

**SELECTIONS FROM STEELE'S
CONTRIBUTIONS TO
THE TATLER: WITH AN
INTRODUCTION AND NOTES**

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Selections from Steele's Contributions to the Tatler: With an Introduction and Notes by L. E. Steele

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

BY

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INTRODUCTION.

It has been the curious fate of at least three men, whose greatness is associated with the eighteenth century, to have had their memories undeservedly injured through the hostility, the mistakes, or the supercilious regard of a succession of more or less adverse critics; and it has been the good fortune of some writers of our own day to be in a position, with fuller knowledge to hand, to vindicate their characters, or greatly to modify the harsh opinions we had been led to form of them, through the carelessness, or something worse, of previous biographers. Of these three, Richard Steele is one; and as to the two others, we now know that Richard Brinsley Sheridan was not quite so contemptible in life and end as we had thought, and that the moral obliquity of Warren Hastings existed in the biased imagination of Lord Macaulay.

Strangely enough it is from Lord Macaulay's mischievous picturesqueness that Steele also has suffered; but not perhaps to so great an extent from this, as from the pitying affection with which Thackeray regards him. We have only to read the *Essay on Addison* of

the one and *Esmond* or the *Lecture on Steele*¹ of the other to appreciate how far the popular conception of Steele's character is due to these two writers. But "the whirligig of time brings his revenges," and Steele need now no longer be for us "the rake" of Macaulay, "whose life was spent in sinning and repenting," or the "Poor Dick" of Thackeray, but a man of high, generous, and chivalric actions; a faithful and lovable friend; and, despite the faults generally associated with enthusiastic and impulsive natures, an honest champion of what was pure and good, and that too in a generation which esteemed but lightly those things which are of good report.²

Although Steele speaks of himself as an "Englishman, born in Ireland," there is reason to believe that he was more of an Irishman than this statement would seem to imply, for there is not much doubt that he was connected with a family of Steeles of Cheshire, which had settled in the country before the middle of the seventeenth century, and had already given a Lord Chancellor to the High Court of Justice in Ireland. In the year 1672, on the 12th of March, when London was still staggering from the two awful blows of the Great Plague and the Great Fire, Richard Steele was born in the sister capital of Dublin, not far from that

¹ See *English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century*.

² To his two latest biographers, Mr. Austin Dobson and especially Mr. George A. Aitken, we are indebted for this better and truer view of Steele's character. The present editor would here acknowledge his indebtedness to the former's *Richard Steele* in the "English Worthies" series and the *Selections* in the "Clarendon Press" volume, and to the latter's admirable *Life of Steele*, 2 vols., 1889.

spot where Dean Swift had been born five years previously; and the record of his baptism may still be read in the register of St. Bride's Parish. But with this event his connection with Ireland may be said to have begun and closed. Steele's father, like Swift's, was a Dublin attorney; apparently well-to-do, for he possessed a country house at Monkstown in the neighbourhood of Dublin, and at one time held the office of sub-sheriff of the county of Tipperary. He died when his son was but five years of age, and there is reason to believe that Richard's mother, whom her son describes as "a very beautiful woman of a noble spirit,"¹ soon followed her husband to the grave. The facts that survive of Steele's early life are very few, and there is nothing to tell of him until he entered the famous Charterhouse School in 1684. It was here that the most memorable of literary friendships—an almost life-long one—was formed, when Joseph Addison joined the school nearly two years after; and it is pleasant to imagine Steele, with his experience of school life and his kindly heart, helping to make the first few trying weeks of a "new boy's" existence tolerable to the shy and somewhat sedate son of Lancelot Addison, the Dean of Lichfield.

It is easy to perceive from Steele's writings that he took advantage of the excellent classical training which the Charterhouse offered, and although not the scholar which Addison proved to be, it was with no bad result that Dr. Thomas Walker, the headmaster, administered those floggings of which Steele frequently speaks in after years.

In due time Steele went to Christ Church, Oxford,

¹ See Essay II., p. 6, l. 11.