

**THE LIFE OF LAURENCE
STERNE, IN
TWO VOLUMES,
VOL. I, PP. 1-215**

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The Life of Laurence Sterne, in Two Volumes, Vol. I, pp. 1-215 by Percy Fitzgerald

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PERCY FITZGERALD

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L. Sano

NOTE

The present work is founded on a previous life of Sterne by the same author. It is in great part rewritten and contains much fresh material.

February 1896.

Inscribed

TO THE

REV. WHITWELL ELWIN

RECTOR OF BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS.

P R E F A C E

MANY years ago I wrote an account of Sterne, the first attempt that had been made at supplying a life of the great humorist. The materials were scanty enough, but I was fortunate in securing a large number of unpublished letters and other important matter. I was still more fortunate in receiving the advice and assistance of my old and valued friend the late Mr John Forster. The Rev. Whitwell Elwin, his friend and mine, an acute and accomplished critic, and the author of what is the best account of Sterne, also helped me with a number of useful suggestions and profuse references, such as only one of his vast reading could supply.

Many years, as I have said, have elapsed since the appearance of this work, and, as was to be expected, a quantity of fresh materials, letters and other MSS. have come to light. I have now almost entirely re-

PREFACE

written the book, which may be practically considered a new life. Letters of Sterne are scarce and costly, yet I have gathered here a great number of new and interesting documents hitherto unpublished. I would point particularly to the long and interesting letter in which Sterne vindicates himself from the charge of neglect of and cruelty to his mother; to the extracts from the strange journal kept for Eliza; to the 'characteristical' notes in the Halifax school book; and to many other curious records.

I have been obliged, however, to modify the too favourable opinion I entertained of Sterne's life and character, and am constrained to admit that Mr Thackeray's view—harsh as it may seem—had much to support it. Yorick's Journal which I have read through carefully, is fatally damaging; exhibiting a repulsive combination of Pharisaical utterances and lax principle. This would seem to show that Mr Sterne was something more than the mere 'philanderer' he described himself to be. Mr Elwin was long ago constrained to adopt the same view. Indeed, it may be always fairly presumed that licentious writing is almost certain to be followed by life and practice as licentious.

PREFACE

Many critics and writers of eminence—Mr Carlyle, M. Taine, Mr Elwin, Mr Traill—have tried to analyse Sterne's style and methods, contrasting him with Rabelais, Cervantes, Fielding and Dickens. The truth is, our author was so capricious and even fragmentary and disorderly in his system that comparison is impossible. The writers just named were really 'monumental' in their handling of their characters, and completed their labour before issuing it to the world. Sterne sent forth his work in fragments, and often wrote what was sheer nonsense to fill his volumes. He allowed his pen to lead him, instead of he himself directing his pen. The whole is so incomplete and disjointed that cosmopolitan readers have not the time or patience to piece the various scraps together. But, as I have shown in the text—and this, I am convinced, is the true view—he has given to the world a group of living *characters*, which have become known and familiar even to those who have not read a line of *Tristram*. These are My Uncle Toby, Mr and Mrs Shandy, Yorick—his own portrait—and Dr Slop. There are choice passages, too, grotesque situations and expressions which have become part of the language. Mr Shandy, I venture to think, is the best