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THE NOVELIST

CAMBRIDGE

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# THACKERAY THE NOVELIST

BY  
GEOFFREY TILLOTSON



CAMBRIDGE  
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
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TO  
MY MOTHER AND FATHER

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## PREFACE

At the present day the place of Thackeray's novels in the regard of Englishmen, and perhaps also of Americans, has its interest for any historian of literary reputations. Most of the critics whose work achieves print dislike or slight them, and give us the impression that they speak for everybody. Having come to like them very much in recent years, I expected to meet polite disapproval—that glaze of the eye behind which the well-disposed mind seeks to turn the conversation—when I admitted to writing on them; only to find that the embarrassment was on my side alone. Not one of a dozen or so people but voiced either respect or warm liking for Thackeray's novels. On the chance evidence of this dozen people, most of whom do not teach English literature, one of whom is an American, who are of various ages (I show in my book that age counts in a reader of Thackeray) around and above forty—on the evidence of these people, his novels are still honoured and read. I recall the experience of Neville Cardus, given us in his autobiography; at a time when printed criticism assured him of a due arrest, probably a death, in the passion for the novels of Dickens, his inquiries for them at the local public library always found them 'out'. To be in and out of the turnstile of a public library is, I claim, a proof that a novel is alive, and well alive. Of Thackeray's novels, *Vanity Fair* and perhaps *Esmond* would by that test be found still in motion. Probably *The Virginians* also—the British Broadcasting Company presented it a year or two ago as a serial

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radio-play, and this caused some people, I understand, to read the original. But where we are concerned with novels that have been popular for much, if not all, of a century, a further test is to be made before the certificate of death is signed. Of the millions of copies printed during their long heyday, tens of thousands, inherited perhaps and dingy, survive on private shelves. I have made no enquiries of public libraries, but if they do little traffic in Thackeray, private copies, on my evidence, still have their devoted readers.

This may mean—I take the opportunity to draw a moral for the public at large—that, given a proper send-off, people would be ready to rescue and piously furnish the house in Young Street, Kensington—double-fronted, bow-windowed, handsome as domiciles go in this London of makeshifts and accommodations—the house where most of Thackeray’s greatest work was done. There it stands, ninety years after his death, empty, black and glum, discoursing in tones Dickensianly heavy on his old theme of vanity of vanities. It could live again and blossom—yes, with the freshness of his novels—as the London houses of Carlyle and Dickens now blossom, and the house of Keats, whose poetry Thackeray was one of the first to welcome into the circle of great literature.

As to the method used in my book, I am aware that the argument would proceed at a smarter pace had I interposed fewer quotations in support of it. Their amplitude may be allowed in fairness to Thackeray since he is not now read universally; and by the same token in fairness to some of my readers.



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## PREFACE

I wish to thank my wife who introduced me to the critical writings of William Caldwell Roscoe, and who, at the penultimate stage of its career, read my manuscript, making valuable suggestions. I am also indebted to the book she has recently written on the novels of the 1840's, and in particular for her help in interpreting the Preface to *Pendennis*.

G. T.

BIRKBECK COLLEGE  
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## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The quotations from Thackeray's writings are taken from the most authentic editions I myself possess. To make amends to my readers, who will probably possess different editions, I have referred the quotations to the chapter of the novel they come from, taking the chapter numbers from the Oxford Thackeray. The text used for *Philip*, *Lovel the Widower*, *Denis Duval* and *The Roundabout Papers*, is that of *The Cornhill*, where they first appeared, and that for *Vanity Fair*, *Pendennis*, *The Newcomes* and *The Virginians* what in a rough and ready way I may call 'the first edition in book form', not inquiring too closely into issues and variants, which may be safely assumed to have no pertinence for my present purpose. The text used for *Esmond* is that of the Oxford Thackeray, from which all other writings of Thackeray are quoted.

There are advantages in quoting from the original or early texts, advantages which are reduced when a later edition corrects a slip committed in the turmoil of quick writing, or misprint, or when it records an authentic new reading. Such errors I have silently put right, but I have not troubled to collate quotations from early texts with the last of the author's lifetime. Perhaps, therefore, an improved reading has not always been honoured.

For permission to quote from Thackeray's letters I thank Mrs Hester Thackeray Fuller, the editor, my friend Mr Gordon Ray, and the publisher, the Harvard University Press. I am grateful also to Mrs Hilda Spear, who helped to check many of my quotations.

G. T.

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## CHRONOLOGICAL NOTE

The following are the dates of the works of Thackeray most frequently referred to in this book.

- [1811 Thackeray born.]
- 1839-40 *Catherine*, periodically in *Fraser's* (May 1839-Feb. 1840).
- 1843 *The Ravenswing*, periodically in *Fraser's* (April-Sept.). 'Dennis Haggarty's Wife', *Fraser's* (Oct.)
- 1844 *The Luck of Barry Lyndon*, periodically in *Fraser's* (Jan.-Dec.); revised edition, *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, Esq.*, 1856.
- 1846 *Notes of a Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo*.
- 1846-7 *The Book of Snobs*, periodically in *Punch* (Feb. 1846-Feb. 1847).
- 1847-8 *Vanity Fair*, in parts (Jan. 1847-July 1848).
- 1848-50 *The History of Pendennis*, in parts (Nov. 1848-Dec. 1850).
- 1852 *The History of Henry Esmond, Esq.*, 3 vols.
- 1853-5 *The Newcomes*, in parts (Oct. 1853-Aug. 1855).
- 1857-9 *The Virginians*, in parts (Nov. 1857-Oct. 1859).
- 1860-3 *The Roundabout Papers*, periodically in *The Cornhill* (Jan. 1860-Nov. 1863).
- 1860 *Lovel the Widower*, periodically in *The Cornhill* (Jan.-June).
- 1861-2 *Philip*, periodically in *The Cornhill* (Jan. 1861-Aug. 1862).
- [1863 Thackeray died.]
- 1864 *Denis Duval*, periodically in *The Cornhill* (March-June).

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## ABBREVIATIONS

Allingham	<i>William Allingham: A Diary</i> , ed. H. Allingham and D. Radford (1907).
<i>The Brontës</i>	<i>The Brontës: their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence</i> , 'Shakespeare Head' Brontë, ed. T. J. Wise and J. A. Symington, 4 vols. (1932).
Brownell	W. C. Brownell, <i>Victorian Prose Masters</i> (New York, 1902).
Greig	J. Y. T. Greig, <i>Thackeray: a Reconsideration</i> (1950).
Johnson, <i>Lives</i>	Samuel Johnson, <i>Lives of the English Poets</i> , ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 3 vols. (1905).
Ray	G. N. Ray, 'Vanity Fair: One Version of the Novelist's Responsibility,' <i>Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature</i> , New Series, xxv (1950), pp. 87-101.
Roscoe	<i>Poems and Essays by the late William Caldwell Roscoe</i> , ed. R. H. Hutton, 2 vols. (1860).
Ruskin, <i>Works</i>	<i>The Complete Works of John Ruskin</i> , ed. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, 39 vols. (1903-12).
Saintsbury	George Saintsbury, <i>A Consideration of Thackeray</i> (1931).
Thackeray, <i>Letters</i>	<i>The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray</i> , ed. G. N. Ray, 4 vols. (1945-6).