

THE C.L.S. BULLETIN

(Organ of THE CHARLES LAMB SOCIETY, founded 1935)

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AN ANSWER TO A QUESTION

A letter to the Editor from
JOAN TEMPLE.

Your question—"What did it feel like to play Mary Lamb?"—shows surprising insight, the assumption that the acting of such a character cannot be catalogued with other representations. It has brought me face to face once more with a mystery that has baffled me ever since that wonderful first night at the Everyman Theatre, for I must confess the unpalatable truth that I have always had a secret shame about my performance, and this has but little relationship to the dissatisfaction with which the artist so often regards past work. I was amazed then, and have been ever since, by the extraordinary praise I received in the Press and in letters from the audience.

I feel I must insert here a reference to two odd links with the past that came to me through the letters. One, a reproof, stated: "Hester Savory was the sister of my great grandfather, Adey Bellamy Savory." Another, from Mr. Allen Bright of Malvern, brought this story: "When I was a boy the late Lord Houghton was a frequent guest at my father's house. On one occasion I heard him relate that once at a kettledrum at the Lambs' he saw Charles take a kettle off the hob and place it on Mary's head. She called out: 'What are you doing, Charles? You have spoilt my cap!' He turned then to the company and said: 'She will be all right for an hour,' sent for a coach and took her off to a madhouse." A strange tale, distorted perhaps by youthful indifference ("I was only a boy at the time, and didn't pay much attention"), and the passing of the years.

To return to our Lambs. I sought to account for the discrepancy between the praise I received for my performance and my own harsh judgment of myself by the interest that is aroused by a playwright acting in her own play; by the fact that the play had a peculiarly intimate interest, and the greatness of the theme hid the faults of the actress. This last, it would seem, did not meet the case, since one of the two critics who condemned the play gave a column of praise to my acting, while an article in "The New Stateman" entitled "Words and Hands" offered me credit for all the virtues I should have liked to feel I had actually put into the part. And now your question has caused me to face this, to me, curious problem once more and endeavour to find an explanation.

Judging from my own experience, an actor (the word must suffice for both sexes) has a triple consciousness during a performance. There is the consciousness of his part, which must be so intimate that, as St. John Ervine once said, he must know even what the character had for breakfast; there is the consciousness of the audience, and there is his own personal consciousness running between the audience and his performance like a shuttle weaving cross threads into the complete pattern. But with Mary I was often aware of a fourth consciousness not at all personal to myself. I want to affirm that I am no "spiritualist," and to disclaim any mediumistic tendencies, though I am forced to admit that my whole experience in connection with this play would seem to be connected with something of the nature of psychic phenomena.

My first play, "The Widow's Cruise," produced at the Ambassadors Theatre, gained for me the very precious friendship of the kindly manager, the late W. G. Barry, with whom I would talk often about my hopes and plans, always confident of his perfect sympathy. One day, while I was having tea with him in the theatre, I confessed to a temptation to write a play about Charles Lamb. As he himself was a devotee, he instantly expressed great interest, urging me to go straight home and prepare a scenario. My own

enthusiasm reinforced by his, I spoke of the dramatic treatment of Lamb's life to a literary friend. "You can't do it!" he declared. "Those who know nothing of Lamb wouldn't be interested, while those who do would resent it passionately. As for E.V., he'd cut off your head!" As my friend had expressed my own secret misgivings, I decided to let discretion overcome what appeared to be foolish valour—to find myself haunted by the Meyer portrait of Charles, which seemed to reprove such discretion. To clear my mind of what threatened to become an obsession I prepared a scenario, then laid it aside until one day, in conversation with a fellow dramatist about the vitality of certain ideas, I took it out and showed it to him. He insisted that I send it at once to Capt. Barry for his opinion. To my surprise, the response was an immediate request for an option on the unwritten play—to Capt. Barry's mind the only means of permission to the attempt. Treading delicately, I read him scene by scene from my shorthand notes, until one day, after reading the "straight jacket scene," he looked up and said: "I will only produce this play if you yourself are cast for Mary." This completely took my breath away. I had written the play from Charles' point of view; even if I could play Mary, it would need, I felt, such complete re-orientation, that it might distort my performance. I could go no further than to promise to rehearse on approval. The play finished, we were then faced with what looked like being an insurmountable difficulty—a Charles, with Lamb's odd physique. A miracle happened; we found Peter Ridgway, quite by chance, at the Players' Theatre.

Matters had gone thus far when strange things began to happen to me. In the half-way house between sleeping and waking I would hear a voice telling me what would and would not happen, or see distinct symbols of what should be avoided. For instance, during the week prior to production, our Press notices were cruelly discouraging, reaching a climax in a certain evening paper on our opening night—"Lovers of Charles Lamb are going to the Everyman Theatre praying for the best, but fearing the worst."—and as I waited with Peter for the Curtain to go up on the Prologue I imagined Lamb's poor ghost preparing to hiss yet another play associated with himself, never daring to believe the voice that had told me quite distinctly the previous night that the play would be a success. It is to be recorded here that this odd gift was connected only with the play (a fact I did not realise until afterwards, when a delightful dream that I had won £3,000 in a well-known sweepstake proved to be—a dream!), and seemed to link up with that "fourth consciousness" to which I have referred, the final expression of that haunting by the portrait which compelled me to write the play. It is, perhaps, the correct answer, though seemingly oblique, to our question and the solution of my problem, and I think the dramatic critic in "Punch" was hard upon the traces of that "fourth consciousness" when he wrote: "To what, then . . . may one attribute the play's queer charm? Less, I fancy, to any rare virtue in its craftsmanship than to the author's daemon. Miss Temple herself plays MARY with the same rapt absorption that inspired its writing; seeming to live the part, not merely to act it. And through all the stilted courtesies of GODWIN's soiree, no less than in the serial domesticity, one feels this daemon's presence and watches for its plainer manifestations in the recurrent mental crises that end each scene . . . the re-telling of (the play's) story, together with more purposeful analysis, are matters for the interpreter of dreams, not for me."

REPORTS OF RECENT MEETINGS

Saurat on Milton.

The meeting on April 14th was an unique occasion inasmuch as a distinguished man of letters from France expounded to a British audience the qualities and characteristics of an Englishman famed for his poetical and prose writings and for his great part in a critical period of English history: Professor Denis Saurat on "Milton—the Man." Major N. G. Brett-James occupied the Chair.

Prior to the address, Mr. Walter Farrow asked the members to join him in an expression of deepest sympathy with the American members of the Society on the death of President Roosevelt and their sense of his great services to his fellow citizens and to all mankind. Those present stood in silence as a mark of respect to the late President.

Miss Annette Park then gave the customary reading, a French translation by Sainte Beuve, of a sonnet by Lamb. The Chairman confessed to being a life-long Elian through associations linking Margate, Thomas Noon Talfourd and Mackery End, and he welcomed Prof. Saurat as an ambassador of French and English culture—in fact Saurat and Milton always went together.

Prof. Saurat prefaced his address with the remark that there was scant real knowledge of Milton's life and even that was often debateable; a well-founded hypothesis must frequently suffice and so we may not get all the truth on any particular phase of his life. The essential thing is to put oneself in spirit with the period in which Milton lived and so obtain the proper perspective. The 17th century was an age when to be an aristocrat was considered the height of attainment; Milton disapproved of such a notion, but that did not make him a democrat: on the contrary, he suggested a scheme of things under which the community would be governed by a body of sixty persons which, once elected, should thereafter be self-recruiting. In essence Milton was a proud man, and believed himself to be the

instrument of God for the reformation of the country. He had, however, no self-pity for his blindness and gout, nor did he regard himself as a hero for so resolutely bearing such infirmities.

Biographies of Milton are in the main fragmentary, little fact and much inference or guess work; Milton wrote little directly about himself. The biography written by his nephew, for instance, consisted of the reminiscences of an old man of 70-80 years, of things seen and heard by him when a youth of twelve, and the result can be imagined. Masson's history of Milton's time is a wonderful piece of work, but here again when facts are wanting the author himself fills the gap. The political hatred which has centred round Milton is astonishing; Dr. Johnson admired him as a writer of English who writes like an angel, but thinks like a Devil.

A lifetime's study of Milton and his age compels me (continued Prof. Saurat), to declare Milton a very great man. He regarded himself as a normal man, but if he was normal it was on a grand scale. At the same time he was well aware of his artistic faculty as poet and prided himself on his philosophical ability, coupled with a strong sense of responsibility—in other words it was his conception of the true aristocrat. His fear of failure to achieve his conception was the source behind many of his pamphlets. His pride was not peculiar to him, but was of a noble type of mentality, a type common to Cromwell and to Charles I, both of whom had a keen sense of responsibility and a duty to put self aside and do what they could to put things right—although each in a different way. Again, if Milton told lies, they were but weapons in a battle to prevent failure coming to his side.

His marriage to Mary Powell is unexplainable, bearing in mind that Milton's idea of marriage was a union of two in harmony on all planes, mental, religious and political. Mary married at seventeen, was not in any way in harmony with him; the only feasible explanation is that it was, as is often the case, the result of sensual passion; and this is borne out by his description of the Fall in *Paradise Lost*, and the part that sensuality played in the Fall. Pride and sensuality go with a high feeling of moral values and Milton could not be an immoral man. Although he was linked with the Puritan movement, it would be incorrect to call him a Puritan—for one thing he was not narrow-minded. Milton and Cromwell were simply upholders of liberty by the sword. Milton was endowed with great gifts and he used his great gifts in the cause of liberty and for the betterment of his fellows. Contributions to the subsequent discussion came from Mr. S. K. Jones, Mr. H. C. Chapman, Mr. W. Kent, Mr. J. P. Collins and Mrs. C. Badcock. Mr. Farrow proposed a vote of thanks to Prof. Saurat for his delightful and illuminating address delivered in a style eloquent and witty on a great man, famed as a poet and prose writer and as a worker in the glorious cause of liberty. A vote of thanks to the Chairman was proposed by Mr. H. G. Smith.

Lamb's Unitarian Friends.

H.G.S.

On May 12th, the Saturday after VE Day, there was a well attended meeting to hear Rev. R. Thomas, M.A., on "Charles Lamb and his Unitarian Friends." The Chairman, Mr. S. K. Jones, B.A., announced that Mr. Farrow would make a few preliminary remarks. Mr. Farrow said that it was proper for the Society to give expression to its gratitude as one of the London Institutions that had survived the War. Though two meeting places had been destroyed, there had only been one occasion in over five years when a meeting had been cancelled. The devotion of its members in adversity was the surest guarantee for the continued progress of the C.L.S. Mr. Jones then introduced the lecturer as his colleague at Gordon Square, and as one well equipped to deal with the subject chosen. The Rev. R. Thomas gave a most interesting talk on Lamb's numerous friends, who had been Unitarians at some time in their lives, not excluding Lamb himself, who had proclaimed that he was a "one-Goddite" before even George Dyer. Mr. Thomas made a point of the great difference between the Unitarianism of Lamb's Day and that of the present time, sketching briefly the path of the development that had taken place. The address provoked an animated discussion in which Miss M. Brown, Miss A. F. Wedd, Mr. F. E. Sandry, Dr. Murdo Mackenzie, Messrs. M. J. McNulty, F. G. Hallam, P. C. Galloway, A. F. Bishop, J. Raymond, F. G. Pearce, S. M. Rich and E. J. Finch took part. Mr. Harold Edwards expressed thanks to the lecturer and Mr. E. C. Thomas to the Chairman.

S.M.R.

An Indian Admirer of Elia.

Mr. H. C. Chapman opened the proceedings at the June Meeting by reading in eloquent tones, Elia's essay, "Valentine's Day." The Chairman, Sir Frank Brown, introduced Dr. R. G. Shahani as a friend of many years' standing and a man richly equipped in Indian, French and English literature. Dr. Shahani described his first acquaintance with Lamb's writings with a charming naiveté which captivated his audience. As the "busiest idler" amongst the students at Karachi, he was one day in 1920, chasing a butterfly and inadvertently trespassed into a forbidden garden, finding himself near a seat on which was resting the Principal of the school engaged in the placid pastime of trying to catch a sunbeam. Rudely disturbed, the "Father" vented angry words on the intruder, threatening dire penalties, but later these dissolved into friendly overtures and the gift of a book, with the exhortation to cherish it as it contained the words of a man possessed of a great humanity. That book was the Essays of Elia. Dr. Shahani's admiration of Lamb and his works had increased ever since the first reading of that gift book. Lamb dealt in his writings with the stuff of human nature, the little caressing necessities of life; he realised that the powers he possessed were not for squandering on the big important things of the world. Though no idealist, like Shelley or Wordsworth, his writings have lasted longer than many of his great contemporaries. Lamb had suffered and, moreover, was on the brink of a precipice all his life, and one could maintain that a man who has not suffered cannot write anything deep or memorable; he who has not probed into the substance of tears cannot understand the significance of laughter. Again, Lamb's humour is not of the crackling kind, for it is rooted in pity arising from his own suffering; perhaps it is possible that suffering lies at the root of humour. Lamb had a kindly eye for everything, including animals. Though shewing no outward interest in politics and worldly affairs he did not run away from reality.

As a critic, Lamb stood high in two spheres, namely art and literature, and the ghost of Hogarth must bless his name. Where his heart was Lamb believed in a little exaggeration, in a fine excess of praise. His Dramatic Specimens were something new and with exquisite taste and understanding, he lighted up the dark corners of the soul of the old Elizabethan dramas. He was an equisite connoisseur, and also a master of nonsense, a difficult art.

His letters are a department of his essays, and the best of them are those where asides and hints and surmises are present to convey the facets of his character and mind. His letter to Walter Wilson commenting on Defoe is a masterpiece.

The Essays is his best book; in them are the deepest pathos and the greatest merriment, and all his thoughts are enshrined in word and phrase of exquisite felicity, carrying the reader from one mood to another, whilst no two essays are alike in their rhythm. His style in the essays cannot be translated into another language, reflecting as it does his mood of the moment or the occasion or the influence of some older writer. Once a lover of Lamb, one returns again and again to him for refreshment of the soul.

In the discussion which ensued the following took part: Sir John Cuming, who also moved a vote of thanks to Dr. Shahani for providing the members with a memorable occasion, Mr. Walter Scott, Mr. J. Raymond, Rev. R. Thomas and Mr H. G. Smith. Mr. Thomas proposed a vote of thanks to the Chairman.

H.G.S.

Questions from Worthing.

The Treasurer does *not* know who sent him a British Money Order for 5/-, early this year from U.S.A.; will he please reveal himself? The Treasurer *does* know who have not yet sent him their 1945 Subscriptions. Will they please remit to Mr. E. F. Lewis, 13, Shakespeare Road, Worthing?

New Members.

On behalf of the Officers and Council we welcome the following new members:—Mr. K. W. Buckle, 50, Oakleigh Street., S.W.3.; Mr and Mrs. A. S. Burkinshaw, 130, Bulstrode Avenue, Hounslow; Miss N. Curran, 53, Hillfield Road, N.W.6.; Mr. J. Newburn Levien, 57, Rosslyn Hill, N.W.3.; Bombardier C. J. Mahoney, 33, Dartmouth Park Road, N.W.5.; Miss M. Sands, 10 H, Hyde Park Mans., N.W.1.; Miss M. Curran, 21, New Hall Road, Salford, 7; Mr. and Mrs. W. A. W. G. Kemp, 35, Potter Street, Northwood, Miss P. G. Mann, Thorneloe Bank, Worcester; Miss M. Sadler, 4, Parker Road, Norwich; Rev. W. R. Weeks, B.A., B.D., 24, Duddingston Avenue, Crosby, Liverpool.

Gifts.

The Hon. Librarian gratefully acknowledges the following additions to the Society's Collection of Eliana:—

From Miss A. F. Wedd: (corrected entry), "The Love Letters of Mary Hays," by A. F. Wedd (1925), and "The Fate of the Fenwicks," by A. F. Wedd (1927).

From Dr. F. S. Boas:—"Essays and Studies," published by the English Association, containing Dr. Boas's address before the C.L.S., on Charles Lamb's Dramatic Specimens.

From Arthur Swann:—Catalogue of the John Gribbel Sale of Books, parts 3 and 4; Catalogue of the Frank J. Hogan Library (part 2). * Prices of Lamb items entered.

Facsimile copies of the MS. of "Dream Children," "Modern Methods in Public Auction," being an account of the Parke-Bernett Galleries Inc.

Future Meetings: An Experiment.

The Council has decided to have *alternate* meeting places for the remainder of 1945. The July, September and November meetings will be held on Saturday afternoons (2-45), at the Central Club, Y.W.C.A., Great Russell Street, while the October and December meetings will take place at the Society's pre-war home, University Hall, Gordon Square, W.C., on Monday evenings (7-30). Here are the details:—

Saturday, 14th July—"The Godwins," J. P. Collins, (*Chairman*: Miss A. F. Wedd).

Saturday, 8th September—"Thomas Fuller," H. J. Cowell, F.R.S.L. (*Chairman*: T. W. Hill).

Monday, 8th October—"The Religion of Charles Lamb," S. M. Rich (*Chairman*: Rev. R. Thomas, M.A.).

Saturday, 10th November—"Thomas Hood," Milton Waldman (*Chairman*: Edmund Blunden).

Monday, 10th December—The C.L.S. Brains Trust (*Question Master*: Walter Farrow).

Members are asked to make a particular note of these dates.

Current Bibliography of Charles Lamb. From February 1st, 1935 (cont.).

(a) Books and Pamphlets.

English Wits / Edited by Leonard Russell with / contributions by / names of 14 contributors / Hutchinson & Co. (Publishers), Ltd., London: / New York: Melbourne: // (1940). Pp. 160.

*Pp. 73-80, Charles Lamb, by Robert Lynd.

The Lambs/A Story of Pre-Victorian England / by / Katherine Anthony / (device) / New York / Alfred A. Knopf / 1945 // Pp. vi + 253 + vi. 18 illustrations, Price \$3.50.

(b) Articles.

Thomas Hood (*Times*: 2-5-1945).

(c) Reports of Lectures and Meetings.

An Indian on Lamb (*Manchester Guardian Weekly*: 15-6-1945).

Old Sadlers Wells: Its Story Told by Mr. Walter Browne (*Islington Gazette*: 8-5-1945).

(d) Signed Reviews.

Fine Biography of Charles and Mary Lamb, signed Martha MacGregor (*New York Post*: 30-3-1945).

Charles Lamb as Mary's Finest Masterpiece, by George F. Whicher (*N.Y. Herald Tribune*: 8-3-1945).

*Both above on Katherine Anthony's, "The Lambs."

The Industrious Poet: in Southey's Workshop (*Times Literary Supplement*: 21-4-1945).

The Third of the Magi by Keith Feiling (*Sunday Times*: 15-4-1945).