

THE CHARLES LAMB SOCIETY

by ERNEST G. CROWSLEY



A drawing of Charles Lamb by Daniel Maclise, R.A.

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Few figures in English literature have endeared themselves more to the reading public than Charles Lamb. His fame does not rest entirely upon the evergreen "Essays of Elia," but also on his character as "one of the most human and lovable of men." E. V. Lucas, author of the standard life of Lamb and editor of the most complete collection of his letters, has said of his works: "One is continually conscious of a mind inflexibly true to itself and its ideals." Curiously, both Lamb and Lucas come into our St. Pancras picture—Lamb as a regular visitor to Coleridge at Highgate and Lucas as a past resident of Harrington Square. So, we welcome the following contribution by the Honorary General Secretary of the Society.

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IN a room in Essex Hall, Strand, London, a small body of men and women met one evening to discuss the possibility of forming a Society dedicated to "the most beloved figure in English literature." As a result of this discussion it was unanimously agreed to found such an organisation, and consequently on the 1st February, 1935, the Charles Lamb Society was born. The Society had for its objects:

- (a) To study the life, works and times of Charles Lamb and his Circle.
- (b) To stimulate the Elian spirit of friendliness and humour.
- (c) To undertake from time to time the publication of papers which may be read before the Society.
- (d) To form a collection of Eliana.

An ambitious programme, perhaps, but one which has been achieved.

The late Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch became the first President and held that office until his death in 1944. He was succeeded by Lord David Cecil. Mr. Edmund Blunden and Mr. J. Lewis May have been vice-presidents since the foundation of the Society, and Mr. S. M. Rich was elected a Vice-President in January, 1944. The Society has been particularly fortunate in its executive officers, and especially in its Chairman, Mr. Walter Farrow, who fulfils his duties with urbane charm and efficiency.

MEETINGS

During the winter, monthly meetings are held when authoritative lectures by visiting speakers are given on a variety of subjects appropriate to the objects of the Society. Not the least interesting meetings are the Members' Evenings at which short papers are given by members on some set subject. Provincial and Overseas members have contributed papers on these occasions. During the summer, visits are paid to places associated with Charles Lamb and his circle. In May, 1939, the Society visited Charles Lamb's old school, Christ's Hospital, now transferred to Horsham, to attend the unveiling of a Memorial Plaque to Charles Lamb presented by the Society and the sculptor, the Hon. Gilbert Coleridge, a descendent of Charles Lamb's dearest friend—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and himself a member of the Society.

Throughout the War the Society continued its monthly meetings, which were exceptionally well attended, and greatly appreciated, as intellectual oases, by those able to be present.

The outstanding event in the year's programme is the Celebration of Charles Lamb's Birthday. Before the war this took the form of a dinner on the actual day (10th February), but during and since the war the Celebration has taken place on the Saturday afternoon nearest to the birthday. At these functions some distinguished man of letters or public affairs is the Guest of Honour. Lord David Cecil, Mr. Frank Swinnerton, Professor Basil Willey and the late Lord Plender and Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch have been Guests.

For the convenience of members the winter monthly meetings are held alternately on Monday evenings and Saturday afternoons. Not possessing any permanent headquarters the Society has to depend upon the hospitality of other organisations. At the present time the Society holds its Monday meetings at University Hall, 14 Gordon Square, W.C.1, which is a most appropriate venue. This building, originally erected as a hall of residence for the accommodation of Nonconformist students attending University College, had as one of its founders Henry Crabb Robinson, who was an esteemed member of the Charles Lamb Circle. Charles and Mary Lamb are included in the forty-seven friends of "Old Crabb" in the Armitage frescoes round the walls of the Hall.

MEMBERSHIP AND BULLETIN

Membership of the Society is open to individuals and corporate bodies including libraries and schools. Although it began in a small way the Society now has a membership of about five hundred; approximately half of which are either from the Provinces or Overseas. Whether a member resides in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, the U.S.A., or the Provinces of the British Isles, he or she is kept in close touch with the Society by means of periodical letters from the Corresponding Secretaries and by the Bulletin. In order not to deter anyone from joining the Society, on the question of expense, the annual subscription has been kept exceptionally small and merely sufficient to meet current expenditure.

Soon after the formation of the Society it was decided to publish a Bulletin. Mr. S. M. Rich, compiler of *The Elian Miscellany*, became its first editor, and it is due to his efforts that the Bulletin has become such a valuable asset and a friendly link between the members at home and abroad. Owing to ill-health Mr. Rich resigned in 1947, and Mr. H. G. Smith became editor and is admirably upholding the tradition established by his predecessor. The Bulletin, which is issued bi-monthly to members only, contains full reports of meetings, articles and items of Elian interest and a continuous bibliography of references in the Press to Charles Lamb.

ELIANA AND RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

One of the original objects of the Society was to form a collection of books, etc., on or by Charles Lamb, and this has now reached reasonable proportions. The main body of the collection is accommodated at the Edmonton Public Library by kind permission of the Public Libraries Committee, while a smaller part is available at University Hall for the convenience of members attending the meetings held there. Besides books and pamphlets, copies of many of the lectures given before the Society are included in the library. With few exceptions any item in the library can be borrowed by members for home reading.

In order to increase the effectiveness of the Society and to encourage the talents of its members a Dramatic Group has been formed. Some of Charles Lamb's own plays have already been produced, and there have been readings of plays referred to by him in his works and letters. Theatre visits are also included in the Group's programme. Membership is open to any member of the Charles Lamb Society at a small additional subscription.

Where there is a nucleus of members in the Provinces and Overseas it is hoped to form branches. A successful one has been operating for some time in Glasgow, where monthly luncheon meetings are organised during the winter months at which short addresses are given on Elian subjects.

Although the Society does not possess permanent headquarters it concentrates on providing a programme of informative lectures and interesting visits pervaded by the Elian spirit of friendliness and humour. Charles Lamb has admitted—"I am always longing to be with men more excellent than myself"—and this is a sentiment shared by the members of The Charles Lamb Society.