

**THE LAMBS: THEIR LIVES, THEIR
FRIENDS, AND THEIR
CORRESPONDENCE, NEW
PARTICULARS AND NEW
MATERIAL**

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The Lambs: Their Lives, Their Friends, and Their Correspondence, New Particulars and New Material by William Carew Hazlitt

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THEIR CORRESPONDENCE

New Particulars and New Material

BY

WILLIAM CAREW HAZLITT



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MDCCKCVII

FAMILY AND FRIENDS

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SEEING the eminence which Lamb had attained, and the arguable probability that the circumstances of his life and the biographical particulars relative to his parents and origin would become acceptable to future generations, it seems unaccountable, and indeed outrageous, that such men as Talfourd and Procter should have neglected, while it was possible to do so, to collect information and clues. Lamb himself voluntarily laid before the world a kind of *chiaroscuro* glimpse of the subject; with this in their hand, his friends might have readily taken him in communicative moods, and left us a body of facts, for which we should have been thankful indeed. No such matter. Nearly all that we know, we have to learn piecemeal, and much we shall never regain.

The fate of many other writers has overtaken Lamb, who, after experiencing in the earlier

part of his career either obloquy or abuse, lived to see his most trivial productions almost fulsomely eulogised, while after his death many things, on which he and his friends could never have laid stress, were held up to admiration and applause. This passes for criticism; it is neither criticism nor justice, and it is extremely apt, besides, to misguide persons not intimate with the peculiar title of the Lambs to our deep and lasting regard.

Of the detached pieces of autobiography in the Essay form, the full worth has yet to be extracted and reduced to shape and method. Each successive labourer in the field culls something new, or strikes a fresh view. But they await a patient and exhaustive study. I am persuaded that within their limits many a doubt, many a moot point, many a missing link, may be solved or supplied by approaching them with a competent knowledge of the ground and the bearings.

It must be added that, in consulting the papers which thus shed light on Lamb's life and history, especial care should be taken to employ the true text, as liberties were occasionally taken even with the original impressions of *Elia* (1823-33), and what has been achieved since by

Bowdler, we can only surmise from his operations on the Letters.

It is scarcely the case, that the Essays could be woven into a complete and consecutive biographical sketch or view, as, after the most assiduous research, many gaps would remain ; but they are susceptible of being profitably employed in filling up interstices, as it were, or as corroborative testimony.

An explanation and defence of my view may be found in the communication of Lamb, in 1826, to the *Every Day Book*, relevant to a previous paper on Captain Starkey. There the writer enters into graphic particulars of a little school in Fetter Lane, kept by Mr. William Bird, assisted by Captain Starkey, which Charles attended in the morning and his sister in the evening. I do not dwell farther on the account which he gives, and which Canon Ainger reproduces in his Biography. But I point to this as a sort of test case. How much was within the Lambs' recollection, which might have been similarly preserved, and which is at present irretrievably lost !

A knowledge of the father strikes me as imperative in judging how far the brother and sister influenced each other in the formation of

a common literary taste, for Charles himself, her junior by so many years, was principally instrumental in stimulating his relative and life-companion. The ordinary conception of John Lamb the elder is that he was in a state of dotage; and there has never been much inclination to look below the surface. We have not far to go, nevertheless, to discover that the *prima stamina* of Lamb's faculty and his sister's were resident in their male parent, and that the feeling for art and letters was shared by the elder brother. It was a delicate and fragile germ, which, under unfavourable conditions, might have withered and perished, but which in two cases out of three—in one very conspicuously—developed and fructified. In cases where the literary faculty or any species of intellectual development has manifested itself in an individual, it is usual to assume and to seek the source of the gift or the power; nor is the absence of a germ to be inferred because the clue to it is not forthcoming. With many great English characters there are no known data for forming an opinion. The father of the three Lambs, Mr. John Lamb, Scrivener, though a man of humble education and imperfect training, clearly possessed some tincture of literary feeling; and