

THE C.L.S. BULLETIN

(Organ of THE CHARLES LAMB SOCIETY, founded 1935)

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A TALK ABOUT CHARLES LAMB

(Broadcast on the Far Eastern Service on July 8th, 1947)

By JOAN TEMPLE

"There is no more lovable figure in the story of English literature." These words were written about Charles Lamb, who became famous under the pen-name, *Elia*.

Lamb had many friends in his lifetime—Wordsworth and Coleridge the most famous—and since his death the number of his friends has grown steadily year by year—not only in England, but all over the world. There is no other writer who has—in London—not *one*, but *two* Societies founded to honour his memory. There are writers whose work we admire, but they have no shrine in our hearts because the greatness of their work was belittled by the meanness of their lives. Lamb was great in his life first, as a writer afterwards. And because of this, one of his biographers could say of him more than fifty years after his death: "Those who love him do not love him by halves, but are content to be fanatical in their attachment, and not be ashamed of it."

Seven years before his death, Lamb wrote a short autobiographical sketch which I should like to read to you, as much for its data, as because it is a typical example of his style. Incidentally, he is a master of dramatic punctuation, and the total absence of any kind of stop in the opening phrases is worthy of comment. He means by this to imply the dulness of this procession of facts, until, with the introduction of the first comma, he indicates the break of dulness and a life of leisure. Here is the sketch:—

"Charles Lamb born in the Inner Temple 10 Feb. 1775 educated in Christ's Hospital afterwards a clerk in the Accountants office East India House pensioned off from that service 1825 after 33 years service, is now a Gentleman at large, can remember few specialities in his life worth noting except that he once caught a swallow flying; below the middle stature, cast of face slightly Jewish, with no Judaic tinge in his religion; stammers abominably and is therefore more apt to discharge his occasional conversation in a quaint aphorism or a poor quibble than in set and edifying speeches; has consequently been libelled as a person always aiming at wit, which, as he told a dull fellow that charged him with it, is at least as good as aiming at dulness; a small eater but not drinker; was a fierce smoker of Tobacco, but may be resembled to a volcano burnt out, emitting only now and then a casual puff. Has been guilty of obtruding upon the Public a Tale in Prose, called Rosamund Gray, a dramatic sketch named John Woodvil, a Farewell Ode to Tobacco, with sundry other Poems and light prose matter, collected in Two slight crown Octavos and pompously christened his Works, tho' in fact they were his Recreations and his true works may be found on the shelves of Leadenhall Street, filling some hundred Folios. He is also the better known **from** that name without a meaning, than from anything he has done or can hope to do in his own. He also was the first to draw the Public attention to the old English Dramatists in a work called "Specimens of English Dramatic Writers who lived about the time of Shakespeare," published about 15 years since. In short all his merits and demerits to set forth would take to the end of Mr. Upcott's book and then not be told truly. He died (blank) 18 (blank) much lamented.

Witness his hand, CHARLES LAMB,

10th April, 1827.

To any Body—Please to fill up these blanks."
A placid life it would seem; nothing "worth noting except that he once caught a swallow flying"
—the publication of a few works. Nothing at all to suggest that Life had caught Charles Lamb himself
—as "a swallow flying."
When he was twenty-one, his sister—ten years his senior—killed her mother in a fit of madness.
To save Mary from committal to a public asylum—a living hell in those days—Charles gave his solemn

word to take her under his special care for life. He never went back on that promise. He was not only great enough to accept this terrible responsibility at the outset of his life, but to offer excuses for the elder brother who refused it—John, twelve years his senior, and in a comfortable and secure position. John, he wrote, "has taken his ease in the world, and is not fit to struggle with difficulties."

In that autobiographical sketch Lamb makes a wistful bid for recognition of some of his earlier works. It is as though a fond parent pleaded for affection for his crippled older children, pushing them in before the lusty youngster *Elia*. Lamb was a great dramatic critic, but he was no dramatist; he was a fine critic of poetry, but though his own works are poetic in thought, they lack, for the most part, originality of expression, and are often marred by a clumsy metre. Two of his poems find a place in English anthologies, "Hester" and "The Old Familiar Faces," and we love them because Lamb wrote them, shutting our eyes to their faults.

There is one important omission from the list of Lamb's works in that autobiographical sketch—*The Tales from Shakespeare*. These he wrote in collaboration with his sister, and for obvious reasons Mary wrote the comedies, Charles the tragedies. They were written for children, but there is no better introduction to Shakespeare for both young and old alike. *The Tales from Shakespeare*, *The Specimens of English Dramatic Poets who wrote about the time of Shakespeare*—in which Lamb reveals to us the treasures that were hidden by the blinding light of that supreme genius—these are the only two of Lamb's earlier works which, in different ways, can make any real claim to be a contribution to English literature. But, being derivative, the author's name is merely an appendage. It was not until he was forty-five that Lamb found himself personally as a writer. Until then, all his original work had been curiously lacking in vitality. But with the adoption of a pseudonym *Elia*—came the release of Lamb's genius. Paradoxically enough, as Charles Lamb the writer he was only half a man; under the guise of the imaginary person *Elia*, he was completely—*Charles Lamb*.

It is a curious fact that most of the world's famous comedians have been very tragic people at heart. The story of Charles Lamb is the story of a man whom Life cast for a tragic role, who was really a comedian at heart. He is counted among our English humourists. Certainly in his letters and conversation Lamb *was* a humourist. But the word "humour" seems too positive a term to be applied to *Elia*—to a style so delicate, kindly and fragrant. One critic describes that style as "aromatic—like the perfume of faded rose-leaves in a china jar."

Lamb gave his best-known work a solemn title: *The Essays of Elia*. It is as though he offers us a box labelled: "Tools. For mental utility only!" and when we open the box we find the most fascinating toys. Actually, the Essays are Lamb's memoirs—but when he wrote them, he put a pair of spectacles on the very end of his nose. Thus he could put into these autobiographical sketches little impish mysteries that are the outcome of his frolic mind; yet, because Lamb was more than frolic, we see the writer, and the people he writes about, step from the dull black-and-white of the printed page in complete, colourful entity. In the essay, *All Fool's Day*, Lamb writes: "I love a *Fool*—as naturally as if I were of kith and kin to him," and wishes: "Many happy returns of this day to you—and you—and you, Sir!—we have all a touch of *that same*—you understand me—a speck of the motley." There he strikes home. There is no man so grave, no woman so dignified, who has no accommodation for the label—"fool." The truly lovable people are those who wear humanity's motley—with a difference.

But if those spectacles perched on the tip of his nose enable Lamb to view his fellows in an antic perspective, they also serve, as he writes of it, to soften the harsh realities of his own life. He writes, as through a mist, of what his life might have been, in the famous *Dream Children: A Reverie*. We read *Dream Children* through a mist of tears. We know intimately his brother—"my cousin, James Elia"—his sister—"Cousin Bridget Elia," and his father, "Lovel" of *The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple*, and Lamb presents them to us in their very best clothes.

Perhaps the seeds of Charles Lamb's genius may be found in two lines, question and answer, from his drama *John Woodvil*:

"What is it *you* love?"

"Simply, all things that live."

TWO ENJOYABLE SUMMER VISITS

"I dread the prospect of Summer, with his all day long days."

1. CHARLES LAMB AND EDMONTON

A fine summer's afternoon and a goodly company of Elian pilgrims, forty to fifty strong, were "on the road" like Chaucer's pilgrims, wending their way under the genial guidance of Mr. F. H. Postans to the shrine in Church Street, Edmonton, of their own patron saint who for a brief twenty months lived at Bay Cottage with his sister Mary. Viewed from the street the house, now called Lamb's Cottage, appears a small unpretentious dwelling, the pathway from the gate occupying almost one half of the narrow garden leading to the door, but the cottage is deceptively commodious with its nine rooms, the windows of what was once Mary's bedroom overlooking a long garden. Through the courtesy of the present owner, Mr. J. J. E. Potter, members were enabled to inspect the rooms, which are little changed, apart from decoration and furnishings, from Lamb's time. Mr. Potter now utilises the rooms for the display of Oriental art treasures, and one found ornaments of jade and gilded and enamelled gods and goddesses from Chinese and other oriental sources in serried ranks; these would have appealed to the eyes of Thomas Manning. Lamb, though familiar enough with the merchandising of tea and choice spices from the Orient, preferred his mandarins to "float uncircumscribed by any element in that world before perspective—a Chinese teacup."

After inspecting the rooms occupied by Charles and Mary the party assembled on the lawn in the garden, where Mr. H. G. Smith gave a short address descriptive of the house and its associations with

the Lambs and their friends and reminiscences left by contemporaries. Then to the old Parish Church where the Vicar, the Rev. Stanley G. W. Knight, M.A., welcomed the party and gave a most interesting and informal talk on the history of that ancient House of God. Some of the Norman stonework is preserved in the wall of the Church, and near one of the doors are the fine memorial plaques to Charles Lamb and William Cowper. After inspecting the entry of Lamb's burial in the Church Register (No. 964, January 3rd, 1835) the members walked along to the grave of Charles and Mary, on which Mr. Walter Farrow on behalf of the Society placed a laurel wreath bearing the lines:

"The laurels all men seek
Wreathed long ago upon thy brow,
Lie green and fragrant now."

Miss Maire Lawson recited a poem, "Linked Lives" by Dora Cave, a eulogy of the brother and sister, and also Cary's epitaph on the tombstone.

A welcome tea interval was followed by an address "Literary Association of Edmonton" from Mr. E. T. Rhymer, J.P., whose forbears, he said, established themselves in Edmonton in 1800. Apart from Charles Lamb, upon whose sojourn in the town it was unnecessary to dilate in present circumstances, there were records of a law suit in 1307 over some land involving Robert le Chaucer and his wife Mary—Mary was Geoffrey Chaucer's grandmother. Again two famous plays "The Merry Devil of Edmonton," and "The Witch of Edmonton" woven round incidents connected with the town and originating in the early 1600's were popular in their day, and have been revived several times in recent years: Peter Fabell is reputed to be the originator or author of the first-named play. Another interesting feature is that the Plague of London in 1625 caused Edmonton with its more salubrious air to become an "evacuation area" for city residents. Then again "The Bell" figures in the story of John Gilpin's exploits as related by William Cowper, the poem first seeing anonymous publication in the "Public Advertiser" of 1782; the position of "The Bell" at that time is somewhat disputed but evidence assigns it to have been near the site of the present "Angel."

The members then adjourned to the Municipal Library, the entrance hall of which is adorned by two splendid plaques of Lamb and Keats by Sir George Frampton, executed in 1898; in the Reed Library upstairs was an exhibition of Eliana from the Society's collection, including the Lamb Silver Medal awarded by Christ's Hospital annually to their scholars for the best English Essay of the year (donated to the Society by the late Mr. S. E. Wimbolt), together with volumes of writings by Keats, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and other contemporary authors; this had been arranged for the occasion by the Librarian.

The Chairman expressed the thanks of all the members to everyone who had made the afternoon's visit so interesting and enjoyable, and so ended the pilgrimage to Edmonton on Saturday, the 12th of July, 1947.

H.G.S.

2. OLD KENSINGTON

The Elian pilgrims made the "Old Court Suburb" of Leigh Hunt the object of their investigations on 9th August, for which a more fitting and companionable guide than our popular and urbane member, Mr. Frank Hallam, could not have been found. Meeting at the corner of Derry Street, amidst the turmoil of the traffic and the association of emporiums, it was refreshing to be taken to the village atmosphere of South End, where old-fashioned shops and countrified cottages mark what was once the southern boundary of Kensington. Our Chairman, Mr. Walter Farrow, who likes his little joke, appeared to be anxious to know in which direction the Peier was situated. The fact that many members of the party gathered blackberries during their ramble round the village may sound astonishing.

Amongst the somewhat faded glories of Kensington Square, the house in which John Stuart Mill wrote his "Logic" and "Political Economy" was pointed out, as well as that occupied at different periods by such vastly different characters as the Duchesse de Mazarin, Talleyrand and Archbishop Herring. In Young Street, the spirit of Thackeray seemed to hover over No. 16, where he wrote "Henry Esmond" and "Vanity Fair."

A brief visit to St. Mary Abbot's Church was included; some members looking for the monument in the old churchyard to one of Lamb's "two bald women"—Mrs. Inchbald, actress and playwright; while others admired the dim religious light produced by Scott's Gothic style.

The leafy shades of Holland Walk gave a glimpse of all that is left of Holland House, always so difficult to visit in normal times.

Campden Hill provided recollections of Gilbert Chesterton, who refers to his birthplace there, in his Autobiography, and immortalises the district in "The Napoleon of Notting Hill."

A well deserved break for a cup of tea in Church Street was followed by a graceful expression of thanks by the Chairman to Mr. Hallam, who showed his appreciation by offering to continue the walk and point out other places of interest. This was fully taken advantage of, and the party went on to Palace Green. Here Thackeray's last home at No. 2, evoked the greatest interest, the palaces and mansions of the nobility and the administrators, home and foreign, being noted in passing.

The prospect of Kensington Palace from the rear gave an opportunity for an account of the building and its royal occupants past and present.

At Notting Hill Gate, the party groke up, wiser in the lore of ancient Kensington, and more convinced than ever that there is no place like London for surprises.

F.H.P.

Dramatic Group

Our next performance will be on November 26th, at the Interval Club, Dean Street, W.1, when Miss Mayre Lawson will take part, supported by a cast playing "The Pawnbroker's Daughter" an "A Convivial Evening at Charles Lamb," and will also contribute solo items. Further particulars will be published in the November issue of the BULLETIN, or may be obtained from the Hon. Secretary. Readings were held on June 6th and July 25th, at University Hall, and it is hoped to hold other well attended Readings before the year is out.

D.R.C.

OBITUARY

"Deaths overset me, and put me out long after the recent grief."

ELIZABETH MYERS

E.G.C. sends the following appreciation:—It began in September 1944, when in a letter of appreciation of her novel *"A Well Full of Leaves"* the writer included an invitation to attend the meetings of this Society. In a reply, almost by return of post, Elizabeth Myers expressed not only her pleasure of the letter, but also her gratitude in having the C.L.S. brought to her notice.

"It so happens," she wrote, "that I not only love Charles Lamb as a great good man but I consider his prose together with Swift's, Hazlitt's, Addison's, and Steele's, to be the best in English letters. I am therefore delighted to know about the Society, and I wish to become a member at once. . . . What pleases me very particularly is that the Society's endeavour is to stimulate the Elian spirit of friendliness and humour. Nothing could be better."

Mrs. Littleton C. Powys (Elizabeth Myers was her maiden name), was elected a member of this Society on 14th October 1944, and although distance from London, accentuated by chronic invalidism, prevented her from attending any of our meetings she was keenly interested in the Society until her sad death on 24th May, 1947.

The Society's records are richer by a collection of charming, thoughtful and courageous letters written in her distinctive script, and couched in language familiar to readers of her novels. The Society is also the richer for some valuable contributions to its Library, including a copy of the first edition of Charles Lamb's *Collected Works* (1818). She was ever anxious to help forward its aims by introducing the Society to her friends, and by her example encouraging those who held office in the C.L.S.

Although Elizabeth Myers has passed from us she leaves behind a memorial in her books, and the memory of a truly courageous lady, who notwithstanding the grave condition of her health, was ever looking forward to the time when she could meet her correspondents in person. For a life such as that of Elizabeth Myers the sadness of her passing is truly tempered by gratitude for the privilege of knowing her. We offer sincere sympathy to Mr. Littleton C. Powys, who is also a member of this Society.

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An Appeal for Back Numbers

Will any member who has spare copies of Nos. 60, 61, 62, and 63 of the BULLETIN please inform the Editor. These four issues are required by a member who is anxious to make up a complete file. Incidentally, the following item appeared in Elkin Mathews Catalogue No. 104, dated November, 1946:

126—BLUNDEN (E). *The November Hour*. (*Privately Printed*, 1936). First edition, two leaves, sq. 8vo. £1 1s. od.

Set in 12-pt. 'Dolphin,' and 200 copies made by S. M. Rich.

The above was the supplement to No. 10 of the C.L.S. BULLETIN, April 1936.

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Bradford and District Branch

We have received a programme of the dates of Meetings of this Branch for the Session, 1947-48, set out below. Members generally who anticipate being in Bradford on any of these dates would be heartily welcomed by the Chairman, Mr. Wyndham T. Vint, M.A., and the Hon. Sec., Mrs. K. C. Asquith (11, Sandringham Road, Clayton, Bradford).

Tuesday evenings:

Sept. 23rd, 1947

Nov. 25th, 1947

Feb. 24th, 1948

The above in the Council Room,
Mechanics' Institute.

Saturday afternoons:

October 25th, 1947

January 31st, 1948

March 27th, 1948

The above at Church House,
North Parade.

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WINTER PROGRAMME FOR 1947-48 SESSION TO END OF 1947.

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| 1947
Monday, 8th Sept. | "People One Would Wish to Have Known." Various Speakers.
(Chairman: Walter Farrow). |
| Saturday, 11th Oct. | "Charles Lamb and his Hertfordshire." Reginald L. Hine, F.S.A.
(Chairman: A. J. White) |
| Monday, 10th Nov. | "Some Characters in Jane Austen's Novels." Miss G. B. Stern.
(Chairman: L. A. G. Strong, F.R.S.L.) |
| Saturday, 13th Dec. | "An Elizabethan Antiphony." Milton Waldman.
(Chairman: N. Hardy Wallis, M.A., F.R.S.L.) |

Monday meetings are held at University Hall, 14 Gordon Square, London, W.C.1, at 7 p.m.
Saturday meetings are held at The Central Club (Y.W.C.A.), Great Russell Street, London, W.C.1, at 2-45 p.m.