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Edited by A. Hamilton Thompson

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LAMB

MISCELLANEOUS ESSAYS

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CHARLES LAMB

MISCELLANEOUS ESSAYS

EDITED BY

A. HAMILTON THOMPSON, M.A., F.S.A.

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## PREFACE

THIS volume forms a complement to the editions of the *Essays* and *Last Essays of Elia* already published in the Pitt Press Series, and contains the most noteworthy of the essays not included in those collections. As in the two volumes which preceded it, the editor has endeavoured to indicate in his notes the sources from which Lamb derived his frequent quotations and reminiscent phrases. Most of Lamb's recognisable borrowings have been identified by previous editors, especially by Mr E. V. Lucas in his *Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*; but it is still possible to add to their number and occasionally to supply an alternative suggestion. The editor is greatly indebted to the readers of the University Press for hints and corrections, particularly with regard to the text of the essays.

A. H. T.

NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE.  
*November, 1920.*

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## INTRODUCTION

IN the editions of *Essays of Elia* and *The Last Essays of Elia* which were published in this series in 1913, an attempt was made to provide some general remarks upon the character of the work which is Lamb's chief title to fame, and particularly upon his preeminent quality of humour, the rare gift in which, among the countrymen and disciples of Shakespeare, he stands unsurpassed. The series of essays collected in the present volume forms a prelude and companion to the two famous books published in his lifetime. Although his numerous editors have from time to time identified forgotten pieces of his work in periodicals and added them to fresh collections, it cannot be said that much of real importance has been discovered since the publication of *Elia* in 1864; while some of the additions are obviously little more than curiosities. Lamb's work was by no means always equal to his best achievement, and some of *The Last Essays of Elia* fall short of the earlier series which charmed readers of *The London Magazine* from 1820 to 1822. His genius, however, which, though it had its precursors, has defied imitation since his day, is so much a thing by itself that whatever he wrote has some value in illustrating its development; and the best of the essays which led up to *Elia* and were contemporary with his better known work are but little inferior to it and share its claim to a classical reputation.

The *Curious Fragments*, in which Lamb imitated Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, are peculiarly interesting as his earliest experiments in the discursive and allusive form of prose of which he became a master. Of the first two he wrote to Manning, 'I am afraid they won't do for

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a paper. Burton is a scarce gentleman, not much known, else I had done 'em pretty well.' It is not surprising that the editor of *The Morning Post* did not print compositions which certainly would have conveyed little meaning to most readers. As literature, however, they stand in the front rank of imitations. In a certain sense, they are parody: Burton's favourite authorities are used to substantiate or refute opinions upon which Lamb naturally did not consult them, and this constitutes the element of fun with which parody is associated. Otherwise, they are imitations in which the special manner and style of Burton are not merely copied but reproduced by an author whose temperament was peculiarly akin to Burton's own humour. The lines, printed in this volume, which appeared as the third fragment on their publication in 1802, show a depth of serious insight into Burton's fantastic melancholy, amounting to a character-sketch by a sympathetic critic which could not be improved upon. In the fourth fragment, although the general quality of style is maintained, with the frequent intrusion of tags of Latin followed by English paraphrases, Lamb seems to have written without his Burton in front of him; and his reflexions upon a pauper funeral are of a more personal and individual nature, forming a transition from imitative writing to the essay proper. The power of assimilating style, of which these 'extracts' are a signal instance, coloured Lamb's whole work. The fascination of his writings is due to qualities which are by no means exclusively literary: his humanity and sympathy find their way to the hearts of many who would have found little to attract them in his library. Not the least of its secrets, however, is the natural skill with which he interwove loved quotations and phrases into his prose, giving a new fragrance to the past. Through his phrases we hear continually 'the horns of Elf-land, faintly blowing,' a recurrent echo 'like to something we remember a great while since, a long, long time ago.'

Lamb did not depend upon writing for his living, and



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his days at his clerk's desk were probably too fully occupied, if he did snatch time from them for casual correspondence, to give him much leisure for journalism. It was not until after he had published the two volumes of his *Works* in 1818 that he began the famous series of essays which has given him his place in English literature; and the interest of much of his work before *Elia* is due to the fact that it marks his development in the direction of his masterpiece. At the same time, such work as his notes to the *Specimens of the Elizabethan Dramatists*, published in 1808, although they cover only a few pages and, to be appreciated, must be read with the scenes they illustrate, stands upon its own merits. These notes are admiring rather than critical and now and then sound an exaggerated note of praise; but, as impressions recording the influence of dramatic poetry and passion upon an individual mind, they are unsurpassed in English, even when we remember that the age of Lamb was also the age of Coleridge and Hazlitt. Yet from these great critics, who said so much of their best about Elizabethan writers, we gain hardly so vivid an idea of their authors as Lamb conveyed in a few unforgettable sentences, sometimes characterising in a single phrase, full of pregnant meaning, the whole secret of a writer's power to stir emotion.

In 1811 Lamb contributed a series of articles to the second, third and fourth numbers of Leigh Hunt's periodical *The Reflector*, which died a natural death at the end of the year. These articles, twelve (originally eleven) in number, were for the most part collected in the volumes of 1818, in which eight were printed. One, the essay *Guy Faux*, was revised and reprinted at a later date: three more, *On the Ambiguities arising from Proper names* (a slight thing, signed X. Y. Z., which is omitted from the present volume), *On the Custom of Hissing at the Theatres* and *The Good Clerk*, were reprinted for the first time in Mr J. E. Babson's collection of *Elia* (1864). Ten have been selected for the present series: the other which has been excluded is the *Specimens from the Writings of Fuller*,

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an anthology of quotations from a writer whose shrewd humour endeared him to Lamb. While it cannot be pretended that these essays, as a whole, reach the level of *Elia*, they nevertheless discover Lamb's ability to write in two very different manners. Most of them are comparatively slight, letters upon casual topics written under assumed names, after the fashion of *The Spectator* and the earlier essay-periodicals generally. They introduce personal reminiscence from time to time, blending it with mere invention in the way which Lamb afterwards made his own: the essay *On...Hissing* was founded upon the failure of his own tragedy, and *Edax on Appetite* is a pleasant exaggeration of his own human appreciation of good meat and drink, a taste which he commemorated later in his *Dissertation upon Roast Pig* and in other passages of lyric fantasy upon the theme of pork. We miss as yet, however, the note of romance and pathos which in time to come was to be inseparable from his humour—nay, more, an essential part of it. He diverts and amuses: we are struck by his capacity for making much out of little, for embroidering gracefully upon a trivial subject and using it as a foundation for casual wisdom. But the deeper note, the peculiar charm are wanting: these effusions, spontaneous though they are, are primarily imitations of a time-honoured mode of writing and leave the full individuality unexpressed. The special quaintness of style which had been fully apparent in the Burton *Fragments* is already well developed, with the Latinisms of word and phrase which he had adopted and appropriated and the constant tendency to allusive quotation which probably underlies more passages than can readily be recognised by the student. Upon these he could hardly improve, and they form a quality in which he is unmatched; but the wistfulness which mingles itself with his easy discourse in *The South-Sea House* or *The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple*, so that the names of John Tipp or Samuel Salt ring in our ears with the imaginative appeal of 'Henry Pimpernel and old John Naps of Greece,' the poignancy of the

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splendid apostrophe to Coleridge in *Christ's Hospital*, and the unstudied music of the heart in *Dream Children* are yet to come.

The long essays upon Hogarth and the tragedies of Shakespeare belong to a different type. They are serious studies of their subject and the humorous observations which they contain are purely incidental. They start out with the object of confuting popular fallacies, in the first case the idea that Hogarth is merely a comic painter, in the second the exaggeration which makes the actor the necessary complement of the dramatist. Like some of his friends, and like Hazlitt in particular, Lamb was a lover and good judge of painting; and Hogarth specially appealed to him because, of all English artists, he is the most narrative. His pictures are not merely full of graphic detail and variety of incident and character: they suggest the causes and consequences of the scene depicted, and thus each scene, taken apart from the rest, has all the elements of a novel. It is this literary quality of Hogarth's art, which gives him a close kinship to the novelists of his day, that made Lamb a peculiarly suitable judge of his work; and, further, the painter of London life, even in its most revolting aspects, struck a kindred chord in the heart of one who loved London in all its moods. Lamb's insistence upon the morality of Hogarth's art may be overstrained: other competent judges have denied it, and it is always easy to confound the particular effect of a work of art upon ourselves with the intention of the author. Here, again, Lamb's power of appreciation may be in advance of the soundness of his criticism; but of the closeness of his argument and the fertility of his illustrations there cannot be two opinions. Of Shakespeare and the theatre no man could be a better judge: theatre-going was his favourite pastime and his mind was so impregnated with Shakespearean phrase that its apt and spontaneous employment became an essential part of his style. Even those who enjoy Shakespeare most upon the stage and welcome new readings of famous parts most heartily must

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acknowledge his main contentions, that no actor can produce the complete effect of Shakespeare's tragic verse upon the imagination, and that the characters and events which leave the most profound impression of tragedy and noble pathos upon the reader run the risk of losing their effect amid the accessories of stage representation. These two essays are Lamb's most sustained pieces of critical writing, and the second is one of those classic pronouncements to which the student of Shakespearean drama must constantly turn for counsel.

Another essay, which originally appeared in *The Reflector*, was recast eleven years later for *The London Magazine*. This, a prose fantasia upon the theme of Guy Fawkes, was conceived in Lamb's lightest mood, in which he fired off one whimsical idea after another without stopping to discriminate between them. The effect of such jests, which in conversation would be exquisitely amusing, is somewhat faint in print, and becomes fainter still when much of their point has been dulled after an interval of a century; but it is impossible to overlook the amusement which Lamb himself found in pursuing his train of thought. He was never happier than when he was playing with the seriousness of solemn people and provoking the inevitable accusation of frivolity. The humorist is sometimes at a disadvantage in the practical affairs of life: his keen perception of the ridiculous hinders him from indulging in attitudes which strike his imagination as conceding a disproportionate importance to trivialities. But he has the compensating advantage of appreciating to the full the point of view which fails to understand and is repelled by his own vagaries, and he finds a subtle gratification in playing the merry Andrew for the discomfiture of his more conventional brethren. It was less for the amusement of kindred spirits that Lamb coined jests on such subjects as hanging, the pillory and Gunpowder plot than for the sake of mystifying readers to whom they afforded no loop-hole for the ludicrous; and the point of his remarks is not so much in the jests themselves as in their calculated

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effect. At the same time, while, as we have said, these jokes on paper miss the full success of an impromptu, the strong personal element which enters into all Lamb's work supplies partially the absence of voice, accent and expression. In spite of the apparent elaborateness of his style, no writer so thoroughly achieves the effect of talking to his readers. Coleridge, to judge from all accounts, talked much as he wrote, and the audience of his fluent and discursive monologues, 'that continuous flow of converse, fetched from Helicon or Zion,' felt a charm which his fragmentary prose works communicate only at rare intervals. Lamb's writing, on the other hand, was conversation itself, not material that had lost the glow of conversation. His archaisms, his free quotations, the form of his sentences are natural to him. They are not diluted into conversation through an intermediate literary process: they pervade his writing as easily as they coloured his talk. His essays are a string of casual observations on a loose thread, expressed in a style which is naturally allusive and unlike the style of every-day life. If the style appears elaborate, it would have cost Lamb far more study to have expressed himself in a more commonplace way. His style is not one of those set styles which can be acquired by imitation: its individuality is the unique possession of a writer who loved to play tricks upon his readers, and there is nothing more characteristic of Lamb than the temptation which he holds out to imitators to follow him to their own disaster.

Thus the essay entitled *Guy Faux*, while it is by no means one of Lamb's masterpieces, is an example of a mood in which he loved to indulge and incidentally of traits peculiarly his own. Moreover, the two long quotations which it contains enable us to compare and contrast his manner of writing with that of two masters of English prose to whose attraction he was specially susceptible. The essay is founded upon an extract from an article by his friend and contemporary Hazlitt, and his own remarks are prefaced by a piece of eloquence from a sermon

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of Jeremy Taylor. Taylor was less closely akin to Lamb's spirit than Burton or Browne; but his prose style is a product of similar influences, he shared their wide and curious reading, and no writer of the seventeenth century made a better use of his learning to adorn and enhance his own powers of speech. Here, then, we can read Lamb side by side with one of the original models whose mannerisms he instinctively adopted: the quotation, indeed, is so blended with the essay that it gains fresh colour from Lamb's evident appreciation of its merits. It is needless to say, with regard to the other quotation, that Hazlitt had much in common with Lamb. His love of old English authors was at least as great: his prose is habitually sown with quotations and reminiscent phrase. While Lamb, however, identified himself with the past and, in his own paradoxical phrase, 'wrote for antiquity,' allowing himself all the license of whimsicality and casual digression, Hazlitt wrote for his own day in a manner and style in direct contrast to Lamb's. It is difficult to imagine Lamb writing of any subject with which he had not some sympathy, or, indeed, to imagine any subject for which his sympathy was not ready to find allowances: his criticism is eminently appreciation. Hazlitt, on the other hand, was a critic of pronounced likes and dislikes whose criticism was more than ordinarily tinged by personal prejudice. The personal element in his style is strong; but, while he fastens himself on to his theme with the grip of a singularly acute intellect, he never becomes inseparable from it. We read Hazlitt less for his own sake than for the sake of what he has to say about things in a style which is a model of perspicuous English: the words are admirable, but the man himself leaves us cold. There are few authors of whom we can say that we like them better because Hazlitt liked them. Lamb, on the contrary, enters into his subject and becomes one with it. It is a theme on which he plays imaginative variations in a manner all his own. What he actually has to say about it may be slight: it is the groundwork of

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humorous fancies which are in themselves a tribute to its stimulating power. We do not find more in the old authors whom Lamb loved merely because he loved them: we love them the better because he shows us, as no one else has done, their essential humanity in the light of his own fellow-feeling for everything that was human.

Two years after the publication of his miscellaneous writings 'collected in Two slight crown Octavos and pompously christened his Works,' Lamb found full scope for his individuality in *The London Magazine*. The mixture of lightly veiled autobiography and criticism of life and literature in the two series of *Essays of Elia* is unique in English. The ease of narrative in which the essayists of the early eighteenth century excelled was equalled: their vein of reflexion and incidental comment on current topics was surpassed by a writer who laid no claim to a moral purpose but treated all that came under his notice with a wise and kindly tolerance. It would be a mistake to say that, as Elia, Lamb found a mode of expression for which he had been deliberately seeking. No writer of his eminence has been so free from literary aims and ambitions. He fell almost accidentally into a form of writing for which his earlier essays had well prepared him: the choice of one congenial subject seems to have paved the way for the essays in the same vein which followed. The freedom which marked his letter-writing communicated itself to his published prose. It is interesting to compare the *Recollections of Christ's Hospital*, which, written for *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1813, was revised for the *Works* of 1818, with the essay on the same subject written in 1820. The first, which had its origin in a patriotic protest against would-be reform, has its own charm and tenderness of feeling, but it is without the pervading glow of wistful reminiscence, the mingled gaiety and sadness which fill the second. It is an essay written on a given theme: its successor is an extemporisation which springs from its theme unbidden and, responding to each prompting of memory, gathers fervour

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and evokes new melodies as it proceeds. Again, while Lamb's earlier essays are full of his characteristic sympathy with the world at large which rejects no material as unsuitable for treatment, it was not until the *Essays of Elia* that the true character of his humour was shown to advantage. The essays in the present volume might be divided into two categories, serious and light. The predominant spirit of the Hogarth and Shakespeare essays is serious: he has set himself the task of working out an argument and allows himself little opportunity for the playfulness to which he devotes himself whole-heartedly in the extravaganzas that appeared side by side with them in *The Reflector*. Any casual reader of the fourth number of that periodical would have found some difficulty in detecting the same hand in the article on Shakespeare's tragedies, the letters of Edax and Hospita upon gluttony, and the character of the Good Clerk. A capacity for writing in such different manners is a proof of an unusually humorous disposition; but it was not till later that the two manners were fully combined and the grave and gay appeared, not in alternation, but in that complete union which is the most perfect form of humour.

The last twelve essays in this volume, including the revised edition of *Guy Faux* and the short fragments, written for friends, upon himself and Coleridge, belong to the period succeeding the first contributions of Elia to *The London Magazine*. *Guy Faux* and three others were collected in the second series of *Elia* which, published in America in 1828, admitted two essays which were not by Lamb. The rest remained in various periodicals until they were brought together in the volume edited by Mr J. E. Babson in 1864 under the title *Eliana*. They represent the best of the work omitted from the two *Elia* volumes of 1823 and 1833. If the *Popular Fallacy* included in them is somewhat inferior to the rest of the series published in *Last Essays of Elia*, there are others which are worthy companions to the more famous essays. Whether *The Gentle Giantess* was read by 'the widow Blacket, of Oxford'



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and, if so, what she thought of it are matters not recorded: it must please everyone who can delight in excellent fooling and fun which is entirely free from unkindness. The *Letter to an Old Gentleman* is a happy example of the parody which, though much more carefully disguised, is probably not absent from the famous *Confessions of a Drunkard*. *The Illustrious Defunct* exhibits unimpaired Lamb's power of making bricks with a minimum of straw: the rhapsody entitled *Reflections in the Pillory* recalls the invocations of *All Fools' Day*; and *Unitarian Protests* is an interesting pendant to the *Letter to Robert Southey* of which *The Tombs in the Abbey* formed part. *Captain Starkey* adds a chapter to the reminiscences of Lamb and his sister, all the more attractive for the charity with which it defends the memory of the quaint personage whose features and habits had been somewhat unflatteringly revived in Hone's *Every-Day Book*. Lamb's *Autobiographical Sketch*, slight though it is, is a key to a temperament which, constantly face to face with the seriousness and sorrow of life, preserved its owner from the capital error of taking himself too seriously and enabled him to meet his duties and his private griefs resolutely and courageously; while the simple and heartfelt tribute to Coleridge, the life-long friend whose death not long preceded his own, is a signal instance of the power of sympathy which that temperament extended to spirits of a widely different cast from itself. It is the perception of this sympathy, so generous and so inclusive in its operation, and so transparent in all his writings, that has endeared Lamb to more than mere lovers of letters and has given him the enviable position of the most beloved figure in English literature.