



## Essays of Elia

*Charles Lamb*

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## Essays of Elia Charles Lamb

Charles Lamb, one of the most engaging personal essayists of all time, began publishing his unforgettable, entertaining Elia essays in the *London Magazine* in 1820; they were so immediately popular that a book-length collection was published in 1823. Inventing the persona of “Elia” allowed Lamb to be shockingly honest and to gain a playful distance for self-examination. The resulting essays touch upon a wide range of compelling subjects from the deliciously humorous “Dissertation upon Roast Pig” to the poignantly reflective “New Year's Eve.” Yet collectively they also comprise a fascinating personal memoir, veiled under the pseudonymous disguise of Elia. Now back in print with a new foreword by the distinguished personal essayist Phillip Lopate and with useful annotations, *Essays of Elia* will provide a delicious stylistic treat for all readers.

## Essays of Elia Details

Date : Published June 1st 1978 by Oxford University Press (first published 1823)

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Author : Charles Lamb

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## From Reader Review Essays of Elia for online ebook

### Elisha Condie says

My copy was printed in 1898 and was super cheap on ebay. And whenever I read this book I love holding it in my hands and thinking about how old it is and how sweet and funny it can be even now. I tracked this down because of "Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society" - it's the book that 2 main characters love. And I can totally see why they did. I loved it too.

However, because it is over 100 years old the printing was *tiny* - like 6 point font tiny. And I hate to admit that there was a fair amount of the vocabulary I found too archaic and didn't understand (...at least I'm hoping that's the reason I didn't understand it).

The essays vary in topic and length and I did enjoy most of them (with a few I skipped). There was one where Lamb talks about how when you have a favorite book and someone else says it's *their* favorite book too it's very disconcerting, like seeing someone wear your clothes. Which I thought was very astute.

If you're a nutty fan of the "Guernsey.." book like me then you'll probably like Charles Lamb.

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### Shyam says

*"I can rise at the Chapel Bell, and dream that it rings for me." —Oxford in the Vacation*

*"What a place to be in is an old library! . . . I do not want to handle, to profane the leaves, their winding sheets . . . I seem to inhale learning, walking amid their foliage, and the odour of their old moth-scented coverings is fragrant as the first bloom of those scintial apples which grew amid the happy orchard." —Oxford in the Vacation*

*". . . what so pleasant as to be reading a book through a long winter evening, with a friend sitting by — say, a wife — he, or she, too, (if that be probable), reading another, without interruption, or oral communication?" —A Quaker's Meeting*

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After reading preceding Essayists, I presumed Lamb's Essays would also contain moralising aplenty, but this was not the case. Instead, Lamb paints a charming portrait of himself and his life, and the Essays are very much of their time. Once I acquainted myself with his style, I found his writing very pleasant, and there were a few Essays I really enjoyed.

If you have an interest in Lamb or his circle (which included Coleridge, Wordsworth, Hazlitt, and De Quincey), late-18th Century/early-19th Century London, or a writing style of this time, you may find much to enjoy in this collection.

But if you've come from Montaigne, Burton, Bacon, Johnson, Hume, Hazlitt, &c., expecting something similar, you'll have to look elsewhere . . .

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*"I in particular used to spend many hours by myself, in gazing upon the old busts of the Twelve Cæsars, that had been Emperors of Rome, till the old marble heads would seem to live again, or I to be turned into marble with them." (My First Play)*

*"Antiquity! Thou wondrous charm . . . The mighty future is as nothing . . . The past is every thing . . ."*

*(Oxford in the Vacation)*

*"Reader, if haply thou art blessed with a moderate collection, be shy of showing it, or if thy heart overfloweth to lend them, lend thy books, but let it be to such a one as S. T. C. — he will return them (generally anticipating the time appointed) with usury: enriched with annotations, tripling their value." (The Two Races of Men)*

*"With long poring, he is grown almost into a book." (Oxford in the Vacation)*

*"I am hanging over (for the thousandth time) some passage in old Burton . . ." (Mackery End, in Hertfordshire)*

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*"You may derive thoughts from others; your way of thinking, the mould in which your thoughts are cast, must be your own. Intellect may be imparted, but not each man's intellectual frame." (The Old and the New Schoolmaster)*

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*"I hate people who meet time halfway. I am for no compromise with that inevitable spoiler." (My Relations)*

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## Sean says

I give up! I appreciate Lamb's skill but I, a somewhat well-educated and moderately intelligent reader, find him too hard to keep up with. It's not only the outdated allusions, with which any such essays will be replete, and it is not only L----'s use of now-archaic conventions and \* \* \* \* \* that make it so difficult to read. Several times I found myself reading along like a good citizen of the literary highway and Wham! Out of the blue I realize I have no idea where I am or how I got there. Some of that is probably my fault, but some of it, I think, just might be the fault of L.

I have too much money invested in sweaters.

But B---- H----- has nothing sensible to say to my confundment or perplexification on attempting to read L in his guise of E-----.

Don't get me wrong. It's not all just confusification and haplidolidol. I read "The South Sea House," in which, pointless as it was, Lamb did a fine job of delineating the characters of several persons so carefully I felt I knew them, before he pulled the rug from under me. In "Oxford in the vacation" he had a couple of good sentences, but I don't have the energy to go looking for them to quote them. "Christ's Hospital five and thirty years ago" did something really amazing, until it went off the rails and I didn't know what he was writing about any more. As Elia, Lamb severely disagrees with an essay he had written under his own name about the orphanage in which he grew up. As Lamb he seems to have thought it a rather decent place. As Elia, he found it horrid and abusive, the terrible conditions and hatred of children we expect of that era from having read Dickens. This was masterful and worth the read. Then I pressed on and read "The two races of Men." This, excepting the tedium, was really somewhat funny. He divides humans into two "races:" those who lend and those who borrow. He humorously finds the borrowers to be more expansive and interesting than the lenders. Finally, I wound up reading "New Year's Eve" on New Year's Eve, with no premeditation whatsoever. I was expecting to have a serendipitous time with many witty or insightful observations, but, sadly, no. It was interesting to find that so long ago New Year's was as big a day, with its different ways of being celebrated, as it is today. And I meant to but did not take to heart his practice of reviewing the old year first and then planning for the new. But it was tedious and dull and confusing and I forced myself to the end and then I quit. Whew.....

By all means, read Lamb for historical interest if you like, and I hope you find it more interesting than I did. But life is short and if you have too many books on your list, skip this one for now.

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### **J.A.A. Purves says**

This essay collection was stupid because Lamb keeps referring to all these people and events that happened in the 1800s. Didn't he know that writing about his lifetime would make all his writing outdated and not worth reading anymore? Also he uses big words and quotes in Latin even though he should of known that readers like me, with a modern "education," would be too lazy and stubborn to look them up. I realize I wouldn't even have to open a dictionary but could just use the internet, but still, Lamb shouldn't have expected me to do that. Finally, because I am incapable of understanding that Elia is a fictional character and I don't know what parody is and I couldn't recognize satire if it bit me, I hereby declare that Lamb is a boring essayist.

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### **Molly says**

Suffered from melancholia and nostalgia, gargled gin and water. Sister killed mother with a table knife, then went on to write children's versions of Shakespeare's comedies. He wrote the tragedies. Sold.

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### **Jamie says**

This is what happens when you read essays written 200 years ago, in which the author has contemporary readers strictly in mind: complete and utter lack of historical context. The strange thing was, I loved his writing style precisely because it is so old-fashioned and, well, archaic. On the flip side, this anachronistic quality dooms some of his essay to obscurity when he spends dozens of pages waxing long about theatre players whom he obviously expects the reader to have prior knowledge of. There are end notes (written circa 1925) to help the reader on their way, but I have an unfortunate aversion to reading end notes so perhaps I am partly to blame for my lack of comprehension at some parts in the reading of these essays. However, a few essays were on universal themes: "Grace Before Meat", "A Dissertation Upon Roast Pig", "A Bachelor's Complaint Of the Behaviour Of Married People" in particular. Those made me chuckle.

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### **Graychin says**

Re-reading Lamb's essays, I bow yet again to the man's unimprovable genius for words. This is some of the very best English, and these are some of the very best essays, you will ever read. The man's life, too... If I had my way we'd be calling him "Saint Charles Lamb."

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### **Ellen says**

I started out enjoying these essays, but as I continued I began to feel as though this writer wasn't a very compassionate or sympathetic person. Really got turned off and decided not to waste my time continuing to

force myself myself to continue.

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### **Leonie says**

Sometimes I get used to finding literary corners thoroughly well-colonised on goodreads and feel surprised when I find one that is less so, as with this. Anyway, I loved this. It's certainly journalism; the mode is primarily riffs on a superficial theme. Lamb might be a little too affected for some in the way he transitions from the ostensible subject to some other destination or in his conceits; a little too self-consciously quaint perhaps. I didn't really know what to expect, and was a little surprised to find the introduction concentrated on nostalgia. But yes, nostalgia is the point here. Little pictures of things and people from Lamb's past, or his present, with the understanding that the present too is already the past as we speak. Lamb regrets the passing of time. He doesn't want to die and he clings to his world. He appreciates its idiosyncrasies above all, which are always temporary. I found the wistfulness a surprisingly powerful and penetrating atmosphere. Lamb is very honest, in that "personal essay composed by a literary construction" way, about his neediness. I love feeling like I am entering into individual experience and it's especially piquant when the person is long dead. I enjoy the nineteenth century way of writing about the eighteenth century/early nineteenth century as the lost yesterday of childhood or family memory. It makes it seem more quintessentially past than our own perspective.

The writing isn't musical; it's hard to make it sound complimentary, but it's like an extremely satisfying mechanical sound that sounds like everything being in exactly the right place.

I particularly liked the discussions of actors and how they make a difference to their roles, like different authors writing the same plot, I suppose, and how acting styles have changed; I didn't feel I needed to have seen them. Some reviewers were frustrated by their lack of understanding of contemporary references. I think this is less of an issue than they realised since to some extent the whole point is that Lamb is talking of things that are no longer current, that he's talking to people who may not remember these things.

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### **Katherine Brown says**

It took me a while to enjoy Lamb, I confess. At first I was slowed down by the long sentences that seemed unwieldy at first sight, by the vague allusions to a distant past. But suddenly, I'm not quite sure how, he grabbed me. I realized that he was both charming and a genius. Here are a few of my favorite moments. They don't pack the same punch when taken out of context (because part of the delight is the way he uses the essay format to work up to his point), but they are still wonderful.

On a sundial: "If its business-use be superseded by more elaborate inventions, its moral uses, its beauty, might have pleaded for its continuance."

On going to the theater: "...there would be for a day or two after, as you would well know, a smack, a relish left upon my mental palate..."

In a discussion of Westminster Abbey: "Is the being shown over a place the same as silently for ourselves detecting the genius of it?"

"A pun is not bound by the laws which limit nicer wit. It is a pistol let off at the ear; not a feather to tickle the intellect."

"But facts and sane inferences are trifles to a true adept in the science of dissatisfaction."

(Note: some of these are from The Last Essays of Elia.)

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### **Mark says**

For me the best of all essayists in English, surpassing even Johnson and De Quincey. But to reduce this merely to a book of essays misses, I think, the essential strangeness of the project, one which slyly grapples with fictions and imposture and the nature (or existence) of personal truths while remaining immensely moving, even haunting. A great book, and rather neglected despite its "stature".

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### **Allyson says**

Well, I wouldn't normally have picked this book up to read--it's just not the type that usually appeals to me. But I'm endeavoring to broaden my horizons and have challenged myself to read straight across our bookshelf instead of picking and choosing only what jumps out at me. This book was next in line, so I faithfully read it all the way through, but I wasn't too impressed with it. Some parts were drily humorous--just enough to make me keep reading--but aside from being mildly entertaining, it was pretty dry and at times boring.

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### **Brooke says**

Yeah bitches! Who did these annotations? I DID THESE ANNOTATIONS! And yes, they're awesome. Charles Lamb ain't so bad himself.

Buy it. Read it. Behold the masterful annotations.

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### **Anna-karien Otto says**

Really enjoyed it. Anne Fadiman put me onto his trail...

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### **Greg says**

"The elders, with whom I was brought up, were of a character not likely to let slip the sacred observance of any old institution; and the ring out of the Old Year was kept by them with circumstances of peculiar ceremony. -In those days the sound of those midnight chimes, though it seemed to raise hilarity in all around me, never failed to bring a train of pensive imagery into my fancy. Yet I then scarce conceived what it meant, or thought of it as a reckoning that concerned me. Not childhood alone, but the young man till thirty,

never feels practically that he is mortal. He knows it indeed, and, if need were, he could preach a homily on the fragility of life; but he brings it not home to himself, any more than in a hot June we can appropriate to our imagination the freezing days of December. but now, shall I confess a truth? -I feel these audits but too powerfully. I begin to count the probabilities of my duration, and to grudge at the expenditure of moments and shortest periods, like misers' farthings. In proportion as the years both lessen and shorten, I set more count upon their periods, and would fain lay my ineffectual finger upon the spoke of the great wheel. I am not content to pass away "like a weaver's shuttle." Those metaphors solace me not, nor sweeten the unpalatable draught of mortality. I care not to be carried with the tide, that smoothly bears human life to eternity; and reluct at the inevitable course of destiny. I am in love with this green earth; the face of town and country; the unspeakable rural solitudes, and the sweet security of streets. I would set up my tabernacle here. I am content to stand still at the age to which I am arrived; I, and my friends: to be no younger, no richer, no handsomer. I do not want to be weaned by age; or drop, like mellow fruit, as as they say, in to the grave. - Any alteration, on this earth of mine, in diet or in lodging, puzzles and discomposes me. My household gods plant a terrible fixed foot, and are not rooted up without blood. They do not willingly seek Lavinian shores. A new state of being staggers me."

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