

# THE C.L.S. BULLETIN

(Organ of THE CHARLES LAMB SOCIETY, founded 1935)

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## Lamb as Poet.

By E. F. LEWIS.

Lamb's eloquent eulogy of Munden ends with a paragraph which I ask your leave to quote in part, familiar though it be.

"Can any man WONDER, like him? Can any man SEE GHOSTS like him? . . . Who like him can throw, or ever attempted to throw, a preternatural interest over the commonest daily-life objects? A table or a joint-stool, in his conception, rises into a dignity equivalent to Cassiopeia's chair. It is invested with constellatory importance. You could not speak of it with more deference, if it were mounted into the firmament. A beggar in the hands of Michael Angelo, says Fuseli, rose the Patriarch of Poverty. So the gusto of Munden antiquates and ennobles what it touches. His pots and his ladles are as grand and primal as the seething pots and hooks seen in old prophetic vision. A tub of butter, contemplated by him, amounts to a Platonic idea. He understands a leg of mutton in its quiddity. He stands wondering, amid the commonplace materials of life, like primæval man with the sun and stars about him."

It would be hard to find a more adequate definition of the poet and his function than that passage enriches us with, albeit by the way. It fits the best of Wordsworth and of Coleridge; how does it suit Lamb's own muse? The answer, I submit, is that to see Lamb passing the test triumphantly, as he does pass it triumphantly, we must turn to his prose; to rapt sentences, like those I have just quoted, and others elsewhere in the Essays, of which Mr. Lewis May's citations from "The South Sea House" are examples: specially endeared to us, these last, from our Vice-President's expounding of them.

We must, then, invert the order which Lamb uses in his dedicatory sonnet to Martin Burney:

"My verse was offered to an older friend;  
The humbler prose has fallen to thy share."

and recognize that in treating of the Poems—I speak broadly—we are concerned with the lesser glory.

I suggest, by way of definition, a threefold division of the verses: first, those we treasure for their autobiographical interest; secondly, those in which we take delight for the play of humorous invention in them; and, thirdly, those—the best-loved and most often quoted—which give expression to the "natural piety" at the core of everyman's experience.

Best in the first kind are some of the sonnets; and of these I pick out for example that written to his sister Mary.

"If from my lips some angry accents fell,  
Peevish complaint, or harsh reproof unkind,  
'Twas but the error of a sickly mind  
And troubled thoughts, clouding the purer well,  
And waters clear, of Reason; and for me  
Let this my verse the poor atonement be—  
My verse, which thou to praise wert ever inclined  
Too highly, and with a partial eye to see  
No blemish. Thou to me didst't ever show  
Kindest affection; and would oft-times lend  
An ear to the desponding love-sick lay,  
Weeping my sorrows with me, who repay  
But ill the mighty debt of love I owe,  
Mary, to thee, my sister and my friend."

Others voice the dreams and sighs of young love, and lament its loss since the "fair-hair'd maid" vanished with "days which ne'er must come again." The poetic feeling in which that episode in his life was enshrined for Lamb is to be found, however, not in these verses which he wrote in his youth, but in the lovely deep-toned "Dream Children" essay of his maturity. Yet we read the sonnets with glistening affection, recalling, as

we do, what their author himself says of them in that noble Dedication of his Works to Coleridge:

"Some of the Sonnets, which shall be carelessly turned over by the general reader, may happily awaken in you remembrances, which I should be sorry should be ever totally extinct—  
the memory  
Of summer days and of delightful years—even so far back as to those old suppers at our old Inn,—when life was fresh, and topics exhaustless,—and you first kindled in me, if not the power, yet the love of poetry, and beauty and kindness.—  
What words have I heard  
Spoke at the Mermaid!"

Next among my favourites in the sonnets is that to Miss Kelly, whose tears "had passion in them and a grace of genuine freshness"; whose smiles were "winds whose ways" could not be traced; who "kept her native dignity of thought"; but whom we as Elians honour for the reason that Lamb held her in such honour.

As examples of the humorous verse, I choose the lines  
"Free Thoughts on Several Eminent Composers,"  
with their most witty and ingenious rhymes; and "A Farewell to Tobacco":

"Scent to match thy rich perfume  
Chemic art did ne'er presume  
Through her quaint alembic strain,  
None so sov'reign to the brain.  
Nature, that did in thee excel,  
Framed again no second smell  
Roses; violets, but toys,  
Or for greener damsels meant;  
Thou art the only manly scent.  
Stinking'st of the stinking kind,

Filth of the mouth and fog of the mind,  
Africa, that brags her foison,  
Breeds no such prodigious poison,  
Henbane, nightshade, both together,  
Hemlock, aconite—

Nay, rather,  
Plant divine, of rarest virtue;  
Blisters on the tongue would hurt you,  
'Twas but in a sort I blamed thee;  
None e'er prosper'd who defamed thee";

Well; we can to-day salute the "greener damsels" as accomplices in this magnificent mock Farewell: and then note how the humour, as will be found by reference to both examples in full, is dyed with the idiosyncrasy that is the mark of Lamb.

Among the poems in which the deepest tones of life and mortality are sounded, I select first the Lines, with their touches of imagination, Shakespearean in quality, I think.

"On an Infant dying as soon as born."

Do you not find Shakespeare—no less than he—coming to mind as you read, and re-read, these, with their questionings of "the economy of Heaven?" And, next,

"The Old Familiar Faces":

itself the most familiar, the most Elian sheaf of all. Lamb is closest to you and me in these haunting stanzas, charged with the realisation of loss and change and unrelenting Time, at work upon the lonely fugitive soul. A page or two away, and we light upon

"Hester"

with its shining close:

"My sprightly neighbour! gone before  
To that unknown and silent shore,  
Shall we not meet, as heretofore,  
Some summer morning,

When from thy cheerful eyes a ray  
Hath struck a bliss upon the day,  
A bliss that would not go away,  
A sweet fore-warning?"

I began this so inadequate note with a quotation; may I end it with another: Walter de la Mare's "Fare Well," in which is distilled for our time, as it seems to me, a spirit akin to Lamb's own?

"When I lie where shades of darkness  
Shall no more assail mine eyes,  
Nor the rain make lamentation  
When the wind sighs;  
How will fare the world whose wonder  
Was the very proof of me?  
Memory fades, must the remembered  
Perishing be?

Oh, when this my dust surrenders  
Hand, foot, lip, to dust again,  
May those loved and loving faces  
Please other men!  
May the rusting harvest hedgerow  
Still the Traveller's Joy entwine,  
And as happy children gather  
Posies once mine.

Look thy last on all things lovely,  
Every hour. Let no night  
Seal thy sense in deathly slumber  
Till to delight  
Thou have paid thy utmost blessing;  
Since that all things thou wouldst praise  
Beauty took from those who loved them  
In other days."

## Report of Recent Meetings.

### The Poet Lamb.

On July 10th the C.L.S. held its annual symposium, at which members offered short papers upon a chosen subject. "Charles Lamb as a Poet" was the subject for 1943, and there were interesting contributions by Mrs. M. Oglethorpe, Mr. E. F. Lewis, Mr. S. M. Rich and Mr. H. G. Smith. Mr. Walter Farrow presided, and Mr. E. G. Crowsley gave the introductory reading, extracts on poetry from two letters to Coleridge, and Lamb's sonnet on Martin Burney. Mrs. Oglethorpe thought that Lamb's reputation as a poet was best sustained by his prose writings, of which she gave examples in illustration; while his writings in verse revealed much lower poetical quality. Mr. Rich, however, held that Lamb's poetical work had been under-valued, perhaps owing to the fact that his prose excelled it so obviously. Mr. Smith did not concern himself with assessing comparative values, and everybody present much enjoyed his detailed commentary and notes on the eight stanzas of "The Old Familiar Faces," his favourite poem by Lamb. Mr. Lewis's paper is reproduced in full in this issue of THE BULLETIN. There was an unusually large attendance, and members were able to continue discussion on the subject informally, owing to the pleasant innovation, by which tea was brought *up* to the meeting, instead of the meeting going *down* to tea.

### The Cowden Clarkes.

The meeting on September 11th was opened by the customary reading. Miss F. Reeves read selected passages from "A Chapter on Ears," as a fitting prelude to Mrs. M. Oglethorpe's paper on "The Cowden Clarkes." This was in two parts, the first dealing in a more formal way with the lives and varied literary activities of this remarkable married couple, both of whom were associated intimately with the Lambs; and the second part, an imagined encounter between Charles Cowden Clarke and the young Keats at the school in Southborough Road, Enfield, kept by his father, John Cowden Clarke. In the discussion that followed, Messrs. J. P. Collins, E. G. Crowsley, F. V. Hallam, E. F. Lewis and E. C. Thomas each had something interesting to contribute. Mr. S. M. Rich expressed the meeting's thanks to Mrs. Oglethorpe, and Mr. Walter Browne to Mr. Farrow, who presided.

### To Charles Lamb.

"Thee would I think one of the many Wise,  
Who in Eliza's time sat eminent,  
To our now world, his Purgatory, sent  
To teach us what true English Poets prize.  
Pasquilant froth and foreign galliardize  
Are none of thine; but, when of gay intent  
Thou usest staid old English merriment,  
Mannerly mirth, which no one dare despise,  
The scoffs and girds of our poor critic rout  
Must move thy pity, as amidst their mime,  
Monk of Truth's Order, from thy memories  
Thou dost updraw sublime simplicities,  
Grand Thoughts that never can be wearied out,  
Showing the unreality of Time.

RICHARD MONCKTON MILNES (LORD HOUGHTON).

(*Poetical Works*, 1876: Vol. II, p. 218.)

### This Absolute Dilettante!

In the past century there lived in London a clerk of the retiring disposition behoving a man of little means, yet with a turn for the brilliant in civilisation, especially for the theatre, for beautiful actresses, for talent and elegance. This man was a playgoer, of course, but in his leisure hours in the day-time, he would read plays, plays of all times and all countries, plays of any description, provided they gave him pleasure. No reader ever placed his own enjoyment more decidedly before any other consideration. We know his impressions, we can hardly be better informed about the mental background of anybody than about this absolute dilettante. Uniquely by his untiring application to pleasing himself and by his delight in analysing his pleasure, this man achieved no mean originality. It is evident that, had he compelled himself to read famous sermons, as many of his contemporaries still did, he would have made his life not only less enjoyable but useless. His name was Charles Lamb. When we look into the kind of literature he used to read, we discover it was the pink of dramatic literature, and the prejudice against perfection left on us by the defects of teaching or teachers is so strong that immediately our chin falls and we know the familiar impression of disgust.

For all that, Lamb had a superb time all his life reading his sixteenth-century dramatists, a much better time than trash, unhampered by any inferiority complex, can ever give even us.

"The Art of Thinking."

By ERNEST DIMNET (*Abbé, Cambrai Cathedral*).

## A Link with Charles Lamb.

### "The Excellent Mr. Burls."

The Baptist Missionary Society, as one way of commemorating its ter-jubilee, is issuing a series of "Brief Biographies of Leading Laymen." No. 4 in this series, by Rev. Ernest A. Payne, B.A., B.D., B.Litt., devoted to "The Excellent Mr. Burls," who was the third in succession to hold the office of treasurer of the society, should be of interest to lovers of Charles Lamb. Mr. Payne, after noting that William Burls was born in London in March, 1763, recalls that Burls's early years were marked by sorrow and hardship, as both his parents died when he was quite young. But a place was secured for him at Christ's Hospital, the famous Bluecoat School, then in its old premises off Newgate Street. "Our most vivid pictures of this great foundation," writes Mr. Payne, "come from a few years later when Charles Lamb and S. T. Coleridge, and then Leigh Hunt, were there at school. Burls had left before these gifted boys arrived, but he must have been at Christ's Hospital with one who later was to be their close friend—George Dyer, the eccentric minor poet and bookworm, for Dyer's schooldays there lasted from 1762 to 1774."

After a life of devoted and fruitful service, William Burls, in October, 1824, when he was in his 62nd year, was laid low by so severe a stroke that for some time his life hung in the balance. He was compelled to give up all outside activities, but subsequently recovered sufficiently to continue to be deeply interested in the causes to which he had devoted so much time and energy. He removed from Lothbury to live at Edmonton, where some years later Charles and Mary Lamb came to be his neighbours. It was at Edmonton, in December, 1834, Charles passed away. "Perhaps," says Mr. Payne, "in these last months, both he and William Burls turned back in memory to their schooldays at Christ's Hospital." Burls passed away in June, 1837, and in a tribute to his memory he was designated as "the excellent Mr. Burls."

H. J. COWELL, F.R.S.L.

**New Members.** The Officers and Council extend a hearty welcome to the following members recently elected:—

- MRS. K. C. ASQUITH, 61, Oakleigh Road, Clayton, Bradford.
- MISS H. M. CLARK, 53, Cranbourne Gardens, N.W.11.
- MR. W. HAINES, 78, Granville Park, S.E.13.
- MISS G. HILL, Public Library, Flagstaff, Arizona, U.S.A.
- MR. M. A. JACOBS, 55, Pall Mall, S.W.1.
- REV. and MRS. W. C. MITCHELL, 35, Braid Farm Road, Edinburgh, 10.
- MISS J. RENDELL, 19, Morland Road, East Croydon.
- MR. J. B. RICHARDSON, 19, Gilbert Street, Hillfields, Coventry.
- MR. H. C. ROBINSON, 'Clavis,' Meols Drive, West Kirby.
- MISS. E. A. THOMAS, 38, Dyne Road, N.W.6.

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**Fixtures for the rest of 1943.** Members are reminded that the following meetings will be held at the Central Club (Y.W.C.A.), Great Russell Street, W.C.1 (Tottenham Court Road end), in the Group Room (3rd floor). This is reached by lift. Meetings commence at 2-45 p.m. and are followed by tea.

- October 9th. "William Blake": Geoffrey Keynes, M.A., M.D.
  - November 13th. The C.L.S. Brains Trust (*Question Master*: Walter Farrow).
  - December 11th. "Quakerism": J. P. Fletcher.
- In connection with the November meeting it is hoped that members (especially those residing in the Provinces) will send in their questions not later than November 1st.

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**1944 Programme.** Preparations for the 1944 Programme have begun; suggestions for lectures and speakers will be welcomed by the Hon. Secretary.

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**Lamb and London.** On September 15th, Mr. S. M. Rich gave an address at a meeting of The Church of St. Andrew Society, Streatham, on "Charles Lamb: a Great Londoner." Capt. J. J. Gilchrist presided.

### CURRENT BIBLIOGRAPHY OF CHARLES LAMB. FROM FEBRUARY 1st, 1935 (contd.)

- (b) **Articles.**
  - A GOODHEARTED BUTT (*Yorkshire Post*: 9.8.1943).
  - \*On George Dyer; leaderette.
- (f) **Letters to the Press.**
  - George Dyer. Wm. C. Mitchell (*Sunday Times*: 8.8.1943).
- (h) **Short Notes.**
  - THE MILLENNIUM, by Argus (*Carlisle Journal*: 5.6.1943).
  - \*On a talk between Lamb and Coleridge in "So Perish the Roses," by Neil Bell.
  - WHERE DO YOU LIVE? by Rev. Henry Cook, M.A. (*Baptist Times*: 12.8.1943).
  - \*What was Lamb's real address?
  - LAMB AND QUAKERS (*Christian*: 22.7.1943).

The Editor will be grateful for items or news of items for inclusion in this Bibliography. The co-operation of overseas members is especially solicited. Cuttings should be addressed to Mr. S. M. Rich, 67, Cricklade Avenue, London, S.W.2.