

**JAMES RUSSELL
LOWELL AS
A CRITIC**

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James Russell Lowell as a critic by Joseph J. Reilly

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JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

AS A CRITIC

BY

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TO

MY MOTHER
AND THE MEMORY OF
MY FATHER

PREFACE

WITH the steady growth of interest in American literature the position of James Russell Lowell as the greatest of our men of letters has been pretty generally conceded. *The Vision of Sir Launfal* is regarded as a classic and studied in our schools; *The First Snowfall*, *The Dandelion*, *An Incident in a Railroad Car*, typical of Lowell the poet, in his tenderness of sentiment, his appreciation of nature, his didacticism, are household poems among us. That sheaf of essays in lighter mood which numbers *My Garden Acquaintance* and *A Good Word for Winter*, wins for Lowell in many minds a place by the side of Thackeray's "Saint Charles." This same Lowell had thoughtful things to say on public libraries, on democracy, and in the heat of the Civil War many other things to say—some thoughtful, others not. Of his prose his most noteworthy work was devoted to criticism. As a man of letters he was poet, essayist, student of politics, and critic, and on each of these many sides he deserves consideration. His has been regarded as the foremost position

in the history of American criticism and he has been compared, and sometimes without disparagement, to Matthew Arnold. Rarely in a modern-day volume of criticism or literary history does one fail to find an apt quotation from Lowell. Obviously his critical work is known and read. This brilliant versatile Lowell, this college professor, editor, poet, etymologist, diplomat, essayist, student of literature and politics, did not for naught don the robes of critic and adventure to sit in the Siege Perilous amid that circle which numbers in English Coleridge, Hazlitt, Lamb, Carlyle, and Matthew Arnold.

It is the purpose of this study to weigh the merits of Lowell the critic, to consider dispassionately his gifts and equipment, to ascertain if possible his right to a place in the brilliant company of admitted critics.

In these days when criticism is in large measure merely a series of personal impressions, one need not perhaps defend the objective method employed throughout this study. For the conclusions presented here the writer alone is responsible.

To Professor Cook of Yale, at whose suggestion this work was undertaken, my gratitude is due for his unfailing interest and advice, and to Professor Beers of Yale for his kindness on many occasions. I wish to acknowledge my obligations to my sister, Miss Katherine M. Reilly, for patience and care in transcribing, and to Miss Teresa

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Ryan, whose aid in reading proof and in preparing the index, has been generously given.

J. J. R.

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON,
March, 1915.