



# BULWER LYTTON

THE RISE AND FALL  
OF A VICTORIAN MAN OF LETTERS

LESLIE MITCHELL

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*The Rise and Fall  
of a Victorian Man of Letters*

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Hambleton and London  
London and New York

Hambledon and London

102 Gloucester Avenue  
London, NW1 8HX

175 Fifth Avenue  
New York, NY 10010  
USA

First Published 2003

ISBN 1 85285 423 5

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A description of this book is available from the British Library and from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by Carnegie Publishing, Lancaster,  
and printed in Great Britain  
by Cambridge University Press.

Distributed in the United States and Canada  
exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan,  
a division of St Martin's Press.

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## *Acknowledgements*

The production of a book draws on many talents. I have been very fortunate in this respect. I would first like to thank Lord Cobbold for allowing me unrestricted access to Edward Bulwer Lytton's papers, and for his unfailing encouragement from the very inception of the project. Henry Cobbold provided invaluable assistance in both reading the text and suggesting and supplying illustrations. Next, librarians and archivists in many institutions on both sides of the Atlantic have shown a professional competence without which authors would be lost. In particular, I would like to mention the Archivist at Knebworth House, Clare Fleck, whose patience was tried but never found wanting. I would also like to acknowledge the kindness of the Trustees of Boston Public Library and the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, for allowing me to use manuscripts in their care. Extracts from the Parrish Manuscripts are published with the permission of Princeton University Library. As for the funding of the research of this book, I am entirely in the debt of the Master and Fellows of University College, Oxford.

Pupils and friends have gallantly supplied the deficiencies of an author who cannot drive or confront a computer. My heartfelt thanks must go to Tom Attanasio, Ross Avery, Alicia and Crofton Black, Philip Burling, Andrew Duncan, William Gore, Paulina Kewes, Matthew Hill, Emily Rose and John Wrathmell for helping to make research painless and often amusing. I hope they will feel that their efforts have had a happy outcome.

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## *Abbreviations*

Balfour	Lady B. Balfour, <i>Personal and Literary Letters of Robert, First Earl of Lytton</i> (London, 1906)
Chalon	L. Devey, <i>Unpublished Letters of Lady Lytton to A. E. Chalon</i> (London, n.d.)
Devey	L. Devey, <i>Letters of the Late Edward Bulwer, Lord Lytton, to his Wife</i> (London, 1884)
EBL	Edward Bulwer Lytton
Knebworth MSS	Manuscripts and Letters of the Lytton Family, Knebworth House, Hertfordshire
LLLR	Lord Lytton, <i>The Life, Letters and Literary Remains of Edward Bulwer, Lord Lytton</i> (London, 1883)
<i>Life</i>	Lord Lytton, <i>The Life of Edward Bulwer, Lord Lytton</i> (London, 1913)
Lytton MSS	Manuscripts of the Lytton family held in Hertfordshire Record Office
<i>Speeches</i>	Lord Lytton, <i>Speeches of Edward, Lord Lytton</i> (London, 1874)

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## *Introduction*

As with almost everything, Edward Bulwer Lytton was ambivalent on the subject of biography. At times, he demanded an approach that left nothing hidden. Writing on the death of a royal prince, he claimed to hate ‘the cant of “de mortuis nil nisi bonum”’. Public characters *never* die; and nothing is so mischievous to mankind as to make the Grave such a “beautifier of the dead”. The Duke of York was a weak, arbitrary, tyrannical bigot.’<sup>1</sup> At other times, he was sceptical that a good biography could ever be written:

We die – none have known us! And yet all are to declaim on our character – measure at a glance the dark abyss of our souls – prate of us as if we were household and hackneyed to them from our cradle. One amongst the number shall write our biography – the rest shall read, and conceive they know us ever afterwards. We go down to our sons’ sons, darkened and disguised, so that, looking on men’s colourings of our mind and life, from our repose on the bosom of God, we shall not recognise one feature of the portrait we have left to earth.<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand, he was clear that, ‘there is nothing in my Biography that can afford much interest to the reader’.<sup>3</sup> On the other, he meticulously kept papers in an archive that was to provide the means to refute any calumny perpetrated in later generations.<sup>4</sup> A man who was so sensitive to the opinions of those around him while alive was in fact unlikely not to protect his reputation when dead.

Certainly he, by being so multi-faceted, is a difficult subject for the biographer, and this would probably have pleased him. He was a politician, novelist, essayist, poet, commentator on European affairs and spiritualist. As he himself put it, ‘the adequate biography of a life so full and various must, however, be the task of years’.<sup>5</sup> Otherwise, there was a danger of merely ‘skimming the cream’ of a life,<sup>6</sup> and producing a book lacking depth and balance. In an attempt to avoid this pitfall, the present book will present the man as much as the artist.

At Lytton’s funeral in Westminster Abbey, Benjamin Jowett heralded him as ‘one of England’s greatest writers and one of the most distinguished men of our time’.<sup>7</sup> One hundred and thirty years later, Lytton and his work is largely unknown. Up to 1914, the sales of his books rivalled those of Dickens.

Since 1918, few people have shown any interest. Rarely can a reputation have stood so high and fallen so low. It is all the more remarkable because Lytton was a figure in so many different types of activity. His rehabilitation as an undoubtedly eminent Victorian is long overdue. It is the aim of this book to contribute to that process.

Lytton's importance in Victorian society may be measured by astonishing statistics. The market for his books was prodigious. The British Library catalogue lists 618 items under his name, and they overwhelmingly refer to books published in his lifetime. Before 1914, there were thirty-two editions of *The Last Days of Pompeii*. No other novel could match this success, and two, *Kenelm Chillingly* and *What Will He Do With It*, only managed four editions, but many others were publishing triumphs. *Eugene Aram* ran to fourteen editions, *The Last of the Barons* to seventeen, *Pelham* to fifteen, *Paul Clifford* to twelve and *Night and Morning* to ten. Nor was this acclaim limited to England. Lytton was translated often into French and German, and occasionally into Spanish, Italian, Swedish, Russian and Greek. A collected edition of his works appeared in Stuttgart as early as 1838. Even his political writings were avidly bought. *The Present Crisis* of 1834, for example, went through thirteen editions within a year. It was on the evidence of figures such as these that he based his claim that his writings could save governments.

Success bred success, and Lytton had every right to take an increasingly strong line in negotiations with publishers. At the end of his life he was unassailable. There were five editions of *The Coming Race* within a year of its publication, and 3150 copies of *Kenelm Chillingly* were sold on the day of its publication. Lytton's death in no way diminished his popularity with the reading public. A collected edition of his works in thirty-seven volumes appeared between 1873 and 1877, to be followed by a twenty-eight volume pocket edition between 1887 and 1889. An American publisher contributed a thirty-two volume edition de luxe between 1892 and 1893.

Another indicator of Lytton's reputation was the sums that he expected publishers to pay for the privilege of marketing his works. His value rose steeply, and from early in his career he rightly saw his income from writing to be as important as that from the Knebworth estate. In 1828 Henry Colburn paid him £500 for *Pelham*, a considerable sum in itself for a first novel. The astonishing success of that novel led to the same publisher having to offer £800 for *The Disowned* and £1500 for *Devereux* in 1830. Thereafter Lytton found himself being able to negotiate about contracts from a position of strength. He took such transactions very seriously. He could change and abuse publishers if they were believed to be financially or artistically doubtful, and his literary standing justified the taking of intransigent positions.

Hard-headed producers of books like Colburn and John Blackwood found him difficult to deal with, but were also aware that his books sold in huge numbers.

Quite suddenly, this interest in Lytton and his works died in 1914. He was one of the many Victorian figures who should be numbered among the casualties of the First World War. The same literary catalogues which proclaim his influence on Victorian and Edwardian society bear witness to his strange demise. *The Last Days of Pompeii* is the only novel to have had any staying-power. Editions of this book continued to appear after 1918, one of the most recent being published in 1979. With this one exception the tally is pitiable. Very occasionally an imaginative publisher has taken a chance on *The Coming Race*, *Eugene Aram*, *Pelham* and *Rienzi*, but the bulk of Lytton's enormous output has fallen away into the shadows. Quite why this should happen opens up a fruitful field for speculation.

Accounting for his success is easier. The range of his literary and political writings made him a leading commentator on many of the major debates of his time. As a practising politician for much of his life he was able, unlike most writers, to have the opportunity of translating ideas into practice. He liked to think of himself as artist and as man of action. On some issues he was a campaigner and a leader of opinion. His novels often had an enormous resonance in the anxieties and aspirations of his contemporaries.

In this sense it is possible, without undue simplification, to divide his literary production into four or five major sections, each picking up a Victorian theme of importance. The first of these sections concerned the dandy novels. *Pelham*, *Falkland* and *Devereux* ensured that Lytton started his life in scandal. Charges of immorality flowed freely. When the books appeared, the debate about the cult of the dandy had been in session for some years. For some this fashion was degenerate, cynical and anarchic. For others it was magnetically Byronic in its attack upon conventions. Lytton tried to claim that his hero in *Pelham* was a model for good. The young man was dandy but also the protector of women and the surest of friends. Lytton hoped that his book would stop bank clerks playing Byron. But this moral purpose was not always seen by contemporaries. They bought the book and complained about its contents. *Pelham* was a *coup de scandale*, and there are many less efficient ways of establishing a literary reputation.

No sooner had the dust of one controversy settled than another of even greater force took its place. The publication of *Paul Clifford* in 1830 confirmed Lytton's notoriety. This time his transgression was to dignify the criminal world by thinking it worthwhile to describe their values in literature. Worse, it was claimed that he put the values of this section of the community on a par with those of good society. This novel, together with *Eugene Aram*,

*Night and Morning* and *Lucretia*, made a major contribution to what came to be known as the Newgate school of writing. Indeed Lytton claimed to have invented the genre. Dickens and Harrison Ainsworth joined in later. Newgate had been London's principal prison in the eighteenth century. Its criminal population regularly fed the gallows. Such people normally provoked fear and revulsion, and it was therefore barely comprehensible that the Newgate writers should give them codes of behaviour that mimicked those of their social superiors.

Indeed, such writing violated contemporary canons of taste. It was a commonplace among reviewers that each level of society had an idiom that was specific to itself. Love, hate, anger and jealousy were found in all people, but their expression was different in every social group. The higher the social context, the more refined and interesting the demonstration of emotion. By contrast, the poor and the criminal reacted with nothing more than brute instinct. In this situation, writers should of course limit themselves to describing what was best and most elevating. To do anything else was simply perverse. To make a hero of a highwayman in *Paul Clifford* or to investigate the scholarly mind of a murderer in *Eugene Aram* was to affront accepted canons of taste. The dandy and the criminal both challenged society and by becoming the apologist of these Lytton made a name.

With a reputation established, Lytton drifted into the mainstream. The novels of his middle age were more accepted and acceptable to his contemporaries. The writing became more relaxed and discursive. It also began to concentrate on themes of acknowledged contemporary interest. *My Novel* and *The Caxtons* gave to the mid-Victorian reader a view of the world around him. Sixteen editions of *The Caxtons* would appear between 1849 and 1903. Affectionate accounts of village life, honest and simple values, and the importance of family ties had a real currency at a time when all of these things were thought to be under threat from a destabilising industrialisation. Such books had all the marketable qualities of topicality. Lytton the iconoclast successfully transformed himself into something respectable. He was hailed as a commentator on the age, and his novels sold as tracts for the times.

This reordering of his priorities was confirmed by delving into fashionable medievalism. Novels like *Harold*, *The Last of the Barons* and *Rienzi*, together with epic poems like *King Arthur*, tapped into a real Victorian preference. For those who found industrial society menacing there was solace in taking refuge in an idealised past. The middle ages were described as centuries of noble values and social harmony. Selfless heroes fought bravely for the public good. A Victorian parliamentarian could do worse than take *Rienzi*

as his model in public life. Lytton had always admired the medievalism of Sir Walter Scott and now offered it to a new generation. In doing so he was once again picking up a theme of major contemporary concern which inevitably turned into profit. There was nothing calculated in this. Matters dealt with in the Caxton series and in the medieval novels touched Lytton deeply. Yet his new preoccupations made it easier for his popularity to be confirmed. They comforted readers and troubled them less.

Even Lytton's fascination with the occult had the same result. Novels like *Zanoni* and *A Strange Story*, which introduced Victorian readers to Rosicrucianism and other mysteries, connected Lytton with a major contemporary debate. Mid-century London was a world of seances and mediums. For some such enquiries were pure quackery, but an equal number of people took them very seriously. Scientific discoveries were being made on an almost annual basis. The scientific method of investigation was being refined. What had previously been mysterious was being made plain. Lytton and many others were open to the view that science might even make the spiritual world accessible, or allow for the indefinite prolongation of life. Elixirs were after all nothing but substances whose properties had not yet been described. There was of course potential embarrassment in all this – and Lytton hated to be embarrassed – but his writings on these subjects merely confirmed his status as spokesman for his age. Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling and Rosamund Lehmann would follow the spiritualist path into the twentieth century.

For sheer range of style and interest therefore Lytton was a giant of Victorian literature. His readers could be assured that he would give them something of interest on a matter of contemporary concern. His last service to them was to offer a view of the future. In old age Lytton became a prophet. His last three novels, *The Parisians*, *The Coming Race* and *Kenelm Chillingly*, deal respectively with the onset of Socialism, society after Socialism, and a restatement of what was being lost as society moved forward. The first two may be called ground-breaking in the themes they addressed. Lytton had moved beyond the role of mere social commentator. He now claimed to stand on an eminence from which he could see into the far distance. Few other Victorians could attain such heights.

As if this varied and prodigious output were not enough, Lytton had other claims on the attention of his countrymen. He was a writer who was also a politician, even briefly a Cabinet Minister. As such he was one of the few literary men who had the opportunity of putting ideas into practice. People as diverse as theatre managers, indigent writers and the population of Queensland had real reason to feel grateful for his public life. Equally, readers of scandal-sheets could feel grateful for his private life, which can