

**GEORGE
SAINTSBURY**



**A LETTER
BOOK**

George Saintsbury

A Letter Book

**Selected with an Introduction on the History and Art
of Letter-Writing**

EAN 8596547333395

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

INTRODUCTION

THE HISTORY AND ART OF LETTER WRITING

I

ANCIENT HISTORY

II

LETTERS IN ENGLISH—BEFORE 1700

III

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

IV

NINETEENTH CENTURY LETTERS. EARLY

V

NINETEENTH CENTURY LETTERS. LATER

VI

SOME SPECIAL KINDS OF LETTER

VII

CONCLUSION

APPENDIX TO INTRODUCTION

I

GREEK LETTERS.—SYNESIUS (c. 375-430).

LATIN LETTERS.—PLINY (62-114).

LETTER OF THE "DARK" AGES

SIDONIUS APOLLINARIS (431?-482-4).

EARLY MEDIAEVAL LETTER (Twelfth Century).

ENGLISH LETTERS

THE PASTONS. Fifteenth Century.

ROGER ASCHAM (1515-1568).
LADY MARY SIDNEY (? -1586).
GEORGE CLIFFORD EARL OF CUMBERLAND (1558-1605).
JOHN DONNE (1573-1631).
JAMES HOWELL (1593-1666).
JOHN EVELYN (1620-1706).
DOROTHY OSBORNE (1627-1695).
JONATHAN SWIFT (1667-1745).
LADY MARY WORTLEY-MONTAGU (1689-1762).
PHILIP DORMER STANHOPE, EARL OF CHESTERFIELD (1694-1773).
GEORGE BALLARD (1706-1755).
THOMAS GRAY (1716-1771).
HORACE WALPOLE (1717-1797).
[AND W. M. THACKERAY].
TOBIAS GEORGE SMOLLETT (1721-1771).
WILLIAM COWPER (1731-1800).
SYDNEY SMITH (1771-1845).
SIR WALTER SCOTT (1771-1832).
SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE (1772-1834).
ROBERT SOUTHEY (1774-1843).
CHARLES LAMB (1775-1834).
GEORGE GORDON, LORD BYRON (1788-1824).
PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY (1792-1822).
JOHN KEATS (1795-1821).
THE CARLYLES—THOMAS (1795-1881) and JANE WELSH (1801-1866).
THOMAS BABINGTON MACAULAY (1800-1859).
THOMAS LOVELL BEDDOES (1803-1849).
ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING (1806-1861).

EDWARD FITZGERALD (1809-1883).

FRANCES ANNE KEMBLE (1809-1893).

WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY (1811-1863).

CHARLES DICKENS (1812-1870).

CHARLES KINGSLEY (1819-1875).

JOHN RUSKIN (1819-1900).

ROBERT LOUIS BALFOUR STEVENSON (1850-1894).

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Peace of the Augustans

A Survey of Eighteenth Century Literature as a Place of Rest
and Refreshment

Handbooks of English Literature

Edited by the late J. W. HALES, M.A. Professor of English
Literature, King's College, London

PREFACE

[Table of Contents](#)

When my publishers were good enough to propose that I should undertake this book, they were also good enough to suggest that the Introduction should be of a character somewhat different from that of a school-anthology, and should attempt to deal with the Art of Letter-writing, and the nature of the Letter, as such. I formed a plan accordingly, by which the letters, and their separate Prefatory Notes, might be as it were illustrations to the Introduction, which was intended in turn to be a guide to them. Having done this with a proper *Pourvu que Dieu lui prête vie* referring to both book and author, I thought it well to look up next what had been done in the way before me, at least to the extent of what the London Library could provide me in circumstances of enforced abstinence from the Museum and from "Bodley." From its catalogue I selected a curious eighteenth-century *Art of Letter Writing*, and four nineteenth and earliest twentieth century books—Roberts's *History of Letter Writing* (1843) with Pickering's ever-beloved title-page and his beautiful clear print; the *Littérature Epistolaire* of Barbey d'Aurevilly—a critic never to be neglected though always to be consulted with eyes wide open and brain alert; finally, two Essays in Dr. Jessopp's *Studies by a Recluse* and in the *Men and Letters* of Mr. Herbert Paul, once a very frequent associate of mine. The title of the first mentioned book speaks it pretty thoroughly. "The Art of Letter Writing: Divided into Two Parts. The First: Containing Rules and Directions for writing letters on all sorts of subjects [*this line*

as well as several others is Rubricked] with a variety of examples equally elegant and instructive. The Second: a Collection of Letters on the Most interesting occasions of life in which are inserted—The proper method of Addressing Persons of all ranks; some necessary orthographical directions, the right forms of message for cards; and thoughts upon a multiplicity of subjects; the whole composed upon an entirely new plan—chiefly calculated for the instruction of youth, but may be [*sic*] of singular service to Gentlemen, Ladies and all others who are desirous to attain the true style and manner of a polite epistolary intercourse." May our own little book have no worse fortune! Mr. Roberts's avowedly restricts itself to the fifth century as a *terminus ad quem*, though it professes to start "from the earliest times," and its seven hundred pages deal very honestly and fully with their subjects. The essays of Dr. Jessopp and Mr. Paul are of course merely Essays, of a score or two of pages: though the first is pretty wide in its scope. There would be nothing but good to be said of either, if both had not been, not perhaps blasphemous but parsimonious of praise, towards "Our Lady of the Rocks." It cannot be too often or too solemnly laid down that an adoration of Madame de Sévigné as a letter-writer is not crotchet or fashion or affectation—is no result of merely taking authority on trust. The more one reads her, and the more one reads others, the more convinced should one be of her absolute non-pareil in almost every kind of genuine letter (as apart from letters that are really pamphlets or speeches or sermons) except pure love-letters, of which we have none from her. As for *Littérature Epistolaire*, it is a collection of

some two dozen reviews of various modern reprints of letters by distinguished writers—mostly but not all French. The author has throughout used the letters he is considering almost wholly as tell-tales of character, not as examples of art: and therefore he does not, except in possible glances, require further attention, though the book is full of interesting things. Its judgment of one of our greatest, and one of the greatest of all, letter-writers—Horace Walpole—is too severe, but not, like Macaulay's, superficially insistent on superficial defects, and ought not to be neglected by anyone who studies the subject.

If, however, there was no need to rely on any of these books, they did nothing to hinder in the peculiar way in which I had feared some hindrance. For it is a nuisance to find that somebody else has done something in the precise way in which you have planned doing it. I have not yet encountered that nuisance here. Dr. Jessopp's general plan is most like mine—indeed some similarity was unavoidable: but the two are not identical, and I had planned mine before I knew anything about his.

So with this prelude let us go to business, only premising further that the object, unlike that of the anonymous Augustan, is not to "give rules and instructions for writing good letters," except in the way (which far excels all rules and instructions) of showing how good letters have been written. Let us also modestly trust that the collection may deal with some "interesting occasions of life" and contain "thoughts on a [fair] multiplicity of subjects." Having been, as above observed, unable during the composition of this book to visit London or Oxford, I have had to rely

occasionally on friendly assistance. I owe particular thanks (as indeed I have owed them at almost any time these forty years) to the Rev. William Hunt, D.Litt., Honorary Fellow of Trinity College, Oxford: and I am also indebted to Miss Elsie Hitchcock for some kind aid at the Museum given me through the intermediation of Professor Ker.

Besides the thanks given to Mr. Lloyd Osbourne, Mr. Kipling and Dr. Williamson in the text in reference to certain new or almost new letters, we owe very sincere gratitude for permission to reprint the following important matters:

His Honour Judge Parry. Two letters from "Letters from Dorothy Osborne to Sir William Temple."

Messrs. Douglas & Foulis. A letter to Joanna Baillie, from "Familiar Letters of Sir Walter Scott."

Messrs. Longmans, Green & Co. Two letters from Mrs. Carlyle's "Letters and Memorials," and one letter from Sir G. O. Trevelyan's "Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay."

Messrs. Macmillan & Co., Ltd. Three letters from "The Letters of Charles Dickens"; one letter by FitzGerald and one by Thomas Carlyle, from "Letters and Literary Remains of Edward FitzGerald"; one letter from "Charles Kingsley: his Letters and Memories of his Life"; and two extracts from "Further Records, 1848-1883," by Frances Anne Kemble.

Mr. John Murray. One letter from "The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning."

GEORGE SAINTSBURY.

1 ROYAL CRESCENT, BATH,

October, 1921.

INTRODUCTION

[Table of Contents](#)

THE HISTORY AND ART OF LETTER WRITING

[Table of Contents](#)

I

[Table of Contents](#)

ANCIENT HISTORY

[Table of Contents](#)

On letter-writing, as on most things that can themselves be written and talked about, there are current many *clichés*—stock and banal sayings that express, or have at some time expressed, a certain amount of truth. The most familiar of these for a good many years past has been that the penny post has killed it. Whether revival of the twopenny has caused it to exhibit any kind of corresponding resurrectionary symptoms is a matter which cannot yet be pronounced upon. But it may be possible to avoid these *clichés*, or at any rate to make no more than necessary glances at them, in composing this little paper, which aims at being a discussion of the Letter as a branch of Literature, no less than an introduction to the specimens of the kind which follow.

If, according to a famous dictum, "Everything has been said," it follows that every definition must have been already made. Therefore, no doubt, somebody has, or many bodies have, before now defined or at least described the

Letter as that kind of communication of thought or fact to another person which most immediately succeeds the oral, and supplies the claims of absence. You want to tell somebody something; but he or she is not, as they used to say "by," or perhaps there are circumstances (and *circumstanders*) which or who make speech undesirable; so you "write." At first no doubt, you used signs or symbols like the feather with which Wildrake let Cromwell's advent be known in *Woodstock*—a most ingenious device for which, by the way, the recipients were scanty grateful. But when reading and writing came by nature, you availed yourself of these Nature's gifts, not always, it is to be feared, regarding the interconnection of the two sufficiently. There is probably more than one person living who has received a reply beginning "Dear So-and-So, Thanks for your interesting and *partially legible* epistle," or words to that effect. But that is a part of the matter which lies outside our range.

On the probable general fact, however, some observations may be less frivolously based. If this were a sentimental age, as some ages in the past have been, one might assume that, as the first portrait is supposed to have been a silhouette of the present beloved, drawn on her shadow with a charcoaled stick, so the same, or another implement may have served (on what substitute for paper anybody pleases) to communicate with her when absent. But the silliness of this age—though far be it from us to dispute its possession of so prevailing a quality—does not take the form—at least *this* form—of sentiment.

There is, moreover, nothing silly or sentimental, though of course there is

something that may be controverted, in saying that except for purely "business" purposes (which are as such alien from Art and have nothing to do with any but a part, and a rather sophisticated part, of Nature) the less the letter-writer forgets that he is merely substituting pen for tongue the better. Of course, the instruments and the circumstances being different, the methods and canons of the proceedings will be different too. In the letter there is no interlocutor; and there is no possibility of what we may call accompanying it with personal illustrations^[1] and demonstrations, if necessary or agreeable. But still it may be laid down, with some confidence, that the more the spoken word is heard in a letter the better, and the less that word is heard—the more it gives way to "book"-talk—the worse. Indeed this is not likely to be denied, though there remain as usual almost infinite possibilities of differences in personal opinion as to what constitutes the desirable mixture of variation and similarity between a conversation and a letter. Let us, before discussing this or saying anything more about the principles, say something about the history of this, at best so delightful, at worst so undelightful art. For if History, in the transferred sense of particular books called "histories," is rather apt to be false: nothing but History in the wider and higher sense will ever lead us to truth. The Future is unknown and unknowable. The Present is turning to Past even as we are trying to know it. Only the Past itself abides our knowledge.

Of the oldest existing examples of *BIBLICAL EXAMPLES* epistolary correspondence, except those contained in the Bible, the present writer knows little or

nothing. For, except a vanished smattering of Hebrew, he "has" no Oriental tongue; he has never been much addicted to reading translations, and even if he had been so has had little occasion to draw him to such studies, and much to draw him away from them. There certainly appear to be some beautiful specimens of the more passionate letter writing in ancient if not exactly pre-Christian Chinese, and probably in other tongues—but it is ill talking of what one does not know. In the Scriptures themselves letters do not come early, and the "token" period probably lasted long. Isaac does not even send a token with Jacob to validate his suit for a daughter of Laban. But one would have enjoyed a letter from Ishmael to his half-brother, when his daughter was married to Esau, who was so much more like a son of Ishmael himself than of the amiable husband of Rebekah. She, by the way, had herself been fetched in an equally unlettered transaction. It would of course be impossible, and might be regarded as improper, to devote much space here to the sacred epistolographers. But one may wonder whether many people have appreciated the humour of the two epistles of the great King Ahasuerus-Artaxerxes, the first commanding and the second countermanding the massacre of the Jews—epistles contained in the Septuagint "Rest of the Book of Esther" (see our Apocrypha), instead of the mere dry summaries which had sufficed for "the Hebrew and the Chaldee." The exact authenticity of these fuller texts is a matter of no importance, but their substance, whether it was the work of a Persian civil servant or of a Greek-Jew rhetorician, is most curious. Whosoever it was, he knew King's Speeches and communications from "My lords"

and such like things, very well indeed; and the contrast of the mention in the first letter of "Aman who excelled in wisdom among us and was approved for his constant good will and steadfast fidelity" with "the wicked wretch Aman—a stranger received of us ... his falsehood and cunning"—the whole of both letters being carefully attuned to the respective key-notes—is worthy of any one of the best ironists from Aristophanes to the late Mr. Traill.

Between these two extremes of the Pentateuch and the Apocrypha there is, as has been remarked by divers commentators, not much about letters in the Bible. It is not auspicious that among the exceptions come David's letter commanding the betrayal of Uriah, and a little later Jezebel's similar prescription for the judicial murder of Naboth. There is, however, some hint of that curious attractiveness which some have seen in "the King's daughter all glorious within—" and without (as the Higher Criticism interprets the Forty-Fifth Psalm) in the bland way with which she herself stipulates that the false witnesses shall be "sons of Belial."

There is a book (once much utilised as a school prize) entitled *The History of Inventions*. I do not know whether there is a "Dictionary of Attributed Inventors." If there were it would contain some queer examples. One of the queerest is fathered (for we only have it at second hand) on Hellanicus, a Greek writer of respectable antiquity—the Peloponnesian war-time—and respectable repute for book-making in history, chronology, etc. It attributes the invention of letters—*i.e.* "epistolary correspondence"—to Atossa—not Mr. Matthew Arnold's Persian cat but—the

Persian Queen, daughter of Cyrus, wife of Cambyses and Darius, mother of Xerxes, and in more than her queenly status a sister to Jezebel. Atossa had not a wholly amiable reputation, but she was assuredly no fool: and if, to borrow a famous phrase, it had been necessary to invent letters, there is no known reason why she might not have done it. But it is perfectly certain that she did not, and no one who combines, as all true scholars should endeavour to combine, an unquenchable curiosity to know what can be known and is worth knowing with a placid resignation to ignorance of what cannot be known and would not be worth knowing—need in the least regret the fact that we do not know who did.

There are said to be Egyptian letters of immense antiquity and high development; but once more, I do not profess direct knowledge of them, and once more I hold that of what a man does not possess direct knowledge, of that he should not write. Besides, for practical purposes, all our literature begins with Greek: so to Greek let us turn. We have a fair bulk of letters in that language. Hercher's *Epistolographi Graeci* is a big volume, and would not be a small one, if you cut out the Latin translations. But it is unfortunate that nearly the whole, like the majority of later Greek literature, is the work of that special class called rhetoricians—a class for which, though our term "book-makers" may be a little too derogatory, "men of letters" is rarely (it is sometimes) applicable, as we use it when we mean to be complimentary. These letters are still close to "speech," thus meeting in a fashion our initial requirement, but they are close to the speech of the "orator"—of the

sophisticated speaker to the public—not to that of genuine conversation. In fact in some cases it would require only the very slightest change to make those exercitations of the rhetors which are not called "epistles" definite letters in form, while some of the best known and characteristic of their works are so entitled.

It was unfortunate for the Greeks, as it *THE RHETORICIANS* would seem, and for us more certainly, that letter-writing was so much affected by these "rhetoricians." This curious class of persons has perhaps been too much abused: and there is no doubt that very great writers came out of them—to mention one only in each division—Lucian among the extremely profane, and St. Augustine among the greatest and most intellectual of divines. But though their habitual defects are to be found abundantly enough in modern society, these defects are, with us, as a rule distributed among different classes; while anciently they were united in this one. We have our journalists, our book-makers (literary, not sporting), our platform and parliamentary palaverers, our popular entertainers; and we also have our pedagogues, scholastic and collegiate, our scientific and other lecturers, etc. But the Rhetorician of old was a Jack of all these trades; and he too frequently combined the triviality, unreality, sophistry and catch-pennyism of the one division with the priggishness, the lack of tact and humour, and above all the pseudo-scientific tendency to generalisation, classification and, to use a familiar word, "pottering" of the other. In particular he had a mania in his more serious moods for defining and sub-defining things and putting them into pigeon-holes under

the sub-definitions. Thus the so-called Demetrius Phalereus, who (or a false namesake of his) has left us a capital *general* remark (to be given presently) on letter-writing, elaborately divides its kinds, with prescriptions for writing each, into "friendly," "commendatory," "reproving," "objurgatory," "consolatory," "castigatory," "admonishing," "threatening," "vituperatory," "laudatory," "persuasive," "begging," "questioning," "answering," "allegorical," "explanatory," "accusing," "defending," "congratulatory," "ironic" and "thankful," while the neo-Platonist, Proclus, is responsible for, or at least has attributed to him, a list of nearly double the length, including most of those given above and adding many. Of these last, "love-letters" is the most important, and "mixed" the *canniest*, for it practically lets in everything.

This way, of course, except for purely business purposes—where established forms save time, trouble and possible litigation—no possible good lies; and indeed the impossibility thereof is clearly enough indicated in the above-glanced-at general remark of Demetrius (or whoever it was) himself. In fact the principle of this remark and its context in the work called "Of Interpretation," which it is more usual now to call, perhaps a little rashly, "Of Style," is so different from the catalogue of types that they can hardly come from the same author. "You *can* from this, as well as from all other kinds of writing, discern the character of the writer; indeed from none other can you discern it so well." Those who know a little of the history of Criticism will see how this anticipates the most famous and best definitions of Style itself, as being "the very man," and they may perhaps

also think worthy of notice another passage in the same context where the author finds fault with a rather "fine" piece of an epistle as "not the way a man would talk to his friend," and even goes on to use the most familiar Greek word for talking—*λάλεῖν*—in the same connection.

Of such "talking with a friend" we have ALCIPHRON. JULIAN unfortunately very few examples—hardly any at all—from older Greek. The greater collections—not much used in schools or colleges now but well enough known to those who really know Greek Literature—of Alciphron, Aristaenetus, Philostratus and (once most famous of all) Phalaris are—one must not perhaps say obvious, since men of no little worth were once taken in by them but—pretty easily discoverable counterfeits. They are sometimes, more particularly those of Philostratus, interesting and even beautiful;[\[2\]](#) they have been again sometimes at least supposed, particularly those of Alciphron, to give us, from the fact that they were largely based upon lost comedies, etc., information which we should otherwise lack; and in many instances (Aristaenetus is perhaps here the chief) they must have helped towards that late Greek creation of the Romance to which we owe so much. Nor have we here much if anything to do with such questions as the morality of personating dead authors, or that of laying traps for historians. It is enough that they do not give us, except very rarely, good letters: and that even these exceptions are not in any probability *real* letters, real written "confabulations of friends" at all. Almost the first we have deserving such a description are those of the Emperor Julian in the fourth century of that Christ for whom he had

such an unfortunate hatred; the most copious and thoroughly genuine perhaps those of Bishop Synesius a little later. Of these Julian's are a good deal affected by the influence of Rhetoric, of which he was a great cultivator: and the peculiar later Platonism of Synesius fills a larger proportion of his than some frivolous persons might wish. Julian is even thought to have "written for publication," as Latin epistolers of distinction had undoubtedly done before him. Nevertheless it is pleasant to read the Apostate when he is not talking Imperial or anti-Christian "shop," but writing to his tutor, the famous sophist and rhetorician Libanius, about his travels and his books and what not, in a fashion by no means very unlike that in which a young Oxford graduate might write to an undonnish don. It is still pleasanter to find Synesius telling his friends about the very thin wine and very thick honey of Cyrenaica; making love ("camouflaged," as they say to-day, under philosophy) to Hypatia, and condescending to mention dogs, horses and hunting now and then. But it is unfortunately undeniable that the bulk of this department of Greek literature is spurious to begin with, and uninteresting, even if spuriousness be permitted to pass. The Letters of Phalaris—once famous in themselves, again so as furnishing one of the chief battle-grounds in the "Ancient and Modern" quarrel, and never to be forgotten because of their connection with Swift's *Battle of the Books*—are as dull as ditchwater in matter, and utterly destitute of literary distinction in style.

It is a rule, general and almost *ROMAN LETTER-
WRITING* universal, that every branch of Latin literature is founded on, and more or less directly imitative of Greek. Even the Satire, which the Romans relied upon to prove that they could originate, is more apparently than really an invention. Also, though this may be more disputable, because much more a matter of personal taste, there were very few such branches in which the pupils equalled, much fewer in which they surpassed, their masters. But in both respects letter-writing may be said to be an exception. Unless we have been singularly unlucky in losing better Greek letters than we have, and extraordinarily fortunate in Fate's selection of the Latin letters that have come down to us, the Romans, though they were eager students of Rhetoric, and almost outwent their teachers in composing the empty things called Declamations, seem to have allowed this very practice to drain off mere verbosity, and to have written letters about matters which were worth pen, ink, paper and (as we should say) postage. We have in Greek absolutely no such letters from the flourishing time of the literature as those of Cicero, of Pliny[3] and even of Seneca—while as we approach the "Dark" Ages Julian and Synesius in the older language cannot touch Sidonius Apollinaris or perhaps Cassiodorus[4] in the younger. Of course all these are beyond reasonable doubt genuine, while the Greek letters attributed to Plato, Socrates and other great men are almost without doubt and without exception spurious. But there is very little likelihood that the Greeks of the great times wrote many "matter-ful" letters at all. They lived in small communities, where they

saw each other daily and almost hourly; they took little interest in the affairs of other communities unless they were at war with them, and when they did travel there were very few means of international communication.

Women write the best letters, and get the best letters written to them: but it is doubtful whether Greek women, save persons of a certain class and other exceptions in different ways like Sappho and Diotima,^[5] ever wrote at all. The Romans, after their early period, were not merely a larger and ever larger community full of the most various business, and constantly extending their presence and their sway; but, by their unique faculty of organisation, they put every part of their huge world in communication with every other part. Here also we lack women's letters; but we are, as above remarked, by no means badly off for those of men. There have even been some audacious heretics who have preferred Cicero's letters to his speeches and treatises; Seneca, the least attractive of those before mentioned, put well what the poet Wordsworth called in his own poems "extremely valuable thoughts"; one of the keenest of mathematicians and best of academic and general business men known to the present writer, the late Professor Chrystal of Edinburgh, made a special favourite of Pliny; and if people can find nothing worse to say against Sidonius than that he wrote in contemporary, and not in what was for his time archaic, Latin, his case will not look bad in the eyes of sensible men.

Sidonius, like Synesius, was a Christian, *SIDONIUS* and, though the observation may seem no more logical than Fluellen's about Macedon and Monmouth,

besides being in more doubtful taste, there would seem to be some connection between the spread of Christianity and that of letter-writing. At any rate they synchronise, despite or perhaps because of the deficiency of formal literature during the "Dark" Ages. It is not really futile to point out that a very large part of the New Testament consists of "Epistles," and that by no means the whole of these epistles is occupied by doctrinal or hortatory matter. Even that which is so, often if not always, partakes of the character of a "live" letter to an extent which makes the so-called letters of the Greek Rhetoricians mere school exercises. And St. Paul's allusions to his journeys, his salutations, his acknowledgment of presents, his reference to the cloak and the books with its anxious "but especially the parchments," and his excellent advice to Timothy about beverages, are all the purest and most genuine matter for mail-bags. So is St. Peter's very gentleman-like (as it has been termed) retort to his brother Apostle; and so are both the Second and the Third of St. John. Indeed it is not fanciful to suggest that the account of the voyage which finishes the "Acts," and other parts of that very delightful book, are narratives much more of the kind one finds in letters than of the formally historical sort.

However this may be, it is worth pointing out that the distrust of other pagan kinds of literature which the Fathers manifested so strongly, and which was inherited from them by the clergy of the "Dark," and to some extent the Middle Ages, clearly could not extend to the practice of the Apostles. If from the Dark Ages themselves we have not very many, it must be remembered that from them we have

little literature at all: while from the close of that period and the beginning of the next we have one of the most famous of all correspondences, the Letters of Abelard and Heloise. Of the intrinsic merit of these long-and far-famed compositions, as displaying character, there have been different opinions—one of the most damaging attacks on them may be found in Barbey d'Aurevilly's already mentioned book. But their influence has been lasting and enormous: and even if it were to turn out that they are forgeries, they are certainly early forgeries, and the person who forged them knew extremely well what he was about. There is no room here to survey, even in selection, the letter-crop of the Middle Ages; and from henceforward we must speak mainly, if not wholly (for some glances abroad may be permitted), of *English* letters.[6] But the ever-increasing bonds of union—even of such union in disunion as war—between different European nations, and the developments of more complex civilisation, of more general education and the like—all tended and wrought in the same direction.

II

[Table of Contents](#)

LETTERS IN ENGLISH—BEFORE 1700

[Table of Contents](#)

Exceptions have sometimes been taken to the earliest collection of genuine private letters, not official communications written in or inspired by Latin—which we

possess in English. "The Paston Letters" have been, from opposite sides, accused of want of literary form and of not giving us interesting enough details in substance. The objections in either case^[7] are untenable, and in both rather silly. In the first place "literary form" in the fifteenth century was exceedingly likely to be bad literary form, and we are much better off without it. Unless Sir Thomas Malory had happened to be chaplain at Oxnead, or Sir John Fortescue had occupied there something like the position of Mr. Tulkinghorn in *Bleak House*, we should not have got much "literature" from any known prose-writer of the period. Nor was it wanted. As for interestingness of matter, the people who expect newspaper-correspondent fine writing about the Wars of the Roses may be disappointed; but some of us who have had experience of that dialect from the Russells of the Crimea through the Forbeses of 1870 to the chroniclers of Armageddon the other day will probably not be very unhappy. The Paston Letters are simply genuine family correspondence—of a genuineness all the more certain because of their commonplaceness. It is impossible to conceive anything further from the initial type of the Greek rhetorical "letter" of which we have just been saying something. They are not, to any but an excessively "high-browed" and high-flying person, uninteresting: but the chief point about them is their solidity and their satisfaction, in their own straightforward unvarnished way, of the test we started with. When Margaret Paston and the rest write, it is because they have something to say to somebody who cannot be actually spoken to. And that something is said.

ASCHAM

The next body of letters—Ascham's—which seems to call for notice here is of the next century. It has not a few points of appeal, more than one of which concern us very nearly. Most of the writers of the Paston Letters were, though in some cases of good rank and fairly educated, persons entirely unacademic in character, and their society was that of the last trouble and convulsion through which the Early Middle Ages struggled into the Renaissance, so long delayed with us. Ascham was one of our chief representatives of the Renaissance itself—that is to say, of a type at once scholarly and man-of-the-worldly, a courtier and a diplomatist as well as a "don" and a man of letters; a sportsman as well as a schoolmaster. And while from all these points of view his letters have interest, there is one thing about them which is perhaps more interesting to us than any other: and that is the fact that while he begins to write in Latin—the all but mother-tongue of all scholars of the time, and the universal language of the educated, even when not definitely scholarly, throughout Europe—he exchanges this for English latterly, in the same spirit which prompted his famous expression of reasons for writing the *Toxophilus* in our own and his own tongue. There is indeed a double attraction, which has not been always or often noticed, in this change of practice. Everybody has seen how important it is, not merely as resisting the general delusion of contemporary scholars that the vernaculars were things unsafe, "like to play the bankrupt with books," but as protesting by anticipation against the continuance of this error which affected Bacon and Hobbes, and was not entirely without

hold even on such a magician in English as Browne. But perhaps everybody has not seen how by implication it acknowledges the peculiar character of the genuine letter—that, though it may be a work of art, it should not be one of artifice—that it is a matter of "business *or* bosoms," not of study or display.

Contemporary with these letters of Ascham, and going on to the end of the century and the closely coincident end of the reign of Elizabeth, we have a considerable bulk of letter-writing of more or less varied kinds. The greatest men of letters of the time—to the disgust of one, but not wholly so to that of another, class of "scholar"—give us little. Spenser is the most considerable exception: and his correspondence with Gabriel Harvey, though it is personal to a certain extent and on Gabriel's side sufficiently character-revealing, is really of the hybrid kind, partaking rather more of pamphlet or essay than of letter proper. Indeed a good part of that very remarkable pamphlet-literature of this time, which has perhaps scarcely yet received its due share of attention, takes the letter-form: but is mostly even farther from genuine letter-writing than the correspondence of "Immerito" and "Master G. H." We have of course more of Harvey's; we have laments from others, such as Lyly and Googe, about their disappointments as courtiers; we have a good deal of State correspondence. There are some, not very many, agreeable letters of strictly private character in whole or part, the pleasantest of all perhaps being some of Sir Philip Sydney's mother, Lady Mary Dudley. Others are from time to time being made public, such as those in Dr. Williamson's recent book on the Admiral-Earl of Cumberland.

As far as mere bulk goes, Elizabethan epistolography would take no small place, just as it would claim no mean one in point of interest. But in an even greater degree than its successor (*v. inf.*) this *corpus* would expose itself to the criticism that the time for perfect letter-writing was not quite yet, in this day of so much that was perfect, that the style was not quite the right style, the knack not yet quite achieved. And if the present writer—who swore fealty to Elizabethan literature a full third of a century ago after informal allegiance for nearly as long a time earlier—admits some truth in this, there probably is some. The letters included in it attract us more for the matter they contain than for the manner in which they contain it: and when this is the case no branch of literature has perfected itself in art.

The position of the seventeenth century THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY in England with regard to letter-writing has been the subject of rather different opinions. The bulk of its contributions is of course very considerable: and some of the groups are of prominent importance, the most singular, if not the most excellent, being Cromwell's, again to be mentioned. As in other cases and departments this century offers a curious "split" between its earlier part which declines—not in goodness but like human life in vitality—from, but still preserves the character of, the pure Elizabethan, and its later, which grows up again—not in goodness but simply in the same vitality—towards the Augustan. This relationship is sufficiently illustrated in the actual letters. The great political importance of the Civil War of course reflects itself in them. Indeed it may almost be said that for some time

letters are wholly concerned with such things, though of course there are partial exceptions, such as those of Dorothy Osborne—"mild Dorothea" as she afterwards became, though there is no mere mildness of the contemptuous meaning in her correspondence. In most remarkable contrast to these stand the somewhat earlier letters of James Howell—our first examples perhaps of letters "written for publication" in the fullest sense, very agreeably varied in subject and great favourites with a good many people, notably Thackeray—but only in part (if at all) genuine private correspondence.

Not a few men otherwise distinguished in literature wrote letters—sometimes in curious contrast with other productions of theirs. The most remarkable instance of this, but an instance easily comprehensible, is that of Samuel Pepys. Only a part of Pepys' immense correspondence has ever been printed, but there is no reason to expect from the remainder—whether actually extant, mislaid or lost—anything better than the examples which are now accessible, and which are for the most part the very opposite in every respect of the famous and delectable Diary. They are perfectly "proper," and for the most part extremely dull; while propriety is certainly not the most salient characteristic of the Diary; and the diarist manages, in the most eccentric manner, to communicate interest not merely to things more specially regarded as "interesting," but to his accounts and his ailments, his business and his political history. His contemporary and rather patronising friend Evelyn keeps his performances less far apart from each other: but is certainly, though a representative, not a

great letter-writer, and the few that we have of Pepys' patronised fellow-Cantabrigian Dryden are of no great mark, though not superfluous. In the earlier part of the century Latin had not wholly shaken off its control as the epistolary language; and it was not till quite the other end that English itself became supple and docile enough for the purposes of the letter-writer proper. It was excellent for such things as formal Dedications, semi-historical narratives, and the like. And it could, as in Sir Thomas Browne's, supply another contrast, much more pleasing than that referred to above, of domestic familiarity with a most poetical transcendence of style in published work. Yet, as was the case with the novel, the letter, to gain perfection, still wanted something easier than the grand style of the seventeenth century and more polished than its familiar style.

III

[Table of Contents](#)

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

[Table of Contents](#)

But whatever may be the position of *THE EIGHTEENTH*
the seventeenth in respect of letter-writing *CENTURY*
it is impossible for anything but sheer
ignorance, hopeless want of critical discernment, or idle
paradox to mistake, in the direction of belittlement, that of
the eighteenth. By common consent of all opinion worth
attention that century was, in the two European literatures
which were equally free from crudity and decadence—

French and English—the very palmiest day of the art. Everybody wrote letters: and a surprising number of people wrote letters well. Our own three most famous epistolers of the male sex, Horace Walpole, Gray and Cowper—belong wholly to it; and "Lady Mary"—our most famous she-ditto—belongs to it by all but her childhood; as does Chesterfield, whom some not bad judges would put not far if at all below the three men just mentioned. The rise of the novel in this century is hardly more remarkable than the way in which that novel almost wedded itself—certainly joined itself in the most frequent friendship—to the letter-form. But perhaps the excellence of the choicer examples in this time is not really more important than the abundance, variety and popularity of its letters, whether good, indifferent, or bad. To use one of the informal superlatives sanctioned by familiar custom it was the "letterwritingest" of ages from almost every point of view. In its least as in its most dignified moods it even overflowed into verse if not into poetry as a medium. Serious epistles had—of course on classical models—been written in verse for a long time. But now in England more modern patterns, and especially Anstey's *New Bath Guide*, started the fashion of actual correspondence in doggerel verse with no thought of print—a practice in which persons as different as Madame d'Arblay's good-natured but rather foolish father, and a poet and historian like Southey indulged; and which did not become obsolete till Victorian times, if then. At the present moment one does not remember an exact equivalent in England to the story of two good writers in French if not French writers[8] living in the same house, meeting constantly during the day, yet