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James Ashcroft Noble (1844-1896)

James Ashcroft Noble spent most of his working life in the north-west of England and did not move to London until his late thirties. The two papers that he published in *The Yellow Book* the year before his death, “Mr. Stevenson’s Forerunner” (Vol. IV, January 1895), about the Scottish poet Alexander Smith, and “The Phantasies of Philarete” (Vol. V, April 1895), a tale of New Grub Street, are not of a nature to excite attention or controversy. Yet Noble was nationally known and widely respected as an essayist and critic.

Born 25 June 1844 at 22 Field Street, Everton, James Ashcroft Noble was the son of James Noble of Westmorland, a bookkeeper in the Liverpool Pilot Office, and his wife Ellen Ashcroft. He originally intended to become a clergyman, but after some time in a solicitor’s office, turned to journalism instead. His first published articles were on “The Present Crisis in the Church,” for the *Liverpool Mercury*. He then became chief reviewer for the *Liverpool Morning Albion*. *The Pelican Papers*, his first book, a series of semi-autobiographical literary and religious reflections, appeared in 1873. Noble dedicated it to Esther Lunt, the daughter of a retired whaler, whom he married that year. In 1876 he was invited to become the editor of a new Liverpool Liberal paper, the *Argus*, where he commissioned William Watson’s first published poem and early work by Henry Hall Caine. He resigned after 18 months and in 1878 became a regular writer for the *Spectator*.

At about this time Noble left Liverpool for Ainsdale, a seaside village near Southport, fictionalized in his essay “Sandycombes” (*Impressions and Memories*,1895). Here he was visited by literary friends Watson, Caine, Charles Cowden Clarke, David Main, Alfred Perceval Graves and, most notably, Alexander Ireland, the book collector and biographer of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Manchester and Liverpool were then active centres of Unitarianism. Though Anglican by upbringing, Noble was drawn to the Unitarian Movement and, through it, to the New England transcendentalists, preaching occasionally in the Unitarian Chapel in Southport. In *Morality in English Fiction* (1886), originally a lecture delivered in various towns in Northern England, he reserved his greatest admiration for the work of George Eliot, “great as a literary artist, equally great as an ethical inspirer.” But he also defended “art for art’s sake,” arguing that, as art stemmed from human emotions, it could never be completely immoral.

The moral underpinning of Noble's work should not obscure the fact that he was also an aesthete, whose career turned on his admiration for Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Reviewing David Main's *Treasury of English Sonnets* in the *Contemporary Review* ("The Sonnet in England," September 1880) he claimed that because Rossetti's sonnets were "purely artistic" they should be exempted from "irritating pseudo-ethical controversies." Thus he made public and gracious reparation to Rossetti for the devastating accusations of immorality printed by Robert Buchanan in the same journal in 1871 ("The Fleshly School of Poetry," *CR*, October 1871). Through Caine, Noble learned how much his remarks had gratified Rossetti and, in May 1881, decided to pack his bags for London. He settled in Battersea, but after little more than two years was driven by ill-health back to Birkdale, near Southport. In 1884 Alexander Ireland came to his aid by offering him the post of literary editor on his Radical newspaper, the *Manchester Examiner*.

During this second sojourn in the Liverpool area John Robb, publisher of *My Ladies' Sonnets*, introduced its author, Richard Le Gallienne, to Noble. With characteristic generosity Noble did all he could to advance Le Gallienne's career. He favourably reviewed his book in the *Academy* (24 March 1888). In 1892 Le Gallienne dedicated the final section of *English Poems* to Noble, who responded with an entry on Le Gallienne for Alfred Miles's anthology, *Poets and Poetry of the Century*. With Le Gallienne as John Lane's reader, it followed naturally that Noble's *The Sonnet in England and Other Essays* (1893) should be published by The Bodley Head. The book opened with a reprint of "The Sonnet in England" paper, Noble gently advertising his Rossetti connection in the preface: "it is a joy to me to know that Rossetti himself received pleasure from the words of one who was then an entirely unknown critic."

Thus Noble, rather in the wake of his younger Liverpool protégés Watson and Le Gallienne, finally took on the colours of The Bodley Head. Yet in 1895, while the conservative Watson demanded Lane withdraw all Oscar Wilde's books from his list, it was the older but more liberal Noble who signed a petition against the harshness of Wilde's prison sentence.

On the strength of *The Sonnet in England* Noble had returned to London in 1893, writing for the foremost London periodicals, including *The Yellow Book*. "The Phantasies of Philarete" is a plea for kindliness in literary criticism, while the death of its protagonist by chloral may well be another Rossetti allusion.

In 1894 Noble helped to found the Liberal journal the *New Age* (he was part-proprietor) and began his editorship of the monthly *Illustrator…for the Sunday School Teacher and Bible Student.* He was also introduced by the minister of the local Unitarian chapel to the sixteen-year old Edward Thomas. Seeing him as a nature writer in the New England tradition of Thoreau, Noble encouraged his work and arranged for its early publication in the *New Age*. Thomas dedicated his first book, *The Woodland Life* (1897) to Noble and in 1899 married his daughter, Helen.

Noble died of tubercular laryngitis on 3 April 1896 at his home, 6 Patten Road, Wandsworth. He was fifty-one. Wreaths were sent by Le Gallienne, Caine, Richard Hutton of the *Spectator* and William Sharp, while Noble's widow preserved a letter of condolence from Robert Buchanan referring to her husband's "brave and beautiful nature" and to the universal love and respect in which he was held.

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