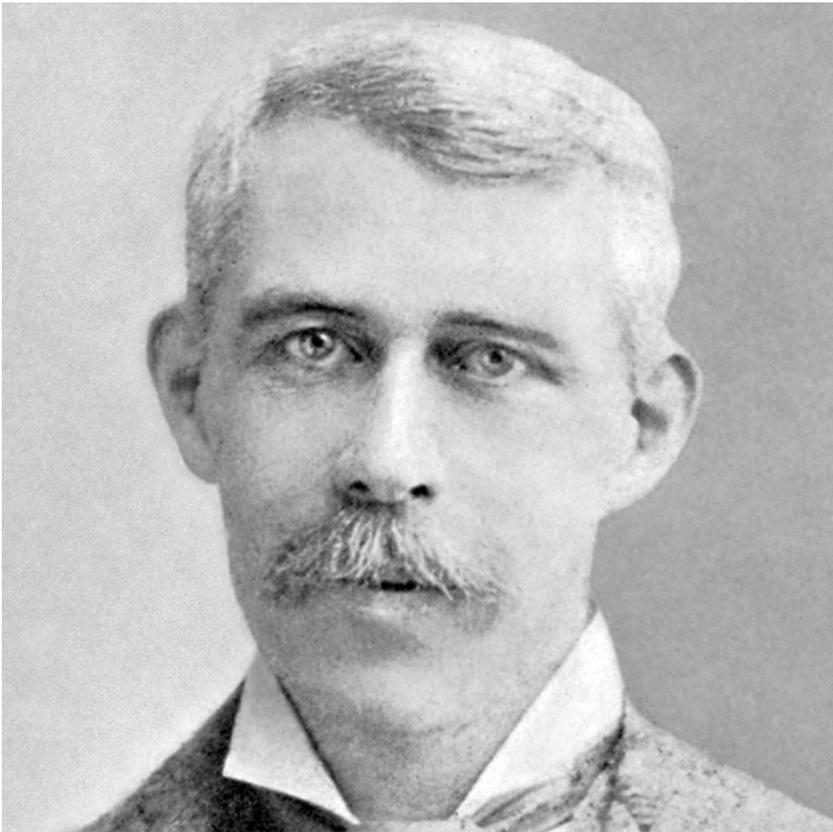


REVIEW OF OLIVER ELTON,
C. E. MONTAGUE: A MEMOIR

An unattributed review in the Pelican Record 19 (1929), 85–6, known to be IB's because the manuscript was found among his papers.



C. E. MONTAGUE belongs to that very small and distinct company of authors who have succeeded in giving an entirely faithful translation of their complete selves in words. In a sense, of course, every book reflects its author's person, but Montague's works embody the largest and most typical part of the man: they are almost everywhere a record of intimate personal experience,

generalised and formalised into works of art. It is extraordinarily difficult to succeed in this type of writing: the depth of sincerity, of sensitiveness, of literary imagination which can create works of art out of consciously personal experience are rarely found side by side; but if ever they do exist in one man, they give rise to a very definite literary genre, that of psychological naturalism.

The finest exponents of it were the greater Russians, who somehow did write as they lived, and live as they wrote, so that their novels and essays and private letters are all homogeneous and complementary to each other, and deal with the same things in the same intimate, scrupulous, embarrassingly sincere manner. C. E. Montague, the actual matter of whose thought was entirely unlike that of all these novelists, did, however, approach things in similar fashion, set up truth and sympathy above everything else, and insisted on them with constant enthusiasm both in his life and in his art. Tolstoy said somewhere that the only division of men which meant anything at all to him was into those who understood and those who could not understand. Montague's 'understanding' is the whole of him, not only as a writer, but also, as this volume shows, as a man.

With a sensibility and a delicacy of feeling whose value Montague himself would have understood best, Professor Elton has not burdened his memoir¹ with lengthy panegyrics or critical disquisitions, but has clothed the letters and unfinished essays which he publishes with a light, exquisitely written commentary, which, with great unselfishness and modesty, [86] effaces itself whenever Montague or his friends speak, and reappears only when they are silent, to give coherence and unity to the scattered collection of private records. It accompanies him to the City of London School and to Balliol, where he lived pleasantly enough, as his happy letters show, and was exceedingly popular.

He failed to impress Jowett, who, nevertheless, with some acuteness of vision, brusquely recommended him to write for the newspapers. He joined the staff of the *Manchester Guardian* soon after he went down, and for the rest of his life identified himself with that most honourable and humane of all newspapers.² He accepted fully and unconditionally the aim to which it was

¹ London, 1929: Chatto & Windus.

² [IB himself was interviewed for it by the Editor, C. P. Scott, unsuccessfully, in 1932.]

committed, 'to bring all political action to the same tests as personal conduct'.³ And this it was that made him 'politically a gallant adventurer on the right side, ready at all times for the difficult, the opprobrious task'.⁴

It was opprobrious enough on the Boer War, and, to say the least, uneasy in 1914, when he began by serving in the ranks, was appointed intelligence officer, and finally became the Press Censor. When he was certain that his conscience was clear, he acted immediately, without any hesitation. When it was not, he never deceived himself into any comfortable compromise, but had a way, both in his novels, and in his articles, of facing the reader with sharp moral dilemmas, whose depth and cruelty he would quietly and painfully emphasise, and leave unanswered when he could see no honest solution; and this intellectual candour of his created its own literary style. Montague's careful, rhythmical, intensely self-conscious prose is never artificial, never, that is, strives after verbal effects which are not founded on a basis of genuine feeling, with the result that it possesses a peculiar Shakespearean blend of shrewdness and nobility, an ample, generous, full-blooded style, a page of which would dilute into a hundred of any other. He brought journalism as near a fine art as he dared – and left it journalism.

Professor Elton has achieved a work of high merit in giving us this portrait of a *preux chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*,⁵ almost alone, in his singular integrity, in the world of English letters of his generation.

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³ Quoted in the work under review, 35.

⁴ *ibid.*, quoted from 'C. E. Montague: Death of a Great Journalist', *Manchester Guardian*, 29 May 1928, 9.

⁵ 'A proud knight, fearless and beyond reproach.'