
The Novels and Novelists

Forsyth William

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in the novels of the period, corroborated by facts from other sources. But I have not thought it necessary to adhere strictly and formally to this programme, and have therefore introduced sketches of the plots and characters of some of the most interesting and once widely popular novels, which for various reasons remain practically unknown to the great mass of readers of the present day, and especially to the female part of them. To do this and give anything like a just idea of the originals, without offending against decorum, is no easy task, nor do I at all flatter myself that I have succeeded. But the very difficulty is in itself a proof of the difference, in one important respect, between the taste and manners of the last and the taste and manners of the present century. In these, I think, it cannot be denied that there has been a great improvement; but I hope it will not be supposed that I mean to imply that our more decorous sins are not morally quite as bad as the vices of our coarser and more free-spoken ancestors. We may be thankful that in many

aspects the state of society is better now than then : but the luxury of the rich is still in startling contrast with the misery of the poor, and although vice may have lost its grossness, it still lurks like a canker in the Commonwealth. We shall have little cause to boast of our superior morality, if we

Compound for sins we are inclined to,
By damning those we have no mind to.





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NOVELS AND NOVELISTS

OF THE

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

CHAPTER I.

FICTION IN RELATION TO FACT.—INFORMATION TO BE GLEANED FROM NOVELS.—GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LAST CENTURY.—ITS COARSENESS.—RELIGION.—LOVE.—INFLUENCE OF THE AGE UPON WOMEN.—THE ESSAYISTS.—HOGARTH.—PROGRESS OF REFINEMENT.—DANGER OF MISTAKING SATIRE AND CARICATURE FOR TRUTH.

MY object in the following work is to make use of fiction as the exponent of fact, and to shew what information is to be gleaned as to the habits and manners and social life of our ancésters from the novels of the last century. If I may be pardoned a legal metaphor I shall summon the heroes and heroines as well as the authors into court, that they may give evidence as witnesses of a state of society that has passed away—and of which it is difficult now in the many wonderful changes

that have since taken place to form a right idea. We may read Histories of England, and be familiar with the pages of Cunningham, Belsham, Adolphus, Hume and Smollett (I mean Smollett, as an historian), and yet be almost entirely ignorant of the manners and habits and mode of life of our forefathers : of their houses and dress : their domestic arrangements and amusements : of the state of religion and morality and all that goes to make up the character of a people. As one of our greatest novelists has said, "Out of the fictitious book I get the expression of the life, of the times, of the manners, of the merriment, of the dress, the pleasures, the laughter, the ridicules of society—the old times live again, and I travel in the old country of England. Can the heaviest historian do more for me?" * I answer, not half so much. The historian tells us of Court factions and political intrigues, and the struggles of an Oligarchy of great families for power—of the Walpoles and Newcastles, and Grenvilles and Pitts—of foreign wars and domestic treason—but little of the condition of the peasantry and life of the people, and absolutely nothing of the state of society in the period. Paradoxical as it may seem, there can be no doubt that fiction is often more truth-

* Thackeray, 'English Humourists,' p. 113.

ful than fact. By this I mean that a more correct idea of a period may be formed from a story where the personages and many of the incidents are imaginary, than from a dry, dull, narrative of events. The most lifelike account of the Civil Wars in England in the seventeenth century that I know is contained in De Foe's 'Memoirs of a Cavalier,' which it is impossible to read without believing that it is the work of a writer who had been himself an actor in the scenes which he describes—and which Lord Chatham indeed quoted as a genuine history. And yet it is as much a fiction as *Waverley*, with its picture of the Rebellion of 1745.

Without some such object in view, it would have been difficult to go through the task of reading what I have been obliged to read. For as stories the novels of the last century, with the exception of some well-known names, are deplorably dull. Their plots are contemptible, and the style is detestable. But, however poor the incidents, or inartistic the construction, the writers unconsciously give us hints when they least intended it of the manners and customs of the time. We may turn with disgust from the insipid narrative and stupid dialogue; but we get from both little traits of habits and opinions which are valuable, as enabling us to form a

just idea of the state of society around. We learn how our ancestors lived, how they amused themselves, and the conversation they indulged in ; how they travelled in lumbering coaches drawn by six Flanders mares ; the books they read, the hour at which they dined, and the dress they wore ; how the boys played at “tagg” and “thrush-a-thrush,” and the girls at “draw-gloves” and “questions and commands.” We are brought into contact with drums and ridottos, and masquerades ; with Ranelagh and Vauxhall, “Marybone Gardens” and the Pantheon ; with swords and periwigs, and *fontanges* ; dominoes and masques ; minuets, cotillons and Sir Roger de Coverleys ; ombre and quadrille, and lansquenet ; with Pope Joan, and “snip snap snorum ;” and we see pictured before us the “life of the fine old English gentleman—all of the olden time.”

There is, indeed, no source from which so much information may be gleaned with respect to the social life of our ancestors as the Novels, supplemented by Diaries and Letters, such as those of Lady Cowper, Lady Mary Wortley Montague, and Mrs. Delany ; the Richardson correspondence, and that of the Malmesbury family and Horace Walpole. We find ourselves there living in a world strangely different from

that of our own day. This difference is shown in a thousand ways, by which the writers unconsciously betray the existence of habits and manners which have now ceased to exist. We find there the loud swearing, the hard drinking, the loose talk, which were common even amongst those who called themselves gentlemen; the swords drawn and the duels fought on the slightest provocation; the stiffness of intercourse between parents and children, and the ceremonious coldness with which the latter addressed the former in their letters, beginning with "Sir" and "Madam," and ending with "Your dutiful child and humble servant." *

But there is a difficulty in the way. We have to face an amount of coarseness which is in the highest degree repulsive. It is like raking a dirt heap to discover grains of gold. And herein lies the specialty of the case. It is because the novels reflect, as in a mirror, the tone of thought and language of the age in which they were written, that the perusal of them even now is useful; and we get from them a much more truthful idea of the state of society and morals than from pompous histories and laboured

* Dr. Johnson almost always ends his letters to Boswell with the subscription, "your affectionate and very humble servant", and Boswell does the same when he writes to the object of his idolatry.