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978-1-108-05733-2 - The Life of Sir John Falstaff: With a Biography of the Knight from Authentic Sources

Robert Barnabas Brough Illustrated by George Cruikshank

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Remembered for both his satirical and serious work, Robert Barnabas Brough (1828–60) was a playwright, journalist, poet and founder member of the Savage Club. Built around a series of inspired etchings by the celebrated artist George Cruikshank (1792–1878), this is a delightful fictional biography, ‘from authentic sources’, of that most colourful of Shakespeare’s characters. We hear how our hero was descended from the great Saxon leader Hundwulf Falstaff, how the name is a corruption of ‘False-thief’, of his adventures with his beloved Prince Hal, and of Christmas 1412 with the Whittington family. Henry V’s terrible rejection of him – ‘I know thee not, old man’ – is touchingly depicted, as are the episode of the laundry basket and other misadventures at Windsor, along with his sad death at the Boar’s Head in 1415. First published in 1858, this book is a must-read for every lover of this larger-than-life figure.

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Sir John Falstaff Knight

Drawn by
William Shakespeare

Etched by
Geo. Cruikshank

London

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“Men of all sorts take a pride to gird at me: The brain of this foolish-compounded clay, man, is not able to vent anything that tends to laughter, more than I invent, or is invented on me: I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men.”

KING HENRY IV. Part 2.

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The Writer's Dedication

TO MARY E. C. BROUGH.



MY DEAREST SISTER,

THE following pages represent (if nothing else) a considerable amount of labour—achieved, as you know, under the most trying circumstances—which I am mainly indebted to your sisterly care and devotion for having been able to accomplish at all.

Accept their dedication, not for their intrinsic worth, but as the only kind of testimonial of love and gratitude just now available to

Your affectionate Brother,

ROBERT B. BROUGH.

March 27, 1858.

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PREFACE.

THE nature and objects of the present work require little, if any, explanation. The whole range of imaginative literature affords no instance of a fictitious personage, ranking, almost inseparably, in the public faith with the characters of actual history, parallel to that of the inimitable Falstaff of Shakspeare. Other creations of the world's greatest dramatist may be as *vraisemblable* and as vividly drawn. But the peculiar association of Falstaff with events that are known to have occurred, and personages who are known to have lived,—added to the fact that his character has been developed to greater length and with more apparent fondness than the poet was wont to indulge in,—make it a matter of positive difficulty to disbelieve that Falstaff actually lived and influenced the age he is assumed to have belonged to,—as much as to doubt that Henry the Fifth conquered at Agincourt, that Hotspur was irascible, and Glendower conceited.

It was a natural thought, then, for a modern humorist,—using the pencil and etching point as his means of expression,—a man whose competence to appreciate and illustrate the arch-humorist, Shakspeare, will scarcely be disputed—to propose to himself a series of pictures embodying the most prominent events in the imaginary career of Shakspeare's most humorous character—in which the illusion intended

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by the dramatist should be carried out by an attention to chronological and archæological probability of detail, in a pictorial sense, corresponding to the marvellous fidelity of historic local colour, which, surrounding the movements of Sir John Falstaff in the Shakspearian dramas, will continue (in spite of all material proof whatever) to bring the veracious records of English history during the fifteenth century into disrepute and suspicion—from the fact of their omitting all mention of Sir John Falstaff's name and achievements.

This design Mr. George Cruikshank has carried out in a series of etchings which forms the essential part of the volume now offered to the public,—with what success, it would not become the present writer—his friend and colleague—to dilate upon. It may be stated, fairly, that no pains have been spared by the artist to make his work conscientiously complete. Every locality indicated by the poet has been carefully studied either from personal observation or reference to the most authentic records—(take, for example, the views of Shrewsbury and Coventry as they appeared in the fifteenth century and the tall spire of “Paul's” before it was struck by lightning). The costumes, weapons, furniture, &c., are from the best available authorities. Had Sir John Falstaff really lived (as it must remain a matter of impossibility to persuade the majority of mankind he did not), and gone through the various experiences imagined for him by Shakspeare, it may be very safely assumed that an eye-witness of all or any of them would have observed a series of scenes very closely resembling the designs which accompany these pages.

The writer of the letter-press—in no spirit of false modesty, but in one of pure business-like candour—disclaims any share in whatever public approval the work may attract. The design was not his but the artist's;

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and he has simply fulfilled, to the best of his powers, a contract, cheerfully accepted, but not drawn up by him. An imaginary biography of Falstaff, away from the scenes described by Shakspeare—supposing the kind of life that must have led up to the marvellous development of an individuality with which the poet has made us all familiar—might have been a work worthy an ambitious man's undertaking. The ambitious man would, probably, have failed to satisfy either his readers or himself,—but that is neither here nor there. The plan of this work—namely, to illustrate the life of Sir John Falstaff exclusively from the most striking passages in his career, as invented by Shakspeare—was completed by the artist ere his literary colleague was applied to for his willingly-rendered assistance. The latter claims no higher place in the transaction, than one proportionate to that of the fiddler who amuses the audience between the acts of a play, or the lecturer who talks unheeded nonsense while a panorama is unrolling.

The author may be permitted one little word of apology, and, perhaps, self-justification, for frequent breaches of punctuality in the periodical issue of the work, for which he, alone, is responsible. The concluding portion of his labours has been achieved under acute and prolonged physical suffering. This may be no excuse for loose or indifferent writing; but, in the memorable words of Ben Jonson to John Sylvester—*it is true*.

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