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Thackeray and His American Admirers— “Pleasant folks to fall among”

John Aplin

I do like the idea of the museum at Harvard so much
and those kind Americans helping and taking an
interest.

—Anne Thackeray Ritchie, on the possible
sale of various Thackeray manuscripts.¹



A CHANCE VISITOR TO THE WESTMINSTER ABBEY CLOISTERS during the morning of July 17, 1900, might have been the witness to a curious private ceremony. At 11 a.m. a lady arrived at the door of the office of the Clerk of the Works for a meeting with a stonemason appointed by the sculptor Onslow Ford, best-known for his statue of Shelley at University College, Oxford (originally intended for the Protestant cemetery in Rome). Ford had been asked by the Abbey’s Dean, George Bradley, to oversee the delicate procedure about to be executed. One of the memorial busts normally situated in Poets’ Corner had been temporarily removed from its plinth in order that some adjustments might be made to it, and the work now got under way watched by a party of three, the lady and two of her many nephews and nieces, Gerald and Molly Warre Cornish. She reported later to her son on the delight she felt in finally witnessing the mason’s chisel remove the

¹ Anne (Annie) Thackeray Ritchie to her son Billy, April 3, 1913, in *The Correspondence and Journals of the Thackeray Family*, ed. John Aplin, 5 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), 5:281 (hereafter cited as *Correspondence*). Her name is spelled interchangeably “Annie” and “Anny” by her correspondents, although in later life she was almost invariably addressed as “Annie” by those closest to her. The main exception was her brother-in-law Leslie Stephen and the children of his second marriage, who always wrote her name as “Anny” (or, in the case of Virginia and her sister, Vanessa, “Aunt Anny”).

The quotation in my title comes from Thackeray to Jane Elliot, March 10, 1856, in *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, ed. Gordon N. Ray, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1946), 3:581 (hereafter cited as *Letters*).

extraneous side-whiskers from the bust. “It was really one of the happiest moments of my life when I saw the horrid weepers chip & fly.”²

This lady whose persuasiveness had won her the agreement of the Abbey authorities for such a bizarre alteration to one of its monuments was Lady Ritchie—Anne (Annie) Thackeray Ritchie, the surviving daughter of the novelist, William Makepeace Thackeray. Ever since the bust of her father had been placed in Poets’ Corner in December 1865, two years after his death, she had not been happy with it. She was insistent that the whiskers were wrong, far too long, and this remained a source of irritation for thirty-five years, reinforced every time that she worshipped there (and she visited the Abbey often). The original sculptor, Carlo Marochetti, had known Thackeray well, indeed had been his immediate neighbor during the later 1850s at Onslow Square in Brompton. But Annie was insistent that the whiskers distorted her father’s usual appearance—“they are such horrors & so unlike”³—and eventually plucked up the courage to canvass for their removal. By 1900, many of those who had known Thackeray were dead, but one survivor was the publisher George Murray Smith, to whom she looked for endorsement. “Of course my Father had whiskers but nothing prominent & sitting under the bust they seem the most prominent thing. You are one of the people who would know.”⁴

It is an emblematic moment, capturing the essential relationship between eminent father and dutiful daughter honored by Annie during the decades since his death. The protectiveness with which she had sought to defend Thackeray from his potential biographers—she lived with the memory of his instruction that there should be no life written of him—even embraced how a future public should forever see him, frozen in marble. But this episode is also noteworthy for an almost incidental detail which can serve as the starting point for uncovering another strand in the history of Thackeray’s posthumous reputation, one which takes the story across the Atlantic.

Annie’s delight in seeing the bust modified was closely matched by her gratification in securing the agreement of one of her father’s American admirers to meet the costs of the work. At his death in June 1912, the Philadelphia businessman Major William H. Lambert owned the finest collection of Thackeray manuscripts and drawings in private hands. He had accumulated these over the course of thirty-five years, during which time he had also gathered many important items relating to Abraham Lincoln, Lambert being a Civil War veteran. When his more than 1,300 items of Thackerayana were sold at the Anderson Galleries in New York, spread across three days in February 1914, Luther S. Livingston pointed out without exaggeration that the collection

2 Annie to Billy, July 31, 1900, Anne Thackeray Ritchie Collection, Eton College Library (quoted by permission of the Provost and Fellows of Eton College).

3 Annie to Billy, April 29, 1900, *Correspondence*, 5:137.

4 Annie to George Murray Smith, July 16, 1900, *Correspondence*, 5:140.

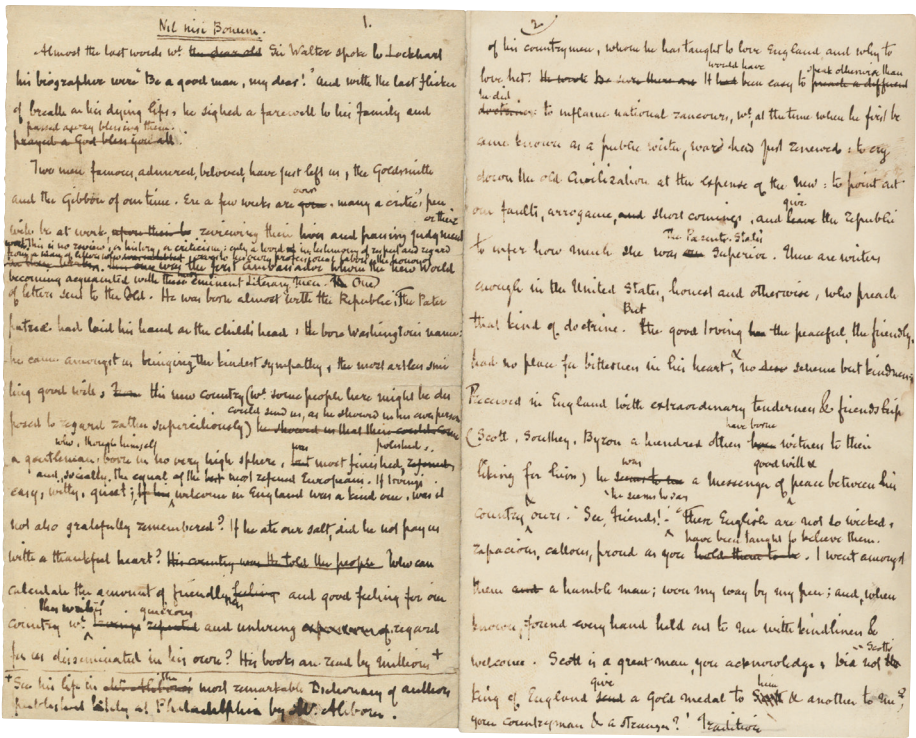


Figure 1. A page from the manuscript of “Nil Nisi Bonum,” one of Thackeray’s “Roundabout Papers” given to Harvard by Sir Leslie Stephen. 34 cm. fMS Eng 278. Gift of Leslie Stephen, 1892.

represented “the finest ever brought together and well-known everywhere . . . No such opportunity can ever occur again.”⁵ The pedigree for a number of the choicest lots was unmatched: since about the 1890s Annie had been selling manuscripts and drawings through the agency of London dealers like John Pearson of Pall Mall, and a number of these treasures went directly to Lambert. At about the time that Annie was negotiating with Dean Bradley to have the Marochetti bust altered, Lambert had been in communication with her, hoping to commission a fresh copy of the much earlier bust of Thackeray as a boy, sculpted about 1822–1824 by James Deville. She told George Smith what she had agreed to do.

5 Preface to auction catalog, *Library of the Late Major Wm. H. Lambert* (New York: Metropolitan Art Association, 1914), iii.

An adoring American millionaire who bought the Rose & the Ring wrote to know whether I w^d consent to let him have a copy of the boy bust. I said yes if he w^d like to pay for the alteration in the abbey; but that if for any reason he didn't like the proposal he should have it the copy for nothing but I had always wished to keep our bust it private & it must not be copied again even if he had it by paying. He writes back perfectly enchanted—as I thought he would & so he is doing it it the alteration & the young bust will give the shape of the jaw. This plan amused me—of course I meant it to be as it were my affair at first—and then I rather liked the idea of the whole thing, even now being a tribute.⁶

Onslow Ford sent Annie the bill for the Abbey alterations in due course, and in forwarding it to Philadelphia for settlement she sent an accompanying note, happy that the work had at last been completed but even now reluctant to assign more than a grudging respect to the Marochetti representation, especially when set against the “boy bust.”

The Abbey bust is only a very commonplace useful sort of recognition not a real likeness even with the alteration, but the little head some day might be very nice reproduced in marble & if you sh^d. ever wish for it I will take it again to M^r Ford's Studio. It is really a very charming & characteristic portrait of my Father as a boy.

I can only tell you once more how truly & gratefully I have felt your kind sympathy in this matter & how happy it makes me to feel that the Abbey monument has been so much & so permanently improved.⁷

6 Annie to George Murray Smith, July 16, 1900, *Correspondence*, 5:140-1.

7 Annie to William Lambert, July 31, 1900, *Correspondence*, 5:141. For a photograph of the Marochetti bust in its unaltered, pre-July 1900 state, see Henry Sayre Van Duzer, *A Thackeray Library*, with a new introduction by Lionel Stevenson (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1965), facing page 6. As for the Deville bust, a marble copy was indeed made for Lambert under Onslow Ford's supervision, later fetching \$260.00 at the 1914 New York sale. It was photographed for the frontispiece to the auction catalog. A marble copy of the altered Marochetti bust was also undertaken for Lambert, fetching \$425.00 in 1914, while a plaster cast of the bust in its original state sold for \$10.00. The comprehensiveness of Lambert's collection (despite the loss of some items in a fire in June 1906) may be measured by the fact that Annie asked him to supply her with photographs of various Thackeray representations for inclusion in her Centenary Biographical Edition of 1911. He was delighted to be able to agree: “I am much gratified by your appreciation of my collection, its formation has been a labor of love and I flatter myself that for completeness the collection will compare not unfavorably with others” (Lambert to Annie, October 6, 1910, Anne Thackeray Ritchie Collection, Eton College Library).

As she mentioned in her letter to George Smith, Lambert had been the purchaser of the manuscript of *The Rose and the Ring*, which, with Thackeray's original hand-drawn illustrations forming an integral part, was certainly the prize of the American's personal collection. He had bought it through John Pearson, and although we do not know his purchase price, Annie had sold the manuscript to Pearson in May 1896 for £1,500, having initially hoped for £2,000. Indeed, just a few months before she decided reluctantly to sell to help pay for her son's education, she told Pearson that this particular family treasure was far too precious for her to consider giving up. "I am afraid I have nothing to sell at present. Someone asked me about the Rose & the Ring & I said 3300 for I am sure we get 100 a year pleasure out of it."⁸ It had been thirty-three years since her father's death.

At the Lambert auction, this single item fetched a staggering \$23,000. The successive days of the sale were being followed with close interest by the *Times* of London, which reported that this was "the highest price ever realized in an American market for a modern manuscript" (February 28, 1914). It went to the New York dealer George D. Smith (he was not related to the British publisher), renowned for his willingness to outbid all competition. Among Lambert's other outstanding items, the manuscript of *The Adventures of Philip*, described by the cataloger as "probably the most important Thackeray manuscript in private hands," was also knocked down to Smith for \$12,100. *Doctor Birch and his Young Friends* fetched \$1,700, while individual Thackeray letters, including a large number to Jane Brookfield, fetched high sums of up to \$775 each.

Clearly the American auction market for original Thackeray materials was still very buoyant in the months before the outbreak of war, even if it took longer for items of this value subsequently to find a buyer in the retail market. George D. Smith had initially hoped that Henry Huntington would take both *The Rose and the Ring* and *Philip* from him, for when he wrote to Huntington a couple of weeks after the auction Smith was of the belief that he had bought cheaply, having been prepared to go higher.

I purchased the two great Thackeray Manuscripts at the Collection, No 1016. "The Rose and the Ring" \$23,000.00; this Manuscript is worth over \$30,000.00 and is the finest extant. Magnificent Drawings are in Thackeray's best style and more finished than any I ever saw; many are beautifully colored by Thackeray himself.

No 1104 "The Adventures of Philip" is one of his most famous novels and is the largest of Thackeray's Manuscripts ever offered for sale or in private

8 Annie to John Pearson, March 2, 1896, *Correspondence*, 5:38.

hands. It only brought \$12,000.00. You should have both for your library, as the opportunity will never present itself again.⁹

Nevertheless, four years later Smith still had both manuscripts on his hands, but Huntington finally surrendered and bought *Philip*, although not *The Rose and the Ring*, which instead was eventually added to the Pierpont Morgan collection.

Although the persistence of influential and cash rich agents like George D. Smith largely determined the final resting place of the most eminent items, since the English novelist's death America had seen the emergence of private collectors of more modest means who wanted to enhance their own Thackeray holdings, often developing links with British intermediaries who bought for them. There was nothing quite comparable in the novelist's homeland. His American enthusiasts were fortunate insofar as Annie Thackeray Ritchie often needed to sell items to generate funds. Although she would never have agreed to part with any of her father's letters, and indeed always discouraged any of his friends from publishing them—"I have always been obliged to refuse to have anything to do with any republication of letters &c"¹⁰—she did not feel the same about other materials. "I find I dont like to sell a letter, it goes against the grain. Pictures & mss. seem to me different."¹¹

Over the years, Annie disposed of a number of individual items through Pearson—usually at his invitation rather than at her initiative—and these would be sold on to his American contacts, usually accompanied by a letter of authentication from Annie herself. But towards the end of her life she was dealing with at least one American dealer directly, for she became acquainted with the Boston bookseller Charles E. Lauriat. He would be a survivor of the sinking of the Cunard passenger liner *Lusitania* off the coast of Ireland in May 1915, but the Thackeray sketch books which he was bringing back from New York, perhaps items for which he had failed to secure the hoped-for buyer, were lost.

Now my bad news. I am so glad Lauriat escaped, but the poor beloved drawing books A & B went down in the *Lusitania*—I wonder if he insured them? If he didnt shall we give him all or half the Cornhill to Cairo books w^h. he still has in N York.¹²

9 George D. Smith to Henry Huntington, March 12, 1914, included in Donald C. Dickinson, *Henry E. Huntington's Library of Libraries* (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1995), 71.

10 Annie to Charles Plumtre Johnson, July 13, 1885, *Correspondence*, 4:160.

11 Annie to Pearson, March 2, 1896, *Correspondence*, 5:38.

12 Annie to Billy, probably June 1915, *Correspondence*, 5:295.



Figure 2. Thackeray. Caricature of Napoleon. Ink, circa 1852. 29 x 16 cm.
pfMS Eng 951.5. Gift of W.B.O. Field, 1942.

Their negotiations had had a happier outcome a few years before, when Lauriat had secured from Annie some of Thackeray's notes and illustrations for an unpublished and incomplete essay on Napoleon (see figure 2). They were sold to W.B.O. Field of New York and Lenox, Massachusetts, a wealthy book collector with many philanthropic interests, who in 1914 decided to produce a facsimile edition and transcription of Thackeray's original, limited to seventy-five privately-printed copies. To accompany the publication Annie provided (through Charles Lauriat) a letter of authentication, which was placed by Field in his personal copy, now at Houghton.

These unpublished notes for an Essay on Napoleon must have been written by my Father either in 1836 when he was a news-paper correspondent in Paris, or as I am now inclined to think later on when in 1842 & the following years he was contemplating a life of Talleyrand & publishing articles in Fraser & other magazines. With what a different response one now reads this noble expression of feeling, from that, with which in July last—only five months ago—I wrote the short preceeding [*sic*] note at the request of M^r Lauriat. How the truth & generous fire of the whole goes to ones heart. He—my Father—would not have loved Peace as he did if he had not kindled as he did & as I can remember so well, to generous valour & noble Patriotic deeds over which I have heard him exclaim in sympathy & pride. I have often thought of late What would my Father have said to this cruel war? This is what he would have said, only changing the terrible indictment of hatred & unrighteous attack from the French to the German Nation.¹³

Of course, most collectors were in no position to buy highly-priced items of manuscript material, and would have focussed instead on Thackeray's published works. But here too there were distinct attractions for "an American collector of not unlimited means . . . [Thackeray] was unique among English authors in the number of first editions that came out in the United States rather than in London. Beginning with the Carey & Hart edition of *The Yellowplush Correspondence* in 1838, American publishers were prompter than their British counterparts in assembling his fugitive writings into books."¹⁴ And there were also less calculating but equally persuasive reasons why Thackeray should have found a fond response in his American followers, something which began during his two American trips in the 1850s and which survived long after his death in 1863. Americans who had met him invariably liked him, and they found their affection for this tall, strangely shy Englishman gratefully returned in kind.

13 Annie, November 21, 1914, MS pasted into *Napoleon: An Essay by William Makepeace Thackeray* (Boston: Merrymount Press, 1915). Houghton Library, *EC85.T3255.915 (B).

14 Lionel Stevenson, introduction to Van Duzer, *A Thackeray Library*, [i].

Above all, they honored his discretion. Thackeray would make two visits to America to follow the lecture circuit, in 1852–1853 and 1855–1856. He had no preconceptions about what he might encounter, but even while still on board ship he was alert to the dangers of finding easy targets in a host country, and he was resolved not to follow the example of Dickens who had stirred so much antipathy upon the publication of his *American Notes* (1842), as well as in the American scenes in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1842–1844). He wrote to his daughters two days before disembarking at Boston:

Shall I make a good bit of money for you in America and write a book about it?—I think not. It seems impudent to write a book; and mere sketches now are somehow below my rank in the world—I mean a grave old gentleman [he was forty-one], father of young ladies, mustn't be comic and grinning too much.¹⁵

It is therefore ironic that, in his private letters home—particularly during the second visit when he was not in especially good health and was exhausted by the constant traveling and lecturing—his remarks on the southern landscape and the manners of the people are not unlike the sort of observations which led to abuse being heaped upon Dickens's head. The difference is, Thackeray did not put them into a book for his hosts to find later.

Over a thousand miles of railroad I have not seen a beautiful prospect . . . [O]n the Alabama river a view about as mournful as if it was a tributary to the Styx, on this Mississippi the same dreariness on a wider scale, in the taverns dirt stenches dreadful swearing in the bars gongs banging night & day to plentiful filthy meals, every mans & womans knife in the mouth or the dish alternately . . . I see a sort of triumphant barbarism, a sordid greed everywhere and an extravagance quite as outstanding . . .¹⁶

Things were different in the cities, in Boston and New York and Philadelphia, where he was royally entertained in the homes of his new friends (“I’m a very big dog here”¹⁷). Nor did the energy and optimism which strikes most new visitors to America leave him unmoved. “Here is the future . . . I almost feel young again as I drink up this young air.”¹⁸ As he assured James Russell Lowell, denying a rumor in a Boston newspaper that he would write a “satirical book” on his return to England, he was not going to indulge

15 Thackeray to his daughters, November 11, 1852, *Letters*, 3:108–109.

16 Thackeray to Whitwell Elwin, March 23, 1856, *Letters*, 3:552–3.

17 Thackeray to his mother, December 20, 1852, *Letters*, 3:149.

18 Thackeray to Lady Stanley, January 21, 1853, *Letters*, 3:181.

in any such impertinence. “I cant even write my own letters home much more compose a book befouling the nest in w^h. I have been made so comfortable.”¹⁹

It was an attitude which won him the trust of those he met, and it meant that he could speak frankly about his reactions without always feeling that he had to flatter the host country. The Boston lawyer George Lunt noticed this, observing “with the true spirit of a gentleman, making it a point to write nothing about us or our concerns, while accepting our hospitality and making profit out of our attendance at his lectures, he was at leisure to enjoy himself in society as he saw fit. Indeed, I think he found himself quite at home . . .”²⁰ The writer and political commentator George William Curtis probably got as close as anyone to understanding Thackeray’s position, believing that a book on America by this particular English visitor would have outranked any other in its impartiality, even though “the great writer was not entirely free from that common English air of condescension and superiority to all human beings not born in their country.”²¹

A number of the people with whom he had made friendships continued to be collectors of Thackerayana after his death, men like William Bradford Reed of Philadelphia. They were eager to share their memories of Thackeray with his younger daughter, Minny, when she visited America during the 1868 Presidential election campaign with her husband, Leslie Stephen. In her frequent letters to Annie, she would pass on details of encounters with those their father had met, of the Baxters in New York “& of their bright days when he was there,”²² of Lowell in Cambridge, about to present a set of Thackeray’s works to his daughter on her twenty-first birthday, and of Mrs. Ticknor in Boston, who recalled that Thackeray had “suffered a great deal of discomfort in America” and who, when Minny commented that her father had not complained of any, said “I mean in the way of attentions.”²³ Mrs. Ticknor, “a dear old stately thing,” was a particular find for Minny.

She had got a beautiful pen and ink sketch of Werther & Charlotte that Papa made for her, he had been a great deal with them, & she told me that one New Years eve he sat there till the clock struck 12 & then she gave him a glass of wine & he said, heres to my daughters God bless them—She said he was dreadfully bored in America. Isnt it curious how very little he ever said about

19 Thackeray to Lowell, January 2[?], 1853, *Letters*, 3:167.

20 Cited in James Grant Wilson, *Thackeray in the United States*, 2 vols. (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1904), 1:97.

21 *Ibid.*, 1:235.

22 Harriet Marian (Minny) Stephen to Annie, August 20, 1868, *Correspondence*, 3:48.

23 Minny to Annie, September 16–17 [?], 1868, *Correspondence*, 3:76.

the roughness & discomfort, & it must have been very bad when he was here 10 years ago, & travelling south & west.²⁴

Interest in Thackeray had begun to extend from his works to take in those of his elder daughter, for by the time Minny visited America Annie's first novels, including *The Story of Elizabeth* (1862–1863) and *The Village on the Cliff* (1866–1867), had already found an admiring audience. In Boston Minny found herself having to reel off information about this other novelist called Thackeray, for one old lady had been charged by her niece to return with hard facts.

When M^{rs} Robbins had to go she said now my dear make haste make haste & tell me everything that you can think of about Lizabeth (meaning you). There's my niece waiting for me at home, she said she w^d be there when I came back ready to hear everything about Lizabeth what does she say, does she look like you what does she do. I began to say that you were fond of charities, but the old lady cut me short with Oh, Lord no, Mary don't care for any thing of that sort. the Miss Westons put in a few words here & there, & the old lady went off with, looks like you, taller, great talker, fond of society, sympathetic, sweet voice, &c &c, checking it off on her fingers.²⁵

Leslie Stephen already had his own connections with Cambridge and Boston, for he had previously visited in 1863 during the Civil War, and had formed close friendships (to be sustained by correspondence over the years) with Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., and Charles Eliot Norton. Since that first visit he had married Minny Thackeray, and that family link simply reinforced his own affection for the country where his father-in-law had been made welcome. Some years after Minny's death, he would present as a gift to Harvard College the manuscript of most of Thackeray's "Roundabout Papers," the series of essays written for the *Cornhill Magazine*, of which he had been inaugural editor (see figure 1). This was as a personal gesture to Norton, as well as a mark of thanks for the honorary doctorate conferred by Harvard on Stephen in 1890. This manuscript was only part of his wife's share of her father's works, which came to Stephen after her death and which also included the surviving portion of the manuscript of *Vanity Fair*, Leslie's favorite nineteenth-century novel.

A last word can be left to Mrs. George Baxter, wife of the New York businessman. Their charming daughter, Sally Baxter, became the object of Thackeray's rather foolish fantasies during his first visit, but it was all innocent enough and certainly did nothing to spoil the real esteem with which the Baxters held him in their memories. After Minny

24 Minny to Annie, October 3, 1868, *Correspondence*, 3:94.

25 Minny to Annie, September 26, 1868, Anne Thackeray Ritchie Collection, Eton College Library.

died in premature labor in November 1875, Mrs. Baxter wrote words of sympathy to Annie, quoting lines from Thackeray's poem "The End of the Play" and reassuring her of the esteem with which he was still regarded, though twenty years had passed since he had been on American soil and twelve since his own death. "Do you know how green & fresh is your dear father's memory in America—The young come to me for anything I can tell of him, & his volumes make always a part of the bridal gifts to our young friends."²⁶

26 Mrs. Baxter to Annie, Christmas 1875, *Correspondence*, 4:42.

12 *Thackeray and His American Admirers*—"Pleasant folks to fall among"

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