

MODERN ESSAYS

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The Habit of Letter-Writing
May Be Disappearing, but the
Kindred Art of the Essayist
Flourishes No Less than of Old
in Great Britain and in America



"THERE are gains for all our losses," so the poet told us years ago; and our own experience tells us every day that there are losses for all our gains. The latest modern improvements, about which we are wont to be boastful, have all to be paid for. The invention of the telegraph and of the telephone, local and long-distance, could not fail to discourage letter-writing; and there are those who fear that our grandchildren will be able to publish no correspondence of this generation which will delight them with its leisurely charm as we are delighted by the easy grace of the epistolary communications of our grandparents.

These despondent critics prefer to believe that in the twentieth century Mme. de Sévigné would be content to telephone her daughter twice a week, and that Horace Walpole would send Mann a few gossiping clippings from the London weekly papers, instead of expressing his own opinions about the passing show. And yet those admirable letter-writers, Lowell and Stevenson, lived at least twoscore years after the telegraph had begun to tick off its messages.

These same despondent critics are also prone to lament the disappearance of the

essay, which is so closely akin to the letter, and which may even be considered as a letter addressed not to a single intimate, but to many unknown friends. Not long ago, I overheard one of them bemoaning the fact that nobody nowadays sits before his own hearth, and is thereupon moved to write about "A Wood Fire," or looks out of the window casually as a spring storm sweeps the streets, and thereupon plumps himself down at his desk to pen his rambling reflections on "A Rainy Day."

Now, it may be admitted that in this hurrying twentieth century, in the busy New World, we do not often find in our magazines papers on "Wood Fires" and "Rainy Days"; but was there ever a time when such papers were frequent? And it may also be urged that there never was a time when such papers were important. A wood fire is all very well as a theme, and so is a rainy day; but only a man of abounding human sympathy and of consummate literary art can make very much out of a topic so insignificant.

It was said of Swift—at least I think it was about Swift that the remark is recorded—that "he could write beautifully about a broomstick." No doubt he could,

EDITOR'S NOTE—Previous numbers of this series of talks upon current literary topics, by Brander Matthews, have been as follows: "Who's Who in Fiction" (March), and "Books on the Drama" (April).

and what of it? Fortunately for us, Swift found not a few subjects of a wider appeal, and did not waste himself often in lucubrations about broomsticks. Lowell, in his turn, could write beautifully about his "Garden Acquaintance" or in behalf of "Winter"; but he had a more stimulating purpose when he discussed "A Certain Condescension in Foreigners."

THE QUALITIES OF A GOOD ESSAY

The essential quality of a good essay is not to be sought in the writer's making something out of nothing, but in the commingled wit and wisdom, humor and good humor, with which he chats to us, his unknown friends, with all the freedom of the good talk whose flavor goes up the chimney. We ought to feel, as we read his paragraphs, that the essayist was writing from a full mind, and that we are enjoying the privilege of listening to a gentleman and a scholar—to employ the good old phrase so vitally significant. We ought to feel that he has something to say to us which he enjoys saying, and which he trusts we shall enjoy hearing. He is expressing himself and distilling the results of his observations and reflections on life, on men and women, on manners, and on books. He is giving us the seemingly spontaneous opinions of a man of the world, illustrating his precepts from his own practise and from his own reading. He has license to quote from the most recondite authors, if only the pearl he is rescuing is worthy of the setting in which he puts it.

"Some there are," said Ben Jonson, three centuries ago, "that turn over all books, and are equally searching in all papers; that write out of what they presently find or meet. . . . Such are all the essayists, even their master, Montaigne."

So far from being dead or even moribund in this first quarter of the twentieth century, the essay is as alive as ever it was, even if to-day it is not quite the same as it was yesterday. In Great Britain, as well as in the United States, it flourishes now as abundantly as it did a hundred years ago—which is not to say that it is very frequent even in this year of grace. But I think that on both sides of the Atlantic it is rather more flourishing than it was half a century ago; and my memory of our magazines goes back nearly fifty years.

In England the essay has had a revival of late, although the British essayists of

the twentieth century are a little lacking in the urbanity of their eighteenth-century predecessors. Mr. Shaw, Mr. Chesterton, and the swarm of their minor imitators are fiercely strenuous; they want to keep us excited by a succession of swift explosions; they seek to startle with paradox, and they strive to coruscate with epigram. They might almost be likened to a knot of impatient little boys swinging packs of fire-crackers around their heads to explode in all directions. One of these minor imitators, after having sent forth volumes of miscellaneous papers on "Something" and on "Anything," followed these tomes with a third on "Nothing"—probably not more autobiographical than its two predecessors.

MODERN AMERICAN ESSAYISTS

The latter-day essayists over here in the United States are just as clever as their British cousins; but they seem to me saner and more cheerful. And cheerfulness is a part—and a major part—of the whole duty of man, and more particularly of man as an essayist. A doleful essay is a contradiction in terms; it is not a true essay; rather is it at best a dissertation and at worst a disquisition. Our American essayists have the buoyant optimism which is one of our most obvious characteristics, and which has seemed to some foreigners perilously near to fatalism. They have the hopefulness which belongs to a new people, to the men of a nation founded by pioneers. They are prone to discuss our own conditions, which is fit and proper, of course; and they disdain to wail in a minor key over the result of their inquisition into ourselves.

In the past few months half a dozen collections of essays by American writers have been published, varying in theme and varying in value, but every one of them having its interest and significance each in its own way. (There is even a seventh volume of essays recently issued here which I should dearly love to discuss—if I were not restrained by an indurated modesty.) These half-dozen volumes are "Genius and Other Essays," by the late Edmund Clarence Stedman; "Time and Change," by Mr. John Burroughs; "The Provincial American," by Mr. Meredith Nicholson; "The American Mind," by Professor Bliss Perry; "Humanly Speaking," by Dr. Samuel McChord Crothers, and "Americans and Others," by Miss Agnes Repplier.

Four of these six volumes contain essays, pure and simple; but two of them, the books of Stedman and of Mr. Burroughs, stray more or less outside the narrower limits of the essay as these are ordinarily circumscribed. The papers in Stedman's volume, garnered by the pious care of his granddaughter, are essays in criticism rather than essays at large. They discuss criticism itself and genius; they consider poets as remote from one another as Keats and Blake, Austin Dobson and Eugene Field; they weigh books as dissimilar as Mr. Kipling's "Seven Seas" and Professor Barrett Wendell's "Cotton Mather"; and they are all of them informed with the critical insight and phrased with the critical felicity which was always characteristic of Stedman, even in the occasional magazine contributions and the casual prefaces which he deemed less important than his larger and more constructive works on the American and on the Victorian poets.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF JOHN BURROUGHS

The collection of papers which Mr. John Burroughs has chosen to entitle "Time and Change" has a larger import than the literary articles garnered in Stedman's posthumous volume. Where Stedman dealt with the problems of literature, Mr. Burroughs deals with the problems of life—or rather with the great problem of life, the relation of man to nature, of humanity at large to the world in which it may wander for a scant threescore years and ten.

In other and earlier books, more especially in "Literary Values," Mr. Burroughs has already revealed his honest appreciation of authors as dissimilar as Emerson and Matthew Arnold; and in "Time and Change" he brings his acute critical sincerity and his imaginative insight to bear upon the position in which we find ourselves now that the geologists and the biologists have interpreted for us a few of the riddles of the past. If the descent of man was what the biologists tell us, and if the surface of the earth has come to be what it is through the working of the causes declared by the geologists, what do these things mean for us? How far had the ancestors of man advanced on the long road when this or that change took place on this globe which man likes to consider as made for his sole use?

It is in the answers he brings to these queries that Mr. Burroughs reveals his in-

sight; and it is in declaring these answers that he exercises his imagination. Although he writes in plain prose—a prose as pellucid as one of the mountain streams of his beloved Catskills—it is as a poet that he sees the universe, and that he proves once more how a prose-writer may also possess the vision and the faculty divine.

What the men of science have been expounding to us for half a century he has here interpreted so that we are forced to perceive the meaning of these strange discoveries. A naturalist himself for sheer love of nature, he disclaims scientific training; but he has the clear intelligence to grasp what the scientists have declared, often with a chilly aridity; and he has the imagination to relate the results of their investigations and to make clear to us their hidden content. It is not too much to say that "Time and Change" is one of the most stimulating books which has been published by any American author in this opening century.

The remaining four volumes fall more completely within the more rigid definition of the essay. They deal with the manners of the moment rather than with man in his relation to eternity. They have the aroma of lively conversation, as the essay should have if it is to charm us—of good conversation, and not of mere chatter or of empty gossip—of good conversation that rises readily from the discussion of persons and of things to the discussion of ideas—of good conversation wherein the other man matches his wits with yours and brings forth the best he has from his stores of wisdom, compelling you to brace yourself for the friendly debate.

BLISS PERRY ON AMERICAN TRAITS

Professor Bliss Perry's "The American Mind" is a volume of connected essays, prepared to be delivered as a course of addresses, just as Emerson's essays had most of them begun by being lectures. Perhaps the title under which these addresses were delivered, "American Traits in American Literature," is more exactly descriptive of the author's intent than the title given to the volume in which they appear in print. Professor Perry has a wide acquaintance with Americans of all classes, both in books and out of them; and he brings to the analysis of our traits a keen intelligence, an understanding sympathy, and an honest desire for disinterestedness.

He tries to see us, not as others see us, but as we see ourselves. Who was it who asserted that a man's opinion of himself, if only he is clear-eyed and frank, is likely to be nearer right than the opinion of anybody else? And what is true of an individual is likely to be true also of a people. After all, we Americans are really better acquainted with ourselves than any foreigners can be; and we are better fitted than the most inquisitive alien to put ourselves to the question.

One friendly alien, after long residence here, has asserted that "the chief trait of the American people is the love of gain and the desire of wealth acquired through commerce." Another foreign observer, temporarily domiciled in the United States, has discovered that we have lately grown "more monarchical in our tendencies." Professor Bliss Perry cites these preposterous opinions, one British and the other German, with the calm contempt they evoke in every native. He has no difficulty in showing that they are absurd, if only because they ignore the fundamental idealism of the American people. He notes how difficult it is to decide offhand on the characteristics of the typical American.

"It would puzzle the experts in racial tendencies," he declares, "to find authentically the common denominator of such American figures as Franklin, Washington, Jackson, Webster, Lee, Lincoln, Emerson, and Mark Twain; yet the countrymen of these typical Americans instinctively recognize in the men a sort of largeness, genuineness, naturalness, kindness, humor, effectiveness, idealism—which are indubitably and fundamentally American."

Many other equally shrewd remarks might be quoted from these illuminating essays—none of them, perhaps, shrewder than this:

There is, in fact, conservatism in our blood and radicalism in our brains, and now one and now the other rules.

And delightfully felicitous is the anecdote of the Connecticut tin-peddler who was asked if he did a good business, and who responded:

"Well, I make a living selling crockery and tinware, but my business is the propagation of truth!"

One wonders what the alien observers would make out of that saying, instantly

understood by all of us who are native to this Western air.

A VOICE FROM THE MIDDLE WEST

Professor Bliss Perry is a Massachusetts man surveying the American mind from a coign of vantage in New England, and Mr. Meredith Nicholson is an Indianian taking observations of the provincial American from a point in the middle West. Yet their outlook differs but little; and in Mr. Nicholson's essays we find the same shrewdness, the same humorous detachment, the same appreciation of American idealism that we have noted in Professor Perry's less fragmentary analysis. Perhaps, however, there is nothing quite so fresh in the New Englander's pages as the Indianian's account of the modest glories of Indianapolis. With the New England aspects of American life and character we were familiar enough before Professor Perry discoursed about them so cleverly; but provincial capitals of the middle West have not been hitherto celebrated with the intimate knowledge and with the honorable reserve that we discover in Mr. Nicholson's essay.

After all, New England is not the whole United States, although it sometimes allows us to suspect that this is its own belief. We are not likely, of course, to underestimate the contribution of New England to the civilization of the United States as a whole; and if we are ever tempted to forget the virtues of the Pilgrim Fathers and of the Pilgrim Mothers, their progeny are always here to jog our memories. But we of the middle States, and the men of the middle West also, feel an elevating pride in the contributions which our respective sections have made to American civilization; and it is well that the New Englander shall now and again be silent for a little space that the rest of us may have a chance to celebrate ourselves.

It is with the utmost discretion, and with no hint of boastfulness, that Mr. Nicholson talks about his own people, and about himself also in turn. These pleasant papers of his are not only agreeable reading for us now; they are valuable documents as well for the future historian of American social development.

A DAUGHTER OF PHILADELPHIA

This future historian will also be able to make his profit from "Americans and

Others," by Miss Agnes Repplier, who sets down her observations in Philadelphia, a city which has had in the past half-century less claim than Indianapolis to consideration as a literary center—although in the final years of the eighteenth century, and in the opening years of the nineteenth, Philadelphia was the nearest approach to a literary center that the then unliterary United States possessed.

In those remote days our criticism was hopelessly colonial, and Americans strained their ears to catch the echoes of British opinion; and Miss Repplier revealed herself a true Philadelphian by descent from this distant period in her earliest essays, wherein her attitude was still colonial. She was very deferential to the second-rate writers of the mother country, and she was prone to greet a very ordinary British goose as a swan of Avon. When the late Andrew Lang reviewed her earliest volume, he made the curious mistake of declaring that Miss Repplier was "nothing if not American"—a dictum which moved the late Henry C. Bunner to suggest that this characterization reduced the lady from Philadelphia to non-existence, and made her as though she had never been.

It is most satisfactory to be able to report that in the score or more of years since Miss Repplier commenced her work as an essayist she has repeated the adventure of Columbus and discovered America. She still quotes on occasion from British journalists unknown in America; who is the George Street, for example, from whom she borrows an uninspired remark in her otherwise interesting essay on "The Chill of Enthusiasm"? But this is only, an infrequent lapse into her former forlorn condition of colonialism; and for the most part she has now her feet firm on the soil of her native land.

In an otherwise excellent essay on "The Mission of Humor," I discover that Miss Repplier has not grasped the useful distinction between humor, which is positive, and sense-of-humor, which is negative. Humor permits us to make a joke, and sense-of-humor helps us to take a joke even on ourselves.

I wonder if I should seem to be lacking in the sense-of-humor if I point out that the lady from Philadelphia has failed to comprehend aright a remark of my own. It appears that I once asserted that certain newspaper-writers here in New York had

"a wit not unlike Voltaire's," and the essayist says that I make "the comparison with the casual assurance which is a feature of American criticism." Now, I have the assurance, not casual in the least, but deliberate, to repeat my belief that the corroding and disintegrating wit of these New York journalists is "not unlike Voltaire's"—in kind, even if it is unequal to Voltaire's in degree. I maintain the exact accuracy of my remark, just as I should maintain the exact accuracy of an assertion that Miss Repplier's essays are "not unlike" Charles Lamb's—in kind, even if not in degree.

STILL ANOTHER AMERICAN ESSAYIST

It would be accurate, also, to assert that Dr. Crothers—whose volume of essays entitled "Humanly Speaking" is the last upon the list to be considered in this paper—has an attitude toward life not unlike that of Dr. Holmes. He inherits the traditions of the autocrat of all breakfast-tables; and he presents us in these pages with whim and fantasy, not unlike the display of those delightful qualities that Dr. Holmes proffered us in the three or four volumes of his tolerant egotism and garrulous sympathy.

But in this latest collection Dr. Crothers is moved also to put his fellow-citizens under the microscope, to analyze the American temperament, and to discuss the noise we Americans make in the "unaccustomed ears of Europe." He takes a keen pleasure in pointing out—and even in proving by apt instances—that we Americans, so often denounced as being lawless and disrespectful of law, have really a deeper veneration for the abstract idea of law than the British have.

It is perhaps more than a chance coincidence that four American essayists should be found simultaneously discussing American traits, and incidentally contrasting them with the traits of foreigners, more particularly with the traits of our British kin across the sea. Perhaps it is not a coincidence at all. Perhaps it is only added evidence that we Americans are eternally interested in ourselves.

And why not? After all, the American as he is may not be an unimportant topic for us to be interested in. Certainly these American essayists are interested in it; and they all of them succeed in making it interesting for us.

THE SPRUCER

BY GEORGE ALLAN ENGLAND

AUTHOR OF "OIL AND WATER," "ON SHARK'S FIN REEF," ETC.

ROUGH, shaggy, and uncouth, yet clean-limbed as an athlete, the huge, red-shirted fellow glanced up suddenly at sound of the far, shrill cry that dropped into the forest stillness like a pebble into a quiet pool.

Into the bed-ticking bag that hung at his side he let fall the lump of amber gum that he had just dug from the bole of the spruce. Reflectively he drew at his cob, and listened.

"Eh? What *now*?" he muttered, his tone and words belying his outward appearance. "I didn't know there was a soul nearer than Dead River. What? Isn't there, after all, any way to be alone?"

A moment he waited, peering in the direction of the sound from his vantage-point of twenty feet up the trunk, but the cry was not repeated. With a grunt of disapproval he once more attacked the gum-seam with his stout blade, clinging to the spruce with the lineman's creepers strapped to his powerful legs, and holding one arm crooked round a limb.

"Extraordinary run of gum in these lowlands, that's certain," he soliloquized, prying off another lump as big as a robin's-egg. "And with the raw stuff fetching seventy-five cents a pound, uncleaned, over at Burnt Stick Portage, I'll soon have enough ahead to winter me in the shack on Cobbossee. That's all I'm looking for, now. With the gum, and maybe a few skins trapped now and then—"

Once more the distant hail quavered through the woodland stillness of that Indian summer afternoon. Frowning blackly, the big man sucked in displeasure at his pipe. His ruddy, virile face wrinkled with bitter annoyance; an odd look filmed his large, rather deep-set gray eyes.

"I wouldn't have had it happen for half my season's pick!" he growled throatily. "I thought a country where I haven't

seen a newspaper in five months was far enough away. But men come everywhere. It's impossible to keep ahead of the fringe of the human tide for very long. Well"—and he knocked the dottle of tobacco from his pipe against the spruce—"well, if Five Lakes Reserve is really invaded at last, the sooner I hike north again, the better! I'll get free from men if I have to trek away up into Gaspé Peninsula, or cross the St. Lawrence and make for Anticosti! Surely there must be some place, somewhere—"

A third time the cry quavered down wind; and now a revolver-shot popped through the smoky stillness of the November wilderness.

The sprucer laughed oddly to himself.

"Lost, eh?" commented he, going on with his work. "Lost, and just awakened to the situation? *I* know! *Arrrh!* The city fool! As if any real man couldn't steer by the watercourses, or the sun, or the mossy northern sides of the trees, or by a hundred signs!

"Lost! Some weak little banker, broker, or what not—the very kind that hounded me and would have put me in a cage for fifteen years if they'd been able, what? Some tenderfoot without nerve, or wind, or even common sense—with nothing but twenty pounds of useless fat on his soft body—up here next to the real thing, where only *men* should come! Up here, trying to take life, a deer's life or a bear's, and now in mighty fine danger of losing his own! Well, it's no funeral of mine. Let the idiot go hang—or starve! It'll be one less of the pack, anyhow, thank goodness for that!"

Grimly exultant, wholly indifferent to the fate of the stranger a mile or so distant, the sprucer calmly continued his exploitation of the tree. When all its yield had been garnered and stored in the striped bag, he very deliberately climbed down,