies were enjoying a degree of fame and fortune so utterly disproportionate to their merits that their toiling successors to-day may be pardoned for wishing themselves part of that happy sisterhood. Think of being able to find a market for an interminable essay entitled “Against Inconsistency in our Expectations”! There lingers in all our hearts a desire to utter moral platitudes, to dwell lingeringly and lovingly upon the obvious; but alas! we are not Mrs. Barbauld, and this is not the year 1780. Foolish and inconsequent we are permitted to be, but tedious, never! And think of hearing one’s own brother burst into song, that he might fondly eulogize our

Sacred gifts whose meed is deathless praise,
Whose potent charm the enraptured soul can raise.

There are few things more difficult to conceive than an enthusiastic brother tunefully entreating his sister to go on enrapturing the world with her pen. Oh, thrice-favoured Anna Letitia Barbauld, who could warm even the calm fraternal heart into a glow of sensibility.

The publication of “Evelina” was the first notable event in our happy half-century. Its freshness and vivacity charmed all London;

and Miss Burney, like Sheridan, had her applause “dashed in her face, sounded in her ears,” for the rest of a long and meritorious life. Her second novel, “Cecilia,” was received with such universal transport, that in a very moral epilogue of a rather immoral play we find it seriously commended to the public as an antidote to vice:—

Let sweet Cecilia gain your just applause,
Whose every passion yields to nature’s laws.

Miss Burney, blushing in the royal box, had the satisfaction of hearing this stately advertisement of her wares. Virtue was not left to be its own reward in those fruitful and generous years.

Indeed, the most comfortable characteristic of the period, and the one which incites our deepest envy, is the universal willingness to accept a good purpose as a substitute for good work. Even Madame d’Arblay, shrewd, caustic, and quick-witted, forbears from unkind criticism of the well-intentioned. She has nothing but praise for Mrs. Barbauld’s poems, because of “the piety and worth they exhibit”; and she rises to absolute enthusiasm over the anti-slavery epistle, declaring that its energy “springs from the real spirit of virtue.” Yet to us the picture of the depraved and luxurious West Indian ladies—about whom it is safe to say good Mrs. Barbauld knew very little—seems one of the most unconsciously humorous things in English verse.

Lo! where reclined, pale Beauty courts the breeze,
Diffused on sofas of voluptuous ease.

With languid tones imperious mandates urge,
With arm recumbent wield the household scourge.

There are moments when Mrs. Barbauld soars to the inimitable, when she reaches the highest and happiest effect that absurdity is able to produce.

With arm recumbent wield the household scourge

is one of these inspirations; and another is this pregnant sentence, which occurs in a chapter of advice to young girls: “An ass is much better adapted than a horse to show off a lady.”

To point to Hannah More as a brilliant and bewildering example of sustained success is to give the most convincing proof that it was a good thing to be born in the year 1745. Miss More’s reputation was already established at the dawning of my cherished half-century, and, for the whole fifty years, her life was a series of social, literary, and religious triumphs. In her youth, she was mistaken for a wit. In her old age, she was revered as a saint. In her youth, Garrick called her “Nine,”—gracefully intimating that she embodied the attributes of all the Muses. In her old age, an acquaintance wrote to her: “You who are secure of the approbation of angels may well hold human applause to be of small consequence.” In her youth, she wrote a play that everybody went to see. In her old age, she wrote tracts that everybody bought and distributed. Prelates composed Latin verses in her honour; and when her “Estimate of the Religion of the Fashionable World” was published anonymously, the Bishop of London exclaimed in a kind of pious transport, “Aut Morus, aut Angelus!” Her tragedy, “Percy,” melted the heart of London. Men “shed tears in abundance,” and women were “choked with emotion” over the “affecting circumstances of the Piece.” Sir William Pepys confessed that “Percy” “broke his heart”; and that he thought it “a kind of profanation” to wipe his eyes, and go from the theatre to

Lady Harcourt's assembly. Four thousand copies of the play were sold in a fortnight; and the Duke of Northumberland sent a special messenger to Miss More to thank her for the honour she had done his historic name.

As a novelist, Hannah was equally successful. Twenty thousand copies of "Cœlebs in Search of a Wife" were sold in England, and thirty thousand in America. "The Americans are a very approving people," acknowledged the gratified authoress. In Iceland "Cœlebs" was read—so Miss More says—"with great apparent profit"; while certain very popular tracts, like "Charles the Footman" and "The Shepherd of Salisbury Plain," made their edifying way to Moscow, and were found by the missionary Gericke in the library of the Rajah of Tanjore. "All this and Heaven, too!" as a reward for being born in 1745. The injustice of the thing stings us to the soul. Yet it was the unhesitating assumption of Heaven's co-partnership which gave to Hannah More the best part of her earthly prestige, and made her verdicts a little like Protestant Bulls. When she objected to "Marmion" and "The Lady of the Lake" for their lack of "practical precept," these sinless poems were withdrawn from Evangelical book-shelves. Her biographer, Mr. Thompson, thought it necessary to apologize for her correspondence with that agreeable worldling, Horace Walpole, and to assure us that "the fascinations of Walpole's false wit must have retired before the bright ascendant of her pure and prevailing superiority." As she waxed old, and affluent, and disputatious, it was deemed well to encourage a timid public with the reminder that her genius, though "great and commanding," was still "lovely and kind." And when she died, it was recorded that "a cultivated taste for moral scenery was one of her distinctions";—as though

Nature herself attended a class of ethics before venturing to allure too freely the mistress of Barley Wood.

It is in the contemplation of such sunlight mediocrity that the hardship of being born too late is felt with crushing force. Why cannot we write “Letters on the Improvement of the Mind,” and be held, like Mrs. Chapone, to be an authority on education all the rest of our lives; and have people entreating us, as they entreated her, to undertake, at any cost, the intellectual guidance of their daughters? When we consider all that a modern educator is expected to know—from bird-calls to metric measures—we sigh over the days which demanded nothing more difficult than the polite expression of truisms.

“Our feelings are not given us for our ornament, but to spur us on to right action. Compassion, for instance, is not impressed upon the human heart, only to adorn the fair face with tears, and to give an agreeable languor to the eyes. It is designed to excite our utmost endeavour to relieve the sufferer.”

Was it really worth while to say this even in 1775? Is it possible that young ladies were then in danger of thinking that the office of compassion was to “adorn a face with tears”? and did they try to be sorry for the poor and sick, only that their bright eyes might be softened into languor? Yet we know that Mrs. Chapone’s little volume was held to have rendered signal service to society. It has the honour to be one of the books which Miss Lydia Languish lays out ostentatiously on her table—in company with Fordyce’s sermons—when she anticipates a visit from Mrs. Malaprop and Sir Anthony. Some halting verses of the period exalt it as the beacon light of youth; and Mrs. Delany, writing to her six-year-old niece, counsels the little girl to read the “Letters” once a year until she is

grown up. "They speak to the heart as well as to the head," she assures the poor infant; "and I know no book (next to the Bible) more entertaining and edifying."

Mrs. Montagu gave dinners. The real and very solid foundation of *her* reputation was the admirable manner in which she fed her lions. A mysterious halo of intellectuality surrounded this excellent hostess. "The female Mæcenas of Hill Street," Hannah More elegantly termed her, adding,—to prove that she herself was not unduly influenced by gross food and drink,—"But what are baubles, when speaking of a Montagu!" Dr. Johnson praised her conversation,—especially when he wanted to tease jealous Mrs. Thrale,—but sternly discountenanced her attempts at authorship. When Sir Joshua Reynolds observed that the "Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare" did its authoress honour, Dr. Johnson retorted contemptuously: "It does *her* honour, but it would do honour to nobody else,"—which strikes me as a singularly unpleasant thing to hear said about one's literary masterpiece. Like the fabled Caliph who stood by the Sultan's throne, translating the flowers of Persian speech into comprehensible and unflattering truths, so Dr. Johnson stands undeceived in this pleasant half-century of pretence, translating its ornate nonsense into language we can too readily understand.

But how comfortable and how comforting the pretence must have been, and how kindly tolerant all the pretenders were to one another! If, in those happy days, you wrote an essay on "The Harmony of Numbers and Versification," you unhesitatingly asked your friends to come and have it read aloud to them; and your friends—instead of leaving town next day—came, and listened, and called it a "Miltonic evening." If, like Mrs. Montagu, you had

a taste for letter-writing, you filled up innumerable sheets with such breathless egotisms as this:—

“I come, a happy guest, to the general feast Nature spreads for all her children, my spirits dance in the sunbeams, or take a sweet repose in the shade. I rejoice in the grand chorus of the day, and feel content in the silent serene of night, while I listen to the morning hymn of the whole animal creation, I recollect how beautiful it is, sum’d up in the works of our great poet, Milton, every rivulet murmurs in poetical cadence, and to the melody of the nightingale I add the harmonious verses she has inspired in many languages.”

So highly were these rhapsodies appreciated, and so far were correspondents from demanding either coherence or punctuation, that four volumes of Mrs. Montagu’s letters were published after her death; and we find Miss More praising Mrs. Boscawen because she approached this standard of excellence: “Mrs. Palk tells me her letters are hardly inferior to Mrs. Montagu’s.”

Those were the days to live in, and sensible people made haste to be born in time. The close of the eighteenth century saw quiet country families tearing the freshly published “Mysteries of Udolpho” into a dozen parts, because no one could wait his turn to read the book. All England held its breath while Emily explored the haunted chambers of her prison-house. The beginning of the nineteenth century found Mrs. Opie enthroned as a peerless novelist, and the “Edinburgh Review” praising “Adeline Mowbray, or Mother and Daughter,” as the most pathetic story in the English language. Indeed, one sensitive gentleman wrote to its authoress that he had lain awake all night, bathed in tears, after reading it. About this time, too, we begin to hear “the mellow tones of Felicia

Hemans," whom Christopher North reverently admired; and who, we are assured, found her way to all hearts that were open to "the holy sympathies of religion and virtue." Murray's heart was so open that he paid two hundred guineas for the "Vespers of Palermo"; and Miss Edgeworth considered that the "Siege of Valencia" contained the most beautiful poetry she had read for years. Finally Miss Jane Porter looms darkly on the horizon, with novels five volumes long. All the Porters worked on a heroic scale. Anna Maria's stories were more interminable than Jane's; and their brother Robert painted on a single canvas, "The Storming of Seringapatam," seven hundred life-sized figures.

"Thaddeus of Warsaw" and "The Scottish Chiefs" were books familiar to our infancy. They stretched vastly and vaguely over many tender years,—stories after the order of Melchisedec, without beginning and without end. But when our grandmothers were young, and my chosen period had still years to run, they were read on two continents, and in many tongues. The King of Würtemberg was so pleased with "Thaddeus" that he made Miss Porter a "lady of the Chapter of St. Joachim,"—which sounds both imposing and mysterious. The badge of the order was a gold cross; and this unusual decoration, coupled with the lady's habit of draping herself in flowing veils like one of Mrs. Radcliffe's heroines, so confused an honest British public that it was deemed necessary to explain to agitated Protestants that Miss Porter had no Popish proclivities, and must not be mistaken for a nun. In our own country her novels were exceedingly popular, and her American admirers sent her a rose-wood armchair in token of appreciation and esteem. It is possible she would have preferred a royalty on her books; but the armchair was graciously accepted, and a pen-and-ink sketch in an album of celebrities represents Miss Porter seated

majestically on its cushions, “in the quiet and ladylike occupation of taking a cup of coffee.”

And so my happy half-century draws to its appointed end. A new era, cold, critical, contentious, deprecated the old genial absurdities, chilled the old sentimental outpourings, questioned the old profitable pietism. Unfortunates, born a hundred years too late, look back with wistful eyes upon the golden age which they feel themselves qualified to adorn.

THE PERILS OF IMMORTALITY

Peu de génie, point de grâce.

THERE is no harder fate than to be immortalized as a fool; to have one's name—which merits nothing sterner than obliteration—handed down to generations as an example of silliness, or stupidity, or presumption; to be enshrined pitilessly in the amber of the “Dunciad”; to be laughed at forever because of Charles Lamb's impatient and inextinguishable raillery. When an industrious young authoress named Elizabeth Ogilvy Benger—a model of painstaking insignificance—invited Charles and Mary Lamb to drink tea with her one cold December night, she little dreamed she was achieving a deathless and unenviable fame; and that, when her half dozen books should have lapsed into comfortable oblivion, she herself should never be fortunate enough to be forgotten. It is a cruel chance which crystallizes the folly of an hour, and makes it outlive our most serious endeavours. Perhaps we should do well to consider this painful possibility before hazarding an acquaintance with the Immortals.

Miss Benger did more than hazard. She pursued the Immortals with insensate zeal. She bribed Mrs. Inchbald's servant-maid into lending her cap, and apron, and tea-tray; and, so equipped, penetrated into the inmost sanctuary of that literary lady, who seems to have taken the intrusion in good part. She was equally adroit in seducing Mary Lamb—as the Serpent seduced Eve—when Charles Lamb was the ultimate object of her designs. Coming home to dinner one day, “hungry as a hunter,” he found to his dismay the two women closeted together, and trusted he was in

time to prevent their exchanging vows of eternal friendship, though not—as he discovered later—in time to save himself from an engagement to drink tea with the stranger (“I had never seen her before, and could not tell who the devil it was that was so familiar”), the following night.

What happened is told in a letter to Coleridge; one of the best-known and one of the longest letters Lamb ever wrote,—he is so brimful of his grievance. Miss Benger’s lodgings were up two flights of stairs in East Street. She entertained her guests with tea, coffee, macaroons, and “much love.” She talked to them, or rather *at* them, upon purely literary topics,—as, for example, Miss Hannah More’s “Strictures on Female Education,” which they had never read. She addressed Mary Lamb in French,—“possibly having heard that neither Mary nor I understood French,”—and she favoured them with Miss Seward’s opinion of Pope. She asked Lamb, who was growing more miserable every minute, if he agreed with D’Israeli as to the influence of organism upon intellect; and when he tried to parry the question with a pun upon organ—“which went off very flat”—she despised him for his feeble flippancy. She advised Mary to carry home two translations of “Pizarro,” so that she might compare them *verbatim* (an offer hastily declined), and she made them both promise to return the following week—which they never did—to meet Miss Jane Porter and her sister, “who, it seems, have heard much of Mr. Coleridge, and wish to meet *us* because we are *his* friends.” It is a *comédie larmoyante*. We sympathize hotly with Lamb when we read his letter; but there is something piteous in the thought of the poor little hostess going complacently to bed that night, and never realizing that she had made her one unhappy flight to fame.

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