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MACMILLAN HISTORY OF LITERATURE

NINETEENTH-
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Margaret Stonyk

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Editor's Preface

THE study of literature requires knowledge of contexts as well as of texts. What kind of person wrote the poem, the play, the novel, the essay? What forces acted upon them as they wrote? What was the historical, the political, the philosophical, the economic, the cultural background? Was the writer accepting or rejecting the literary conventions of the time, or developing them, or creating entirely new kinds of literary expression? Are there interactions between literature and the art, music or architecture of its period? Was the writer affected by contemporaries or isolated?

Such questions stress the need for students to go beyond the reading of set texts, to extend their knowledge by developing a sense of chronology, of action and reaction, and of the varying relationships between writers and society.

Histories of literature can encourage students to make comparisons, can aid in understanding the purposes of individual authors and in assessing the totality of their achievements. Their development can be better understood and appreciated with some knowledge of the background of their time. And histories of literature, apart from their valuable function as reference books, can demonstrate the great wealth of writing in English that there is to be enjoyed. They can guide the reader who wishes to explore it more fully and to gain in the process deeper insights into the rich diversity not only of literature but of human life itself.

A. NORMAN JEFFARES

. . . the function of the nineteenth century was to disentangle the disinterested intelligence, to release it from the entanglements of party and sect – one might almost add, of sex – and to set it operating over the whole range of human life and circumstance. In England we see this spirit issuing from, and often at war with, a society most stoutly tenacious of old ways and forms, and yet most deeply immersed in its new business of acquisition.

G. M. Young, *Victorian England: Portrait of an Age* (1936)

The movement that is going on is so continuous, the variety so great, that every historical comment seems fumbling and inaccurate, every generalisation inconclusive and incomplete.

G. Kitson Clark, *The Making of Victorian England* (1962)

We live notoriously, as I suppose every age lives, in an ‘epoch of transition’. . . .

Henry James, Preface to *The Awkward Age* (1899)

There is nothing that requires more discretion than the paying of compliments to great men.

Bernard Shaw in *The Saturday Review* (1898)

I bless my stars for a taste so catholic, so unexcluding.

Charles Lamb, ‘Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading’
(1823)