

Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

Alexander Pope is in many respects a unique figure. In the first place, he was for a generation "the poet" of a great nation. To be sure, poetry was limited in the early eighteenth century, there were few lyrics, little or no love poetry, no epics, no dramas or songs of nature worth considering, but in the narrow field of satiric and didactic verse Pope was the undisputed master. His influence completely dominated the poetry of his age, and many foreign writers, as well as the majority of English poets, looked to him as their model. Second, he was a remarkably clear and adequate reflection of the spirit of the age in which he lived. There is hardly an ideal, a belief, a doubt, a fashion, a whim of Queen Anne's time, that is not neatly expressed in his poetry. Third, he was the only impor-

tant writer of that age who gave his whole life to letters. Swift was a clergyman and politician, Addison was Secretary of State, other writers depended on patrons or politics or pensions for fame and a livelihood, but Pope was independent, and had no profession but literature. And fourth, by the sheer force of his ambition he won his place and held it in spite of religious prejudice and in the face of physical and temperamental obstacles that would have discouraged a stronger man. For Pope was deformed and sickly dwarfish in soul and body. He knew little of the world of nature or of the world of the human heart. He was lacking, apparently in noble feeling and instinctively chose a lie when the truth had manifestly more advantages. yet this jealous peevish, waspish little man became the most famo-

us poet of his age and the acknowledged leader of English literature. We record the fact with wonder and admiration, but we do not attempt to explain it.

Pope was born in London in 1688, the year of the Revolution. His parents were both Catholics, who presently removed from London and settled in Binfield, near Windsor where the poet's childhood was passed. Partly because of an unfortunate prejudice against Catholics in the public schools partly because of his own weakness and deformity, Pope received very little school education, but browsed for himself among English books and picked up a smattering of the classics. Very early he began to write poetry and records the fact with his usual vanity:

"As yet a child, nor yet a
fool to fame,

I lisped in numbers, for the numbers came!"

Being debarred by his religion from many desirable employments, he resolved to make literature his life work and in this he resembled Dryden who he tells us, was his only master, though much of his work seems to depend on Boileau, the French poet and critic. When only sixteen years old he had written his "Pastorals", a few years later appeared his "Essay on Criticism", which made him famous. With the publication of the 'Rape of the Lock' in 1712, Pope's name was known and honoured all over England and this dwarf of twenty-four years by the sheer force of his own ambition had jumped to the foremost place in English letters. It was soon after this that Voltaire called him "the best poet of England and at present,

of all the world" - which is about as near the truth as Voltaire generally gets in his numerous universal judgements. For the next twelve years Pope was busy with poetry, especially with his translations of Homer, and his work was so successful financially that he bought a villa at Twickenham, on the Thames and remained happily independent of wealthy patrons for a livelihood.

Led by his success, Pope returned to London and for a time endeavoured to live the gay and dissolute life which was supposed to be suitable for a literary genius but he was utterly unfitted for it, mentally and physically and soon retired to Twickenham. There he gave himself up to poetry, manufactured a little garden more artificial than his verse and cultivated his friendship with Martha Blount, with

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Whom for many years he spent a good part of each day and who remained faithful to him to the end of his life. At Twickenham he wrote his 'moral epistles' and revenged himself upon all his critics in the bitter abuse of the Dunciad. He died in 1744 and was buried at Twickenham, his religion preventing him from the honor, which was certainly his due of a resting place in Westminster Abbey.

The end.

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