

**TWO LECTURES ON THE
POETRY OF POPE, AND ON HIS
OWN TRAVELS IN AMERICA,
THE EARL OF CARLISLE**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649246120

Two Lectures on the Poetry of Pope, and on His Own Travels in America, The Earl of Carlisle
by George William Frederick Howard Carlisle

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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GEORGE WILLIAM FREDERICK HOWARD CARLISLE

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ON
THE POETRY OF POPE,
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TRAVELS IN AMERICA,
BY
THE RIGHT HONOURABLE
THE EARL OF CARLISLE.

DELIVERED TO THE
LEEDS MECHANICS' INSTITUTION & LITERARY SOCIETY,
DECEMBER 5TH AND 6TH, 1850.
REVISED AND CORRECTED BY THE AUTHOR.

SIXTH THOUSAND.

LONDON:
SIMPKIN, MARSHALL, AND CO.;
LEEDS: BAINES AND NEWSOME.
1851.

15450.33

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TO THE MEMBERS OF THE
YORKSHIRE UNION OF MECHANICS' INSTITUTES,
BEFORE A BRANCH OF WHICH
THESE LECTURES WERE READ,
THEY ARE NOW RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED
BY THEIR ASSOCIATE AND WELL-WISHER,
CARLISLE.

Christmas, 1850.

ADVERTISEMENT.

The following Lectures, after being delivered at Leeds, were, with characteristic generosity and kindness, presented by the Noble Author to the Committee of the "Yorkshire Union of Mechanics' Institutes," who had asked permission to send a copy to each Institute in the Union, and to publish them at so cheap a rate as to be within the reach of every member.

His Lordship has added to the favour conferred, by revising the Lectures as they passed through the press, so as to ensure their accuracy.

The grateful acknowledgments, not only of the Union Committee, but of every Mechanics' Institution in Yorkshire, are due to the Earl of Carlisle, for his unexampled kindness.

THE COMMITTEE OF THE YORKSHIRE UNION
OF MECHANICS' INSTITUTES.

LEEDS, December, 1850.

LECTURE I.

ON THE POETRY OF POPE.

I have undertaken to read a paper on "The Poetry of Pope." My hearers, however, will be sorely disappointed, and my own purpose will have been singularly misconstrued, if any expectation should exist that I am about to bring any fresh matter or information to the subject with which I am about to deal. Such means of illustration, I trust, may be amply supplied by Mr. Croker, who has announced a new edition of Pope,—a task for which both his ability and his long habits of research appear well to qualify him. As little is it within either my purpose or my power to present you with any novelty of view, or originality of theory, either upon poetry in general, or the poetry of Pope in particular. The task that I have ventured, perhaps rashly, to impose upon myself, has a much more simple, and, I am willing to hope, less personal aim.

It is briefly this. It has seemed to me for a very long time, I should say from about the period of my own early youth, that the character and reputation of Pope, as a poet, had sunk, in general cotemporary estimation, considerably below their previous, and their proper level. I felt ruffled at this, as an injustice to an author whom my childhood had been taught to admire, and whom the verdict of my maturer reason approved. I lamented this, because I thought that the extent of this depreciation on the one side, and of the preferences which it necessarily produced on the other, must have a tendency to mislead the public taste, and to misdirect the powers of our rising minstrels.

I allow myself the satisfaction of thinking that there are already manifest some symptoms of that re-action, which, whenever real merit or essential truth is concerned, will always ensue upon unmerited depression. I remember, too, that it gave me quite a refreshing sensation to find, during my travels in the United States of America, that among some of the most literary and cultivated portions of that great community, (although I would not more implicitly trust to young America than I would to Young England upon this point,) the reverence for Pope still partook largely of the sounder original faith of the parent land. I fear, however, that there is still enough of heresy extant among us, to justify one, who considers himself a true worshipper, who almost bows to the claim of this form of Popish infallibility, in making such efforts as may be within his power to win back any doubtful or hesitating votary to the abandoned shrine.

The attitude, then, in which I appear before you on the present occasion, is this. I look on myself as a counsel, self-constituted it is true, but for whose sincerity the absence of any fee may be considered as a sufficient guarantee; and here, then, in the short space which can be allowed by this Court for the business of the defence, I consider myself bound to put before you such pleas as I may think best calculated to get a verdict from you on my side of the case.

The best plan, which, as it appears to me, I can adopt for disarming any reasonable suspicion on the part of my jurors, (all, I feel sure, candid and enlightened men), as well as for doing justice to my own character as a critic, is to state frankly what I do not claim for my client, the late Alexander Pope. I do not, then, pretend to place him on the very highest pedestal of poetry, among the few foremost of the tuneful monarchs and lawgivers of mankind. Confining ourselves to our own country, I do not, of course, ask you to put him on a level with the universal, undisputed, unassailable supremacy of Shakespeare—nor with Milton, of whom Mr. Macaulay, whom this town once honoured itself by making its representative, has lately thus beautifully spoken :—

“ A mightier spirit, unsubdued by pain, danger, poverty, obloquy, and blindness, meditated, undisturbed by the obscene tumult which raged all around, a song so sublime and so holy, that it could not have misbecome the lips of those ethereal beings whom he saw, with that inner eye which no calamity could darken, flinging down on the jasper pavement their crowns of amaranth and gold.”

I fancy that some might wish to make a further reserve for the gentle fancy of Spenser, though the obsolete character of much of his phraseology, and the tediousness inseparable from all forms of sustained allegory, must, I apprehend, in these days, very considerably contract the number of his readers. Nay, I can quite allow for the preference being given to Pope's more immediate predecessor, Dryden, whose compositions, though assuredly less finished and complete, undoubtedly exhibit a more nervous vein of argumentative power, and a greater variety of musical rhythm. When I have mentioned these august names, I have mentioned all, writing in the English tongue, who, in my humble apprehension, can possibly be classed before Pope.

I may observe, that in this estimate I appear to be confirmed by the present Commissioners of Fine Arts, who, in selecting the Poets from whose works subjects for six vacant spaces in the new Palace of Westminster were to be executed by living artists, named Chaucer, (who by his antiquity as well as his merits was properly appointed to lead the line of English bards,) Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, Dryden, and Pope.

Though I conceive, and you will readily concur, that the case I am endeavouring to make good must be mainly established by my client's own precise words,—and the anticipated pleasure of quoting them to attentive ears has been, perhaps, my chief inducement to undertake the office which I am now fulfilling,—yet I consider it will not be out of place for the object I have in view, especially before an audience of a nation which much delights in, and is indeed much ruled by, precedent, if I should quote a few approved authorities, (had time permitted I might have availed myself of a great number,) merely for the purpose of showing that if you should be pleased to side with me in this issue, we shall find ourselves in company of which we shall have no need to be ashamed.

I shall also thus furnish a proof of what I have stated above, that I am not straining after originality or novelty of remark; indeed, I feel that I shall make way in proportion as the testimony I adduce proceeds from lips more trustworthy than my own.

What says Savage, a poet himself of irregular, but no mean genius? He thus speaks of Pope :—

“ Though gay as mirth, as curious thought sedate,
As elegance polite, as power elate,
Profound as reason, and as justice clear,
Soft as persuasion, yet as truth severe,

As bounty copious, as persuasion sweet,
Like nature various, and like art complete :
So fine her morals, so sublime her views,
His life is almost equalled by his muse."

Part of this commendation, I must admit, appears even to me overstrained. Some of Pope's compositions are marred by occasional coarseness and indelicacy, and his mind and character, I fear it must be allowed, were at times disfigured by envy, resentment, and littleness. Compared, however, with most of his predecessors of the reign of Charles II., and with many of his own cotemporaries, both his muse and his life may have been deemed decent and severe. He seems himself, at all events, to have indulged in this estimate of the tenor of his own productions:—

"Curst be the verse, how well soe'er it flow,
That tends to make one honest man my foe,
Give virtue scandal, innocence a fear,
Or from the soft-eyed virgin steal a tear."

I return to my authorities.

I do not quote Bishop Warburton, as he was the avowed apologist, as well as executor and editor, of Pope.

Dr. Joseph Warton, who wrote an essay on the genius and writings of Pope, chiefly with a view of proving what I have admitted above, that he ought not to be ranked in the highest class of our native poets, and who appears to wish, as I certainly do not, to have a hit at him whenever he can, concedes, however, thus much to him,—

"In the species of poetry wherein Pope excelled, he is superior to all mankind, and I only say that this species of poetry is not the most excellent one of the art. He is the great pact of reason, the first of ethical authors in verse."

Dr. Johnson, in his well-known and most agreeable life of Pope, says thus,—

"Of his intellectual character, the constituent and fundamental principle was good sense;" and then, "Pope had likewise genius, a mind active, ambitious, and adventurous, always investigating, always aspiring, in its widest searches longing to go forward, in its highest flights still wishing to be higher."

And at the close of the masterly contrast which he draws between Dryden and Pope, he thus sums it up,—

"If the flights of Dryden are higher, Pope continues longer on the wing; if of Dryden's fire the blaze is brighter, of Pope is the heat more regular and constant. Dryden often surpasses expectation, and Pope never falls below it; Dryden is read with frequent astonishment, and Pope with perpetual delight."

Mason, also a poet and very accomplished man, who had done so much in editing and illustrating the works of another most eminent and admirable master of his art, (I refer to Gray,) has shown what an exalted estimate he had formed of Pope, in the passage where he reproaches him for the undue praise which he had lavished on the famous Henry St. John, Lord Bolingbroke—

"Call we the shade of Pope from that blest bower,
Where throned he sits with many a tuneful sage;
Ask, if he ne'er repents that luckless hour,
When St. John's name illumined glory's page.
Ask, if the wretch who dared his honour stain,
Ask, if his country's, his religion's foe,
Deserved the wreath that Marlboro' failed to gain,
The deathless meed, he only could bestow!"