

# Thomas De Quincey

BY PHILIP VAN DOREN STERN

OUR interest in Thomas De Quincey begins not with his birth, when he had yet to prove himself worthy of interest, but with his death, when he had already done so. The day of his death is nearer to us in point of time; we can, without too much effort, creep back through the veins of our fathers to our grandfathers (or great-grandfathers if necessary) to an early morning in December, 1859, when Thomas De Quincey, wasted and aged, but with a full life behind him, lay dying in a rented room at 42, Lothian Street, Edinburgh.

The little tired man who was so quietly breathing his life away had made a curious name for himself. He had been known to magazine readers throughout the world as the English Opium-Eater, and there was about him that aura of the mysterious which is associated with those who have dared to explore the furthest depths of the human mind with the aid of the strange oriental drug. A painter of the romantic school, depicting his deathbed, would have peopled the air with phantoms, misshapen and horrible images from the mythology of the East and "unutterable slimy things from the Nilotic mud." And there would be faces there, pale and delirium-haunted, drawn with suffering, and dragged up from the dark and rain-swept streets of a city that had already ceased to exist.

These were the images of his dreams. His life, except for the one remarkable period described in the "Confessions," had been rather uneventful, haunted more by the very real spectres of poverty and hunger, and the omnipresent police officers hounding him endlessly for unpaid debts.

The last nine years had been relatively peaceful. Scattered around him in the room where he lay dying were the manuscripts and proofs from which he was building the collected edition of his far-scattered works. Nearly all of his writings had appeared first in magazine form for the very good reason that in this way it was possible, by writing comparatively short pieces, to obtain some money quickly. And there was a never-ending need



THOMAS DE QUINCEY

*From the portrait by Sir John Watson Gordon (1825).*

for money with eight small children crying for food. His books (he had once owned five thousand) had long since been sold to feed the hungry mouths. When he says, as he often does, "I write this without books for reference," he means just that. His books were gone and it was impossible for him to venture out to borrow from friends. He was afraid of being picked up by some watchful officer of the law. He had several times taken refuge in the debtor's sanctuary of Holyrood but finally even that had been closed to him, for he had incurred debts within the actual confines of the sanctuary itself.

Poverty and debt had plagued his life for thirty years and he had been tortured since early childhood by illness. He had lived like a recluse, solitary and shy. The amazing range of his writing reflects the range of a mind that had sampled everything and traveled everywhere—in books. Actually he had never been out of the British Isles although he had planned to settle in the Canadian woods, to go to Germany, to France, to Spain. . . .

Those who knew him in his later years speak invariably of the little man's gentle

manners, of his beautifully modulated voice, and, above all, of his conversational ability. Words flowed from him naturally; his sentences, elaborate and complex, came with the ease that only a life-long acquaintance-ship with fine prose could establish. They speak too of the eccentricities of his old age. He drank up the contents of old medicine bottles in the hope that the composite mixture would have a salutary effect; he stored his tattered manuscripts in a tin bath and he carried with him a pocket brush so he could dust them off before handing them to the printer. He was always plagued by fire—it burned up his precious papers, and once, as he sat reading too near a lamp, his hair began to blaze. He casually brushed away the flames and continued with his book. He was oblivious of such external things as money or clothes; his mind lived within itself, dwelling in a country of its own where such things as time and the elements were unimportant.

He had spent his life in a welter of old papers. Around him always were books, proofs, and manuscripts—some of them stained to this day with the purple ring left by a glass of laudanum. He had shut himself off from the world, so that the swift and astounding changes taking place in his generation reached him only at second hand, filtered through a screen of printed symbols. He had been born into the eighteenth century at a time when its glories were fading. He knew that the age of elegance was over, and that there was nothing to be gained from carrying on its already obsolete literary and artistic forms. The rhymed couplet had gone with the rapier into oblivion.

His life was to mark the transition be-

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AND SO—VICTORIA

By VAUGHAN WILKINS

Reviewed by Theodore Purdy, Jr.

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF A SPANISH TOWN

By ELLIOT PAUL

Reviewed by Ben Ray Redman

tween a world of stage-coaches and candle-light, and a world of steam-engines and electricity. In the year of his birth the courts of Europe were shocked by the Affair of the Diamond Necklace that threatened the rule of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette; in the year of his death, the citadels of orthodox were shaken by the publication of Darwin's "Origin of Species." But this isolated scholar never understood that the very structure of civilization was being altered; never became fully aware of the effect that this alteration was having on the minds and characters of his fellow men. He had seen the huge spinning-mills spring up in his native city of Manchester to bring ruin to the household weavers of the countryside. He had heard the deep sullen rumblings of Watt's new engines, but he was deaf to their significance.

He had grown up in an era of revolution. He had been educated during the years when the armies of Napoleon were conquering the strongholds of European feudalism. But to De Quincey's insular mind, Bonaparte was only a bloodthirsty monster who might invade the peaceful shores of England. He disliked everything French, and to him revolution was a French disease which should be rigorously quarantined. He never experienced the revolutionary ardor that dominated the youth of Wordsworth and Coleridge, nor did he, of course, have to suffer their disillusionment. He was professedly a Tory and he preserved throughout his life a complacent belief in aristocratic institutions. He was passionately interested in the science of political economy but he never comprehended the political and economic actualities of his own times.

But if he was a Tory in politics, he was at least sympathetic to radical ideas in literature. He was one of the first in all England to be drawn to the new poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge. He was opposed to the forces that had moulded their poetic ideals, but he greeted enthusiastically these writers who were attempting to express in everyday language the rhythm of contemporary life. In his own work, however, he did not follow their lead. He drew upon the writings of past centuries for the influences which shaped his style, and his subject matter was a strange mixture of intimate self-analysis and historical pedantry.

Yet he was in every way a romantic; he helped to introduce the romantic literature of Germany to England; he was powerfully influenced by the imaginative prose of Jean Paul Richter; and he was unusually well read in the philosophy that constituted the foundation of romanticism.

It is not difficult to understand why he was so unclearly oriented. Romanticism itself was a curious product of contradictory tendencies. Basically it was the artistic expression of the mighty forces that were reshaping the world. Yet it contained

within itself a reactionary element—a nostalgic gesture toward the glories of the feudal past. In its highest form this fond look backwards was expressed in the transcendental mysticism of Blake, Coleridge, and Keats. For more popular consumption there were the historical romances of Sir Walter Scott and, on an even lower plane, the tales of Monk Lewis and Mrs. Radcliffe with their ancient castles haunted by ghosts in clanking chains, their pale knights in armour, and their inevitable maidens in distress.

Compared with men like Chatterton or Otway or Keats he had been fortunate. His first published work had brought him instant success—fame if not fortune. The "Confessions of an English Opium-Eater," written hastily for *The London Magazine*, where they appeared in the autumn of 1821, immediately established the reputation of their anonymous author. Taylor and Hessey, the publishers, brought the



DOVE COTTAGE

*Home of Wordsworth, later of De Quincey.*

"Confessions" out in book form and sold several editions. De Quincey received a present of £20 for the book—he had no legal rights in its profits.

The instant success of the "Confessions of an English Opium-Eater" indicated that the public was more than ready for subjectivity in writing. Like Rousseau, although without his all-embracing frankness, De Quincey took the reader into his confidence and exposed even the less admirable side of his own character. But he went beyond Rousseau by leading the reader into the innermost recesses of his subconscious mind where his opium dreams in all their terrible magnificence held sway.

It is in this field of personal writing that De Quincey did his finest work. As a writer of fiction he was a failure. He lacked the peculiar kind of inventive power needed to create character and devise original plots. He could put down on paper an amazingly accurate portrait of some one he had seen and known (he

makes Wordsworth a living figure, and the description of his first meeting with Charles Lamb is vividly realistic), but he always had to have the living model in mind before he could make the portrait. He possessed a fine narrative power (see the "Revolt of the Tartars" and the magnificent last paper of "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts"), but in these he had the advantage of being able to work with actual historical material.

But if he lacked the faculty of being able to create seeming images of flesh and blood, it was certainly because of no inherent lack of imaginative power. This power in him was vast and terrible. He drew his material from that inexhaustible reservoir—the subconscious mind; he perceived the richness that lay concealed there; and at times his writing shuttles curiously between the levels of wakeful objectivity and the dark reaches of that hinterland which only the sleep-drugged brain can traverse.

It was in this world which lies between twilight and darkness that De Quincey was most at home. To him even the simplicities of daily existence had about them a quality of strangeness. His reaction to things was never the usual one of matter-of-fact people. He saw London, not as a sprawling and industrial metropolis emerging from the provincial elegance of the eighteenth century, but as a vast nation, a conglomeration of peoples living in misery and luxury, where the slow sullen rhythm of life was made up from the heartbeats of mankind in travail. Its narrow sinister streets haunted his dreams, and again and again he would find himself back among the terraces of Oxford Street, pacing its nightly silences with the forlorn figure of Ann at his side. Even the solid and substantial reality of an English mail-coach took on in his mind a symbolic meaning. It was more than a method of transportation; it was a part of the nervous system of a great country, and its swift passage through town and village spread across the nation the tidings of defeat and victory, of dissolution and progress. And in its terrible flight it carried with it a shrouded coachman who took the place of the sleeping driver to send the flying hoofs of its horses into a rhythm that pounded out a song of death.

The writing produced by this dark and brooding mind called for a style that was founded in the vivid realization of sensual experience and in the capture of transubstantial awareness. The age had favored the growth of an experimental technique in the handling of English prose. The romantic dichotomy was expressed in style as well as in subject. Prose was not only hard and real but mystical and imaginative. In the early years of the nineteenth century the tendency towards concreteness and informality was only foreshadowed. It was not to reach its full de-

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# Prophetic Autobiography

ESCAPE TO THE PRESENT. By Johannes Steel. New York. Farrar & Rinehart. 1937. \$2.50.

Reviewed by EUGENE LYONS

**J**OHANNES STEEL erupted on the journalistic horizon of New York in the spring of 1934 with a shrewd forecast of blood-letting in the Nazi ranks which was proved substantially accurate by the purge of June 30. Thereafter, as a sort of *Wunderkind* foreign editor of the *New York Post*, he continued in the trade of prognosticator, surely the most hazardous of professions. His guesses remained consistently shrewd but not always accurate. They led him to an indiscretion in prophecy which he called "The Second World War." Undaunted, Mr. Steel in the present autobiographical volume maintains the prophetic strain, but on a universal scale and without time limitations, which makes it much safer.

The gist of his thesis is that Europe is hopeless, morally and economically bankrupt, and in general moribund; and that the centers of civilization and culture are shifting rapidly eastward and westward—to the Orient and to the Americas. There is no need to accept the prophecy literally in order to admit that it holds true for thousands of individual young Europeans whose lives have been cut at the roots and set adrift by events in these last years. Johannes Steel is of this homeless company. In "Escape to the Present," summarizing his own life's story, he shows forcefully how one young German found existence under Hitler's dispensation intolerable and decided to begin it anew in America. He has changed worlds, deliberately and in the full knowledge of the seriousness of his choice.

Whatever future historians may say about his larger assumptions, they are at least poignantly valid in his own case. Fascinating as sheer adventure, Mr. Steel's story achieves symbolic grandeur because his private destiny is so intimately related to the main currents of recent history: the World War, the chaotic aftermath, the totalitarian reaction. There is a certain flamboyance about the author's temper and a certain recklessness about his generalizations. Nevertheless, at its core his personal experience is true and significant, and he has recorded it with a great deal of charm, skill, and gusto.

Like so many other young people from the fascist lands, Mr. Steel has replanted his life in America and he is frankly amazed how quickly and firmly it has taken to the new soil. "I have taken out my first papers," is the triumphant theme song of his autobiography. He marvels at the hospitality and the eager curiosity and

the fresh energy that he has met in going through our country as a reporter and lecturer. Already, in less than three years, he begins to feel himself an American. But unlike other exiles in our midst, his transfer was a conscious choice. He is not a Jew, and despite some dabbling in Social Democratic politics he might have merged himself with Nazi Germany had he wished to do so. His cleavage with the current phobias of his homeland was deeper than race or politics—it was fundamentally cultural. He was the European man refusing to sink himself into the primordial slime of the know-nothing fascist retreat to barbarism, purposefully seeking a climate congenial for survival and finding it in the United States.

Besides being a document of our times, "Escape to the Present" is also a document of an unusually exciting individual career. Among the youthful autobiographers whose books are coming thick and fast these days—Mr. Steel is apparently in his early thirties—there are many who went forth to seek adventure and found it in full measure. This young German, on the contrary, seems to have been sought out by adventure. The most that can be said is that it found him always ready and coöperative. He seems to have moved in an aura of remarkable coincidence and sudden dangers.

A casual meeting and a dream threw him at a tender age into the maelstrom of fevered finance on the Black Bourse of his native town during the German inflation. Later he was catapulted into economic espionage for the Weimar Republic on several continents, including North and South America. He sold left-over German war materials on a contraband basis in the Near East and the Far East, in years replete with providential meetings, hair-breadth escapes, and routine melodrama. An accidental encounter with Herr Schacht, the financial dictator, in a post office during the first week of Hitler's reign led to an invitation to enter the Foreign Department of the Nazi party. "If you consider this proposal," Dr. Alfred Rosenberg, head of that department, promised, "you may be Under-Secretary of State inside of five years." Having disdained this offer, Mr. Steel was arrested and jailed. How he brained a sleeping Nazi guard and stole across the frontier to France is among the more thrilling of the assorted thrills.

Mr. Steel's story will be read by many for its sheer excitement. Even more will read it, this reviewer trusts, for the more fundamental adventure of an intelligent and ambitious young man who chose to defy the tides of fascism in Germany and to make himself a new home across the seas. "Escape to the Present" is integral with our epoch, and therefore instructive as well as exciting.



FROM THE JACKET OF "WAR ON SATURDAY WEEK"

## Thunder of the Guns

WAR ON SATURDAY WEEK. By Ruth Adam. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company. 1937. \$2.50.

Reviewed by LOUIS J. HALLE, JR.

**I**N reviewing Mrs. Adam's novel one is reminded of the expert who wrote a book proving that war was impossible and whose publishers rushed it through the press so that it should appear before war actually did break out. A few years ago this novel, which deals with the life of an English family in the present pre-war period and ends with the thunder of the first guns, would have seemed fantastic. Tomorrow it will be out of date. It is strictly a novel of today.

The Lawsons, Norah, Mary, Cedric, and John, were children at the time of the late war, living in the village Rectory as rectors' children have lived for generations in Merrie England. The world they were born into was the old world of order and security; the world they grew up to was a world of anarchy, tyranny, and sudden death. The mental strain of the war-threat and its effect on the various characters is the burden of the novel. One takes refuge in communism, another in a glittering army uniform; a third, who represents moderation, takes no refuge and finally has his head bashed in by clashing fascist and communist mobs.

Mrs. Adam doesn't definitely represent England as going fascist. But in one scene Mosley's blackshirts are shown coöperating with the London police to put down a communist rising. Again, a pacifist society is ordered by the government to dissolve. The author offers no solutions. She merely observes, in a spirit of detached amazement, and allows her observations to be their own comment. She is clever enough to keep her political and social picture of the future vague, and has thus attained a degree of plausibility that most prophetic books lack.