

**LORD  
MACAULAY**

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Lord Macaulay by D. H. MacGregor

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**D. H. MACGREGOR**

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# LORD MACAULAY

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*BEING THE MEMBERS' PRIZE ESSAY FOR 1900*

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## LORD MACAULAY.

A century after the birth of Macaulay, it is still doubtful what rank of fame will finally be his. Truly enough, we are still very near to him; too near, it may be, to gauge his height correctly. We are still little remote from his contemporaries; we have even yet those among us who have seen his features and heard his voice. The influences of his work have not yet passed away. They are not yet perfected and may not yet be fully judged. And in this generation criticism is in no slight degree stayed by all that we know of the man himself, by the singular fascination of his life and of his nature, by the purity of his literary ardour, by the high integrity of his public service. Time will remedy all this; a later posterity will see him in his true

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relations, and will judge him with the impartiality of a stranger. But our nearness to him cannot by itself account for the fact that his position has yet to be assigned to him. For many who lived by his side have gone to their rest secure of a definite fame by the certain and general judgment of men. Hallam and Wordsworth, Dickens and Thackeray and Carlyle are names not hard to place. Each of these has his evident and peculiar stamp. The same cannot be said of Macaulay. The clue to his genius is not easy to follow. To read his works is to delight the attention and inspire the feelings. But when we are asked to estimate him, we hesitate. In the cause of this hesitation, real difficulty must be added to something of reluctance.

The great diversity of his work may well render impossible a judgment without qualification. All of us regard him from the standpoint of our own tastes; we severally think of him as preeminently a poet, a critic, an historian, an orator; some may value him most for a certain

tone and spirit, a note of the old classic *humanitas* that is felt in all, even his most faulty work; others may attribute to him the fame only of a master of style. Something can be said for every view of him. But wherever the emphasis of our esteem may fall, none of his work is slight enough to be overshadowed by any other part of it. He lies in Poet's Corner; and in number, perhaps, those who know him by his stirring *Lays* overtop any other body of his admirers. But the tribute of his College to his various qualities of mind is that which must be followed here. In a judgment so broad it may not be easy to preserve unity. Yet there are, it seems to me, unique traits of genius which reveal themselves in all the aspects of his many-sided life.

At the present time the opinion of men of letters regarding him runs strongly in the direction of criticism. All are agreed that the man himself is an ornament to our literature and our public life. It is agreed, too, that there

are few in this century whose work, despite high literary qualities, has been so little over the heads of the people. His influence does not stay in the closet but reaches the forum; and he is welcome wherever he is known. But yet, as Aristotle has said of Plato, when both our friends and the truth are dear to us, the truth must be preferred; and round the intrinsic value of Macaulay's work vigorous and penetrative criticism continues to gather. His own critical judgment is assailed; the knife he did so much to sharpen is turned upon himself. His new and striking departure in historical method is condemned on the witness of its result. His poetry, it is said, is an exotic growth, his style a gaudy mannerism. To much of this indictment we must consent; but our consent will not always be unqualified. For there are faults and faults. There are faults which greatly serve the ends of truth by defining her limits more closely; there are scholars' errors which touch the imagination with all the