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978-1-108-06690-7 - Roxburghe Revels, and Other Relative Papers: Including Answers to the Attack on the Memory of the Late Joseph Haslewood, with Specimens of his Literary Productions

Edited by James Maidment

Excerpt

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The Roxburghe Revels.

“ Meanwhile my greatest source of comfort is the generous candour of Hazlewood.”—
Guy Mannering.

“ Perhaps it would be the best way to confide the whole secret to Hazlewood.”—*Ibid.*

AMONG the late Mr. Joseph Haslewood's books was sold a MS., in his own hand-writing, to which he had given the following title :—‘ ROXBURGHE REVELS; or, an *Account of the Annual Display, culinary and festivious, interspersed incidentally with Matters of Moment or Merriment. Also, Brief Notices of the Press Proceedings by a few Lions of Literature, combined as the Roxburghe Club, founded 17th June, 1812.*’ The announcement of this work in the auctioneer's Catalogue excited much astonishment. Mr. Haslewood, it was known, had not died insolvent, or left a widow to struggle on with a large family; he was a bachelor of moderate fortune, who bequeathed his books and other property to

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immediate, but not dependent relations, by whose direction, and for whose profit, this manuscript must have been offered *for sale!* On this strange proceeding we shall not stop to comment. It was enough for us to know that the work itself excited considerable interest, and we resolved therefore to purchase it at any price, that we might gratify curiosity, and give our readers its principal contents. We now set about the fulfilment of our design, in the course of which it will be necessary for us to speak pretty freely of the author, and to say something of most of the other “ lions of literature combined as the Roxburghe Club.” We hope and believe that we shall be able to execute our task without giving offence in any quarter. For any objectionable matter furnished by Mr. Haslewood, we cannot be answerable, and, most assuredly, upon nobody has he been so severe as upon himself. Before we have proceeded much farther, the reader will perceive in what way this “ lion of literature” has been unspairing of his own reputation.

While living, Mr. Haslewood was a very cautious and politic man, and, had he extended this feeling to his death, few would have had reason to complain. Sprung from the very humblest class—we happen to know that he was born in Brownlow Street Lying-in Hospital—he never had any regular education, and he never remedied this original misfortune by subsequent exertion; yet, by strange accidents, he was brought in contact with some of the most scholar-like, best informed, and most accomplished men of the age. Before these, he was generally reserved in conversation—careful to betray his ignorance as little as possible; and, though he could scarcely open his mouth without committing an offence of some kind or other against his mother-tongue, he was prudent enough not to open it often in company where his blunders were likely to be detected. Where, however, he dare do so with impunity, he launched out with wonderful vivacity and assumption of importance; and he persuaded some few, who were even less informed than himself, (they could not be many), to believe that he really was what he calls himself in conjunction with the rest of the Roxburghe Club, a “ Lion of Literature.” If he had termed himself “ a lion of literature and alliteration,” he would have been nearer the mark; for his only *forte* seems to have been “ affecting the letter.” He had a sort of knack of

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this kind, and much of the rubbish he collected, and which was recently sold by Mr. Evans, was recommended to purchasers, about as sagacious as Haslewood himself, not by comical, but by coxcombical, titles.* In addition to these alliterative letterings, he “illustrated,” as he termed it, his books by sundry manuscript notes, scarcely one of which did not betray the grossest ignorance, both of the subject and of the common grammatical modes of expressing an opinion. If Mr. Evans had selected only a few of these characteristic criticisms, they would have formed a most choice assortment of *Haslewoodiana*. The contrast between his caution when living, and his imprudence when dead, is remarkable. He was amazingly fond of fine words in his written compositions, and misapplied them in a manner never exceeded by the antiquated Mrs. Slipslop, or her modern imitator, Mrs. Malaprop;—an important work was always “consequential,” and an unimportant one “inconsequential;”—a reference was generally “allusional,” and sometimes “allusive;”—a book seldom met with was “infrequential,” and tracts corresponding in subject were “anomalous.” When Mr. Haslewood edited any reprint, of which he did several, his unacknowledged obligations to the compositor, if not to the printer’s devil, must have been very considerable.

The Roxburghe Club is now at an end: had its regular meetings been continued to the day of Mr. Haslewood’s death, they could no longer have been held after the exposure he has made of the members and himself. How he contrived to become one of the number, is, to us, a mystery which possibly Dr. Dibdin could explain, for we do not think that at the sale of the

* Mr. Evans, who is an intelligent and judicious man, was almost ashamed of inserting them in his Catalogue, and never did so, without warranting himself, by informing the reader, that Mr. Haslewood had himself entitled such and such an assemblage of forgotten dulness—“Garlands of Gravity”—“Eleemosynary Emporium”—“Poverty’s Pot Pourri”—“Wallat of Wit”—“Beggars’ Balderdash”—“Octagonal Olio”—“Zany’s Zodiac”—“Noddy’s Nuncheon”—“Mumpers Medley”—“Quaffing Quavers to Quip Queristers”—“Tramper’s Twattle, or Treasure and Tinsel from the Tewksbury Tank”—“Nutmegs for Nightingales”—all the merest nonsense in the world, the titles having little, and sometimes no relation to the contents of the volume.

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library of the Duke of Roxburghe, in 1812, his purchases were sufficient in number or value to warrant his filling so prominent a station; and such men as the Duke of Devonshire, Lord Spencer, Lord Gower, Lord Morpeth, Sir F. Freeling, Mr. Baron Bolland, Mr. Justice Littledale, and others, must have felt themselves very ill-assorted, cheek-by-jowl, at a dinner-table at the Clarendon, with such a man as Mr. Haslewood, though a *soi-disant* “Lion of Literature.” Attainments and talents level all ranks; but where were Mr. Haslewood’s attainments?—where were his talents? and how will the well-educated and accomplished members of the Roxburghe Club get over the fact, that they, even once a year, associated with an individual who not only could contribute nothing to the stock of amusement (excepting, perhaps, as a butt,) but was in the habit of playing the spy upon their proceedings, and registering the follies, weaknesses, or unbendings,—call them what you will,—of the convivial board of the preceding day. *Dr. Dibdin seems to have been aware that such a record was kept*, for, on the 5th March 1827, the only occasion, we believe, when Haslewood was absent from the anniversary assembly, he tells him, in a note, that “his *chronicling* powers had been much needed,” underscoring the word “*chronicling*”; and another member may have been also privy to it, as Mr. Haslewood records, that the particulars of what occurred had been furnished to him “by his accurate friend G. H. Freeling, Esq.” However, we shall come to this date in the due course of the transactions, and it is time to insert Mr. Haslewood’s account of the origin and formation of the Club. We must preface our first quotation, by observing, that the author seems to have taken especial pains with it, and that although it contains several inaccuracies and *Haslewoodisms*, we cannot help suspecting, that some other “Lion of Literature” had a finger in the correction of it. Here, again, possibly Dr. Dibdin could enlighten us.

“ OF THE ORIGIN OF THE ROXBURGHE CLUB.

“ The Roxburghe Club claims its foundation from the sale of the library of the late John Duke of Roxburghe, which commenced Monday the 18th

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day of May 1812, and extended to 41 days following, with a supplementary catalogue of three days, beginning Monday 13th July, with the exception of Sundays. The auctioneer was Robert H. Evans of Pall-Mall, being his first attempt to hold and heft the hammer, and the place of sale was at his Grace's late residence in St. James's Square.

“ Upon Wednesday the 17th day of June, ‘ Il Decamerone di Boccaccio ’ was to be sold, and that lot being considered the rarest article in the whole of the Duke's library, (although no one then conjectured it would produce L.2,260,) the Rev. T. F. Dibdin, who therefore justly claims the title of Founder of the Club, suggested, some few days before the sale, the holding a convivial meeting at the St. Albans Tavern after the sale of that day. In consequence of that proposition originated the first of the following circular letters to those who assented to the meeting. The names of the gentlemen present on that occasion, and the resolution then adopted, was noted on the back of the letter of invitation immediately upon returning home. Similar memorandums were made in following years, and when omitted at the hour, were done so shortly afterwards, that it may be said the following papers contain an accurate history of the Club, which, to preserve, Charles Lewis, the binder of all the pieces distributed by the Club, gave same a clothing in April 1817.”

We can only guess what Mr. Haslewood means by “ heft the hammer,” but Dr. Dibdin, in his “ Biographical Decameron,” (III. 51,) by a more figurative expression, explains it when he says, “ Mr. Evans for the first time wielded the sceptre of dominion.” How does the reader think he “ wielded the sceptre of dominion ?” Why, as the learned Doctor himself adds, “ as a bookseller” ! The figure is, therefore, at least appropriate.

We have never approved of the formation of the Roxburghe Club, or of the exclusive principle on which it was established ; the realm of letters is, ought to be, and always will be, a republic—an oligarchy is not only odious, but impossible to be preserved. Neither are eating and drinking such intellectual occupations as well assort with the love of books ; and when eating and drinking the *panem et aquam* degenerate into mere gormandizing and

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guzzling, as they did on every occasion when the Club met, whether annually or accidentally, we do not well see how the general cause of letters can be advanced by such proceedings. The result, too, bears us out; for in what department, let us ask, has this association been beneficial? or how have the prints and reprints of neglected and deservedly-forgotten trash, made from time to time by the Club, been useful either to the living or the dead?

The first specimen of authorship by the Club was not very favourable: it was in the form of a letter of invitation to certain noblemen and gentlemen to dine together—and how was it worded?

“The honour of your company is requested to dine with the Roxburghe dinner on Wednesday the 17th instant.”

We presume that this note was drawn up by Mr. Haslewood, who, as he could not be ornamental, tried to make himself useful; and it is worthy of his pen: “to dine with the Roxburghe *diners*” might have been sense, or “to dine *at* the Roxburghe dinner” would have been better, but the Club, under the superintendence of the genius of Haslewood, scorned all common forms of expression, and therefore Lord Spencer was invited “to dine with a dinner.” What was the result? The following met and dined on the 17th June 1812, at the St. Alban’s Hotel:—

Lord Spencer, President—Lord Gower—Mr. Isted—Mr. Bolland—Mr. Laing—Mr. Freeling—Mr. Haslewood—Mr. Freeling, jun.—Mr. Heber—Sir Mark Sykes—Mr. Wilbraham—Mr. Dent—Mr. Phelps—Mr. Bentham—Sir Egerton Brydges—Mr. Utterson—Rev. T. C. Heber—Mr. Dibdin, Vice.

On the same occasion, a resolution was agreed to by the eighteen noblemen and gentlemen (“Lions of Literature”) present, that the Club should meet annually, and that it should be extended to twenty-four members: the following were therefore admitted *sur le champ*:—

The Duke of Devonshire—The Marquis of Blandford—Lord Morpeth—Mr. Ponton—Mr. Towneley—Mr. Markland.

Mr. Haslewood is generally very particular, but he omits, on this occasion, to supply the important intelligence of the cost of the dinner to each individual—thereafter we shall find that he was minute, not only as to the price,

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but the bill of fare. On the next occasion, Lord Spencer was again in the chair, as President of the Club, and he was “faced,” as usual, by Mr. (afterwards Dr.) Dibdin, and supported by all the members above enumerated, except the Duke of Devonshire, the Marquis of Blandford, (who, as the purchaser of the Valdarfer Boccacio, for L.2,260, ought, one would think, to have been present,) and Sir Mark Sykes. The proceedings we give in the words of Mr. Haslewood, whose clearness of style and accuracy of grammar are equally conspicuous.

“After Lord Spencer left the chair, who departed early, it was taken by Lord Gower, and the following resolutions were put and carried *nem. con.*

“That the Roxburghe Society should have an anniversary dinner on the 17th June, and the number of members be extended and limited to thirty-one.—That such meeting be held at the Saint Alban’s Tavern.—That the mode of election, on any vacancy, should be by ballot, one black ball to exclude.—To fill up the vacancies beyond our original, of twenty-four, there *was* proposed, Lord Althorpe, elected unanimously, without show of hands—Rev. Rob. Holwell Carr—Mr. Joseph Littledale—Mr. Edward Littledale—Mr. Boswell—Rev. Mr. Dodd.

“Mr. Dibdin requested to take the office of Secretary [of course this could not be refused to him.]

“After Lord Gower left the chair, it was filled by Mr. Dent, and Dent and dullness are synonymous [we wonder Mr. Haslewood did not say “anonymous].” To him there succeeded Mr. Heber, with whom a select few tarried, that on arriving at home, the click of time bespoke a quarter to four.

“Dinner reckoning, L.50.

“Whip of half-crowns.

“Very inferior accommodation last year, but an excellent dinner this, moistened with champagne and claret.—*Da capo.*”

What Mr. Dent had done to excite Mr. Haslewood’s spleen, that he should make his name synonymous with dullness, does not appear; but the chance is, that being a gentleman and a scholar, as well as a lover of old books, he felt, and possibly showed, his contempt for Mr. Haslewood: it could hardly be that he usurped a seat on this occasion which Mr. Haslewood thought

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himself better qualified to have filled. It was at this meeting that a resolution was adopted for reprinting rare and curious pieces of “ancient lore,” given by our author in the following form:—

“It was proposed and concluded for each member of the Club to reprint a scarce piece of antient lore, to be given to the members, one copy being on vellum, for the chairman, and only as many copies as members.”

Here we see another objectionable point of exclusiveness, for if what was reprinted were worth the trouble and expense, and would do any good to the cause of letters, what an absurdity—a worse than absurdity—it was to allow only one-and-thirty copies to be struck off. We are happy to say, however, that the resolution of the Roxburghe Club has, at all events, done little harm in this respect, for there are not perhaps four out of the forty-four volumes, thus in the whole produced, that deserve reading, excepting for some purpose purely antiquarian. Mr. Bolland (now Baron Bolland) was the first to set the example, and we must do him the justice to say, that his reprint of the ‘*Certaine Bokes of Virgil’s Æneis*,’ translated by the celebrated Lord Surrey, is one of the few valuable contributions to the Society and to society in general: hence they obtained admission into the collected works of Surrey and Wyatt, by Dr. Knott. In the *Gentleman’s Magazine* for July 1813, may be seen a flaming account of the observance of the anniversary of that year, from the pen of Mr. Markland, under the signature of *Templareus*. These “*Lions of Literature*,” therefore, did not hesitate to puff themselves into a little notoriety; and here we are told that a seat at the India Board, or a directorship of the Bank, were of less value, and would be less eagerly sought, than a seat at the dinner table of the Roxburghe Club!

It is to be observed, that in June 1813, the members were requested “to dine with the gentlemen at Roxburghe Dinner;” but, in the next year, Mr. Haslewood’s authorship for the card of invitation seems to have been again in requisition, and Lord Spencer and the rest were called upon “to dine with the Roxburghe Dinner.” It would puzzle anybody but Beau Nash to dine without a dinner, since the custom of dining with Duke Humphrey went out of use. On this occasion, twenty-one out of the thirty-one sat

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down to table, and their proceedings are thus recorded by the pen of the immortal author of the "Roxburghe Revels."

"A motion was made, but negatived most properly, for an encrease of members.

"After Lord Spencer left the Chair, it was taken, I believe, by Mr. Heber, who kept it up to a late hour: Mr. Dodd very volatile and somewhat singular, at the same time quite novel in amusing the company with Robin Hood ditties and similar productions. I give this on after report, having left the room very early from severe attack of sickness which appeared to originate in some vile compound partook of at dinner:

"The charge was L.2, 5s. p. man, and the wine alleged to have been drank in a proportion of excess that must have intoxicated every one. It was generally believed that the next dinner wo^d not be had at the same place.

"N. B. Mr. Bolland's reprint was not ready."

The Rev. Mr. Dodd, here celebrated, was one of the Masters of Westminster School—a man whom we have good reason to remember—a great collector of old plays and poetry, and especially mad on the subject of ballads relating to Robin Hood and his fellow outlaws. He died in 1818, but until that year, the Roxburghe Club was annually enlivened by his chants, which sometimes held the company over-long, as we used to hear sundry members complain. On the 17th of June 1814, poor Mr. Haslewood seems early in the evening to have been assailed by a "severe attack of sickness," which he attributes to some "vile compound *partook* of at dinner;" we apprehend that it proceeded from some vile compounds partaken of after dinner; but, whether one or the other, he certainly was not in a condition to know whether Mr. Heber did or did not take the chair after Lord Spencer left it. We conclude, that his Lordship abandoned the room about the time when Mr. Haslewood began to be afflicted.

Mr. Richold, of the St. Alban's Tavern, got into sad disgrace, for his real or supposed overcharge for wine on this occasion; but had all the members

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been as much *overcharged* as Mr. Haslewood confesses himself to have been, perhaps, after all, there was no great reason to complain of the bill, and of the “L.2, 5s. p. man.” The next field-day was held at Grillion’s Hotel, and here, the worthy proprietor, obviously having no respect for Mr. Haslewood’s powers of composition, wrote the invitation himself, and nothing, therefore, could be more properly worded. Twenty members assembled under the chairmanship of Sir Mark Masterman Sykes, for nobility and its scions this day were absent. The persevering non-attendance of one or more of the most distinguished members, led to the adoption of a resolution, that any one who was absent for five successive anniversaries, should be considered as no longer belonging to the association. On this occasion it was, that Mr. Bolland’s reprint of “Lord Surrey’s Translation of part of the *Æneid*,” was distributed among the members; and it was agreed, that the order of the alphabet should be pursued, as regarded these donations, for the future; but our annalist adds, with his usual choice phraseology, that it was agreed, that any member might go out of this course if he thought fit.

The bill on this occasion amounted to L.57, or L2. 17s. p. man, and in this instance we are furnished with all the interesting minutiae of the dinner, and the number of bottles of each sort of wine, according to which, these twenty “Lions of Literature,” managed to dispose of drinkables to the extent of about L.33, at one sitting.*

* The authorship of Grillion’s French waiter is to the full as well worth preserving as that of Mr. Haslewood; and we, therefore, give the “reckoning” with “all its imperfections on its head.”

“Dinner du 17 Juin 1815

20	20	0	0
Desser	2	0	0
Deu sorte du Glasse	1	4	0
Glasse pour 6	0	4	0
5 Boutelle de Champagne	4	0	0
7 Boutelle de harmetage	5	5	0