

# EIGHT BOOKS OF THE MONTH

## I

ANDREW LANG AND WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE\*

Andrew Lang was the most multifarious author of his era,—in fact, he was probably the most versatile writer in the long history of English literature on both sides of the Atlantic. He united two qualities never before conjoined: he was a genuine scholar, recognised as an equal by scholars everywhere, and he was also a working journalist of indefatigable industry and of unprecedented variety. As a serious scholar he won to the front in widely separated fields,—in Greek literature, in old French literature, in folklore and anthropology, and, of late, in history and in biography. With Butcher, Leaf and Myers he translated the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, and in so doing he set an unsurpassable standard for translation from a dead language. Without collaborators he rendered into nervous and pellucid English the *Homeric Hymns*, the idylls of Theocritus, the song-story (*chante-fable*) of *Aucassin and Nicolette* and a score or more of the lays of old France.

A long contemplated translation of Herodotus he seems never to have accomplished; and a biography of Molière, projected more than thirty years ago, was also abandoned after he had thoroughly investigated all the sources, the sole result of this research being the article in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, revised for his admirable Clarendon Press edition of the *Precieuses Ridicules*. As a folk-lorist he was instrumental in discrediting, not to say demolishing, the sun-myth theory of Max Müller; and as an anthropologist he did more than any one else to elucidate the secret of the totem. As a historian he gave us what is certainly the most readable book on the intricate story of his native Scotland; and as a biographer he dealt with characters as dissimilar as Mary Stuart and John

\*Shakespeare, Bacon and the Great Unknown. By Andrew Lang. With eight illustrations. New York and London: Longmans, Green and Company. 1912.

Knox, Lockhart and Stafford Northcote. He had a special fancy for attacking the obscure puzzles of history and he displayed a Scotch shrewdness in unravelling the tangled skein which led to the centre of the labyrinth.

As a journalist he was incessantly active in dailies and in weeklies, in monthlies and in quarterlies. When I first had the pleasure of meeting him, now thirty-two years ago, he was contributing five or six times a week an editorial article, as brilliant as it was brief, to the *London Daily News*; and only too few of these charming essaylets have been recaptured from the swift oblivion of the back number in the little volume entitled *Lost Leaders*. At the same time he was writing two or three articles every week for the *Saturday Review*,—minute investigations into the problems of folklore, reports of cricket matches, essays on literary and social themes and on topics of the times, and reviews of books in widely separated fields of literature. A little later he wrote for an American weekly, the *Independent*, his charming *Letters on Literature*, and for an English daily his ever delightful *Letters to Dead Authors*—which bids fair to survive as his indisputable masterpiece. A little later still he undertook the monthly department entitled “At the Sign of the Ship” in *Longman’s Magazine*. And all through these busy years he was pouring forth in magazines, British and American, a heterogeny of essays on all sorts of subjects, only a few of which have been replevined in *Books and Bookmen* and *Adventures Among Books*, in *Angling Sketches and Essays in Little*. The fascinating papers on *Shakespeare’s Comedies*, which he composed to accompany Abbey’s exquisite illustrations in *Harper’s*, are still uncollected.

He wrote one long narrative poem, *Helen of Troy*, and he gathered his many scattered lyrics into half a dozen volumes, of which the best known is *Ballades in Blue China*. He not only wrote poetry and translated poetry, but he wrote about poetry; he was the foremost authority in England on the ballad,

following loyally in the footsteps of Child; and he contributed the required articles on this subject to Ward's *English Poets* and to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Moreover, he adventured himself in prose-fiction; he collaborated once with Sir Rider Haggard and once with Mr. A. E. W. Mason; and he wrote without any partner tales as dissimilar as the *Mark of Cain*, the *Monk of Fife* and the *Disentanglers*. Finally, he undertook a school history of *English Literature from Beowulf to Swinburne*, a sincere, frank, individual and unhackneyed book, illumined by flashes of insight and rich in appreciative criticism. It is to be noted that this history of English literature is unique among all the manuals of literary history prepared by British writers in that it does not neglect the American authors who have contributed to the literature of our common language. No British critic has been more cordial or more acute in his recognition of the special gifts of Poe and of Longfellow.

For versatility and for variety of accomplishment such as this a heavy price is always exacted. We are loath to believe that any man, however gifted he may be, can be an expert in widely separated fields. We are still more unwilling to accept the working newspaper man and the fecund magazine writer as also a man of letters. Andrew Lang's activity as a journalist in periodicals of every kind, ranging from *Punch* to the *Hibbert Journal*, from the *Illustrated London News* to *Mind*, could not but interfere with his reputation as a scholar. The bull's-eye of fame is more likely to be hit by a single rifle-shot than by successive discharges from a shotgun, no matter how accurate the aim or how abundant the ammunition. But those of us who knew him and who cherish his memory need not be discouraged. Time will do him justice, for posterity with its unerring judgment will select out of Lang's immense miscellany the half dozen volumes or the single book which cannot be permitted to perish. If an individual speculation may be hazarded, the suggestion must be made that the most likely to endure are the translations of Homer and Theocritus and of *Aucassin*

and *Nicolette*, a handful of lyrics, and above all, the incomparable *Letters to Dead Authors*.

His characteristic qualities are exhibited in this posthumous book which deals with the Shakespeare-Bacon myth. Here we find his searching common sense, his customary shrewdness, his lively wit and his abundant humour, which was always good humour. He disavows any special acquaintance with Elizabethan literature, but he brings to the discussion of the authorship of the Shakespearian plays a wide acquaintance with literature ancient and modern, which allows him to adduce parallels and to provide satisfactory explanations for certain of the puzzles propounded by those who deny that Shakespeare was the author of Shakespeare's works. His special opponent is Mr. Greenwood, who maintains that the actor Shakespeare is not the author Shakespeare and that the actual author of the plays and poems is a Great Unknown,—possibly Bacon. This absurd belief Lang riddles with ridicule, showing it up in all its inadmissible assumptions and in all its illogical inconsistencies. The Baconians and the other anti-Shakespearians are so persistent, so vociferous, so intolerant,—and at bottom so ignorant,—that there is advantage in having their pretensions and their assertions examined from time to time by clear-eyed scholars possessed of that simple common sense which seems sometimes to be so uncommon. This needful task was performed a score of years ago by John Fiske, in a paper reprinted in his volume called *A Century of Science*; and it has been accomplished again in this more ample examination by Andrew Lang.

The result of Lang's analysis is that there is no reason to doubt Shakespeare's authorship of the plays attributed to him, however inexplicable may be the mystery of genius whereby a Warwickshire lad of doubtful schooling developed into the greatest dramatic poet the world has ever seen. At bottom the mystery here is but slightly greater than that which veils the development of the illiterate Illinois lad into the Abraham Lincoln who wrote the Gettysburg Address. But the Baconians and the anti-Shakespearians

in general will not be converted by Lang's logic; they are immune to argument, since they have been bitten by the microbe of prejudice. That which gets into the head without the aid of argument cannot be got out by the aid of argument. Indeed, when prejudice has captured the mental citadel, argument spends itself in vain, even if it is as acute and as courteous and as convincing as is Lang's argument in the present volume.

Perhaps, therefore, there is no profit in my adding my missile to the weapons of assault that Lang has here collected and sharpened. But I have always found keen satisfaction in the fact that Shakespeare's authorship of the Shakespearian plays has never been questioned by any one really familiar with the theatre,—that is to say, by no actor, by no manager, by no dramatist, by no dramatic critic, by no historian of the drama. And the reason for this unanimity on their part is simple; they know, as experts in stage-technic, in dramatic construction, in the dramaturgic craft, that Shakespeare's plays must have been written in the theatre itself, so to speak. The author of Shakespeare's plays was no outsider, no mere man of letters not intimately associated with the stage, but a man of the theatre, availing himself of every device of the theatre of his time and familiar with every theatrical tradition of that epoch. In other words, the author of Shakespeare's plays was not only the greatest dramatic poet of the world, he was also the Sardou and the Belasco of the Elizabethan theatre.

*Brander Matthews.*

## II

### ANDREW LANG'S "HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE"\*

For some while past the student who desired a compendious and authoritative history of English literature had but one sure resort—he could turn with confidence and pleasure to that marvellously compact storehouse of facts and impressions in which Professor Saintsbury

had garnered for him the results of a lifetime's reading and judgment. It is doing no injustice to other manuals to assert that the *Short History* held the field from the very day of its publication, if only because of the breadth of its survey, the thoroughness of its author's knowledge and the catholicity and soundness of his taste. That monument of learning which is gradually being built up by Cambridge scholars and their colleagues will accomplish in detail a task which one man's labours could only attempt in outline; but as a summary and a convenient work of reference, the little Saintsbury volume will still be consulted. On the smaller scale none of our critics has seriously challenged the professor's supremacy till the current year; now comes a rival history in miniature from Mr. Andrew Lang, and there must be general regret that its kindly and accomplished writer was not spared to see it in print. Perhaps to his death may be set down certain repetitions in the text, not to mention occasional misprints, which should not have missed the proof-reader's eye. That the name of Sir Walter Scott should turn up like a veritable King Charles's head periodically through the various chapters is a matter of idiosyncrasy, which should merely amuse; that Mr. Lang should reiterate his favourite quotations—thus Jonson's remark on Shakespeare, "sufflaminandus erat," mentioned five times at least—need not offend anybody save your pedant; but it certainly seems a pity that information already given in one place should be reproduced in another, for it argues a lack of skill in dovetailing the book's material. Indeed it is largely on account of Andrew Lang's lack of architectonic sense that I am sure his history, while it may serve as a "second string" to Mr. Saintsbury's book, can never hope to replace it, though it travels just a tiny distance further afield into modern times. Delightfully as he always gossiped on literary topics, full of scholarship and refreshing allusiveness as were his causeries, Mr. Lang never had the knack of making even his newspaper articles run with easy consecutiveness; his readers were expected to supply the connections of his rather rambling thoughts; form was

\*History of English Literature: From "Beowulf" to Swinburne. By Andrew Lang. New York: Longmans, Green and Company.