

On a plan greatly more comprehensive than the time-honoured *Elegant Extracts* of Vicesimus Knox, this *Cyclopædia of English Literature*—like all the old cyclopædias systematic and not alphabetic, and following the chronological order as obviously the only practicable one—aimed to give a conspectus of our literature by a series of extracts from the more memorable authors set in a biographical and critical history of the literature itself. Dr Chambers laid the plan in 1841, and for realising it secured the help of his friend Dr Robert Carruthers of Inverness. The outcome of their joint labours, which began to appear before the close of 1842, was completed in two volumes in 1844, and was brought down to date and reprinted in 1858. It was revised and extended under the charge of Dr Carruthers in 1876; and a fourth reissue, again incorporating new matter, took place a dozen years later. But a keener interest in our older literature and a fuller knowledge of it, new facts, new theories, and new light on a thousand points, the increasing supply of new materials for selection, the continued activity of accepted authors, the rise of new and brilliant stars, and all that is implied in the unabated continuity of the literary life of the nation, have rendered necessary a much more thorough-going revision and reconstruction; a completely new edition is imperatively demanded.

'Tis sixty years since—just sixty years since Dr Chambers began work on the first edition. Coleridge had then been dead for half-a-dozen years, but Southey was still laureate and Wordsworth was in vigorous health. Tennyson had not yet published those two volumes that gave him a secure place amongst English poets. John Ruskin, Charles Kingsley, and Matthew Arnold were still at Oxford, and William Morris was a schoolboy. Marian Evans, at Griff, had as yet no literary ambitions, and George Meredith had not sent his first contribution to *Chambers's Journal*. Macaulay was M.P. for Edinburgh, but had not published his *Lays* or begun his *History*. The reputation Carlyle had made by the *French Revolution* was but five years old, Thackeray's first volume was lately published, and Dickens had issued only a very few of the long series of his stories. Darwin had not yet put on paper the first rough sketch of his evolution theory, and Huxley was a young medical student. Emerson was hardly known in England; Longfellow and Lowell had each published but one volume of original

verse; and 'The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table' had made but a few desultory efforts in literature. Howells was an infant, and Henry James was not yet born. A vast proportion of what gives character to modern letters had not yet been written or thought out. Upper and Lower Canada had just been united, the New Zealand Company had only begun to plant the colony, and the first great rush of free settlers had not yet given promise of the future Commonwealth of Australia.

Sixty years after Dr Chambers and Dr Carruthers addressed themselves to their task, we stand in a new century, and, as regards literature, in a new world. In the new edition, of which the first volume now appears, the essential plan has been retained. The aim has been to carry that plan out even more perfectly, and to make the new work more fully representative of our present and past literary history at the commencement of the Twentieth Century than the first edition was for the middle of the Nineteenth. Neither then nor now has a pedantic attempt been made to draw a hard-and-fast line between what is by right and what is not a part of pure national literature, and to include only what wholly approves itself before the strictest canons of the higher criticism of the day. The selection was made on a more catholic, comprehensive, and historical plan: nobody being excluded whom the general consensus of the ages has adjudged worthy of remembrance. In literature more than in most things human *die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*, history is the supreme and final judge; in the end it is the best books that live.

Our enterprise has a quite definite aim, and from the nature of the case its scope is limited—severely limited by the boundlessness of the materials with which it deals. It is not, and is not meant to be, an anthology of the perfect models of our prose and verse, a chrestomathy of purple patches, a collection of elegant extracts. The acknowledged gem should be there, if the man is mainly known by some one noble passage, one sonnet, one song, one aphorism or sententious saying; but something there should be, as a rule, to illustrate his average achievement, the standard by which he may fairly be judged. Nor does the work profess to be a marrow of our literature, or to give the spirit and quintessence of the several authors; still less does it aim to