

Christopher Ricks

– Introduction –

Samuel Rogers was born in Stoke Newington, 30 July 1763, and died in St. James's Place, 18 December 1855. A prolific versifier who indulged not only *The Pleasures of Memory* (1792) but more largely those of *Human Life* (1819) as well as of *Italy* (1822, 1828), he was not so lamentable a poet as never even to be offered the Laureateship. Wordsworth, having scarcely penned a Laureate line, had died at eighty in April 1850. Rogers, nearing ninety, sagely passed the torch to the young Alfred Tennyson (forty-one), who succeeded in igniting the Laureateship more illuminatingly than anyone else has ever done. Tennyson borrowed, as Wordsworth likewise had once done for a royal occasion, Rogers's court-suit.

It was not to being a poet that Rogers was especially suited; rather, a recorder of things said by wise, witty contemporaries of his. In some ways, as a diarist who found himself in fortunate company, he is the William Allingham of the opening half of the nineteenth century, excepting only (first) that

Allingham had true gifts as a minor poet, creatively intelligent about his talents, and (second) that Allingham was one of the nicest of people. Rogers was distinctly otherwise. Sir Walter Scott remarked, with the needed equanimity, that “It matters not what ill we say of Rogers behind his back, since we may be pretty certain that he has said as much of us behind our backs.” William Jerdan practised Rogers-like qualification or rescinding: “I have used the word *friend* but it did not appear that the nonagenarian (whatever he might have enjoyed half a century before) had any friends. I never saw about him any but acquaintances or toadies.” Presumably Jerdan never saw about himself any reason to fear that he’d be lumped among the latter.

Slily denigratory, condescending and cosseted, Rogers was a man of independent means – meaning that money depended to him by inheritance – and this with what is often a consequence of such good fortune: a lack of independent ends. A banker, he banked on his wealth to bring him into a world – political, literary, gossipy – that he lordlily slighted, serpentinely envied, and (it must be granted with gratitude) perceptively penetrated. It has to be said that he was very good at hearing what was said. Socially, he had not only his wits but his ears about him, everywhere about him. He put things down, often somebody’s putting somebody down. He was

not himself a delight, but the jottings of this much-deferred-to man remain a delight.

His first editor, Alexander Dyce, was no mincer of words, though the following words of his did not figure in the publication:

The face and figure of Rogers were very peculiar. Though he had a fine ample forehead, his eyes were heavy and lustreless, his under-jaw was too prominent, his chin of more than ordinary length, and his complexion deadly pale. He was of the middle size, and strongly built; but ill-made in the lower limbs, and so awkward and shambling in his gait, that he sometimes attracted the notice of strangers in the street: yet in his youth he had been fond of dancing, and talked with pleasure of having had Miss De Camp (Mrs. Charles Kemble) for his partner at dancing parties given by Mrs. Siddons when she lived in Gt. Marlbro' Street; nay, at a much later period, he danced with Queen Caroline at Kensington Palace, and did not foot it with sufficient quickness to satisfy that undignified piece of royalty.

Miss De Camp! Nay! To satisfy! Piece of — ah — royalty!

He never married.

Dyce characterized what “was undoubtedly the effect of intercourse with Mr. Rogers, it was indeed improving”. The posthumous publication of the

notebook-entries improved in several respects when the edition of 1856 (the year after Rogers's death) gave way to that of 1859. The history is odd, in that the later – the leaner and better – of the two editions has the air of being the earlier. The earlier one, *Recollections of the Table-Talk of Samuel Rogers. To which is added Porsoniana* (London: Edward Moxon, 1856), is a self-important book of 350 pages. The self-importance is remittingly Rogers's and unremittingly that of the editor, the violently disputatious Alexander Dyce. The brief biographical preface ended with an assurance:

From my first introduction to Mr. Rogers, I was in the habit of writing down, in all their minutiae, the anecdotes, &c. with which his conversation abounded: and once on my telling him that I did so, he expressed himself pleased, – the rather, perhaps, because he sometimes had the mortification of finding impatient listeners. Of those memoranda, which gradually accumulated to a large mass, a selection is contained in the following pages; the subjects being arranged (as far as such miscellaneous matter would admit of arrangement) under distinct heads; and nothing having been inserted which was likely to hurt the feelings of the living. A. D.

This report hurt the feelings of the living rivals for the continued favour of Rogers's company. Dyce's self-serving self-pleasing account ("he expressed

himself pleased”) failed to carry conviction in certain quarters, and he was promptly set upon. “Nor is Mr. Hamilton Gray the only person who has charged me with misrepresenting the conversation of Mr. Rogers”: the preface to the 3rd edition concludes its eight pages of aggressive self-defence by declaring what it cannot conclude without:

I cannot conclude without noticing the insinuations which (in spite of what I said in the Preface to the first edition) have been thrown out from more than one quarter, that my memoranda of Mr. Rogers’s conversation were hastily made towards the close of his life, when his memory was greatly impaired. Nothing can be farther from the truth: — they were every one of them written down at various times during a period which terminated at least five years before the death of Mr. Rogers. A. DYCE

Three years after Dyce’s publication, there appeared a more modest book, physically modest too, smaller pages, and fewer of them: *Recollections* by Samuel Rogers (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1859). Making no mention of Dyce’s ample spread, *Recollections* was edited by Rogers’s nephew William Sharpe, with the name, the address, and the date – Highbury Terrace, May, 1859 – subscribed at the end of an unexclamatory Notice by the Editor.