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George Edward Wherry
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I

**THE CAMBRIDGE
CHARLES LAMB
DINNERS**

by
George Wherry

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C. In Memoriam: Charles Sayle

*My pleasant neighbour, gone before
To that unknown and silent shore,
Shall we not meet as heretofore,
Some Summer morning.*

IN the founding and organising of the Cambridge Charles Lamb Dinners perhaps the largest part was played by Charles Sayle and it is in memory of him that this account of them has been compiled.

These dinners—six in all—were held in each of the years 1909 to 1914, when the War brought them to an end.

Sayle's life peculiarly fitted him for this agreeable task. Educated at Rugby School and New College, he returned after a brief period in London to his old home at Cambridge, and joined St John's College. He devoted himself to bibliographical work and became an Under-Librarian in the University Library. His knowledge of books enabled him to give valuable help to enquirers in every branch of learning and in the pursuit of references and quotations he spared no pains.

At the Library he came into contact with most of the literary men in the University and thus it was easy for him to collect those who

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would be likely to sympathise with the idea of a Lamb Dinner.

But it was his great gift of gaining touch with undergraduates which was of most help in drawing to the table the best of the younger men. For many years Sayle had succeeded in gathering undergraduates to his house in Trumpington Street, a bachelor abode, rather hidden back from the main street, small but commodious, with a room upstairs which held an old Broadwood grand piano.

Generations of undergraduates came to his quarters for literary talk, with intervals of music. Since his death long letters have come to me—I hope many came to him in his lifetime—all bearing testimony to the help those evenings gave. Maurice Berkeley, of Pembroke, wrote:

Any ability I have acquired in appreciating music, which previously I could not understand, I owe entirely to Sayle.

Charles E. Lambe wrote from his ship *Benbow*, off Malta:

Sayle's gift of collecting round him a little company of undergraduates was remarkable, if only because youth is not easily attracted by its seniors. I feel he must have done it by some subtle form of flattery, very discreet and very indirect. He made you feel, even on first meeting him, that you were

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worthy of his attention, which he gave undividedly. When one is young, and I imagine afterwards as well, this is a pleasing factor, and it seems to me that to this special quality Sayle largely owed his popularity with younger men....Sayle was a great listener—with few words he would draw one out in an amazing way.

A. Macdonald, of Repton School, wrote that he treasured “thirty or forty pages of trifling notes” which he “would not exchange for a far more printable correspondence.”

“There is,” so ran the letter, “a touch of melancholy, but of the best kind, in a sentence in a recent letter, ‘My road for the rest of the journey seems mostly downhill.’ We watched his descent too calmly, forgetting that the last mile is often so steep, and he disappeared through the haze into the pleasant Inn of Death before we had even time to say Good-bye to him.”

Sayle was very fond of flowers, especially white flowers, and sedulously cultivated his garden, hidden away behind the house and guarded by high old walls of dark brick. The little house and garden always reminded me of Herrick’s song of “littles,” with his maid “Prew,” for there was always a Prudence Baldwin to look after Sayle. The garden was used in summer for the Sunday evenings which for years became an important part of his life, “that best portion

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of a good man's life"—the thousand "little unremembered acts of kindness and of love."

In this house he died in his sixtieth year, having reached the same age as Charles Lamb.

C. THE FIRST DINNER

Among Sayle's papers evidence was found by Mr A. T. Bartholomew that he intended to write an account of the Charles Lamb Dinners at some future time, but not a line on the subject was discovered. It was natural that the editor of Sir Thomas Browne should love Charles Lamb and seek to perpetuate his memory. As Ainger has pointed out, Browne was the author most frequently quoted in the *Essays* and *Letters*.

It was an old idea of Sayle's, and as far back as 1905 I find a note:

The Vice-Master of Trinity [Aldis Wright] wants to know if you care to subscribe anything up to half-a-sovereign to a Charles Lamb Tablet to be erected on the house he occupied at Enfield. He got 5s. out of me.

Later, when the gravestone of Charles Isola, on the north side of the church of St Mary the Less, was found to be broken across, we, with the help of Canon Stokes, repaired the stone. This was in memory of the father of Emma

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Isola, Lamb's adopted daughter, who married Moxon, the publisher¹.

In 1908 a small society was formed, of which Mr A. T. Bartholomew of the Library, Sayle, and myself were the most active members, and over little dinners at my house we met to discuss the founding of an Annual Dinner in memory of Lamb. Many difficulties had to be overcome, and first, that as Lamb was not a Cambridge man, in the sense of having belonged to a College, there was no obvious place for such a feast. The Pepys dinner was, of course, held at Magdalene College, and a Coleridge dinner (such as was once suggested by Mr Arthur Gray) would naturally have been held at Jesus.

The Samuel Johnson supper, held at Lichfield, seemed the nearest to what we proposed. Being homeless, we decided to dine in the University Arms Hotel; to invite our guests; to have one guest of the evening and to obtain a chairman from the University. As undergraduates were to be asked to join, it was necessary to gain permission, which was duly accorded:

I give permission to Mr C. E. Sayle of St John's College to arrange for a dinner for 70 persons at the University Arms Hotel.

H. F. Stewart, Senior Proctor.

¹ See p. 44.

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The date of February 10th was that of Lamb's birthday, but the Saturday nearest the birthday enabled week-end visitors to attend and was therefore chosen. Our project met with much encouragement in the University, and had, moreover, a good send-off in the recent publication of *The Life of Charles and Mary Lamb*, by Mr E. V. Lucas—a book which had reminded many of their old love.

Mr Augustine Birrell was asked to come as our guest, and kindly promised to do so if only his Parliamentary duties permitted—he was at that time Secretary of State for Ireland, and there was some uncertainty about his visit. Acceptances came in very well and indeed more might have been gathered if a dinner of forty guests had not seemed large enough.

In spite of all this support we could not persuade anyone to preside at our feast, and at the last moment I had to take the chair, and as Chairman, it was my duty to introduce Mr Birrell:

“We are here to-night in honour of literature, and to commemorate the birth of Charles Lamb. We meet upon a date near upon his birthday, which was on February the 10th, 1775. It is related of Thackeray that, reading one of Lamb's letters containing a tender passage to a child, and thinking on Lamb's life, he put the letter to

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his lips and said ‘*Saint Charles.*’ Thackeray was right! With all those who, like ourselves, distinguish *goodness* from *goodyness*, Charles Lamb *was* a saint. In the Roman Church, I believe, three qualifications are necessary for sainthood: first, that there should be a life which displayed great fortitude and charity; secondly, that the candidate should be worshipped during that life; and thirdly, that miracles should have been wrought after death. Charles Lamb is blessed by us on all these points exactly. He manifested during his life the greatest amount of fortitude and cheerful courage; in his lifetime was adored ‘on this side idolatry’; and what miracles have not his ‘midnight darlings’ wrought, since his death, in many a sad heart!

“He is honoured, though not beneath the dome of St Peter’s; but we ourselves are the cardinals who have canonised him in our hearts.

“It is fitting that in Cambridge we should celebrate this event. The old universities held Lamb’s deep affection, and especially he loved Cambridge, for Lamb felt strongly the genius of places. It was here that he wrote the essay ‘Oxford in the Vacation,’ Oxford standing for Cambridge with his usual mystification. Here, at the house of Mrs Paris, he met his adopted child—Emma Isola—daughter of the Esquire

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Bedell, and granddaughter of the Cambridge teacher who taught Italian to Wordsworth.

“Lamb’s interest contained a strange assortment such as Crisp the Barber, Richard Hopkins the swearing scullion, afterwards cook of Trinity Hall and Caius.

“And Mrs Smith. ‘Ask anyone,’ he says, ‘who is the biggest woman in Cambridge? They will tell you *Mrs Smith*, who broke down the bench, between Trinity and St John’s, and was the cause of litigation between the societies as to who should repair it!’ She became the gentle giantess and widow Blackett of Oxford. ‘Oxford,’ he says, ‘in vacation could never be said to be empty, having *thee* to fill it.’

“Lamb notes the college cat, and the college portraits. He approves them all.

“And then his best friends were Cambridge men. Coleridge was at Jesus when Lamb wrote the ‘Monologue to a Young Jackass in Jesus Piece,’ but better than this he spoke of ‘the friendly cloisters and happy groves of quiet ever-honoured Jesus.’ Wordsworth was at St John’s, where he enjoyed to the full ‘the advantages to be derived from the neglect of his Teachers.’ Charles Valentine le Grice, his old schoolfellow, was at Trinity. Of him Gunning relates the story of how he shouted a noisy song

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on King's Parade as the V.C. was going to church—with the refrain 'Gadzoons, gadzoons, Lowther Yates in pantaloons!' and how the silver-tongued undergraduate soothed the rage of the V.C. and was forgiven. Charles Lloyd resided in Cambridge for a time, and did a good deed in introducing Lamb to Manning.—Thomas Manning of Gonville and Caius, 'the friendly, the mathematical Manning.'

"Is there anywhere in literature a more marvellous blending of pathos and humour than in Lamb's letter beseeching Manning not to go to China—not to go among the Manchus, people with a name like that must be *cannibals*—not to go among 'nasty, unconvertible, horse-belching Tartars.' Well, Manning grew his great beard and spent his years in China and Thibet, was the first Englishman in Lhassa, and saw the grand Llama; a scholar, and a great traveller, but known to the world as the friend of Lamb.

"One word about George Dyer, of the 'House of Pure Emmanuel,' Amicus Redivivus, the G. D. of 'Oxford in the Vacation'¹.

"Dyer was very short-sighted, and walked in broad daylight straight into the New River, which was opposite Lamb's house at Islington. Dyer was on his way to see Mrs Barbauld—you

¹ For a fuller account of Dyer, see pp. 59 ff.