

THE ORIGINALITY OF SAMUEL BUTLER

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LIKE everyone else much worth talking about, Samuel Butler, author of *Erewhon*, can hardly be talked about in short compass. The interesting men in history are the versatile men—Aristotle, Julius Caesar, Leonardo da Vinci, Michel Angelo, in later times Galton. This is true even of greatness in the second rank. Walter Bagehot, for example, is not the greatest of economists, but he is more interesting than any of the others, simply because he was something else besides economist. But versatility carries an admirer over wide fields. And Samuel Butler, besides being wide, is deep.

The great temptation for one who undertakes to discuss Butler is to use his very witty writings to gain for one's self a momentary reputation for wittiness,—to bask in a reflected light, and leave one's readers saying: "How amusing! How brilliant!" A very interesting essay might also be made merely by recounting Butler's life, which was exceedingly varied in scene, more than a little varied in the ups and downs of fortune, and extraordinarily versatile, as I have already hinted, in occupation. He was a Cambridge graduate of high standing, a theologian, a botanist, an art critic of great acumen; he painted pictures; he composed music; he was easily the greatest wit of his generation; in New Zealand he learned so well to rear and shear and kill sheep that he made a competence for himself in less than five years; but he was also one of those lambs who seem to be reared for the special purpose of being shorn and bled by a certain type of Canadian, and in Montreal he lost all that he had made in New Zealand. In spite of, and because of, these activities, Butler wrote more than a dozen books, on widely differing subjects, all of them highly original, and some of them in a prose style which in my opinion has never been surpassed in English. Surely it would be good if one simply recounted these activities, and quoted some of Butler's comments on them!

I may be making a great mistake in attempting it, but I am going to try to set one or two things straight about my author, or straight as it appears to me. About eleven years ago I wrote articles and delivered lectures on him, in a perhaps foolish attempt

to get others to read him. Nowadays of course, and especially with the growing popularity of Bernard Shaw, there are very few people who do not claim to have read Samuel Butler; but by Samuel Butler they mean *Erewhon*, the novel, and the *Note-Books*, and these are by no means his greatest works. What is worse, the soft pedal is nearly always applied in discussing him. It is impossible even to understand *The Way of All Flesh* unless one has read the scientific and theological writings, and the *Note-Books* must often appear to be the merest raving to one who has not read all the rest, or who does not know the whole story of Butler's life. Then *Erewhon*, though it has been rather absurdly praised, for merits which it does not possess, is often set aside as a mere extravaganza, and the point of its satire is blunted by misunderstanding. Even where Butler's ideas are understood, they are whittled down, and made into pretty allegories. In short, there is an attempt to make Samuel Butler respectable. Now, Samuel Butler cannot be made respectable. God never intended him to be respectable. That scriptural verse which Butler was fond of twisting, so that it read: "Unless ye come as amoeba, as protoplasm, ye cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven," I should like to twist another way, and say: "Unless ye become unrespectable, thoroughly unrespectable, unless ye are willing to undergo all the consequences of unrespectability, ye cannot enter into the Kingdom of Samuel Butler."

What I am going to do, then, is to call attention to Butler's greatest book, and in my opinion one of the very greatest books of the nineteenth century—*Life and Habit*. I shall merely glance at the other writings. At the same time I warn my readers that if they feel themselves of little faith, if they are not assured of the greatness and nobility and divinity of Life, by which I do not mean merely human life, if they do not feel sufficiently at home with Life in all its forms to laugh at it occasionally—if they cannot laugh at Life in the form of Queen Victoria for example, or, to come a little nearer home, in the form of some of our United Empire Loyalists—then they had better put Samuel Butler back on the shelf for their grandchildren to read. By this I do not intend to be an offensive, superior person, ahead of my time. It was the cardinal principle of Samuel Butler's philosophy that one should not attempt to go too fast or too far. To go too fast or too far was to be a prig, and to pretend to go farther than one wanted to go was the worst kind of hypocrisy.

Let me give a plain illustration of what I mean. From what I know of both men, I think Butler would have delighted in Sir

William Dawson, the former Principal of McGill University. Dawson was much ahead of his time, so far as Canada was concerned, in geology. Neither Canadian science nor Canadian theology could ruffle his belief in Lyell. But that was as far as he could honestly go. Against Darwin and the biologists he set his face. Lyell was something Dawson had grown up with; Lyell involved no thinking, no turning one's self inside out. But, for Dawson, Darwin was a novelty, unholy, unrespectable; he opposed him with all his honesty of character. Honesty of character Butler greatly admired, as everyone must. Now, let us suppose that everyone has got as far as Lyell, and the great nineteenth-century geologists. Let us suppose that everyone has come on as far as Darwin. If one has come on no farther than that, Butler will still turn him inside out. We may not like that. We may refuse to submit to the process. Very good. It is for ourselves to say. But let us have no cant. Don't talk about Butler as an amusing novelist, nor as an eccentric crank, and pretend that you like his writing, or that you don't like his writing, when you have not taken the trouble to understand it.

Anyone living in Montreal in 1874 or 1875 might have encountered late in the afternoon a ruddy, bearded, shabbily-dressed Englishman making his way from the business district to the mountain. There he took his daily walk, summer and winter. He was not a talkative man, and he had a way of saying deep things if you addressed him foolishly. One day a man who had never been outside Montreal said to him: "You know, Mr. Butler, what I want to do is to get away from civilization." "Human beings are a discontented lot," said Butler, "and they seldom know when they've got the very thing they want." He found very little in Montreal life that amused or interested him; he thought that Manmon was our chief pursuit. Of course in the last fifty years we have changed all that. And Butler may have been prejudiced. Not only did he lose a great deal of money by trusting to Montrealers; but when the matter came to litigation, and Butler gave his evidence in the witness-box, opposing counsel moved that his deposition be struck out of the records on the ground that he was an atheist. Only if you came as Spurgeon's haberdasher, or at the very least as the brother-in-law of Spurgeon's haberdasher, so it seemed to Butler, could justice be done or money be repaid you in a Montreal law-court. But the Montreal mountain Butler loved, and he praised its beauty till he died. It was on the mountain, in June 1824, that he began to write his greatest book. (I hope that no one will report that fact to the Canadian Authors'

Association. If so, they will be sure to claim him as one of themselves, and I do not think that he and they would be congenial company). In June, 1874, Butler was thirty-eight years old, and had already written two books, *Erewhon*, and *The Fair Haven*.

He was the son of an English Church clergyman, and the grandson of a bishop, who had formerly been a great schoolmaster. (Aside from the Greek scholars he turned out, it is a great schoolmaster who can make money out of his profession, and Butler's grandfather even accumulated a fortune). As a boy Butler drew and painted, botanized and played the piano, but his most striking characteristic was his slow-wittedness. Even after he came of age, his father swindled him out of part of a legacy, and it was years before Butler discovered the fraud. At Cambridge he got a scholarship, and proceeded to read for Honours in mathematics. But about eighteen months before he was to take his degree he changed to classics. Notwithstanding this, he took his degree with first-class honours. It had been arranged for him that he should enter the Church, and Butler, who had been bullied all his life, at first acquiesced. Just at this time, however, his mind seems to have matured. He thought it his duty to study the Greek Testament, and everything that had been written on it, and these studies disquieted him. Besides, a determination shaped itself in him to be a painter. Music was a passion with him, but painting he took to be his career. There were terrible family quarrels, and in the end, when Butler was now twenty-three, it was agreed that he should go to New Zealand as sheep-farmer. Here he played the piano, painted, botanized, studied the Greek Testament as before, studied Darwin's *Origin of Species* as soon as it appeared, and wrote many articles in the New Zealand press. But he also took up land in a far-sighted way, succeeded in sheep-raising, and in less than five years doubled the money his father had advanced him against a reversion willed him by his grandfather. He returned to London in 1864, worth about £800 a year. Translate that into our currency, and present parity of prices, and it means not less than annual income of \$10,000. He began to live as an art student, on a modest scale, which would consume about a quarter of this income. But he had brought back with him from New Zealand Charles Pauli, one of the greatest spongers in history, and for the next thirty-three years Pauli consumed more of Butler's income than Butler did himself. Besides, Pauli and his friends gave him bad advice about investments,—hence the visit to Canada. Until his father died in 1886, and he came fully into the reversion of which his father had already partly cheated him, he was continually anxious about money.

Until 1878 Butler was convinced that painting was his life's work. During this time he painted numerous pictures, many of which were hung in the Royal Academy, many of which were sold for respectable prices, and one or two of which hang in the public galleries in England to-day. I have seen none of these pictures, and venture no opinion on them. Butler's own comment, late in life, was that he had been too much influenced by authorities and academies, and had not sufficiently followed his own bent. At the same time he was devoted to music. Several who heard him perform on the piano have told me that he played very creditably. Again I offer no opinion. Nor have I listened to the music of his own composition. But I stop over this long enough to point out that Butler had in him most strongly and urgently the artistic impulse. He struggled all his life to express himself. It was only after he had written a couple of books, and these mainly at the insistence of friends, that he began to see that possibly literature was to be his form of expression. That expression at his best is some of the finest English prose we have. Swift and Defoe may have handled English prose as well, but I do not think they handled it better. Strangely, all three of them were masters of irony. Is irony a gift added to those who can write prose, or is it a discipline that makes good prose possible? In French and Greek also the two go together.

It was *Life and Habit*, published on his forty-second birthday, December 4, 1877, which finally persuaded Butler that literature was to be his real career. His other pursuits were never relinquished, but they fell into second place. He lived another quarter-century, and in that time he was to write four more works on Evolution; two travel-books, as they are usually called, about North Italy; a book about the *Odyssey*; prose translations of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*; a book about Shakespeare's sonnets; a two-volume biography of his grandfather; essays and art criticisms, and his novel, besides musical compositions. He took a long annual holiday in Switzerland and Italy; on Sundays he walked among villages near London; three days a week he wrote in the British Museum; on other days he worked in studios and at home, on pictures and music.

He has left an account of some of these activities at this period in his essay, *Quis Desiderio?* We have seen that Butler's literary career seems to have depended upon accident. In this essay he demonstrates that it depended upon the accident of his stumbling upon a book in the British Museum—a work called *Frost's Lives of Eminent Christians*.

And now let us turn to *Life and Habit*. I ask my readers to

recall to mind with as great precision as they can what they know about Evolution. When did this theory begin? And what precisely is it? Most will agree that they are very hazy about details, but that they connect it with Charles Darwin. There are, in fact, many scientific works which state that the theory first occurred to Charles Darwin and A. R. Wallace, simultaneously. Of course such statements are extremely inaccurate. There is more than a little about Evolution in Aristotle. Anaxagoras had said that man was so wise because he had been given hands. Aristotle retorted that man had hands because he was so wise,—he had grown himself hands. There are echoes of this dispute in Lucretius and other ancient writers. But let us leave these far-off forgotten things, and come to more recent times. Readers of Helmholtz's little essay on Goethe as a man of science will see there that Helmholtz believed Goethe to have discovered Evolution. Well, for himself so he did. He was walking on the Lido near Venice when he picked up from the sand the skull of a sheep. It flashed on him that the skull was one of the vertebrae, modified. But of course this sort of thing was flashing on the minds of other thinkers in Europe. Buffon had devoted a scientific study to the question. In England Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of Charles Darwin, and born about a century before our Samuel Butler, had also written clearly in the same strain. This Erasmus Darwin was considered by most of his contemporaries to be a little cracked. Not only did he write about Evolution, he wrote about male and female flowers, which seemed indecent in those days; and he advised Englishmen to sleep with their bedroom windows open, and to shun alcohol. All of this, of course, was revolutionary, and no Englishman paid any attention to it. But a Frenchman named Lamarck, who had worked with Buffon, fastened on these writings of Erasmus Darwin, and in Paris in the first decade of the nineteenth century (a place and a time congenial to scientific freedom, if not to political liberty) Lamarck poured out a great number of writings, in which he developed his theory of descent with modification. In this he anticipated Charles Darwin and A. R. Wallace even in their phrases "the survival of the fittest," "struggle for existence", and so on. The chief thing in Lamarck's philosophy which these biologists overlooked was his theory of "use and disuse". Lamarck's idea was that a species of plant or animal tended in a certain direction not merely because of the environment in which it was placed, but through the deliberate skill with which the species adapted itself to that environment.

Such were the ideas that had been simmering in the minds of men, many men, in the three-quarters of a century before the ap-

pearance of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*. During this period botany had become a popular pastime; during this period geology had its beginning. Fifteen years before *Origin of Species* there was published, anonymously, a striking work called *Vestiges of Creation*. Still, when Charles Darwin published his book in 1859, the first paragraph indicated that his ideas had occurred to him quite spontaneously, while serving as a ship's doctor. I do not think that Charles Darwin wished unduly to claim originality for his work; but he may have wished to escape contamination, in the minds of his readers, with former unorthodoxies. Still that first paragraph has stuck in the minds of men, even in the minds of men who have never read the book; and if you asked almost any university professor to-day about it, he would tell you that Charles Darwin invented the theory of Evolution. This is largely because, as Butler used to say, it was Charles Darwin who made men believe in Evolution.

He began to read Darwin in 1860, and like almost everyone he knew nothing of the earlier Evolution theories. In his slow-witted way he accepted Darwin, lock, stock and barrel. He knew the book by heart. But for a while he was preoccupied with other things,—the Greek Testament, music, whether his sheep would develop scab before money arrived from his father which would enable him to wash his flocks. Suddenly he began to think about Darwin, and three years after the book appeared he wrote an article in a New Zealand paper hitching tools, machines and human inventions to the idea of modification and descent. This was precisely what Aristotle had done more than three centuries B. C. But Butler was to ponder the *Origin of Species* a long while yet before he became dissatisfied with it.

A few words about Darwin. He was a great observer, a most industrious student; the world of men will never cease to be in his debt. And in a way he wrote well, that is, he wrote interestingly; he caught the ear of his public. But he was often unable to see the drift of what he himself wrote. He often let words and phrases do for thinking. His admirers called him a simple man, and Huxley, his great disciple, used to growl in private that he was a most unphilosophic man. Systems of philosophy, political and moral, were being reared on what he wrote; but he seemed incapable of reasoning out his own foundation or other men's superstructures. The great question, as Butler soon saw, was: *Did all these changes in Species come about by Chance?* To this question in many, many revised editions of his work Charles Darwin gave most obscure and confusing answers. Study the last revised edition

and you will see that the answer is still confused, but in many places Darwin says plainly: "Chance, Accident explains it all." Now Butler hated confusion, and he recoiled from the idea that Chance ruled the Universe. Unorthodox he was, and flippant and irreverent you may think him, if you read only *The Way of All Flesh* and the *Note-Books*. But in reverence for what Carlyle called "the eternal veracities" Carlyle himself did not surpass him. Like many other minds capable of sustained and difficult philosophic reasoning, Butler was curiously *naïf* and slow. He accepted everything so long as there were no inaccuracies or inconsistencies on the very surface. But when he had brooded on a thing, or when something appeared not to go on all fours, he brought to bear on the question powers of logic such as few men are gifted with. In this respect there was hardly a mental faculty he did not possess: memory; that faculty in analogy which is so nearly allied to wit; ability to grasp the essential thing; the imaginative sympathy which allows analysis to see not only the argument itself, but whence it may have come, and whither it might conceivably proceed; and finally, that higher imagination which versatile men are so likely to have, the imagination which soars above the subject immediately in hand, and sees its proportion to all things.

Life and Habit begins with a careful demonstration that memory when most complete is not conscious, and that it may lie long dormant until stimulated. It then proceeds to the thesis that "individuality" or "personality", in the every-day sense of the words, will not bear analysis. Our "self" contains many "selves," and it overlaps with other "selves," and indeed with many inanimate things, such as food and experiences. Again, if the man is the "same person" as the youth, as the infant, is not the infant the "same person" as the embryo, and the embryo the "same person" as the cell, and the cell the "same person" as the parents of the cell? (Charles Darwin's grandfather had said that the child was the "elongation" of its parents, but when he was writing *Life and Habit* Butler did not know this.) Again, we speak of instincts as "inherited habit," and the phrase "experience of the race" is common. Now, if child and parents are the "same person," the phrase "experience of the race" has some meaning, but not otherwise. And instinct is strikingly like habits and accomplishments which we remember so perfectly to do that we are not conscious of remembering them at all. What then if instinct is a case of unconscious memory? If so, there are certain things which we should expect to find happen in a certain way. Butler goes on to examine these. He finds an astonishing amount of evidence in favour of his

theory—the relation of age at which puberty takes place to longevity, for example; the sterility of hybrids; indeed the theory illumines the whole conception of Evolution. Memory does not work exactly,—the pianist will never perform a piece of music precisely in the same way twice; and as a rule the oftener he repeats it, the better and less consciously he does it. The difference between his fortieth and his forty-first performance will not be very great, but the difference between his fortieth and his thousandth performance will be very great indeed. Similarly between one generation of woodpeckers and the next there will be no great change in adaptability of structure, but there will be a greatly increased degree of adaptability after millions and millions of generations.

Now see how fundamentally this differs from Charles Darwin! If you connect instinct and the development of species with memory, you make them intelligent. Chance is ruled out. "Blind instinct" is impossible. Furthermore, the illogic of Darwin is done away with. You see, grant Darwin that by chance, in a certain generation of a species, there happens to be one example of a certain tendency. The chances are millions to one against this "sport" mating with a similar tendency; and if the "sport" does beget several half-similar tendencies in the next generation, the chances of breeding are millions to one against each one of them. Once or twice Darwin admits that "use and disuse" contribute to variation—this is Lamarck's theory, but then in other places he says that Lamarck's theory is absurd. In particular, he says that "the exploded theory of Lamarck" is completely disposed of by instinct in neuter insects—among ants and bees.* For a while Butler was pulled up by this statement of Darwin's, but after a while he saw that neuter insects also made for his theory.

I am afraid that the brevity with which I am compelled to outline all this is far from being the soul of wit. It occurs to me that Butler would have been greatly amused at the idea of a dull discourse on himself, especially a dull discourse written in Montreal. No book ever was wittier than *Life and Habit*. Almost any page of it will do for an illustration of that fact. If you read a chapter of *Life and Habit*, you will not rest until you have read all the book, and its sequel, *Evolution Old and New*, a little historic and critical work from which Huxley and others learned a very great deal.

What is the greatest question an individual or a generation of men can be faced with? Is it not what must I do, what must we do, with new ideas—the particular new ideas of the time, whatever the time is? As an answer to that question I think hardly anything else

* One of the best illustrations of the twist in Darwin's mind about Lamarck is the passage about the little South American animal, the tuco-tuco, in Darwin's first book, *Voyage of the Beagle*.

will be found so profound, so true,—nor, because of its alternating playfulness and grimness, so endlessly attractive—as the concluding paragraphs of the chapter on “Conscious and Unconscious Knowers” in *Life and Habit*. There is a fine passage in Lange—the author of *History of Materialism*—which comes to pretty much the same thing; but if ever you compare them (and, remember, Lange was a very great man) you will find that I have not been extravagant in praising the resources of Butler’s mind, and you will yield higher tribute than you have ever yet done to Butler’s style.

DEEP IN THE DUSK

CHARLES T. BRUCE

Deep in the dusk that dims the mystic years
 The wistful shadows of old dream-days pass;
 Their pensive eyes alight, yet dark with tears,
 Like silver gleams of glory in the grass.
 Old melodies grow still in broken bars;
 Gray shadows linger by forgotten streams;
 They stretch veiled hands, and fade beyond the stars—
 To leave me nothing but the drift of dreams.

These are the threads of mystery in my heart
 That bind me to the dusk of yesterday.
 This breathless hour a moment lives apart,
 And then is cast upon the common clay.
 I cannot tell what truth the old days knew;
 I only know the dream is always true.