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978-1-107-61815-2 - The Eighteen-Seventies: Essays by Fellows of the Royal
Society of Literature

Edited by Harley Granville-Barker

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Preface

THESSE papers upon the Eighteen-seventies were written for—and mostly read to—the Royal Society of Literature. With the fixing of the subject and the parcelling of its field collaboration ended. There has been little trespassing; and if, now and then, the temptation to stray has been stronger, neither life nor letters, as Dr Macan reminds us, will ‘arrange themselves in neat packets of ten years for our convenience’.

Our immediate concern, of course, is with letters, less directly with life; but the time is close at hand when the life of the Eighteen-seventies will be found in its letters and nowhere else at all. So, if anyone should ask ‘Why the Eighteen-seventies?’ here is one answer: it is a period that is just about to become historical. It is, indeed, entering the orbit of the romantic. Those of us who were born in it found our elders still clothing their romance in powder and patches and brocade. We were soon for the bucks and buckskins of the Regency, high waists and sandals. Books of Beauty, John Leech and his crinolines, whiskers and peg-top trousers, looked the height of the absurd. We have lived to see them grow in grace again; a little more, and the crinolette and that ‘sort of tongs’ of Mr de la Mare’s recollection (and mine) ‘which were worn dangling from the hips to keep the train from out of the dust’ will take their place, re-created by the poet and romancer, among the glamorous beauties of the past. At this moment, then, the Eighteen-seventies are a period ‘just remote and just retrievable enough to be singularly beguiling’. I quote Mr de la Mare again; it is an editor’s privilege to pillage his contributors for phrases. In literary reputation, moreover, they are

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decidedly down on their luck. It seemed worth while before they became subject to the more absolute inquisition of history to take a casual, friendly glance at them.

It is no better than a glance, in no sense a digest. There is no passing of judgment. But by good luck and deserving—more precisely perhaps, by the generous sense of duty of some of its Fellows, stealing time and energy from their own literary affairs—the Society has had at command what is rather a full battery of glances, fired from varying points of vantage. One main difference of position will be noted. Some of us write out of recollection: to some the Eighteen-seventies are but history already. If there is a hint of attack and defence, if a slight deflection of the firing would make our area a battleground—well, the book will not be the less instructive or entertaining for that.

There is better reason for leading off with a paper on Lord Houghton than the fact—though in academic courtesy this would be reason enough—that in it the Society's president writes of his father. For, as Lord Crewe tells us, 'the tale of his friendly acquaintance among men of letters up to 1870 would be little more than an exhaustive catalogue of the workers in that field'. It is surprising indeed that he was never president himself. He so typified the relation between Letters and Affairs which is England's nearest practical approach to the recognition of literature as a public service. Now, whether this is a satisfactory one is a large question, far too large for present discussion. That it is better than none will hardly be disputed; though Lord Houghton himself—if ever a little chafed by that 'alarming reputation for benevolence to aspiring writers'—might excusably have protested that a human link is, after all, only human. He was a patron of letters, and sympathetic and discerning as perhaps only one who was also a man of letters

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could be. In this he inherited a tradition, under which, from the time of the Tudors and yet more remotely, English literature had subsisted—if it had sometimes starved. A tradition changed and dying in his day: it may almost be said to have died with him. ‘Patronage’ has a less pleasing sound to modern ears: we relegate it to charity concerts and country bazaars. But condescension is still the dictionary’s last gloss upon the word, and by the authentic thing itself much good work in the past has been, in a proper sense, protected and supported. There was, we may be sure, no condescension, nothing of the Chesterfield in Houghton, nor did Nineteenth-century authorship depend upon dedication and subscription. What he did, beside his many acts of personal kindness, was to help form public opinion. That was a thing worth doing. Sir Edmund Gosse cites instance after instance of such watchful interest in Swinburne. He did not, be it noted, set out to make his young poet a best-seller; the sales of *Poems and Ballads* to date would probably, for that matter, leave a best-selling publisher of today bewailing. But he could see to it—and he did—that educated public opinion recognised and acknowledged the significance of the new thing. Swinburne’s books might sell or not sell, be praised or abused; but, with Houghton for sponsor, he could not be neglected.

An easier task no doubt—a more grateful one certainly—so to dominate on occasion the Victorian forum, than single-handed to set about inoculating the mob-mind of to-day. How that has to be done is a study for the curious cynic, though a part of the process is visible enough in the costly columns of advertisement which support (in more than one sense) a newspaper’s ‘literary’ pages and leaves mere criticism to show like chinks of faint light in between. Good work, as well as bad, it may be owned, can be planted on the public in this costermonger fashion.

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It very often is; and it will be for as long—just as long—as the business proposition pays. But for how long will that be? If good and bad alike must be brought into such competition and given the same currency—or *none*—it may well be that a Gresham's Law for literature will begin to function, and the bad money drive out the good. It is soon to say. The method of the literary world, in which Lord Houghton was ascendant, had changed but slowly till, our pre-war yesterday past, it took on of a sudden its present hectic complexion. The business man himself cannot yet have counted the final business cost. What the cost to our more sober-sided literature may be, that which is, after all, the staple of our intellectual credit, it well becomes a Royal Society of Literature to ask. The patron of letters was humanly partial, no doubt, and made his mistakes of omission and commission alike; but at his best he did discriminatingly and disinterestedly do something for literature which cut-throat business competition and its less overt accompaniments can hardly be trusted to do. If we have now finally lost him, what is to take his place?

Yet, spite of all changes, the relation to Affairs which gives, for good or ill—in the main, surely, for good, since it is of the English nature of things—its peculiar pragmatic tinge to our maturer literature, does essentially endure; is here exemplified indeed, in Lord Crewe himself and his presidency. And one would suppose it a unique scope of family experience: a Robert Milnes who in 1809 refuses a seat in the Cabinet as Chancellor of the Exchequer, an office which is not then (Oh, happy England!) 'of quite the first rank'; his son elected to Queen Victoria's first parliament; his grandson, a Liberal statesman in 1929. The son's political career was, we are told, 'disappointing to himself'. But he was, without doubt, one of the chief architects of English Liberalism, his share in the work the

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cultivating of an attitude of mind, more tolerant and more sensitive, perhaps, than party politics could then easily accommodate. And one imagines him generously satisfied to see—could he have seen—in conditions he had helped to create, his ambitions fulfilled by *his* son.

The editor of this sort of book is supposed to do no more than pay passing—and quite superfluous—compliments to the contributors. The difficult thing is to avoid that intolerable gesture of the pat on the back; the more intolerable, if, as in instances here, one must stand upon tiptoe to administer it. I venture, then, no more than a most modest Thank you to Dr Saintsbury for his tribute to Andrew Lang, that writer from a full mind, written for us from a mind as full. But I cull from it a summing up of Lang's style which any young aspirant might do well to pin for a motto over his desk '...pervasive, but not obtrusive; varied but not superficial; facile to a wonderful degree, but never trivial or trumpery'. And again, one feels the praise come boomeranging back to its author.

Of Sir Arthur Pinero, I will only say that I am tempted, behind his back, to alter the title of his paper to 'The Theatre as I found it'. He does needed justice to T. W. Robertson. And if the truth of his saying that 'in dealing with the stage you must judge an author's work in relation to the age in which he wrote', is, it may be claimed, as applicable to other arts, no one who has never been tangled in its machinery can know *how* true it is of the Theatre! Therefore, when we consider what, spite of generous excuses, the theatre really was in those 'seventies my temptation is to prepare the way for a companion paper, should this series extend, say, to the Nineties, to be written by a younger dramatist (there are many who could gratefully write it) with the title 'The Theatre that Arthur Pinero did most to make'. For it

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would be a far more inspiring picture. My own paper by the way, the present companion to his, could as well be called 'The Theatre of the 'seventies as it might have been'.

Mr Walpole and Mr de la Mare have an easier time with the novelists, one notices, than do Miss Sackville-West and Mr Drinkwater with their poets. Mr Walpole's generalisation that in the extreme *Englishness* of the English novel lay its primitive store of strength which sophistication must sap (for a time, will he let us interject?) and his sympathetic view of the 'seventies as a period of mediocre achievement, truly, but of the struggle towards a lost honesty in the picturing of life—this surely is a far-reaching truth, and other things than novel-writing come under its searchlight. But English life, as lived beyond the borders of Bloomsbury, and the English character have changed less than some modern novels (though not Mr Walpole's own) would lead us to suppose. I fancy that Mr James Payn's hero with his 'I am none of your dreamy ones, thank God! It is eleven o'clock. There are one, two, three good hours of fishing before me; and then, ah, then, for my sweet Mildred!' is still a fairly common object of the countryside, though he may not phrase his feelings quite so elegantly (he would if he could, however); and his sweet Mildred, truly, is apt, nowadays, to have gone fishing too.

Mr Walpole and Mr Drinkwater have a fortuitous and stimulating difference of opinion upon the possibility of discussing literature by periods; but it turns out, as so often happens, not to be a real difference after all. Miss Sackville-West and Mr de la Mare come to an equally fortuitous agreement upon the sound principle that self-consciousness is fatal to creative art, and that this weighed heavily and sometimes disastrously upon the women writers of the 'seventies. The two papers do indeed

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complement each other very admirably. I thank Miss Sackville-West for that phrase ‘the high Victorian standard of bashfulness’ and Mr Drinkwater for his test of the minor poet; one found just destitute of saving original grace, his best hardly ever failing to remind us of the men that have done better. And for all that their field looked barren, they do find some flowers in it. One knew that in many ways the ’seventies must prove a barren field. It was stubble time and seed time. But one of our tasks was to search for the flowers, however few.

Mr de la Mare’s field on the other hand, proved to be a perfect jungle, and his paper set me thinking about all the other papers we might have had; upon Punch in the ’seventies; upon the songs of the Seventies (if he pursues his investigations I commend to his notice the works, in this kind, of Virginia Gabriel, particularly ‘Weary, so weary of waiting, longing to lie down and die!’ with, for an antidote, the comic drawing-room ballad—an extinct species—‘There were three old maids of Lee’); the domestic culture of the ’seventies, and what not! He does most usefully point out to the future social historian that there will be no authority upon the then appearance of the homes of England, stately and other, to compare with the woman novelist. In such matters men are not to be trusted.

Dr Boas seems to have had the most straightforward task; though an admirably ordered result is no sure sign of it. But he finds his ’seventies undoubtedly robust in critical, whatever they may have been in creative power. It is to be remarked that he lays stress—and with good reason, surely—upon Pater’s influence, which Dr Macan, in his re-integrating of Pater’s university, can dismiss in a sentence; an instance of our fruitful diversity of outlook.

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With the two authentic pictures of the Oxford and Cambridge of the decade we end—end with them because they make the spring board for the decades to come, the five of them, now nearly past. These are perhaps, then, if we examine them closely, the most significant pictures of all. For out of that Oxford, looking ‘mild and modest and mid-Victorian beside the Oxford of today, but . . . alive and moving’, out of that Cambridge, which saw the making of Newnham and Girton, most that still steadies, if it with ever greater difficulty dominates, the immediate intellectual life of England has come. Mild they may have looked, both of them; but from Dr Macan’s and Mr Heitland’s mellow pages come echoes of conflict enough. It was a time (for all kindness of reminiscence) of hard struggle, that is clear, for men there, whose eyes were, as they should have been, on the future rather than the past; ‘ . . . a period’, says Dr Macan, ‘of disappointment, unsatisfied demands, apparent reaction, yet with a touch of Spring in the air’. Thanks then, to the men, in the persons of these honoured survivors of them, who endured the disappointments, refused to be satisfied, withstood the reaction, and had the faith that could discern the ‘touch of Spring in the air’.

There will never be a time when Oxford and Cambridge and England have not need of their like. By a wider view than we can take from the top of the pile—though it makes a high enough pile, heaven knows!—of imaginative and sometimes unimaginative literature, the Englands of the Eighteen-seventies and Nineteen-twenties may have more in common than the change in the noise of their life lets us suppose. And, to pillage Mr de la Mare once more, ‘The very years we now so actively occupy will soon be packed up in an old satchel . . .’ But, no! There are limits to an editor’s privilege.

H. G-B.