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978-1-107-68004-3 - The Eighteen-Eighties: Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of
Literature

Edited by Walter De La Mare

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THE EIGHTEEN-EIGHTIES

ESSAYS

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WALTER DE LA MARE

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AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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INTRODUCTION

Sequels in literature are usually more dangerous than discreet. The impulse and the novelty of the initial venture cannot but have lost something of their bloom. But though this volume and *The Eighteen-Seventies* have a good deal in common—the same “idea”, the same method of treatment, for example—there the resemblance between them ends; except only that the several papers in this book, as in the last, were “written for—and mostly read to—the Royal Society of Literature”, and many of them by those who could ill spare the time and labour so generously devoted to them. By comparison with its predecessor, however, this collection has one signal misfortune—a change in editorship; and that, alas, will become more and more apparent as this *Introduction* proceeds. Yet even though my grace for the feast that follows cannot but fall far short of what it ought to be, that is only an additional cause of gratitude for the privilege of having been bidden to say it.

A disconcerting discovery lies in wait for the amateur explorer of any recent literary period—its refuse. The further he ventures, the more widely he surveys the scene, the more numerous, in proportion, he will find, are the books that have not only been forgotten but are now practically unreadable. And among these will be not merely the still-born, the dry-as-dust, the dejected inmates of the *2d.* box, but many of the once smart or elegant or *outré*, of the nine-day-wonders, and of “the widely popular”—eloquent testimony to their authors’ “celebrity, importance and success”. They were written

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in that intense seclusion of self with self which is essential even to the dullest and stupidest of literary compositions, they were devoured in their tens or their thousands of copies, they had their day, they became old-fashioned, out-moded, they have perished. To all appearance they shed little influence on what was to follow them; yet it is these poor relics, simply because they served their temporary purpose, but no other, that are saliently characteristic of their day. And it is almost as difficult to discover why they are dead as it is to detect symptoms of senile decay in the brand-new volumes hot from yesterday's press.

If then it is the bad and indifferent books that date most deplorably, what of the good? Good books, however various they may be in form, style and design, contain an *elixir vitae*—a quintessence of which every great writer has the secret prescription, but which none can pass on. And though they too share in some degree in the fleeting of their day, it is this that matters least. They continue to influence and irrigate men's minds, even if it be the ultimate fate of some of them to attain the peculiar limbo of being "revered unread". "In the character of a nation inconsistency is impossible", said Buckle; and a nation's literature is its looking-glass. And as with its great men so with its great books. However original and insulated they may be, they too could have come into being only when and where they did. The signs in them of their times and of their *genius loci* become the clearer the more closely we examine them. And the more closely we examine them the richer is the reward. Movements and tendencies in letters as in life become conspicuous only in the perspective of time. It is curious to trace the river to its wellspring—in some single human soul. But though one man must originate a movement it takes many men to *make* one, and when

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our glance backward deepens into a scrutiny we see not so much the movement as the men.

So with the 'seventies, so with the 'eighties. The one decade glided as inexorably as usual into the other—the vast blunt stream of events pressing onward into the vast O of temporal space—and we might assume that the later decade would have about as much to say for itself as the earlier. In fact, as I think the following pages will prove, it has more. It better deserves the compliment of being called a *period*. A new life is stirring, these are years of transition, they mark an end and a beginning, we become conscious of a lively and refreshing breath of Spring in the air. And though the most conspicuous flowers that presently bloomed in that Spring were the rareties of the 'nineties—when, as Mr Binyon has said, “it having been decided that the close of a century must be decadent . . . blameless people therefore paraded in print imaginary vices”—the natural, the more traditional kinds, though less visible, were at least as vigorous; and equally blameless people, who in the later 'eighties had begun to put forth the first green leaves of far from imaginary literary virtues, continued to flourish for many years afterwards. Dates, too, are obstinate and “periods” overlap; *Patience* was produced as early as '81 and in '82 Oscar Wilde, then aged 26 and with a sunflower in his velvet buttonhole, was lecturing in America—when Aubrey Beardsley was not yet in his teens. 'Ninetyisms were rife, that is, well in advance of the calendar.

It is a temptation, perhaps, to claim too much. A sort of loyalty, an almost paternal tenderness, springs up in the mind towards anything that awakens one's deeper interest. And there is always the risk of romanticizing the past; particularly a past so near and dear and yet so far as the years of one's childhood. To minimize the

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effects of any such temptation in this volume we may attempt to conceive what its general trend would have been if (unlike even Mr Eliot who, if I may venture to be specific, was in his angel infancy when, three years before the death of Matthew Arnold in 1888, *Marius the Epicurean* was published)—if all its contributors had been born, say, at the turn of the century. That being so, how would the general verdict and tribute of “the bright young savages of to-day”, in Mr Granville-Barker’s gallant phrase—those “learned and loyal sons of the Muses”—compare with that of an equal number of mellow octogenarians? The true poet, as Robert Lytton decided very early in life, “must hit hard, and speak sharply and severely, and give trouble, and set thought going”. So on occasions must the true critic. And it is likely enough we should in the one case have heard the laments and the objurgations of “the child of sensibility moaning at the wintry cold”, “the breaches in his bleeding heart having been filled with the briars of suspicion”, and in the other, little but well and fair. “Verily”, and I am again quoting our Tupper, who seems to have recalled here and there the letter, if not the precise spirit, of Blake—“Verily the man is a marvel whom Truth (and nothing but the truth) can write a friend.”

If, again, mere age cannot but have affected the issue—since personal memory has a very sly finger in the focusing of the romantic—how much more must the individual point of view! Any such survey as this is bound to be partial, and partial in both senses of the word. At least a score of volumes would be necessary to make it completely exhaustive—and exhausting. But even at that, it is interesting to redistribute in fancy the *subjects* of the papers in this volume among their authors—keeping in remembrance, may be, other

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authorities on the period not represented here. What, for example, would Dr Boas have said on Mr Eliot's theme; what Mr Eliot on Mrs Woods's; or Father Martindale on Ibsen; or Mr Granville-Barker on W. S. Gilbert; and Mr Chesterton on all? It may be greedy, but I hope it is not graceless to glance at such possibilities.

From any imaginary standpoint in time we can look behind us, we can look around us, and we can attempt (from *there*) to look ahead. No fewer than four of the following essays are concerned with men of letters, some of them equally renowned also as men of affairs, who were already famous in the 'eighties, and whose labours were nearly at an end. "No great man", said Ruskin, tragically enough, "ever stops work until he has reached his point of failure." And this was assuredly true of the great Victorians.

I strove with none; for none was worth my strife,
Nature I loved and, next to Nature, Art;
I warmed both hands before the fire of life;
It sinks, and I am ready to depart.

To the few of Landor's contemporaries who at the end of the 'eighties remained alive—he himself died in 1864—the last two lines of this lovely quatrain were equally appropriate. But not so the first. It had been an age of strife and controversy, and the Victorians, whether philosophers or not, were most of them bonnie fighters. The protracted war, for example, between "science and religion", or rather theology (however nebulous the precise limitations of its field), was "drawing towards its close", though the return to the outlook of intuition or even of mere commonsense, whether simple or transcendental, which is increasingly manifest in our own day, was not yet to show itself.

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Carlyle after many years' silence died in 1881, a few weeks before Disraeli, whose *Endymion* had been published the year before. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Anthony Trollope and Longfellow followed in 1882; J. R. Green, Mark Pattison, Charles Reade, William Barnes and Sir Henry Maine in the next few years; and in 1889 Eliza Cook (whose effusions if not exactly "writ in brass" at any rate adorn a myriad tombstones of her time¹), Charles Mackay, William Allingham, Wilkie Collins, and (on the day of the publication of his *Asolando*) Robert Browning. And though much of *Fors Clavigera* and the entrancing and unfinished *Praeterita* were also of the 'eighties, Tennyson, though he was ten years older than Ruskin, had then become the almost isolated representative of the great writers of a day gone by. He was made a peer in 1884, and during the 'eighties, apart from *The Promise of May* and *Becket*, published no fewer than four volumes of verse—the supremely characteristic "Crossing the Bar" being included in *Demeter*, which appeared in the same year as *Asolando*. Huxley died in 1895.

What active influence these individual writers continue to shed in our own day it would be difficult to discover. Some of them still abide our question—or

¹ And we must never "patronise the past". Faithful and tender good sense is not so common in English verse that we can afford to laugh at Eliza Cook's *Old Songs*:

"... Old Songs! old Songs—my brain has lost
 Much that it gained with pain and cost:
 I have forgotten all the rules
 Of Murray's books and Trimmer's schools;
 Detested figures—how I hate
 The mere remembrance of a slate!
 How have I cast from woman's thought
 Much goodly lore the girl was taught;
 But not a word has passed away
 Of 'Rest thee, Babe' or 'Robin Gray.'..."

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posterity's; others have won their way into a renewed recognition; yet others seem to have suffered hardly even a temporary eclipse.

Two supreme figures have not as yet been mentioned. With these Fr. Martindale's paper is concerned. It is a portrait and appreciation of the two men on whom "popular imagination has fastened as 'Cardinals'", and who, while utterly diverse from one another in temperament and achievement, were at one in their ardent allegiance to the Church wherein they had both found their haven. And though literature in itself must be judged not by its service to any particular cause, it is profoundly interesting to observe, as we do observe, in Fr. Martindale's paper, no less than in Lord Lytton's and in Mr Granville-Barker's, what aims and ideals may be the vital incentives of the writer of any given book other than that of making it as good a book as he can. That banner with the strange device—art for art's sake—looks a little bedraggled nowadays. Book for book's sake might perhaps have worn a little better.

Seldom, for example, has the conflict in a young mind and heart between an "irresistible passion" for poetry and (to use a phrase that was far more familiar in the last century than it is now) a sense of duty been revealed as it is in Lord Lytton's essay on the work of his father. The letter on p. 20, apart even from its intrinsic interest, is an astonishing tribute to the mind and sensibilities of one who, when it was written, was still in his early twenties. It is followed by the noble and tragic submission in that on p. 24. History may repeat itself; but the repetition of almost precisely the same crisis, but with how different an emotional response, in the lives of gifted father and son as they are revealed so poignantly in Lord Lytton's pages is, so far as I know, unique.

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Whatever, again, may be said in disparagement of the Englishmen of the last century—in temperament, character and aim—one thing is certain. They exhibit an extraordinary variety. Nature, for them, seems scarcely ever to have used the same mould twice, and certainly not for the poets of the time. Mr Drinkwater's ironical conclusion that Martin Tupper failed in being a great poet only because he was not a poet at all might suggest a career of exacerbating pathos. Apart, however, from the hazardous attempt by the author of *Proverbial Philosophy* to finish "Christabel", which was received a little coldly, his literary career seems to have been a path of roses and with a very fair share of myrtle. And though his "homilies and rhythmicals", while continuing to amuse are unlikely ever again to edify, Mr Drinkwater none the less leaves him not only a peculiar but an endearing figure, and has shown also that he could write an easy, vivid and pleasing prose. That—innocent apparently of the faintest hope of reward—he invented the screw-top bottle and the fountain pen is an even more remarkable phenomenon than Dodgson's nictograph and postage-stamp case. In their utilitarian age indeed the idle poet had other alternatives to the thankless Muse than that of sporting with the tangles of Neaera's hair.

The remaining papers are concerned not with what had already been achieved in the 'eighties, but with what was then actually in process of achievement; and Dr Boas's is one of many affectionate and enthusiastic tributes that have lately been offered to the memory of a poet whose loyalty perhaps to his beloved island (and the want of initiative in anthologists) has to some extent obscured his finest work—such lovely things, for example, as his *Epistola ad Dakyns*.

Mrs Woods has also had the happiness of writing out of vivid recollection; of the years indeed when she herself had one of the most romantic of all experiences, that of

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publishing a first book. “What living poets we who were young in the ’eighties were reading” is her theme, a more defensible way than most of “penning” men of letters within the hurdles of a decade. My one regret, if I may express it, is that she has been unable to offer Coventry Patmore a closer place in her memory’s affections.

The mere title of *The Angel in the House* suggests the risks its author ran. It was a lofty challenge but a challenge with a rather parochial ring, and its parochial passages are more easily memorable than its exquisite best. No one, however, can dispute its “fundamental brainwork” and Patmore on his “homely Pegasus” faced its dangers unperturbed, for he knew also that his theme was concerned with “the very well-head . . . Whence gushes the Pierian spring”. And it was not mere arrogance—so conspicuous in that aquiline face of Sargent’s vivid portrait—that enabled him at his life’s end truthfully to declare, “I have written little, but it is all my best”. The fact that the insensitive Victorians bought no fewer than 250,000 copies of this epic of matrimony, while suggesting that lamentable marriages were not so common with them as is generally supposed, may only add to our amusement at Honoria and her husband. So too may the confession that she was the chosen one of an “eminently fair” bevy of sixteen rivals scattered throughout Europe who had blossomed in the poet’s light. But Patmore himself is smiling to himself when he says so! And the more one reads of the poem the better it becomes. There was little of the dreamer and nothing of the poseur in Patmore, as “A London Fête” alone would prove. Lines like

A florin to the willing Guard
Secur’d, for half the way,
(He lock’d us in, ah lucky-starr’d)
A curtain’d front coupé—

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and “The while I tied her bonnet on” could not be better said, though the best place for saying them may not be a poem. Patmore often failed and Hardy did not always succeed in assimilating the prosaic in his verse—a prosaic that after all only thinking makes so. But he did not attempt to poeticize it. Nor, unlike certain “realists” who followed him, did he ever degrade the prosaic. Moreover, as Mrs Woods points out, alike in his earlier poems and in his magnificent Odes—even in verses written when he was only sixteen—he was a supreme craftsman and artist. He was also “the most adventurously-minded of all our modern poets”, and one who will some day be given a far higher place among his contemporaries than is his for the moment.

Mr Eliot has no definite memories of the 'eighties to stand between himself and his two Victorians. He views them with the quiet and steadfast eye of the critic, weighs them in the balances, and in much finds them wanting. In so doing he is innocent of that revulsion of feeling which some of us who came into the world in the 'seventies might have to confess to—in respect, at any rate, to Walter Pater. In our youth we fall in love at first sight with certain books, and maybe with the authors of them; with writers perhaps as dissimilar as Newman, Jane Austen, Emily Brontë and Poe. That love may ripen into a lifelong and inexhaustible affection. For others we experience an early infatuation, and I must confess that mine for Pater was much less (was even, I am afraid, less likely to be) on account of what he said—and it is *this* Mr Eliot challenges—than on account of his seductive, his very unusual way of saying it. He breathed an incantation; and from incantations one is apt to waken more coldly disillusioned than is quite fair to the enchanter. Such is humanity; on the one side the hard gemlike flame . . . the maladies . . . the delicate

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odour of decay and the rumour of that primrose-yellow panelling in his rooms at Oriel; on the other that entirely unforeseen tall hat and moustache. In our early contemplation of this great writer we had not perhaps “learned to manage ourselves quite perfectly”. Mr Eliot indeed convicts not only Pater but even Arnold of traffic with Philistia itself, and Edward Thomas’s “critical study” of a few years ago was hardly innocent of irony. Every don has his day, and assuredly “Mr Rose” of *The New Republic* had his—a day too that may yet have its morrow. As for Matthew Arnold, he would have agreed that it is only the valiant Davids of criticism who go out to meet the giants. The resounding of their smooth stones on that brazen armour not only inspires courage in the feeble, but may also serve to re-awaken their victims to a renewed activity!

Again and again in this volume it is the moral outlook of the writers under review that is most sharply questioned. Maybe in part for the very reason that it was not on their moral outlook they prided themselves least. Mr Osbert Burdett in his *The Beardsley Period* went even further: “The perversity and the corruption are upon the earlier side, and, compared with them, the Beardsley period is natural and healthy”. It is a vexatious question. Getting to the roots of things—quite apart from the manure—tends to blot out the view of their flowers and green leaves and the blue sky above them. So piercing a comment, however, as “the positive content of many of Arnold’s words is very small” is a shaft aimed not at anybody’s morals but at the very heart of literature itself.

With Ibsen, the subject of Mr Granville-Barker’s paper, we bid a rather emphatic farewell to anything in the nature of the (British) Victorian, and W. S. Gilbert, says Mr Chesterton, is “the only Englishman who

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understood and observed the unities of the Greek tragedy". Here, though late in the day, I am reminded of a remark made by the Editor of *The Eighteen-Seventies*. He speaks of that "intolerable gesture"—the prefatory "pat on the back". That being so, it would be indiscreet indeed to make any reference to the wit, wisdom and humour so merrily in company in the paper on Gilbert, and (all else apart) to the incisive documentation in that on Ibsen.

To turn from drama to fiction is to be swept from a softly-running river out to sea. Figures speak louder than words. If, at a moderate estimate, for every novel that was published in 1929 three novels were *written*, then, with a meagre allowance of one each, no fewer than 15,000 more or less intelligent persons were then busily engaged in writing them. And drama? Only one single play finds mention in a popular survey of the literature of the year—Whitaker's—and that play was not staged in London. There being such a vast quantity of fiction, it is no wonder there are extremes of quality. To explore in a brief space, then, the best to the worst of its "output" even in the 'eighties, including novels as salient but so different from one another as *The Portrait of a Lady*, *Robert Elsmere*, *A Drama in Muslin*, *The Romance of Two Worlds*, *Three Men in a Boat*, *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and *Called Back*, was a task only comparable with similar and almost equally desperate attempts in *The Eighteen-Seventies*. Indeed it was one only just practicable even for a lover of fiction like Mr Forrest Reid who was already familiar with the *terrain* and had long ago surveyed its every hill and valley. To rescue even one good book from oblivion is perhaps a critic's richest reward: and Mr Reid is not content with *one*. He reports progress too—of a kind: "If there is less genius in the novel of to-day, I think we may claim

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that there is more science". And, in one conspicuous respect, he tells of a change in outlook—a change exemplified in a remark made by Rhoda Broughton in her old age to Mr Percy Lubbock. It will be found on p. 120. The Rhoda Broughtons of our own day will not have to go to Paris for contrast, and fifty years hence, it may be, England will have as drastic a Censor as Russia, the Irish Free State and Italy have now—where the works of Gorky, Tolstoy, Turgenev and Dostoievski have recently been banned. Or, celestial hope, may it be that by then the "problem" will have been exhausted, and the pioneer free to begin again?

Fiction is literature's shortest cut to life; and though books age differently from social and political events, and in general much less quickly, a glance at the current interests, activities and premonitions of the 'eighties may help to bring its books a little nearer to us. As regards "marginal stimulations of the Empire", the Battle of Majuba Hill was fought and lost on 27 February 1881; and that of Tel-el-Kebîr was fought and won on 13 September 1882. The Married Woman's Property Act was of the same year. In 1884 Gordon was killed at Khartoum, the Franchise Bill was passed, and two years afterwards Gladstone's Home Rule Bill was rejected. In 1888/9 Stanley, having relieved Emir Pasha, discovered the Congo pygmies and the Mountains of the Moon. Anarchist and dynamitard were then terms in common use; there were Sunday riots in Trafalgar Square (and incidentally Buchanan's *God and the Man* irradiated for one small boy his prescribed sabbatical reading, *The Day of Rest*). The decade ended not only with yet another successful demand to strengthen the British Navy but also with a cartoon in *Punch* which depicts Queen Victoria entreating her grandson, "dear

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Willie”, to turn his greedy eye from a posse of toy soldiers of which he has far too many already to “these pretty ships”!

Old volumes of *Punch* indeed may be not only invaluablely terse and vivid recorders of the nearer past but at the same moment disturbing reminders of the immediate present. In June 1880 we find for example an invocation to the Australian cricketers, which concludes:

...and—drinking your health—*Mr Punch* would ask, “What! Can cricket in England be going to pot?”

The chorus of *that* has not yet ceased to resound. And so with literary matters. In the same year the jester kills two birds with one stone in a reference to a proposal to commemorate Lord Byron:

...Bad as Byron’s life may have been, it can hardly be said to have fairly drawn down the retribution that enrols him in that ignoble army of martyrs, the tenants of that enlarged out-door Chamber of Horrors... the London Street-Statues!

And Byron reappears a few years later on the occasion of his centenary:

...Englishmen seem too busy considering whether Shakespeare wrote his own plays, to give a spare thought to the author of *Childe Harold*—

for the 'eighties were responsible not only for the foundation of the Bacon Society, but for Mrs Henry Pott’s dissertation on *Promus*, and Ignatius Donnelly’s *The Great Cryptogram*.

But what is apt to age and in effect perish more rapidly than either books or events are jocular comments on them. In the 'eighties *Mr Punch*’s chief butts were the lady doctor, “sweet girl graduates”, votes for women, the Bluestocking in Parliament, divided skirts (Mrs Bloomer—who, like Wellington, Mr McIntosh, Burke, Brougham, Boycott and Buncombe,

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had the rare privilege of adding her name to the English language—died in 1894), the telephone, electricity, mashers (there is seemingly no current colloquialism for this synonym of the fop, the dude, the dandy, the spark), vaccination, the Society for Psychical Research and a Channel *Bridge*. The positive species, indeed, of humour in the 'eighties—a volume entitled *Puniana* was followed by *More Puniana*—has now a curiously domestic flavour; it is a little too early to boast of our own. Similar pleasantries refer to Miss Braddon's having boiled down *Ivanhoe* to 32 pages at a penny, to Matthew Arnold's "sootable" lecturing-suit, and the greeting given to a visitor by the wife of a newly elected working-man M.P.—

Ow d'e do, Mrs Fuzbush? Pray take a chere, M'm. Though I ham a lady now, it won't make no difference in my manners.

With that "ham" we are reminded first that the letter *h* was about this time beginning to return to its proper place in the vernacular; next that the right to impose compulsory education having been bestowed on local authorities in 1870, a "violent change" was then in progress, with the result that to-day, "for the first time in history, everybody has learned to read", and some perhaps to mark, learn and digest; and next, that while in 1868 the country could boast of only fourteen free public libraries, by 1890 there were 208, Andrew Carnegie having established the first of his benefactions to the nation in 1886: a crusade which was to cost him £10,000,000 in all. With these glorious statistics in full view, it would perhaps be a little ungracious to breathe a sigh for the benighted old illiterates of the past, who were often, though not always, as rich and racy elements in English character as are its lawless idioms in the English language.

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As for the owner of the “chere” so urbanely offered to Mrs Fuzbush, it was not until 1892 that Keir Hardie became a one-man party in the House of Commons. And though the Social Democratic Federation (at first without the “Social”), the Fabian Society and the Socialistic League were all of them founded in our period, few of their most ardent adherents can have any more clearly anticipated the Labour Government of 1929 than we ourselves can foretell the possible future of a potential “party” of which the Minister of Labour and her sister Members of Parliament form at present the starry but divided nucleus.

Nor, to all appearance, was *Mr Punch* in this a seer. When, however, *apropos* of a comment of James Russell Lowell’s, who returned to the United States in 1885—“There is no such tonic as Dante”—that renowned old wag suggested a series of papers on the poetic treatment of disease, with “Tupper as a sedative, Browning as an irritant, Tennyson as a demulcent and Oscar Wilde as an em—” we may not be much amused, but we are less astonished. All honour to him that he welcomed to his pages in our decade not only the author of *Vice Versâ* but also *The Diary of a Nobody*—a “small classic” which Lord Rosebery considered indispensable to the proper furnishing of any bedroom, whose Charles Pooter Mr Birrell has ranked with Don Quixote, and whose Mr Padge Mr Belloc has greeted as “one of the half-dozen immortal achievements of our time”. It may be as well to add for the sake of those who have not as yet had the joy of his acquaintance that the “Nobody” of the title is not William Shakespeare in disguise.

Even at risk of tediously referring to what in part the following pages will amply explore, a brief list, however defective it must be, of the salient publications of the ’eighties may help to clarify the view. And here it is

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well to keep in mind a comment on the Victorian essayists made by Mrs Woolf in *The Common Reader*:

They wrote at greater length than is now usual, and they wrote for a public that had not only time to sit down to its magazine seriously, but a high, if peculiarly Victorian, standard of culture by which to judge it. . . .

By 1890 the historians of Victorian times were completing their lifework. James Anthony Froude—responsible surely for the most destructive scrap of mis-copying on record when he transformed “marked veracity” into “morbid vanity”—had turned from history to what was to prove an even more tempestuous venture, biography; though his happiest books were still to come. Gardiner’s *Collective Edition* of his *History of England* (1603–42) was completed in 1884; *The Great Civil War* in 1891. Stubbs’s *Constitutional History of England* was of 1878. Lecky’s *History of England in the Eighteenth Century* was brought to a conclusion in 1890, while Freeman’s *History of the Norman Conquest*, concluded in 1879, was followed soon afterwards by his *Historical Geography of Europe* and *The Chief Periods of European History*.

Apart from works of individual authorship, the 'eighties were singularly rich in great and enduring literary enterprises, which, unaided by a penny of public funds, have since then been brought to a triumphant conclusion. The *English Men of Letters* Series was begun in 1878. The first volume of the *Dictionary of National Biography* appeared in 1884; the first volume of the *New English Dictionary* in 1888. Dr Wright’s *Dialect Dictionary* was to follow them in the middle 'nineties. In addition to these there were no less than three popular “libraries” which owed everything to the zeal of their editor, Henry Morley. His “National Library” consisted of

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no fewer than 213 admirably selected reprints at the price of threepence each.

To continue our list, the second volume of Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Sociology* was published in 1882, and *The Nature and Reality of Religion*, which he suppressed but which was re-issued without his knowledge as *The Insuppressible Book*, in 1885. Balfour's *A Defence of Philosophic Doubt* was of 1879, Caird's *The Social Philosophy and Religion of Comte* of 1885. Edward Carpenter's *Towards Democracy* and his *Civilisation: Its Cause and Cure*, Leslie Stephen's *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* ('76), and his *Science of Ethics* were also of our period; so too were Sir Francis Galton's fascinating *Enquiry into Human Faculty*, and Huxley's *Science and Culture*.

As for poetry—if Mrs Woods will forgive me once more for trespassing *and* borrowing—apart from the Gallic influences clearly evident in *Poems and Ballads*, apart from the advent of Zola-ism, which was no more kindly welcomed than the author of *A Doll's House*, there was a keen revival of interest in the technique of verse as well as prose; in Andrew Lang's experiments, for example, with the old French measures and in Mr George Moore's with the new French fiction. Sidney Lanier's *The Science of English Verse*, and the invaluable essay on English metrical law appended to Patmore's *Collected Poems* were also of the 'eighties. Oscar Wilde, already the recognized high priest of aestheticism, made his literary *début* with his *Poems* in 1881—poems that deliciously fluttered the coteries but were dismissed by one uncompromising critic as “Swinburne and water”; in 1886 Mr Kipling woke to find himself famous with *Departmental Ditties*; and in 1888 *A Reading of Earth* was published, the last collection of his verse to appear in Meredith's lifetime. A few years more, and lo, *The*

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Hound of Heaven, The Celtic Twilight, A Shropshire Lad; and where else shall we find six brief volumes of poetry at once so close together in time, so diverse in theme, impulse, mastery and technique and so prolific in seed?

The Nineteen-Twenties have gone their way. The Nineteen-Eighties—and into what a markless azure vacuum the phrase transports us—will enjoy a far clearer view of their literary achievement than is practicable now. Still, for bare comparison of the last ten years with a decade that is gone indeed, and as an occasion perhaps for a brief pause in our self-congratulations, even the confused catalogue that follows may be of service. The books referred to are one and all publications of the 'eighties: Seeley's *The Expansion of England*, Butler's *Unconscious Memory*, Gomme's *Folk Lore Relics of Early Village Life*, the *Fabian Essays*, Lubbock's *Ants, Bees and Wasps*, Sir James Frazer's *Totemism* (*The Golden Bough* was of 1890), W. Stanton Moses's *Spirit Teachings*, Lang's *Custom and Myth*, Gosse's *Northern Studies* (containing for England the first tidings of Ibsen), Pater's *Imaginary Portraits and Appreciations*, Whistler's lecture, *Ten O'Clock* (to appear again with *Whistler v. Ruskin* in *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*), Dr Saintsbury's *Histories of Elizabethan and of French Literature*, Charles Doughty's *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, Robert Bridges's *Eros and Psyche*, Sir Richard Burton's translation of the *Arabian Nights*, *The Story of My Heart*, *The Confessions of a Young Man* and *The Twilight of the Gods*; and in fiction (again for mere mention), apart from about twelve novels by Henry James, we have *John Inglesant*, *The Tragic Comedians* and *Diana of the Crossways*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *The Woodlanders*, *The New Arabian Nights* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*, *Micah Clarke*,

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Plain Tales from the Hills, Dead Man's Rock, Auld Licht Idylls and *Cashel Byron's Profession*.

But all this is again to anticipate Mr Forrest Reid to whose happy lot it falls also to welcome Sherlock Holmes and his man Watson; for *A Study in Scarlet* was published in the year of Queen Victoria's Jubilee. Already the old ivied church tower with its peal of wedding bells had become a little *passé* as a happy ending: the scaffold and "the chair" were about to take its place: the heart of the writer of fiction was resigning to the head.

Many of the books mentioned above *are* literature, and that of a high creative order; some of them fall short of it, all of them in their various ways and degrees have fed or affected the minds of the present generation. There cannot but be many signal omissions in such a catalogue, some important ones are dealt with at length later, but even as it stands it is one as rich as it is miscellaneous. It is abundant proof that the writers of the 'eighties had their full share of genius, talent, enterprise and originality, though in the heat of the reaction after the war critics may have been tempted to tar the complete generation with the same dismal brush.

Societies of Literature are concerned with—literature. The vast majority of the reading public would not only smile, and possibly blush, to use the word, but would connect it at one extreme with "printed matter", and at the other with the highbrow. Still, a great part even of the intellectualist's reading is for diversion; it is an anodyne, a sip of the waters of Lethe. Happy the reader who seeks these in the masterpieces yet is not too fastidious to find them elsewhere. Not quite so richly blessed the reader who discovers them solely in the current popular press. And here a brief backward glance only at the evening newspapers of the 'eighties and

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of their smaller, darker, dirtier, more mysterious and not *less* delightful London cannot but be disconcerting—the *Pall Mall Gazette* (to name only the gone), the *Globe*, the *St James's Gazette* and, a little later, the sea-green *Westminster*. They were one and all partisan and yet independent; and one and all were faithful to a definite literary standard.

Literature apart, again, the reading public which in spite of, and possibly because of, broadcasting, is rapidly continuing to multiply, is a monster with seven heads, the chief sustenance of each of which may be a specific kind of best-seller. This hydra, though not then of its present bulk, was also active in the 'eighties. None the less, surely, and here I am anticipating Mr Granville-Barker, no melodrama, no farce, no "shocker", no mere novelette even of our period can have approached in cheapness, stupidity, ugliness, humbug and sneaking obscenity, the lowest order of our everyday movies and talkies. There were periodicals as witty and "shocking" as *Pick-me-up*, as vulgar as *Modern Society* and *Ally Sloper*: but they were at least English and they were in the eighteenth-century tradition. The cinematograph is mainly alien. Its fine and, in many cases, successful exceptions serve chiefly to illuminate the otherwise dingy scene. British audiences—enthusiastic admirers in the old days of the Nigger Minstrels and the Harlequinade—sit mute. That here was a cheap, easy and universal form of amusement only intensifies the tragedy. Waters, from enormously expensive reservoirs, that might have been at least reviving and refreshing have been laid on the wide world over, and as often as not the supply is putrid. Lives there the man with brow so low . . . ?

Still, we are living in a time of scrutiny, experiment, unrest and challenge, though by no means all the

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ancient havens and securities are denied us. Childe Roland must be for ever setting out again, and the battlements of his dark tower, “blind as the fool’s heart” in the dying sunset under the lowering hills, have echoed to many challenges. To the Nineteen-Eighties their aspect may appear a little less formidable than they look at present. Whether or not, when the critics of that far day glance back in contemplation of what the writers of our own day have aspired to do, attempted to do, and done, may they in their turn temper justice with mercy. There is an ideal; it was expressed in his own Victorian fashion by Coventry Patmore in words following the sentence I have already quoted from the ten-line preface to his *Poetical Works*:

I have written little, but it is all my best; I have never spoken when I had nothing to say, nor spared time or labour to make my words true. I have respected posterity; and, should there be a posterity which cares for letters, I dare to hope that it will respect me.

W. de la M.