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ARCHIBALD CONSTABLE

AND HIS

LITERARY CORRESPONDENTS

A Memorial

BY HIS SON THOMAS CONSTABLE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

EDINBURGH

EDMONSTON AND DOUGLAS

1873.

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than that of an ordinary merchant, whose goods, however injudiciously he may buy them, are always sure to fetch a certain portion of the price.

“Another proof of the liberality and discernment of the booksellers is the readiness with which they adapt the form and mode of publishing their books to the spirit of the times. Since the reading public became the world generally, and not the merely professional students, a new literature has been demanded, and it has been demanded in a new form. Men, whose occupations are connected with the passing time, have become the majority of readers, and they accordingly desire that the reading shall also not only be connected with the passing time, but shall come in portions as that time passes. Hence the great demand for periodical literature; and hence, too, the breaking down of larger works into numbers, so that they may be published periodically.

“This, which began with obscurer publishers, and with works of a less important nature, is extending itself over the whole trade, and over the whole empire of letters, in such a way as proves that reading is becoming universal both as to the readers and the subjects read.”—*News of Literature*, Dec. 10, 1825.

“CONSTABLE’S MISCELLANY.”

“The name of Constable has strong claims to respect from those who feel an interest in the literary honours of Scotland. To hundreds it has been the passport to fame, to consequence, and to emolument; and it is indeed associated with almost every work of genius which has appeared in the last and brightest period of our literary history. It would be ungrateful in the Press and the Public to forget this; and we can truly say, therefore, that it gives us sincere pleasure to see that name reappear, after an interval of gloom and misfortune, in connexion with a work of undisputed utility. This First Volume of the Miscellany is now ready, and we hope will meet with the encouragement which it amply merits. It is a reprint of Captain Hall’s very interesting Voyage to Loo-Choo, with various additions, and, among others, an account of his interview with Bonaparte in 1817. This small volume, neatly printed, enables the reader to obtain, for three shillings, what would cost in another shape twelve or fourteen. The plan of progressive publication in weekly numbers puts it within the reach of all but the very poorest classes, while the style of its typography, and its general appearance, render it not unworthy of a place in the libraries

of the opulent.—When the work was projected, more than twelve months ago, we anticipated that it would become highly popular, and be in fact the parent of a race of publications which would give a new impulse to the diffusion of knowledge. We were not mistaken, for, previous to the melancholy revulsion in trade which plunged so many persons in distress, and suspended the publication at the moment when it was on the eve of starting, it had obtained the unprecedented number of fourteen thousand subscribers! The subject is one upon which we could easily enlarge: but as we could probably say nothing better than we have said already, we shall close this notice with an extract from an article which we published on the 14th December 1825.

“To estimate what may be the effect of this class of works, let us look to the recent changes in our literature. There are two species of publications which have given a new impulse to thought, and prodigiously accelerated the progress of knowledge within the last sixty years—we mean Encyclopædias and Reviews which deal in discussion. Both of these owe some portion of their usefulness to a circumstance common to all periodicals—that, coming out in parts, they neither press heavily on the time nor the purse, and are thus within the reach of multitudes in the middle and lower walks of society. The former made scientific knowledge and general information more widely accessible; the latter familiarized the people with the principles of philosophy, and taught them to take comprehensive views of passing events and of their own situation. But both from their nature are subject to restrictions. The one can take in no article which exceeds 30 or 40 octavo pages, and excludes some species of reading altogether; the other, being compelled by its plan to embrace many subjects which nobody cares for, can assign but a small space to others which are far more attractive. A Life of Washington or Nelson in two volumes, a History of India in three volumes, a Narrative of Hall’s Voyages of a similar size, could find admission into neither. Yet many readers will deem these as interesting and profitable as anything in the pages of a Review, and for ninety-nine in a hundred they are infinitely more attractive than a long treatise on Botany, Mineralogy, or the Genus *Mammalia*. An Encyclopædia is a work three-fourths of which are necessarily useless to its possessor; but in a Miscellany, fettered by no system in the compiling, nine parts in ten will have a value to every reader. Of our modern Magazines, filled up with *flash* and flummery, it is needless to speak. They sparkle like champagne at the moment of decanting, but are so stale and vapid one month after they issue from the press, that no man out of his dotage ever opens them a second time. An

Encyclopædia in 20 volumes costs forty pounds: and, for the same sum, those who subscribe for a Miscellany of this kind, will have a library of 266 volumes, in every one of which an ordinary reader will find instruction or rational amusement. In short, the great merit of this project is, that the principle of progressive and periodical publication, which has so many advantages, but has hitherto been applied only to a few old standard books, to ephemeral discussions, and summaries of science, is rendered applicable to the great floating mass of our literature, and thus furnishes a prodigious engine for the diffusion of every species of useful and ornamental knowledge through the lower and middle classes of society. We anticipate one farther, and, in our opinion, very great advantage, from the establishment of such publications. Generally speaking, at present, books are esteemed by all persons in the middle and lower ranks, as something of the nature of luxuries or superfluities. They are something which it is very convenient and pleasant to have, but which can quite well be wanted. Casual circumstances make an individual lay out half a guinea or a guinea, at a rare juncture, upon some volume which strikes his fancy; but no man (a professed collector excepted) sets apart a portion of his income to buy books, as he does to buy food, clothes, or furniture. Now, it occurs to us that when three or four of the great publishing Booksellers have commenced their Miscellanies, and have thus broken down the mass of our mental aliment (as chandlers do our corporeal food) into portions for daily and weekly consumption, literature will take its rank among the *necessaries of life*, and a library will be considered—as it ought to be by every man in decent circumstances—an indispensable part of household furniture. Few persons would want a collection of books, if one adapted to their tastes and habits could be procured by laying out a shilling weekly. But we hesitate when £2, 12s. are to be expended in buying only two quartos or four octavos—first, because so large a sum as 13s. or 26s. can ill be spared at once; secondly, because, when books are at such a price, we despair of forming a useful collection; and, thirdly, that as we cannot get what we would wish, we find few single volumes so tempting as to break through our habit, and put our hands in our pockets. But things will be greatly changed when the 52s. which buys only four volumes at present, perhaps on one single subject, will buy seventeen volumes of equal size as to reading, and embracing a great variety of instructive or interesting matter. In a few years, we predict that every young man, when his apprenticeship is done, will lay aside a shilling weekly for books—that a young couple taking up house will reckon

thirty or forty volumes of Constable's Miscellany as indispensable as a chest of drawers, or an eight-day clock—and that the question 'Who is your Bookseller?' will be as pertinent in every decent family as 'Who is your grocer' or 'clothier?'"—*Scotsman of January 6, 1827.*

"On Thursday last, the 19th inst., the old, extensive, and respectable house of Messrs. A. Constable and Co. suspended payment—an event so wholly unexpected that it is difficult to say whether regret or surprise most predominated at its announcement. For more than thirty years Mr. Constable has been at the head of the bookselling interest in Scotland; and, without even excepting the London bibliopoles, where, we ask, is the individual who, within that time, has published so many standard works? The Waverley Novels—the Poems and Miscellaneous Writings of Sir Walter Scott—the Works of Stewart, Playfair, Leslie, and Brown—the Supplement to the Edinburgh Encyclopædia—Edinburgh Review, Annual Register, Gazetteer, and a hundred other books of approved excellence, have all borne the imprint already alluded to; and not a few of our English authors, attracted by the fame of Mr. Constable, have been glad to avail themselves of his services to introduce their works to public notice. Twenty-five years have nearly elapsed since the first number of the Edinburgh Review appeared, and at that time more than one bookseller was deterred from affixing his name to a publication which, however full of literary promise, aspired from the first to a character of sturdy independence. Mr. Constable, however, calculated better, and the event fully justified his expectations. Not many years ago 14,000 copies of this publication were printed and sold four times in the year; and, for aught we know to the contrary, the same number may be circulated still. The property of such a popular work must have yielded a very handsome income, even when shared by the gifted editor and his able coadjutors; and we believe we do not exaggerate when we say that, with one exception, the Edinburgh Review has put more money into the pockets of eminent literary men than all the periodicals of the present age. Though the organ of a party, and sometimes unnecessarily keen and rancorous in discussion, its merits far outweigh its defects; and the fine philosophy, critical acumen, and strong, straightforward, manly sense, by which it has ever been characterized, have had no slight influence upon the opinions, feelings, and even the fortunes of the British people. Had Mr. Constable published nothing else, his name would have been advantageously