

NINETEENTH CENTURY ESSAYS

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Nineteenth century essays by George Sampson

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GEORGE SAMPSON

**NINETEENTH
CENTURY ESSAYS**

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ESSAYS


Edited with Introduction and Notes

by

GEORGE SAMPSON

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INTRODUCTION

THE choice of pieces and the extent of annotation in this volume may seem to need some exculpatory remarks. First, as to the text. To call a book "Nineteenth Century Essays" and include no specimen of Lamb whose "Elia" volumes appeared respectively in 1823 and 1833, or of Hazlitt whose record as an essayist stretches from 1817 to 1826, or of Leigh Hunt whose published work falls wholly within the century, is, apparently, to take very arbitrary liberties with chronology. But literary chronology, like synchronised time, is often wrong. Thus, though Carlyle was born in the eighteenth century, he belongs in spirit almost to our own days; and though Leigh Hunt died in the same year as Macaulay, he belongs as plainly to the Georgian age of Revolution as Macaulay to the Victorian period of Free Trade. As a matter of fact the volume covers exactly a century; for Carlyle, the first of our essayists, was born in 1795, and Stevenson, the last, died in 1894. If any weakness is discernible in the latter part of the book, not the editor, but the inexorable interdict of copyright must be blamed. This matter is altogether too large for discussion here; but room should be found for a bitter, if brief, complaint that the harsh

exercise of copyright veto is a dreadful difficulty in the way of the English teacher, and produces in the mind of the pupil a fixed impression that literature ended abruptly somewhere about the time of Wordsworth. A book of Nineteenth Century Essays should certainly have included examples from some writers here unrepresented, but my attempts to secure one or two which I specially wished to include were met by flat, not to say fierce, refusals. It is with the greater pleasure that I record my thanks to Messrs Longmans for permission to use the amended form of Bagehot's "Shakespeare the Man" from Vol. I. of the *Literary Studies*, and to Messrs Chatto and Windus for the readiness with which they allowed me to reprint Stevenson's "A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured" from *Memories and Portraits*.

Next, as to the notes. I fear that some young lions among English teachers will roar furiously at so old-fashioned a production as a school book with elaborate annotation. Now it is quite undeniable that one of the most valuable acquirements a student can gain during the English course at school is the ability to use a plain text; but a place still remains for the annotated volume as a means to that most valuable disciplinary exercise in literary work, the intensive study of a piece or group of pieces. The present agitation against notes is a reaction, not really against notes, but against unsuitable notes. That is a fact frequently overlooked. Because past students in their teens were injudiciously offered two pages of philological and antiquarian information about the use of some particular word or phrase, some teachers have vigorously proclaimed that present students in their teens must be offered

nothing at all about anything. This is a great mistake. The mind of youth is inquisitive, and its curiosity must be neither defrauded nor wilfully handicapped. To urge that a boy should read Macaulay without notes and consult an encyclopædia for solution of his difficulties is magnificent but not practical. Every teacher knows the precise amount of uncompelled reference he can expect from the average labour-saving schoolboy. In the present instance, the notes are many, not for quantity's sake, but because allusion is the salt of an essay, and allusions need elucidation. A student who reads intelligently the Macaulay essay here given should be stimulated by its multitudinous allusions to a proper literary curiosity. Baffle that curiosity by denying information, and the student will miss one of Macaulay's chief merits. At the same time it cannot be too strongly urged that the text is truly, though not in corporal fact, the beginning and the end of this volume. The student may entirely ignore the notes, and, with only partial understanding of the text, learn much about the essayists of the nineteenth century; on the other hand, he may diligently acquire every fact recorded in the notes, and know nothing at all about the matter. The text is the thing: the notes are an appended encyclopædia to which recourse may be had (fruitfully I hope) when curiosity prompts. As far as I know, none of the essays here printed has been annotated before, and I am therefore relieved from making the usual acknowledgments to predecessors. I have, of course, pillaged the usual works of reference, and I am indebted, also, to some kindly correspondents.

In preparing the volume I have had in view the upper forms of secondary schools, and, especially,

the needs of those students who are preparing for the Board of Education's Preliminary Examination for the Teachers' Certificate, the requirements of which, in the matter of general reading, are excellent in intention though disconcertingly vague in statement. My own experience among candidates for this examination has shewn me that even the simplest classical allusions are not understood by some, and such allusions are therefore explained here. These and similar notes can be simply ignored by those who do not need them.

The choice of essays is deliberate: I have tried to select different types,—the abstract, the historical, the æsthetic, the critical, the biographical, and the actual. That some passages will be beyond the comprehension of the young student is very possible; but each essay as a general rule should be not only intelligible but attractive. The pieces are arranged in order of composition without reference to the authors' birth-dates. In the little biographical notes I have aimed at two things: first, to add something to the impulse each essay should give towards further reading, and next, to suggest the books in which that further reading may be most profitably sought.

The volume raises the interesting question What is an essay? What is there in common between the elaborate review-article and the purely personal note; between Macaulay's wide historical survey and Stevenson's charming trifle; between the hundred-and-forty pages of Carlyle's *Scott* and the forty lines of Bacon's *Adversity*? One might, perhaps rather frivolously, suggest that the modern essay is generally a discourse (occupying some fifty-five minutes in delivery) decorously