

The Enigma of Leslie Stephen's Reputation

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“He pulled down the whole edifice, and never knew what he was doing.”¹

At the time of his death, Leslie Stephen (1832-1904) was the most eminent English man of letters. He had written and edited forty books and thousands of essays and reviews on history, literature, ethics, mountaineering, politics, university life, social movements, agnosticism, and utilitarianism. He had been the most influential contemporary editor, and the undisputed master of biography. At the *Dictionary of National Biography* he created the model on which biography was written for decades. Respected by his peers, honored by universities, and created Knight Commander of the Bath, it was an impressive array of achievement and public recognition.

Yet he died an isolated, unhappy man. According to his daughter, Virginia Woolf, in his last years he was “deaf, eccentric, absorbed in his work, and entirely shut off from the world” (“Hyde Park Gate” 146). He doubted the value of his work, convinced he would be derided if not forgotten by future generations, remembered only “in small type and footnotes” (Alan Bell 93). In many ways, he was right. In 1904 his work was praised, glowing obituaries were written, and a sympathetic biography followed, but most of his books were already out of print. The *DNB* was completed, with no plans to continue it into the twentieth century. Even the term man of letters was old fashioned. Carlyle’s 1840 “The Hero as Man of Letters,” and Macmillan’s *English Men of Letters*

series, begun with Stephen's 1878 volume on Samuel Johnson, now belonged to another age. In place of these men – and women – academic critics emerged.

Stephen's fame had been based not on books and journalism, but on his editorship of the *DNB*. It had made him what we would now call a celebrity. In most first sentences about him today, the *DNB* and Virginia Woolf will figure. Stephen's failures and shortcomings tend to be ignored: this essay examines them. It investigates Stephen and the *DNB*, attempting to unravel just what he achieved there. The long view is that it was an enormous success: day to day details tell a different story.

Success had not come easily. Stephen's work took its toll on his physical and mental health, those around him, and his relations with them. Failures there undoubtedly were. He was disappointed with what he had done and not done professionally. He was scarred by personal tragedy, loss, loneliness, bad temper, and low spirits. Yet today interest in his life and work continues. His reputation has survived late-twentieth century analysis from Woolf critics, and frank observations in her published diaries. Speculating on what would have been his 96th birthday, she recorded "mercifully" he did not live that long. "His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books – inconceivable" (*Diary* 208). Yet even she revised her opinion. On the centenary of his birth she described him as "a man of great learning," his lessons, "To read what one liked because one liked it, never to pretend to admire what one did not [...] to write in the fewest words possible, as clearly as possible, exactly what one meant" (Woolf, "Leslie Stephen" 15-16). It is an endorsement of his teaching, a formula for success.

Stephen worked at a particularly favorable time, when gentlemen of education, aided by circumstances and connections, had easy entry into writing for the magazines and newspapers with which mid-Victorian England teemed. He is a fine example of the amateur professionalism that allowed a man – and it was largely a male phenomenon – to be simultaneously journalist, philosopher, mathematician, political

commentator, literary critic, lecturer, and mountaineer. He established himself as a writer between 1865 and 1882. The *DNB*, which he edited from 1882 to 1891, confirmed his eminence and secured his place in literary history. Yet the Dictionary was born out of the eclecticism and amateurism that were the cornerstones of his writing life. What made the Dictionary, and Stephen, stand out was a unique moment where publication coincided with, and contributed to, a burgeoning sense of nationalism. The *DNB* is a monument to Victorian nationalism and national identity. Its status as an institution outweighs its reliability as a reference work. Like all icons, it represents something greater than its physical being. It is not merely that it is greater than the sum of its nearly 29,000 biographies, but that they were almost immediately irrelevant to the *DNB* phenomenon, and to its reputation. Stephen was fortunate to be part of that phenomenon.

Stephen's was in many ways a mediocre life: youngest son; a scintillating brother, James Fitzjames Stephen, High Court judge; distinguished ancestry, difficult to live up to, including slavery abolitionists, members of the Clapham sect; a less than brilliant Cambridge career, his passion the Trinity Hall boat rather than the mathematical tripos. He drifted into the Anglican clergy, until conscience and agnosticism got the better of him. The air buzzed with scientific ideas. He read Darwin and was convinced. In his mid-30s he gave up the comforts of Cambridge and went to London to make a living as a writer.

He had connections. Through Fitzjames, he wrote for *The Saturday Review* and *The Pall Mall Gazette*. He met publisher George Smith and through him Thackeray's daughters. He married the younger, Minny, in 1867. He contributed mountaineering articles to Smith's *Cornhill Magazine* and wrote on eighteenth-century literature, his lifelong love, signing himself "A Cynic." He wrote on philosophy, social issues, and travel. At £12-35 per piece, the work barely covered household expenses, even supplemented with the £1 a week retainer from *The Saturday Review*. But writing four articles a month, together with Minny's £10,000 legacy (Shillingburg) secured a comfortable lifestyle.

By the 1870s Stephen had edited *Fraser's Magazine* and *The Alpine Journal*. In 1871 Smith made him the editor of the *Cornhill* at a salary of £500, a quarter of what first editor Thackeray received, but Thackeray was a literary giant, Stephen all but unknown. It gave him the freedom to reduce his journalism and write books: *Essays on Freethinking and Freespeaking* (1873), *Hours in a Library* (1874, 1876, 1879), *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876), *Belief and Evidence* (1877), *Samuel Johnson* (1878), *Alexander Pope* (1880), and *The Science of Ethics* (1882). They were productive years professionally, but turbulent personally. Laura, the only child of his marriage, born prematurely, "required great care," and spent her later years in an institution for the mentally ill (Maitland 262). On 28 November 1875, Stephen's birthday, Minny died. In 1878 he married Julia Duckworth, a widow with three children. Over the next five years four more were born: Vanessa, Thoby, Virginia, and Adrian. Within months of Virginia's birth he resigned from the *Cornhill* and became editor of the *DNB*. It marked the beginning of the end of his health, comfort and stability.

Stephen took on the Dictionary under a professional shadow. By the late 1870s his pessimism was habitual. *Cornhill* contributors often found his editorial comments "awful and gloomy" (Maitland 262). In 1882 Smith reported a fall in sales, from 120,000 in 1860 under Thackeray, to 20,000 as Stephen took over, to 12,000 by 1880. Stephen blamed himself. Smith knew he must make changes, and Stephen recognized "The public wanted something 'lighter'" (Alan Bell 85). He had perhaps been in the job too long, and he was too conservative, allowing personal taste to dictate the tone. He had, for example, rejected Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* as too "dangerous" for a family magazine (Maitland 276). Hardy was popular, and it was undoubtedly an error of judgement on Stephen's part. He criticized the marriage made by a Hardy heroine. Hardy argued that women often did marry the wrong man. Stephen replied, "Not in magazines" (Maitland 277).

With change in the air, Stephen told Smith:

I cannot flatter myself that another man might not have succeeded in making the magazine at once light and good. I see the fault clearly, though I do not see how I, being what I am, could have avoided it: – which proves again that I am very ill qualified to be the editor [...] I am rather depressed about my work. I have done my best but it does not seem as if I made much impression upon anyone – certainly not upon the general reader. The best remedy for the depression is, as I very well know, to go on working. But it gives me some qualms in regard to the [DNB] [...] It is a new venture, and I cannot tell how I shall succeed. At times [...] I feel rather appalled. If you could get a more vigorous editor, and employ me as a chief contributor, I sometimes fancy that it might be better. (Maitland 354)

Smith was Stephen's good friend, so removing him from the *Cornhill* was embarrassing. Smith knew the dangers of having too little work, too much time on his hands, and the depression to which it could lead. By the mid-1860s his ventures outside publishing were going so well that he left their management to his partner, his brother-in-law Henry Samuel King. This left Smith not just with more time to devote to publishing, but also with more unstructured time than, as what we now call a workaholic, he was used to. Bill Bell writes:

Smith found himself almost immediately in a state of nervous collapse. "I was like a man who stepped out of his own skin [...] My condition was morbid to an almost lunatic degree." It is likely that the near sudden relaxation of his responsibilities precipitated severe depression [...] So severe was his illness that those close to him feared for his life. It was only when [...] he launched himself into a new business venture that the clouds began to clear. (Bill Bell, "Smith")

Smith was, therefore, sensitive to the dangers of leaving Stephen without new work suited to his style and character. Smith's solution was the new Dictionary project, where diligence and plodding, describing the past rather than confronting the modern world, would be positive qualities, even an advantage. It is possible that Smith devised it in order to find Stephen a new occupation. Whatever the sequence of events, Smith's idea for the Dictionary neatly coincided with Stephen's availability to take it on.

Smith knew the Dictionary would lose money. Given what he saw would be its prestige, he could tolerate that, but he could not also afford to subsidize an unpopular magazine. The answer was to appoint a relatively lightweight editor at the *Cornhill*, James Payn, popular novelist and old Eton and Cambridge friend of Stephen's, proposed by him. It worked, and the magazine revived and flourished. Stephen was perhaps not quite as out of touch as his *Cornhill* editorship suggests. He had resisted change, but he readily saw a solution in Payn. Further, he had always been keen to encourage new talent. Not least among his new contributors was Robert Louis Stevenson, even if Stephen underestimated the depth of his fiction.

Smith's commercial successes were significant for the Dictionary. While passionate about publishing, his strength was as an astute businessman. He had run Smith, Elder & Co. from the age of 21 in 1845 when his father retired. Beyond publishing, they dealt in commodities, shipping, and banking, with prosperous agencies in India, West Africa, and Java. Early in his career, Smith employed William Smith Williams, remembered for his association with the Brontës, as literary adviser. Branching into newspapers, Smith set up two successful colonial ventures, the *Overland Mail* and the *Homeward Mail*, in the 1850s as increasing numbers of military and civil service personnel and their families went to the colonies. The *Cornhill*'s success confirmed Smith's business acumen, its contributors including the Brownings, Tennyson, Ruskin, Eliot, Trollope, Arnold, and Thackeray. Under Stephen it published popular

novelists, poets, and essayists including Collins, James, Arnold, Meredith, Swinburne, Blackmore, and Hardy.

Meanwhile Smith ran the daily *Pall Mall Gazette* as a vehicle for higher criticism. Among his business successes, and silent sponsorship of the *DNB*, was his 1880 acquisition of the Apollinaris Table Water Company. Labelled the Queen of Table Waters, it made an average annual profit of £30,000. Smith sold the company in 1898 for £600,000. Overall it made him £1.5 million (Bill Bell, "Smith"). Profit from its first two years was enough to bear the entire loss the Dictionary made over forty years. Smith later wrote, "I could afford to take risks for the gratification of my own literary tastes [...] which an ordinary publisher, who lives solely on his publishing profits, would hardly have ventured" (qtd. in Schmidt 4).

With Williams as his advisor, the *Cornhill* under Thackeray, and Stephen at the *DNB*, Smith believed that his publishing projects succeeded when he chose the best literary men, while managing the finances himself. He wanted their contacts, reputations, and names to attract the best writers. Though Stephen was not in the same league as Williams and Thackeray, Smith trusted him. Thus began a venture that had been attempted and abandoned before, one whose completion must have been in doubt and certain to lose money, under an editor partly responsible for a magazine's decline, and unsure of his own suitability for the project. Stephen was about to make history, though the next seven years were shadowed by frustration, stress, declining health, collapse, and retirement. There were as many failures as triumphs, yet those years made his reputation.

Smith first envisaged an international dictionary. Stephen persuaded him to limit it to British, Irish and colonial subjects: "we shall have quite enough on our hands [...] a big job enough" (Maitland 351). It was scale that lay at the roots of previous failures. The *Biographia Britannica* had been published in seven folios between 1747 and 1766, with a second, five-folio edition abandoned in 1793 after the letter F. In 1814 the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge had begun a

universal biography. Thirty-two volumes were planned, but it ceased after the letter A's seven volumes. Rose's universal *New General Biographical Dictionary* was published in twelve volumes (1839-1847). The existing dictionaries were incomplete, out of date, unwieldy and illegible. A new dictionary was needed. French, German, Dutch, Belgian, Austrian, and Swedish publishers had managed it, so why not a British publisher?

The problem, aside from finance, was the scale of nineteenth-century British expansionism, as the publisher John Murray realized in the 1850s. Murray, experienced with dictionaries, calculated costs, concluding it could not succeed financially. He abandoned the idea, but not his lists of subjects, which he now gave Smith. Smith was not discouraged by previous failures: quite the reverse. He later said he was tempted by the challenge as a matter of pride. He liked the idea of private enterprise, an individual taking on a project rooted in nationalism yet not state sponsored. "I resolved that this should be my gift to English letters. I owed much to English literature [...] and this seemed a fitting contribution on my part to English history" (qtd. in Huxley 181-82).

Stephen began in November 1882 at a salary of £800, setting up the offices in 14 Waterloo Place, London, adjacent to Smith, Elder. While fascinated by the project, it "sometimes is a nightmare" (letter to Morison 23 November 1882). He knew staff would be vital, not least his sub-editor. After consulting friends and university acquaintances, he made what turned out to be an inspired choice. On the recommendation of Frederick James Furnivall, he approached the young Balliol graduate and promising Shakespeare and Early English Text scholar Sidney Lee. It was the start of a twenty-year association, if not friendship. Without Lee the Dictionary might never have been completed. He had the strength of character, determination, and robust constitution that Stephen lacked. He spotted flaws Stephen overlooked. He took over the editorship when Stephen literally collapsed. He kept the Dictionary on schedule, and under him there were not the catastrophes that plagued

Stephen. Lee was praised for his work, but he never received the acclaim that came Stephen's way, and his life and work are all but ignored today.

Stephen was not a good manager, did not delegate, and trusted no eye but his own. Despite Furnivall's advice, he waited four months before approaching Lee: "The sub-editorship question is still undecided and will not be decided for some time [...] upon looking into the matter I found myself rather at a loss as to what sort of assistance I should want." He made "a temporary arrangement" with a Cambridge man, Thompson Cooper, later list-compiler, thinking he might later make another appointment, "but I cannot yet say whether the same one would be a mere assistant to Mr Cooper: or a sub-editor instead of him: nor whether in the latter case, I should be in want chiefly of a man of business superiority or a man of antiquarian or other knowledge" (letter to Gosse 13 December 1882). He was dithering. Was he considering Lee as sub-editor? Or assistant name-compiler? And why, with Smith at the end of a speaking-tube next door and always in charge of business affairs, was Stephen considering business superiority? Even Maitland, close friend and Stephen's choice as his biographer, was in no doubt that even before Lee was named joint editor in 1890, he was a better editor than Stephen (Maitland 365). Lee took the job at £300 a year.

Stephen announced "A New 'Biographia Britannica'" in *The Athenaeum* in December 1882. It was a manifesto and statement of editorial principles. The Dictionary would record deceased subjects; entries would be based on precise facts with full bibliographical citations, there would be no philosophical or critical disquisition, or picturesque description; character analysis would be irrelevant, critical theories unwelcome. Stephen's tastes are clear: "characteristic anecdotes in their most authentic form [...] [statements] on political controversies or of the position in the history of literature of a remarkable poem [...] [Contributors] must be historical, not controversial or discursive, [recording] the greatest possible amount of information in thoroughly business-like form." On whether "literary style" would be admitted,

If style means superfluous ornament, I say emphatically, No. But style, and even high literary ability, is required for lucid and condensed narrative, and of such style I shall be anxious to get as much as I can. [...] [It would] be easy to ensure failure by attempting too much. We must exclude much if the dictionary is not to break down under its own weight [...] The editor [must] be autocratic. He will do his best to be a considerate autocrat. (Stephen, "New Biographia" 850)

He was soon in despair: the Dictionary would "last me the rest of my life – if, that is, it succeeds in living at all [...] there are 900 A's to begin with, and God knows how many more [...] If we get it done in 50 [volumes] I shall be surprised" (Maitland 375-76). It reached 63 volumes, published quarterly from January 1885 to June 1900. Six-monthly lists of 1,000 possible subjects were printed in the *Athenaeum*, inviting contributions, corrections, and information on sources. Stephen selected contributors from specialists, friends, academics, and replies to advertisements. At times he felt on top of the task and hoped that once underway momentum would develop, yet he was constantly frustrated, as when "One specialist offers me lives of 1400 hymnwriters alone" (letter to Gosse 13 January 1883).

The problems were just beginning. Although a principle that contributors should research all known sources, papers and records, he found such work intolerable: "I was not, and I have not become, an antiquary. I fear that I rather sympathized with Carlyle's lamentations at having to take service under Dr. Dryasdust, and spend years in exploring the rubbish-heaps accumulated by former specimens of the genus" (Stephen, "Some Early Impressions" 567). He had never before been confined to an office and subject to routine. At Cambridge, as a freelance writer, and as *Cornhill* editor, he set his own timetable, climbed mountains when he chose, escaped for the summer, rarely left his library in the afternoon, and never, as now, worked in the evening.

His main problem was contributors. Many were amateurs, ignorant of research and concise writing, needing training "in the Dictionary, by

the Dictionary, for the Dictionary" (Maitland 336-37). He struggled against "the insane verbosity of the average contributor. I never knew before how many words might be used to express a given fact. I read piles of MS, cutting right and left, and reducing some 'copy' to a third of its original mass" (Maitland 383). He was not delegating this routine work. Every piece of paper crossed his desk. He wanted to do everything. He had a team of half a dozen men, yet he did not quite trust them. The triviality of some of his disputes is clear. An argument with Oxford scholar Edward Augustus Freeman arose over whether Athelstan and Alfred should begin with A or AE. Another academic, Alexander Balloch Grosart, was angry because Stephen refused him some of the biographies he requested. Worse followed, because while Stephen was engaged in back and forth argument, furious that "though his information is large, his style is damnable" (letter to Gosse 29 September 1883), what was really of concern, and Stephen had missed, was that Grosart had used copyright material from his *Encyclopaedia Britannica* articles, and elsewhere passed off the scholarship of others as his own. Stephen took it personally. Grosart had "been cheating me. Having found out his villainy I next discovered that he had been manufacturing sham references" (Letter to Norton, 13 December 1884).

In fact it was Lee who made the discovery. Stephen had read and approved the articles, and sent them to the printer. He told Smith he had been put off guard by Grosart's seemingly legitimate citations. The matter was urgent, with publication only weeks away. Stephen turned to Lee to check Grosart's articles. There were 25 for Volume I, no small task for Lee, yet publication was delayed only three months.

Despite Stephen's determination to drop Grosart, his was the sort of authoritative name the Dictionary needed, and his biographies were published in the following four volumes. Stephen told Smith, "the failure to discover such things proves me to be an utterly incompetent editor [...] I can't say how much it vexes me to get you into a fix when you have trusted me so generously" (letter to Smith 24 August 1889).

It was not the first time he had missed errors. After Stephen had read the first proofs of Volume I, Smith found an alarming number of misprints and inaccuracies. Stephen admitted “my slowness in perceiving errors of the press – a weakness of which I am fully aware.” Yet he blamed a contributor’s “loose style [and] [...] difficult handwriting” (Letter to Smith, 20 August 1884). He established a network of checks, without resorting to the expense and delay of sending proofs to contributors. It included Lee and the printer Spottiswoode’s reader, but in the end he read every manuscript and proof. He was correcting spelling, word use, punctuation and grammar, checking factual accuracy, historical detail, omissions, and was endlessly annoyed by having to prune almost every biography. Meanwhile he wrote biographies, twelve in Volume I, including the Addison article, sent to contributors as a model. He was recruiting contributors, assigning articles, dealing with correspondence, writing advertisements, and running the office. He oversaw volume layouts, title page details, and volume breaks. The following illustrates the minuteness of his involvement: “if Anne is the last name [...] there should be, if possible, some indication of *which* Anne. We have five Annes [...] If this is, as I hope, the last Anne, it may well, I think, be all right, as in that case the next volume would begin with a different name, eg Annesley; but if we divide the Annes between two volumes it could be advocated to have one Abbadie-Anne; and on the next Anne – etc.” (letter to Smith 21 September 1884). He was supervising detail, but also consulting Smith about it. He was not delegating, yet he was also not making executive decisions.

It is noteworthy that after the Dictionary was completed, Lee compiled a volume of *Errata* in 1904. Early volumes each show six or seven pages of corrections, yet under Lee’s editorship that was reduced to two or three pages. To illustrate this, in the *Errata* 136 pages of corrections cover the 21 volumes Stephen edited, and only 134 pages the 36 volumes Lee edited, excluding their joint-editorship, Volumes XXII–XXVI.

When Volume I was advertised, Stephen wrote, "it gives me a shiver. I feel as I do when I have just stripped [for swimming] and am wondering whether it will be very cold" (letter to Smith 21 September 1884). He described Dictionary work as "drudgery of this wearisome kind" (Maitland 383). Publication brought some relief. Immediate critical reaction was favorable, and over the next two years opinion recognized the Dictionary's importance. The volumes were smart, well-produced, with clear type and pleasing, readable layout. While early criticism noted wordiness and unevenness of treatment, in time style improved. There was sympathy for Stephen, with 83 contributors in Volume I alone. A reviewer found "a vigorous and more effective editorial control" was noticeable. He had "curtailed the exuberance of several contributors." Praise for Stephen included his articles – readable, entertaining, never dull – as well as his editorial work. "A more competent editor [...] it would be impossible to find: his extensive knowledge of English Literature, his thorough mastery of the history of English thought, his eminent critical powers, and above all his absolute fairness and impartiality when dealing with controversial topics, make him specially qualified to superintend [the] work [...] while his literary gifts enable him to set before his contributors models of what the articles of a biographical dictionary ought to be" (Christie 356).

Gratifying as this was, Stephen was under pressure physically and mentally. He was unwell in March 1885. He wrote of enemies made through the "infernal dictionary," "damned dictionary," "accursed drudgery," and "my treadmill"; he had "been dragged into a damnable thing by fate like a careless workman passing moving machinery" (letter to Gosse 24 October 1877). He was exhausted. By December 1886 he was ill with rheumatic fever and severe strain, and took two months off. In 1887 another blow fell. Smith reported the loss on Volumes I-IX as £9,284 6s 6d, over £1000 per volume, even greater than anticipated. He increased the volume price from 12s 6d to 15s 0d, and reduced booksellers' profits. Production costs had exceeded expectations. Sales were lower than hoped, surprising given the overwhelmingly favorable

reviews and opinion that it was a work that a library of any pretension would want. A notice explaining the price increase appeared in Volume XII. Smith assured subscribers that the Dictionary was on schedule for completion in 50 volumes. How he justified this is difficult to understand since the letter C was not yet completed. The new price would only slightly reduce the loss. He asked Stephen to cut volume size and shorten articles. It led to Stephen's further exhaustion in 1888, and another break. The staff was increased to include "a young lady" typist. Stephen was skeptical: "I do not think we shall be able to give her much to do." His greatest concern was, "Is she to be in the next room?" (letter to Smith 19 December 1888). She was.

Stephen's stress was constant, with trips to Switzerland and Cornwall offering only temporary respite. Smith was so anxious about him that he offered a publication pause, but Stephen declined, afraid it might affect their reputation for reliability. He collapsed again in September 1889, and then in the Athenaeum Club library in October. His doctor ordered complete rest: "real work would upset me again" (letter to Sidgwick 39 November 1889). His name last appeared as sole editor in Volume XXI in January 1890. Lee was now effectively the editor. Stephen admitted putting the Dictionary "into commission" (Maitland 401), to his grave disappointment. Released from his treadmill, he hoped to find work more to his taste, and eventually to return as "general superintendent or ultimate referee" (letter to Smith 23 May 1890), three days a week, checking proofs. He wrote another 95 biographies in the remaining 37 volumes, and two in the 1901 Supplements, but he never again worked as editor. In 1891 he gave it up, "a great weight off my shoulders" (Maitland 403). In 1895 he was able to look objectively at the *DNB*, recognizing its success. He admitted he had found it "very laborious [...] worse, a very worrying piece of work." He wrote of problems with contributors, antiquaries, and what he labelled impostors, lamenting "the wearisome petty detail." He regretted having had to learn "a new art," and "to puzzle out the whole thing for myself." None of this he had foreseen, nor the personal toll it would take (Alan Bell 86). In a

warning to Lee, he admitted he had been overpowered by the editorship. "The danger of dictionarying is like the danger of walking – one finds out suddenly that one has been overdoing it, though no warning appeared at the moment" (letter to Lee 1 August 1893). This was not strictly true, as he had been under pressure from the start, and his body and mind had given him plenty of warnings.

Honors and literary successes followed. In 1890 he was made Honorary D. Litt. at Harvard, in 1891 Honorary Fellow of Trinity Hall, and in 1892 Honorary D. Litt. at Cambridge. From 1892 he was President of the London Library. He wrote *An Agnostic's Apology and Other Essays* (1893). In *The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen* (1895) he bluntly told painful truths, faithful to his Dictionary standards: he knew no other way. Then came *Social Rights and Duties* (1896), and four volumes of *Studies of a Biographer* (1898, 1902). His three-volume *The English Utilitarians* (1900) confirmed his status in the history of ideas. *George Eliot* (1902) was proof that he was a master of literary biography and criticism.

But they were not happy years. Julia died in 1895, leaving him lonely and depressed. His step-daughter, Stella, tried to take her place, but she died suddenly in 1897. It then fell to Vanessa to manage the household, less than successfully. Virginia Woolf describes "the horror of Wednesday":

The weekly books were shown him. If they were over eleven pounds that lunch was a torture. The books were presented. Silence. He was putting on his glasses. He had read the figures. Down came his fist on the account book. There was a roar. His vein filled. His face flushed. Then he shouted, "I am ruined." Then he beat his breast. He went through an extraordinary dramatization of self-pity, anger and despair. He was ruined – dying [...] Tortured by the wanton extravagance of Vanessa [...] "And you stand there like a block of stone. Don't you pity me?" and so on [...] He flung at her all the phrases

– about shooting Niagara and so on – that came handy
[...] Another attitude was adopted. With a deep groan he
picked up his pen and with ostentatiously trembling
fingers wrote out the cheque. (Woolf, “A Sketch” 126)

It is difficult not to conclude that he was overreacting, exaggerating, relishing the drama of the situation. It is tempting to speculate on a similar vein in his always entertaining letters to friends about the Dictionary. True, it affected his health, and he disliked the work, but disasters made a good narrative and aroused sympathy. Might that have been his aim?

In 1903 he was Ford Lecturer at Oxford. His topic was English Literature and Society in the Eighteenth Century, later a book. Although he was dying of cancer and unable to deliver them himself, the impact of the lectures and their reception were the final triumph of a lifetime’s work. Further, they marked the moment when the amateur professional, the one-time jobbing journalist, was acclaimed in the highest academic circles. Literary criticism was coming of age, English Literature a university subject, literary history established in the academy. Stephen’s work connects the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He was not merely literally the father of the Bloomsbury group, but also its founder as critic, editor, essayist, analyst, and intellectual historian. Like them, he challenged existing norms and ways of writing.

Stephen was at his best writing in his library. It is no coincidence that his best-loved work is the *Hours in a Library* series. John Gross notes the paradox that Stephen was

often more impressive than his ideas. There is a constant hint about him of unused capacity, reserve power [...] the Gentleman in the Library, content not to ask too many embarrassing questions. This sets a definite limit on his value to posterity. Unlike Arnold, he never seems an indispensable critic – except, that is, in the sense of there being no finer example of his type available. (91-93)

The new role of the academy saw the demise of the man of letters: even the term was quaintly Victorian. By the time the Dictionary was transferred to Oxford University Press in 1917, the role was clear. They published new volumes, and in time would produce a new dictionary, the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, begun in 2004.

Stephen's reputation has been further enhanced by the quality of recent scholarship on his life and work, not least Noel Annan's biographies (*Leslie Stephen: The Godless Victorian* and *Leslie Stephen: His Thought*) and John Bicknell's edited letters (Bicknell, *Selected Letters*). Publication of the Oxford dictionary has drawn new attention to the original *DNB*, and recognition not only of the work of its editors and contributors but of its value as a representative of Victorian enterprise and culture. It is seen as a work that says as much about the moment of its production as about its subjects. New technology keeps the *DNB* accessible, with a CD-ROM, an online edition, sophisticated search tools, and ways of using the material that its founders could never have imagined. Meanwhile some of Stephen's other works are now available as e-books. The man of letters is on-line, out of copyright, free on one's iPad. Contrary to his expectations, Stephen survives beyond the learned footnotes, yet it is difficult not to conclude that in the shadow of Stephen lie the forgotten heroes of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Lee, Smith, and Apollinaris.

Leslie Stephen, the acclaimed hero, was undoubtedly unsuited by temperament to the close cooperation, the teamwork, demanded by a project like the *DNB*. He liked hours alone in the library and, as he aged, the more isolated and bitter he became. Virginia Woolf, who perhaps understood him as well as anyone, observed his "keen intellect, always voyaging [...] alone in ice-bound seas" ("Reminiscences" 37). She describes her mother encouraging him "towards the most remote and unprofitable tasks [...] which would yield no wealth and very little fame" ("Reminiscences" 38). As the Dictionary was finished there were royal dinners and celebrations, but Stephen resisted the enjoyment felt by the rest of the team. A cynic to the end, he wrote, "I envy them the power of

being pleased by such things, which to me are a weariness of the flesh” (Alan Bell 108). Acclaim and recognition meant little to him.

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Note

¹ Virginia Woolf, recording Francis Birrell’s assessment of Stephen (*Diaries* 3:61).

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