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978-1-107-66720-4 - The Eighteen-Sixties: Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of  
Literature

Edited by John Drinkwater

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*ESSAYS*

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JOHN DRINKWATER

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## INTRODUCTION

By *John Drinkwater*

It was Mr Granville-Barker who proposed to a little lunch party at the Garrick Club that the papers delivered to the Royal Society of Literature should be written year by year with some co-ordination of aim. After much discussion it was decided that this could be most suitably achieved by concentrating upon a given period. In order to make the scheme more specific, the period in each case was to be a decade. The firstfruits were brought together in *The Eighteen-Seventies*, edited by Granville-Barker himself, and were followed by *The Eighteen-Eighties*, edited by Mr de la Mare. The present volume, which turns back to the 'sixties, is the third of the series.

Within the very simple editorial plan the writers, needless to say, have been free to follow their own bent. But the editor in each case has had a double purpose to fulfil, and it has been his business to see that not the treatment but the choice of subjects was made with this purpose in mind. The intention of each of these volumes is to give nothing like an exhaustive survey, but a faithful impression of the period in question, and, further, to give this impression without re-examining the major writers whose work is familiarly known to everyone who cares about literature at all.

In the eighteen-sixties, for example, the representative English poets clearly were Tennyson and Browning,

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but here we have Mr Abercrombie on Henry Taylor and Mr Wolfe on Clough. To read these two papers is not to get a complete view of poetry in the 'sixties, but it is to discover certain intellectual and spiritual qualities that were emphasised by that period, and to see them in their merits and their limitations more precisely than we could in the work of the more universal men. Similarly, Mr de la Mare, in his paper on Wilkie Collins, evokes powers that, while they were certainly not beyond the scope of Dickens and Thackeray, find a more particular, a more easily disengaged expression in the smaller master.

This consideration in the 'sixties has less force when we pass from the poetry and the fiction. These good poets and this good novelist are here richly rewarding to their latest critics, and not the less so in that they must without dispute take second place to giants of their own time. When Mr Granville-Barker comes to write about the theatre in the 'sixties he is free to make the most of any giants that he can find. But that is only because there were not any. The transit from Planché to Gilbert is perhaps as important as anything that was happening in the English theatre at that time, and yet there will be few readers who do not come to Mr Granville-Barker for their first knowledge of the process. Here are no Olympian ardours to remind us of the Elizabethans or Ibsen, but here is an account which in its liveliness reminds us that even in the lapses of its inspiration the theatre remains an enchanted place.

Mr Graves, on the other hand, has caught a giant right enough. His giant is a little fellow with a hump-



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back, but whatever we may think about him he remains indisputably a giant. *Punch* in the 'sixties was a social force, and he has remained one ever since. Mr Graves, most devoted of historians, is the first to allow that there have been occasions when *Punch* has been foolish, even sometimes a little ill-tempered. But no one can be nearly a hundred years old, and still going strong, with an account quite clear of indiscretions. For good and ill, common sense passes in the world as the first characteristic of the Englishman, and common sense has nowhere so constantly been raised to the level of wit as in the pages of *Punch*. To some natures even witty common sense is incurably tiresome, and most of us have moods in which we can find it so, but on the whole *Punch* remains, as it has never for long failed to be, the acutest and the most amusing satirist of daily life in England. It is not too much to say that it has not only reflected but has had a definite influence upon the English habit of mind. This volume is fortunate in having as the chronicler of that influence in the 'sixties a writer who has himself done so much to invigorate it in our own time.

Dr Boas has his giants too. But his immediate concern is with the less-considered aspect of their statures. It would have been beyond the scope of this book merely to remind us that the great historians of the 'sixties were great historians, but it is precisely to our purpose to remind us that in writing history they were adding to the riches of English literature. If my own Mr Dallas is no giant, he is certainly no pigmy. He is a big loose-limbed sort of a fellow, so big indeed as to make it surprising that he should have been able to efface

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## Introduction

himself from all common and almost from all critical knowledge for fifty years and more. He is just the sort of recovery that one is glad to have made for such a book as this.

I have left to Sir John Fortescue and Sir Oliver Lodge the responsibility of bringing this discursive account of the 'sixties to a really distinguished close. That I should be Sir Oliver Lodge's editor is a joke that affords me peculiar satisfaction. In the days when I used to play respectful tennis with him in Birmingham he had a great reputation for being able to make abstruse scientific subjects attractive and intelligible to the layman. And so I reflected that while pure science was not within my editorial mandate, the literature of science was, and the Royal Society of Literature has been fortunate in inducing a great scientist to take part in its deliberations. There are eminent historians who regard Sir John Fortescue as chief among living exponents of their craft. If I do not know enough to express an opinion about that, I know enough to know that everything he writes makes authority engaging, and I knew that if he could be persuaded he was just the man to write the paper that I wanted upon the sporting literature of the 'sixties. I suggested Surtees, but Sir John declined, saying that Surtees was too early. He dropped a hint that if it had been Whyte-Melville it might have been another matter. Naturally, Whyte-Melville it was, and surely a vanished phase of English society never had a tenderer or a more challenging epitaph.