

## A Forgotten Novelist

By Hermione Ramsden

THERE is no sufficient reason to account for the manner in which Robert Bage has been forgotten, while numbers of his contemporaries have been canonised among the classics. It may be true that his works have not the enduring qualities of Samuel Richardson's many-volumed novels, yet they are not without many of the attributes which go towards the making of popular romances, and in many respects they are better calculated to appeal to the reading public of our time. His style is brighter than Richardson's, less sentimental than Fielding's; his good men are less priggish, and his young women have more of nature in them; while, as regards his subjects, he may be said to have much in common with some modern authors, who would find it no easy matter to surpass him in the boldness with which he upholds his opinions.

Bage was born on the 29th of January, 1728, at Darley, where his father was a paper manufacturer, which profession he afterwards followed. In politics he was a Whig, while in religion it is said that, for a time at least, he was a Quaker, which would account for his peculiar way of writing; but if this was the case, he does not appear to have remained one long, for, to use the expression of a contemporary, he very soon "reasoned himself into infidelity,"

infidelity," and all the traces that remained of his former religious persuasion were a sincere esteem for the Quakers and an unconquerable dislike for the clergy. The characters of Miss Carlill in *Man as He Is*, and of Arnold in *Barham Downs*, are delineated with a touch of sympathy which is quite unmistakable, while Mr. Holford and the Rev. Dr. Blick, who differ so little as to be virtually the same man, are both of them the *beau-idéal* of the sporting parson of the period, and are described as the toadies of a rich lord, for ever holding up the example of the patriarchs as an excuse for the behaviour of their wealthy patrons. Mr. Holford "was a sound divine, orthodox in preaching and eating, could bear a little infidelity and free-thinking, provided they were accompanied with good wine and good venison."

But to return to Bage's own life. Shortly after the death of his mother, his father removed to Derby, and Robert was sent to school, where it seems that he soon proved himself a distinguished scholar, for at the age of seven he was already proficient in Latin.

In 1765 he entered into partnership in an iron manufactory with three persons, one of whom was the then celebrated Dr. Darwin; but the business failed, and Bage lost a considerable portion of his fortune. It was partly as a distraction from these pecuniary troubles that he wrote his novels. Of these, *Mount Henneth* was the first, and it was written, as he informs his readers in the preface, in order that he might be able to present each of his daughters with a new silk gown. The fashions appear to have been as tyrannical in those days as they are now, for our author declares that it was with feelings approaching to dismay that he observed that his daughters' head-dresses were suffering "an amazing expansion."

This novel was written in the form of letters, and was published in 1781, when the copyright was sold for the sum of £30.

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It is filled with the most surprising and improbable situations, while many of the characters appear to have been introduced for the sole purpose of relating other peoples' histories, the result being awkward and unnatural. *Mount Henneth* was speedily followed by works of a similar nature; *Barham Downs*, two vols., published in 1784, which, by some, was considered his best; *The Fair Syrian*, two vols., 1787; *James Wallace*, three vols., 1788; and, finally, his two masterpieces: *Man as He Is*,\* and *Hermisprong, or Man as He Is Not*.†

The epistolary style in which Richardson had succeeded so well was not suited to the lighter substance of Bage's novels, and it was not until he dropped it and developed a style of his own that he can be said to have achieved anything worthy of immortality. It was his careful studies of character, no less than the fidelity with which he pictured the manners and customs of the times, to which he owed the wide-spread reputation that he enjoyed in his life-time, when translations of his novels were published abroad in France and Germany. In his own country, fresh editions were continually called for, and after his death in 1801, they were republished under the editorship of Mrs. Barbauld and Sir Walter Scott. The poet Cowper may also be counted as one of his admirers, for, in a letter to William Hayley, dated May 21, 1793, he writes as follows:

. . . "There has been a book lately published, entitled *Man as He Is*. I have heard a high character of it, as admirably written, and

\* *Man as He Is*. A novel in four volumes. London: printed for William Lane, at the Minerva Press, Leadenhall Street. 1792.

† *Hermisprong; or, Man as He Is Not*. A novel in two volumes. By the author of *Man as He Is*. Dublin: printed by Brett Smith, for P. Wogan, P. Byrne, J. Moore, and J. Rice. 1796.

and am informed that for that reason, and because it inculcates Whig principles, it is, by many, imputed to you."

And the same year, in a letter to Samuel Rose, dated Dec. 8, he writes :

"We find it excellent ; abounding with wit and just sentiment, and knowledge both of books and men."

According to his friend, William Hutton, Bage cared little for the world, although he seems to have resembled Richardson in the preference which he evinced for the society of ladies, and he undoubtedly surpassed the latter in his manner of describing some of them. Maria Fluart, for instance, in *Hermesprong*, is a woman of the same type as Charlotte Grandison, yet it cannot be denied that her character is better drawn and her frivolous moods more consistently sustained ; for Charlotte, in spite of her flightiness, partakes too strongly of the Grandison temperament, and there are moments when she relapses into conversations worthy of her brother.

Of Bage's domestic life we know very little, beyond the fact that he had three step-mothers, and that he married, at the age of twenty-three, a lady possessed of beauty, good sense, good temper, and money. In a letter, written a few months before his death, we learn that his wife sometimes scolded him to the extent of spoiling his appetite at breakfast, but that he bore it patiently we may conclude from the following passage, quoted from *Man as He Is*, which seems likely to have been the result of personal experience :

Every man whose education has not been very ill-conducted, has learned to bear the little agreeable asperities of the gentle sex, not merely as a necessary evil, but as a variety, vastly conducive to female embellishment, and consequently to man's felicity.

In Bage, as in almost all authors, the autobiographical note is  
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not absent, and when we come upon sentences as astounding as the following, we cannot avoid the suggestion that one or other of those three step-mothers must have inspired it:

“Ladies,” said Sir George, “have no weapons but their tongues and their nails. . . .”

But Lady Mary Paradyne by no means confined herself to these, for when suffering from one of her periodical attacks of gout, a “slipper or a snuff-box thrown at the head of her nurse or her woman gave her tolerable ease.” And on one occasion “she enforced her observations with a knife,” and inflicted a wound on the nurse’s arm which resulted in “an eloquence superior to her own.”

Domestic happiness is decidedly not a characteristic of Bage’s novels, and here, as elsewhere, it is the women who receive all the blame.

“What shall I say of our women?” exclaims Mr. Mowbray. “Heavens! What pen or tongue can enumerate the evils which arise from our connections, our matrimonial connections, with this frail and feeble sex? Which of our corruptions may we not trace to their vanities? . . . In every connection with woman, man seeks happiness and risques it—and the risque is great. It is so much the greater, because in the usual mode of connection, the laws come in to perpetuate it, and the misery is for life. Gentlemen endeavour to avoid this . . . and no doubt that ‘as long as we love,’ is a more advantageous formula than ‘as long as we live.’ Yet there are drawbacks.”

Mr. Fielding, a friend of Sir George’s, goes further still in maintaining that “matrimony kills love, as sure as foxes eat geese.”

Sir George Paradyne was a model son, and always respectful in his behaviour towards his mother, although her complaints,  
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poured forth over five glasses of Madeira in succession, must often have been a severe trial to his patience. It was Lady Mary's desire that he should be the most accomplished gentleman of his age, and in order that this wish might be realised, she was anxious to procure him a tutor who had studied manners under Lord Chesterfield, in place of the worthy Mr. Lindsay, whose views on education were the direct antithesis to her own. Of Lady Mary it is said that "her affections went to the whole duties of a mother. . . . It was she who regulated his taste in dress, who superintended the friseur in the important decoration of his head."

Poor Sir George ! What a vision of powdered hair and pig-tail, flowered satin waistcoat and velvet coat, to say nothing of the shoes with diamond buckles ! He was only just twenty when the story begins, and as yet quite unspoilt by the world ; his chief delight at this period was to converse with Lindsay on Cicero and Demosthenes, Horace and Virgil, or to spend a quiet evening "in moralizing upon the various follies of mankind." It was not without reason that he had asked Lindsay to become his friend and guide, for he sadly needed some one to whom he could confide his love for Miss Cornelia Colerain. Mr. Lindsay was a man of parts ; he had met with a variety of misfortunes, and was a philosopher, if, also, somewhat of a pessimist. His chief aim at this time seems to have been to warn his pupil against the dangers of matrimony, because, as he says :

"The love of woman and the love of fame lead to different things ; no one knows better than myself how fatal love, as a passion, is to manly exertion."

Even the worthy Lindsay does not seem to have held the ordinary views on the subject of marriage, for on one occasion he shocks the fair Quakeress by observing that :

"If

"If it was the law or usage of the country for men and women to make temporary contracts, no one would call it a vice."

"According to thee, then," said Miss Carlill, "vice and virtue are mode and fashion?"

"Not wholly so, perhaps," Mr. Lindsay said, "nor wholly otherwise. . . . It is a pity a tender mistake, as it often does, should involve two people in wretchedness for life."

Yet he is not afraid to risk his happiness with Miss Carlill, and she condescends to marry him at last, in spite of their differences of opinion.

"I like not the doings of thy steeple-house," she tells him; "there is much noise and little devotion. . . . If I take thee, it is out of pity to thy poor soul."

And with this reason he is obliged to be content.

Sir George, on the other hand, is no pessimist with regard to marriage; he feels assured that a good wife is the greatest blessing that Heaven can bestow; but when Miss Colerain will not accept him because she considers that their acquaintance has been too short, the effect upon his character is not all that could be desired. These circumstances result in a strained relationship with Lindsay, they part in anger, and Sir George is left to continue his "airy course." "Youth," he argued, "must have its follies; the season would be over soon; a few years œconomy would free him from their effects," . . . and for the time being he forgot Miss Colerain.

The author here excuses himself for his hero's conduct by saying that the rules of probability would be violated were he to depict the character of a young gentleman of quality in the reign of George III. with too many virtues.

Sir George goes to Paris, gets into debt, and is obliged to have recourse to Lindsay to help him out of his difficulties. Three

years he intends to devote to the business of regeneration ; the remainder of his life to his country, to friendship, and, if he can obtain her, to Miss Colerain. But the lady in question requires to be fully convinced of the sincerity of his repentance before she will marry him, and because of this delay "his spirits flagged ; his appetite ceased ; his bloom changed ; and it was too apparent that he must soon be lost to his friends and to himself." His days were spent in the contemplation of Miss Colerain's picture which he had hung in a temple in the garden, and so great was the depression of his spirits that he would most certainly have died but for the timely intervention of a certain Mr. Bardo, who thus addressed him :

"Paradyne," said he, "you are a fool."

Thus roused, Sir George regained his courage, and before long the fair Cornelia consented to become his wife.

If we may trust the combined testimony of eighteenth century authors, *Man as He Is* may be studied as a faithful representation of a time when emotional natures were more common than they are now, when young men wept because their mothers scolded them, and turned dizzy at an unexpected meeting with the lady of their choice. Sir George, on one occasion, after he had been severely reprimanded by his mother for fighting one of the many duels in which he was constantly engaged, "withdrew to his library with his handkerchief at his eyes." With women, fainting was more than a fashion, it was an art, and Cornelia, like other fair ladies of her time, could faint at a moment's notice.

Another very interesting point in Bage's novels is the important part played by the lady's maid and the valet. That this was actually the case, and was not merely an invention of the author's, is proved by the frequency with which like incidents occur in the works of contemporary novelists ; readers of Richardson will remember

remember how a dishonest footman assisted the villainous Sir Hargrave Pollexfen in the abduction of Miss Harriet Byron, and how that that young lady herself sees no harm in cross-questioning her friend's maid on the subject of her mistress's love affairs. Miss Grandison's maid was the daughter of a clergyman, and it does not appear to have been at all unusual for young ladies in distressed circumstances to earn their living in this way, for even the learned Mrs. Bennet, in Fielding's *Amelia*, had some thoughts of going into service and was advised by her aunt to do so, in spite of her knowledge of Latin.

In *Man as He Is*, the ladies' "women" and gentlemen's "gentlemen" are persons of influence, and Sir George Paradyne, the first time that he is refused by Miss Colerain, drives off, leaving his purse in the hand of Susanna, her "woman," with the request that she shall pray for him three times a day to her mistress. And another time, whilst he is discussing the subject of his sister's matrimonial happiness with Mr. Lindsay, his "gentleman," who happens to be in waiting at the breakfast table, suddenly assumes the air of having something of importance to say, and, upon being pressed, he reads a love-letter which he has just received from the above-mentioned lady's "woman," which serves to confirm Sir George's worst fears.

Bage's last and best work, *Hermesprong, or Man as He Is Not*, marks a new stage in contemporary thought, and this time the change is brought about by a woman. Nora realises that she is being treated like a doll! In other words, the "woman question," which had slumbered since the days of Mary Astell, had just made its re-appearance in the person and writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, whose *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* first saw the light in 1792. That Bage was strongly influenced by it is proved

proved by the fact that his hero—who, it must be remembered, represents man as he is *not*—is very eloquent in his arguments in favour of the higher education of women. Women, he maintains, are allowed too little liberty of mind, and he adds:

“Be not angry with me . . . be angry at Mrs. Wollstonecraft . . . who has presumed to say that the homage men pay to youth and beauty is insidious, that women for the sake of this evanescent, this pitiful dominion permit themselves to be persuaded that their highest glory is to submit to this inferiority of character, and become the mere plaything of man. Can this be so?”

“Now, the devil take me,” said Sumelin, “if I know what either you or this Mrs. Wollstonecraft would be at. But this I know, that the influence of women is too great; that it has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished.”

“Well then,” Mr. Hermsprong answered, “let it be diminished on the side of charms; and let its future increase be on the side of mind.”

“To what purpose?” the banker asked. “To invade the provinces of men? Weaker bodies, you will allow, nature has given them, if not weaker minds.”

“Whatsoever may be the design of nature, respecting the sex, be her designs fulfilled. If she gave this bodily weakness, should education be brought in to increase it? But it is for mind I most contend; and if ‘a firm mind in a firm body’ be supposed the best prayer of man to the gods, why not of women? Would they be worse mothers for it? or more helpless widows?”

“No,” said the banker; “but they would be less charming figures.”

“Let us be more just, Mr. Sumelin. They are our equals in understanding, our superiors in virtue. They have foibles where men have faults, and faults where men have crimes.”

Hermsprong

Hermesprong is the necessary complement to Sir George Paradyne. He is the ideal, while the other is the real. Hermesprong is a native of America, and in many respects he resembles the Alien of Mr. Grant Allen's hill-top novel. In Bage's time, America was still sufficiently unknown to supply the novelist from Mrs. Aphra Behn \* onwards with an original character for which now-a-days he is obliged to seek among the phantoms of the twenty-fifth century, or in the person of an angel visitant. Hermesprong, like the Alien, or Mr. H. G. Wells's angel, is a thoroughly unconventional being who finds it impossible to accustom himself to the ways and habits of British barbarians. He is, according to his own description, a savage whose wish it is to return to nature, and who holds up the habits and customs of the American Red Indians as worthy of being imitated. He is in fact an Anarchist, who maintains that virtue is natural to man, and that a return to nature is a return to the primeval state of innocence before the laws had taught men how to sin.

Hermesprong's views, however, do not assume any very dangerous proportions. The utmost that he does to astonish the natives is to announce his intention of going to London on foot, a journey which is likely to occupy three days. But if he had suggested flying, the announcement could hardly have excited more surprise.

"Surely, Mr. Hermesprong, you cannot think of walking?"

"Oh, man of prejudice, why? In what other way can I travel with equal pleasure?"

"Pleasure! Pleasure in England is not attached to the idea of walking. Your walks we perform in chaises."

"I pity

\* *Oroonoko; or, the Royal Slave.* By the Ingenious Mrs. Behn. Seventh Edition. London, 1722.

“I pity you for it. For myself, I chuse not to buy infirmity so dear. . . . I must be independent, so far as social man can be independent. In other words I must be free from the necessity of doing little things, or saying little words to any man. . . .”

It is said of him that his singularities of character unfit him for the society of English gentlemen ; he eats only to live, instead of living to eat ; he cares nothing for the pleasures of the bottle, nor for the still greater pleasures of cards and dice, yet his manners are such that he never fails to please. An English dinner he considers melancholy :

“If to dine,” says he, “were only to eat, twenty minutes would be ample. You sit usually a couple of hours, and you talk, and call it conversation. You make learned remarks on wind and weather ; on roads ; on dearness of provisions ; and your essays on cookery are amazingly edifying. Not much less so are your histories of your catarrhs and toothaches. . . . It is said that physicians have much increased in your country ; one great reason may be, because you dine.”

He has, moreover, a secret, but deep-founded contempt for the forms of politeness, and is often found to err on the side of plain speaking, to the intense anxiety of those who are anxious to befriend him.

“I have often been told,” he says, “that in very, very civilised countries no man could hold up the mirror of truth to a lady’s face, without ill-manners. I came to try.”

In this experiment he is fairly successful, for the ladies do not resent his truthfulness as much as might have been expected. His mission, like the Alien’s, is to rescue a lady from tyranny, only this time the tyrant is a father and not a husband. By degrees he overcomes her filial prejudices by bidding her lay aside  
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all pre-conceived notions of duty, and declaring that "in vain would the reasoners of this polished country say everything is due to the authors of our existence. Merely for existence, I should have answered, I owe nothing. It is for rendering that existence a blessing, my filial gratitude is due."

The lady of his choice is a certain Miss Campinet, the daughter of Lord Grondale, but the latter does not favour his suit, which is the less surprising when we consider that it is one of the characteristics of the savage that he does not love lords. It will be remembered that the Alien did not love lords either, and that he, too, was equally contemptuous of rank and riches. The conversation which takes place between Hermsprong and his father-in-law elect is sufficiently original to be worth transcribing :

"Before I condescend to give you my daughter," says Lord Grondale, "I must have a more particular account of your family, Sir ; of its alliances, Sir ; and of your rent roll."

"Upon my word, my Lord ; here is a great deal of difficulty in this country to bring two people together, who are unfortunate enough to have property. For my part I have thought little of what your lordship thinks so much. I have thought only that I was a man, and she a woman—lovely, indeed, but still a woman. Nature has created a general affinity between these two species of beings ; incident has made it particular between Miss Campinet and me. In such situations, people usually marry ; so I consent to marry."

We must observe that it was a gross inconsistency on the part of Hermsprong that he should be guilty of one of the most barbarous customs of the times. When applying to Lord Grondale for permission to marry his daughter, he never contemplates the necessity of first consulting the wishes of the young lady herself ;

herself; these he takes for granted, and when reproached for his lack of humility, he defends himself by saying:

“I consider a woman as equal to a man; but . . . I consider a man also as equal to a woman. When we marry we give and we receive. Where is the necessity that man should take upon him this crouching mendicant spirit, this excess of humiliation?”

All this is very plausible, of course, but his notions of love-making were curious, to say the least, and it is difficult not to feel some compassion for Miss Campinet. In course of time however, his arguments convince her, and his efforts on her behalf are crowned with the success they deserve. He turns out to be none other than her long-lost cousin, Sir Charles Campinet, the lawful heir to Lord Grondale's estate, and the son of his ship-wrecked brother. A reconciliation takes place, Lord Grondale dies, and the young couple are happy ever after.

As an author, Robert Bage resembles Mr. Grant Allen in more than one respect, for in the first place his publisher was one named Lane, and in the second his object was to instruct women. Instruction intended for them can only be offered in the form of a novel as they are not likely to read works of a more serious nature, and *Man as He Is* is intended especially for the fair sex, amongst whom he hopes to find twenty thousand readers; in it he treats of the subjects which he thinks will be most agreeable to them, *i.e.*, love and fashion. In like manner, Mr. Grant Allen, in his *British Barbarians*, informs us that he writes not for wise men, because they are wise already, but that it is the boys and girls and women—women in particular—whom he desires to instruct.

The study of *Man as He Is* and *Is Not*, or rather, as he was and was not, in the years 1792 and 1796, is very instructive and also

also distinctly salutary, and as such it deserves to be recommended as an antidote to pessimism. Both these books prove in the most convincing manner that a great change for the better has taken place in the ways and customs of English men and women since the close of the eighteenth century. Men no longer fight duels at the smallest provocation, nor weep in public, and women have long ceased to cultivate the art of fainting, nor do they—in polite society—use their nails as weapons of defence, while even the art of writing fiction has made considerable progress since the days when Robert Bage first began to write his romances.