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978-1-108-07739-2 - Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century:
Consisting of Authentic Memoirs and Original Letters of Eminent Persons, and Intended
as a Sequel to the 'Literary Anecdotes': Volume 6

John Nichols

Excerpt

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ILLUSTRATIONS

OF THE

LITERATURE

OF THE

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

WILLIAM GIFFORD, Esq.

WILLIAM GIFFORD, the Juvenal of the 18th Century, the founder, and for twenty years the conductor, of the *Quarterly Review*, published in 1802 a most interesting piece of autobiography. This beautifully artless and honourable narrative, although it has perhaps been more frequently perused than almost any other similar production, none of his friends will be sorry to see inserted in the present Work. Of his early life, therefore, it will, in this introductory memoir, be necessary to notice only the principal events.

Mr. Gifford was born at Ashburton in Devonshire in 1756. His parents were of an inferior station in society; and, losing them both before he had attained his thirteenth year, he was left dependant on the charity of a far from indulgent godfather. After but little education at the free-school of his native town, he was first apprenticed to the master of a coasting vessel, in which he endured great hardships for nearly a twelvemonth; and

VOL. VI.

B

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[More information](#)

2

ILLUSTRATIONS OF LITERATURE.

afterwards to a shoe-maker, whom he served for five years.

In his twentieth year his attempts at verse attracted the notice of Mr. Cookesley, a surgeon in the town; and the remarkable instance he displayed of thirst for knowledge, struggling with almost overwhelming circumstances, prompted that benevolent gentleman to raise a subscription for relieving him from his apprenticeship, and supplying him with proper means of instruction. In little more than two years he was pronounced fit for the University; and, by the interest of one of his patrons, obtained the situation of Bible-reader at Exeter-college, Oxford. His finances were then proposed to be increased by a translation of Juvenal's Satires, to be published by subscription; but the design was thwarted by the death of his friend Mr. Cookesley; and not resumed until after a lapse of twenty years. He was, however, soon enabled to provide himself for his wants, by being allowed to take some pupils; and it was not long after that he was introduced, by an accidental circumstance, to the patronage of Lord Grosvenor. That generous nobleman, after the first exposition of the youthful student's circumstances, charged himself with his support and establishment; and received him under his own roof. Mr. Gifford continued to reside with his Lordship; and as tutor to the present Earl Grosvenor, both at home and in two successive tours on the continent, he spent many years.

Mr. Gifford did not appear as an author until 1794, when his first publication was his Satire, intitled, "The Baviad," levelled at the taste for maudlin poetry then fashionable *. That taste it was so

* "In 1785," says Mr. Gifford in his Preface, "a few English of both sexes, whom chance had jumbled together at Florence, took a fancy to while away their time in scribbling high panegyrics on themselves, and complimentary canzonettas on two or three Italians, who understood too little of the language to be

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

WILLIAM GIFFORD, ESQ.

3

successful in banishing from the British Parnassus, that in the following year he was encouraged again to wield the same weapon for the amendment of dramatic poetry *. This was in "The Mæviad," an

disgusted with them. In this there was not much harm; but as folly is progressive, they soon wrought themselves into an opinion that they really deserved the fine things which were mutually said and sung of each other. About the same period a daily paper, called 'The World,' was in fashion, and much read. This paper was equally lavish of its praise and abuse, and its conductors took upon themselves to direct the taste of the town, by prefixing a short panegyric to every trifle that appeared in their own columns. The first cargo of Della Cruscan poetry was given to the public through the medium of this paper. There was a specious brilliancy in these exotics which dazzled the native grubs, who had scarce ever ventured beyond a sheep, and a crook, and a rose-tree grove; with an ostentatious display of 'blue hills,' and 'crashing torrents,' and 'petrifying suns.' From admiration to imitation is but a step. Honest Yenda tried his hand at a descriptive ode, and succeeded beyond his hopes: Anna Matilda followed; in a word,

—————"Contagio labem
Hanc dedit in plures, sicut grex totus in agris
Unius scabie cadit, et porrigine porci.

"While the epidemic malady was spreading from fool to fool, Della Crusca came over, and immediately announced himself by a sonnet to love. Anna Matilda answered it; and the 'two great luminaries of the age,' as Mr. Bell calls them, fell desperately in love with each other. From that period not a day passed without an amatory epistle fraught with thunder, lightning, *et quicquid habent telorum armamentaria cæli*. The fever turned to frenzy: Laura-Maria, Carlos, Orlando, Adelaide, and a thousand other nameless names, caught the infection, and from one end of the kingdom to another, all was nonsense and Della Crusca. Even then I waited with a patience which I can better account for than excuse, for some one (abler than myself) to step forth to correct this depravity of the public taste, and check the inundation of absurdity that was bursting upon us from a thousand springs. As no one appeared, and as the evil grew every day more alarming (for now bed-ridden old women, and girls at their sampler, began to rave), I determined, without much confidence of success, to try what could be effected by my feeble powers; and accordingly wrote the following poem."

* "I know not," Mr. Gifford declares in the preface to this Satire, "if the stage has been so low since the days of Gammar Gurton as at this hour. It seems as if all the block-

B 2

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

ILLUSTRATIONS OF LITERATURE.

imitation of the tenth Satire of the first book of Horace. Never was satire better employed, or more powerfully directed, than it was in both these instances, but the effect was not equal; for while the triumph of the Baviad was signally decisive, that of the Mæviad was only partial. Not that the execution of the latter failed; on the contrary, of the two the Mæviad excels in pointed wit and dignified severity of language; but, as unfortunately the malady opposed had its seat more in the public manners than in the affectation of individuals, it was not so easily expelled.

The next object of Mr. Gifford's satyric muse was a writer who had made himself notorious by the most scurrilous attacks on all that was good and great in the Kingdom. Mr. Gifford, who well knew the man, his history*, and his habits, discharged against him one of his sharpest arrows, in the form of an "Epistle to Peter Pindar." Wolcott, though a lampooner of others, could not bear to be satirized himself; and, stung to the soul by

heads in the kingdom had started up and exclaimed, *una voce*, 'Come! let us write for the theatres.' In this there is nothing, perhaps, altogether new, but the striking and peculiar novelty of the times seems to be, that all they write is received. Of the three parties concerned in this business, the writers and the managers seem the least culpable. If the town will have husks, extraordinary pains need not be taken to find them any thing more palatable. But what shall we say of the town itself! The lower orders of the people are so brutified and besotted by the lamentable follies of O'Keefe, and Cobbe, and Pilon, and I know not who—*Sardi venales*, each worse than the other—that they have lost all relish for simplicity and genuine humour; nay, ignorance itself, unless it be gross and glaring, cannot hope for 'their most sweet voices.' And the higher ranks are so mawkishly mild, that they take with a placid simper whatever comes before them; or, if they now and then experience a slight disgust, have not resolution enough to express it, but sit yawning and gaping in each other's faces for a little encouragement in their pitiful forbearance."

* It is remarkable that the two keenest satyrists of the age should have been born (out of the metropolis or any large town) within fifteen miles of each other.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

WILLIAM GIFFORD, ESQ.

5

this attack, determined upon revenge. Instead, however, of applying in the first place to his most powerful weapon, "the grey goose quill," he assumed the *argumentum baculinum*, and sallied forth in quest of his adversary. Watching his opportunity, and seeing Mr. Gifford enter the shop of Mr. Wright, the bookseller, in Piccadilly, he rushed in after him, and aimed a blow at Mr. Gifford's head with the cudgel which he had provided for the occasion. Fortunately, a gentleman standing by saw the movement in time to seize the arm of the enraged Poet, who was then bundled out into the street, and rolled in the mud, to the great amusement of the gathered crowd. Nothing further took place at that time, but the disappointed satirist went home and penned one of his worst pieces, which he published with the title of "A Cut at a Cobbler." As, however, there was more passion than either poetry or wit in this performance, the only laugh which it provoked was against its author.

About this time, however, Mr. Gifford entered into a warfare of much greater moment. A number of men of brilliant talents and high connection, at the head of whom was Mr. Canning, the late Premier, having determined to establish a weekly paper, for the purpose of exposing to deserved ridicule and indignation the political agitators by whom the country was then inundated, had engaged as editor a Dr. Grant, well known as a writer in the reviews and other periodical works of that period. A few days before the intended publication of the first number of "The Anti-Jacobin" (which was the name given to the new paper), Dr. Grant being taken seriously ill, sent for Mr. Wright the bookseller, who was to be the publisher of it, told him of his utter inability to discharge the arduous and responsible duties of editor, and requested that he would communicate the

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John Nichols

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6

ILLUSTRATIONS OF LITERATURE.

circumstance to some of the individuals by whom the undertaking had been projected. Mr. Wright accordingly waited upon Mr. Charles Long (now Lord Farnborough), and informed him of what had occurred. Mr. Long asked Mr. Wright if he knew any one who was competent to the office. Mr. Wright mentioned Mr. Gifford's name, and was immediately commissioned to make Mr. Gifford the offer, which that gentleman accepted without hesitation. The first number appeared on the 20th of November 1797, and the publication continued until the 9th of July 1798. Some of the ablest articles in this celebrated journal were written by Mr. Gifford. A corner of the paper was expressly reserved for the "misrepresentation" and "lies" of the Opposition papers; and these misrepresentations and lies it was especially Mr. Gifford's province to detect and expose. Mr. Gifford's connexion with the Anti-jacobin naturally led to a very agreeable intimacy with a number of men of rank and distinction, among whom were Mr. Canning, Mr. Frere, Mr. Charles Long (now Lord Farnborough), Mr. Jenkinson (the present Earl of Liverpool), Lord Mornington (now Marquis Wellesley), Lord Clare, Mr. Pitt, &c. With one or other of these eminent individuals Mr. Gifford dined twice or thrice a week; and at these festive meetings many of the most exquisite papers in the Anti-jacobin were concocted. The value of Mr. Gifford's powerful assistance was acknowledged by every one; but of all governments on the face of the globe, that of England has invariably exhibited the most prudish delicacy of finance in the recompense of literary exertion. The ministerial recollection of Mr. Gifford's services was by no means a signal exception to the rule, although he obtained the Paymastership of the Band of Gentleman Pensioners. At a subsequent period he was made a double commissioner of the lottery.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

WILLIAM GIFFORD, ESQ.

7

In 1802 Mr. Gifford published his Juvenal in quarto, under the title of, "The Satires of Decimus Junius Juvenalis; translated into English verse, with notes and illustrations." The translation was the first of the Roman satirist which had deserved that name*; and in the notes Mr. Gifford found opportunity to display a very extensive acquaintance with the early poetry of his own country. Throughout his life he prosecuted at his leisure hours this interesting study; and at intervals he published the results as a commentator. In 1805 an edition of the plays of Massinger, in four volumes octavo, was issued under his editorial care; and in 1816 appeared the Works of Ben Jonson, in nine octavo volumes. Of Jonson in particular, the most learned in the estimation of his contemporaries, the best poet of his age (although he who "exhausted worlds and then imagined new" is now, by the suffrage of posterity, preferred to a seat so vastly superior,) a standard edition was certainly a great desideratum. The impartial reader must peruse with delight and admiration the able and convincing vindication of the poet's personal character and disposition, which is contained in the 307 introductory pages. Jonson,

* The Monthly Reviewers thus expressed their opinion: "In the translation before us the Roman satirist appears with great advantage. Mr. Gifford has caught the spirit and style of his author; and he has in general accomplished his endeavour, which was to make Juvenal speak as he would probably have spoken if he had lived among us. Excepting Dr. Johnson's admirable imitations of the 3d and 10th Satires, we know not any prior version in our language which could convey to the English reader so complete an idea of the stateliness, force, and point, which are the prominent features of the compositions of this bard. It is needless to mention the translations of Stapleton, Holiday, Dryden and his coadjutors, and Owen, since they will not endure a comparison with that of Mr. Gifford, which conveys the sense and manner of the original in easy and flowing verse." Of some strictures on the Juvenal, which appeared in the Critical Review, Mr. Gifford published an "Examination," in 1803, and a "Supplement to that Examination in 1804." An octavo edition of the Juvenal was published in 1806.

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[More information](#)

though truly honest, sincere, and benevolent, had undeniably a somewhat rough and forbidding demeanour; this made enemies in his own time, and their aspersions were perpetuated by biographers who should have exercised more discrimination. The number was greatly increased by those, who to feed the popular deification of Shakspeare have attempted to immolate at his altar every author that could possibly be brought into comparison with him; as well as by those who in sacrificing to other authors of that period have so frequently made Jonson their victim; and all such Mr. Gifford has classed under the title of the "enemies" of Jonson. The folly, and in many instances the misrepresentations of these enemies, no writer could have proved so deeply, or cauterised so sharply, as the vigorous and undaunted author of the *Baviad* and *Mæviad*.

In 1821 appeared Mr. Gifford's translation of Persius, at the same time with another by that profound and elegant scholar, Sir William Drummond, author of "*Academical Questions*," &c.

At the time of his death Mr. Gifford left, in a complete state for publication, the *Dramatic Works of Ford*, in two volumes, which have since appeared*.

* "Of the text of this long-expected edition of Ford we shall merely say, that its correction and purification display in an uncommon degree, the extraordinary critical skill, sagacity, and perspicuity of the late William Gifford. His vast extent of reading and intimate acquaintance with our ancient dramatists, are signalised by a multitude of amendments; while his judgment and acumen are equally apparent in the great variety of new lights and able annotations dissipating almost all those corrections and mistakes with which careless typography and senseless commentaries had loaded the author. The prefatory matter, contained in an Introduction and Notes, and occupying nearly 200 pages, appears to have been written, or at least begun, about 1812-13, though not finished till very recently, as it alludes to the operas of *Faust* and the *Freyschütz*. Never did Mr. Gifford dip his pen in gall of deeper wormwood flavour than in his remarks on Steevens, Malone, Weber, (and, by implication with the latter, somewhat on Sir Walter Scott,) in these pages. He has cut, and spared not; and whether we

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John Nichols

Excerpt

[More information](#)

WILLIAM GIFFORD, ESQ.

9

Those of Shirley, in six volumes, were also advanced towards the middle of the last volume; and whilst this page is printing they are still due to the world, although they may very probably be published before the present volume*.

Throughout the early part of these labours, the height of Mr. Gifford's ambition in this department of literature was to superintend an edition of Shakspeare; and in one passage of his Jonson in particular (perhaps in more than one) he particularly laments that his former prospects of the realisation of this wish were not likely to be gratified.

To proceed to speak of Mr. Gifford in the character in which he was most generally known,—that of editor of the *Quarterly Review*. On its establishment in 1809, he was, in a happy hour for the proprietor and for the public, appointed its conductor; and it remained under his direction until about two years before his decease. Of the unwearied industry, extensive knowledge, varied talent, correct judgment, and sound principle, exhibited by Mr. Gifford in the management of this excellent and popular publication, during the long course of between fifteen and sixteen years, it is wholly unnecessary to speak. It must be acknowledged that at times his pen was at least sufficiently severe; but it

acknowledge or deny the justice of all his lashes, we must, while we accuse them of being harsh and remorseless, confess that they bestow a discipline on the genius of lumbering and perplexing annotators, which may have a salutary effect in future times on worthies of that kind." *Lit. Gaz.* March 3, 1827.

* "The Plays and Poems of Shirley, which never had been previously collected and uniformly printed, Gifford lived to finish; and, it is said, the 'Life of Shirley,' which alone was incomplete at Mr. Gifford's death, was in a considerable state of advancement. The papers are, we understand, at present with the executor, Dr. Ireland, who laboured so hard upon his analysis of the Plays of Massinger, and had so long and intimate acquaintance with the views and literary opinion of Mr. Gifford; so that this most interesting work, which has been nearly eighteen years in the press, will probably soon be ready for publication." *St. James's Chronicle*, Oct. 1827.

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John Nichols

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

ILLUSTRATIONS OF LITERATURE.

merits observation, that none of the various parties, poetical, religious, or political, that occasionally felt the castigation bestowed upon their productions in the *Quarterly Review*, ever ventured to recriminate, by attacking the moral character of the editor. Even Lord Byron, who alternately praised and abused most of his contemporaries, professed great respect for Mr. Gifford, lauded the purity of his principles, and courted his friendship.

Mr. Gifford died at his house, No. 6, James-street, Buckingham-gate, on the 31st of December, 1826. It was his original wish to be buried in the burying-ground * attached to Grosvenor

* Where there is a tomb-stone displaying the following epitaph:

“Here lies the body of ANN DAVIES, for more than xx years servant to WILLIAM GIFFORD. She died February 6th, MDCCCXV, in the XXXXIII year of her age, of a tedious and painful malady, which she bore with exemplary patience and resignation. Her deeply afflicted master erected this stone to her memory, as a painful testimony of her uncommon worth, and of his perpetual gratitude, respect, and affection, for her long and meritorious services.

Though here unknown, dear Ann, thy ashes rest,
Still lives thy memory in one grateful breast,
That trac'd thy course through many a painful year,
And marked thy humble hope, thy pious fear.
O! when this frame, which yet, while life remain'd,
Thy duteous love with trembling hand sustain'd,
Dissolves (as soon it must), may that bless'd Power,
Who beam'd on thine, illumine my parting hour!
So shall I greet thee, where no ills annoy,
And what was sown in grief, is reap'd in joy;
Where worth, obscur'd below, bursts into day,
And those are paid whom earth could never pay.”

“His regard for this faithful attendant also manifested itself in the following simple, beautiful, and affecting stanzas; which rank with the best productions of our elegiac poetry:

“I wish I was where Anna lies,
For I am sick of lingering here,
And every hour affection cries,
‘Go and partake her humble bier.’