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### **Biographia Borealis**

Hartley Coleridge (1796–1849), the eldest surviving son of the poet S.T. Coleridge, himself tried to earn a living as a writer and teacher, but his own disposition, the result of a difficult upbringing during which his frequently absent father used him as the subject of scientific and psychological research, made it difficult for him to function in the real world, and he relied for much of his life on the charity of friends for both income and home. This 1833 work on the ‘lives of distinguished northerns’ was originally commissioned by a publisher who subsequently went bankrupt, but the thirteen lives presented here – including Andrew Marvell, Anne Clifford, Richard Arkwright, and James Cook – are described with Coleridge’s characteristic warmth. In his introduction, he makes a distinction between biography as part of public history and as personal, local or family history: these sketches definitely fall into the latter category.

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# Biographia Borealis

*Or, Lives of Distinguished Northerns*

HARTLEY COLERIDGE



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*Del. scul. pinxt.*

*J. W. Cook sculp.*

ANDREW MARVELL.

*Copied by permission from the original  
in the British Museum.*

*Published June 1, 1832, by F. E. Bingley, 67 Briggate, Leeds.*

BIOGRAPHIA BOREALIS;  
  
OR  
  
LIVES  
  
OF  
  
DISTINGUISHED NORTHERNS,  
  
BY  
  
HARTLEY COLERIDGE.

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Hic manus ob patriam pugnando vulnera passi,  
Quique sacerdotes casti dum vita manebat,  
Quique pii vates et Phœbo digna locuti,  
Inventas aut qui vitam excoluère per artes,  
Quique sui memores alios fecêre merendo.

VIRGIL. ÆNID. VI.

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1833.

## ADVERTISEMENT.

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THE *Lives* contained in this volume were originally intended to form part of a much longer series of provincial Biography. From causes, in *which the Author alone is concerned, and for which he alone is responsible*, the publication is for a time suspended. The sample here offered, is, however, independent and complete in itself: and should it meet with approbation, the Author hopes at no distant period, to resume and fulfil the original design.

He trusts that few inaccuracies or deficiencies will be found in the detail of facts. One or two inadvertencies he takes this opportunity of correcting. The “*Mercunis Rusticus*” mentioned page 16, was not a Newspaper; but an account of the sufferings of the Episcopal Clergy, during the Commonwealth, written by Bruno Ryves, some time Rector of Acton, and published soon after restoration, probably with a view to justify or filliate the “*Bartholoma Act.*” The dates of Roger Ascham’s degrees, were 1534, and 1536, not, as given in his life, 1538, and 1544. It was not the Earl of *Carnarvon* that fell at the battle of Edge-hill, as stated in the life of Roscoe, but the Earl of *Lindsey*. Robert Earl of Carnarvon, was slain at the first battle of Newbury.

As to the principles on which the work has been conducted, and the sentiments which it breathes, explanation is needless, and apology would be base. The Author finds nothing to retract, nothing which he is resolved to dilute into no meaning, and nothing with which any sect, party, or person, can be justly offended.

TO THE  
RIGHT HONOURABLE  
THE EARL FITZWILLIAM,  
THESE NOTICES  
OF THE  
TALENT AND VIRTUE OF THE PROVINCE,  
WHICH HE HATH SO LONG HONOURED WITH HIS RESIDENCE,  
AND BENEFITTED BY HIS BOUNTY,  
ARE,  
WITH HIS OWN GRACIOUS PERMISSION,  
RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED  
BY  
HIS SINCERE AND GRATEFUL ADMIRER,  
HARTLEY COLERIDGE.



## INTRODUCTORY ESSAY.

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WHAT duller looking volume than a Parish Register? What drier commentary on the trite text, *Mors omnibus communis*? What is it, but a barren abstract of the annals of mortality—

—————Where to be born, and die,  
 Of rich and poor makes all the history?

It might, indeed, set on a calculator, or a life-insurance broker, to compute the comparative duration of life in different periods; a Shandean philosopher to speculate on the successive fashions in christian names; a manuscript-hunter to note down the revolutions of penmanship; or a moral economist to infer the progress of corruption from the increase of illegitimate births: but to men whose thoughts and feelings travel in the “high-way of the world,” its all-levelling uniformity presents neither amusement nor instruction.

But suppose an aged man to open this same volume, and, seated in the midst of a circle of his fellow-parishioners, run his eye along the time-discoloured pages, and relate his recollections, and his father’s, and his great-great-grandfather’s recollections of every name in the list, though perhaps few had done more than erect a new dial, or leave the interest of £5 to be distributed on New-Year’s Day to twenty poor widows; yet his talk would not be devoid of interest to such as “find a tale in every thing,” and that all of whom he spake had been born within hearing of the same church clock, would infuse a family-feeling into his narratives.—He would be a local biographer.

If a few leading characters be excepted, who often owe their exception more to fortune and circumstance than to their intrinsic power, the notices of men in general histories are very much like the Parish Register:—consisting of names and dates, and events in which the bulk of the species are as passive as in their own birth and death. Nor can the majority of readers derive any thing from such histories,

better than empty speculations, not quite so trifling, perhaps, but quite as foreign to their “business and bosoms,” as those of the virtuosos before mentioned. *Biography* is required, like the old man, to give history a human meaning and purpose.

It is, indeed, frequently asserted, that *Biography* is a most important *part* of History ; and if by history we mean all such knowledge as rests upon testimony—as distinguished from science, which is grounded on demonstration, or on experiment, this is undoubtedly true. But it is more for our purpose, to consider *Biography* as the *antithesis* of History ; to divide the knowledge of the past, founded on testimony, into History and *Biography*. The distinction we would draw, is not between an inclusive *greater*, and an included *less*, as Geography is distinguished from Topography, but rather such as obtains between Mechanical philosophy and Chemistry ; the former of which calculates the powers of bodies in mass,—the latter analyses substances, and explains their operations by their composition.

The facts of the same life may be considered either biographically or historically. If the acts or circumstances of an individual are related only as they bear upon the public interests—if the man be regarded as a state engine, no matter whether he be the steam engine that sets the whole in motion, or one of the most insignificant spindles—if his fortune be set forth, not for any personal interest to be taken therein, but merely as an instance, proof, cause, or consequence, of the general destiny—such an account, though it admitted nothing that did not originate from, or tend towards, a single person, ought not to be called a biography, but a history. Thus Robertson’s Charles V. is not a life of Charles V. but a history of Europe in the age of Charles V. On the other hand, the private Memoirs of a public character are no necessary part of public history. Anecdotes of Kings and Ministers, Courtiers and Mistresses, do not explain the state of a nation ; they are only so far historical as they indicate the average of morals ; and in this point of view they are often extremely delusive,—for the Court is not the dial plate of the national heart. We have been led to state this, though not perhaps in the direct line of our argument, because the substituting a very exceptionable kind of Court biography for true national history is a mistake often practically made, and very mischievous ; not only be-

cause it bestows the dignity of history on prurient or malignant scandal, but because it breeds a false belief that the welfare and distress of communities are doled out at the discretion of a few fine dressed individuals, who, according to the popular temper, become idols or abominations.

A portion of history does, indeed, enter into all biography. The interests of individuals are so implicated in those of the community, that the life of the most domestic female could not be justly understood without some knowledge of the politics of the time in which she lived. Now what to one age is *Politics*, becomes *History* to all that succeed. The impossibility of writing the annals of a nation without recording the acts, words, and characters of many men in that nation, is obvious. But a philosophical historian always has his eye fixed on an *Event*, or a *Principle*; individual interests and personal characters he considers but as water drops in the “mighty stream of tendency.” If he weighs Scipio against Hannibal, it is because they represented Carthage and Rome: if he drops a tear at Philippi, it is not for Brutus, but for the Republic. Whatever diverts attention from the onward course of things, without representing their general aspect, is, in a history, out of place, just as much as anecdotes of physicians and patients, or puffing descriptions of steam-packets, watering places, and the Island of Madeira, in a scientific treatise of medicine. The more interesting such episodes may be, the more they obstruct the historian’s legitimate purpose; for the proper interest of history is of a very high abstract quality, and consists chiefly in observing the operation of great principles upon communities in long periods of time; in remarking how the seeming contradictions of facts, tempers, and opinions unite in one result, as this planet, in which there are at every moment so many millions of conflicting motions,—mechanical, chemical, vital, and voluntary, diverging and converging in every possible direction, is still itself moving along the same everlasting way. The motion of the heavens is a sublime contemplation; so are the great, ordained revolutions of empires, magnificent subjects of thought. But to understand either the one or the other; to reduce the multitude of phenomena under a law of unity; and again to trace that law in the infinite detail of its operations; to verify general conclusions by fit inductions; to prove what really is the centre and source of motion and change, and what is inertly and

passively moved ; is a slow, dry, laborious work of intellect, requiring an intense and continuous attention, which few minds can sustain, and none will find agreeable. For in all abstract processes, besides the strong exertion of one faculty, which as conveying the sense of power, may be pleasurable, it is necessary to keep others under an almost painful constraint. The mind must be held, if the phrase may be allowed, in *decomposition*. No wonder then, if it seize eagerly on the first opportunity of returning to its natural state, and bringing the imagination and sympathies into play. Hence the introduction of biographical, or human interest, into political history, indisposes both reader and writer for the hard passionless spirit of enquiry, so essentially necessary to arrive at those grand principles which convert facts into truths ; principles in the light whereof a statesman ought to read the past, and without which history is, for all political application, something worse than an old almanack. For it should be left to the *administrators* of the laws to seek for precedents ; the *makers* of laws should regard only principles. Facts, for antiquaries ; Examples, for school-boys ; Precedents, for lawyers ; Principles, for legislators. Let us take an instance, in the reign of our own Elizabeth. Does not our interest in the beautiful Queen of Scotland, interfere with our attention to the interests of the public ? and is that interest at all more *historical* in the strict sense of the word, than that we take in the fortunes of Desdemona or Clarissa ? Or, to go back a little, are not fair Rosamond, and Jane Shore, in popular recollection, the most prominent characters in their respective epochs ; epochs memorable for great changes in society, and rapid development of the constitution ? Let us not deceive ourselves after the manner of those that write, or perhaps rather of those that *buy*, pretty books for children. The romance of history only differs from other romances by requiring no invention.

But it will be said, that it is quite natural that we should care more about *persons*, who are our fellow creatures, than about state interests and revolutions, which, in the aggregate, are *brute* forces, as unsympathizing as the lever, the pulley, or the steam-engine ; and that most people would find history very tiresome, if it were written according to the idea above proposed. To this we answer, that we do not wish history, for general perusal, to be so written. We only wish to distin-

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guish the peculiar end, object, and function of History from that of Biography.

In history all that belongs to the individual is exhibited in subordinate relation to the commonwealth; in biography, the acts, and accidents of the commonwealth are considered in their relation to the individual, as influences by which his character is formed or modified,—as *circumstances* amid which he is placed,—as the sphere in which he moves, or the material he works with. The man, with his works, his words, his affections, his fortunes, is the end and aim of all. He does not, indeed, as in a panegyric, stand alone like a statue, but like the central figure of a picture, around which others are grouped in due subordination and perspective, the general circumstances of his times forming the back and fore ground. In history, the man, like the earth on the Copernican hypothesis, is part of a system; in Biography, he is like the earth in the ancient Cosmogony, the centre and the final cause of the system.

There is one species of history which may with great propriety be called biographical, to which we do not remember to have heard the term applied;—we mean that wherein an order, institution, or people, are invested with personality, and described as possessing an unity of will, conscience, and responsibility;—as sinning, repenting, believing, apostatizing, &c. Of this, the first and finest sample is in the Old Testament, where Israel is constantly addressed, and frequently spoken of, as an individual; and the final restoration of the descendants of Abraham is treated as the redemption of ONE body from disease, of ONE soul from perdition. The scripture *personality* of Israel is something far other, and infinitely more real, than the *personification* of Britannia; and points at a profounder mystery than human sense can ever interpret.

Much has been said about the usefulness of history, meaning thereby the history of nations; and hardly too much can be said, if regard be had to the community and its rulers; for it makes the Past a factor to buy up experience for the Present; and enables the purged eye to “look into the seeds of time.” But if the consideration be private, fireside, *moral* usefulness, we think the bene-

fits of historical reading as a necessary department of education, or a profitable employment of leisure hours, have been very much exaggerated. It may, indeed, do no harm, for the same reason that it does no good, viz. because it takes no hold ; it glides away like globules of crude quicksilver over a smooth surface, or at most is deposited in the shew-room of the memory :—because no conclusions, applicable to common life, can be drawn from it ; because it excites no sense of reality. It is gone through as a task,—by children on compulsion, by *young people* as a merit. The most remarkable thing about your history-reading young ladies, is the self-satisfaction with which they turn over the pages ; and in truth, they might be doing much worse, but might they not also be doing much better ? To make this sort of reading available for any purpose, requires very deep and wide research, and harder thinking than we would gladly see young brows furrowed withal ; for not one man in a thousand, not one woman in a million, is called on to make any use of their politic wisdom when they have got it, and nothing is more likely to delude and puzzle simple persons in the exercise of their political rights, than a superficial acquaintance with the heads of history. But this same politic wisdom itself, even when genuine, and not a puffed conceit, is one of the most unwholesome fruits of the tree of knowledge, and if the mind be not fortified with good and sufficient antidotes, is a moral poison. Why is the “murderous Machiavél” a bye word of abhorrence ? Whence is it, that while the bloody deeds of conquerors shine fair in story and in song, as the wounds of the Faithful in Moslem Paradise, the master-strokes of the subtle politicians, of the Richelieus and Bedomars, only appear as letters of sulphurous flame, writing their own condemnation ? Because the heart of man gives honour to bravery, which is nature’s gift, but has no respect for the wisdom which grows of experience in evil ways. Now the study of history in books can give only the same kind of knowledge, and the same habits of mind, as men long versed in public affairs gain by actual experience ; the impression will, indeed, be much fainter, the effect for good or ill much less potent, but it is the same as far as it goes. It is like the knowledge of the world acquired by keeping bad company. Now the study of Biography has at least this advantage, that it enables the student to select his companions. If he

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chooses Colonel Jack, or Moll Flanders, it is his own fault. But history not only continually exhibits the doings of bad men, but it exhibits only the bad, or at any rate the worse, acts of good ones: for most men are better in their private than in their public relations.

Frail and corrupt as human nature is, it is by no means so hateful, so utterly forsaken of Heaven, as the transactions of kingdoms and republics (there is little difference between the two) would incline us to think. The best part, even of the most conspicuous characters, is that which makes the least shew and the least noise. And after all, the history of nations is only the history of a small portion of the life of a very few men.

We cannot be supposed to censure the study of history: we only wish it to be properly balanced by studies which tend to keep the eye of man upon his own heart, upon the sphere of his immediate duties, of those duties, where his affections are to be exercised and regulated, and which, considering man as a person, consider him as sentient, intelligent, moral, and immortal. For simply to think of a man as a sentient being, is inconsistent with that hard-hearted policy which would employ him, reckless of his suffering or enjoyment, like a wedge or a rivet, to build up the idol temple of a false national greatness; to regard him as intelligent, or rather as capable of intelligence, condemns the system that would keep him in ignorance to serve the purposes of his rulers, as game cocks are penned up in the dark that they may fight the better; to regard him as moral, corrects the primary conception of national prosperity; and to revere him as immortal, commands peremptorily that he shall never be made a tool or instrument to any end in which his own permanent welfare is not included.

It is in all these capacities that the biographer considers his subjects. He speaks of actions, not as mere links in the concatenation of events, but as the issues of a responsible will. He endeavours to place himself at the exact point, in relation to general objects, in which his subject was placed, and to see things as *he* saw them—not, indeed, neglecting to avail himself of the vantage ground which time or circumstances may have given him to correct what was delusive in the partial aspect, but never forgetting, while he exposes the error, to explain its cause.

The work to which these remarks are prefixed is purely biographical.

It professes no more than to introduce the reader to an acquaintance with the several *Worthies* that may drop in upon him during the course of publication. As it will comprise characters in every profession; of all parties, and many religious denominations, the author cannot in all cases undertake to decide upon the professional merits of those whose lives he has endeavoured to depict; or to criticise purely professional works, such as relate to physic, engineering, &c.; but will faithfully detail the judgments which have obtained public credit. As to matters of opinion, whether political or religious, his rule has been, to make each speak for himself in his own words, or by his own actions, taking care, as far as possible, to represent the opinions that men or sects have actually held, in the light in which they have been held by their professors—not in the distorted perspective of their adversaries. He enters into no engagement to withhold his own sentiments; but he will not judge, much less condemn, the sentiments of others.

A work of this nature necessarily borrows much, but wherever original matter was attainable, it has been gladly used, and in the proper place, thankfully acknowledged. And so far we have discharged our duty as chairman to the combined meeting of the great Counties of Yorkshire and Lancashire.

H. C.