

# *H.D. Traill: Championing the Man of Letters*

**John L. Kijinski**

In an article he wrote for H.D. Traill's weekly journal, *Literature*, Leslie Stephen argued, only half-jokingly, that all writers, with the exception of those rare ones of demonstrable genius, should insist that their work be "printed upon perishable material" so that, after an appropriate period of availability, none of it would be left to clutter up the archives of posterity (178). Traill would have shared this sentiment, as he focused much of his work as a literary critic on the question of determining on what grounds we should grant canonical status to writers and their works. I believe he would have been surprised to find that, 115 years after his death, his writing is still being read, albeit by a small group of historians interested in nineteenth-century literature.

Yet Traill, if decidedly a minor figure, deserves to be remembered precisely because his views on literature, culture, and the responsibilities of the literary critic epitomize the most respectable strain of professional literary life in late-Victorian London. Furthermore, he was much less quirky and complex than some of his more accomplished colleagues – such as Andrew Lang, Edmund Gosse, and George Saintsbury – all of whom admired Traill. As a journalist, leader writer, literary critic, imaginative writer, and editor, he presents an argument for the utilitarian function of the professional man of letters who serves to guide middle-class readers in a time of cultural uncertainty.

Born in 1842, Henry Duff Traill took his BA (1865) at St. John's College, Oxford, the university that would also grant him a Bachelor of Civil Law degree (1868) and finally a Doctor of Civil Law degree (1873). He was

called to the bar, but soon turned his attention to writing professionally, publishing articles, most of them unsigned, in the more important periodicals of the day, including the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the *St. James's Gazette*, and the *Saturday Review* (Low). As a part of the professional literary scene in London, he joined a group who were, as a New York journal of the time aptly described it, "able to turn out in six months a neat and praiseworthy history of English or French literature, a selection of lyrics, a neat edition of a classic, a biography, or an edited series, with perhaps an original poem or novel thrown in" (qtd Jones 118).

But at this very time, the idea of "professional man of letters" was being challenged on two fronts. Ian Small, in his *Conditions for Criticism*, argues that the notion of an independent, non-specialist professional who could write with authority on any number of subjects was being called into question by what he terms an epistemological crisis of the time. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, fields such as literature, history, and political science were being formalized as university disciplines, the beginning of the current system in which only specialists speak with authority, and mostly to other specialists. A second challenge to the man of letters came from the movement that would eventually be called Modernism but, at the time, was often called realism or decadence; in any case, this movement challenged the idea of a literary culture controlled by people with a view toward preserving middle-class respectability as one of its core features. Traill's career represents a rejection of both of these movements, and he consistently argues for the cultural value of the respectable man of letters.

Traill's work associated with the journal *Literature*, the late-Victorian ancestor of the *TLS*, which he edited from its founding in October 1897 until his death in February 1900, is the best place to begin a consideration of his important role in helping to define and defend the utilitarian function of the man of letters (for an extended consideration of *Literature*, see Kijinski, "Respectable Reading"). This new journal was announced in a formal "Prospectus" in October 1897 in the pages of *The Times*. This most authoritative of all Anglophone newspapers would offer readers the opportunity to purchase *Literature* each Saturday, along with the regular

newspaper, for an additional sixpence. One could also subscribe to the journal at the annual rate of one pound, eight shillings, and two pence. Under the imprimatur of *The Times* and the editorial direction of the eminently respectable Traill (who had already made his name as a writer and as the editor of the *Observer*), *Literature* became a powerful voice for middle-class views on the production and consumption of books. The "Prospectus" offers a clear statement of the cultural mission of *Literature*. From the first, the journal encouraged readers to see the contemporary mass marketing of books as an urgent problem that a periodical under the direction of Traill could help to remedy. A critical organ was needed to guide readers in the respectable consumption of the many books now available:

It is the aim of the Proprietors in publishing *Literature*, under the editorship of Mr. H.D. Traill, to supply this want, and it is their hope to make it essentially the organ of the literary classes in the widest sense of the term. Books, alike and equally in their relation to the world of authors, of publishers, and of readers, will be its exclusive concern; and no effort will be spared to win recognition for it as an impartial and authoritative organ of literary criticism and a comprehensive and trustworthy medium of literary intelligence. ("Literature" 7)

From the very first leading article he wrote for *Literature*, Traill worked to define the appropriate function of the professional critic in an age of mass circulation of books. Entitled "Author and Critic," this article lays out his program for his new journal:

While endeavoring, therefore, in these columns, to provide the public with an adequate account and appraisal of whatever works may deserve any critical notice at all, we shall at the same time make it our constant aim to assign that position of importance to the higher classes of literary productions which nowadays, amid the multiplicity of claimants to the attention of criticism, may too often fail to obtain. (2)

The critic must take on the role of professional judge and guide. This is a theme that Traill and others writing for his journal take up regularly within its pages. In a leader he published shortly before his death, Traill once again makes clear the need at this particular juncture for a robust criticism that guides general readers:

At no previous period certainly was it more essential that the public taste should be educated by a clear exposition of the factors which make a work of art great, or more necessary to cultivate the one special task – too likely to fall into disuse when critics have become so heterogeneous a class, and criticism so vague a term – of estimating the merit on principles which can be defined and analyzed. (“What is a Critic?” 98)

This utilitarian function of the professional man of letters is further underlined by Augustine Birrell – whom Traill selected to be the first contributor to *Literature*’s weekly series “Among My Books.” Birrell writes, “The duties of a critic are those of a handicraftsman who takes money in exchange for an article of his manufacture. He must do his best to learn his business, and, having learned it, to go about it diligently and honourably, and in a spirit of humanity” (17).

In yet another leader, “The Age of Superlatives,” Traill uses specifically monetary terms to argue that inflated criticism diminishes the possibility of a genuine language of criticism that will ensure the establishment of communal standards on what is valuable in literature. Mass production and distribution of books make this an urgent problem:

For to-day the sensational showman stands on the platform of the cheap press, with its big drum within his reach, its gigantic sounding-board behind him, and in front of an audience of “general readers” which, alike in its simplicity, its docility and its sheep-like propensity to flock through the same gap in the hurdles, more nearly resembles the rustic holiday-makers of a village fair than any other known assemblage of human beings. (194)

John L. Kijinski, "H.D. Traill: Championing the Man of Letters"

A sonnet published in the second number of *Literature* dramatizes this sense of the need for professional guidance and the salutatory impact it could have on the general reader. This poem is the contribution of the impeccably respectable Hardwicke Rawnsley, Honorary Canon of Carlisle Cathedral and activist for the preservation of England's national treasures as a co-founder of the National Trust. I reproduce it here in full because it illustrates the contemporary sense of cultural crisis and the faith that professional guidance could help to mitigate this crisis.

**Good Luck to "Literature" – A FIRST VOYAGE**

Child of this restless age of praise and blame,  
When all who hold a pen must needs outpour  
Heart's fruit for daws to peck at, to what shore  
Sails the capacious hull that dares to claim  
Toll of all books that name the English name?  
Shall baffling tides add sorrow to the oar,  
Harbour bid welcome home, or reef work shame?  
One thing at least gives presage of far good,  
Your helmsman's guiding star can never set,  
The Star of Truth that knows nor hate nor fear;  
Tho' jealous winds of criticism fret,  
Towards a nobler dawn he dares to steer. (59)

This champion of the preservation of English culture portrays Traill, the professional man of letters, as helping to guide that culture through a time of extraordinary challenge.

Apart from the work he did as editor and writer for *Literature*, Traill's two most important contributions to the field of literary criticism and to the definition of the role of the professional man of letter are monographs he wrote for John Morley's "English Men of Letters, First Series": *Sterne* (published in 1882) and *Coleridge* (published in 1884). The fact that Traill was selected to write two volumes for this series is evidence of his stature as a man of letters. Morley's work as reader and editor for Macmillan's – the most respectable of all London publishers – put him in a position to select

the finest writers of the day for this series. His standard for selection was simple, as Morley reveals in a letter to Alexander Macmillan: “The highest respectability – and the highest capacity – an impossible union, O my Macmillan. But I accept your command all the same” (Letter 5 October 1877). The series, which virtually became a national institution, ran to 38 volumes, written by some of the most important literary figures of the day (for an overview of the series, see Kijinski, “Macmillan”): Leslie Stephen, John Addington Symonds, A.W. Ward, William Minto, Richard Holt Hutton, Thomas Huxley, J.A. Froude, Henry James, Anthony Trollope, Sidney Colvin, Edmund Gosse, Margaret Oliphant, and David Masson. Morley’s goals in creating this series coincided perfectly with the goals that Traill worked for in all of his writing. Morley writes in his *Recollections* that he hoped to direct the series toward a popular audience, those too busy to devote large amounts of time to the acquisition of “knowledge, criticism, and reflection”; the goal would be to bring “all these three good things within the reach of an extensive, busy, and preoccupied world” (I:92).

Morley’s assignment of Sterne and Coleridge to the pen of Traill is significant, as these are two writers he saw as problematic. In Morley’s series, writers are treated as public men of influence, exemplary Englishmen whose lives and works contributed to the great national tradition. Coleridge’s life could not, of course, be explained in terms of respectability. Traill, however, does his best to recuperate him for the great tradition. Morley’s series, and most particularly Traill’s volumes, do what Brian Doyle argues to be the central mission of Victorian cultural projects of this kind: to introduce the reading public to “a sequence of strategies to combine traditions of aristocratic cultural mystique with utilitarian programs of industrial and social administration,” the primary goal of which was “to develop a new collective sense of Englishness” (91). How can a life like Coleridge’s become part of a respectable tradition? Traill works at this in several ways. Coleridge’s life becomes cautionary. His enthusiasm for the French Revolution is, in fact, described in pathological terms. “Coleridge not only took the ‘frenzy-fever’ [that is, enthusiasm for the French Revolution] in a more violent form than either Wordsworth or Southey and uttered wilder

things in his delirium than they, but the paroxysm was much shorter, *the immediate* reaction more violent in its effects, and brought about by slighter causes in his case than in theirs" (14). Or consider his comments on Coleridge's time in Malta and his subsequent return to England, the least respectable period of his life. Traill cites this as a challenge to the English tradition. He writes, we are "entering upon that period of Coleridge's life – a period, roughly speaking, of about ten years – which [...] no lover of English letters[...] can ever contemplate without pain" (106). Furthermore, Traill argues Coleridge could have lived a much more praiseworthy life if he had only taken up work for hire, that is, if he had become more like a late-Victorian man of letters:

What, after all, would the loss in hours devoted to a comparatively inferior class of literary labour [journalism] have amounted to when compared with the gain in which much-needed habits of method and regularity, and – more valuable than all to an intellect like Coleridge's – in the constant reminder that human life is finite and the material of human speculation, infinite, and that even a world-embracing mind must apportion its labour to its day? (82)

Traill's stance on what would have helped Coleridge calls to mind Wilde's assertion that France is superior to England because "in France every bourgeois wants to be an artist, whereas in England every artist wants to be a bourgeois" (682). Although in his final years Coleridge recovers a "certain measure of his long-lost dignity," Traill's final judgment on Coleridge is that, in spite of his intellectual and artistic achievements, he cannot be placed among the first order of heroes within the English tradition, and this for a reason closely tied to his lack of a bourgeois work ethic: "It is difficult not to feel that Coleridge's character, apart altogether from defects of physical constitution, was wanting in manliness of fibre" (198). Within the respectable criticism of this time, a lack of manliness disqualifies a writer from true greatness.

In his volume on Sterne, Traill faces another challenge. By Victorian standards, some of Sterne's humor seems less than respectable; equally

problematic, some of his emotional turns seem effeminate. Traill takes on his critical job of guiding the reader on how to react to such lapses in a writer who, overall, has salutary things to offer:

How strange, then, that, with so keen an eye for the humourous, so sound and true a judgment in the highest qualities of humour, Stern should think it possible for anyone who has outgrown what may be called the dirty stage of boyhood to smile at the story which begins a few chapters afterwards – that of the Abbess and Novice of the Convent of Andouillets! The adult male person is not so much shocked at the coarseness of this story as astounded at the bathos of its introduction. It is as though some matchless connoisseur in wine, after having a hundred times demonstrated the unerring discrimination of his palate for the finest brands, would then produce some vile and loaded compound and invite us to drink it with all the relish with which he seems to be swallowing it himself. (87)

These comments epitomize Traill's belief that the function of the critic is to provide guidance to wholesome consumption of literature. He goes on, as in his treatment of Coleridge, to point out the root of Sterne's problem: "if his love-affairs stopped sort of the gratification of the senses, they involved a perpetual fondling and caressing of those effeminate sensibilities of his into that condition of hyper-aesthesia which, though Sterne regarded it as a strength, was in reality the weakness, of his art" (29). This lack of manliness is a problem that nearly disqualifies Sterne from entering the great English tradition.

Traill's treatment of Coleridge and Sterne can be seen as a part of his long-term campaign against those who would attack respectability and idealism as high literary virtues, writers who Traill labels as "new realists" or decadents. In 1897, he published in *The Fortnightly Review* his most famous work on this topic, "The New Realism" (re-published, with some revisions, later that year in a collection entitled *The New Fiction and other Essays on Literary Topics*). The article focuses on two novels that Traill saw

as exemplars of a disturbing new trend in fiction: Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and Arthur Morrison's *A Child of the Jago*. His contention is that what is passed off as new and realistic is neither of these things: "the two most obvious things to be said [about the New Realism] are that it is unreal with the falsity of half truth, and as old as the habit of exaggeration" (2). He gives Crane's novel much less respect than he does Morrison's (whom he sees as "a bigger gun and greater talent") and comments on the first chapter of *Maggie*, "It is art? If so, is the making of mud-pies an artistic occupation, and are the neglected brats who are to be found rolling in the gutter of every great city unconscious artists?" (5). When he takes up Crane, his main contention is that realism does not give us an objective form of recording what is seen; rather, it is a new and strange form of idealism, "a condensation of squalor" (14). Traill argues that Morrison's realism "is a subjective product, a way of looking at things, not a quality of things seen" (24). But, because literature of this sort is passed off as something new and advanced, the general reading public is not capable of understanding that fictional sensationalism is undermining critical discrimination:

A public avid of sensation and critics wanting in the sense of measure have corrupted it, until the desire of each writer to strike and shock more violently than his competitors, to be more "relentless" and "unflinching," to write a "strong," even if only in the sense of a pungently malodorous, book than they, has first driven them to load their literary palettes with only "lurid" colours, and is now rapidly demoralizing, if, with some of them, it has not already demoralized their artistic sense to the extent of blending it to all other hues. (24)

In other essays in this volume, Traill raises a concern related to his view of realism. He distrusts novelists who focus too much on chronicling states of mind or too much on matters of style. He is the champion of the tradition that has its roots in Fielding and Scott, a tradition not adequately respected by those contemporary novelists, such as Henry James, who prefer a far less robust approach to writing ("The Novel of Manners" 143).

For understanding Traill's views on the importance of the man of letters, his article on Matthew Arnold is the second most significant piece in *The New Fiction and other Essays on Literary Topics*. Here he attempts to determine what place Arnold should have within the great English tradition. How, he asks, are we to judge the value of Arnold as the premier man of letters of his time? He doubts that Arnold will be best remembered for his poetry, although he leaves this open to speculation: "for all we know, the world may be reading Matthew Arnold with eager delight a century hence, while Sir Lewis Morris [who, according to Traill, is, along with Tennyson and Browning, the most-read poet of the time] may have long sunk into neglect" (82). But he is certain about what does make Arnold important: the impact that his work in prose has had on the thinking people of England:

A deliverance of Mr. Arnold's on any question – social, moral, or political, as well as literary – was always the most admirable touchstone of received opinions. None of us could be quite sure of our reason for the faith that is in us on any matter till it had stood the test of his refined and searching criticism. More of us have been compelled by him than by any other writer of our age and country to review and revise our judgments upon most subjects of human interest; and not only the world of literature, but the infinitely larger world of unexpressed thought and feeling and embodied imagination, is sensibly the poorer for his loss (103).

Thus, he claims that Arnold's primary value to the culture was the work that he did as an independent man of letters willing to take on the role of guide to the general public.

Traill certainly shared Arnold's willingness to write on a variety of topics important to the culture. He regularly moved outside the realm that we would traditionally associate with the literary critic. In 1881 he published a volume for Macmillan's "English Citizen" series on constitutional government. He also wrote book length studies of Shaftesbury (1886), William III (1888), Strafford (1889), the Marquis of Salisbury (1891), and Lord Cromer (1897), as

well as an extensive biography of Sir John Franklin (1896). During the time that he was editing the 1896 *Centenary Edition of the Collected Works of Thomas Carlyle* (still available today from Cambridge University Press), he was also editing, between 1893 and 1896, a six-volume collection: *Social England: A Record of the Progress of the People In Religion, Laws, Learning, Arts, Industry, Commerce, Science, Literature, and Manners from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*. I quote the entire title, as it gives a sense of the scope of the series. In his lengthy "Introduction" to the project, Traill explains that the series will illuminate, for the general reader, a history not of the English polity, nor of England as a state among states, but rather as a people. Thus, the series works to underwrite a sense of Englishness, much as the canon-making work that Traill did to create a sense of an English tradition in literature.

Turning to his endeavors that can be classified as "imaginative" rather than critical writing, we can still gain from them a sense of his representative stance as a respectable, professional, non-specialized man of letters. In 1884, he published a collection of critical/imaginative pieces entitled *The New Lucian, Being a Series of Dialogues of the Dead*. Sidney James Mark Low, Editor of the *St. James's Gazette*, in his *DNB* entry on Traill, judged *The New Lucian* to be "the most remarkable of his works" and explained, "This is a series of 'Dialogues of the Dead,' full of wit, pathos, and insight. It gives a better idea of the author's brilliancy and scholarship, his humour and his irony, than anything else he wrote." Traill's obituary in the *Spectator* notes, "His great literary gifts, though partially submerged in journalism, are most conspicuously displayed in that brilliant series of imaginary dialogues, *The New Lucian*." I find it hard to imagine that any reader in the twenty-first century would find these dialogues particularly interesting. But what remains impressive is the number of topics that Traill is willing to take on and the number of ancient and modern personalities to which he is able to give voice.

Although, frankly, each speaker sounds a good deal like Traill himself, these dialogues display an extraordinary range of knowledge, the sort of knowledge available only to the non-specialist man of letters who has made reading and writing his life's work. For example, Traill speaks as Disraeli and Sir Robert Peel to discuss British politics, as Daniel O'Connell and Isaac

Butt to discuss Irish politics, as Garrick and George Henry Lewes to discuss the comic theater, and as Lucretius, Paley, and Darwin to discuss creation and evolution. There are particularly literary conversations as well, as between Sterne and Thackeray and between Fielding and Richardson, and in both dialogues Traill further promotes his views on the importance of a manly approach to fiction as the key to the English tradition. One cannot imagine a critic, editor, and journalist in the post-Victorian period willing to take on such a number of subjects in dialogue form. Nor can one imagine a post-Victorian reading public eager to read such a work.

An appropriate volume of Traill's to consider as a conclusion to this overview of his work is *Number Twenty: Fables and Fantasies*, published in 1892. Within this collection, Traill brings together poems and parodies that he had published before, but of most interest is the title piece, "Number Twenty," written for this volume. The "Prologue" to this fable is its most revealing section. It takes place at 11:30 on December 31, 1900 (people of the time knew that the new century would begin in 1901 rather than in 1900), and chronicles the last moments of the Nineteenth Century, personified as Old Seekleham. The personification of Time appears and, much to Old Seekleham's surprise, sweeps into oblivion the busts of famous people that the old century thought would achieve lasting fame. Although names are not named, Time assigns the great majority of the revered writers, artists, painters, poets, men of letters, scientists, and composers of music to oblivion; only a few – and sometimes not the ones Old Seekleham expected – escape. Thus Traill dramatizes his career-long concern about appropriate judgment: how one can know and explain to others what is real and what is false in the world of culture, what will last and what will fade with time? Traill takes special delight in closing the "Prologue" with a shot at the enemies of manly culture, those who saw the work of the realists and decadents as valuable. As the "Prologue" closes, the Decadents arrive: "After this they all joined in the strophic and antistrophic recitation of an 'Ode to the Spirit of Decadence,' which meant, as was explained in the Ode, the Spirit begotten of the fact of living in an age of exhaustion and disillusion, and failure, and emptiness, and weariness, and *getting rather to like it*" (12). The rest of the fable gives us

John L. Kijinski, "H.D. Traill: Championing the Man of Letters"

glimpses of the Twentieth Century, which tends toward promoting things (specialization in education, realism, pessimism, materialism) that Traill consistently fought against.

Traill was committed to what he believed to be the highest standards of critical judgment. His fable of the end of the Nineteenth Century makes it clear that, like his friend Leslie Stephen, he thought that most contemporary work could not stand the test of time. He did not live to see the dawn of the Twentieth Century, dying unexpectedly of a heart attack on February 21, 1900, at the age of 58. I am certain that he would have never seen himself as one of those cultural workers to be spared from oblivion. He did, however, work tirelessly to impact a culture that he believed was in need of people like himself: professional men of letters willing to engage and guide the public on a wide range of topics.

***State University of New York at Fredonia***

#### **Works Cited**

- Birrell, Augustine. "A Colloquy on Criticism." *Literature* (23 October 1897), 17-18.
- Doyle, Brian. "The Invention of Englishness." *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920*. Ed. Robert Colls and Phillip Dodd. London: Croom Helm, 1986. 89-115.
- Jones, Dorothy Richardson. "*King of Critics*": *George Saintsbury, 1845-1933*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992.
- Kijinski, John. "Macmillan's English Men of Letters, First Series." *Nineteenth-Century British Literary Biographers, DLB* Vol. 144. Ed. Steven Serafin. Detroit: Gale, 1994. 310-316.
- . "Respectable Reading in the Late Nineties: H.D. Traill's *Literature*." *Nineteen-Century Contexts*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (2003), 357-72.
- "'Literature': a Prospectus." *The Times* (18 October 1897), 7.
- Low, Sidney James Mark. "Henry Duff Traill." *DNB*. 1901 Supplement. 1257-59.
- Morley, John. Letter to Alexander Macmillan. 5 October 1877. British Library ADD MSS 55055.

- . *Recollections*. 2 Vols. London: Macmillan, 1917.
- Rawnsley, Hardwicke. "A First Voyage." *Literature* (30 October 1897): 59.
- Small, Ian. *Conditions for Criticism: Authority, Knowledge, and Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1991.
- Spectator*. "Mr. H.D. Traill." 24 February 1900: 3.
- Stephen, Leslie. "Perishable Books." *Literature* 27 (November 1897): 176-87.
- Traill, H.D. "The Age of Superlatives." *Literature* (4 December 1897): 193-94.
- . "Author and Critic." *Literature* (23 October 1897): 1-2.
- . *Coleridge*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1902 [1884].
- . "Introduction." *Social England: A Record of the Progress of the People In Religion, Laws, Learning, Arts, Industry, Commerce, Science, Literature and Manners from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*. By Various Writers. Ed. H.D. Traill. London: Cassell and Company, 1895.
- . *The New Fiction and other Essays on Literary Subjects*. London: Hurst and Blackett, 1897.
- . *The New Lucian, Being A Series of Dialogues of the Dead*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1884.
- . *Number Twenty: Fables and Fantasies*. London: Henry and Co., 1892.
- . *Sterne*. New York: Harper, 1901 [1882].
- . "What is a Critic?" *Literature* (3 February 1900): 97-98.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Portable Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Richard Aldington. New York: Viking, 1946.

