

THE ELIAN

Claude A Prance

On 30 March 1925 the centenary of Charles Lamb's retirement from the East India House was celebrated by a dinner in the Hall of the Inner Temple, adjacent to Lamb's birthplace, No. 2 Crown Office Row. The Chairman was Augustine Birrell and the Hon. Secretary was F A Downing. Many distinguished people attended, among whom were the Earl and Countess of Winterton, Sir Frederick and Lady Pollock and Lady Spencer Churchill. Literature was represented by A St John Adcock, Robert Lynd, G K Chesterton, J C Squire, E V Lucas, C E Lawrence, Clement Shorter and George Sampson.

As a result of suggestions made at this dinner a meeting was later held in Downing's flat in Grays Inn Road and the society known as The Elian was founded. It was to consist of those who loved Charles Lamb and his works and originally it was intended to limit it to fifty-nine members (Lamb's age at the time of his death).

Dinners were to be given at a tavern in Fleet Street three or four times a year, but the venue was varied later. A special occasion was to be made each year of Lamb's birthday, 10 February. Papers were to be read by members and there were to be guest speakers. The annual subscription was five shillings.

The first dinner was held on November 6, 1925 at the Cheshire Cheese, Fleet Street. Augustine Birrell, the first President of The Elian, presided and a short paper on Lamb was read by a member. A further meeting took place on December 10, and on February 10, 1926 the first Birthday Dinner was held, not in Fleet Street, but at the Comedy Restaurant, Haymarket. Again Birrell was in the Chair and the speakers included A G Gardiner, the Dean of St Pauls, George Sampson, A St John Adcock and Mrs Robert Lynd (who replied to the toast of the guests).

To the function held on March 29, 1926 ladies were invited. On December 2 the members met in the Chapter Room at Anderton's Hotel, Fleet Street and the Secretary's letter to members stated that "those sources of Elian inspiration, The Pun, The Pipe and The Pint would be discussed by Brothers E V Knox, J B Priestley and G K Chesterton." The Birthday Dinner on February 10, 1927 was evidently a more elaborate affair for the Secretary's notice stipulated "Dinner Jackets or Tails." For seven shillings and six pence the members had a six course meal plus dessert and coffee! The speakers included Augustine Birrell, Dr George Wherry (a Cambridge Elian), Wilfred Whitten (John O'London), Gerald Gould, E Charles Fache, Beatrice Kean Seymour and J P Collins.

On November 29 the Elians met at Anderton's Hotel and welcomed Edmund Blunden to their midst on his return from Japan. He gave a talk on Leigh Hunt on whom he was no doubt working at the time, for his book on Hunt appeared a few years afterwards. Evidently the sartorial request for the earlier dinner had not met with universal approval for the Secretary's letter now stated "Morning dress".

A special Ladies' Dinner was held on March 21, 1928 at the Comedy Restaurant when Augustine Birrell and Professor Edith J Morley spoke on Crabb Robinson; other speakers were A Tresidder Sheppard, Edmund Blunden, William Kean Seymour and George Sampson. On September 24 a dinner was held at the Mitre Tavern, Ely Place at which John Freeman spoke on Goldsmith, whose bicentenary occurred in 1928. The Birthday Dinner in 1929 was held at Anderton's Hotel when Walter Jerrold spoke on Thomas Hood.

Similar meetings continued over the years and among the speakers were Edmund Blunden, A J Cronin, F Harvey-Darton, J P Collins, E V Knox and J B Priestley. In February 1934 a main subject for discussion was the best way of commemorating the centenary year of the deaths of Charles Lamb and S T Coleridge. Prominent among suggestors for this was E V Lucas.

Augustine Birrell ceased to be President of The Elian in 1932 and J P Collins took his place. Later Presidents were E Charles Fache and J G Wilson (of Bumpus fame).

In 1934 meetings were being held at the old Cheshire Cheese in Little Essex

Street, Strand. A notable meeting in later years must have been that in March 1938 when F C Owlett spoke on "Shakespeare and Charles Lamb". This lecture was subsequently printed as a separate pamphlet and published by Herbert Joseph Ltd.

A memorable achievement was the commissioning of the portrait bust of Charles Lamb which was erected on the wall of Christ's Church, Greyfriars and was unveiled by Lord Plender on November 5, 1935. A wreath was at the same time placed on the memorial in the name of the Charles Lamb Society, founded the same year. It will be remembered that this bust was removed to Christ's Hospital, Horsham for safety during the War, but that it has now been re-erected on the Watch House of the Church of St Sepulchre, Giltspur Street.

The Elian was undoubtedly responsible for a number of pleasant and convivial meetings for lovers of Charles Lamb and the speeches must have been notable. No doubt the fortunes fluctuated with changes in membership, particularly when it lost some of the most active and enthusiastic members. As some resigned or died others were elected by the Committee, but when the War came difficulties increased and the Society finally ceased to meet in April 1940. Meetings were not resumed after the War. Perhaps, too, there was no need of two societies devoted to one author, for the Charles Lamb Society was then only five years old and the enthusiasm of its members, particularly Ernest Crowsley, enabled it to survive the War and to move to fresh strength.

During the life of The Elian it must have included the names of at least as many famous contemporaries as any other similar society. Much of its success was no doubt due to the enthusiasm of its first secretary, F A Downing, and of those who came after, J P Collins and S M Rich. All three of them became members of the Charles Lamb Society.

A glance at the list of the fifty-nine members of The Elian as at January 15, 1926 makes interesting reading. There was so much talent. I have added occupations for most of them, from which it will be seen that literature was very well represented. They were:

Rt Hon. Augustine Birrell	Statesman and essayist
J C Squire	Poet, critic and editor of <i>The London Mercury</i>
A St John Adcock	Journalist, editor of <i>The Bookman</i>
G K Chesterton	Essayist, novelist and poet
C E Lawrence	Joint-editor of <i>The Quarterly Review</i>
Robert Lynd	Essayist, Literary editor of <i>The News Chronicle</i>
Walter de la Mare	Poet and novelist
Rt Hon. J M Robertson	Politician and critic
W Kean Seymour	Poet
Dr Hubert Norman	Doctor of medicine, bibliophile
Alfred Noyes	Poet
Eugene Mason	Poet and essayist
Gerald Gould	Journalist and poet
John Freeman	Poet and critic
Thomas Sharp	Poet
Cecil Palmer	Publisher
R Cobden-Sanderson	Poet
Geoffrey Dearmer	
John Henderson	
F G Bettany	Dramatic critic of <i>Illustrated London News</i>

E V Knox
 Clennell Wilkinson
 H M Tomlinson
 Philip Tomlinson
 J G Wilson
 Walter Jerrold
 E Gilpin
 S M Ellis
 Dr G Wherry
 George Sampson
 James Bone

W H Pratt
 Edmund Blunden
 John Hassall
 E Charles Fache
 T Michael Pope
 A J MacDowell
 Milton Waldman

A G Gardiner
 B Anderson
 G L Stampa
 George Morrow
 Robin Flower

Rolf Bennett
 John Hart
 E J Finch
 W W Jacobs
 Keighley Snowden
 W L Courtney
 James Milne
 R Ellis Roberts

James Greig
 J M Bullock
 Gerald Barry
 R P Cowl
 J P Collins
 Crawford Snowden
 J B Priestley
 F A Downing

Later editor of *Punch*

Novelist, travel writer, critic

Bookseller, later Chairman of Bumpus
 Miscellaneous writer

Biographer and journalist
 Surgeon, author of *Charles Lamb and Cambridge*
 Educationist and man of letters
 Journalist, London Editor of *The Manchester Guardian*

Poet and critic
 Artist

Author and Publisher, Assistant Editor of
The London Mercury
 Journalist and essayist, editor of *Daily News*

Artist
 Artist
 Scholar and poet, Deputy Keeper of
 Manuscripts, British Museum
 Novelist

Print collector and Lamb scholar
 Short story writer
 Novelist and journalist
 Editor of *The Fortnightly Review*
 Literary editor of *Daily Chronicle*
 On staff of *Pall Mall Gazette*, author of
Samuel Rogers and his Circle

Editor of *The Graphic*
 Editor of *The Saturday Review*
 Man of letters
 Journalist

Novelist, dramatist and essayist
 Business man and Lamb collector

Although it was proposed to limit the numbers to fifty-nine, the Committee later decided to accept others and among those later members were Lewis Melville (biographer and man of letters), Herman Finck (musician and composer), R L Hine (solicitor and author of *Charles Lamb and his Hertfordshire*), Basil Francis (author of *Fanny Kelly of Drury Lane*, Hon. Treasurer of the Society for Theatre Research), Kenneth Willis Cotton (librarian of the Bank of England) and S M Rich (schoolmaster, Lamb scholar and collector and author of *The Elia Miscellany*).

Since one of the objects of *The Elia* was to bring together lovers of Charles Lamb and his works, it does seem that a very real tribute to Elia is indicated by the meetings and the enthusiasm of so many distinguished people.