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978-1-107-45064-6 - Literary Friendships in the Age of Wordsworth:

An Anthology

Selected and Edited by R. C. Bald

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*THE CAMBRIDGE ANTHOLOGIES*

GENERAL EDITOR: J. DOVER WILSON, LITT.D.

LITERARY FRIENDSHIPS  
IN THE  
AGE OF WORDSWORTH

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AGE OF WORDSWORTH

AN ANTHOLOGY  
SELECTED AND EDITED  
BY

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the University of Adelaide

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## PREFACE

IN compiling this companion to the study of the period of the Romantic Revival, the editor's aim has been to provide a background somewhat wider and more interesting than the usual bare statements of biographical facts concerning each author, which are all that are usually offered to the student or the general reader who does not care to go to the larger biographies or has not read widely enough to be familiar with the passages here presented. There is, however, no lack of material for such an anthology as this; the difficulty rather has been one of selection and compression. One principle, however, has been maintained throughout. Selections have been made from the works of the more important authors of the period, in order to present what they themselves said to or about one another; what their somewhat less distinguished friends said about them has had to be excluded. The few exceptions to this rule are easily explained: Dorothy Wordsworth was so much at one with her brother and with Coleridge during their most vital years that the extracts from her *Journals*, even apart from their very high intrinsic interest, have as much significance as if they had come from the pen of either of the other two; Haydon's account of his famous dinner party was too good to be omitted; and Crabb Robinson, prosaic as he often is, furnishes a day-by-day commentary such as is accessible nowhere else, and is too illuminating to be ignored. Explanatory notes have been kept down to the barest minimum; but a few biographical details concerning some of the minor personages who appear in these pages have been included in the Index.

Acknowledgments for permission to include copyright material are gratefully tendered to Messrs G. Bell & Sons, Ltd., Messrs William Heinemann, Ltd., Mr Roger Ingpen, Messrs Macmillan & Co., Ltd., Messrs Methuen & Co., Ltd., and Mr John Murray.

R. C. B.

*Adelaide, June 1932*

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## INTRODUCTION

## I

ISOLATION, in the arts at least, is by no means as splendid as the popular phrase would have it. In all the great creative epochs there have been groups of men eagerly discussing the problems of life and art, exploring new ideas and new realms of technique, and generously sharing their results with one another. Athens, in the fifth century before Christ, and Florence, in the fifteenth century of our era, could never have achieved their pre-eminence in the history of Europe without the constant intercourse of the men who made them great; nor can anyone doubt that Shakespeare, no less than his opponent, profited by those “wit-combats betwixt him and Ben Jonson” at the Mermaid Tavern. Even Milton, who seems to stand alone more than any other figure in English literature, was in close contact with the greatest men and the greatest deeds of his age. The truth is that great men are stimulants to one another, and lead on lesser men to achievements which would have been impossible for them without these high examples and high incentives. Incomplete and thwarted achievement is the penalty of isolation.

Almost all the poets who are generally spoken of as the precursors of the Romantic Revival paid the penalty of isolation. Madness claimed Smart, Collins and Cowper; Gray “never spoke out”; Chatterton,

the marvellous boy,  
The sleepless soul that perished in his pride,

took his own life. In the works of none of them can one find evidence of the eagerness of hope or the spur of emulation, for the isolation from which they suffered was the cruellest of all—the loneliness inflicted on them by a hard and unresponsive environment. The outbreak of the French Revolution, however, provided a new incentive to hope; youth and courage

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did the rest. Wordsworth and Coleridge together broke through the old barriers of prejudice and inertia, and twenty years later Shelley wrote: "The great writers of our age are, we have reason to suppose, the companions and forerunners of some unimagined change in our social condition or the opinions which cement it. The cloud of mind is discharging its collected lightning".

Since the days of Carlyle, historians, literary and otherwise, have alternatively stressed men and movements as the decisive factors in change and progress. The aim of this book is to hold the balance between the two tendencies, unnecessarily in conflict, and to show that, in so far as the Romantic Revival was a movement, the men who were its leaders were in constant and intimate contact with one another, and that their relations constitute some of the most delightful as well as some of the most important records in the annals of literary friendship. With the study of the records comes, too, the realization that without these friendships the work of almost every one of these men would have been, in some respects at least, different from what it was.

### II

The extracts in this book cover the space of about half a century, yet, strangely enough, it contains but two vital "spots of time" when the most important creative work of the period was being done. The first of these extends from 1797 to 1805, when Coleridge wrote everything and Wordsworth practically everything by which they are remembered. The second period, from 1818 to 1823, is remarkable for an outburst of activity scarcely paralleled in the history of English literature; in prose, Lamb, Hazlitt and De Quincey, each of whose talents ripened slowly, suddenly reached maturity; and in poetry these same years saw the culmination of the powers of Byron, Shelley and Keats.

Nevertheless, the stream of friendship flowed steadily on through the whole period. It is true that there were occasional quarrels and misunderstandings, but these may be passed over lightly, for there was no breach that remained permanently

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unhealed. It is much more important to realize that, even during the years that were comparatively barren in literary production, men such as Lamb, Coleridge and Wordsworth were continually in touch with one another, and that the results of this constant intercourse were often revealed later. From 1805 to 1815, for instance, Coleridge was developing ideas in conversation that were not published until they had been thoroughly familiar to his friends for a decade, and during the same period Lamb, Hazlitt and De Quincey were storing up memories and experiences with which they afterwards enriched their writings.

It is inevitable that in such a book as this Lamb's letters should occupy a large space. Not only do they contain as much of his peculiar charm as his essays, but they also show that Lamb's wide tolerance and his genius for friendship made him the link that held together the men of the older generation. He had known Coleridge, Southey, Wordsworth and Hazlitt in the days before any of them became famous, and he kept their friendship throughout his life. The younger men he welcomed too, and his relations with such men as Procter and Hood bear eloquent testimony to the fact that age could never wither him; Shelley alone stood outside the bounds of his sympathies. It was around Leigh Hunt, however, that the most famous of the younger men congregated; to his warm-hearted encouragement Keats undoubtedly owed a great debt, and Shelley formed a friendship with him that only death could break. Hunt also had the distinction of being the only member of the London or the Lake groups who was on friendly terms with Byron before he left England for ever.

Byron is one of the four men who seem to stand aloof from the others. He esteemed his rank and position more than his literary achievements, and has recorded that the literary men whose friendship he valued were Moore, Rogers and Scott, who were men of the world as well as men of letters. Even Byron, however, could not help respecting the genuineness of Shelley's unworldly idealism, and, in spite of the protests of his friends, twice found his company a stimulus and an incentive at times when life had become stale and unprofitable

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## INTRODUCTION

for him. Both Scott and Landor were removed by distance from the centre of literary activities, but Scott's generous friendliness for Wordsworth, his admiration for Byron and his staunch support of Southey are pleasant to record. It is pleasant, too, to remember that he wrote to Lamb inviting him to Abbotsford; but, although the two men never met, they always regarded one another with the warmest respect. Landor did not meet most of his famous contemporaries till late in life, and then most of his relations were with an altogether younger generation; his long-standing friendship with Southey is the only one that covers the period of this book. Landor had seen and perhaps spoken to Shelley in Pisa, but at that period he "would not see a single English person; says he is glad that the country produces people of worth, but will have nothing to do with them"; in spite of this, however, both Hunt and Hazlitt received unexpectedly warm welcomes at his villa at Fiesole not long afterwards. Blake, alone of the great writers of the age, stood aloof from his contemporaries in true isolation. He lived in a world apart, into which none but such as he could enter.

### III

This book is primarily a record of friendships, but it remains to suggest very briefly the effects which these friendships had on the thought and work of the men who shared them.

It is practically impossible to overestimate the importance of the constant companionship of Coleridge with Dorothy and William Wordsworth at Nether Stowey and Alfoxden during 1797 and 1798. Here the volume of *Lyrical Ballads* was planned, and Wordsworth's theory of poetic diction was worked out. It is true that Coleridge was as incapable of writing *We Are Seven* (as *The Three Graves* showed) as Wordsworth was of writing *The Ancient Mariner*, yet every poem in the *Lyrical Ballads* was fully discussed by the three, and its significance clearly realized, for the *Lyrical Ballads* were written in pursuance of a definite plan to illustrate the twin powers of poetry, "the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modi-

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## INTRODUCTION

fyng colours of the imagination. The sudden charm, which accidents of light and shade, which moonlight or sun-set diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both". By carrying their plan into execution Wordsworth and Coleridge permanently enlarged the scope of English poetry and ultimately brought about a revolution in taste and feeling, the results of which are still felt.

Although Coleridge claimed that the ideas expressed in the famous Preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* were as much his as Wordsworth's, he was startled by the criticism with which they met, and he soon began to re-examine their principles. As early as 1802 he wrote to Southey: "Although Wordsworth's Preface is half a child of my brain, and arose out of conversations so frequent that, with few exceptions, we could scarcely either of us, perhaps, say which first started any particular thought . . . yet I am far from going all lengths with Wordsworth. . . . On the contrary, I rather suspect that somewhere or other there is a radical difference in our theoretical opinions respecting poetry; this I shall endeavour to go to the bottom of". Here is the germ, which was developed and elaborated in conversation during the intervening years, of the most vital and interesting chapters of the *Biographia Literaria*. Coleridge's influence, indeed, was probably more personal than that of any of his contemporaries. The circulation of *Christabel* in manuscript influenced Scott and Byron; his talk helped to clarify the thought of the young Hazlitt, who, though estranged from Coleridge in later years, acknowledged that he was "the only man who ever taught me anything"; and he gathered around him a knot of disciples who took up and spread his philosophical and theological ideas, although they were never, or only imperfectly, recorded in print by Coleridge himself.

In their younger days Lamb, Southey and Coleridge were all eager explorers of the neglected writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but, for the greater part of the period, Lamb was undoubtedly the guide and director of his fellows. His tattered but well-read collection of old books

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was at the disposal of his friends, especially Coleridge; his enthusiasm for the Elizabethan dramatists and the less known authors of the seventeenth century, which is so evident in his *Specimens* and in his essays, was often the subject of his talk. A slight example will show how Lamb's influence was spread. Hazlitt's famous account of one of Lamb's "Thursday nights" represents him as reading "with suffused features and a faltering tongue" Donne's elegy *On his Mistress*. One is not surprised to find Leigh Hunt, who was present, writing later to Shelley, asking him airily "Do you know Donne?" and then following up with a quotation from this very poem.<sup>1</sup> Naturally, some of Lamb's friends owed more to him than others did. While it is interesting to find Wordsworth seeking Lamb's advice about a course of reading among the Elizabethan dramatists, it is not known whether he carried it out, and, if he did, it had little influence on his poetry. Hazlitt, on the other hand, probably owed much more to Lamb than he realized, for one has only to compare Lamb's paper on Hogarth with Hazlitt's seventh lecture on the *English Comic Writers* to perceive that Hazlitt had often heard Lamb talking about the Hogarth prints that were hung round his room. Similarly, Lamb is in the background of many of the *Lectures on the English Poets* and almost all of the *Lectures on the Dramatic Poetry of the Age of Queen Elizabeth*. Coleridge, indeed, went so far as to say, rather unkindly, that some of Hazlitt's criticisms of Shakespeare were "round and round imitations of Charles Lamb's exquisite criticisms", and, because they did not "progress and evolve, but only spun upon themselves", lacked an essential criterion of genius.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hunt's letter to Shelley is dated Sept. 20, 1819. Mr E. V. Lucas, in his *Life of Charles Lamb*, believes that the evening's conversation recorded by Hazlitt occurred about 1814; Hunt, however, was in prison then. It is possible, of course, that Lamb read out or talked of the poem on more than one occasion, or that Hazlitt's essay is to some extent an imaginary reconstruction, built up from his recollections of many such evenings.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that Coleridge is himself here borrowing from one of Lamb's criticisms. Lamb, comparing the styles of Shakespeare and Fletcher in a note to his *Specimens*, had said: "Noble as this whole passage is, it must be confessed that the manner of it, compared with Shakespeare's finest scenes, is faint and languid. Its motion is circular, not progressive; each line revolves on itself in a sort of separate orbit".

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Hazlitt, Byron and Shelley were, during the greater part of their careers, out of sympathy with Wordsworth and Southey, whom they regarded as political renegades and castigated in such works as *The Spirit of the Age*, *The Vision of Judgment*, and *Peter Bell the Third*. Nevertheless, Shelley had cherished an early admiration for Wordsworth's poetry, and later, even though it disappointed him at first, he studied *The Excursion* carefully. The Third Canto of *Childe Harold*, written when Byron and Shelley were together in Switzerland, shows that Wordsworth's influence had even penetrated to Byron, who could not remain unaffected by Shelley's interest in the Lake poet. Keats, too, was for a time an enthusiastic admirer of Wordsworth, and often repeated the *Lines written above Tintern Abbey* and the *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*; he was proud also of meeting Wordsworth, but Wordsworth's influence is implicit rather than explicit in his work.

The influence of Keats's friendship with Hunt on *Endymion* is well known: it was responsible for the more unfortunate passages of that poem, and helped to provoke the savage reviews in the *Quarterly* and in *Blackwood's Magazine*, which were for so long supposed to have hastened Keats's death. Keats, however, outgrew Hunt's influence and turned to Hazlitt, with his more trenchant judgments, for correction: "I am convinced that there are three things to rejoice at in this Age," he wrote to Haydon, "*The Excursion*, Your Pictures, and Hazlitt's depth of Taste", and later, when he was convinced that he needed more than anything else the mental discipline of a philosophical training, it was to Hazlitt that he proposed to turn for advice and guidance. Hunt also influenced Shelley, although never so strongly as he had influenced Keats. "I am sending you a poem in the style you like", Shelley wrote to him of *Rosalind and Helen*, and later, when *Julian and Maddalo* was written, he wrote: "You will find the little piece, I think, in some degree consistent with your own ideas of the manner in which poetry ought to be written. I have employed a certain familiar style of language to express the actual way in which people talk with each other". Yet of the two men it was definitely Shelley who was

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the more vital spirit, and, when he died, it was left to Hunt to reverence his memory with the unflagging devotion of a disciple.

In conclusion, it is hardly necessary to say that too much stress must not be laid on the mutual influences that have just been suggested. Without them, the essential originality of each of the great writers of the period would have remained unchanged. However, these influences helped to determine the channels into which the creative effort of the period was poured; and life would have been less stimulating, work less congenial, and mental activity more restricted for each of the writers of the age without the friendships and the intercourse recorded in this book.