

**JOHN ADDINGTON
SYMONDS; A
BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY**

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John Addington Symonds; a biographical study by Van Wyck Brooks

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VAN WYCK BROOKS

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A BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY

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TO
MAXWELL EVARTS PERKINS
AND
LOUISE SAUNDERS PERKINS

from their affectionate friend

PREFACE

NINETEEN years have now passed since the death of Symonds. During that period no study of his life and work has appeared except the original Biography, compiled from his *Autobiography*, letters, and diaries, by his friend, Mr. Horatio F. Brown, the well-known author of *Life on the Lagoons* and other works dealing with Venice. Meanwhile his reputation remains substantially unaltered in the fields covered by his writings, and he continues to hold a special and an honorable place in late Victorian literature. No English critic indeed is more universally known among popular students of culture, both in England and America. "There has, in our time," wrote William Sharp, in the year of Symonds' death, "been no mind more sensitive to beauty, and that not only in one or even in two, but in all the arts—in nature to an exceptional

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degree, and in human life and human nature to a degree still rarer." And Frederic Harrison, in an essay which remains the most satisfactory summing-up of the man, says of Symonds: "He has a wider and more erudite familiarity with the whole field of modern literature and art than had either Ruskin or Matthew Arnold. Indeed we may fairly assume that none of his contemporaries has been so profoundly saturated at once with classical poetry, Italian and Elizabethan literature, and modern poetry, English, French, and German. Though Symonds had certainly not the literary charm of Ruskin, or Matthew Arnold, perhaps of one or two others among his contemporaries, he had no admitted superior as a critic in learning or in judgment."

But although his writings are known everywhere and by all, the man is known very slightly. And the man was, as his friend Robert Louis Stevenson said, "a far more interesting thing than any of his books." Only a handful of his closest friends ever guessed the peculiar spiritual tragedy which accompanied the development of a life in so many

ways outwardly tragic. As it is chronicled in his private memoranda it presents the only really close parallel to the more familiar tragedy of Amiel which is recorded in English literature. Psychologically the case of Symonds has a unique interest.

Aside from Mr. Brown's work, the literary material bearing directly on Symonds is curiously meagre. The publications of his daughter Mrs. Vaughn have proved helpful to me, as also the various essays, reviews, notices, or memorials by Frederic Harrison, Professor Dowden, Walter Pater, William Sharp, Mr. Hall Caine, Churton Collins, and Professor Villari. I have also made liberal use of the *Life and Letters of Jowett*, the *Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, and Mr. Horace Traubel's great work, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. Dr. Symonds' *Miscellanies* contributed to form my view of Symonds' father. Aside from these sources, almost all the writings of Symonds himself are surprisingly autobiographical to anyone who reads them with some previous knowledge of the man.

Few readers of Symonds may realize the

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obligation they are under to Mr. H. F. Brown, his literary executor, who has devoted years of entirely disinterested, patient, affectionate labor, as biographer and as editor, to the memory and fame of his friend. I wish here to record my own grateful sense of this indebtedness.