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Charles Lamb.

May Brown

University of Rhode Island

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Recommended Citation

Brown, May, "Charles Lamb." (1896). *Student and Lippitt Prize essays*. Paper 1.

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1896

CHARLES LAMB.

May Brown.

There is a marked tendency nowadays to undervalue the work of other than contemporary authors. But whatever critics may say, the world is after all neither forgetful nor unjust, and insists that he who has lived heroically and thought nobly, shall be duly remembered. It is thus as man as well as author that Charles Lamb deserves to be held in lasting honor.

Situated on the banks of the Thames, easily accessible and yet removed from one of the busiest of London streets, is a group of buildings originally owned and occupied by the Knights Templar. After the suppression of the order in the fourteenth century, the Temple was given over to the service of law, and from that time until now, there the lawyers have lived and taught. In this historic place, Charles Lamb was born, his father being clerk and servant to a "Bencher", and the boy's earliest recollections were of the Temple - where he spent the first seven years of his life - "of its church, its halls, its gardens, its fountains,

its river." That love for the past so conspicuous an element in Lamb's character and writings, if not due to this early environment at least received from it abundant nourishment.

When seven years old, through the influence of a friend, he was entered at Christ's Hospital, a school founded by Edward VI. He was naturally shy and so made few acquaintances among the blue-coat boys. It was here, however, that he met Coleridge, destined to be his dearest friend. After Lamb had been in the school for seven years he was obliged to give up all thought of further study, with attendance at the University; there was poverty at home and he had to return to share it and help sustain his family. To part from his friends and school was a sad disappointment; but he cheerfully submitted to it, and thus early began his unselfish living.

After two years service in the South Sea House he became a clerk in the office of the East India Company where he remained during the rest of his working life.

But a darker cloud than poverty hung over that

household. There was insanity in the family and Charles was the first to suffer. In a letter to Coleridge he tells him the sad truth, and refers to a person, who he is inclined to think was the more immediate cause of his temporary derangement. This can be no other than the fair haired Alice W. of his essays. The details of the episode are not known. But doubtless the stinging consciousness of his poverty and resolute acceptance of duty to his family forbade him to speak of love; and after his illness to think of it.

A few months later occurred the tragical event that darkened his after life. The gentle sister Mary (ten years his senior) worn with anxiety, the care of an invalid mother and almost imbecile father and with the effort to add to the common purse succumbed to the dread malady, and temporarily frenzied, took her mother's life. The blow was terrible but Lamb bore it bravely. The father survived the mother only a few months. Then Charles was free to care for his sister and from that time, they were never separated except when illness rendered her absence from home necessary. His tenderness never lessened and as time passed and the dreaded attacks became more frequent, his loving care and watchfulness

over her only increased and both learned to enjoy to the full the intervals they were together.

Their outward circumstances gradually improved as the unassuming writer became better and better known. The long days of distasteful labor in the East India House were followed by delightful evenings when many friends would gather in his rooms in the Temple to chat and smoke and indulge in a game of whist. Among his frequent visitors were Manning, the mathematician; Hazlitt, the critic and essayist; the Lake-poets when in town; Barry Cornwall; Rogers, the rich banker poet; Landor; Leigh Hunt; and - dearest to Lamb - Coleridge, the bright particular star whose brilliancy dazzled all. And Mary Lamb was no less a favorite than her brother. She was always ready to welcome her guests with most cordial hospitality, while her fine literary taste enabled her to appreciate and take part in conversation or discussion. Her ability as a writer appears in her verses for children and the familiar "Tales from Shakespeare", many of which were her work as indeed the idea was hers.

For more than thirty years Lamb worked faithfully and steadily in the East India House; but at last he

grew tired and longed for a release. This was granted him and a pension amply large to insure his comforts with a provision for his sister should she survive him.

He lived nine years longer to enjoy this freedom and yet his best literary work had been done in his brief intervals of leisure under the pressure of an uncongenial occupation. As has been well said, he needed the "compulsion of duty," and we should not have had more but fewer Essays of Elia, if the daily routine of difficult labor had been less severe or regular. These last years were a period of retrospect. His active life was over and he had nothing to look forward to. His sister's health was growing worse, and the fireside was at times very lonely. Coleridge's death was a blow from which he could not rally, and in five weeks he had followed his lifelong friend, bearing with him, to quote Landor, "The love of friend without a single foe" and Wordsworth's affectionate tribute - "Oh, he was good, if ever good, man was." Not until he was gone did the world know how truly he had served humanity, how large had been his sympathy and how generous his aid whenever he could help.

As a writer he is at his best in the essays. The most widely known of these perhaps, is "A Dissertation upon Roast Pig", the humor of which is eminently characteristic. Others are largely autobiographical. In one, Mackery End in Hertfordshire, he refers to his sister as his cousin Bridget Elia who has been his housekeeper for many a long year and says, "We housed together old bachelor and maid in a sort of double singleness". Then in the Essay on Old China, he represents himself and sister again as talking over their past life while drinking tea from the old blue china cups, a recent purchase, and recalling how much little pleasures meant to them when they were less prosperous. In Dream Children, an exquisite reverie, he imagines himself telling his little ones about his childhood and certain happy holidays.

As poet and dramatist, Lamb is well nigh forgotten. But as critic he is more deserving, and is sometimes great. His limitations are due to his nature, for as a man he was not impartial. His heart was often at war with his head; and what he did not like, he could not rightly estimate.

And so while many of his criticisms have great merit, others are of but little value. Writing of Bridget Elia, he says, "She was tumbled early, by accident or design, into a spacious closet of good old English reading, without much selection or prohibition, and browsed at will upon that fair and wholesome pasturage." This passage well illustrates Lamb's own fondness for our early literature.

The Elizabethan writers were his especial delight. "The sweetest names and which carry a perfume in the mention are Kit Marlowe, Drayton, Drummond of Hawthornden and Cawley." From his "Specimens of English Dramatic Poets contemporary with Shakespeare", says one of his biographers, "dates the revived study of the old English drama."

In his own inimitable way, Lamb sums up the results of his observation, thought and experiences in many a crisp sentence. Apropos of chimney sweeps, he declares "All is not soot which looks so." And of beggars, - "A beggar is the only man in the universe who is not obliged to study appearances." A certain acquaintance is thus epitomized "He was not to be trusted with himself with impunity". - But best

of all and giving the keynote of his life, perhaps, is this bit of wisdom, - "A laugh is worth a hundred groans in any market."