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Samuel Butler: Author of Erewhon

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WORDS are like money: there is nothing so useless, unless when in actual use. Books are simply imprisoned souls until someone takes them down from the shelf and reads them.” These words of Samuel Butler, nineteenth-century novelist, satirist, and essayist, are good advice for anyone attempting a study of the man and his works. For there are many of us who would buy Butler’s complete works expecting them to be written by the author of Hudibras, repeating the mistake of an official of one of England’s great public schools. It was William Lyon Phelps who, when asked if he knew the Samuel Butler, made what he considered a few pertinent and critical remarks about Hudibras. Our Samuel Butler, as Mr. Phelps promptly learned from his irate interrogator, was the grandson of the Bishop of Lichfield and Coventry, but was in no way related to the Restoration poet.

Mr. I. R. Brussel of New York, a bookseller of long experience and an especially able “book-hunter” for the Colby College Library, has presented to the Library in honor of the late Carroll A. Wilson (LL.D., Colby, 1940) a fine collection of the single works of Samuel Butler, including no less than nineteen editions of The Way of All Flesh, nine editions of Erewhon,¹ Alps and Sanctuaries of Piedmont and the Canton Ticino, God the Known and God the Unknown, Unconscious Memory, and others. Mr. Wilson, whose recent

¹ For an interesting account of the revisions of Erewhon, see Lee E. Holt, Samuel Butler’s Revisions of Erewhon, in Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America, Vol. 38, 1944, pp. 22-38.
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dehth deprived the Colby Library Associates of one of its most loyal and helpful members, gave a distinguished Samuel Butler collection to the Chapin Library in Williams College. The catalogue that Mr. Wilson prepared (Southworth-Anthoensen Press, 1945) states that the collection was the result of many years' labor. Mr. Brussel therefore felt that a Butler collection at Colby would serve as a fitting memorial to Mr. Wilson's long interest in Colby College.

Samuel Butler was born on December 4, 1835, at Langar, near Nottingham where his father was vicar. Young Samuel attended school at Shrewsbury where his grandfather had been headmaster. For the four years following 1854 he went to St. John's College, Cambridge. Upon completing his studies, his plan was to work among the poor and unite with the church, but instead he decided to sail for New Zealand, where he became a rather prosperous sheep farmer on the middle island (Canterbury). His success in the colony was told in long letters to his parents which became the core for his *A First Year in Canterbury Settlement*, edited and prefaced by his father and published in 1863 by Longmans. Thomas Seccombe calls this first book of Butler's "one full of quasi-humorous detail, sub-acid in flavour, and plain almost to aridity in point of style." After five years of farming and newspaper writing, Butler returned to England and settled himself in London, where he studied painting. During this three-year period of study, he exhibited no less than eleven of his paintings at the Royal Academy.

In 1871 Butler finished *Erewhon* and sent the manuscript to the London publisher, Chapman and Hall, whose reader, George Meredith, refused it. Upon being notified of this fact, Butler remarked, "This is not strange, for I should probably have condemned his *Diana of the Crossways*, or indeed any other of his books... No wonder if his work repels me that mine should repel him."2 *Erewhon*,

a Utopia where crime is a disease that must be cured, and disease a crime that must be punished, was finally published by Trubner and appeared anonymously, although later editions carry the author's name. *Erewhon*, according to a London critic, "recalled the vein of Swift . . .: the trial of a man . . . and the view of machines—as representing and eventually dominating the functions of man—are strongly suggestive of a new Gulliver, but the book also contains the most original of Butler's conceptions—his preference for physical over moral health . . ., his convictions of the unconscious transmission of habit and memory from one generation to another, the superior importance of manners to beliefs. . . ."3

Butler's next book, *The Fair Haven*, which he started in New Zealand, came in 1873, carrying the author's name as the late John Pickard Owen, probably to avoid any further controversy with his father. The work was supposedly "in defence of the miraculous element in our Lord's ministry upon earth, both as against rationalistic impugners and certain orthodox defenders." What was surprising to everyone, including the author, was the fact that the book was taken seriously; the church was very free in its praise for such a "splendid defence of orthodox Christianity."

During the next few years Butler made several trips to Canada in an attempt to salvage what he could from his capital investments there, which were the profits of his New Zealand adventure. While visiting the Dominion he conceived the idea of his next book, *Life and Habit*, published in 1877, in which he set forth his views on Darwin's theory. In 1881 came *Alps and Sanctuaries*, "one of his most interesting and perhaps most charming of his works, as he wrote it in holiday mood and illustrated it throughout himself."4 This "holiday mood" may be explained by a

series of events just prior to the publication of this above-mentioned book. Butler had decided that his study of art must give place to literature to which he would devote himself almost exclusively; his financial position was relieved by the death of his father in 1886 (he never forgave his father for living as long as he did); he was able to spend his summers abroad, mainly in his beloved Italy; and lastly, his evening visits with his friend, and later his biographer, Mr. H. Festing Jones, who enjoyed as much as did Butler composing Handelian minuets and gavottes. As a child Butler had developed a tremendous admiration for Handel and his music, a love that grew steadily during his lifetime. Witness the last two lines of his poem *Handel*:

Methinks the very worms will find some strain Of yours still lingering in my wasted brain.

Butler memorized a good part of the *Odyssey*, and while doing so, he decided that the epic was written by a woman, probably at Trapani in Sicily. In 1897, after a visit to the territory in question, he published *The Authoress of the Odyssey*, in which he elaborated on his views. He also translated both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* into colloquial prose. During this period Butler also wrote the two-volume *Life of Samuel Butler* (his grandfather), and *Shakespeare's Sonnets Reconsidered*, which received very little attention. In 1901 *Erewhon Revisited* was published, which was “an examination of the religion which had come into existence among the Erewhonians after the ascension of their first explorer in a balloon.” The following year, after a short trip to the continent, Butler died in London.

Mention must be made of three important posthumous works. One, the autobiographical novel *The Way of All Flesh*, is perhaps the book for which Butler is most famous. The incentive for this work was his lady-love, Miss Mary Ann Savage, who appears in the book as Alethea Pontifex and whom he had known since 1871. Why he never mar-
ried, and specifically why he never married Miss Savage, no one knows. Thomas Seccombe, in commenting on the book, describes Butler as the “most versatile of iconoclasts,” who attacked “religion, science, painting, archaeology, literary criticism and music . . . and the conventional morality in which the genteel children of his age were reared.” The second, *The Humour of Homer and Other Essays*, noted for its terse but clear and concise style of which he was a staunch advocate, is called a “masterpiece of idiosyncrasy.” Lastly, Butler’s *Notebooks* which were edited by his literary executor, Mr. Richard A. Streatfeild, and Mr. H. Festing Jones, deserve a sentence or two. “In this volume are collected together all the germs of all his work . . . To read them is to copy them out; to copy them out is to learn them; and to learn them is an education in itself.”5 It was Butler’s practice to carry a notebook with him at all times and jot down whatever he heard or saw that he considered worthy of preservation. He justified this practice because, as he said, “One’s thoughts fly so fast that one must shoot them; it is no use trying to put salt on their tails.” Every conceivable subject, it seems, is treated in strict Butlerian style. His telling the story of one freethinker who exclaimed “I am an atheist, thank God!” has led many to believe that he himself was an atheist, but quite to the contrary, he was a firm believer in God and religion, although he was free in his criticism of various religious beliefs.

George Bernard Shaw, who owes much to Samuel Butler, once said that “in the department of satire, Butler is the greatest English writer in the latter half of the nineteenth century.” These words, by such a distinguished playwright and critic, are reason enough for our sincere gratitude to Mr. Brussel for enriching the ever-growing resources of the Colby College Library.