

I

INTRODUCTION

WERE what we have done for others the measure of what should be done for us, then the life of Leslie Stephen, if written at all, should be well written. Moreover, I think that had he been an impartial judge in his own cause, he would have admitted that an interesting book might be made about him. His insight, his honesty, his sympathy, his humour were sometimes expended with good results upon tasks that were far less promising, and, before I have done what I have to do, I shall hear him allowing that my materials were better than he thought, though he would not commend the unskilful use that will be made of them.

In two or three words I will explain why I turn my hand to work of a kind to which it is not accustomed, and then I will say no more of myself. I first met Leslie Stephen on Sunday, April 4, 1880. He was then forty-seven years old and I was nearly thirty. A friend of ours had enlisted me as one of those 'Sunday Tramps' of whom a word must be said hereafter. My acquaintance with our 'chief guide,' as we called him, became friendship, and after a while a marriage, upon which he bestowed his blessing, made me in some sort a kinsman of his. Though the relationship was not of the closest, he could, as I now see, write of me as having been 'domesticated in his family,' and 'yours very truly' was exchanged for 'yours affectionately.' Then when he was struck down by a great sorrow and did not think to live much longer, he told me how he was writing about himself and the wife whom he had lost, a letter to be read by her children, and how he wished me to see that letter after his death. After his death I saw it, and in it he had said that I might make use of the contents if I chose

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to write 'a short article or "appreciation" or a notice in a biographical dictionary.' He added: 'He, as I always feel, understands me.' When his death was very near, he wrote with pencil in a little book that he kept by his bedside for his children to read the following words: 'Any sort of "life" of me is impossible, if only for the want of materials. Nor should I like you to help anybody to say anything except . . . Maitland. He might write a short article or so . . . and if he liked to do so, you should show him my "letter" to you.'

I feel then that I am doing not only what I should in any case have wished (though I might not have been bold enough) to do, but also what I have been asked to do if I endeavour to tell a little more of Leslie Stephen than is apparent in his books. At the same time, I feel that in writing so much as I propose to write, I shall go beyond, though certainly I shall not transgress, the letter of his expressed wish; and it seems well for me to say why this is done. That 'short article or so' about somebody else he could have written to perfection; but I cannot write it even imperfectly. The powers, natural and acquired, which enabled him to sum up a long life in a few pages, to analyse a character in a few sentences, are not at my disposal, nor did I observe Stephen as some expert in psychology, or as some heaven-born novelist might have observed him. If I am to write of him at all, I must use other words and other eyes than mine, more especially his own—which means that I shall copy a good many extracts from his letters, and report what has been told me by his sister, his children, his pupils, and his friends. I do not think that the public will be entitled to complain if it gets some first-hand evidence instead of my epitome of it, and if Stephen himself saw the 'short article or so' swelling to the size of a book, he would shake his head, it is true, but he would acquit me of anything worse than clumsiness and verbosity.

I think it well to add that the 'want of materials' was not the only reason that he gave when he said that his life could not be written. He also said that he did not care to tell everything even to those who were dearest to him. He would, however, have been the first to admit that a biographer rarely

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penetrates far below the surface, and that he yet performs a useful office if he is fairly diligent, moderately intelligent, and scrupulously sincere. Perhaps I am at this moment but too scrupulously sincere; and in order that no false impression may be left by what has just been said, I make haste to add that not only have I nothing to conceal about Leslie Stephen, but that he had nothing to conceal about himself. Only he did not think himself interesting. In the 'letter' which has already been mentioned stands the following passage, and it is characteristic of the man who wrote it: 'I wish to write mainly about your mother. But I find that in order to speak intelligibly it will be best to begin by saying something about myself. It may interest you and will make the main story clearer. Now, I have no intention of writing autobiography except in this incidental way. One reason is that my memory for facts is far from a good one, and that I really remember very few incidents that are at all worth telling. Another reason is that I could give you none of those narratives of inward events, conversions, or spiritual crises which give interest to some autobiographies. I was amused lately by reading Horatio Brown's life of Symonds, virtually an autobiography, and reflecting how little of the same kind of internal history could be told of me.' No, he did not think himself interesting, and if, like other people, he had had an internal history, he was not going to 'bore' (as he would have said) other people with it—not even his children.

This means, so it seems to me, that with all his many accomplishments Stephen would not have been in all respects a good autobiographer. Also it may serve to give a not unnecessary warning to those who would interpret the various scraps and snatches of autobiography that are scattered about in his writings. To put that warning into a more explicit shape may seem impolitic, for it is to suggest that there are some who are not quick to detect irony and humour wherever they are present. Still we occasionally have to remember that we live in a very solemn world. Shall I illustrate this painful truth? Stephen wrote an article on George Eliot in the 'Dictionary of National Biography,' and, in giving his

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judgment of 'Romola,' said that, while the other personages were scarcely alive, Tito was one of the author's 'finest feminine characters.' Thereupon, in a weighty newspaper, a critic surmised that 'Tito' was a misprint for 'Romola.' Where such criticism is possible we ought to be serious, and I cannot claim for Stephen that he was always serious. In particular I cannot claim that he was always serious when he spoke of himself and his doings. Some pages might, I fear, be filled with statements of his which are by no means literally true. To take a few examples, we might extract from one passage the fact that for flowers he cared so little that he could hardly tell a poppy from a tulip; whereas, in truth, not only did he love flowers, especially certain flowers which spoke to him of those whom he had lost, but also he had made himself, so a high authority tells me, 'a very fair British field botanist,' and friends of his who rambled with him in Cornwall have had to regret that conversation was sometimes interrupted by the discovery of a rare little plant upon a wall or in the hedge-row. Or again, if we took him at his word, we might believe that, with the exception of one of his uncles, his whole family was 'incapable of distinguishing a horse from a cow'; whereas, in truth, before he went to college, he himself had done a good deal more riding than falls to the lot of most boys of his age and station. And so he would say that, having had the advantage of an education at an English public school and university, he knew nothing about science; but those who have laid stress upon this phrase should have remembered that men who knew nothing about any kind of science did not become good 'wranglers' even fifty years ago. Indeed, at times if you adhered to the letter of Stephen's words, you would believe that he had sometimes looked at a few books, that he had now and then scribbled for the newspapers, and that, by way of relaxation from this fatiguing toil, he had strolled across some rising ground in the neighbourhood of Grindelwald or Zermatt. But solemn though this world may be, I should be needlessly insulting my readers if in the spirit of a scholiast I asked them to observe the irony of one sentence, the humour of another, or the art with which Stephen effaced,

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or seemed to efface, himself, even when he was writing the life of his brother Fitzjames or of his friend Fawcett. It is more to my purpose to remark that behind the irony and the humour and the artistic self-effacement there was unaffected modesty: an estimate of his own powers and achievements which, if it seemed to some of us absurdly low, was none the less unquestionably genuine. When he was editing the biographical dictionary, it gave him, as I know, real pain to run his pen through honest work and to explain to a contributor, especially if he were a young contributor, that some forgotten worthy was only worthy of a column and a half, not of the two columns that had been reared to his memory. It would have been without pain, but not without strong language, that he would have reduced a reasonably full article on 'Stephen, Leslie, man of letters,' until it was a brief string of curt phrases—'third son of Sir James Stephen (*q. v.*) . . . educated at Eton and Trinity Hall . . . owing to some religious scruples he resigned the tutorship . . . became editor of the *Cornhill* and afterwards of this Dictionary . . . climbed the Schreckhorn,' and so forth; but I am not sure that even the Schreckhorn would not have been suppressed. Near the end of his life he consented, under great pressure, to write some Reminiscences, or rather to report some 'Early Impressions.'¹ Men who did not know him have called them delightful, and delightful they seem to me. I hope that hereafter they may be republished in some volume of Remains. But even at this last moment when he might have claimed the rights which old age and abundant honours can confer, Sir Leslie could not be induced to say much about himself. He had met some interesting people—Carlyle and Ruskin, Tennyson and Arnold, Darwin and Huxley—and about them he would chat for a while, if anybody really cared to hear him; but as to himself—well, he was not interesting.

Other 'reminiscences' he had, but they were not for the public—or rather, not reminiscences but ever-present memories which in his last years were, if I judge rightly, the core of his being. When he said that I understood him, he certainly did

¹ *National Review*, September, October, November, December 1903.

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not mean to ascribe to me any unusual insight ; but rather he meant that it had been my privilege to see both in joy and sorrow a certain side or aspect of Leslie Stephen that was only visible to a few. Without what he would have felt to be sacrilege, he could not have told to the world what he felt to be the real story of his life. What he could make known to people in general would not, so he thought, be interesting to them, because it was so little interesting to him. That is not my own view, and I have some hope that without raising a veil, which hides nothing that is not honourable and beautiful, I may, by means of letters and diaries, and with the help of his kindred and friends, add a little to the pleasure of those who are fond of their hours in a library, enjoy the playground of Europe and do not shrink from a little free-thinking and plain-speaking.

Two things I shall not do. It would be idle for me to describe the contents of Stephen's books, for he rarely wrote an obscure page or a dull line ; and I shall not criticise his books, for I do not possess and cannot now acquire the requisite knowledge or the requisite taste. If, as I doubt not, he has left worthy successors, some one will some day do for him what he to our admiration did for many others : illustrate in a small compass his life by his books, his books by his life, and both by their environment. Meanwhile here are some materials.

II

PARENTAGE

OF Leslie Stephen's ancestry little need be said. He spoke of it at some length when he wrote the life of his brother, Fitzjames, and it would be ill gleaning where he has reaped. Few of those 'rivulets which help to compose the great current of national life' have been better described, and few perhaps were better worth describing, than that which had its origin in a certain James Stephen (*c.* 1733–1779), whom we might call James Stephen I., and who, proceeding from Aberdeenshire, made his home in England. On many a page in the catalogue at the British Museum his progeny have left their mark, for, whatever else a true Stephen might do, he would at all events publish some book or at least some pamphlet for the instruction of his fellow men. Solid and sober, for the more part, were the works of the Stephens: grave legal treatises—for theirs was pre-eminently a family of the long robe—or else pamphlets dealing argumentatively with some matter of public importance. We might amuse ourselves for a moment by suppressing the names of authors, and supposing that books beget books without human aid. Then taking one of Leslie's books, for instance, the 'History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century,' and ascending the direct male line, we might say that it was the son of 'Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography,' which was the son of 'War in Disguise,' which was the son of 'Considerations on Imprisonment for Debt.' We might say that it was the brother of 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity,' and of the 'History of Criminal Law'; the brother also of 'Quaker Strongholds.' We might say that it was the nephew of a classical treatise on Pleading: the nephew also of a very miscellaneous batch of books, including a novel,

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‘The Jesuit at Cambridge’: the uncle of ‘Lapsus Calami,’ and—but the law books are too numerous to mention. Then, if we desert the agnatic lines, we observe that the ‘Science of Ethics’ is the grandchild of many sermons, the great-grandchild of the ‘Complete Duty of Man,’ the great-great-grandchild of ‘The Eternity of Hell Torments asserted,’¹ the first cousin of the ‘Logic of Chance,’ the first cousin also of the ‘Law of the Constitution,’ and, while we are about it, we may add—for affinity also is important—that the ‘Playground of Europe’ is the brother-in-law of ‘Old Kensington’ and the son-in-law of ‘Vanity Fair.’

James Stephen I., being himself a prisoner for debt, made himself somewhat notorious by declaiming against imprisonment for debt, organising an insurrectionary movement in the gaol, and wrangling with the King’s judges. When he was once more a free man, the Benchers of the Middle Temple refused to call him to the Bar owing to his ‘want of birth, want of fortune, want of education, and want of temper.’ Exactly how many of his descendants have done judgment and justice upon mankind from benches more or less exalted in England, Australia and India it would be long to tell. Seven, at the very least, of them have been knighted; two of them were Privy Councillors. They were a strenuous race. Hot tempers we may discern in some instances and sensitive nerves in others; but always there is a certain strenuousness, a certain greediness for work, and not infrequently there is devotion to some cause, a doctrine to be delivered, a crusade to be preached.

Leslie’s grandfather, James Stephen II. (1758–1832), became a Member of Parliament and a Master in Chancery, and devoted his abundant energy and oratorical power to the crusade against negro slavery. His children proceeded from a first wife, but he married as a second wife Wilberforce’s sister and became one of Wilberforce’s closest allies. Also he was a prominent member of the Evangelical Party. The quarrel with negro slavery became an hereditary feud and outlived its connexion with evangelical principles. It broke out for a last time when Leslie, a young clergyman troubled in his faith, tried to teach

¹ See Venn: ‘Annals of a Clerical Family,’ p. 61.

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a not too teachable public the true meaning of the civil war in America ; and the glorious end of that story is a speech in praise of James Russell Lowell, pronounced in the Chapter House at Westminster, by one whose voice had not lately been heard in sacred buildings. 'He wrote war-songs for a crusade against the monstrous evil which was offending the helpless and sapping the moral strength of a nation.' Ancestral Stephens might applaud these words.

James Stephen II. died a few weeks before Leslie was born in the year of the Reform Bill. Of James Stephen III. (1789-1859) a little more, though only a little more, must be said. Both of his distinguished sons, Fitzjames and Leslie, wrote something about his life. Both thought of writing more, but abandoned the project for a reason that will be apparent hereafter. Very briefly we will run over the main facts. The Rt. Hon. Sir James Stephen, K.C.B., for so we might call him by anticipation, was born in 1789, was sent to various private schools and afterwards to Trinity Hall, where, according to his own account, he learnt very little. He took the degree of bachelor of law in 1812, having been called to the Bar in 1811. In 1813 he was appointed counsel to the Colonial Office, and in a few years he was making a professional income highly creditable to so young a man. On December 22, 1814, he married Jane Catherine, daughter of John Venn, Rector of Clapham. Five children were born to them : Herbert Venn was born in 1822 and died when he was twenty-four years old ; a daughter, Frances Wilberforce, was born in 1824, but died in infancy ; the future Sir James Fitzjames was born in 1829 ; the future Sir Leslie in 1832 ; Caroline Emelia in 1834.

But we must return to the father. In 1825 he became permanent counsel to the Board of Trade as well as the Colonial Office, and abandoned his private practice. In 1834 he was appointed Assistant Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, and in 1836 Under-Secretary. One powerful motive for the choice of an official career—which was not, so I gather, altogether congenial to him, and which involved some loss of income—was a desire to influence the action of the British Government in the matter of slavery. The result, however,

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was that for some years momentous in British history he, in the words of his colleague, Sir Henry Taylor, 'virtually ruled the colonial empire.'¹ Secretaries of State for the Colonies—'my bird-of-passage masters,' as he called them—came and went in those days with great rapidity, and some of them when they took office were, so it was currently said, sadly to seek in the geography of the empire; but 'King Stephen,' or 'Mr. Over-Secretary Stephen,' remained at his post, working long hours and without a holiday. To say just what he did and just what he did not—when his advice prevailed with those 'birds-of-passage' and when it was overruled—would probably be impossible, even for one who should ransack the archives of the Colonial Office. We find that on one occasion his friend Charles Greville, the diarist, who was by way of knowing the knowable and a little more, could not profess to apportion the shares that were due to the Cabinet as a whole, to Lord Glenelg in particular, and to Mr. Stephen in the conduct of certain Canadian affairs.² This was the reason why Mr. Stephen's sons were compelled to say less than they might have wished of a father whom they greatly admired.

Unremitting labour in his office, relieved only by the study of ecclesiastical history and the composition of articles for the *Edinburgh Review*, was more than the strength of this naturally strong man could endure. We may see a certain restless and fiery element in the Stephen soul which threatens prematurely to impair the robust body and the vigorous intellect. Mr. Stephen once explained to a brother-in-law how, instead of allowing his mind a fallow, he was practising a rotation of crops and bestowing upon certain learned and polished essays those powers of mind that were fatigued by Colonial despatches. But human nature resents such intensive culture. He was alarmingly ill in 1847, and, after taking sick leave, he in the next year resigned his office at the age of fifty-nine. The loss of his eldest son in 1846 had deeply affected him. He was made a Privy Councillor and knighted. His health improved, and once more he looked about for work. In 1849 he pub-

¹ Taylor: 'Autobiography,' vol. i. p. 233.

² 'Greville Memoirs' (1888), vol. iv. p. 180.