

**ECLECTIC ENGLISH
CLASSICS. THE LIFE AND
WRITINGS OF ADDISON**

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Eclectic English Classics. The Life and Writings of Addison by Thomas Babington Macaulay

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THOMAS BABINGTON MACAULAY

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J. Addison.

ECLECTIC ENGLISH CLASSICS

THE
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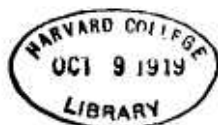
BY
LORD MACAULAY



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MACAULAY—ADDISON.

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INTRODUCTION.

MACAULAY, in his "Essay upon Addison," has related the principal events in his life with a fullness of detail that makes it unnecessary to dwell upon them here, except incidentally and so far as they connect themselves with a discussion of his writings. Written in the maturity of his powers, and divested of some of the redundance attaching to his earlier style, Lord Macaulay presents to us a most winning portrait of this great master of English prose, with a truthfulness, a graphic power, and a beauty of diction, such as, up to the time of its appearance, fifty years ago, did not exist in the language. It forms at once a splendid tribute to Addison's genius and to his many virtues as a man.

It is remarkable, in view of the unique and distinguished place occupied by Addison among English men of letters, that no complete and carefully annotated edition of his works has yet been made; and, except for the narrative of Tickell prefixed to the edition of 1721, no account of him was published during his lifetime, or subsequently, by any of his contemporaries.

If one whose acquaintance with English literature was precise as well as extensive, and who was thereby qualified for judgment, were asked to indicate which, among its eminent writers, had exerted the most salutary influence in his generation, in reforming

and correcting, not only public taste, but public morals as well, he would with little hesitation, we think, point to Joseph Addison.

As a poet, Addison's talents did not fit him to excel; and had his fame rested entirely upon his translations from the Latin poets, the "Campaign," an apotheosis of Marlborough, the tragedy of "Cato," and his other verses, he would have been assigned a niche in the British Temple of Fame, doubtless in a line with Gay, Tickell, and Parnell, but certainly much below Pope.

In that kind of prose literature, however, which he may be said to have created in those charming papers in the "Tatler," and in the "Spectator" particularly,—of which nearly one half emanated from his pen,—he was unapproachable. Imitators by the score he has had,—in the "World," to which Lord Chesterfield and Horace Walpole contributed, the "Connoisseur," the "Mirror," the "Lounger," and Dr. Johnson's sententious "Rambler;" but, as Macaulay said of Boswell in his immortal biography, Addison distanced all competitors. "Eclipse is first, and all the rest nowhere."

No example presents itself in our language, and certainly not in that of any other nation, of writings of such rare and precious merit, produced, as were Addison's essays in the "Spectator," from day to day, going to the press from his writing table, often with the ink scarcely dry upon them, unpremeditated, as in many cases they must have been, and with little or no opportunity of revision.

Addison, as many other distinguished men have done, ripened slowly; and there is a broad line of distinction between his earlier prose works and the papers in the "Spectator," in which, later in life, he at last found his inspiration. It must be regarded as a misfortune, that with his powers of observation, and his lively

interest in what was going on about him, Addison should, in the narrative of his travels in Italy, have given us so few glimpses of the life of the Italian people, or of the men—the statesmen and the scholars—who were then shaping the destinies of Italy, or enriching its literature. As Macaulay has pointed out, the Latin writers with whom he seems to have been most familiar, and of whom he is oftenest reminded in the presence of some memorable scene, are, many of them, but little esteemed among us now. In fact, while, undoubtedly, Latin composition was cultivated at the universities, and an ease and elegance attained in it at that time far more than is common at present, the acquaintance of our scholars with the language and its literature is much more extensive, exact, and profound than we have any evidence of its being then.

Of Italian literature,—that of Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarch, Ariosto, and others,—which had exerted so powerful an influence upon that of England in the earlier period, from Chaucer to Shakespeare, the writers of Queen Anne's time knew but little; and from their study of French literature, then more in favor with them, their style had acquired a stiffness and formality, from which Addison, among the rest, was long in emancipating himself.

In order rightly to estimate our indebtedness—not only in a literary sense, but also in their influence on the amelioration of manners and the elevation of the tone of public morality—to these little essays in the "Spectator," which found their way to many thousand breakfast tables every week-day morning, the condition of literature and of society at the dawn of the eighteenth century should be considered.

The nation had been slow in recovering from that state of intellectual and spiritual torpor into which the license, the ribaldry,

and the infamous excesses of the Restoration of Charles II. had plunged it. The cynicism and irreverence of Charles's court had blunted the moral sensibilities of the people, debauched the public conscience, and destroyed, apparently, all memory of that chivalrous feeling, that reverence for women, and those noble ideals of life and conduct, which distinguished the men of the Elizabethan age and those of a later generation. Of the coarseness, indecency, and profligacy of the people of fashion in London, at this and a later period, the works of Swift, the novels of Defoe, and the graphic and terrible realism of Hogarth's paintings, furnish abundant evidence.

Of polite literature, in any strict sense, such as existed in France and in Italy at the time, there was none. Books were being multiplied; but they were mostly of a controversial or religious character, or translations from the classics, the reading of which was confined to the few. Of reading for the people, of an entertaining or instructive kind, there was scarcely any deserving mention. The people of London were still crowding the playhouses to witness and applaud the vile entertainments provided for them by Congreve, Etherege, Wycherley, and other lesser wits of the town, and to the production of which the great Dryden himself—though a moralist by profession, and a man of decorous life—did not disdain to prostitute his talents.

The ignorance prevailing among the rural population, even of the better class, and among the tradespeople in the provincial towns, would be incredible, if we failed to consider the difficulties of communication between the metropolis and the different parts of the kingdom, and the fact that no such means of diffusing intelligence as is furnished by a newspaper press existed in England prior to 1685. Until the reign of William III. no