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GEORGE SAINTSBURY

THE MEMORIAL VOLUME

**A NEW COLLECTION OF HIS ESSAYS
AND PAPERS**

**Personal Portraits by
OLIVER ELTON
SIR HERBERT GRIERSON
JOHN W. OLIVER
JOHN PURVES**

**Biographical Memoir by
A. BLYTH WEBSTER**



Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

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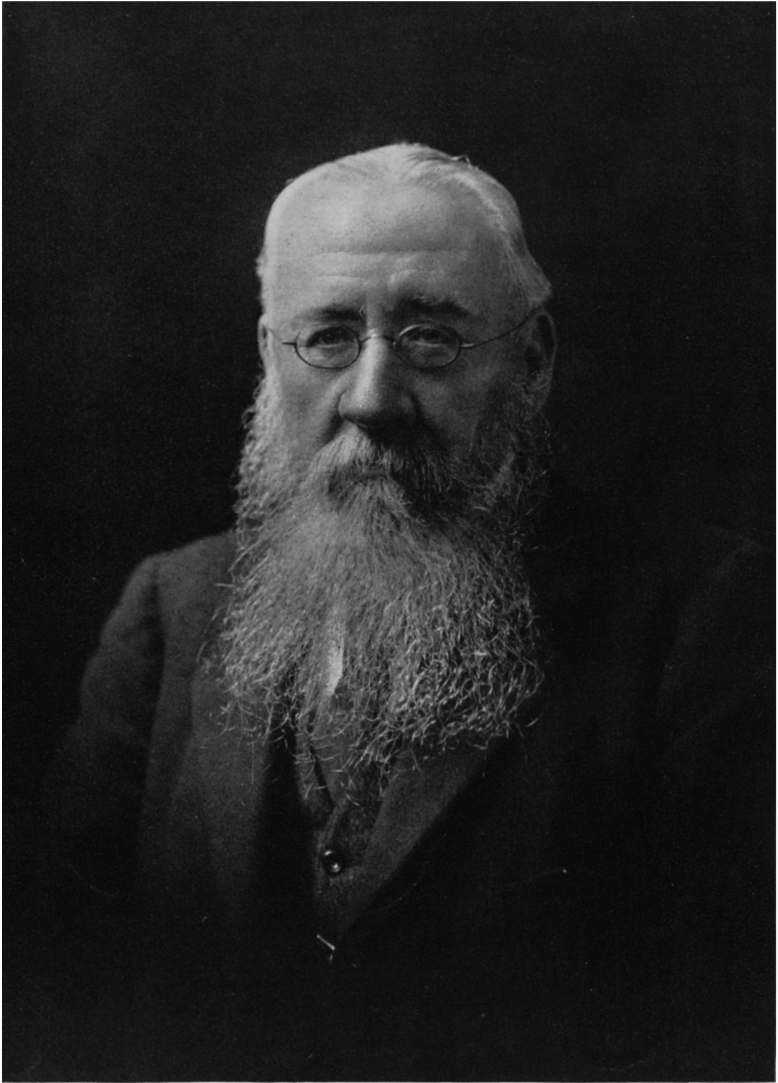


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[Lafayette

GEORGE SAINTSBURY
(1845-1933)

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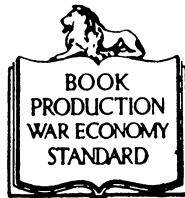
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PREFACE

DR. JOHN W. OLIVER and I, being of that brotherhood of men who sat at the feet of Professor George Saintsbury in the University of Edinburgh, and having the support both moral and active of Dr. Arthur M. Clark of the English Department in that University, were united in a desire that the centenary year of his birth should be remembered in a fitting way. Writing in 1923, he said himself of the Prefaces he had contributed to editions of Dryden, Herrick and others that he would "rather like to see them together"; and in the pages of many an old periodical there are essays which those who hold him in veneration would wish to see reprinted. From these essays and those Prefaces we have gathered the materials for this memorial volume. We record our special thanks to Mr. Christopher Saintsbury, Professor Saintsbury's surviving son, for his consent to the publication of the book and for his help. He has generously agreed that the royalties should go to the provision of an annual Saintsbury Essay Prize at Edinburgh University.

It has been our editorial policy to present a happy diversity of George Saintsbury's essays and studies. A number of shorter pieces we have collected under the title of "A Saintsbury Scrap Book", forming a continuation of the three *Scrap Books* he published in his later years. No record exists of his fugitive writings: he had estimated these, nearly forty years before the end of his busy life, to have run to more than the bulk of one hundred large volumes: thus our task of searching among the periodical literature of his day has not been easy.

George Saintsbury had expressed a wish that the advice of Professor Oliver Elton should be obtained on any collection of his papers which might be made after his death. Professor Elton gave his blessing to our work and contributed a personal study of his old friend: and now his own death on the 4th of June, 1945, must be sadly recorded.

Our thanks are due to Sir Herbert Grierson for valued memories of his predecessor in the Edinburgh Chair of Rhetoric and English Literature; and since it was Saintsbury's wish that no biography of him should be written, we are all indebted to Professor A. Blyth

Webster of St. Andrews University (Saintsbury's colleague and senior lecturer in English at Edinburgh 1905-15) for the sympathetic care and labour that went to the making of his Memoir.

Mr. John Purves has kindly given us his recollections as a student who attended the first classes to which Professor Saintsbury lectured in the University ; and at the request of his two co-editors, Dr. John W. Oliver has contributed a picture of Saintsbury during his last years at Edinburgh.

We acknowledge in gratitude the help given in many different ways by Mr. J. E. Scott, Dr. Henry W. Meikle, Mr. A. W. Brickell, Mr. W. M. Parker, the Rev. M. H. Faulds, Miss K. Mary Smith, Miss Mair G. Davies, Miss M. B. Aitken, and the staffs of Edinburgh University Library and of the National Library of Scotland.

Since George Saintsbury's death in 1933, it is notable that his "legend" has grown. His stature as a literary historian and critic is recognized as fully by the younger generation as it was by his own contemporaries. And how many of those contemporaries, once famous, are now no more than faintly remembered names ! During his lifetime, the Saintsbury Club was founded in London to do him honour as a man by whom the more gracious and civilized things of life were appreciated with a joyful discrimination. In this, the centenary year of his birth, many will wish to join in remembering with thankfulness the man and his works.

AUGUSTUS MUIR

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GRATEFUL acknowledgment must be made to the editors and publishers who have given permission to reprint the essays and studies included in this volume : to the editors concerned for articles from *The Nineteenth Century*, *The Dial*, *Life and Letters*, *The London Mercury*, *The University of Edinburgh Journal*, *The Athenæum*, *The Glasgow Herald*, *The Morning Post*, *Blackwood's Magazine* ; to Messrs. Edward Arnold and Co., Ltd., for Professor Oliver Elton's tribute to George Saintsbury ; to Messrs. Ernest Benn, Ltd., for the Introduction to *Eight Plays of John Dryden* ; to Messrs. George Harrap and Co., Ltd., for the Introduction to FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* ; to Messrs. G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., for the Introduction to the Poetry of Robert Herrick ; to Messrs. Cassell and Co., Ltd., for the Introduction to *Oxford Sights and Scenes* ; to Messrs. Constable and Co., Ltd., for the Introduction to *The Vicar of Wakefield* ; to Messrs. William Blackwood and Sons, Ltd., for Professor Saintsbury's Inaugural Address ; and to Messrs. Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd., for articles from *The Bookman*.

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Frontispiece.—GEORGE SAINTSBURY, from a photograph by
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GEORGE SAINTSBURY

BY OLIVER ELTON

LIVING on to eighty-seven, George Saintsbury found some compensation for the burden of years in the honours that he received and enjoyed. What he called, echoing the phrase of Gibbon, the "browner shades", were brightened, perhaps unexpectedly. There was a kind of *renouveau* of his reputation. Mr. Nicholson's portrait in the Merton Common Room shows him well: the kindly, sagacious, and expressive eyes, under the skull-cap, and the lined features full of humane experience. There he sat in his room in Bath, facing one of the great city prospects of England; more and more house-bound, but reading and writing insatiably while his sight permitted; answering letters more briefly than of old, but always vivaciously, and always, as his habit was, by return; warmly regarded, both by the older and the younger sort: an institution now and almost a piece of history, but in heart and wit permanently young. Some years back, walking in the street, he had been knocked down by a taxi. He rose and spoke words to the cabman, who retorted that he ought to thank God for escaping with his life. "I do thank God", was the reply (which found its way into print), "but I damn you": a sentence that consoled Saintsbury for his bruises. The *renouveau*, perhaps, was due in part to the *Notes on a Cellar-Book* (1920), with their Bacchic lore and their appeal to the world of judicious feasters. They carried Saintsbury's name far beyond the literary class; a formal retort from those whom he reviled as "pussyfoots" would have delighted him, but never came.

Later still appeared the three small square *Scrap Books* (1922-4), which are a mirror of the real, the ultimate Saintsbury. The much-abused "style" is there, at its best and worst and freshest: whims, jests, funny ferocities, sudden far-off allusions in parenthesis ("divine Parenthesis", I think he once called it), capitals, italics, rare or not rare quotations. Everywhere a Sterne-like oddness and twist of language—only it is not, like Sterne's, the effect of care and artifice. It is the native idiom of the speaker in his talk and letters and his thoughts. Many who had disliked it were reconciled, once they came to know and like the man. In his writings he would bring in his ego, perhaps to excess; but that mattered little if the ego

attracted you. To all those who censured the style, and to numerous other bruisers, Saintsbury's answer was that which he gave to the cabman. I make these notes, after a friendship that began a generation ago. I met him first when he came to examine with us (most shrewdly and punctually he did such business) at Owens College. At first, be it owned, he seemed strange. He spent some time in expatiating on the enormities of a critic who had suggested that he, Saintsbury, did not know his Horace. The villain disposed of, he proceeded, after deciding, in the restaurant, that cold beef was the safest diet, to talk happily of many things; I forget what, but they might range from cheese to Charles d'Orléans or from prosody to Pigott, the forger of the "Parnell Letters", from whom he had once saved, as he was fond of relating, the old *Saturday Review*. This is part of the entertainment offered by the *Scrap Books*.

I am not sure that the press notices have done justice to him as a critic and man of letters. The public, and even the reviewers, have been apt to salute with open mouth his learning and reading and to forget his brains. The learning, the omnilegence, were no doubt exceptional. "Reading", he said, "is to me like *mental breathing*". And naturally, if you go on for seventy years reading very hard, and, like Macaulay, very fast, the sum mounts up. But we may easily make too much of that; there are plenty of pundits with full heads. The question is, what comes out of the heads; and Saintsbury's performance can hardly be judged without regard to what our American friends like to call the "background": the setting of convictions, of sympathies and antipathies, within which his critical spirit found such free play. Now, if there is a single seat of honour, among those who discourse of Church and State, that is *beyond* the extreme Right, there, surely, sits Saintsbury. He must have been nearly the last of his clan. There are other high Tories and Puseyites, greatly to be esteemed; but *he* gave in at no single point, in politics or creed, to what is called the modern spirit. The average Conservative probably smiled in approval, but "thought that he could hardly go quite so far". Saintsbury, in these matters, was a thoroughgoing Manichæan and proclaims it on every page. He comes out, sometimes in surprising places, with amazing and most amusing flings at the enemy; and only sourness could take offence. He was on the best of terms with many in the other camp, and it was a point of honour with him that opinions should not interfere with friendship. Only, he much preferred that

such friends should have no half-convictions. "So-and-so", he said once, "is a good fellow, a brilliant fellow; I like him—but he has no *tie-beam*." Some topics, naturally, did not come up in conversation; his uniform, like that of a most intelligent *abbé*, could only command respect. There was all the world of letters, and a good deal of life, left to talk about.

This Toryism was an admirable soil for a critic of Saintsbury's cast. For here, too, a similar point of honour ruled and, save for some inevitable small eruptions, he observed it nobly. His canon was simple: Keep your critical conscience clean, your artistic impressions and perceptions undistorted. Your author's opinions, his ideas in the abstract, are not your affair *while* you are talking of his art. "L'œuvre est-il bon ou est-il mauvais?" and how, and why? You may abominate "free love", and yet enjoy *Epipsychidion*; nay, you will catch its flying essence all the better for having conscientiously shelved its doctrine. No doubt Tom Paine was a wretch, but you will have a good word for his prose. This attitude is a source of strength to Saintsbury, since it sets no limit to his liking for whatever may be good; it makes for catholicity. He often defends it; the living work of art—that, he says, is the sacred thing for the critic. Not bare form, or mechanism, will be his quest, but perfect, and passionate or delicate, or at least sound, expression. Walter Pater long ago, as Saintsbury knew, had gently noted in him a certain over-emphasis on pure "form". And it is true, I shall suggest presently, that Saintsbury's books on metre and rhythm are the last word and logical outcome of his concern for form. It is also true (not to vex this ancient question further) that to sever the form from the "substance" and "ideas" is hardly possible; for where do these stop? The thing can be done, up to a point, but only for the purpose of analysis. Yet Saintsbury was far away from the queer mental taint of the so-called, and now, I suppose, all but extinct "æsthetic" school. He sometimes, unjustly to himself, lays himself open, with his metaphors from "vintages" and the like, to the charge of being a literary epicurean. But he was not consistent here, for no one can be. His beloved classical poet seems to have been Lucretius, who moved him deeply, and that not simply as a poet and executant, but through his stern presentment of the human lot. In Saintsbury there was a streak of what may be called conditional pessimism. He responded also to the Preacher; and he seems to say, "That is what life looks like, what it really would be, *but* for all that I, so im-

mutably, believe." He had much depth, and even fierceness, of temperament, and responded no less to the *Song of Songs*. Yet he was far too big, too healthy, too full of Homer and Rabelais and Fielding, and too well versed in history, to rest there, or to inhabit any foolish "ivory tower" of "art". Such freedom of mind, I repeat, is no bad foundation for criticism. Saintsbury, in any case, was born to urge and to apply his peculiar point of view; not that—an equally important one—of Professor Bradley; and still less that of Coleridge, whom he justly held to be one of the greatest of critics, and who cares, as we know, most unmistakably, for "ideas" and "substance".

Another of Saintsbury's "neglected First Laws of Criticism" is sound enough. As he puts it, "B is not bad because it is not A, however good A may be". Probably he has applied his canon to more authors, old and new, ancient and native and foreign, than any critic in the language. There is no man, however well informed, however unsympathetic, who cannot learn from Saintsbury; who cannot acquire from him not only new facts, but illumination. But before touching on his performance I ought to give a word to the devil's advocates. The volumes that fill so many shelves doubtless offer a large exposed surface to the censor. Writing so much and so fast (and the long years of journalism made composition too easy), Saintsbury could hardly be invulnerable. Far back in the 'eighties he was twice noisily assailed, first by Edmond Scherer and then by John Churton Collins, for some errors of detail in his literary histories. The censures were not all fair or well founded. Saintsbury hardly referred to them, but silently, in following editions, made the needful corrections. He was not at his best as an editor of texts, and more than once he passed errors of transcription. But these things must be seen in proportion; no English critic has covered so big a field of literature; and, in my belief (formed after seeing reams of his proof sheets), he was, on the whole, a very accurate chronicler, and made fewer mistakes than most historians who write on the grand scale.

Often, no doubt, he is too copious; and he suffers from a certain want of finality—not, indeed, in his critical judgments, which he seldom or never retracts, but in his expression of them. He will talk, again and again, of the same author, with unabated freshness, and without ever taming his language, and yet without decisively *stamping* it. So in the case of Tennyson, or Fielding, or Thackeray (of whom he is one of the extreme votaries). But most criticism

is so tender a plant, fading in a night—unless it be that of Dante or Longinus—that it will hardly bear such treatment. Among Saintsbury's briefer works, indeed, can be found many shapely and delightful *causeries*, where this uncertainty does not arise. The best, perhaps, are in the three volumes of *Collected Essays and Papers*, 1875–1920, reissued in 1923–4. There are more than sixty of them, and many read as if written yesterday. Many deal with writers, Hood and Leigh Hunt, Lockhart and Jeffrey, on whom some dust has begun to settle. Others, like those on Præd or Peacock or Borrow, centre on some rare delightful gift or idiosyncrasy of a minor classic. Others are on Landor, Dickens, and the major authors of the last century. A few are on Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, but in each case with the significant addition—"and the grand style". Nearly all show Saintsbury's skill in the craft of the *causerie* and are full of the "minute sparkle" which he somewhere attributes to Sainte-Beuve. With these volumes I would rank the prefaces to the editions of Sterne and Fielding and Smollett and Peacock. All this can be read with pleasure by educated persons who are not students by profession.

None of Saintsbury's bigger books are more original and learned, or done with greater relish, than the *History of English Prosody* (1906–10) and the *History of English Prose Rhythm* (1912). The people who are truly enthusiastic over these topics could be gathered in quite a small dinner party. Most men will echo Walter Raleigh :

The spondee, dactyl, trochee, anapaest,
Do not inflame my passions in the least.

But they do inflame the passions of the metrists, hardly two of whom agree, because though they all *like* much the same things, they all *hear* them differently. Some of them raged when Saintsbury waved aside all disputes as to the physiological, or musical, basis of metre, and when he styled these questions "*metaprosodic*" or "*metacritical*"; meaning by "*meta*" that which lies too far behind the subject and is irrelevant. Certainly his own "first principles" as to accent, quantity, and the like, are none too lucid; but this matters little to the result. His notation suffices for his purpose, which is that of the historian, enjoyer, and connoisseur. So he writes of Tennyson's *Dying Swan* :

The poet takes the old equivalenced octosyllable of the thirteenth century and of *Christabel*, moulding it into an irregular stanza with more or fewer recurrences of rhyme as he pleases. But in the first of these stanzas he avails himself

very little of anapaestic substitution. There are only two anapaests in ten lines . . . In the third we come to the death-song itself, and the metre lengthens, unrolls, is transformed by more and more infusion of the trisyllabic foot, till the actual equivalent of the "eddying song", the "awful jubilant voice", the "music strange and manifold", is attained. Such command of sound, joined to such power of painting, might, one would think, have sent good wits and good lovers raving. Yet Mill says nothing about it in the dawn, and George Brimley, when noon was drawing on, thinks it "uninteresting" because there is no apron-string or medicine-bottle about it as the *Gardener's Daughter* and the *May Queen* . . .

Here, indeed, is "gusto"; and there is much of George Saintsbury in those few lines. The book on prose rhythm, on which I must not dilate, is still more original, because the ground had hardly been broken before. The three-volume *History of Literary Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe* (1900-4) is his widest and lengthiest contribution to learning; it is, indeed, on the lengthy side. It has had many critics; but no one has tried to do the work again. Here, once more, the theoretical basis is not Saintsbury's concern; and Croce, I believe, has protested against the omission. Criticism is a branch of æsthetics, and æsthetics of general philosophy. Saintsbury's attitude, for which he argues with spirit, is not so easy to maintain while reviewing Aristotle or Lessing. Also, as W. P. Ker once noted, the treatment takes us "some way from literature". What do *you* think of what Saintsbury thinks of what Boileau thinks of what Longinus thinks of the Sublime? But then this treatment is in the nature of the work, unavoidable if a history is to be made at all. Saintsbury begins, not with theory, but with the books. He goes through the whole huge chronicle, including many a writer forgotten or obscure, expounding, documenting, annotating, swashing right and left, joking for light relief in the middle of a solemn argument, and enjoying all with unslackening energy. The later volumes, in my own opinion, are the best; but all are of value. Saintsbury's first principle is very much that of the writer who is known as "Longinus". He seeks, above all, for the transporting thrill of style and rhythm, caused by the passion of the artist behind them; the moment of electric contact between conception and expression. And surely, whatever more we may ask of literature, this at least is necessary.

I must ignore here the ample volumes on the French novel, the shorter ones on French and English literature, the mass of articles in the *Britannica* and in the *Cambridge History of English Literature*, and much besides. No one can have read all Saintsbury's signed

writings ; and the unsigned ones, innumerable, are out of reach. And he said (the remark opens a vista) that he had, as a journalist, "written almost as much on politics as on literature". Once, at a dinner given to him in Liverpool, I was moved to quote the familiar *Quae regio in terris ?* and to say that wherever one wandered in literature, English or French or medieval Latin, Saintsbury was likely to have been there first. This is the bare truth, and it would be true of men more learned than myself. His acknowledged works certainly deserve a careful bibliography : it is a task for one of the many pupils whom he inspired and taught. There is room, too, for an anthology of his best pages. Time will surely pay its meed to a critic of so true a gift, of so high a rank, so animated, so single-minded, and so wide and just in his perceptions.

SOME PERSONAL MEMORIES

BY SIR HERBERT GRIERSON

SAINTSBURY desired, like Thackeray, that no biography of him should be written. But, again like Thackeray, Saintsbury tells the world a good deal about himself, not only in the three books of reminiscences, *Scrap Books* as he called them, but in everything he wrote. It was never difficult to know what Saintsbury thought on any subject, nor what was his opinion of the "fools" who thought otherwise. My first acquaintance was with his *Elizabethan Literature*, when I was trying to teach in a school for young women in Aberdeen. I remember that then, a rash young man, I declared that if one did not know all about Elizabethan Literature one could not understand the criticism, and if one did one would not care to read it. There was a certain amount of truth in the first half of my statement, if not in the second. It was not his way to tell you much about the contents of any book he was criticizing. In fact it was a point of principle not to do so lest he substituted what he had to tell you for your own reading. He took for granted that you knew that book already and wished to have his opinion upon it. It is the latter part of my hasty judgment which was not just. When you *did* know something of the literature, and at that time I knew very little about the Elizabethans, you found that Saintsbury's opinion was well worth having. He was an excellent "taster" if one may transfer the word from tea and wine to literature, excellent at laying his finger at once on what was best in a book. But he could also, if he did not always choose to do so, give you the reason for his judgment. I remember that having come somewhat late in life under the powerful influence of Crabbe's poetry, and writing to Saintsbury, he at once laid his finger on what is the chief, I think, defect in Crabbe's poetry, the monotony of his versification. But it is not always monotonous, and the monotony is often very effective for the poet's purpose.

But it is not of Saintsbury the critic that readers of this volume, I fancy, wish to hear but about Saintsbury the man. If he did not wish to write an autobiography or let some one else write a biography dealing with the intimacies of his life, which were no one's concern but his own, he has in his *Scrap Books* told one as much

as, say the late Lord Tweedsmuir or any other recent Biographer, about his days at school, at the University, his beloved Oxford, his days as a journalist, his contacts with various interesting men, his first reactions to various books—Thackeray and Swinburne—while his amazing memory enabled him to recall and dilate upon scenes and characters in a way that sent many of us back to revive our memories. And in all his books, as I have said, he leaves one in no doubt what sort of a man this is, what are his likes and dislikes. It was in an essay on Johnson, I think, I found perhaps the extremest statement of his Toryism, his conviction that everything has gone wrong politically and otherwise since the Reform Bill of 1832.

But the new wars, since their lesson was learned imperfectly, from 1854 to 1871 : and the extension of the franchise from the unstable middle class, half-way house, to the more and more unfittest ; and Darwinism ; and *Essays and Reviews* ; and the promiscuous extension of a misunderstood education ; and the repauperizing of the poor ; and the plundering not only of the rich but of all who work honestly and honestly save ; with all the rest of what is called modernism—these things have brought about once more a new relation between Johnson and the times, the relation of patient and specific.

A close parallel to such Conservatism *in excelsis* I came on in Sir John Maynard's *Russia in Flux*, where he describes the statesman Konstantin Pobiednastser :

He condemns democracy, elections, and representative institutions, the jury system, the press, free education, obligatory school attendance, all education except real education in the sphere of domestic, professional, and social life ; reform except in periods when reform is the ripe fruit of social evolution ; devotion to knowledge ; and the doctrine of evolution.

I fancy Saintsbury would have agreed to most of that statement.

But Saintsbury's sweeping statements were apt to take a more genial tone when you heard him talk. He was one of the most brilliant conversationalists that I have known. I made his acquaintance first in the summer of 1896. I had been in London, and on my way home called on him in the large house he occupied temporarily at the top of Murrayfield Avenue, and invited him to stay with us when he came to Aberdeen to lecture to the Students' Literary Society on William Morris who had died earlier in the year. It was my first experience of his flow of talk and I shall never forget it. Among other things, I remember, he dilated on the house and its capacity for a large wine-cellar. He came in October and gave the lecture. It was a lecture, as I have suggested, in which he took for granted a more intimate knowledge of Morris's poetry