Women's Writing

The later twentieth century saw a huge wave of academic interest in women's writing, which led to the rediscovery of neglected works from a wide range of genres, periods and languages. Many books that were immensely popular and influential in their own day are now studied again, both for their own sake and for what they reveal about the social, political and cultural conditions of their time. A pioneering resource in this area is Orlando: Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present (http://orlando.cambridge.org), which provides entries on authors' lives and writing careers, contextual material, timelines, sets of internal links, and bibliographies. Its editors have made a major contribution to the selection of the works reissued in this series within the Cambridge Library Collection, which focuses on non-fiction publications by women on a wide range of subjects from astronomy to biography, music to political economy, and education to prison reform.

Memoirs of Eminent Englishwomen

Louisa Stuart Costello (1799–1870) was a poet and artist who supported her family with her paintings. As well as writing a number of historical novels, Costello researched and wrote the biographies of many prominent women, using their letters and diaries to tell their extraordinary stories. This first volume chronicles the lives of seven women including Elizabeth, Countess of Shrewsbury (Bess of Hardwick), whose husband was the jailor to Mary, Queen of Scots. It includes letters written by Bess and those around her, including Queen Mary, whom Bess saw as a rival for her husband's affections. These letters provide an insider view of the day-to-day life of a shrewd political strategist. Also covered are the lives of Catherine Grey and Arabella Stuart, who were rivals for the English throne. For more information on this author, see http://orlando.cambridge.org/public/svPeople?person_id=costlo
Cambridge University Press has long been a pioneer in the reissuing of out-of-print titles from its own backlist, producing digital reprints of books that are still sought after by scholars and students but could not be reprinted economically using traditional technology. The Cambridge Library Collection extends this activity to a wider range of books which are still of importance to researchers and professionals, either for the source material they contain, or as landmarks in the history of their academic discipline.

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Memoirs of Eminent Englishwomen

Volume 1

Louisa Stuart Costello
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MEMOIRS

OF

EMINENT ENGLISHWOMEN.

BY

LOUISA STUART COSTELLO,

AUTHOR OF


IN TWO VOLUMES.

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INTRODUCTION.

It is scarcely possible to give the Biography of the Females of England who have been remarkable in their time, with any hope of accuracy, till the sixteenth century.

The accounts, before that period, respecting them, are so meagre and uncertain, that imagination must supply much of the void left by historians; and, though just enough is said to excite curiosity and interest, there is nothing to furnish a narrative of their proceedings such as might be depended on, and be really valuable as a record of their lives.

I have begun this collection at the reign of Elizabeth, because, with all her great qualities, she stands out, both in her own and in all succeeding ages, as one of the most prominent personages of England and of Europe; and because the existence of
introduction.

powerful talent and superior intellect in her seems to have raised her sex in esteem from the period at which she flourished.

It appears to have been thought worth while to bestow some attention on women, after the glory of her _avatar_ had given them dignity and importance from henceforth in the scale of society; and the long duty of paying deference to a female grew at length into a habit, which her own merit, once properly acknowledged, did not allow to decline.

The position thus acquired could not be again lost, and woman no longer occupied a mean station in the social state.

In some cases it is not to be denied that females, thus exalted into consequence, exulted and triumphed too far; and, as in the instance of Bess of Hardwick, rendered themselves more conspicuous than admired; but their characters, whether for good or bad, were developed, and a field was now afforded them wherein to display whatever energies they possessed.

It is true that, like all great events, this had been for some time preparing; and, occasionally, a female character had started forth which could not fail to
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draw the world’s attention. In the records of chivalry, women play a prominent part, and are named as the ultimate reward or rewarders of valour; but they are honoured as a body, and their individual merits rarely recounted, while little is positively known of their domestic habits.

The time when Queen Mary occupied the throne is a gloomy and melancholy period, and we do not love to recur to her as our first female sovereign; indeed, as her sway was in a great measure directed and dictated by her husband, we cannot look upon her as an independent Queen: nor were her talents such as to enable her to act for herself, like the woman of wonderful and masculine spirit who succeeded her, and for so many years presided over the destiny of our nation, and regulated, in a great degree, the conduct of all the States of Europe.

It would almost seem that Elizabeth had no feminine weakness but one—her inordinate vanity; but, although apt to be influenced by it in small matters, her overpowering sense got the better even of that besetting sin when great events required her to act. When all her grandeur of intellect, her promptness, wisdom, and resolution, are considered, this blemish on her manly qualities ought to be looked upon with
indulgence, if it does not altogether redeem her reputation, for it was the only female trait she allowed to appear. Tenderness, softness, pity, and forgiveness, were unknown to her mind, and, but for her vanity, she would have been scarcely woman or human.

But what is to be said of her successor, who had all her female weakness more odiously exhibited, and no quality but cunning to make him remarkable?

In all that was harsh and cruel, jealous and suspicious, in tenacity of his claim to the crown, in inveteracy and tyranny, he followed closely the footsteps of Elizabeth, but in all the rest of his follies and vices he was entirely original.

The change was very great when James came to the throne, and deeply shocked were many of those accustomed to the somewhat overstrained elegance and romantic gallantry of the female court. The letters of some of the old courtiers on the subject of the strange manners introduced, would be amusing, but for the disgusting impression necessarily formed of the actors in scenes such as would disgrace a country wake: lords and ladies of rank, for instance, rolling about in intoxication at the foot of the throne, while the reeling sovereign is carried off to his couch.
amongst the tipsy uproar of this rabble rout of favourites who surrounded him.

Anne of Denmark, alone, of those attached to the new court, seemed to bear herself with courtesy, and keep up any semblance of propriety, as Arabella Stuart relates in one of her indignant letters to her uncle. Although there was not much in her character to challenge respect or admiration, yet the deferential feeling which had so long prevailed, was extended to her and her ladies, and, in spite of all the coarseness of the King, and the contumely which he loved to heap on his female subjects, they no longer required patronage to give them countenance.

The lovely Elizabeth, afterwards Queen of Bohemia, and the young beauties who surrounded her, made amends, by their attractions, for the awkward vulgarity of King James; and the grace and majesty of the youthful Prince Henry induced similar manners amongst his followers.

Although her character can never be popular with her sex, still Englishwomen are indebted to Queen Elizabeth's best qualities for a new era in their existence, and though she, herself, showed no more preference for them than did her un gallant successor, still she had involuntarily bestowed great benefits on
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her fellow females by proving of what importance they could be.

Just at her time, the education of women had altogether taken a different turn; and, though the accomplishment of the needle was still appreciated and admired, yet the mind was not allowed to lie fallow while acres of tapestry and carpet-work were carefully cultivated. The first advance from ignorance to erudition, seemed to over-leap all between, and women became, from mere embroideresses, arrant pedants, vying with the learned in classical and abstruse knowledge. Some amongst these were really as highly instructed as it was the custom to endeavour to appear: as, for instance, the daughters of Sir Thomas More, and Sir Anthony Coke, Lady Jane Grey, and a few others.

Elizabeth herself remained a pedant, but most of the ladies of her time excelled in the pleasing accomplishments she also affected. Perhaps the superiority in many of these charming acquirements of the ill-fated Mary Stuart, was not the least of her crimes in the eyes of her envious rival.

I have not, in this collection, confined myself to the biographies of women celebrated for their literary attainments, or, in fact, to females of any
INTRODUCTION.

class, but have recorded all I could find that was interesting of them, as they passed along the magic glass of recollection, starting from the point I have named, for the reasons I have given.

It appeared useful and interesting to me to bring together a great many female characters; with whom to become acquainted, it was necessary to seek, in works not always accessible, for particulars scattered here and there.

I have not, as far as I could accomplish my wish, neglected any source likely to afford authentic accounts of each of those whose biography I have attempted to write; and I have every reason to hope that what is contained in these pages may be relied on.

Elizabeth of Hardwick,—that managing and clever woman, who by the charms of her person, manners, and spirit, contrived to accomplish her own will so effectually,—is the first lady I have introduced to the notice of the reader: her history is an epitome of the times in which she lived; and the letters and conversations which relate to her, bring the days of Queen Elizabeth clearly before our eyes, in the most minute manner possible; while the monument of her magnificence, still
INTRODUCTION.

existing entire, in her far-famed mansion of Hardwick Hall, transports those who have become familiar with its foundress back to her society, and that of her unfortunate granddaughter, Arabella Stuart.

For permission to publish the Portraits of both these ladies, together with one of the ill-fated Mary Stuart, all hitherto unengraved, I am indebted to the extreme kindness of his Grace the Duke of Devonshire, who, with the utmost liberality and courtesy, allowed me to copy them from his galleries; and who, further, gave me access to manuscripts and books in his possession, without which I could not have hoped to render these Memoirs valuable. The other Portraits are from the best authorities.

CHATSWORTH PARK,
August, 1843.