

**PROSE &  
POETRY**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649004690

Prose & poetry by Charles Lamb

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**CHARLES LAMB**

**PROSE &  
POETRY**



# CHARLES LAMB

Prose & Poetry

With Essays by

HAZLITT & DE QUINCEY

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With an Introduction by

GEORGE GORDON

and Notes

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OXFORD : AT THE CLARENDON PRESS  
LONDON : GEOFFREY CUMBERLEGE

THE Frontispiece is from the painting by Francis Stephen Cary in the National Portrait Gallery.

The introduction was originally written as the Centenary Notice of the *Essays of Elia* in *The Times Literary Supplement*, and is reprinted here with some alterations.

The selection has been made by Mr. Gordon. The Notes are by Mr. A. M. D. Hughes.

FIRST PUBLISHED APRIL 1927  
REPRINTED SEPT. 1921, 1922, 1924  
1925, 1928, 1930, 1931, 1937, 1948, 1952  
PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

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## INTRODUCTION

A VISITOR to London in August, 1820, must have remarked an unusual animation in the life of that city. The season was over, but very few people seemed to have gone. The theatres were still running, well after their usual time, Mr. Kean announcing, for August 19, his last performance in the character of Othello before his 'positive departure' for America. Wherever one went, in London or about, there were soldiers quartered or on guard. It was said, with some excitement, that a gunboat could be seen lying off in the Thames; and there, sure enough, it was, facing Cotton Garden, while a certain great lady passed through the streets to the tribunal of the Lords escorted by 'young men on horseback' and cheering crowds of 'well-dressed persons' whom the *Courier* called a 'mob'. We are in the month of the celebrated Trial of Queen Caroline—the fourth act of a Royal drama, never, perhaps, in the very best style, which had swept all England into one gigantic Chorus, and by something, we must suppose, Corinthian in its proportions, had roused the least worldly of statist, first gentleman of London, modest-hearted Ch—L—b, to the chivalry of invective rhyme. He who had declined six years before to triumph with his countrymen over Napoleon's fall, because the man was great and in the dust, and persisted in liking men who 'frowned upon Trafalgar'—who in earlier days, in the very chaos and thunder of the new-born world, had found Burnet's 'Own Times' more seasonable than all that the friends of the Revolution could write—this generous and homely freethinker was

for once with the majority. There was only one side for him, the side of the weak, and he was a 'Queen's man' always.

It will be readily understood that no other topic, at such a time, stood much chance. Even the reported opening of the Regent's Canal, that 'singular example of British industry and enterprise', and the prophecy, punctually fulfilled at daybreak on the 23rd, of still another Continental revolution, failed to obtain that share of public notice which Portugal and the engineering interests had a right to expect. Only here and there a few idle people, neither of the great Vulgar nor the small, lazily glancing at the current pages of the *London Magazine* and voting it otherwise a weak number, found time to ask themselves, and in the end to ask each other, the unusual question, 'Who is Elia?' It was a short article, or rather essay, of some four pages, describing in an assumed character—for it was not to be supposed that the man had been a clerk—and yet it seemed not all invented—the life of a great house of business fallen into decay; with commemorations, quick and affectionate, of its inhabitants, a queer assemblage—odd fishes, a lay monastery—and yet perhaps to another eye they might have been dull enough—now chirruping, most of them, in the shades. The style of the piece was of an older fashion and yet new, with such felicities of phrase and pretty rhetorical modulations as seemed to smile back upon their maker; a style now brief and plain, now running into little catches hanging loose, one would say, upon the score, yet somehow masterfully concerted, and knocking, it could not be denied, most strangely at the heart.

Reader, in thy passage from the Bank—where thou hast been receiving thy half-yearly dividends (supposing thou art a lean annuitant like myself)—to the Flower Pot, to secure a place for Dalston, or Shacklewell, or some other

thy suburban retreat northerly—dids't thou never observe a melancholy looking, handsome, brick and stone edifice, to the left—where Threadneedlestreet abuts upon Bishopsgate? . . . This was once a house of trade. . . .

Can it be wondered that the question was asked, or that at this distance of time, surveying events from our centennial *speculum* or watch-tower, we pronounce this, on the whole, the question of the month?

The answer was scarcely more readily to be guessed at from the man himself than from the essay, though he was in London at the time (his yearly holiday over), and living, in free commerce with his friends, where in those years he most loved to be, in the general noise and resort of all London—'the individual spot I like best in all this great city'—among the theatres and flower-sellers of Covent Garden. Any one in the habit of traversing this region, says Barry Cornwall, by merely extending his walk a few yards into Russell-street

might have noted a small spare man, clothed in black, who went out every morning and returned every afternoon, as regularly as the hands of the clock moved towards certain hours. You could not mistake him. He was somewhat stiff in manner, and almost clerical in his dress; which indicated much wear. He had a long, melancholy face, with keen, penetrating eyes; and he walked with a short, resolute step, City-wards. He looked no one in the face for more than a moment, yet contrived to see everything as he went on. No one who ever studied the human features could pass by without recollecting his countenance; it was full of sensibility, and it came upon you like a new thought, which you could not help dwelling upon afterwards; it gave rise to meditation and did you good. This small half-clerical man was—Charles Lamb.

So Elia, in his day-hours, looked and moved. He was in the first novelty of the character; a man of forty-five, with his golden years unexpectedly opening upon him; heavily tried in what are called the sorrows of the world,