

**ENGLISH MEN OF
LETTERS.
ALEXANDER POPE**

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English Men of Letters. Alexander Pope by Leslie Stephen & John Morley

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LESLIE STEPHEN & JOHN MORLEY

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ALEXANDER POPE**

English Men of Letters

EDITED BY JOHN MORLEY

POPE



ALEXANDER POPE

BY

LESLIE STEPHEN

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PREFATORY NOTE.

THE life and writings of Pope have been discussed in a literature more voluminous than that which exists in the case of almost any other English man of letters. No biographer, however, has produced a definitive or exhaustive work. It seems therefore desirable to indicate the main authorities upon which such a biographer would have to rely, and which have been consulted for the purpose of the following necessarily brief and imperfect sketch.

The first life of Pope was a catchpenny book, by William Ayre, published in 1745, and remarkable chiefly as giving the first version of some demonstrably erroneous statements, unfortunately adopted by later writers. In 1751, Warburton, as Pope's literary executor, published the authoritative edition of the poet's works, with notes containing some biographical matter. In 1769 appeared a life by Owen Ruffhead, who wrote under Warburton's inspiration. This is a dull and meagre performance, and much of it is devoted to an attack—partly written by Warburton himself—upon the criticisms advanced in the first volume of Joseph Warton's *Essay on Pope*. Warton's first volume was published in 1756; and it seems that the dread of Warburton's wrath counted for something in the delay of the second volume, which did not appear till 1782. The *Essay* contains a good many anecdotes of interest. Warton's edition of Pope—the notes in which are chiefly drawn from the *Essay*—was published in 1797. The *Life* by Johnson appeared in 1781; it is

admirable in many ways; but Johnson had taken the least possible trouble in ascertaining facts. Both Warton and Johnson had before them the manuscript collections of Joseph Spence, who had known Pope personally during the last twenty years of his life, and wanted nothing but literary ability to have become an efficient Boswell. Spence's anecdotes, which were not published till 1820, give the best obtainable information upon many points, especially in regard to Pope's childhood. This ends the list of biographers who were in any sense contemporary with Pope. Their statements must be checked and supplemented by the poet's own letters, and innumerable references to him in the literature of the time. In 1806 appeared the edition of Pope by Bowles, with a life prefixed. Bowles expressed an unfavourable opinion of many points in Pope's character, and some remarks by Campbell, in his specimens of English poets, led to a controversy (1819—1826) in which Bowles defended his views against Campbell, Byron, Roscoe, and others, and which incidentally cleared up some disputed questions. Roscoe, the author of the *Life of Leo X.*, published his edition of Pope in 1824. A life is contained in the first volume, but it is a feeble performance; and the notes, many of them directed against Bowles, are of little value. A more complete biography was published by R. Carruthers (with an edition of the works), in 1854. The second, and much improved, edition appeared in 1857, and is still the most convenient life of Pope, though Mr. Carruthers was not fully acquainted with the last results of some recent investigations, which have thrown a new light upon the poet's career.

The writer who took the lead in these inquiries was the late Mr. Dilke. Mr. Dilke published the results of his investigations (which were partly guided by the discovery of a previously unpublished correspondence between Pope and his friend Caryll), in the *Athenæum* and *Notes and Queries*, at various intervals, from 1854 to 1860. His contributions to the subject have been col-
lated in the first volume of the *Papers of a Critic*,

edited by his grandson, the present Sir Charles W. Dilke, in 1875. Meanwhile Mr. Croker had been making an extensive collection of materials for an exhaustive edition of Pope's works, in which he was to be assisted by Mr. Peter Cunningham. After Croker's death these materials were submitted by Mr. Murray to Mr. Whitwell Elwin, whose own researches have greatly extended our knowledge, and who had also the advantage of Mr. Dilke's advice. Mr. Elwin began, in 1871, the publication of the long-promised edition. It was to have occupied ten volumes—five of poems and five of correspondence, the latter of which was to include a very large proportion of previously unpublished matter. Unfortunately for all students of English literature, only two volumes of poetry and three of correspondence have appeared. The notes and prefaces, however, contain a vast amount of information, which clears up many previously disputed points in the poet's career; and it is to be hoped that the materials collected for the remaining volumes will not be ultimately lost. It is easy to dispute some of Mr. Elwin's critical opinions, but it would be impossible to speak too highly of the value of his investigations of facts. Without a study of his work, no adequate knowledge of Pope is attainable.

The ideal biographer of Pope, if he ever appears, must be endowed with the qualities of an acute critic and a patient antiquarian; and it would take years of labour to work out all the minute problems connected with the subject. All that I can profess to have done is to have given a short summary of the obvious facts, and of the main conclusions established by the evidence given at length in the writings of Mr. Dilke and Mr. Elwin. I have added such criticisms as seemed desirable in a work of this kind, and I must beg pardon by anticipation if I have fallen into inaccuracies in relating a story so full of pitfalls for the unwary.

L. S.

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