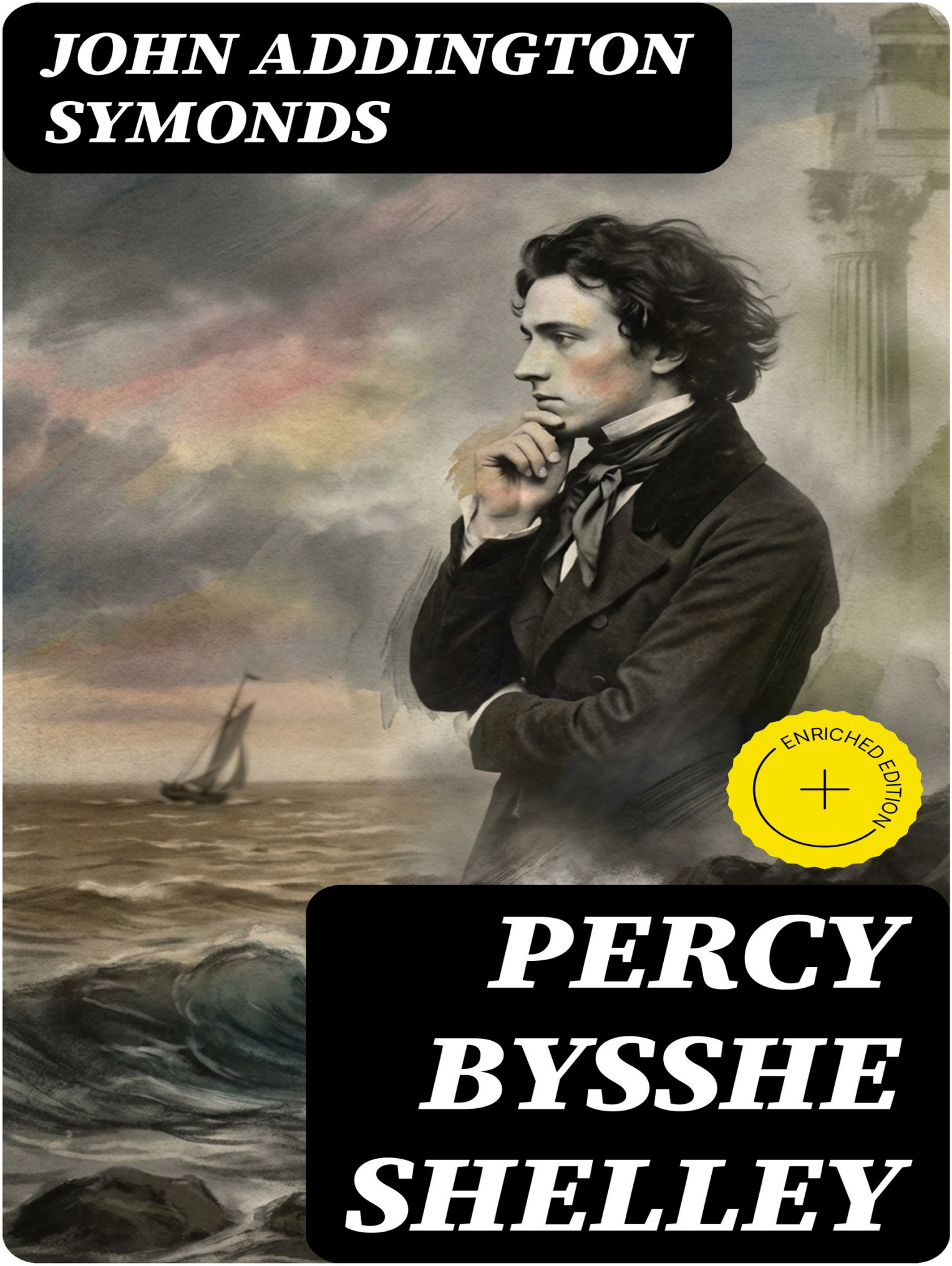
JOHN ADDINGTON SYMONDS



PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

John Addington Symonds

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Liam Oakley

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Introduction

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At once a portrait of artistic idealism and a meditation on the costs of dissent, John Addington Symonds’s Percy Bysshe Shelley considers how a mind aflame with visionary purpose confronts the resistant matter of society, tradition, and personal fate, balancing the biographer’s duty to documented fact with a critic’s effort to discern the governing energies of a life, and holding in productive tension the purity of Shelley’s aspirations and the ambiguities of their expression, so that the reader feels both the exhilaration of unfettered imagination and the sober reckoning required by history, character, and the discipline of art.

Symonds’s book is a literary biography and work of criticism, composed within the late nineteenth-century tradition of English letters. It examines Shelley’s career within the settings that shaped Romantic writing, from Britain’s cultural ferment to the Mediterranean landscapes that sustained his later creativity. Published in the Victorian era, it reflects the period’s confidence in moral inquiry allied to aesthetic judgment, yet it resists simple didacticism. Without pedantry, Symonds situates the poet among contemporaries, intellectual movements, and social pressures while keeping the focus on the life of the imagination. The result is a study that is historical in method and interpretive in aim.

Rather than rehearsing every incident, Symonds composes a clear, continuous narrative that traces formation, conviction, and artistic experiment, pausing to illuminate how particular works articulate a developing vision. The voice is poised and humane, with a cadence typical of cultivated Victorian prose, attentive to nuance and wary of caricature. He balances admiration with scrutiny, preferring careful inference over confident assertion when evidence is scant. The tone alternates between analytic steadiness and moments of lyrical warmth, encouraging readers to hear the music of Shelley’s language even while considering its philosophical stakes. One reads not only a life, but a mind in motion.

Across the study, Symonds foregrounds the contest between idealism and constraint: the individual’s demand for intellectual and moral freedom against the norms of church, state, and custom. He charts the interplay of reason and imagination, the claims of private feeling alongside the imperatives of public commitment, and the pull of earthly beauty against metaphysical yearning. Poetry, in this account, is not ornament but an ethical instrument, testing how words might advance justice, compassion, and clarity. At the same time, Symonds underscores the cost of such striving, registering the vulnerabilities, misreadings, and resistances that inevitably accompany a life devoted to reform.

Methodologically, the book leans on attentive readings of poems and prose, connecting images, arguments, and forms to the circumstances that provoked them without reducing art to biography. Symonds sifts public record and critical

reception with judicious reserve, declining sensational anecdote in favor of patterns that can be reasonably inferred. He is alert to how contemporaries interpreted Shelley, how reputations harden or soften over time, and how criticism itself is shaped by the temper of its age. By revisiting controversies with measured sympathy, he offers a portrait that neither sanctifies nor indicts, trusting the works to disclose the character they imply.

For contemporary readers, the book matters because it clarifies enduring questions about the relation of art to ethics and of private conscience to public life. Symonds’s Shelley models how imaginative audacity can coexist with disciplined craft, and how dissent can be voiced without rancor. The emphasis on responsibility in language, on candor joined to compassion, and on the risks of heterodox conviction speaks to current debates about free expression, social justice, and the uses of beauty. Moreover, the ecological and humanitarian horizons of Shelley’s imagination, as presented here, resonate with present urgencies, inviting a reconsideration of hope as a civic task.

Approached as both primer and companion, Symonds’s study rewards first-time readers seeking orientation and seasoned readers pursuing synthesis. Its chapters move fluidly from life-situations to analyses of major works, allowing the novice to follow the arc of development while offering the experienced student a coherent map of themes and styles. The prose is accessible without concession, rich enough for reflective reading yet unfussy in exposition. By the end, one has gained a framework for exploring Shelley’s corpus with refreshed attention and a vocabulary for

discussing its aims. The book endures because it teaches a way of reading as much as a subject.

Synopsis

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John Addington Symonds's Percy Bysshe Shelley (1878) appears in the English Men of Letters series edited by John Morley. As a concise critical biography, it surveys Shelley's life alongside close readings of major poems, arguing neither prosecution nor defense but a measured account of a poet often judged by legend. Symonds frames his inquiry around two linked problems: how Shelley's uncompromising ideals shape his art, and how his temperament affects form and genre. The book balances narrative and analysis, situating Shelley within Romantic-era debates on freedom, imagination, and faith, while mapping the evolution of his style from experimental polemic to finished lyric power.

Symonds begins with Shelley's youth in Sussex, schooling, early voracity for science and speculative thought, and the first clashes with authority that marked his intellectual independence. He treats the expulsion from Oxford after the pamphlet on atheism as a formative break, setting the frame for Shelley's lifelong antiauthoritarianism. Early poetic and prose ventures are read as testing grounds for ideas that later become art, with Queen Mab presented as an immature but revealing compendium of his radical creed. Symonds underscores how the young writer's moral earnestness outran his technical control, preparing the transition to more imaginative modes.

The biographical thread turns to Shelley's early adult attachments and encounters that shaped his work, including

his ties to William Godwin’s circle and the relationships that altered his domestic life. Symonds treats these as contexts rather than sensational episodes, emphasizing how Shelley’s evolving conceptions of love, companionship, and duty inform the poetry’s central myths of liberation. Alastor is read as a turning point toward visionary inwardness, while Laon and Cythna (later revised) amplifies his reforming zeal through allegory. Symonds traces a shift from declamation to symbol, noting improved craft, deeper psychological resonance, and a widening imaginative landscape.

At the center of Symonds’s critique stands the cluster of mature works. He presents Prometheus Unbound as the fullest synthesis of Shelley’s idealism in lyrical-dramatic form, while judging The Cenci as a deliberately constrained experiment in tragic realism. The great odes and shorter lyrics exemplify his unrivaled gift for verbal music and imagery, and Adonais embodies elegiac breadth and control. Symonds attends to metrical resourcefulness, the precision of natural description, and a palpable Hellenic strain that shapes tone and symbol. He marks both expansiveness and fragility: high flight in song often paired with structural looseness in narrative or drama.

The narrative surveys the productive years spent abroad, when new settings, friendships, and access to art and languages broadened Shelley’s horizons. Symonds links the Mediterranean environment and creative companionships to a surge of lyric intensity, disciplined translation, and experiments in dramatic and philosophical reach. He also treats the prose, reading the Defence of Poetry as a key statement of aesthetic and ethical conviction that clarifies

the poems’ aims. Throughout, Symonds weighs how exile heightened clarity of purpose while complicating practical engagement, and how cosmopolitan encounters reinforced Shelley’s attachment to intellectual liberty and imaginative aspiration.

Turning to character and reputation, Symonds distinguishes documented habit from rumor, acknowledging controversies over belief, marriage, and responsibility while resisting caricature. He assesses the charge of moral inconsistency by contrasting Shelley’s abstract benevolence with the difficulties of action, and he calms partisan judgments by returning to the texts. Strengths appear in purity of lyrical impulse, breadth of sympathy, and visionary coherence; limitations in rhetoric that can outrun dramatic credibility and a proclivity for diffuse argument. Symonds embeds these judgments within contemporary reception, showing how hostile readings yielded, over time, to a recognition of technical mastery and ethical ambition.

The book closes by placing Shelley within English poetry’s larger movement, neither isolating him as an anomaly nor diluting his singularity. Symonds argues for a poet whose ideals of freedom, love, and intellectual courage animate forms that remain influential, while acknowledging the unresolved tensions that make the work vital. The portrait avoids definitive closure, inviting readers to test assessments against close reading rather than anecdote. As an entry in a series meant to introduce major writers, it offers a disciplined, accessible synthesis whose enduring resonance lies in linking a life of principle to a body of art still capable of renewing sympathy and thought.

Historical Context

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John Addington Symonds's Percy Bysshe Shelley appeared in 1878 within Macmillan's English Men of Letters series, edited by the radical Liberal critic John Morley. Symonds, an Oxford-trained historian of literature and culture, wrote for a broad Victorian readership newly accustomed to concise critical biographies. Educated at Balliol College under Benjamin Jowett's liberal tutelage, he approached poets through moral and aesthetic categories shaped by classical studies and Renaissance scholarship. His Shelley thus stands at the junction of expanding professional criticism and accessible series publishing, aiming to integrate life, works, and milieu. The book frames Shelley as a national writer to be judiciously reassessed rather than merely idolized or condemned.

Symonds wrote amid Britain's late-Victorian debates over religion, science, and culture. Darwin's On the Origin of Species (1859) and The Descent of Man (1871), the controversy over Essays and Reviews (1860), and the spread of German biblical criticism unsettled older orthodoxies. The Elementary Education Act (1870) and the University Tests Act (1871) widened participation in intellectual life by reducing Anglican gatekeeping. Morley's series encouraged frank, secular appraisal of writers once treated primarily as moral exemplars. In this climate, Shelley's atheism and political radicalism could be reconsidered as components of an idealist poetic vocation,

allowing Symonds to balance candor with the decorum expected of a mainstream publisher.

To understand Shelley’s formation, Symonds situates him in the upheavals of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic era and its British aftermath. The anxieties of war, economic distress, and post-Waterloo repression—Habeas Corpus suspensions, the Seditious Meetings Acts, and the Six Acts (1819)—formed the backdrop to Shelley’s republican sympathies. The Peterloo Massacre (1819) and the climate of surveillance and prosecution sharpened his hostility to authoritarian power and class privilege. Poems and pamphlets advocating liberty, nonviolence, and reform responded to this atmosphere, even when publication had to be cautious or delayed. Symonds emphasizes that Shelley’s politics were integral to his art, not an adventitious scandal to be excused.

Institutions central to Shelley’s early life anchor Symonds’s narrative. Born in 1792 at Field Place, near Horsham, Sussex, the heir to Sir Timothy Shelley, Whig MP for New Shoreham, he entered elite schooling at Eton and then University College, Oxford. In 1811 he was expelled from Oxford for refusing to disclaim a pamphlet, The Necessity of Atheism, exemplifying his collision with Anglican authority and patrician expectations. The episode, together with family pressure regarding income and marriage, frames themes of conformity, conscience, and independence. Symonds uses these institutional settings to show how Shelley’s intellectual defiance arose within, and against, the established structures of British education and politics.

Symonds highlights Shelley’s literary and expatriate networks that shaped his mature production. Contacts with William Godwin and his circle, and Shelley’s union with Mary Godwin—daughter of Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft—connected him to radical Enlightenment legacies. The 1816 sojourn near Lake Geneva with Lord Byron, during the “year without a summer,” fostered exchanges that informed works by both households. From 1818 Shelley resided mainly in Italy—Milan, Naples, Rome, Pisa, and the Gulf of Spezia—while publishing in London through C. and J. Ollier. Symonds, a historian of the Italian Renaissance, underscores how Mediterranean landscapes, art, and classical associations inflected Shelley’s lyric intensity and dramatic ambitions.

Publishing realities and censorship are essential context for Symonds. Queen Mab (1813) was privately printed; later pirated editions drew legal scrutiny. In 1841 the publisher Edward Moxon was prosecuted for blasphemous libel for issuing Shelley’s poems, notably Queen Mab, signaling how long official suspicion persisted. During Shelley’s lifetime, the law of libel and fears of persecution curbed distribution of political pieces; after 1832, with parliamentary reform and widening public discourse, several works achieved larger circulation, including The Mask of Anarchy (first published 1832). Mary Shelley’s editorial labors (notably 1839) shaped his posthumous image, while 1870s editions by H. Buxton Forman furnished Symonds with fuller textual materials.

Symonds built his portrait on a growing but uneven body of testimony. He used memoirs by Thomas Jefferson Hogg (1858), Edward Trelawny’s Recollections of the Last Days of

Shelley and Byron (1858), Thomas Medwin’s Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley (1847), and Thomas Love Peacock’s recollections (1858), alongside Mary Shelley’s prefaces and notes. These sources mingled firsthand observation with partisanship and anecdote. Symonds’s book predates Edward Dowden’s archival Life of Shelley (1886), so his synthesis necessarily weighed conflicting Victorian witnesses against emerging critical editions. The result seeks a fair-minded, document-based account that resists both hagiography and vilification while foregrounding the poems as the primary evidence of character.

Finally, Symonds’s treatment mirrors late-Victorian efforts to reconcile aesthetic aspiration with liberal ethics. Adopting Shelley’s own Defence of Poetry (1821) as touchstone, he presents the poet as an ethical imagination working toward social renewal, yet judges private conduct with the restraint demanded by contemporary propriety. His Hellenism and Renaissance studies equip him to read Shelley’s ideal beauty, mythic structures, and Mediterranean settings without severing them from British political experience. Thus the book participates in a broader revaluation: it integrates Romantic radicalism into a national literary heritage, critiques earlier moral absolutism, and models a historically grounded, secular appreciation of a once-contested poet.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

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SHELLEY.

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CHAPTER 1.

BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD.

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It is worse than useless to deplore the irremediable; yet no man, probably, has failed to mourn the fate of mighty poets, whose dawning gave the promise of a glorious day, but who passed from earth while yet the light that shone in them was crescent. That the world should know Marlowe and Giorgione, Raphael and Mozart, only by the products of their early manhood, is indeed a cause for lamentation, when we remember what the long lives of a Bach and Titian, a Michelangelo and Goethe, held in reserve for their maturity and age. It is of no use to persuade ourselves, as some have done, that we possess the best work of men untimely slain. Had Sophocles been cut off in his prime, before the composition of "Oedipus"; had Handel never merged the fame of his forgotten operas in the immortal music of his oratorios; had Milton been known only by the poems of his youth, we might with equal plausibility have laid that flattering unction to our heart. And yet how shallow would have been our optimism, how fallacious our attempt at consolation. There is no denying the fact that when a young Marcellus is shown by fate for one brief moment, and withdrawn before his springtime has bought forth the fruits of summer, we must bow in silence to the law of waste that rules inscrutably in nature.

Such reflections are forced upon us by the lives of three great English poets of this century. Byron died when he was

thirty-six, Keats when he was twenty-five, and Shelley when he was on the point of completing his thirtieth year. Of the three, Keats enjoyed the briefest space for the development of his extraordinary powers. His achievement, perfect as it is in some poetic qualities, remains so immature and incomplete that no conjecture can be hazarded about his future. Byron lived longer, and produced more than his brother poets. Yet he was extinguished when his genius was still ascendant, when his "swift and fair creations" were issuing like worlds from an archangel's hands. In his case we have perhaps only to deplore the loss of masterpieces that might have equalled, but could scarcely have surpassed, what we possess. Shelley's early death is more to be regretted. Unlike Keats and Byron, he died by a mere accident. His faculties were far more complex, and his aims were more ambitious than theirs. He therefore needed length of years for their co-ordination; and if a fuller life had been allotted him, we have the certainty that from the discords of his youth he would have wrought a clear and lucid harmony.

These sentences form a somewhat gloomy prelude to a biography. Yet the student of Shelley's life, the sincere admirer of his genius, is almost forced to strike a solemn key-note at the outset. We are not concerned with one whose "little world of man" for good or ill was perfected, but with one whose growth was interrupted just before the synthesis of which his powers were capable had been accomplished.

August 4, 1792, is one of the most memorable dates in the history of English literature. On this day Percy Bysshe

Shelley was born at Field Place, near Horsham, in the county of Sussex. His father, named Timothy, was the eldest son of Bysshe Shelley, Esquire, of Goring Castle, in the same county. The Shelley family could boast of great antiquity and considerable wealth. Without reckoning earlier and semi-legendary honours, it may here be recorded that it is distinguished in the elder branch by one baronetcy dating from 1611, and by a second in the younger dating from 1806. In the latter year the poet's grandfather received this honour through the influence of his friend the Duke of Norfolk. Mr. Timothy Shelley was born in the year 1753, and in 1791 he married Elizabeth, daughter of Charles Pilford, Esquire, a lady of great beauty, and endowed with fair intellectual ability, though not of a literary temperament. The first child of this marriage was the poet, named Bysshe in compliment to his grandfather, the then living head of the family, and Percy because of some remote connexion with the ducal house of Northumberland. Four daughters, Elizabeth, Mary, Hellen, and Margaret, and one son, John, who died in the year 1866, were the subsequent issue of Mr. Timothy Shelley's marriage. In the year 1815, upon the death of his father, he succeeded to the baronetcy, which passed, after his own death, to his grandson, the present Sir Percy Florence Shelley, as the poet's only surviving son.

Before quitting, once and for all, the arid region of genealogy, it may be worth mentioning that Sir Bysshe Shelley by his second marriage with Miss Elizabeth Jane Sydney Perry, heiress of Penshurst, became the father of five children, the eldest son of whom assumed the name of Shelley-Sidney, received a baronetcy, and left a son, Philip

Charles Sidney, who was created Lord De l'Isle and Dudley. Such details are not without a certain value, inasmuch as they prove that the poet, who won for his ancient and honourable house a fame far more illustrious than titles can confer, was sprung from a man of no small personal force and worldly greatness. Sir Bysshe Shelley owed his position in society, the wealth he accumulated, and the honours he transmitted to two families, wholly and entirely to his own exertions. Though he bore a name already distinguished in the annals of the English landed gentry, he had to make his own fortune under conditions of some difficulty. He was born in North America, and began life, it is said, as a quack doctor. There is also a legend of his having made a first marriage with a person of obscure birth in America. Yet such was the charm of his address, the beauty of his person, the dignity of his bearing, and the vigour of his will, that he succeeded in winning the hands and fortunes of two English heiresses; and, having begun the world with nothing, he left it at the age of seventy-four, bequeathing 300,000 pounds in the English Funds, together with estates worth 20,000 pounds a year to his descendents.

Percy Bysshe Shelley was therefore born in the purple of the English squirearchy; but never assuredly did the old tale of the swan hatched with the hen's brood of ducklings receive a more emphatic illustration than in this case. Gifted with the untameable individuality of genius, and bent on piercing to the very truth beneath all shams and fictions woven by society and ancient usage, he was driven by the circumstances of his birth and his surroundings into an

exaggerated warfare with the world's opinion. His too frequent tirades against:—

> The Queen of Slaves,
> The hood-winked Angel of the blind and dead,
> Custom,—

owed much of their asperity to the early influences brought to bear upon him by relatives who prized their position in society, their wealth, and the observance of conventional decencies, above all other things.

Mr. Timothy Shelley was in no sense of the word a bad man; but he was everything which the poet's father ought not to have been. As member for the borough of Shoreham, he voted blindly with his party; and that party looked to nothing beyond the interests of the gentry and the pleasure of the Duke of Norfolk. His philosophy was limited to a superficial imitation of Lord Chesterfield, whose style he pretended to affect in his familiar correspondence, though his letters show that he lacked the rudiments alike of logic and of grammar. His religious opinions might be summed up in Clough's epigram:—

> At church on Sunday to attend
> Will serve to keep the world your friend.

His morality in like manner was purely conventional, as may be gathered from his telling his eldest son that he would never pardon a mesalliance, but would provide for as many illegitimate children as he chose to have. For the rest, he appears to have been a fairly good landlord, and a not unkind father, sociable and hospitable, somewhat vain and

occasionally odd in manner, but qualified for passing muster with the country gentlemen around him. In the capacity to understand a nature which deviated from the ordinary type so remarkably as Shelley's, he was utterly deficient; and perhaps we ought to regard it as his misfortune that fate made him the father of a man who was among the greatest portents of originality and unconventionality that this century has seen. Toward an ordinary English youth, ready to sow his wild oats at college, and willing to settle at the proper age and take his place upon the bench of magistrates, Sir Timothy Shelley would have shown himself an indulgent father; and it must be conceded by the poet's biographer that if Percy Bysshe had but displayed tact and consideration on his side, many of the misfortunes which signalized his relations to his father would have been avoided.

Shelley passed his childhood at Field Place, and when he was about six years old began to be taught, together with his sisters, by Mr. Edwards, a clergyman who lived at Warnham. What is recorded of these early years we owe to the invaluable communications of his sister Hellen. The difference of age between her and her brother Bysshe obliges us to refer her recollections to a somewhat later period—probably to the holidays he spent away from Sion House and Eton. Still, since they introduce us to the domestic life of his then loved home, it may be proper to make quotations from them in this place. Miss Shelley tells us her brother "would frequently come to the nursery, and was full of a peculiar kind of pranks. One piece of mischief, for which he was rebuked, was running a stick through the

ceiling of a low passage to find some new chamber, which could be made effective for some flights of his vivid imagination." He was very much attached to his sisters, and used to entertain them with stories, in which "an alchemist, old and grey, with a long beard," who was supposed to abide mysteriously in the garret of Field Place, played a prominent part. "Another favourite theme was the 'Great Tortoise,' that lived in Warnham Pond; and any unwonted noise was accounted for by the presence of this great beast, which was made into the fanciful proportions most adapted to excite awe and wonder." To his friend Hogg, in after-years, Shelley often spoke about another reptile, no mere creature of myth or fable, the "Old Snake," who had inhabited the gardens of Field Place for several generations. This venerable serpent was accidentally killed by the gardener's scythe; but he lived long in the poet's memory, and it may reasonably be conjectured that Shelley's peculiar sympathy for snakes was due to the dim recollection of his childhood's favourite. Some of the games he invented to please his sisters were grotesque, and some both perilous and terrifying. "We dressed ourselves in strange costumes to personate spirits or fiends, and Bysshe would take a fire-stove and fill it with some inflammable liquid, and carry it flaming into the kitchen and to the back door." Shelley often took his sisters for long country rambles over hedge and fence, carrying them when the difficulties of the ground or their fatigue required it. At this time "his figure was slight and beautiful,—his hands were models, and his feet are treading the earth again in one of his race; his eyes too have descended in their wild fixed beauty to the same