

**MEREDITH
REVISITED,
AND OTHER ESSAYS**

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Meredith Revisited, and Other Essays by J. H. E. Crees

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J. H. E. CREES

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BY
J. H. E. CREES, D. LIT.
AUTHOR OF
DIDASCALUS PATIENS
GEORGE MEREDITH
ETC.

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

LONDON
RICHARD COBDEN-SANDERSON
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JOHN BELLOWS
GLOUCESTER

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

PREFACE

The following twelve essays, written at different times in the last eight years, deal with very different writers representative of very different literatures. At first sight there is very little resemblance between Homer and Ibsen, Meredith and Newman, Cicero and Mr. J. D. Beresford. But any method of criticism which is based on really sound foundations must arrive at some general conclusions which it should be possible to apply to writers even as distantly related as those whose works are treated of in these pages. Criticism, to be successful, must not be one-sided. It should view with sympathy, or attempt to view with sympathy, writers of every clime and every age, and though it must be far from sitting on the fence, it must regard with impartial favour the combatants in the secular struggle between the ancients and the moderns, neither contemning the ancients as *passé* or *effete* because they are ancient, nor refusing moderns the privileges of genius because they were born in the nineteenth (or twentieth!) century. It must not shirk the difficult task of appraising those who have not received the *testamur* of many ages, though it must not make a cult of the *dernier cri*. And, therefore, there may be some justification—one hopes—for including in a single volume so many different names besides the plea which Samuel Butler wittily advances for publishing that of which the world seems in no urgent need, particularly in an age when conditions seem to have conspired for the destruction of the writer unless he be a novelist. Some of the essays herein included were papers originally put together for a private society at Gloucester (the XII). The essay on two plays of Aristophanes ("The Acharnians" and "The Clouds") appeared originally in the *Gloucester Journal* on the occasion of the production by boys of the Crypt School, in 1912 and 1913, of selections from the two plays in the original Greek. The essays were later modified and expanded and now are combined into one longer essay.

As for the essay on the Smoke Nuisance (which has been refused a place in various reviews) it can scarcely claim a place by right in the present volume, but at a time when human beings seem to be fast reducing themselves to the condition of mere smoking machines it is only natural that one to whom the vogue of tobacco is a colossal enigma should set forth his opinion as emphatically as he can.

It is only right to add that Mr. S. M. Ellis, having, as it would seem, settled the differences existing between himself and Mr. W. M. Meredith, has recently (July, 1920) reissued his book on Meredith, and it can be obtained from the publisher, Mr. Grant Richards. What modifications the book has suffered I cannot say, but I gather from a notice in the *Saturday Review* of August 28, that it has been shortened. I was able to see a copy of the original edition and my own essay stands as a criticism of the original work.

J. H. E. CREES.

SCHOOL HOUSE, HEREFORD,
NOVEMBER, 1920.

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A CRITICISM OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH CRITICISM*

1919

"No man was ever written down except by himself." Jeffrey may tell Wordsworth that "this will never do," Lockhart may bid Keats go back to his ointments and ipecacuanha, but Wordsworth and Keats are enthroned with the gods of literature, and their infallible and omniscient censors owe much of their present fame to their fatuous judgments upon rising genius. The truth holds good doubtless of lesser things in literature. An honest piece of work will win whatever recognition it deserves, whether critics are spiteful, fatuous, or merely lazy.

A book becomes a very different thing the longer it is studied. Inevitably it presents a different aspect to the harassed journalist who has, with the aid of the index, to produce an appreciation in half an hour or less, from that which it presents to the sympathetic student whose time has no competing claims upon it, or to the author who has laboured many solitary hours, and burnt many quarts of midnight oil. In some ways therefore a review by the author might be the best appraisal of a book. He is assuredly his best expositor. He is able, or should be able, to set forth the things which he was driving at, he has read his book, perchance with loving interest. At any rate the experiment shall be tried.

The author may indeed be as variable as his most flighty critics. Every man who has toiled his hardest, gone over his pages time after time, filed and polished, trimmed and pruned, knows that feeling of lethargic exhaustion when the unstrung mind turns wearily from the task which has consumed so many hours of ardent enthusiasm and intense thought. The gems which erstwhile seemed so brilliant sparkle no more; gone is the freshness of those happy turns and sudden inspirations. As he gazes at his creation there are good things visible, but they seem embedded in a mass of dead matter. The whole thing is one vast and mis-begotten chaos. The mind is stagnant, dull as ditch-water, the mental energies cease to respond to the stimuli which once were potent. The author is so numbed that he cannot even correct his proofs efficiently.

At other times indeed he may yet win some satisfaction from a perusal of his finished product. Here at least is a condensation of his vaporous fancies, some organisation of a considerable mass of opinions, judgments, moods, some more definite expression of that Protean infinite thing, personality. Here at last in some definite shape has been caught himself. Here is a segment of himself, something that is, and may even abide some little while, (even as long as the British Museum), a clarified record of one human mind. In such a mood he may not be appalled by his own style, or fatigued by his own epigrams. He may even catch himself applauding some apt strokes, or deft phrases, he may even—truly in rare cases—find himself ejaculating like Swift "Good God! What genius I had when I wrote that!"

*"George Meredith, a Study of his Works and Personality," by J. H. E. Cress. Blackwell, Oxford, 6/- net.

TO VVVU
AMPOSLIAO

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But the prevailing frame of mind is neither that of sombre pessimism or sanguine enthusiasm, but a settled, cheerful indifference. An honest workman—not a hack—may generally trust with reason that his achievement is not absolutely futile, not absolutely worthless. If he had something to say, he has probably said something of this something. But art is long and life is short, and human powers are weak, and language an instrument of many keys requiring skill consummate for the sounding of them all. The artist, or, if you prefer it, the conscientious craftsman, realises at every completion of a fresh task how imperfectly he has succeeded in getting into words his happiest inspirations, and how rarely the happy inspiration comes. Yet Hope springs eternal. Onward he goes, journeying always towards perfection, never within a million miles of it, on a quest which he will never accomplish, but which satisfies him by the mere activity. He prudently counts on audience few if not fit, he is prepared to divert himself if no one else, he knows that in the nature of the case none will give the time and thought to his labours which he has bestowed upon them, first in the rough, then in the hewing of them from the stone, then in the final chiselling. Resignedly but resolutely he unloads his slow-gotten gains on a thankless and incurious world.* Great is his handicap. He has to express perfectly and easily what he has laboriously acquired, he has to hit the reader in a minute with the accumulation of a month; a single phrase may have to represent the generalisation of long hours of reading. Here is condensed on one white page of 300 words, scanned by a careless reader in thirty seconds, taken by an irresponsible reviewer at ten to the minute, the teeming thoughts of long years' experience, the intense literary toil of a whole day. A writer expects but little. He is not perturbed by the light condemnation of a light critic, he is rather surprised than not if any notice his best things, and incense and oblation but discomfit him. A merciless self-scrutiny has strange results. Humility and self-confidence may co-exist. It is always easy to be proudly content if one measures oneself by the general average, it is never possible to be anything but humble when aim and achievement are contrasted. Thus the laborious author may combine almost complete depreciation of self with a feeling of not uncertain satisfaction or even arrogant disregard, that extreme of arrogance which is marked by the quiet ignoring of the world. He is scarcely amused by not notable anonymity when it tells him his work is not notable, he is equally resigned if he is praised and blamed for the wrong thing, he is as little interested in indiscriminate eulogy as in indiscriminate censure.† He does not ask to be admired, he scarcely heeds it if he is denounced, but what, lodged in a wilderness he craves for, and but rarely gains, is to be understood.

Such are the reflections which arise in me as I peruse some forty notices of a recent work on Meredith. I have no particular grievance that demands expression. I had a not unfavourable press. There was, not lavish, yet well-considered praise from those whose verdict I would value most. Some who admired too ardently neither Meredith nor his expositor spread themselves in columns, and adorned their effusions with some of

* There are some who could say with Samuel Butler "Like the greater number, I suppose, of those who write books at all, I write in order that I may have something to read in my old age when I can write no longer. . . . I have published all my books at my own expense, and paid for them in due course."

† He is however grieved if only one reviewer notices the care he took upon the index!

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my best phrases, borrowed without acknowledgment. One kindly critic devoted a leading article to the book, others bestowed the epithet "notable" upon it, (though this must cancel out with others who explicitly declared that it was *not* notable) one or two embarrassed by their lavishness. Many praised me for my enthusiasm. Some, on the other hand, regarding me as a blind and freakish satellite, blamed me for enthusiasm. One vigorous assailant declared the book worthless on this account, though, I must add, he expended three columns on the task under the heading "The Book of the Week." The case in point is of importance only to myself, but the general tendency involved is a matter of more consequence. I propose in the pages next following to examine some of these vagaries, and also to set forth concisely and more clearly, if I can, my estimate of Meredith's greatness and my own aim in writing.

Of this last first. I purposed, not to write a biography of Meredith, not to garner sheaves of anecdotes illuminating or the reverse, certainly not to search for "chatter about Harriet," not to deal with Meredith the man except as he is revealed in his books, but to write as sound and discriminating an appraisal of Meredith's genius as I could. In this task I sought for principles to aid me. I assumed that there is a science of criticism.* I assumed that Meredith was a classic, or at least that there was a *prima facie* case for this view. I tried to put him in line with the greatest, ancient or modern. I had recourse to such canons of criticism as I could devise myself, or find expressed in the writings of the great critics. I studied the Meredithian novels in the same detailed manner that one studies an ancient text, though with reference rather to broad principles of treatment, design and construction, philosophy of life, than to linguistic matters, and in all this I took for granted that the training and methods which I had acquired both as a classical student and an historical investigator would be needed in the examination of the works of this modern novelist. I read and re-read him, pencil in hand, I made annotations and abstracts, in my holidays and upon railway journeys when other times did not suffice, and finally, when a considerable mass of material had accumulated, I braced myself for the real task, that of organising this material into a co-ordinated whole. I decided that a *catalogue raisonné* of the novels was useless, and that if I were neither to weary the reader nor to perpetrate a futile summary of the novels, what I left out would be as important as what I inserted. I selected therefore out of the abundance of matter which was now mine only that which seemed to me to illustrate the main lines of Meredith's genius, and the leading doctrines in his philosophy of life. I feel certain now, as I felt certain then, that this was the best method—if it could be carried out successfully—of achieving the end proposed.

This assuredly is not the method of a perfervid partisan. I admired Meredith from my youthful days, not blindly, and certainly in no sense exclusively. If there be any Meredithians, and if a Meredithian is one who lives and has his being in Meredith, who thinks of nothing else, reads nothing else, and cannot stomach Hardy or Thackeray, Milton or Homer, or any other classic whom you please, because these great men are not Meredith, I assuredly am no Meredithian. I burn no incense at his shrine, I have but

* In consequence one critic accuses me of a schoolmasterish tone, and declares that I measure off Meredith with a yard measure.