

**A BOOK OF
ENGLISH
PROSE, 1470-1900**

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SELECTED BY

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TO MY WIFE

PREFACE

WHEN called upon to justify the scanty time allotted in English education to the national literature, defenders of the "grand old fortifying classical curriculum" have often pointed out that nobody acquires the art of writing Latin prose without incidentally bestowing close attention upon a number of the choicest pieces of English prose offered for the purpose of translation. For those students of Latin who reached the standard of a good sixth-form, or of classical honours at a university, the defence was not without reason; though for the reduced number of classical students to-day it is possibly less adequate than it was, since the modern desire to find interesting and novel material sometimes leads the teacher or examiner to select a tricky piece of current journalism in preference to a model of pure style, just as it leads him in dealing with younger pupils to displace Caesar and his battalions in favour of a dialogue about a half-holiday and a cricket match.

Be this as it may, the number of English-speaking boys and girls who gain an acquaintance in this way with the best English prose is strictly limited. Cannot something more be done than has been attempted yet to bring a knowledge of the best prose within the reach of all who enjoy what is called secondary

education? This book is the outcome of a belief that something more is both possible and eminently desirable.

It is true that an anthology of prose is not so simple a matter as an anthology of poetry. The criticism of prose style is less advanced than the criticism of poetic style. There is not the same agreement as to what constitutes excellence in the case of prose as in the case of poetry. Nay, the very fact that we rightly tend to value prose primarily for its matter, not for its manner, might be held to foredoom to failure the attempt to select passages mainly in virtue of their form. Again, the amount of prose is much larger than the amount of poetry, and the best passages of a prose work do not always stand out with the same distinctness as the best passages of a lengthy poem.

But real as these objections are (and the reviewer, it is hoped, will appreciate the forethought that here offers them for his use), they are less cogent than might at first appear. There are many famous passages of prose, as any student of English literature who turns over these pages will readily admit—passages whose pre-eminent excellence is established by the secure judgment of the world of letters—passages, therefore, without knowledge of which an Englishman's education cannot be said to be complete. Further, in some prose writings, and especially in oratory, there are one or two paragraphs of supreme significance, the central point of the author's argument or the impressive climax of his appeal. Lastly, the distinction between matter and form is by no means fatal to the scheme. Though the distinction is real

and important, when we are bent on analysis, yet excellence of style always implies excellence of matter. Without goodness of the thing said, mere skill in saying would be as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. No piece, it is believed, has been admitted within these pages that does not answer to the test of "thorough truth of substance and an answering truth of form."

The editor hopes, therefore, that he may without presumption offer this collection to the boys and girls of the English-speaking world as a "golden book" of the choicest prose, in the assurance that the more faithfully they study it, the more they will find in it to admire and to love, not in youth only but throughout their lives. Moreover, it will give them, if they care for the gift, a touchstone by which they can try other prose that is presented for their reading, an unerring rule by which they can accept the good and reject the bad. Whatever fate may be in store for the book now that it is at last completed, its compilation (if the personal note may be forgiven) has been a labour of love, and there are few pages that do not recall to the compiler memories of friends whose sympathetic appreciation has fortified his own judgment of, and deepened his own affection for, many a noble saying. He would fain hope that some of these utterances may go on sounding in the ears of his readers as they have sounded in his own, rememberable as the lines of great poetry, and not less powerful "to interpret life, to console, to sustain."

There is still a smaller use—and yet it is not small. Of prose that is perverse, pretentious, obscure