

THE "ESSAYS OF ELIA" AND MY LAMB LIBRARY

BY

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3300 words

The late R. K. Munkittrick, the one-time Editor of "Judge" once remarked that, when a certain distinguished literary family were hard up for money they met together and said:- "Come let us dig up father."

How is it possible to dig up anything new or original about Charles Lamb? It is possible, because of a few recent and interesting "finds."

Any rich man can have a library and boast of his possessions; but the poor man has an excusable pride in acquiring things he desires.

My library is divided like Ancient Gaul, into three parts;- Charles Lamb and his friends;- books with inscriptions or provenance,- and others. One may be pardoned for writing with extravagance about one's own library when the books collected have been the result of industry and persistence and an acquired knowledge. Before me, on the wall as I write, between three portraits of Lamb on one side, and four on the other, is framed a brief one-page unpublished letter from Lamb to Edward Moxon, as follows:

Dear M. I came to town last week, but could not stretch so far as you. A letter has just come from Mrs. Williams to say that Emma is so poorly that she must have long holidays here. It has agitated us so much and we shall expect her hourly, so that you shall excuse me to Wordsworth for not coming up. We are, both, nervous and poorly. Your punctual newspapers are our bit of comfort. Adieu, till better times."

Chas. Lamb.

It is interesting that on the day Lamb wrote this letter he had made his famous remark which biographers have to keep continually in the background of the mind, "The more my character comes to be known, the less my veracity will come to be suspected." A few days later Lamb received another letter from Mrs. Williams which caused him immediately

to announce his intention of travelling to Fornham the following week to bring Miss Isola home. Isola was Lamb's adopted daughter, teaching at this time the children of Mrs. Williams. During the visit, Lamb deepened the already formed friendship with the delightful wife of the rector of Fornham, in Suffolk. In the best of his later letters he writes to tell Mrs. Williams of their safe arrival home.

"The incidents of our journey were trifling, but you bade me tell them. We had then in the coach a rather talkative Gentleman, but very civil, all the way, and took up a servant maid at Stamford, going to a sick mistress... The former engaged me in a discourse for full twenty miles on the probable advantages of Steam Carriages, which being merely problematical, I bore my part in with some credit, in spite of my totally un-engineer-like faculties. But when somewhere about Stanstead he put an unfortunate question to me as to the 'probability of its turning out a good turnip season'; and when I, who am still less of an agriculturist than a steam-philosopher, not knowing a turnip from a potato ground, innocently made answer that I believed it depended very much upon boiled legs of mutton, my unlucky reply set Miss Isola a laughing to a degree that disturbed her tranquility for the only moment in our journey. I am afraid my credit sank very low with my other fellow-traveller, who had thought he had met with a well-informed passenger, which is an accident so desirable in a Stage Coach. We were rather less communicative, but still friendly, the rest of the way."

A few days later this very characteristic little note was sent by Lamb to the Enfield doctor concerning some medicine addressed by mistake to Miss Isola Lamb:

"No such person is known on the Chase Side, and she is fearful of taking medicines which may have been put up for another patient. She begs me to say that she was born an Isola and christened Emma. Moreover that she is Italian by birth, and that her ancestors were from Isola Bella (Fair Island) in the kingdom of Naples. She has never changed her name and rather mournfully adds that she has no prospect at present of doing so. She is literally I. SOLA, or single.

This letter is of especial interest in view of the fact that Emma Isola afterwards became the wife of Lamb's correspondent 'Dear M.' to whom the preceding letter was addressed and ~~Edward Moxon~~ who was later ^{to become} the publisher of the second series of the "Essays of Elia."

This year, the one hundredth anniversary of the publication

of the "Essays of Elia" ^{is being} ~~should be~~ commemorated in various ways. "The Essays" as we now call them, were entitled by Lamb "Elia, Essays, which have appeared under that signature in the London Magazine." I have before me two copies of the first series. One of which belonged to Allan Cunningham, the Scotch Poet and Literateur, containing this inscription: "Allan Cunningham, Esq., with Elia's best respects." The following unpublished letter in Lamb's clerkly hand ^{is} ~~so~~ inserted in the volume:-

"Dear Sir, Our friends of the "London Magazine" meet at 20 Russell Street, Cov. Gar. this evening, at quarter before seven. We shall be disappointed if you are not among them.

Yours with perfect sympathy,

C. Lamb."

'Our friends of the London Magazine' included: John Scott, editor, and among the contributors Thomas Hood, Sub-editor, Bernard Barton, the Quaker Poet whose daughter married Edward Fitzgerald; Cary, the translator of Dante; John Clair, the Corn-Law poet; B. W. Procter and De Quincey. It is easy to imagine the conviviality, repartee, and brilliant conversation called forth by ~~such~~ ^{the} informal contact of such minds.

"Imperfect Sympathies," is the title of one of Lamb's most revealing Essays, and the irony of the foregoing signature is explained in the following passage from the essay:

"I have been trying all my life to like Scotchmen, and am obliged to desist from the experiment in despair. They cannot like me--and in truth I never knew one of that nation who attempted to do so."

My other copy of the "Essays of Elia" is equally unique, it contains the ^{"Last Essays of Elia"} ~~second series~~ and formerly belonged to William Wordsworth. Now Wordsworth lacked a sense of humor, which fact always amused Lamb, and Wordsworth, with his own hand establishes this fact for all time. All the world is familiar with Lamb's charming Essay "Grace Before Meat."

Over this essay Wordsworth has written, illustrating and condemning his own lack of humor:

"This article is bad, -- very bad, -- whatever people's habits may be."

If Lamb, in another world, should ever see this comment, he would certainly turn in his grave. This copy also has neatly written on the half title, in ink, in Wordsworth characteristic style "W. Wordsworth."

Another One of my most treasured possessions is the original autograph letter written by Lamb to John Taylor, his publisher, June 30th, 1821, in which he describes the manner in which he adopted ~~his~~ non-de-plume.

"Poor Elia (call him Elia) does not pretend to so very clear revelations of a future state of being as Olen seems gifted with. Poor Elia, the real (for I am but a counterfeit) is dead. The fact is, a person of that name, an Italian, was a fellow-clerk of mine at the South Sea House, thirty (not forty) years ago, when the characters I described there existed, but had left it, like myself many years, and I having a brother now there, and doubting how he might relish certain descriptions in it, I clapt down the name of Elia to it, which passed off pretty well, for Elia himself added the function of an author to that of a scrivener, like myself. I went the other day (not having seen him for a year) to laugh with him at my usurpation of his name, and found him, alas! no more than a name, for he died of consumption eleven months ago, and I knew not of it. So the name was fairly devolved to me, I think; and 'tis all he has left me. Dear Sir, yours truly, C. Lamb."

The circumstances under which the "Elia Essays" were published were these. While residing at 20 Russell Street, Covent Garden, Lamb began to contribute "Elia Essays" to the London Magazine. As I write I have before me volume two of this magazine, published in 1820. To the August number Lamb contributed "~~Recollections of~~"^T "The South Sea House," and to the October number "Oxford in the Vacation" which is signed with some of Lamb's fooling, as follows: "Elia, August 5th, 1820, from my rooms facing the Bodelian." This signature ^{is} ~~was~~ most amusing in view of the fact that when this Essay was written Lamb had never visited Oxford. This sort of foolery was characteristic of Lamb's whimsicalities.

In the November number appeared the Essay, "Christ's Hospital Five-and-Thirty Years Ago," in which Lamb undertook, in a spirit of mischief, to review himself thus:-

"In Mr. Lamb's works published a year or two since, I find a magnificent eulogy on my old school....I remember L. at school; and can well recollect that he had some peculiar advantages, which I and others of his school-fellows had not. His friends lived in town, and were near at hand; and he had the privilege of going to see them, almost as often as he wished, through some invidious distinction, which was denied us. The present worthy sub-treasurer to the Inner Temple can explain how that happened. He had his tea and hot rolls in a morning, while we were battenning upon our quarter of a penny loaf-our crug-moistened with attenuated small beer, etc."

In the December number of ^{the} London Magazine for 1820 appears the well known essay entitled: "The Two Races of Men," which Lambians recognize as the men who borrow and the men who lend:

"Reader, if haply thou art blest with a moderate collection, be shy of showing it; or if thy heart overfloweth to lend them, lend thy books, but let it be to such a one as S.T.C. [Samuel Taylor Coleridge]. He will return them (generally anticipating the time appointed) with usury; enriched with annotations, tripling their value. I have had experience. Many are these precious manuscripts of his (in matter oftentimes, and almost in quantity, not infrequently vying with the originals), in no very clerkly hand, legible in my Daniel; in Old Burton; in Sir Thomas Browne; and those abstruser cogitations of the Greville, now alas! wandering in Pagan lands.--I counsel thee, shut not thy heart; nor thy library, from S.T.C."

The regret expressed in this last paragraph is especially apropos, as many of Lamb's books containing these very ^{an} ^{by Coleridge} notations came to this country in 1847.

Lamb was forty-eight years old when the "Elia Essays" ^{were published} appeared and but for a few contributions to Hones' "Everyday Book" the publication of "Album Verses" and a Sketch entitled "Satan in Search of a Wife" it was his last work, ^{so} ~~and~~ his fame rests upon the Elia Essays.

Prior to the publication of the Essays he had written the following:

In 1806 "Mr. H.--* a farce," ~~was~~ produced at Drury Lane Theatre,

London, and Lamb himself seated in a box hissed the play off the stage thereby demonstrating his fine critical sense to the det^wement of his own personal interest. The following year he published "Tales from Shakespeare" followed by "Specimens of English Dramatic Poets" "The adventures of Ulysses" "Mrs. Leicester's School" and "Poetry for Children" The two last mentioned he received the assistance of his sister Mary.

The Elia Essays were largely autobiographical and were inspired by incidents in his everyday life, for instance while living in Colebrooke Row, Islington, which was situated on the New River, Lamb received a visit from his friend George Dyer, the noted historian of Cambridge, who was very near sighted, when the friends parted Dyer walked right into the New River and caused Lamb several moments of anxiety, to which he gave full vent in his essay "Amicus Redivivus". "Old China" describes his love and appreciation of book-collecting. The essay "Dissertation upon Roast Pig" was written in embryo in a letter to the Rev. Thomas Manning who at the time was travelling and exploring in China and Tibet. This legend, which gives the origin of c^oking a pig, is a very ancient one, and is said to have been known in the third century. Lamb was very fond of roast pig, and his rhapsody was a natural one. In a letter to Coleridge, written on March 9, 1822, discussing the present of a small pig, Lamb gave the substance of this legend. Six months later he wrote the essay, on somewhat the same lines, giving his fancy fuller play, and rollicking through the subject in a highly characteristic manner.

In the introduction to the last "Essays of Elia" Lamb makes another humorous review of himself.

"This poor gentlemen, who for some months past had been in a declining way, hath, at length paid his final tribute to nature. To say truth, it is time he were gone. The humour of the thing, if there

was ever much in it, was pretty well exhausted; and a two years' and a half existence has been a tolerable duration for a pantom. I am now at liberty to confess, that much which I have heard objected to my late friend's writings was well-founded. Crude they are, I grant you - a sort of unlicked, incondite things - villainously pranked in an affected array of antique modes and phrases... Egotistical they have been pronounced by some who did not know... My late friend was in many respects a singular character. Those who did not like him, hated him;...the truth is, he gave himself too little concern what he uttered, and in whose presence;..Your long and much talkers hated him. The informal habit of his mind, joined to an inveterate impediment of speech, forbade him to be an orator; and he seemed determined that no one else should play that part when he was present....The impressions of infancy had burnt into him, and he resented the impertinence of manhood. These were weaknesses; but such as they were, they are a key to explicate some of his writings."

Upon Lamb's retirement from the India House, where he had labored for thirty-three years, he received an annual pension of four hundred and forty one pounds which enabled him to follow out his inclinations and tastes, his frolics and cavorting in the "Essays of Elia".

My acquaintance with the noted Lamb Editor Alfred Ainger, began with correspondence in 1890, and upon my trip to London in 1903, thirteen years later I hastened to call on "The Master of the Temple" in his charming Rectory adjoining the Temple Church. Who more fitting to be Editor of Lamb's Works than he?-- Cannon Ainger showed me his Lamb collection and among other books which interested me profoundly was a facsimile copy of Shakespeare's Tragedy of

"Hamlet" printed in 1825, and a ^{copy} facsimile of the first edition issued in 1603. This precious volume contained this inscription in Lamb's well-known handwriting; "Present this to Mr. Mitford in my name, if he has not got it. Signed C.L." Lamb writing to Bernard Barton, March 25th, 1829, says: "I have writ in the old "Hamlet" 'Offer it to Mitford in my name, if he has not got it.' 'Tis woefully below our edition of it, but keep it, if you like. What is M. to me?" Canon Ainger had written on the fly-leaf; "Charles Lamb's autograph, see letter to Bernard Barton, of March 25, 1829, given to me by Mrs. Edward FitzGerald, (Lucy Barton) November, 1886." As Lamb was saturated with Elizabethan Literature, and nobably with the Drama of the period, it would be difficult to possess a more intimate souvenir of this passion. At the sale of Cannon Ainger's books at Sothebys, I fortunately secured this treasured and much envied volume.

In 1848, the late Charles Welford, an English bookseller of the old firm of Bartlett & Welford, who were then under the Astor House, purchased from the late Edward Moxon, some sixty volumes, containing fifty-five books from Lamb's Library. I have before me a catalogue of these books, five of which contain notes by Coleridge. Where are these books now?---They range in interest from the Latin Poems of Vincent Bourne, to the Works of Lord Bacon, Michael Drayton, The Duchess of Newcastle, Shakespeare's Poems, 1714, and Suckling's "Fragmenta Aurea."

A number of these books came into the possession of the late Charles W. Frederickson, who had sold his Shakespeare Library many years before and transferred his affection from Shakespeare to Shelley ^{and Lamb.} "because" to quote his own words to me "I have been betting on the wrong horse."

This remarkable Shelley Library was sold by the old firm of Fane & Co.

at the Frederickson
sale.

One of the most dramatic moments, bibliographically speaking, of my life was when Lamb's copy of Chaucer was offered for sale. It was number 279 in the catalogue and was described thus: "Chaucer (Geffrey) "The Works of ^{our} an Ancient and Learned English Poet, and Litgate's Story of Thebes, Sp~~e~~ight edition, folio, black letter, good copy, old calf, London, 1598." The cataloguer, who must long since have been laid to rest, failed to notice that the blank leaves in the back of the copy were literally crowded with notes and comments in Lamb's handwriting. I knew the book well, because in Mr. Frederickson's Library I had conned it many times. As I sat in the salesroom, my heart gave a jump when this number was offered, "hoping against hope" that no one else had discovered Lamb's handwriting; but alas! one of my fellow book-sellers had made the same discovery, and he ran me up to three hundred and forty dollars. But I left the auction room the proud possessor of the unique volume and the next morning found the incident recorded in the "New York Sun."

In relation to this very copy, Lamb, in writing to Ainsworth in 1823, said; "I have not a black letter book amongst mine, old Chaucer excepted." The book originally was purchased from Bartlett & Welford, by William E. Burton, the Actor. It was bought at the Burton sale in 1860 by E. A. Crowninshield, of Boston, and when the Crowninshield Library was sold en bloc to Henry Stevens, of Vermont and London, Mr. Frederickson took an express train for Boston and persuaded Mr. Stevens to part with this folio.

Another of the books from the Lamb Library now in my possession is "The Cities Great Concern, Or Question of Honor and of Arms. Whether Apprenticeship Extinguisheth Gentry." This copy lacks the title page,

London 1674
^

2891

and Lamb has copied the title in full on the inside of the cover. The following letter will show how it came into my Library:

"June 18th, 1895. My dear North, You have oft expressed a wish to have and to hold a volume that had once been owned by Charles Lamb, by the Grace of God accomplished. The Book which goes with this, is one of the volumes that once belonged to the God-hearted Lamb, whose memory is as eternal as the hills, and whose Life and Character are more worthy to be read, understood and imitated than those so-called Heroes of War, whose paths echo with the groans of the dying and the sighs of the living.

Place this volume to your ear, and you will hear the echoes of the voices of Lamb and Coleridge, of Hunt and Hazlitt, of Godwin and Hone--Listen to the tender voice of Mary, chiding Charles for his humanities. Place the Book to your breast, and the pulsations of your heart will receive an inspiration that will be soulfull to the end of time. Place the Book on your Library Shelves, and give a silent prayer to the memory of Lamb, and sometimes think of the giver.

C.W. Frederickson"

Inside this little volume is pasted an extract from the catalogue of the sale of Charles Lamb's books, conducted by Cooley, Keese, and Hill, New York, October 21st, 1848.

Another of my treasures is a book entitled "John Woodvil" a tragedy to which are added "Fragments of Burton, the Author of ^{The} Anatomy of Melancholy, London, 1692." My copy of this little book, with only 128 pages, 104 devoted to the Tragedy and two to the Poem entitled: "Balad From the German" and "Helen!" ~~the latter is Mary Lamb's noted poem~~ "Helen" beginning thus:-

"High-born Helen, round your dwelling
These twenty years I've pac'd in vain:
Haughty beauty, thy lover's duty
Hath been to glory in his pain."

The fragments mentioned on the title page have a half title, ^{separat} ~~page 109, and the text goes from 111-124.~~ They were the outcome of a suggestion by Coleridge, who was trying to secure Lamb employment on the "Morning Post." ~~The subtitle was "Curious Fragments extracted from a~~

London

These were all reprinted in the two volume edition of Lamb's works.

My copy of this precious little book contains this inscription, "Chs. Lamb to William Dawson, friend of C.L.'s very good friend Edward Moxon." Evidently this once belonged to a descendant of the William Dawson because it has indications of former ownership. "J.H. Dawson" being stamped on the fly-leaf. Some former owner had this precious volume bound in half calf with marbled edges, a style rapidly becoming extinct.

Perhaps this is a good place to mention the fact that Mrs. Moxon lived to the ripe old age of 82 years and died in Manchester on February 14th 1891. She always referred to her foster father as 'my uncle' and held Charles and Mary in sacred memory.

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