

LETTERS OF CHARLES LAMB

W. J. SYKES

OF English authors the two best loved are, I suppose, Charles Dickens and Charles Lamb. Dickens is loved chiefly for what he wrote; Lamb partly for what he wrote, but still more for what he was. Dickens in his novels created an imaginary world of men and women whose sayings and doings move thousands to laughter or to tears; his novels in extent and popularity far outstrip the works of Lamb, though there are readers, not a few, who would let them all go rather than the *Essays of Elia*. But as a personality Lamb was infinitely more attractive than Dickens, and it is in his letters that his personality is most fully revealed.

Except by enthusiastic admirers of Lamb, his letters have not been widely read—for the good reason that until the last few years they have not been obtainable in any satisfactory edition. Obviously they were written without any thought of their being collected and published. But friends like Wordsworth and Coleridge, recognizing their unique quality, preserved most of those they received, and after Lamb's death some began to appear in print. Thus in the *Memoir and Letters* by Talfourd, and in the collections of Carew, Hazlitt, Percy Fitzgerald, Canon Ainger, and William Macdonald, many were given to the public. All such collections, however, were incomplete; indeed E. V. Lucas, in the preface to his edition of 1905, expressed the opinion that owing to the curious operation of the law of copyright "in order to possess a complete set...one must purchase at least nine, and possibly more, works". It was not until 1935, when the centenary of Lamb's death was commemorated, that Mr. Lucas, his best biographer and the indefatigable collector of everything from his pen, with the co-operation of several publishers, and of private collectors, gave to the world an edition as near complete as is now possible.

Before discussing the *Letters*, we may refresh the reader's memory of the main features of Lamb's life. Born of humble parentage in the chambers of the Temple, London, Charles attended Christ's Hospital School, where Coleridge was a fellow pupil. At the age of seventeen he was appointed to a clerkship in the East India House, a post he held for thirty-three years.

In the year of his appointment a tragedy occurred in his life from the shadow of which he never wholly emerged. His sister, Mary, in a fit of insanity, killed her mother. Although her reason returned in a few weeks, there was hardly a year of her life afterwards in which she did not have a recurrence of her malady. On the death of their father a few years later, Charles brought Mary home to live with him, and the two, devoted brother and sister, entered on a life-long companionship, broken only by Mary's illnesses, the name given in the *Letters* to her fits of insanity. Thus much of Lamb's life was clouded either by Mary's "illnesses" or by fear of a bad spell coming: he was never sure when the storm might break.

Nevertheless we must not think of his life as for the most part gloomy. In the good seasons, when Mary was herself, there was in it much of happiness and even gaiety. An attractive picture of the pleasure of her companionship is drawn in the essay, *Mackery End*, where he writes of Bridget Elia. Moreover, the friendships that he formed in increasing numbers, from his twenty-fifth year on, brought much sunshine into his life. Coleridge and Wordsworth, Manning and Crabb Robinson, Hazlitt and Rickman, Captain Burney who had sailed the South Seas and the eccentric but lovable George Dyer, were a few of the circle who did a great deal to stimulate his thought and to brighten his days and nights. Indeed in a letter to the Wordsworths, written in 1818, he complains half humorously that he is never alone. "I am saturated with human faces. . . That is a wonderful week in which I can get two, or one (evening), to myself. . . God bless 'em! I love some of 'em dearly. . . (but) I am a little over-companied."

No less important sources of happiness were books and the theatre. Poetry he had loved from the early days of his intimacy with Coleridge. He was fond of the older English classics, the dramatists, the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, *Religio Medici*, the *Complete Angler* and other well known or half forgotten Elizabethan or seventeenth century works. He speaks of "hanging over (for the thousandth time) some passage in old Burton, or one of his strange contemporaries". From his childhood to his last years in London he was a theatre-goer. "The theatre became to me the most delightful of recreations," he tells us, and how deep an impression it made on him is shown by the vivid recollections of "two-and-thirty years ago" that make up the essay, *On Some of the Old Actors*. He tried his hand at play-writing, but without success: his historical drama, *John*

Woodville, though it contained fine poetic passages, was rejected by the managers, while his farce, *Mr. H.* was hissed off the stage.

A word about his writings. In his early thirties (1806-7) he and Mary wrote the *Tales from Shakespeare*. Next year he published his *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets*. At the age of forty-five he began contributing to the *London Magazine* the series of articles afterwards collected under the title of *Essays of Elia*, on which his fame chiefly rests. If it were not for the perennial charm of these essays, it is probable that Lamb would be remembered only by curious students of the period, and that his incomparable letters would never have been collected.

In 1825, at the age of fifty, he was released from the desk at which he had served the East India Company for a third of a century, and given a pension adequate to meet the needs of a simple life such as he and Mary led. Nine years later he died.

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As the more important letters were written to friends differing considerably in mind and temperament, they show corresponding variations in style. How Lamb felt about this was expressed after true Elian fashion in writing to Wordsworth on the recent loss of friends:

Two or three have died within this last two twelvemonths, and so many parts of me have been numbed. One sees a picture, reads an anecdote, starts a casual fancy, and thinks to tell of it to this person in preference to any other—The person is gone whom it would have peculiarly suited. It won't do for *another*. Every departure destroys a class of sympathies... One never hears anything, but the image of the particular person occurs with whom alone almost you would care to share the intelligence. Thus one distributes oneself about... I am made up of queer points, and I want so many answering needles.

So with the letters. Those to Coleridge differ from those to Wordsworth, and in each of these we detect differences in tone from what he wrote to Manning or to Bernard Barton the Quaker. The writer shows a different facet of himself as he turns from one correspondent to another. Hence it seems well to consider separately the series of letters written to each of his main correspondents, and we shall begin with those to his old school-fellow and lifelong friend, Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

To Coleridge—

These letters fall into two groups: the frequent early ones, written in Lamb's 22nd and 23rd years; and those fewer but more characteristic, sent irregularly to Coleridge during the last thirty years of his life. Of the first group little need here be said. As a source of biography of Lamb, they are of prime importance. Moreover, one can trace in them in bud that warm appreciation of the beauties of poetry, that gift of discriminating criticism, that response to the power of the older English dramatists, which came to flower in his maturer work. And yet these early letters differ markedly from the later ones. Of humour in them there is hardly a trace. In one he describes himself as "awkward in conversation and solitary"; "I see nobody. I sit and read or walk alone"; whereas some years afterwards, as we have mentioned, he complained of too much company. In his darkest hours after Mary's tragedy he sought support in religion. In acknowledging Coleridge's comforting letters he wrote, "To you I owe much under God...Your conversations won me to the cause, and rescued me from the polluting spirit of the world." A few years later, as a tolerant and humorous man of the world, he bantered his old friend: "Bless you, old Sophist, who next to Human Nature taught me all the corruption I was capable of knowing."

This group ends with a sarcastic letter that interrupted the friendship for two years. A common acquaintance carried, or perhaps invented, tales, and Lamb indignant sent Coleridge a number of questions to be studied in the schools of Germany, for which country he was on the point of setting out. The first question was, "Whether God loves a lying Angel better than a true Man". When, a year and a half later, Coleridge returned to London, there was some sort of reconciliation, and indeed not long afterwards Charles wrote to a friend, "Coleridge has been with me now for nigh three weeks, and the more I see of him in the quotidian undress and relaxation of his mind, the more cause I see to love him, and believe him *a very good man.*"

The second group begins when Coleridge left London to reside in the Lake District, and continues intermittently for thirty-four years,—letters characterized by humour, occasional pathos, bright water-colour sketches of scenes and incidents, and over all the atmosphere of a pervading charm. It is impossible to convey to one who has not read them their full flavour by means of short illustrative extracts, and yet that is about all one can do in a brief essay.

Naturally, when writing to one with whom he was so intimate, he gave free play to those individual tastes and odd humours that were so distinctive a part of his personality. An instance is his protest against the epithet "gentle-hearted" which Coleridge in a poem had applied to him:

For God's sake don't make me ridiculous any more by terming me *gentle-hearted* in print. . . Please to blot out *gentle-hearted* and substitute: drunken dog, ragged head, seld-shaven, odd-eyed, stuttering, or any other epithet which truly and properly belongs to the gentleman in question.

The pleasure of owning the books we love is described in this whimsical passage:

It is pleasanter to eat one's own peas out of one's own garden than to buy them by the peck at Covent Garden; and a book reads the better which is our own, and has been so long known to us that we know the topography of its blots and dog's ears, and can trace the dirt in it to having read it at tea with buttered muffins, or over a pipe.

A comment on puns might easily be mistaken for an extract from one of the *Essays of Elia*. Coleridge had been praising the *Odes of Hood*, and thought he detected in the puns they contain the fine hand of Lamb. Lamb denied this, declared he had not "a broken finger in them", and gravely expressed his disapproval of making puns play second fiddle to an ode:

A Pun is a thing of too much consequence to be thrown in as a makeweight. . . A Pun is a Noble Thing *per se*: Oh never lug it in as an accessory. . . It is perfect as a sonnet. . . It limps ashamed in the train and retinue of Humour: it knows it should have an establishment of its own. The one, for instance, I made the other day, I forget what it was.

Many passages in the letters may be regarded as first sketches worked up later in the *Essays*; and, as in the case of pictorial art, the first study often shows a greater freshness and vitality than the finished work. For instance, the sayings and doings of George Dyer (of whom Charles was really fond) are the subject of many comic anecdotes and descriptions, some of which were elaborated into the conventionalized portrait of G. D. in the essay, *Oxford in the Vacation*. From the numerous passages about Dyer in the *Letters* a clearly portrayed humorous character comes alive again,—the absent-minded scholar, conventional poet, indiscriminating critic, absurd and lovable man, "with a head uniformly wrong and a heart uniformly

right...born, I verily think, without original sin, but chooses to have a conscience, as every Christian gentleman should have"; in short, a character that might fairly challenge comparison with Mr. Pickwick. Again, readers of *Elia* will remember that in the essay, *Two Races of Men*, the author complains of borrowers of books, "those mutilators of collections, spoilers of the symmetry of shelves, and creators of odd volumes. There is Comberbatch, matchless in his depredations". Of course this was Coleridge, to whom shortly before the essay was composed, he had written:

Why will you make your visits, which should give pleasure, matter of regret to your friends? You never come but you take away some folio that is part of my existence...My third shelf (northern compartment) from the top has two devilish gaps, where you have knocked out its two eye-teeth.

At another time, however, in a more expansive mood he wrote:

Let me know if I can be of any service as to books. God forbid the Architectonican (S. T. C.) should be sacrificed to a foolish scruple of some book-proprietor, as if books did not belong with the highest propriety to those that understand 'em best.

Still another instance of Lamb's practice of working over some idea or anecdote from a letter into an essay is to be found in *Elia's* account of A Quakers' Meeting. Years before, in a letter to Coleridge, he had described this visit more frankly than in the published account. While it would be easy to multiply such instances, it is enough to say that a large part of the *Essays* is autobiographical in its nature, and that the germs of many of the most memorable passages in them are the direct and vivid sketches in the *Letters*.

On the other hand, he used to throw off little descriptions and stories with such humour and vivacity as to make them unforgettable, though on account of their personal nature he could not use them in the *Essays*. Such is his report of the visit he and Mary paid to Miss Benger, the blue-stockings, friend of Mrs. Inchbald and Mrs. Barbauld (whom he used to call the two bald women). Probably the best of these letters about common acquaintances is the one containing the kindly, humorous account of his "solemn visit of condolence" to Joseph Cottle on the death of his brother, Amos. Joseph had recently published a long poem entitled *Alfred*, and had sent a copy to Lamb, who made disparaging remarks about it to Coleridge. When during this solemn visit the poem was mentioned, "Joseph's

poor face wet with tears and his kind eye brightened up in a moment. . . I could perceive that Cottle had forgot his brother was so lately become a blessed spirit”:

I could not say an unkind thing of *Alfred*. . . I felt my cue and strong pity working at the root, I went to work and belabbr'd *Alfred* with most unqualified praise. . . Joseph was in a humour to hope and believe *all things*. What I said was beautifully supported, corroborated, and confirmed by the stupidity of his brother on my left hand, and by George on my right, who has an utter incapacity of comprehending that there can be anything bad in poetry. All poems are *good* poems to George; all men are fine geniuses.

Later in the evening, Dyer remarked that “Amos was estimable both for his heart and head”. Joseph agreed, adding that “he always thought that the qualities of his brother’s heart exceeded those of his head”. On this Lamb comments, “I believe his brother, when living, had formed precisely the same idea of him; and I apprehend the world will assent to both judgments”.

It would give a false picture to represent all the letters as humorous and bright; Lamb had his dark days, when he turned to Coleridge for sympathy. Once when their old servant had died, and Mary suffering from a return of her malady had to be taken away, Charles quite alone in the house wrote, “My heart is quite sunk, and I don’t know where to look for relief. . . I am completely shipwrecked”.

Probably no one but Mary understood Charles so well as S. T. C.; and on the other hand, none of Coleridge’s friends or relatives had a more lasting and tolerant affection for him than had Lamb. “An archangel a little damaged” was the phrase in which he summed up the opium-eater’s genius and weakness.

To Manning—

In December, 1799, Lamb spent a few days at Cambridge, and there met a young man of about his own age, a tutor in mathematics, Thomas Manning. The two took to each other from the first, and the friendship begun at some gay college parties was to last throughout their lives. Manning’s responsiveness, his quick, sympathetic understanding of both fooling and seriousness, drew from Lamb one of the most notable series of his letters. Manning’s personality is somewhat enigmatic. Lamb thought very highly of him: “A dainty chiel—a man of great power—an enchanter almost. . . when he gets you alone,

he can act the wonders of Egypt. Only he is lazy, and does not always put forth all his strength; if he did, I know no man of genius at all comparable to him." Crabb Robinson's comment was "an interesting man, but nothing more." E. V. Lucas's idea is that though his letters are not remarkable, he was a good talker and actor.

Whatever be the truth about Manning's gifts, there is no doubt about the influence he exerted on Lamb. He awakened the soul of wit and humour that till their intimacy had lain dormant. Moderately witty himself, he was the cause of wit in others, and from the time of their early friendship Lamb's letters, not only to him but to Coleridge and others, breathe a new spirit of vivacity and fun.

In an early letter Charles gives us a glimpse of the merry evenings spent at Manning's rooms. "Do your night parties still flourish? And do you continue to bewilder your company with your thousand faces running down through all the keys of idiotism...from the smile and the glimmer of half-sense and quarter-sense to the grin and hanging lip of Betty Foy's own Johnny?" Another picture of these evenings (drawn by anticipation) is given when a year later Lamb announced his intention of paying a visit to Manning at Cambridge:

Man of many snipes.—I will sup with thee, *Deo volente et diabolo nolente*, on Monday night, the fifth of January...A word or two of my progress. Embark at six o'clock in the morning, with a fresh gale on a Cambridge one-decker; very cold till eight at night; land at St. Mary's light-house¹, muffins and coffee upon table...snipes exactly at nine, punch to commence at ten, with argument; difference of opinion is expected to take place about eleven; perfect unanimity, with some haziness and dimness, before twelve.

Once when Manning had stayed a few days with Charles and Mary in London, and on leaving had ordered a turkey to be sent to them, Charles in his letter of acknowledgment remarked, "By the way, I am anxious to get specimens of all English turkeys. Pray send me at your leisure separate specimens from every county in Great Britain, including Wales."

But it is not drollery alone that fills these letters. There are serious discussions of literature; and a difference of opinion about a friend's conduct is dismissed with these words: "But you see it in one view, I in another. Rest you merry in your opinion! Opinion is a species of property; and though I am al-

1. Manning's lodgings were near St. Mary's Church, Cambridge.

ways desirous to share with my friend to a certain extent, I shall ever like to keep some tenets and some property properly my own." He writes of enjoying Burnett's *History of My Own Times*, "full of scandal, which all true history is."

He is not attracted by the philosophical indifference of Hume "so cold and so unnatural", nor the fine writing of Gibbon; and it will be recalled that in one of the Essays he places the works of Hume, Gibbon, and Robertson along with directories, scientific treatises, almanacs, and statutes in the list of "books which are no books—*biblia abiblia*".

But the most interesting of his letters to Manning about literary topics is his account of a tiff with Wordsworth and Coleridge over some forthright and honest opinions that he had expressed in a letter to the former on the second volume of *Lyrical Ballads*. He had mingled praise and censure, and had concluded by saying, "I do not feel any one poem in it so forcibly as the *Ancient Mariner*, the *Mad Mother*, and the *Lines at Tintern Abbey* in the first". The criticism could not be called harsh, but the poets were sensitive, and both were annoyed. Lamb's version of the incident is amusing. "I had need be cautious henceforward what opinion I give of the *Lyrical Ballads*. All the North of England are in a turmoil. Cumberland and Westmoreland have already declared a state of war." Only a few weeks before, Wordsworth had pleaded in excuse for his delay in acknowledging the receipt of Lamb's tragedy an "almost insuperable aversion from letter-writing", but when he received Charles's criticism of the poems "the post did not sleep a moment".

I received almost instantaneously a long letter of four sweating pages from my reluctant letter-writer, the purport of which was that he was sorry his 2d vol. had not given me more pleasure (Devil a hint did I give that it had *not pleased me*), and "was compelled to wish that my range of sensibility was more extended," with a deal of stuff about a certain union of Tenderness and Imagination. . . . This was not to be all my castigation. Coleridge, who had not written to me some months before, starts up from his bed of sickness to reprove me for my hardy presumption: four long pages, equally sweaty and more tedious, came from him; assuring me that, when the works of a man of true genius, such as W. undoubtedly was, do not please me at first sight, I should suspect the fault to lie "in me and not in them", etc. etc. etc. What am I to do with such people? I shall write them a very merry letter.

If Lamb wrote the "merry letter" it has not been preserved—which is a thousand pities.

Lamb wrote several eulogies of his beloved London—one to Wordsworth to offset the poet's praise of mountains, and another, *The Londoner*, included in *Miscellaneous Essays and Sketches*; but in its concise vigor the best of them is, we think, this short passage at the end of a letter to Manning:

Streets, streets, streets, markets, theatres, churches, Covent Gardens, shops sparkling with pretty faces of industrious milliners, neat sempstresses, ladies cheapening, gentlemen behind counters lying, authors in the street with spectacles...lamps lit at night, pastry-cooks' and silver-smiths' shops...noise of coaches, drowsy cry of mechanic watchmen at night, with bucks reeling home drunk; if you happen to wake at midnight, cries of Fire and Stop Thief; inns of court, with their learned air, and halls, and butteries, just like Cambridge colleges; old book stalls, Jeremy Taylors, Burtons on Melancholy, and Religio Medicis on every stall. These are thy pleasures, O London with-the-many-sins...For these may Keswick and her giant brood go hang!

The humour in these letters no doubt loses something of its brightness by the passage of years, and yet it is surprising how well it keeps its colours. Of course it differs widely from the type of joke—the snappy short story or the flash of wit followed by an explosion—so popular in post-prandial addresses today. Absurdities uttered with a serious countenance, puns, ridiculous exaggeration, the telling in a grave circumstantial manner of a story that had no foundation in fact,—these are some of the forms that his wit and humour took in the letters. Even in the Essays, Lamb indulged in this free flight of fancy. A well known example is *The Biographical Memoir of Mr. Liston*, of which Lamb said, "Of all the lies I ever put off, I value this most. It is from top to toe, every paragraph, pure invention, and has passed for gospel; it has been republished in newspapers as an authentic account." An elaborate hoax is found in a letter to a common friend announcing that Hazlitt committed suicide by cutting his throat with a pallet knife. Hazlitt when informed played up to the joke by "a humble petition and remonstrance", setting forth "with all the sincerity of a man doubtful between life and death" that not he but Lamb, except for one or two writings, should be considered a dead man, "and the undertaker spoken to accordingly". To this Lamb replied with a long mock-serious discussion on the nature of disembodied spirits, and the causes of their revisiting the earth. To Manning, nine years after the mathematician had sailed

for the East, he wrote a fantastic letter on the changes that had taken place during his absence:

Empires have been overturned, crowns trodden into dust, the face of the western world quite changed. . . St. Paul's Church is a heap of ruins; the Monument isn't half so high as you knew it, divers parts being successively taken down which the ravages of time had rendered dangerous. Poor Godwin! I was passing his tomb the other day in Cripplegate churchyard. . . Coleridge is just dead, having lived just long enough to close the eyes of Wordsworth, who paid the debt to nature but a week or two before. Poor Col., but two days before he died he wrote to a bookseller proposing an epic poem on the "Wanderings of Cain" in twenty-four books. It is said he has left behind him more than forty thousand treatises in criticism and metaphysics, but few of them in a state of completion.

Next day he wrote again contradicting these "unprobable romantic fictions".

The months of 1800 and 1801 passed with letters, some witty, some sad, from the literary clerk of the East India House to the mathematical don of Cambridge, till early in 1802 Manning went to Paris to study Chinese, and in the following year wrote that he thought of visiting Independent Tartary. To this Lamb at once sent a reply, the nature of which may be judged from these extracts:

The general scope of your letter afforded no indications of insanity, but some particular points raised a scruple. For God's sake don't think any more of Independent Tartary. . . My dear friend, think what a sad pity it would be to bury such parts in heathen countries, among nasty, unconvertible, horse-belching Tartar people! Some say they are cannibals; and then conceive a Tartar fellow eating my friend, and adding the cool malignity of mustard and vinegar! . . . The Tartars really are a cold, insipid, smouchy set. . . Pray try and cure yourself. . . Shave yourself oftener. Eat no saffron, for saffron-eaters contract a terrible Tartar-like yellow. . . Read no books of voyages (they're nothing but lies). . . Do come to England. Air and exercise may do great things. Talk with some Minister. Why not your father? God dispose all for the best. I have discharged my duty.

It was three years later that Manning actually left for China. While he was waiting at Portsmouth for his ship to sail, he received a letter from Charles in which whimsical fancies are mingled with words of regret and sadness:

O Manning, I am serious to sinking almost, when I think that all those evenings, which you have made so pleasant, are gone perhaps for ever. Four years you talk of, maybe ten, and

you may come back and find such alterations! Some circumstance may grow up to you or to me, that may be a bar to the return of any such intimacy. . . I have friends, but some of 'em are changed. Marriage, or some circumstance, rises up to make them not the same. But I felt sure of you.

The peculiar value that Charles placed on Manning's friendship is revealed in this tribute, "I will nurse the remembrance of your steadiness and quiet which used to infuse something like itself into our nervous minds. Mary called you our ventilator".

During the eleven years that Manning was absent from England, Lamb wrote to him occasionally, but few of the letters have been preserved,—not on an average one a year. Several, however, deserve mention. In one of them there is a notable example of a feature we had noticed in the Coleridge correspondence—the earlier sketch, later elaborated into an essay. Lamb had written a farce, *Mr. H.*, which was accepted by one of the London theatres, was produced, and proved a decided failure. The account in the letter is shorter and more vigorous than "On the custom of hissing at the theatres":

Damn 'em, how they hissed! It was not a hiss neither, but a sort of frantic yell, like a congregation of mad geese, with roaring something like bears, mows and mops like apes, sometimes snakes, that hissed me into madness. . . Mercy on us, that God should give his favourite children, men, mouths to speak with, to discourse rationally, to promise smoothly, to flatter agreeably, to encourage warmly, to counsel wisely: to sing with, to drink with, and to kiss with: and that they should turn them into mouths of adders, bears, wolves, hyenas, and whistle like tempests, and emit breath through them like distillations of aspic poison, to asperse and vilify the innocent labours of their fellow creatures who are desirous to please them!

When Manning returned to England, Charles found him at first a little reserved, but this feeling soon wore off, and he was often a guest of the Lambs for several days at a time. The last letter, in answer to a merry note from his friend of thirty-four years standing, reveals Lamb in gloom broken by an occasional ray of sunshine:

You make me feel so funny, so happy-like; it was as if I was reading one of your old letters taken out of hazard any time between the last twenty years, 'twas so the same. . . I have had a scurvy nine weeks of it, and am now in the sorry fifth act. Twenty weeks nigh has she been violent, with but a few sound months before, and those in such dejection that her fever might seem a relief to it. . . Once a month I pass a day, a gleam in my life, with Cary at the Museum (he is the flower of clergymen), and breakfast next morn with Robinson.

To Wordsworth—

The letters to Wordsworth are somewhat different again in tone. Manning was genial, witty, tolerant of any extravagance, and never placed himself on a pedestal; Wordsworth was grave and sober, somewhat austere, though he could enjoy an occasional joke, and held (and indeed occasionally expressed) the highest opinion of his own powers. Though all Lamb's letters reveal his unique personality, those to Wordsworth lack the intimate touches of those to Coleridge, and are less free and easy than those to Manning.

It was in the summer of 1797 that Lamb, a young man of twenty-two, on a visit to Coleridge first met Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy. The two men were sufficiently impressed with each other's talents to exchange compositions, Lamb sending the manuscript of his drama, *John Woodville*, and Wordsworth making a handsome return with a copy of *Lyrical Ballads*. Lamb's candid criticism of some passages in the poems and the heat it aroused in both Wordsworth and Coleridge have already been referred to, and it may be added that after they had cooled off, some changes were made in the poems to meet Lamb's strictures. That no hard feelings remained from this episode may be assumed from the fact that next year, when the Wordsworths were visiting London, they dined with Charles and Mary, and Charles acted as their guide to "Bartlemy Fair".

When Wordsworth's brother, Captain John, went down with his ship in a storm in the English Channel, Lamb wrote sympathetic letters, and collected from survivors to send to the bereaved brother and sister what information he could gather about the captain's gallant behaviour in the face of death. For these kind offices the Wordsworths were deeply grateful, and the friendship between the two families ripened into intimacy which lasted for life.

In these letters to William and Dorothy there are many glimpses of the home life of the Lambs, and often when the picture is gloomy, it is shot through with humour. For instance, Mary had just recovered from one of her "illnesses", and Charles, who had been wretched, wrote:

We have neither of us been very well for some weeks past. I am very nervous, and she most so at those times when I am: so that a merry friend, adverting to the noble consolation we were able to afford each other, denominated us not unaptly Gum Boil and Toothache: for they used to say that a Gum Boil is a great relief to a Toothache.

At another time, during one of her bad spells, he writes of how he looks forward to the pleasant days he and Mary will have when she recovers: "Then we forget we are assailable; we are strong for the time as rocks; the wind is tempered to the shorn Lambs". In the letters to Dorothy about this time, each of them in confidence praised the other. Charles wrote of Mary:

She is older, and wiser, and better, than me, and all my wretched imperfections I cover to myself by resolutely thinking on her goodness. She would share life and death, heaven and hell, with me. She lives but for me. And I know I have been wasting and teasing her life for five years past incessantly with my cursed drinking and ways of going on.

And Mary wrote of Charles:

Charles is very well and very *good*—I mean very sober, but he is very good in every sense of the word, for he has been very kind and patient with me, and I have been a sad trouble to him lately. He has shut out all his friends because he thought company hurt me, and done everything in his power to comfort and amuse me.

Occasionally he indulged in banter of the great poet, who would take from Lamb as a privileged jester what he would hardly put up with from anyone else; as in this passage on his bad handwriting:

Tell Mrs. W. her postscripts are always agreeable. They are so legible too. Your manual graphy is terrible... "Likelihood", for instance, is thus typified (here an illegible scribble).

I should not wonder if the constant making out of such paragraphs is the cause of that weakness in Mrs. W.'s eyes... Dorothy, I hear, has mounted spectacles; so you have deeculated two of your dearest relations in life. Well, God bless you and continue to give you power to write with a finger of power on our hearts what you fail to impress in corresponding lucidness upon our outward eyesight.

A passage in true Elian vein was called forth when Wordsworth sent him some unbound volumes of his poems. In acknowledging the gift, Charles wrote:

I have not bound the poems yet. I wait till people have done borrowing them... For of those who borrow, some read slow, some mean to read but don't read, and some neither read nor mean to read, but borrow to leave you an opinion of their sagacity. I must do my money-borrowing friends the justice to say that there is nothing of this caprice or wantonness of alienation in them. When they borrow my money, they never fail to make use of it.

At times he indulged in ridiculous absurdities, as when he wrote to Dorothy about to visit Cambridge, "Two special things are worth seeing... a portrait of Cromwell... and a better of Dr. Harvey, who found out that blood was red". Another well-known example is his reply to a rather talkative fellow traveller, who asked him whether he thought it would turn out a good season for turnips. Lamb, who knew nothing of agriculture, but was familiar with the bills of fare of London eating-houses, replied that he believed it depended very much upon boiled legs of mutton.

The literary criticism in the letters to Wordsworth is, with two or three exceptions, not now very important. Of Wordsworth's own poetry he was warmly appreciative and helpfully critical. The *Excursion* he called "the noblest conversational poem I ever read", though Mary remarked that according to the poet's system it was doubtful whether a liver in towns had a soul to be saved. He often suggested alterations, omissions, or restorations of an earlier text, and Wordsworth, who was a poor critic of his own work, and who as a rule was impatient of criticism, often took Lamb's advice.

A great event in Lamb's life was his superannuation; in April, 1825, he was set free from the East India office with a pension of £450 a year. He wrote Wordsworth the good news, and made some characteristic comments:

I came home for ever on Tuesday of last week. The incomprehensibility of my condition overwhelmed me. It was like passing from life into Eternity. Every year to be as long as three, i.e. to have three times as much real time, time that is my own, in it.

In this last phrase we have the germ of the essay, *The Superannuated Man*, in which he submits that if you deduct from his fifty years the hours he has lived to other people, you will find him still a young fellow. "My ten next years, if I stretch so far, will be as long as any preceding thirty."

There are not many letters to Wordsworth during the nine remaining years of Lamb's life. The friendship continued warm as ever, and on Wordsworth's occasional visits to London the two spent pleasant hours together. After one such visit he wrote a sort of apology that is self-revealing:

Mary and I felt quite queer after your taking leave (you W. W.) of us in St. Giles. We... felt we had scarce been sufficiently acknowledging for the share we had enjoyed of your company. We felt as if we had been not enough expressive of our pleasure.

But our manners both are a little too much on this side of too-much cordiality. We want presence of mind and presence of heart. What we feel comes too late, like an after-thought impromptu.

It is characteristic of Lamb's active kindness that the last letter he wrote to Wordsworth was a request to help an old friend who was establishing a school at Carlisle. He does not call this note a letter: "But you shall have one. This I cannot mingle up with any nonsense which you usually tolerate from C. Lamb". And the note is signed, "Yours with fervor of friendship for ever". Death intervened, and the promised letter was never written.

To Bernard Barton—

In any consideration of Lamb's correspondence his letters to Bernard Barton, the Quaker, should not be overlooked. Barton was a bank clerk in a provincial town, a minor poet, and a contributor to the *London Magazine* at the time the *Essays of Elia* were appearing in it. Though Lamb was in his forty-eighth year when he wrote his first letter to his Quaker friend, they corresponded so frequently that in bulk, as well as in more important respects, these letters are to be ranked but a little lower than those to Coleridge and to Manning.

While bearing all the marks of Lamb's genius (the ingenuity, the critical judgment, the humour) these letters are somewhat modified by the fact that they were written to a serious-minded, matter-of-fact man. . . . This no doubt toned down some of the exuberances that bubbled from him when writing to Manning or Coleridge, but it certainly did not banish jokes. Indeed it is quite possible that it provoked him to sly drolleries. For example, when Barton was about to publish a volume of verse under the title of *Poetic Vigils*, and was casting about for a motto, Lamb apologetically suggested,

Sleepless himself—to give his readers sleep.

At times he fairly took Barton's breath away by his humorous exaggerations, which the Quaker perhaps called lies. Once when he was suffering from a bad cold, he wrote this account of his condition:

Do you know what it is to succumb under an insurmountable day mare? A whoreson lethargy, Falstaff calls it—an indisposition to do anything, or to be anything—a total deadness and distaste—a suspension of vitality—an indifference to local-

ity—a numb soporifical goodfornothingness—an ossification all over—an oyster-like insensibility to the passing events—a brawny defiance to the needles of a thrusting—in conscience—did you ever have a very bad cold? . . . I have not a thing to say—I am flatter than a denial or a pancake—emptier than Judge Park's wig when the head is in it. . . I am weary of the world—Life is weary of me. . . my hand writes, not I, from habit, as chickens run about a little when their heads are off.

This extravagant letter alarmed the literal-minded Quaker, and Charles had to write again in a few days to relieve his concern and say "It was only my way of telling you I had a severe cold".

Sometimes Lamb gave advice that showed a fund of shrewd common sense. For instance, Barton had mentioned that he was thinking of giving up his post in the bank and supporting himself by his pen,—whereupon Charles wrote him a vigorous letter of dissuasion with this stirring opening:

Throw yourself on the world without any rational plan of support, beyond what the chance employ of booksellers would afford you! Throw yourself rather, my dear Sir, from the steep Tarpeian rock, slap-dash headlong upon iron spikes. If you had but five consolatory minutes between the desk and bed, make much of them. . . rather than turn slave to the booksellers. . . I have known many authors for bread, some repining, others envying the blessed security of a counting house. . . I have known some starved, some to go mad, one dear friend literally dying in a workhouse. . . Oh you know not, may you never, know the miseries of subsisting by authorship.

Once the honest Quaker may have been in two minds whether to laugh or be angry at Charles's grave-faced raillery. Fauntleroy, a banker, had been hanged for forgery, and Lamb improved the occasion by a serio-comic warning to those who handle other people's money:

The fate of the unfortunate Fauntleroy makes me, whether I will or no, to cast reflecting eyes around on such of my friends as by a parity of situation are exposed to a similarity of temptation. . . Who that standeth knoweth, but he may yet fall? Your hands as yet, I am most willing to believe, have never deviated into others' property. You think it impossible that you could ever commit so heinous an offence. But so thought Fauntleroy once; so have thought many besides him who at last have expiated as he hath done. You are as yet upright. But you are a banker. . . I feel the delicacy of the subject; but cash must pass thro' your hands, sometimes to a great amount. If in an unguarded hour—but I will hope better. Consider the scandal it will bring upon

those of your persuasion. Thousands would go to see a Quaker hanged, that would be indifferent to the fate of a Presbyterian or an Anabaptist. Think of the effect it would have on the sale of your poems.

As the years went by, and Lamb's health declined, the letters to Barton grew less frequent and perhaps lost some of their sparkle. The last one, however, was quite funny. It was in Latin, and pretended to aim at reviving Barton's fading memory of that language by turning into it common nursery rhymes. Here are "*Maria, Maria, valde contraria quomodo crescit hortulus tuus?*" and little Jack Horner who "*magna voce exclamavit 'Dii Boni, quam bonus puer fio!'*" and "*Meus unicus filius Johannes cubitum ivit, integris braccis*". Whether Barton ever answered this, I do not know. It may be that he considered it too frivolous, or that his Latin was too rusty.

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Beside the letters to these four friends, there are among the four or five hundred others in Mr. Lucas's comprehensive collection a few almost equal to his best. To John Rickman, prominent civil servant, who spent a few years as an official in Dublin, he wrote lively accounts of life in their London circle. The letters to Hazlitt written between quarrels, for Hazlitt quarrelled with Lamb as he did with all his other friends, are hardly among the best, though they contain some interesting comments on painting. With Rev. Henry Francis Cary, translator of *Dante*, the Lambs were quite intimate during the last years of Charles's life. Some of the best-known letters to his clerical friend discuss drinking; once he refused an invitation to a dinner party at Cary's because "there is a necessity for my drinking too much at and after dinner". On one occasion he certainly did take too much and had to be carried home, as we learn from his witty and contrite letter of apology. One of his best letters was written to a young friend who had left London for his health and gone to Hastings to recuperate. Lamb advised him to visit a tiny church nearby:

It seems dropt by some angel for the use of a hermit, who was at once parishioner and a whole parish... Go in the night and bring it away in your portmanteau... It is built to the text of two or three assembled in my name. It reminds me of the grain of mustard seed. If the glebe land is proportionate, it may yield two potatoes... It is truly the strait and narrow way... The still small voice is surely to be found there, if anywhere... Go and see, but not without your spectacles.

On the small shelf of books at one's "beddes head" there should be a place for the *Letters* of Lamb next to Boswell's Johnson. The tolerance of the one and the occasional intolerance of the other are both permeated by a broad humanity that binds them to us. "A completely self-revealed personality," writes Orlo Williams, in his excellent short *Life of Lamb*, to which we would reply "half revealed and half concealed". But we agree entirely when he goes on to say, "(his) greatest achievement was not to invent Elia but to be Charles Lamb, that compound of poetry, loving-kindness, waywardness, and transparent honesty. . . And the whole flavour of his personality can only be tasted by those willing to dwell unhurriedly among his letters".