

**ANTHONY ASTON,
STROLLER
AND ADVENTURER**

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Anthony Aston, Stroller and Adventurer by Watson Nicholson

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WATSON NICHOLSON

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AND ADVENTURER**

ANTHONY ASTON

STROLLER AND ADVENTURER

To which is appended Aston's *Brief Supplement to Colley Cibber's Lives*; and *A Sketch of the Life of Anthony Aston, written by Himself.*

By

WATSON NICHOLSON, Ph. D.

Author of "The Struggle for a Free Stage in London," "Six Lectures on American Literature," "Sources of Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*," etc.

UNIVERSITY OF
CALIFORNIA

1920

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TO THE
AMERICAN

FOREWORD

Writing twelve years after Milton's death, in *Lives of the Most Famous English Poets*, old Winstanley, the royalist, disposed of the author of *Paradise Lost* in exactly eighty-two words. Shakespeare, escaping the political odium enveloping the blind poet, came off a trifle better. Other early biographers of the English Stage and Drama disclosed similar exaggerations and eccentricities; but when we find, later, one of them devoting twice as much space to Tony Aston as to Shakespeare and Milton combined, we are aware that proportion and perspective are wanting, or that there was a woful lack of material and judgment. However, when the editors of the latest edition of the *Dictionary of National Biography* reserve a niche for the effigy of Anthony Aston, we do not feel called upon for an apology for this brochure.

This sketch of Aston's life is brief, but—

Ther n'as namore to telle.

Short as the account is, the details contained in the following pages represent all that is

TO YOU
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known about the once famous wag, and are now published for the first time since Aston's death. In addition to the *Sketch*, the discovery of which is herein recorded and the document itself printed in full, it has been thought opportune to reprint the *Brief Supplement* and also Chetwood's account of Aston; thus collecting in one place all that is known of and about Tony Aston.

W. N.

"Deer Lodge"
South Haven, Michigan,
July 4, 1920.

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The name of Tony Aston has been familiar to all men of letters, particularly to students of the Stage, for two centuries; and yet, so few real facts have been discovered, hitherto, concerning the man's life that we may assert without fear of contradiction, that practically nothing has been known about him, save that he was a strolling player for many years, the author of an unsuccessful play and the much more important *Brief Supplement* to Colley Cibber's *Apology*. Chetwood's *General History of the Stage* (1749) has been, until now, the sole source of our knowledge about Anthony Aston. This is the only reference mentioned by Baker in his sketch of Aston in *Biographia Dramatica*, and it is the only work appended to his life in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. A mere glance at Chetwood's three-page gossip account will suffice to show how really meager our knowledge of Tony Aston has been, up to this time. Even now, many essential details are wanting for a wholly satisfactory biography of the man.

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This paucity of information about Aston is the more surprising, inasmuch as during his own lifetime, he was so universally known in England and Ireland that his name was a mere byword that wanted no explaining. Not only had he played "in all the Theatres in London", but he was "as well known in every town as the post-horse that carries the mail". Probably no actor of his time, with the possible exception of Dogget, was known to so many people. Nearly every one who could raise a shilling for the purpose had been convulsed at Tony's grimaces. He was so familiar to all that his name grew into a figure of speech. After his own generation, however, until now, all that attached to the name of Tony Aston, making it a living personality, was forgotten, save the few choice samples preserved by Chetwood. Just as the old Drury Lane prompter, John Downes, is known to us simply as the author of the priceless *Roscius Anglicanus*, so Tony Aston has come down to us as the blackguard author of the no less rare *Brief Supplement*: the person who went by that name has vanished and left not sufficient for even a "sticks-and-rags" man.

At last, by one of those lucky stumbles, perpetually possible in the path of the researcher, much of this ignorance about the details of the

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life of Anthony Aston has been cleared away. One day, in the British Museum, about the time of the outbreak of the Great War, while leafing over some old and forgotten "drolls", trivial and sorry stuff even in their own time, I chanced upon a title-page that caused me to sit up and rub my eyes. There was something decidedly familiar about it; and yet I had never seen it before. It appeared in no library catalogue that I had ever seen, in no reference list, in no bibliographical table. If any one else had ever seen it, he had failed to report the fact. This was the title-page:

A
S K E T C H
O F T H E
L I F E, &c.
O F

Mr. Anthony Aston,
Commonly call'd TONY ASTON.
Written by Himself.—Now *All Alive*.

There was no mistaking the pages which followed this announcement,—they were written by the author of the *Brief Supplement*. Meager as this sketch is,—it was intended only as a synoptical outline of a more complete autobiography—it supplies us with a multitude of