ENGLISH BOOKS IN 1850

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One of the great delights of the study of Literature, is that we can learn to enjoy the best that has been thought and spoken by people who have passed through this world ahead of us. And one of the charms of reading is that we can put ourselves back in time through books...can imagine ourselves the daily companions of our own forefathers.

Today I want to take you back a hundred years and tell you some thing about what was happening in English Literature a century ago. We have reached the middle of the 20th Century..1950. What was it like to be living in England in 1850? What books had been written? What authors were people talking about? What did they believe and hope for? What kind of dreams did people have of their future? Some of these questions I am going to try to answer.

First I want to give you, very briefly, a short account of the social situation then, and of the characteristics of that period in the history of England.

In 1850, Queen Victoria was on the throne, the first queen to reign in her own right for over a century. She had been reigning for thirteen years and she was to continue on the throne for another fifty-one years, during which time immense changes were to take place. She had a family of seven children. The eldest, Victoria, who later became the mother of William 11 of Germany, was then ten years old. It was an era which was marked by two

important characteristics: 1, there was no great war and no fear of catastrophe from without, in other words, the country felt safe; 2. the whole period was marked by interest in religious questions and was deeply influenced by seriousness of thought and self-discipline of character, an outcome of the Puritan tradition. We must remember these two things, for they are reflected in all the literature of the time. The age which included 1850 has been called The Age of Reform and that too might be a good name to describe it. The industrial revolution, which had begun in the earliest part of the century, had resulted in the building of factories, the discovery of coal, the crowding of cities, the immense increase of wealth of a few and the exploitation of masses of the poor. Education, except for the rich, and even for them, was in great need of expansion. There were no colleges for women and few good schools for girls. The only occupation for women apart from women workers on farms and in factories was that of governess. It was before the day of Florence Nightingale and her experience in the Crimean War, and the nursing profession was still in the hands of uneducated older women, one of whom, Mrs. Gamp, Dickens portrayed so vividly. Although science was advancing rapidly, and steamers and trains were being used, stage coaches and sailing vessels were still numerous....journeys were long and uncomfortable, aristocratic society was all powerful, social classes were still rigid, and a general social conscience, which we now find almost

universal, was then only just beginning. Governments did not feel responsible for their humbler members. There was constant talk of the lower orders and the masses; the working man as contrasted with the gentleman. A very pompous attitude is quickly discernible in most of the writing of the period. On the other hand, many high-minded people, writers among them, were ardent in their pleas for reform.

During the year 1850 the Prince Consort, the Queen's husband, was preparing an immense Exhibition, which the Queen opened the following year, If you had been walking near Hyde Park in London, you would have seen a huge glass building being put up... The Crystal Palace. In this exhibition building all kinds of displays were being planned...to show how prosperous, how wonderful, how rich and how powerful England and her colonies had become. You must remember that when you are living in a certain era, you always consider that era to be the most extraordinary epoch the world has ever seen.

If you had been a person interested in books in 1850, you would have been eager to read a new story by Charles Dickens called David Copperfield. You could not have read it in book form, for it came out month by month, in installments. It had been begun in May 1849 but was not finished, as it was a long book, until November 1850. Dickens had already written many books and was a well established author, famous and growing richer , each year, but this book was to be his masterpiece. In it, he put a great many of the episodes of his own life and many of the characters are

real people whom he had known. He was a man of such enormous vitality and energy that he was not only writing furiously all this memorable year on his book, but he undertook the editorship of a new magazine ~~which he~~ called Household Words, which became a huge success. At the same time he often acted in private theatricals, entertained a great deal, travelled about in England and the continent. And seething in his mind was the great company of his immortal characters...Dora, the child wife, Mr. Micawber, drawn from his own father, Betsey Trotwood and Peggotty, Steerforth and Little Emily. Writing as he did in installments, he felt the pressure of the next month's issue with him all the time. One day going into a shop to buy some paper, he heard a woman ask for the latest number of David Copperfield, which was handed to her. "Oh, I have read this, I want the next one," she said and was told that it would be out at the end of the month. As not a word of the number she wanted had been written, Dickens declared that he felt frightened for the first time in his life. To understand how real each of Dickens' books was to him, we only have to read snatches of his letters in which his enthusiasms and absorption can be seen. For instance, he wrote on Jan. 31 1850:

"I feel a great hope that I shall be remembered by Little Emily, a good many years to come."

On Sept. 15th:"I have been tremendously at work these two days: eight hours at a stretch yesterday, and six hours and a half today, with the Ham and Steerforth chapter, which has completely knocked me over...utterly defeated me!"

Do you remember that marvellous chapter about the storm at Yar-

mouth when Steerforth is on the wreck in the tempest and Ham, whom he has wronged in the past, goes to his rescue but is too late and they are both drowned? It is one of the greatest descriptions of a gathering storm in English fiction and the threatening weather only throws into relief the terror and passions of the people who are involved.

There isn't time to quote much, but let me read you a bit of that chapter:" It was broad day light...eight or nine o'clock; the storm raging, and someone knocking and calling at my door.
'what's the matter,'I cried.
Aa wreck! Close by!
I sprang out of bed and asked what wreck.
'A schooner from Spain or Portugal, laden with fruit and wine. Make haste, sir, if you want to see her! It's thought, down at the beach , she'll go to pieces every moment.'
The excited voices went clamoring down the staircase and I wrapped myself in my clothes as quickly as I could and ran into the street. Numbers of people were there before me, all running in one direction, to the beach. I ran the same way, outstripping a good many, and soon came facing the wild sea.
A half-dressed boatman, standing next to me, pointed with his bare arm (a tattoo'd arrow on it, pointing in the same direction) to the left. Then, O great Heaven, I saw it close upon us!
One mast was broken short off, six or eight feet from the deck, and lay over the side, entangled in the maze of sail and rigging; and all that ruin, as the ship rolled beat the side as if it would stave it in...
As the ship which was broadside on, turned towards us in her rolling I plainly descried her people at work with axes, espcially one active figure with long curling hair conspicuous among the rest. But a great cry, which was audible even above the wind and water, rose from the shore at that moment; the sea, sweeping over the rolling wreck, made a clean breach, and carried men, casks, planks, bulwarks, heaps of such toys, into the boiling surge."

And then after Ham is known to have been killed and there is no hope for anyone on the wreck, we have that dramatic ending to the chapter called The Tempest. Dickens never says the name of Steerforth, but we know it was he on the sinking ship. Here is the last bit of that chapter:

"...a fisherman, who had known me when Emily and I were children,

and ever since, whispered my name.
'Sir,' he said, with tears starting to his weather-beaten face, which with trembling lips, was ashy pale, 'will you come over yonder?'
..I asked him, terror-stricken, leaning on the arm he held out to support me:
'Has a body come ashore?'
He said, 'Yes.'
' Do I know it?' I asked then.
He answered nothing.
But, he led me to the shore. And on that part of it where she and I had looked for shells, two children--on that part of it where some lighter fragments of the old boat blown down last night, had been scattered by the wind--among the ruins of the home he had wronged-- I saw him lying with his head upon his arm, as I had often seen him lie at school."

At last in October, Dickens wrote: "I have just finished Copperfield and don't know whether to laugh or cry...I have an idea of wandering somewhere for a day or two...To Rochester I think where I was a small boy...to get all this fortnight's work out of my head."

David Copperfield is less concerned with reform than some of Dickens'other stories, such as Nicholas Nickleby, which showed up a bad school, or Oliver Twist, which aroused sympathy for a poor foundling, but it was his own favorite novel because he put so much of himself into it. Someone once said: " If modern novels pall, if we get tired of new stories, we can never despair, for we can always read again, David Copperfield.

There was another great author who was writing a novel, also in installments in 1850. This was a man very different from Dickens in his upbringing, in his education, in his approach to life...but none the less fine in another way, William Makepeace Thackeray. He was writing a novel which had much in it that was autobiographical too...Pendennis. Thackeray became famous as a novelist much later in his life than Dickens, but by this time

he was a well established author, for three years before, in 1847 he had written Vanity Fair, one of the greatest novels in the English language. Thackeray too was a reformer in his way, but his criticisms were levelled at society, at the weaknesses of worldly men. He was called a cynic, but actually his heart was soft and sentimental, and underlying all his work, one discovers a vein of sadness. Thackeray was a tremendously sociable person, who enjoyed good company, good food and good wine. He had been to Cambridge, had studied in Paris and had mixed in educated circles all his life. But he had a great misfortune...his wife, after a few years of married life, lost her mind...all his life he was a sad and lonely man. He had two daughters whom he loved very dearly and for whose sake he worked to make money. His habits were irregular and haphazard, so that his health suffered. While he was writing Pendennis, he had a verysevere illness and nearly died. But his fine physique asserted itself and he survived. He lived to write other books, to travel and lecture in America. The system of writing novels in installments was a great trial to Thackerary as he could never organize his time or make plans in advance. Often and often he was writing his month's installment, while a boy from the printer was waiting outside his room for the copy. Sometimes the ink was hardly dry when the boy snatched the papers and ran off with them to have them pblished.

Amongst the many admirers of Thackeray's gifts as a writer was a shy young woman who herself had written a much talked of novel. She was the daughter of a country parson and lived in the tiny

hamlet of Haworth on the edge of the Yorkshire moors, in the bleak north country. The novel she had written was Jane Eyre but no one but her publishers and her family knew it because she had used a pen name, Currer Bell, to disguise her sex. In 1850 she was a very sad and lonely woman because tragedy had dogged her footsteps for the two years previously. Her gifted sister, Emily, who had written a novel, Wuthering Heights, (were these two novels by the same man, people asked) had died fifteen months before, unknown to the world and only a year before her other sister, Anne, who was also a writer, had followed her. Shortly before that, her brother, Branwell, who had shown such wonderful talents in writing and drawing had wasted his life and drunk himself to death. Thus Charlotte Brontë was living alone with her eccentric father in the gray parsonage in Haworth. She had just completed her second novel, Shirley about her sister, Emily. And at last her secret was out, for in this novel she described the region around Haworth so faithfully that a man, who lived in Liverpool wrote a letter to the paper in that city and said he was sure the writer of Shirley was someone who lived in Haworth and no one there was capable of writing such a book but Charlotte Brontë, the parson's daughter. So at last, even though she still tried to hide behind the name of Currer Bell, she had to admit that she really was a woman and that she had written both Jane Eyre and Shirley. After that people wanted to meet her. But she had been a poor, despised governess in rich houses and was deeply prejudiced against what she called society. However, she went to London and visited

in some great houses and met her idol, Thackeray. She was dreadfully shy, so easily upset that after an evening of entertainment, she went to bed with a sick headache. She was serious, sad and Puritanical in appearance, never at her best with strangers. About her first meeting with Thackeray, she wrote:

"When Mr. Thackeray was announced I saw him enter, looked up at his tall figure, heard his voice, but the whole indident was truly dreamlike. I was only certain it was true because I became miserably destitute of self-possession...Had I not been obliged to speak, I could have managed well, but it behooved me to answer when addressed, and the effort was torture. ..I spoke stupidly."

Too
Thackeray recorded his first meeting with Charlotte Brontë. He wrote:" I remember the trembling little figure, the little hand, the great honest eyes. An impetuous honesty seemed to me to characterize the woman. Twice I recollect she took me to task for what she held to be errors in doctrine. I fancied an austere little Joan of Arc marching in upon us and rebuking us for our easy lives, our easy morals. She gave me the impression of a very pure, lofty and highminded person."

I have said that this period in English history was concerned with reform and with religion. Boththese tendencies can be most vividly seen in the life and writings of Charles Kingsley. I wonder how many of you are familiar with that name; and how many of you have read one of his novels, Alton Locke. In my youth he was one of my greatest heroes and his book, published in 1850, this year I am talking about, was a tragic story that moved me as that kind of social tragedy can move a young, idealistic student. I remember perfectly well when I first read Alton Locke. It was in the old Lirary at Üsküdar, with its modest shelves, its scanty books, its two broad windows that looked out on our quiet garden. It was a revelation to me. It told the story of a poor tailor, living in miserable conditions in London, half-starved but longing for an education and all the intellectual delights that, in those days, were reserved only for the rich and well born. The tailor was a poet, he had friends in Cambridge, but could never achieve success because he was lowly in birth and poor. He spoke for the poor and downtrodden. His reward was 3 years in prison.

Kingsley had visited the slums of London in the district called Bermondsey and was so appalled at the dreadful unsanitary houses, at the wretched overcrowding, the prevalence of disease and the degrading surroundings that he determined to tell the world about them all and try to bring about reform. He wrote the book at white heat. As Kingsley himself was a prosperous clergyman, a university man and what was known as a "gentleman", people were horrified at his outspoken sympathy with the working man. In that very fact, it seems to me, lies the worst condemnation of the indifference of most privileged people to the fearful living conditions, which sudden industrialization in England had developed. Thousands of poor people in those days lived almost like animals, they died of preventable diseases, and when they complained or tried to bring about reforms themselves, they were ruthlessly suppressed. Kingsley's book awoke the conscience of England somewhat and later on reform in these matters did take place. But it was a long and bitter struggle.

Kingsley was also a poet...some of his verse was extraordinarily good...but he is remembered mostly for his earnest, devoted, sincere love of his fellow men and his desire to better their conditions, to have more people enjoy the happy life that he himself enjoyed.

In conncetion with this talk, I have just reread Alton Locke. I found it old fashioned, of course, dealing with questions of religion, for instance, that do not bother people today. But the utter sincerity of the author shines in every page. And now

and then he breaks into sheer poetry, describing as he does, the beauties and freedom of nature. Listen to this, for instance. His hero, Alton, is walking from London to Cambridge...and he sees the countryside for the first time in his life. This is how he describes his feelings:

"Oh, the joy! The lawns with their high elms and firs, the green hedgerows, the delicate hue and scent of the fresh clover fields, the steep clay banks where I stopped to pick nosegays of wild flowers and became again a child...and hurried on... while my eyes ranged free, for the first time in my life, over the chequered squares of cultivation, over glittering brooks and hills quivering in the green hazewhile above hung the skylarks, pouring out their souls in melody....So on I went, down the bright broad road, which seemed to beckon me forward to the unknown expanses of human life...and I saw it both with my eyes and with my imagination in the temper of a boy broke loose from school. My heart kept holiday. I loved and blessed the birds which flitted past me and the cows which lay dreaming on the sward...and then I recollected the tail_ors' shop...and the starvation, and the oppression which I had left behind, and, ashamed of my own selfishness, went hurrying on again."

All these people I have mentioned so far...Dickens, Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë and Kingsley knew each other, discussed each others' books and met many times in London. In 1850 they were all talking about a wonderful newpoem which had just been published called In Memoriam. At first nobody knew who had written it, as it appeared anonymously, but soon it was discovered to be by the poet, Alfred Tennyson, a man of forty, who had written some very fine poetry, but who was admired by only a small circle. Much of his work had been severely criticized in the past and he was not too well known.

That year, 1850, the old poet laureate , William Wordsworth, had died and everyone was wondering who would be the next poet laureate. The fame of his poem had something to do with the appointment of Alfred Tennyson to that high post.

You all know the name of In Memoriam , if you have not read the whole poem. Alfred Tennyson, when a young man at Cambridge, had made a friend of a brilliant fellow student, Arthur Hallam. They were closer than brothers. After they had left the university, Arthur Hallam came to visit the Tennysons and became engaged to Alfred's sister, Emily. The two college friends talked and wrote and travelled together each enjoying the other's genius. A few years later, in 1833, Arthur Hallam went on a journey to Austria with his father. One day, very suddenly, with no warning illness, Arthur Hallam died of a heart attack in his hotel room. Alfred Tennyson was stunned by this blow. The comfortable religious faith he had had seemed to him hollow. Why did these terrible things happen? For years Tennyson brooded on the meaning of life and death. He began writing verses about his friend interwoven with a search in his own mind for the riddle of life. For a time he called these odd verses "the elegies." They are intense fragments each complete in itself, of a mood or a thought or a description.

It was Tennyson's wife, another Emily, whom he married in June 1850, who suggested to him that he call his poem, which had never been published but which had been embelished and added to over a period of seventeen years, In Memoriam. Someone has described it thus: "Tennyson has woven the fragments together into a poem portraying the progress of the human spirit from sorrow to joy, not by the loss of love or the mere dulling of grief but the merging of the passion for the individual friend, removed but still living, into the lerger love of God and his fellowmen."

He almost thinks aloud in this poem. His every mood is represent-

ed. Let me quote a few verses. These verses, it seems to me, not only voice what is felt by many people the world over when faced by the mystery of life on this earth, but are characteristic of the mid-Victorian era , whenreligious changes, in the face of the growing importance of science, were worrying a great many people: Tennyson must believe that good will triumph:

"Oh, yet we trust that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill,
To pangs of nature, sins of will,
Defects of doubt and taints of blood;

That nothing walks with aimless feet ;
That not one life shall be destroyed,
Or cast as rubbish to the void,
When God has made his pile complete.

Behold we know not anything;
I can but trust that good shall fall
At last...far off...at last, to all,
And every winter change to spring. "

And then his mood changes and he wonders again and again:

So runs my dream: but what am I?
An infant crying in the night;
An infant crying for the light;
And with no language but a cry."

The success of In Memoriam was tremendous. From that moment Tennyson's future was assured. He had reached a turning point in his life. He was happily married, he had written a great poem and he had been made poet laureate...all in the middle year of the century..1850.

I have told you enough for you to know that the year 1850 was a significant moment in the history of English Literature. There is no time to dwell on other authors, of whom there were many... essayists, historians, poets. For instance, the Brownings were

both of them writing. They had married in 1846 and had gone to live in Italy. Elizabeth Barrett Browning published that year, her famous Sonnets from the Portuguese of which I have spoken to you before. Ruskin was in Venice too collecting material for his great work, The Stones of Venice, which made its mark on the artistic life of England. Carlyle was living in London, a powerful influence on the minds of many of the younger writers of that time, and Darwin was already formulating in his mind, his devastating theory of evolution, though his book, The Origin of Species, was not published till nine years later.

It is too early to assess the achievements of our own century and the books that are being published now in 1950. But we can truthfully say of a hundred years ago "There were giants in those days."

In closing may I add just a small bit of local color to the year 1850...which does not belong to English Literature at all but to us personally. Dr. Mary Mills Patrick to whom we owe the conception of this college was born on March 10,1850. No wonder she was a pioneer..for although she was born in America, she came into an Anglo-Saxon world interested in individual effort, embued with the idea of discipline and character. She was born into an age of reform. And the end of her great effort is not yet, for her work was a living organism that continues to grow and expand from year to year.

ETS.