Anna Seward

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[Picture: Picture of Anna Seward]

Anna Seward
AND
CLASSIC LICHFIELD,

BY

STAPLETON MARTIN, M.A.

AUTHOR OF

“*Izaak Walton and his Friends*,” *etc.*

“As long as the names of Garrick, of Johnson, and of Seward shall endure, Lichfield will live renowned.”—_Clarke_.

“Biography, the most interesting perhaps of every species of composition, loses all its interest with me when the shades and lights of the principal characters are not accurately and faithfully detailed.”

Extract from a letter of Sir Walter Scott to Anna Seward.

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PREFACE.

Literature and music and science have been found this year amazingly prolific in centenary commemorations of their great exemplars, as a leading article in the “Times,” for April, 1909, has lately reminded us. Yet the death in 1809 of Anna Seward, who “for many years held a high rank in the annals of British literature,” to quote the words of Sir Walter Scott, has generally passed unnoticed. It is the aim of this book to resuscitate interest in the poetess, and in the literary circle over which she reigned supreme.

ANNA SEWARD

Anna Seward, a daughter of the Rev. Thomas Seward, destined to become, by universal assent, the first poetess of her day in England, was born 12th December, 1747. Her mother was Elizabeth, one of the three daughters of the Rev. John Hunter (who was in 1704 appointed Head Master of Lichfield Grammar School), by his first wife, Miss Norton, a daughter of Edward Norton, of Warwick, and sister of the Rev. Thomas Norton, of Warwick. Anna Seward's parents were married at Newton Regis Church, Warwickshire, in October, 1741. The poetess was born at Eyam in Derbyshire, where her father was then the Rector. She was baptized Anne, but she generally wrote her name Anna. Her pet name in her own family was "Nancy," and also often "Julia."

Mr. Seward attained some literary fame, and was co-adjutor to an edition of the works of Beaumont and Fletcher. When Anna Seward was seven years old, the family removed to Lichfield, and when she was thirteen they moved into the Bishop's Palace, "our pleasant home" as she called it, where she continued to live after her father's death, and for the remainder of her days.

The derivation of the word “Lichfield” has excited a good deal of controversy. In Anna Seward’s time, it was generally thought to mean “the field of dead bodies,” *cadaverum campus*—from a number of Christian bodies which lay massacred and unburied there, in the persecution raised by Diocletian. A reference to “Notes and Queries,” in the Sixth and Eighth Series, will show an inquirer that later search throws some doubt on such derivation. St. Chad, or Ceadda (669–672) founded the diocese of Lichfield, and was its patron saint.

The Cathedral, the Venus of Gothic creation, as now existing, was built piecemeal during the 13th and early part of 14th centuries. The present Bishop’s Palace is of stone, and was erected in 1687, by Thomas Wood, who was Bishop from 1671 to 1692, on the site of the old palace, built by Bishop Walter de Langton (1296–1321). The Bishops of Lichfield had a palace at Eccleshall, and this was the one used by these dignitaries down to the time of Bishop George Augustus Selwyn, who, it may be mentioned, was born 5th April, 1809. The latter sold it, and with part of the net proceeds added two ugly wings and an ugly chapel to the palace when he came to dwell there, in order to make it a centre of religious activity in the diocese. The body of the palace is, however, to this day little

changed from its state when inhabited by the Sewards.

Anna Seward had several sisters, and one brother, all of whom died in infancy, except her second sister, Sarah. She, almost on the eve of marriage in her nineteenth year, to Mr. Porter, brother to Mrs. Lucy Porter of Lichfield, and son-in-law to Dr. Samuel Johnson, died in June, 1764. She is described as having been "lovely."

A stanza in "The Visions," an elegy, the first of the poems in Anna Seward's "Poetical Works," having reference to the sad event, runs thus:—

> The bridal vestments waited to array,
> In emblematic white, their duteous maid;
> But ne'er for them arrived that festal day;
> Their sweet, crush'd lily low in earth is laid.

John Hunter was Samuel Johnson's schoolmaster, and Johnson declared that he was very "severe, and wrong-headedly severe." He once said, "My master whipt me very well. Without that, sir, I should have done nothing." Mrs. Hunter died in July, 1780, aged 66. She had been very beautiful, from all accounts, insomuch that Dr. Green, afterwards Bishop

of Lincoln, and Dr. Newton, afterwards Bishop of Lichfield ("the learned and lucky pair") were once, Anna Seward tells us, rivals in their attachment to her.

Miss Honora Sneyd was the youngest daughter of Edward Sneyd, who was the youngest son of Ralph Sneyd of Bishton, in Staffordshire. She was adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Seward and brought up by them as one of their own children.

Edward Sneyd was a Major of the Royal Horse Guards (blue), and became a widower early in life. The death of his wife was a great affliction, but his relations and friends, who were numerous, proved eager to take charge of his daughters. Nothing could have exceeded the kindness and care with which Mrs. Seward executed the trust that she had undertaken. Indeed, none could have singled out Honora from Mrs. Seward's own daughters by the light of anything in Mrs. Seward's treatment or conduct. Honora was very beautiful and accomplished, and had attracted many admirers, as well as lovers. Anna Seward relates a whimsical story of an "oddity," an "awkward pedantic youth, once resident for a little time at Lichfield, who, when asked how he liked Honora, replied, 'I could not have conceived that she had half the face she has,' adding that Honora was finely

rallied about this imputed plenitude of face. The oval elegance of its delicate and beauteous contour made the exclamation trebly absurd." But her first real lover was the "ill-fated" Major André. He first met Honora at Buxton, or Matlock, and, falling deeply in love with her, became a frequent visitor at the Palace. He writes, "How am I honoured in Mr. and Mrs. Seward's attachment to me!" An engagement followed, but the marriage was prohibited. The reason, it would seem, was that André had not sufficient means to support a wife. André wrote to Honora, "But oh! my dear Honora! it is for thy sake only I wish for wealth," which wealth, indeed, he called "vile trash" in another of his letters.

The story of the young soldier is truly a sad one. In 1780, while serving in America, André was entrusted with secret negotiations for the betrayal of West Point to the British forces, but was captured by the Americans. In spite of his petition that General Washington would "adapt the mode of death to his feelings as a man of honour," he was hanged as a spy at Tappan. General Washington was unable to listen to strong appeals for clemency, for, though commander of the American armies, his voice counted but one on the court martial. André was of French descent, and has been described as high-spirited, accomplished, affectionate and merry-hearted. Anna Seward tells us that he appeared to her to be

“dazzled” by Honora, who estimated highly his talents; but the poetess adds that he did not possess “the reasoning mind” Honora required. In 1821 his body was, on the petition of the Duke of York, brought to England. “The courtesy and good feeling,” remarks Dean Stanley of the Americans, were remarkable. The bier was decorated with garlands and flowers, as it was transported to the ship. On arrival in England the remains were first deposited in the Islip Chapel, and subsequently buried in the nave of Westminster Abbey, where the funeral service was celebrated, and where a monument was erected to his memory.

Washington, Anna Seward records, did her the honour to charge his aide-de-camp to assure her that no circumstances of his life had given him so much pain as the necessary sacrifice of André’s life.

Thomas Day, the author of “Sandford and Merton,” who spent a good deal of his life in hunting for a wife, made love to Honora. She, however, refused to marry him; and small wonder, for the conditions he wished to impose on her were ridiculously stringent and restrictive, and she, not unnaturally, refused to entertain the prospect of the unqualified control of a husband over all her actions, implied by his requirements. Later on Day wished to marry Honora’s sister, but she also refused his offer. It

may be added that he eventually succeeded in marrying a Yorkshire lady, who became devoted to him, and was inconsolable on his death, in 1789, from a kick by a horse.

The Earl of Warwick, when Lord George Greville, met Honora at some race-meeting, and was, we read, much fascinated with her. A Colonel Barry also was her lover, and once stated, “she was the only woman he had ever seriously loved.”

Honora supplied the place of Sarah Seward, after the latter’s death, in Anna Seward’s affections, and numbers of her poems and letters testify how ardently the poetess admired and loved her.

In 1765 Richard Lovell Edgeworth, the well-known author, visited Lichfield. He had been a wild and gay young man, and had eloped with his first wife, who died in March, 1773. His personal address was “gracefully spirited, and his conversation eloquent.” He danced and fenced well, was an ingenious mechanic, and invented a plan for telegraphing, consequent on a desire to know the result of a race at Newmarket. Becoming very intimate with the Sewards, and the addresses he had made to and for Honora, “after some time being permitted and

approved,” Edgeworth married her on 17th July, 1773, as his second wife, in the beautiful ladies’ choir in Lichfield Cathedral. Mr. Seward, who had become a Canon Residentiary of Lichfield Cathedral, performed the ceremony, and shed “tears of joy while he pronounced the nuptial benediction,” and Anna Seward is recorded to have been really glad to see Honora united to a man whom she had often thought peculiarly suited to her friend in taste and disposition.

Honora died of consumption in 1780, and, in accordance with her dying wish, Edgeworth married her sister Elizabeth on Christmas Day in the same year. Honora, who was buried at King’s Weston, had issue two children.

In Anna Seward’s elegy, entitled “Lichfield,” written in 1781, we read:—

> “When first this month, stealing from half-blown bowers,
> Bathed the young cowslip in her sunny showers,
> Pensive I travell’d, and approach’d the plains,
> That met the bounds of Severn’s wide domains.
> As up the hill I rose, from whose green brow
> The village church o’erlooks the vale below,
> O! when its rustic form first met my eyes,

What wild emotions swell'd the rising sighs!
Stretch'd the pain'd heart-strings with the utmost force
Grief knows to feel, that knows not dire remorse;
For there—yes there,—its narrow porch contains
My dear Honora's cold and pale remains,
Whose lavish'd health, in youth, and beauty's bloom,
Sunk to the silence of an early tomb."

Edgeworth is to be remembered as having been a good Irish landlord; he had a property at Edgeworthstown.

In 1802 Anna Seward wrote, "The stars glimmered in the lake of Weston as we travelled by its side, but their light did not enable me to distinguish the Church, beneath the floor of whose porch rests the mouldered form of my heart—dear Honora,—yet of our approach to that unrecording, but thrice consecrated spot, my heart felt all the mournful consciousness."

It is not easy to agree with Mr. E. V. Lucas, the author of a very entertaining book, entitled "A Swan and her Friends" (Methuen & Co.), when he says, "of Honora's married life little is known, but she *may*

have been very happy," for she left a letter, written a few days before her death, which cannot easily be construed as applying merely to her death-bed state. Here is a paragraph from it:—

> "I have every blessing, and I am happy. The conversation of my beloved husband, when my breath will let me have it, is my greatest delight, he procures me every comfort, and as he always said he thought he should, contrives for me everything that can ease and quiet my weakness."

> "Like a kind angel whispers peace,
> And smooths the bed of death."

Her husband records that she was the most beloved as a wife, a sister, and a friend, of any person he had ever known. Each member of her own family, unanimously, almost intuitively, preferred her.

Anne Hunter, the eldest sister of Mrs. Seward, married a few days before her, viz., in October, 1741, at Newton Regis Church, the Rev. Samuel Martin, the Rector, who was formerly a Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford. He afterwards became the Rector of Gotham, Notts., where he remained for

27 years, until his death, in 1775. In a letter dated 23rd June, 1764, written from Gotham, while visiting “her excellent Uncle and Aunt Martin,” as she styled them, soon after the death of Sarah Seward, Anna Seward says, “pious tranquility broods over the kind and hospitable mansion, and the balms of sympathy and the cordials of devotion are here poured into our torn hearts,” and “my cousin, Miss Martin, is of my sister’s age, and was deservedly beloved by her above all her other companions next to myself and Honora.”

It was Dr. Erasmus Darwin (grandfather of Charles Robert Darwin, the naturalist, who died in 1882, author of the “Origin of the Species”) who first discovered Anna Seward as a poetess. Happening to peruse some verses apparently written by her, he took an opportunity of calling at the Palace when Anna Seward was alone, and satisfied himself that she could write good poetry unaided, and that her literary abilities were of no common kind.

Dr. Darwin (who was a native of Nottinghamshire) in either the year 1756 or 1757, arrived in Lichfield to practise as a Physician there, where he resided until 1781. Darwin was a “votary to poetry,” a philosopher, and a clever though an eccentric man. He wrote “The Botanic Garden,” which

Anna Seward pronounced to be “a string of poetic brilliants,” and in which book Horace Walpole noted a passage “the most sublime in any author or in any of the few languages with which I am acquainted.” He inserted in it, as his own work, some lines of Anna Seward’s,—which was ungallant, to say the least. Anna Seward’s mother repressed her early attempts at poetry, so for a time she contented herself with reading “our finest poets,” and with “voluminous correspondence.” On her mother’s death, being free to exercise her poetical powers, she forthwith produced odes, sonnets, songs, epitaphs, epilogues, and elegies, in profusion.

Anna Seward visited Bath, and her introduction into the literary “world” was made by Anna, Lady Miller, a verse writer of some fame, who instituted a literary salon at Bath-Easton, during the Bath season. An antique vase, which had been dug up in Italy in 1759, was placed on a modern altar decorated with laurel, each guest being invited to place in the urn an original composition in verse. When it was determined which were the best three productions, their authors were crowned by Lady Miller with wreaths of myrtle. Lady Miller died in 1781, and a handsome monument in the Abbey at Bath marks the spot where she was buried. It is stated in the D.N.B. that the urn, after her death, was set up in the public park in Bath.

Fanny Burney met Lady Miller, whom she describes with her usual candour: "Lady Miller is a round, plump, coarse-looking dame of about forty, and while all her aim is to appear an elegant woman of fashion, all her success is to seem an ordinary woman in very common life, with fine clothes on. Her habits are bustling, her air is mock-important, and her manners very inelegant."

Once a year the most ingenious of the vase effusions was published, the net profits being applied to some Bath charity. Four volumes of the compositions appeared. The prize poem was written several times by Anna Seward, and on one occasion was awarded for her monody on the death of David Garrick.

Macaulay says, in his essay on Madame D'Arblay, that Lady Miller kept a vase "wherein fools were wont to put bad verses." Dr. Johnson also said, when Boswell named a gentleman of his acquaintance who wrote for the vase, "He was a blockhead for his pains"; on the other hand, when told that the Duchess of Northumberland wrote, Johnson said, "Sir, the Duchess of Northumberland may do what she pleases: nobody will say anything to a lady of her high rank." Remembering who were ranked among the

contributors to the “Saloon of the Minervas,” these criticisms seem rather absurd, for

> “Bright glows the list with many an honour’d name.”

Christopher Anstey, a fellow of King’s College, Cambridge, remembered as having written the “New Bath Guide,” and as having been deemed worthy a cenotaph in Poets’ Corner in Westminster Abbey, and William Hayley, appear to have been among the best-known to fame at “the fanciful and romantic institution at Bath-Easton.” The latter was a friend of Cowper, Romney and Southey, and published the lives of the two former. In “English Bards and Scotch Reviewers,” occur these lines:—

> “Triumphant first see Temper’s Triumph shine,
> At least I’m sure they triumphed over mine.
> Of ‘Music’s Triumphs’ all who read may swear
> That luckless music never triumphed there.”

The poems “Triumphs of Temper” (1781) and “Triumphs of Music” (1804) were Hayley’s chief productions. He was the most ardent of all of those who paid their homage to Anna Seward. Mr. Lucas informs us that David

Garrick appears also in the list. To the foregoing names may be added Edward Jerningham, the friend of Chesterfield and Horace Walpole, a dramatist as well as a poet; George Butt, the divine, and chaplain to George III.; William Crowe, “the new star,” as Anna Seward calls him, a divine and public orator at Oxford; and Richard Graves, a poet and novelist, the Rector of Claverton, who wrote “Recollections of Shenstone” in 1788. These, and Thomas Sedgwick Whalley, were perhaps the most learned of the vase group. The latter, Fanny Burney says, was one of its best supporters. He was a Prebendary of Wells Cathedral, and corresponded a good deal with Anna Seward. Wilberforce’s description of him is worth recalling, viz., “the true picture of a sensible, well-informed and educated, polished, old, well-beneficed, nobleman’s and gentleman’s house-frequenting, literary and chess-playing divine.”

Anna Seward’s “Elegy on Captain Cook,” and her “Monody on Major André,” were contributed to the Vase, and immediately brought her into great repute.

Anna Seward made friends with, and had a great admiration for, the celebrated recluses, “the ladies of Llangollen Vale,”—Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Sarah Ponsonby. They were so called because when they arrived

their names were unknown. It is said that they never left their home for 50 years, and were so absolutely devoted as to be inseparable from each other. They adopted a semi-masculine attire. These curious ladies,—“extraordinary women,”—are described as ladies of genius, taste and knowledge—who were “sought by the first characters of the age, both as to rank and talents.”

She kept up a considerable correspondence with both of them. Their house at Plas Newydd is described minutely and at great length in one of her letters. It is still standing, and continues to be visited by scores of tourists. Lady Eleanor Butler died in 1829, and Miss Sarah Ponsonby in 1831. One of Anna Seward’s poems is entitled “Llangollen Vale,” and was inscribed to these ladies, as likewise were some more of her verses.

In 1782 Anna Seward produced “Louisa,” a poetical novel in four epistles. It ran through five editions. She says that she received the highest encomiums upon the poem “by the first literary characters of the age.” It is now rarely read. However, the writer of an article in “The Lady’s Monthly Museum” for March, 1799, vol. 2, wrote that, “the story, though interesting enough, is but a secondary object. It is told in strains, which, for energy, voluptuousness, and dignity of description, are rarely

found in our language.” The writer further states that “our readers will be amply gratified by a perusal of the whole poem, which is everywhere equally replete with genius and taste, happy invention, and a luxury of glowing description.”

She found another writer of the time ready to defend her against a reviewer who had brought a charge of “accumulating in her dramatic characters glaring metaphors,” and of aiming “to dazzle by superfluity of ornaments.”

In 1790 Canon Seward died. He was deeply beloved by his daughter, who most dutifully nursed him for some ten years before his death.

Twelve years later Dr. Darwin died suddenly, in the very act of writing a letter to Richard Lovell Edgeworth; and in 1804 Anna Seward published a biographical Memoir of Darwin, in reference to which Sir Walter Scott wrote, “he could not have wished his fame and character entrusted to a pen more capable of doing them ample and, above all, discriminating justice.” She called Darwin her “bright luminary.” On his death she wrote thus:—“His extinction is universally lamented, from the most operative cause of regret; and while disease may no longer turn the eyes

of hope upon his rescuing and restoring skill, the poetic fanes lose a splendid source of ornament; philosophic science, an ingenious and daring dictator; and medicinal art, a pillar of transcendent strength.” The Memoir she called, “The woman’s mite in biography.” This book, notwithstanding Sir Walter Scott’s praise, is, nowadays, considered but a poor piece of writing.

The Lichfield literary circle in Anna Seward’s time included many learned people, for, besides Dr. Darwin, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, and Thomas Day, may be mentioned the two Canons of the Cathedral—Archdeacon Vyse and Canon Sneyd Davies, a poet; the Rev. William Robinson (nicknamed “The Rector” amongst his friends), a great wit, one who could “set the table in a roar”; Sir Brooke Boothby, a poet and politician; her cousin, the Rev. Henry White
{20}, Sacrist of Lichfield Cathedral (who married Lucy, the daughter of the Rev. John Hunter by his second wife); and sometimes Dr. Johnson, but his presence was not much appreciated. “There was,” wrote Sir Walter Scott, “some aristocratic prejudice in their dislike, for the despotic manners of Dr. Johnson were least likely to be tolerated when the lowness of his origin was in fresh recollection.”

How came Anna Seward to dominate and reign as the Queen over the literary society in Lichfield? The great “magnetic” power she must have possessed accounts to a large extent for the popular adulation bestowed upon her. Still, the circumstances of her residence in the Episcopal Palace, and her being by birth a lady and endowed with a certain amount of wealth, added to an attractive presence, must have greatly helped her to attain the position.

Anna Seward certainly hated, and hated venomously, Dr. Johnson, who was afraid of her, and he, she says, “hated me.” She could not endure his mannerisms, but mimicked his gestures and curious demeanours; calling him “a despot,” “the old literary Colossus,” an “envious calumniator,” “surly Samuel Johnson,” “the massive Being,” “the old elephant,” and “a growler.”

In 1787, Anna Seward tells us, she became acquainted with Mr. and Mrs. Piozzi (formerly Mrs. Thrale), and on the latter’s publication of Johnson’s letters, she writes:—“Greatly as I admired Johnson’s talents and revered his knowledge, and formidable as I felt the powers to be of his witty sophistry, yet did a certain quickness of spirit, and zeal for the reputation of my favourite authors, irresistibly urge me to defend

them against his spleenful injustice—a temerity, which I was well aware made him dislike me, notwithstanding the coaxing regard he always expressed for me on his first salutations on returning to Lichfield.” Again, in other letters, she says:—… “I have had frequent opportunities of conversing with that wonderful man (Dr. Johnson). Seldom did I listen to him without admiring the great powers of his mind, and feeling concern and pain at the malignance of his disposition. He would sometimes be just to the virtues and literary fame of others, if they had not been praised in the conversation before his opinion was asked—if they had been previously praised, never.” …

“What right had a man who wrote a play for the stage, to avow contempt for the theatric profession”? she wrote, when referring to Johnson’s envy of David Garrick. Boswell admitted, when he visited Anna Seward, in 1785, at Lichfield, that Johnson was “galled by Garrick’s prosperity.” … “Who can think Johnson’s heart a good one? In the course of many years’ personal acquaintance with him, I never knew a single instance in which the praise (from another’s lip) of any human being, excepting that of Mrs. Thrale, was not a caustic on his spirit; and this, whether their virtues or abilities were the subject of encomium.” His opinions of poetry were, she thought, “so absurd and inconsistent with each other,

that, though almost any of his dogmas may be clearly and easily confronted, yet the attempt is but combating an hydra-headed monster … Johnson's 'Lives of the Poets,' and all the records of his own life and conversation, prove that envy did deeply stain his spirit. To your question, 'Whom could Johnson envy'? I answer, all his superiors in genius, all his equals; in short, at times, every celebrated author, living or dead … I cannot help feeling that he has superiors, and that in a very large degree, though they will not be found amongst our essayists, where I acknowledge his pre-eminence. Johnson was a very bright star, yet to Shakespeare and Milton, he was but as a star to the sun … Gray was indolent, and wrote but little; yet that little proves him the first genius of the period in which he lived. I have been assured that he had more learning than Johnson, and he certainly was a very superior poet. Johnson felt the superiority, and for that he hated him… . Johnson's first ambition was to be distinguished as a poet, and as a poet he was first celebrated. His fine satire, 'London,' had considerable reputation; yet it neither eclipsed, nor had power to eclipse, the satires of Pope."

The account she has given of Johnson's last days and hours differs very widely from Macaulay's version, who states that, "when at length the

moment, dreaded through so many years, came close, the dark cloud passed away from Johnson's mind. His temper became unusually patient and gentle; he ceased to think with terror of death, and that which lies beyond death; he spake much of the mercy of God and of the propitiation of Christ." In a letter written by Anna Seward to T. S. Whalley, dated November 7th, 1784, she said, "The extinction, in our sphere, of that mighty spirit, approaches fast. A confirmed dropsy deluges the vital source. It is melancholy to observe with what terror he contemplates his approaching fate." In a letter to Mrs. Knowles (the wife of Dr. Knowles, an eminent physician in London, and in her younger days a well-known Staffordshire beauty), dated March 27th, 1785, Anna Seward says, "O, yes, as you observe, dreadful were the horrors which attended poor Johnson's dying state. His religion was certainly not of that nature which sheds comfort on a death-bed pillow. I believe his faith was sincere, and therefore could not fail to reproach his heart, which had swelled with pride, envy, and hatred, through the whole course of his existence. But religious feeling, on which you lay so great stress, was not the desideratum in Johnson's virtue." The reader must decide for himself which of these two contradictory accounts he will believe. It may be remarked that she was in "the almost daily habit of contemplating his dying," which she describes as "a very melancholy spectacle." She

informs us that it was at Johnson's repeatedly expressed desire that she often visited him.

*

In a letter written in 1785, to James Boswell, Anna Seward said that she regretted it was not in her power to collect more anecdotes of Dr. Johnson's infancy. "My mother passed her days of girlhood with an uncle at Warwick, consequently, was absent from home in the school-boy days of the great man; neither did I ever hear her mention any of the promissory sparkles which, doubtless, burst forth, though no records of them are within my knowledge. I cannot meet with any contemporary of those, his *very* youthful days… . Adieu, sir, go on and prosper in your arduous task of presenting to the world the portrait of Johnson's mind and manners. If faithful, brilliant will be its lights, but deep its shades."

Anna Seward seems to have known everybody worth knowing, and she met many celebrities of her day,—not only at Lichfield, but when she visited Buxton and Harrogate, as she sometimes did, for the Baths. Writing from

Buxton in 1796 to Mr. Saville, she said, “my acquaintance here seem to set a far higher value on my talents and conversation, such as they are, than the Lichfieldiens; but it is more than probable that novelty is the cause of this so much more appreciating attention”; and, further on, she adds that she had conversed with William Wilberforce, the philanthropist, “who disappoints no expectation his imputed eloquence has excited”; and also with the luminous and resistless Lord Chancellor, Thomas Erskine, “whose every sentence is oratory, whose form is graceful, whose voice is music, and whose eye lightens as he speaks.” She corresponded with Dr. William Lort Mansel, when he was Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1798, who was well known as a wit, and writer of epigrams, and to whom she was introduced by her cousin, H. White, at Lichfield. In a letter written in 1806, she said that “the animated attention with which he honoured me, the praise he lavished on my poems, and the passages he quoted from them, constituted one of the most poignant literary gratifications I ever received. The hope that they may live, is attached to the demonstrated impression they had made on a mind of such distinguished classical endowment.” Further on, she said that he often exclaimed, “Lichfield is, indeed, classic ground of peculiar distinction.”

In a letter dated March 5th, 1789, written from Lichfield by Anna Seward, she said, “I was honoured and blest by a two hours personal conversation with the most distinguished excellence that ever walked the earth, since saints and angels left off paying us morning visits. To say that his name is Howard would be superfluous. This is the third time he has favoured me with his conversation on his way through this town. I am truly glad of our King’s recovery, but yet I should not walk half so tall upon a visit from him. Mr. Howard presented me with his new publication, and had previously given me the former.”

The Poet Laureate in 1785 was Thomas Warton, and she corresponded with him, “our great Laureate,” as she called him.

Miss Mitford has described Anna Seward as “all tinkling and tinsel—a sort of Dr. Darwin in petticoats.” Edgeworth described her as “a handsome woman of agreeable manners, she was generous, possessed of good sense, and capable of strong affection”; and Sir Walter Scott thought that she must have been, “when young, exquisitely beautiful; for, in advanced age, the regularity of her features, the fire and expression of her countenance, gave her the appearance of beauty, and almost of youth. Her eyes were auburn, of the precise shade and hue of her hair, and possessed

great expression. In reciting, or in speaking with animation, they appeared to become darker, and, as it were, to flash fire… . Her voice was melodious, guided by excellent taste, and well suited to reading and recitation, in which she willingly exercised it."

An accident to her knee in her youth prevented her from riding, which, had she been able to do, she thought she would have enjoyed.

She did not care for "eternal card-parties," and considered the card-table "an annihilator of ideas." She had a passionate love for scenery, especially for mountain scenery, and in general for the pleasures of landscape.

Her estimates of many of the poets born in her lifetime appear in her letters, but most of their poetry was only read during their respective lives, and for a few years after, and theirs, like her own productions, are little known to readers of this age, though it appears that she hoped her works would be read for a long time after her death. She wrote, "If my poems are of that common order which have, as Falstaff says, a natural alacrity in sinking, the praise of hireling and nameless critics would not keep them above the gulf of oblivion. If, on the contrary, they

possess the buoyant property of true poetry, their fame will be established in after years, when no one will ask, ‘What said the reviewers?’” Her remarks as to plagiarism—petty pilferings—and borrowing from others, to be found in her letters, are most interesting. She thought that “imitative traces, of one kind or other, may be found in all works of imagination, up to Homer; and that he is not detected in the same practice, is certainly owing to the little that remains of the writings of his predecessors.”

Her religious views were broad. She felt “no great reverence for Kings.” In politics she was a Whig. “I was born and bred in Whiggism,” which word, she tells us, was synonymous to “fool and rascal,” from Johnson’s lips. It may be added that Johnson also said, “the Devil was the first Whig.” She confessed she had no great appetite for politics, though she expressed her views pretty freely on the subject. In 1790 the titles of nobility were suppressed in France, and Anna Seward disapproved of Burke’s vindication of hereditary honours. She thought that “they are more likely to make a man repose, with slumbering virtue upon them, for the distinction he is to receive in society, than to inspire the effort of rendering himself worthy of them. They are to men what beauty is to women, a dangerous gift, which has a natural tendency to make them

indolent, silly, and worthless. Let property be hereditary, but let titular honours be the reward of noble or useful exertions. France, in her folly, has destroyed them totally, instead of making them conditional.” Howbeit, titled people appear to have been highly honoured by her, notwithstanding these observations. By 1797 she had lost her long-existing confidence in Pitt’s wisdom and integrity, and in 1798 she thought he was “disqualified for retaining the reasonable confidence of the people of England.” In 1801 she wrote of “Pitt’s low and perfidious manœuvres,” and she never changed her opinion of him. She seemed unable to write what is called plain English. Archdeacon Vyse is described by her as “a man of prioric talents in a metrical impromptu.” Another person “evinced an elevated mind,” while a third exhibited an “attic spirit” in her writings. An evening is described as being “attic”; but even Pope, we may remark, calls a nightingale an “attic warbler.” It is true, however, he was writing poetry, not prose. Though a Bluestocking, her praise was usually generously bestowed; she knew well how to flatter. She, though unacquainted with Latin, paraphrased Horace; and she admitted her ignorance of French. She loved all animals, notably cats and dogs, and, believing in a future existence for the dumb creation, wrote a poem, entitled “On the Future Existence of Brutes.”

The following are three of more beautiful stanzas:—

"Has GOD decreed this helpless, suffering train
Shall, groaning yield the vital breath he gave,
Unrecompens'd for years of want, and pain,
And close on them the portals of the grave?

Ah, no! the great Retributory Mind
Will recompense, and may, perhaps, ordain
Some future mode of being, more refin'd
Than ours, less sullied with inherent stain;

Less torn by passion, and less prone to sin,
Their duty easier, trial less severe,
Till their firm faith, and virtue prov'd, may win
The wreaths of life in yon Eternal Sphere.

She appears to have liked all things bright and beautiful. "It is too seldom," she wrote, "that people express a conscious enjoyment of the present. While regret is busy with the past, and expectation with the future, *ennui* usurps the place of cheerful feelings, and thinks coldly

of the social, and yawns through the studious hour.” But as to Balls, she tells us, “I am one of the creatures that love not Balls in general.”

Had she lived now, she probably would have approved of women having votes, for, concerning a book published in her lifetime, entitled, “Rights of Woman,” she wrote:—“It has, by turns, pleased and displeased, startled, and half-convinced me that its author is oftener right than wrong. Though the ideas of absolute equality in the sexes are carried too far, and though they certainly militate against St. Paul’s maxims concerning that important compact, yet they do expose a train of mischievous mistakes in the education of females.” We may note that Tom Paine, “the greatest of pamphleteers,” died in 1809, whose pamphlets, “The Rights of Man,” and “The Age of Reason,” achieved great success. Anna Seward sympathised with the views expressed in his books on the French Revolution, though she considered many of his views on politics far too fanciful to be put into practice; moreover, she thought they would, if adopted, “ruin the earth.”

Her affection for a Mr. Saville (“a man of sense, and a scholar”) who was for 48 years Vicar-choral of Lichfield Cathedral, appears to have been merely platonic, though deep and sincere. In a letter dated August 31st,

1803, she tells us that, “the dearest friend I had on earth, passed in one quarter of an hour, from apparent health and even gay vivacity, to the silence and ghastliness of death.” He died August 2nd, 1803, aged 67 years. She erected a monument to his memory in the Cathedral, and composed the verses inscribed on it. His vault is on the south side of the green surrounding the Cathedral.

In a letter to Sir Walter Scott, written in 1807, the poetess remarks that her “astonishment and disgust” rose to their utmost height while she read Wordsworth’s poem, “The Daffodils”—“dancing daffodils, ten thousand, as he says, in high dance in the breeze beside the river, whose waves dance with them, and the poet’s heart, we are told, danced too.” She deemed this unnatural writing, and mentions some of his verses she liked, notably the “Leech-Gatherer.” If he had written nothing else, that composition might stamp him, she thought, a poet of no common powers. Lovers of poetry generally, however, think “The Daffodils” one of the most beautiful poems ever written.

Mr. Alfred Austin, the Laureate of our own day, has recently written in an article, entitled, “The Essentials of Great Poetry,” that the English masters of song are, Chaucer, Spencer, Shakespeare, Milton, and Byron,

and he tells us that only the merest fraction of Wordsworth's work is real poetry. Anna Seward would seem to have agreed with the selection of these names, if we substitute Pope for Byron. However, the latter was, we must recollect, only born in 1788. She would surely have welcomed Mr. Austin's estimate of Wordsworth! Anna Seward considered Southey's genius, beyond comparison, superior to that of Wordsworth. She wrote in 1796, "This is the age of wonders. A great one has lately arisen in the poetical world—the most extraordinary that ever appeared, as to juvenile powers, except that of the ill-starred Chatterton—Southey's Joan of Arc, an epic poem of strength and beauty, by a youth of twenty." Cowper was, to her mind, a vapourish egotist and a fanatic. She hated his Calvinism, and thought that the spirit of scornful denunciation everywhere prevails when Cowper reprehends the errors of mankind. Still, in answer to a request for her opinion of Cowper, she wrote, "He appears to me at once a fascinating, and a great poet; as a descriptive one, hardly excelled;" but she would not allow that his constitutional melancholy was any excuse for his misantrophy. She writes, "Dante is the only poetic author of high reputation, whom I cannot understand. Were you not struck with the inherent cruelty of that mind which could delight in suggesting pains and penalties at once so odious and so horrid?" We may remember that Dante has stated that "I found the original of my hell in the world which we

inhabit."

She did not like "gloomy religionists," as she called the Calvinists. One acquaintance she evidently did not care for, because he talked "methodistically." Hannah More, she lamented, "exposed herself to the reproach of that absurd and intolerant Methodism with which I have long believed her tainted." She wrote to the Rev. R. Fellowes; "the eminent champion in our day of true and perfect Christianity,"—"How happily have you removed that dire impediment to rational faith, the doctrine of original sin, which the revived Calvinistic school, of which Mr. Wilberforce is the head, so injudiciously presses upon the attention of the public… . The licentious, or giddy votaries of fashion, wish to have an excuse for persisting in their career, and think they have found it in the dark and cruel difficulties in which resumed Calvinism involves Christianity."

Anna Seward did not sing, but enjoyed music. She learnt, late in life, to handle the harpsichord sufficiently well to play it in little private concerts. Musical festivals she frequented, and admired Elizabeth Billington's singing.

This vocalist is remembered in our day as one of England’s greatest singers, especially at Handel commemorations. “Handel,” Anna Seward said, “is as absolute a monarch of the human passions as Shakespeare.” … “Were Handel living, I should approach and address him with much more awe than any merely good sort of body upon the throne of England.” …

“Poetry itself, though so much the elder science, for music has been a science only since the harmonic combinations were discovered, possesses not a more inherent empire over the passions than music, of which Handel is the mighty master; than whom

> ‘Nothing went before so great,
> And nothing greater can succeed.’” …

“Milton knew music scientifically, and felt all its powers. To Samuel Johnson, the sweetest airs and most superb harmonies were but unmeaning noises. {39} I often regret that Milton and Handel were not contemporaries; that the former knew not the delight of hearing his own poetry heightened as Handel has heightened it.”

The poetess thought that “The contemptible rage for novel-reading is a

pernicious and deplorably prevalent taste, which vitiates and palls the appetite for literary food of a more nutritive and wholesome kind… . I am well assured, that novels and political tracts are the only things generally read." … Though disavowing a propensity to read and to love novels, yet she always considered the "Clarissa" and "Grandison" of Richardson—"glorious Richardson" she calls him—as the highest efforts of genius in our language, next to Shakespeare's plays. She abjured the coarse, unfeeling taste of those who preferred Fielding's romances to the glories of the Richardsonian pen. In 1792 she wrote that "the London papers had no authority for saying that I was writing a novel. The design of framing such a composition never occurred to me; though I am well aware that novels and political tracts are the only things generally read. If I could write like Richardson, I would turn novelist; but then my work would be too good to be popular;—for how is Richardson neglected!"

Mr. Andrew Lang, at the festival this year of the Royal Literary Fund, stated that the only literary people who prospered were "the novelist and the gentleman who remembered many people in his reminiscences. The essayist was no longer in favour. He had been killed by fiction and photographs. It was the purpose of the Royal Literary Fund to aid

authors who needed assistance, and all who were not novelists did need it." It seems that the public, a hundred years ago, had the same taste as the public of to-day! It is novels, novels, novels, which alone satisfy their appetites, when they feed on books!

"Wit was never my talent," Anna Seward says, but she has recorded that when the "rulers of our Cathedral" decreed a four years' silence for "the pealing organ and the full-voic'd choir," because of alterations to be made there, she considered them "a little bedemoned, or much be-deaned—which is nearly the same thing."

Anna Seward was a faithful and generous friend; her fault would appear to have been her conceit. As Mr. Lucas finely remarks, everything conspired to increase her self-esteem and importance, for the three things that might have corrected it were all lacking: poverty, London life, and marriage.

The poetess had several lovers, and was jilted by one, who was a native of Lichfield, and who afterwards became a General. "But overtures, not preceded by assiduous tenderness and, which expected to reap the harvest of love without having nursed its germs, suited not my native enthusiasm,

nor were calculated to inspire it." She wrote in 1767, from Gotham Rectory, "to a female mind, that that can employ itself ingeniously, that is capable of friendship, that is blessed with affluence, where are the evils of celibacy? For my part, I could never imagine that there were any, at least, compared to the *ennui*, the chagrin, the preclusion, which hearts, cast in the warm mould of passion, must feel in a marriage of mere esteem."

As to sermons, she considered, "immoderate length in a sermon is a fault which excellence itself cannot expiate." … "The present mode of dress in our young women of fashion, and *their* imitators, is, for its gross immodesty, a proper subject of grave rebuke for the preacher." … "Nothing is more disgusting to me, and, indeed, to the generality of people, than dictatorial egotism from the pulpit. Even in the learned and aged clergyman it is priestly arrogance. When we see that man in the pulpit whom we are in the habit of meeting at the festal board, at the card-table, perhaps seen join in the dance, and over whose frailties, in common with our own, no holy curtain has been drawn, we expect modest exhortation, sober reasoning, chastened denunciation." …

Anna Seward informs us that she was "no great reader of sermons," but she

wrote a sermon for “an ingenious young clergyman of our neighbourhood, who has just taken orders, and who wishes to make his first essay in the pulpit with something of my writing. If I know anything of my talents, sermonising is their *forte*.” She wrote another sermon for a friend, a funeral sermon, delivered on a festival day—Whit-Sunday, and chose the text from the 7th chapter of Job; a verse than which she thought there was nothing in Scripture more sublime:—“The eyes of them that have seen me, shall see me no more—thine eyes are upon me—and I am not.” “The young preacher,” she says, “spoke this oration with solemn earnestness and unaffected sensibility.”

Her love and admiration for Lichfield began early in life, and remained keen to its close. When twenty-four years old she wrote from Gotham Rectory, in 1767, “We bend our course towards Lichfield, lovely, interesting Lichfield, where the sweetest days of my youth have passed—the days of prime.” No City could compare with Lichfield in her eyes, and no Cathedral with that of Lichfield when the music to be heard there was also taken into account. After visiting York Cathedral, that “vast and beautiful House of God”: she herself styled it “noble and transcendent,” she wrote, “I passed through York, and heard choral service in the noblest Cathedral in the world; … but if the sight

perceived the undying superiority of York Minster, my ear acknowledged the yet more transcendent, harmonic advantages of the Gothic boast of Lichfield."

Lichfield, although it may seem to the casual visitor rather a sleepy place to-day, appears to have been pretty lively in Anna Seward's day. "Plays thrice in the week, balls and suppers at our Inns, cards and feasting within our houses." And again, "Lichfield has been of late wondrous gay. Six private balls were given, which I was persuaded to attend."

Sir Walter Scott corresponded for some time with the poetess before his visit to Lichfield in May, 1807. He wrote in 1805, "believe me, I shall not be within many miles of Lichfield without paying my personal respects to you, and yet I should not do it in prudence, because I am afraid you have formed a higher opinion of me than I deserve; you would expect to see a person who had dedicated himself much to literary pursuits, and you would find me a rattle-skulled half-lawyer, half-sportsman, through whose head a regiment of horse has been exercising since he was five years old; half-educated, half-crazy, as his friends sometimes tell him, half-everything, but entirely Miss Seward's much obliged, affectionate

and faithful servant, Walter Scott."

She wrote of him, "the stranger guest delighted us all by the unaffected charms of his mind and manners," and Scott, Lockhart tells us, "had been, as was natural, pleased and flattered by the attentions of the Lichfield poetess in the days of his early aspirations after literary distinction."

No one can deny that Anna Seward was the most famous poetess of her day, but there is, as Sir Walter Scott wrote, "a fashion in poetry, which, without increasing or diminishing the real value of the materials moulded upon it, does wonders in facilitating its currency, while it has novelty, and is often found to impede its reception when the mode has passed away." It must be admitted that her poetry is not likely ever again to be much read; still, a study of her, and of the Lichfield *Savants* of her time, must always be instructive.

Writing as to the probability of the poems being much read, Sir Walter Scott says: "The general reception they may meet with is dubious, since collectors of occasional and detached poems have rarely been honoured with a large share of public favour."

There is yet, it may be suggested, another reason, which is, that her poetry was far too artificial, and abounds in words now unfashionable, even when used in prose.

Anna Seward died 25th March, 1809, and is buried Lichfield Cathedral, probably in the choir. She had always prayed for a sudden death, but though this prayer was not literally answered, she did not long suffer serious illness, for on the 23rd of March she was seized with “an universal stupor,” which only continued until the 25th.

The poetess has always been known as “The Swan of Lichfield,” though no one seems to know who gave her the name.

There are two portraits of Anna Seward, painted by Romney; the latest particulars with regard to their history and present ownership is to be found in “Notes and Queries” 10, s. IX., 218. Her portrait by Kettle is in the possession of Colonel Sir Robert T. White-Thomson, K.C.B., of Broomford Manor, Exbourne, N. Devon, and he also possesses a miniature of her by Miers. It is not known who the painter was of the portrait forming the frontispiece of this book, which is the same as the frontispiece to “The Lady’s Monthly Museum” for March, 1799.

Anna Seward commenced her Will thus:—“I, Anne, or as I have generally written myself, *Anna* Seward, daughter of the late Reverend Thomas Seward, Canon Residentiary of the Cathedral Church of Lichfield, do make and publish my last Will and Testament in manner following:—I desire to have a frugal and private funeral, without any other needless expense than that of a lead coffin to protect my breathless body. If the Dean and Chapter shall not object to our family vault in the choir being once more opened, I desire to be laid at the feet of my late dear father; but, if they object to disturbing the choir pavement, I then request to be laid by the side of him who was my faithful excellent friend, through the course of thirty-seven years, the late Mr. John Savile, in the vault which I made for the protection of his remains in the burial ground on the south side of the Lichfield Cathedral: I will that my hereafter executors, or trustees, commission one of the most approved sculptors to prepare a monument for my late father and his family, of the value of £500; that with consent of the Dean and Chapter, they take care the same be placed in a proper part of Lichfield Cathedral.” The Will is a very lengthy one, many relations, connections, servants and friends being remembered in it. Lockhart relates that “she bequeathed her poetry to Scott, with an injunction to publish it speedily and prefix a sketch of

her life, while she made her letters (of which she had kept copies) the property of Mr. Constable, in the assurance that due regard for his own interests would forthwith place the whole collection before the admiring world. Scott superintended accordingly the edition of the lady's verses, which was published in three volumes in August, 1810, by John Ballantyne and Co., and Constable lost no time in announcing her correspondence, which appeared a year later, in six volumes."

As regards the literary correspondence, Lockhart observed, "no collection of this kind, after all, can be wholly without value; I have already drawn from it some sufficiently interesting fragments, as the biographies of other eminent authors of this time will probably do hereafter under the like circumstances."

The *Staffordshire Advertiser* for July 8th, 1809, contained the following notice:—"We hear Mr. Constable intends to publish Miss Seward's correspondence before Christmas next; and if the public in general be as anxious for its appearance as the inhabitants of Lichfield and its vicinity, it must prove to him a very valuable legacy indeed."

A monument, the work of Bacon, was erected in the Cathedral,

commemorating the parents of Anna Seward, her sister Sarah, and herself. It was originally placed in the north transept, but is now in the north aisle of the nave. There is a representation of the poetess mourning her relations, while her harp hangs, neglected, on a tree.

Sir Walter Scott wrote the lines on the monument, which run as follows:—

Amid these Aisles, where once his precepts showed,
The heavenward pathway which in life he trode,
This simple tablet marks a Father’s bier;
And those he loved in life, in death are near.
For him, for them, a daughter bade it rise,
Memorial of domestic charities.
Still would you know why o’er the marble spread,
In female grace the willow droops her head;
Why on her branches, silent and unstrung,
The minstrel harp, is emblematic hung;
What Poet’s voice is smother’d here in dust,
Till waked to join the chorus of the just;
Lo! one brief line an answer sad supplies—
Honour’d, belov’d, and mourn’d, here Seward lies:

Her worth, her warmth of heart, our sorrows say:

Go seek her genius in her living lay.

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Footnotes

{20} NOTE.—It was Thomas White, Prebendary of Lichfield Cathedral, who married Lucy Hunter, and became the father of Henry White.

{39} Macaulay says that Johnson just knew the bell of St. Clement's Church from the organ.

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