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The Works Of The Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.

In Four Volumes

Addison, Joseph

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Atheniensium res gesta, sicut ego existumo, satis ample magnificaeque fuere, verum aliquanto minores tamen quam fama feruntur: sed, quia provenere ibi magna scriptorum ingenia, per terrarum orbem Atheniensium facta pro maximis celebrantur. Ita eorum, qui ea fecere, virtus tanta habetur, quantum verbis ea potuere extollere praecleara ingenia. Sallust.

GRATIAN, among his maxims for raising a man to the most consummate character of greatness, advises first to perform extraordinary actions, and in the next place to secure a good historian. Without the last, he considers the first as thrown away; as indeed they are in a great measure by such illustrious persons, as make fame and reputation the end of their undertakings. The most shining merit goes down to posterity with disadvantage, when it is not placed by writers in its proper light.

The misfortune is, that there are more instances of men who deserve this kind of immortality, than of Authors who are able to bestow it. Our country, which has produced writers of the first figure in every other kind of work, has been very barren in good historians. We have had several who have been able to compile matters of fact, but very few who have been able to digest them with that purity and elegance of style, that nicety and strength of reflection, that subtilty and discernment in the unravelling of a character, and that choice of circumstances for enlivening the whole narration, which we so justly admire in the antient historians of *Greece* and *Rome*, and in some Authors of our neighbouring nations.

Those who have succeeded best in works of this kind, are such, who, besides their natural good sense and learning, have themselves been versed in publick business, and thereby acquired a thorough knowledge of men and things. It was the advice of the great Duke of *Schomberg*, to
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an eminent historian of his acquaintance, who was an *Ecclesiastick*, that he should avoid being too particular in the drawing up of an army, and other circumstances of the day of battel; for that he had always observed most notorious blunders and absurdities committed on that occasion, by such writers as were not conversant in the art of war. We may reasonably expect the like mistakes in every other kind of publick matters, recorded by those who have only a distant theory of such affairs. Besides; it is not very probable, that men, who have passed all their time in a low and vulgar life, should have a suitable idea of the several beauties and blemishes in the actions or characters of great men. For this reason I find an old law quoted by the famous Monsieur *Bayle*, that no person below the dignity of a *Roman Knight* should presume to write an history.

In *England* there is scarce any one, who has had a tincture of reading or study, that is not apt to fancy himself equal to so great a task; though it is plain, that many of our countrymen, who have tampered in history, frequently shew, that they do not understand the very nature of those transactions which they recount. Nay, nothing is more usual than to see every man, who is versed in any particular way of business, finding fault with several of these Authors, so far as they treat of matters within his sphere.

There is a race of men lately sprung up among this sort of writers, whom one cannot reflect upon without indignation as well as contempt. These are *Grub-street* Biographers, who watch for the death of a great man, like so many Undertakers, on purpose to make a penny of him. He is no sooner laid in his grave, but he falls into the hands of an historian; who, to swell a volume, ascribes to him works which he never wrote, and actions which he never performed; celebrates virtues which he was never famous for, and excuses faults which he was never guilty of. They fetch their only authentick records out of *Doctors Commons*; and when they have got a copy of his last Will and Testament, they fancy themselves furnished with sufficient materials for his history. This might indeed enable them in some measure to write the history of his death; but what can we expect from an Author that undertakes to write the life of a great man, who is furnished with no other matters of fact, besides legacies; and instead of being able to tell us what he did, can only tell us what he bequeathed? This manner of exposing the private concerns of families, and sacrificing the secrets of the dead to the curiosity of the living, is one of those licentious practices which might well deserve the animadversion of our government, when it has time to contrive expedients for remedy-

ing the many crying abuses of the press. In the mean while, what a poor idea must strangers conceive of those persons, who have been famous among us in their generation, should they form their notions of them from the writings of these our Historiographers! What would our posterity think of their illustrious forefathers, should they only see them in such weak and disadvantageous lights! But to our comfort, works of this nature are so short-lived, that they cannot possibly diminish the memory of those Patriots which they are not able to preserve.

The truth of it is, as the lives of great men cannot be written with any tolerable degree of elegance or exactness, within a short space after their decease; so neither is it fit that the history of a person, who has acted among us in a publick character, should appear, till envy and friendship are laid asleep, and the prejudice both of his antagonists and adherents be, in some degree, softened and subdued. There is no question but there are several eminent persons in each party, however they may represent one another at present, who will have the same admirers among posterity, and be equally celebrated by those, whose minds will not be disordered by interest, passion, or partiality. It were happy for us, could we prevail upon our selves to imagine, that one, who differs from us in opinion, may possibly be an honest man; and that we might do the same justice to one another, which will be done us hereafter by those who shall make their appearance in the world, when this generation is no more. But in our present miserable and divided condition, how just soever a man's pretensions may be to a great or blameless reputation, he must expect his share of obloquy and reproach; and, even with regard to his posthumous character, content himself with such a kind of consideration, as induced the famous Sir *Francis Bacon*, after having bequeathed his Soul to God, and his body to the earth, to leave his fame to foreign nations; and after some years, to his own country.



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