

PREFACE

EDINBURGH, said Matt. Bramble, "is a hot-bed of genius." Indeed the register of geniuses in Edinburgh during the second half of the eighteenth century was an imposing one, including such conspicuous personages as James Boswell, Adam Ferguson, "Douglas" Home, David Hume, Lord Kames, James Macpherson, William Robertson, and Adam Smith. Among such men moved the Reverend Doctor Hugh Blair, minister, professor, *littérateur*—"a vain, timid, fussy, kind-hearted little man that everybody liked."¹

This man was, in his day, "the famous Dr. Blair" whom the English-speaking world held in highest regard as a moralist and as a literary critic. His reputation continued high for almost half a century after his death in 1800, but after that half-century Fate began to deal with him rather cavalierly. Thereafter his published pulpit orations were often referred to in such terms as "the egregious sermons of Dr. Blair,"² or as "Blair's bucket of warm water."³ Unqualified disgust was also heaped upon the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, as when Leslie Stephen took to speaking of Blair "mouthing his sham rhetoric."⁴

The active critical abuse of Blair gave way thereafter to almost complete suppression of his name, but he is latterly appearing again—now without either praise or censure—in scores of articles and books attempting in one way or another to reconstruct the moral, intellectual, or esthetic temper of Blair's day, which is now recognized as a highly

1. *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford, 1932), I, 348n.

2. J. H. Millar, *A Literary History of Scotland* (New York, 1903), pp. 319–20.

3. Edmund Gosse, *A History of Eighteenth Century Literature* (New York, 1927), p. 302.

4. *English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1902), II, 455.

important era in the history of British thinking. He also appears in a number of excellent lives and critiques recently written about Hume, Kames, Mackenzie, and Burns, but only fitfully as a figure emerging for a moment from the shadow cast by the greater image.

There are, to be sure, several biographies with Blair as the central figure. James Finlayson, Professor of Logic at the University of Edinburgh, wrote the first as "A Short Account of the Life and Character of the Author," to be prefixed to the edition of Blair's complete *Sermons* (1801). In certain respects Finlayson was a man proper for the work. As a churchman he was spiritually much like Blair. He succeeded Blair in the pulpit of the High Church in St. Giles and preached his funeral sermon there. When he came to prepare a "Life," he spent much time and effort in inquiry, but the biography, despite its excellences, has the funerary tone of the Rev. Dr. Finlayson praising his predecessor the Rev. Dr. Blair. Furthermore it is, as the title indicates, "short."

The second of the "Lives" is by John Hill, Professor of Humanity at the University of Edinburgh, and the manuscript may very well have been prepared—judging from its extended treatment of Blair as a pulpit orator—for the same purpose as Finlayson's. Though less ingratiating than the former, Hill's "Life" is much longer and is fuller of factual details. The manuscript was found among Hill's remains after his death in 1805, and was published two years later as *An Account of the Life and Writings of Hugh Blair, D.D.* Its chief weakness may be gathered from the unqualified damnation of Macaulay who found it a "stupid book," written "in that vile fashion which Dugald Stewart set;—not a life, but a series of disquisitions on all sorts of subjects."⁵

Finlayson and Hill were whittled down to make two subsequent biographies, both worthless by all standards: W. Hamilton Reid's "A Copious Account of the Life and Writings of the Author," prefixed to *The Sentimental Beauties and Moral Delineations of the late Dr. Hugh Blair* (1809), and Thomas Tegg's "Memoirs of the Reverend Hugh Blair," prefacing *The Beauties of Blair* (1810). Tegg reported

5. G. O. Trevelyan, *The Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay* (London, 1903), II, 292.

that the "Memoirs" were copied "from Vol. 3 of a popular work entitled the *Public Characters*."

Leslie Stephen's sketch of Blair in the *Dictionary of National Biography* was the first attempt to go beyond the sources already mentioned. His inquiry included an examination of three very valuable books: Burton's *Hume*, Carlyle's *Autobiography*, and Tytler's *Kames*. Stephen's is, however, no more than a sketch. About the same time appeared a curious anonymous article of 25 pages entitled "A Littérateur of the Eighteenth Century," in a collection of essays, *Cross Lights* (1888). The author was poorly informed on many points of Blair's life, but he was the first to make any mention of Blair's editorial work on *Shakespeare* and on *The British Poets*. Recently some inquiry into original materials was undertaken at the University of Chicago by William N. Hawley, but the work was carried out no further than was necessary to the limited purposes of the dissertation, *Hugh Blair: Moderate Preacher* (1938).

To these sources I have added much that lay scattered far and wide in the principal libraries and collections of Scotland, England, and the United States, hoping that from the mass of materials I might bring forth a real and lively picture of Blair. He is unfortunately little more than a name to most of the persons who are currently writing about the Scottish group or about literary ideas of the eighteenth century, but he seldom fails to make an appearance and often carries considerable weight in these discussions. I shall be content if I can bring before such writers a lifelike representation of the man as the first step necessary to a realistic estimate of his place in the history of critical ideas.

That place may be somewhat difficult to determine, partly because a highly complex eighteenth century has not yet submitted to an orderly or convincing digest of its leading ideas, and partly because Blair's writing upon literature is encyclopedic in scope. A further hazard lies in the fact that his ideas are largely derivative. "Dr. Blair," said Burns, "is merely an astonishing proof of what industry and application can do." ⁶ "As penetration . . . and profoundness are not his characteristics," wrote Gilbert Stuart reviewing the *Lec-*

6, Chambers-Wallace, *Burns* (New York, 1896), II, 86.

tures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, "we meet here with no theories of his own."⁷ "Blair's great popularity," as Miss Randall sums it up, "was due undoubtedly to the simple and 'perspicuous' way in which he presented almost every one of the current critical concepts about which his contemporaries wished to be informed."⁸ The note struck by each of these quotations might be taken as a sign of Blair's critical impotence. I believe, however, that *deference* is the proper conclusion, and deference can hardly be interpreted as weakness when it spends its efforts absorbing the ideas of a most noteworthy group of men in a most notable era. This fact makes me hope that an extended account of the "vain, timid, fussy, kind-hearted little man," moving among his friends, his parishioners, his students, and his books, will be of help in judging the pervasive influence of Dr. Blair upon the moral, esthetic, and literary thought of his time.

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7. *The English Review*, II (1783), 18-25.

8. Helen Randall, *The Critical Theory of Lord Kames* (Northampton, Mass., 1944), p. 82.

Library, of Dr. Lauriston Sharp at the University, and of the secretary at the Royal Society I remember with particular pleasure. These gentlemen permitted me to clutter up their libraries with the photographic equipment of which I made extensive use in an attempt to make headway in a race for time against an approaching war.

I was graciously received also at the libraries of the universities of Glasgow, Aberdeen, and St. Andrews, and I am pleased to acknowledge publicly a very enlightening correspondence with Dr. G. H. Bushnell of St. Andrews. The further search for materials at Durham Cathedral Library, at Oxford, at Cambridge, and finally at the British Museum was an experience of great pleasure and profit.

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R. M. S.

