

## **A biographical sketch of Dr. Lettsom / [John Coakley Lettsom].**

### **Contributors**

Lettsom, John Coakley, 1744-1815.

### **Publication/Creation**

[London] : [publisher not identified], [1804]

### **Persistent URL**

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/mkkgxks8>

### **License and attribution**

This work has been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighbouring rights and is being made available under the Creative Commons, Public Domain Mark.

You can copy, modify, distribute and perform the work, even for commercial purposes, without asking permission.



Wellcome Collection  
183 Euston Road  
London NW1 2BE UK  
T +44 (0)20 7611 8722  
E [library@wellcomecollection.org](mailto:library@wellcomecollection.org)  
<https://wellcomecollection.org>

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF  
DR. LETTSOM.

TO record the actions, the merits, and the claims of cotemporary genius, is the proper and peculiar province of periodical works, inasmuch as it is solely their object to furnish amusement and instruction, and to "Hold, as it were, the Mirror up to Nature."

John Coakley Lettsom was born, in the year 1744, at Little Van Dyke, a small island about three miles in circumference, and situated near Tortola, within the verge of the tropics. His ancestry may be traced far back, not that we think this any addition to the merits of a really good man.

When only six years old, young Lettsom was sent to England for the purpose of receiving his education. One of those fortuitous circumstances, which sometimes determine the fate of empires, and sometimes cast the character of individuals, attended our subject on this occasion. Mr. Fothergill, brother to the celebrated physician of the same name, and an eminent preacher among the Quakers, happened to be at the very sea-port where Dr. Lettsom landed, and who was accidentally lodged in the same house with him. This gentleman, conceiving a predilection for the youth, took in some measure the charge of his welfare, and placed him at the school of Mr. Thompson, uncle to the physician of the same name.

Mr. Thompson's school being in the vicinity of Warrington, where Mr. Fothergill resided, he continued his superintendance of his education, and finally became his guardian on the death of Dr. Lettsom's father.

VOL. I.

This friendly office, which he undertook at his own suggestion, led ultimately to the most beneficial effects.

After a proper time, our young adventurer was placed with Dr. Sutcliff, with a view to his future profession. He afterwards assiduously attended St. Thomas's Hospital for two years, and then returned to his native place, in order to take possession of some property which had devolved to him, and which on his arrival he found to consist chiefly of a number of negro slaves: these, to his honour as a man, he liberated, notwithstanding that he became, in consequence of this step, reduced to considerable embarrassment\*.

From this period Dr. Lettsom regarded his professional abilities as his subsistence; and, after some successful practice in Tortola, he returned again to Europe, visiting at the same time the great medical schools of Paris, Edinburgh, and Leyden: at the latter he took his degrees. After a short stay at Paris, where he was introduced to some of the most eminent characters then living, he finally, took up his residence in London, and experienced several gratuitous honours.

Thus fixed in the metropolis, his active philanthropy soon began to exert itself, and he became sometimes the founder, and always the supporter, of many charitable institutions. About this time he mar-

\* We have recently learnt that he possessed a moiety of Little Van Dyke, which he then sold to assist some relatives in distress; but he has since purchased the whole island, in order, as he once observed to a friend, that he might possess the ashes of his parents, who were interred in the island.



ried a lady with a considerable fortune, which placed additional means within his reach for stilling the throbs of helpless disease, smoothing the brow of haggard poverty, and raising the forlorn hopes of expiring merit. At all times, Dr. Lettsom has been found the effective and prompt friend of distress: nor has he, like many reputed generous persons, waited to be solicited, or sat in supine apathy, until objects of wretchedness were pointed out to him: the amiable energies of his bosom, always alive to the woes of suffering humanity, have ever prompted him to seek the abodes of want and misery, have prompted him to explore the glooms of poverty, and wipe the tear of disconsolate wretchedness from the cheek of affliction, and illumine the dim eye of despair by his advice, his exertions, his skill, and his generosity. Numberless instances might be adduced of his philanthropy, and we could dwell upon them with all that fondness which the recording of good actions excites in every feeling bosom; but we know that Dr. Lettsom's is not an ostentatious but a heart-felt generosity; and, as such, we know that he loves to brood over his actions in the luxurious silence of his thoughts, without exposing them to the inquiring eyes of mankind.

Dr. Lettsom was a staunch opposer of Dr. Mayersbach, the famous Water-doctor; and in this point of view he may perhaps be considered as having performed a really acceptable service to his country.

His publications on moral and medical subjects are very numerous, but in the whole of them, he has always kept in view the great end of all human labour,---*public good*. It would be needless to enumerate them, as they are all deservedly popular, and consequently known to our readers.

His uniform exertions in behalf of the general community, have not escaped that honourable notice

which they deserved, and many literary societies, in various parts of Europe and America, have in consequence enrolled the name of Dr. Lettsom among their members; in addition to which, he has been chosen, at different times, to the vice-presidencies, and delegated to the treasuries of various public charities and other benevolent institutions.

But where is the man who can say to himself, "Now is my cup of happiness full!" In the midst of all these splendid homages to his virtues, and when he bore "His blushing honours thick upon him," the death of his eldest son, a most accomplished young man, and endowed with every virtue which can gladden a father's heart, was cut off from this life in his very prime. This heavy stroke was long severely felt by his father, and for a time, clouded the pure gaiety of that mind, which was heretofore wont to diffuse around a pleasing and an amiable hilarity.

Dr. Lettsom is considerably advanced in life, but has not in any respect diminished the sphere of his active benevolence and professional skill. His disposition is cheerful and mild; he is not averse to society, though he lives more in his carriage than in his house.

He rises early, and is generally in his carriage by nine in the morning, and does not sometimes quit it finally till the same hour in the evening. It is here that he reads and writes, carries on an extensive correspondence, and thus holds an intercourse with many parts of the globe.

His rural retreat near Camberwell, called Grove Hill\*, is delight-

---

\* When Dr. Lettsom was a pupil in the hospitals, he once rambled in a walk with a friend to the summit of this Hill, then a rude uncultivated spot, and, standing where his house has been since erected, viewing the surrounding scenery, he exclaimed, as we have heard, "Here my ambition would lead me to live and die."



fully situated, and commands a most extensive and captivating prospect. The pens of various cotemporary poets, friends of the author, have done justice to this beautiful spot in language not inferior to the subject. Here he usually retires every day after his professional labours. It is enriched with a valuable library, and a very curious museum of natural history. One day in the week he devotes to this blissful spot, where he enjoys the happiness of a select society, a small circle of literary friends, in the midst of whom he freely unbends his mind, and regales them with various anecdotes, and characteristic descriptions of things, which have been impressed upon his mind in the course of a long, an honourable, an useful, and an active life.

Dr. Lettsom has not, however, passed through his career without engaging in the bitterness of controversy. This is not the place, however, either to discuss the merits of the case, or to state the respective arguments. The "*Critical Reviewers*," with whom he differed, and to whom he addressed various remonstrances, did not observe that decorum which is the characteristic of liberal minds. Nay, we think, Dr. Lettsom would have shewn more prudence, had he conducted himself with a dignified contempt, despising at once the weakness of their arguments, and the pitiful insolence of their language. An injured author can gain little by opposing a concealed enemy: he may detect his stupidity, or he may expose his fallacy. *Cui bono?* The man is unknown, and he may ridicule in safety, because his secrecy conveniently covers his ignorance. In the present instance, the *Critical Reviewers* have descended to the most shameful meanness: they have not been content with opposing the arguments of Dr. Lettsom in a coarse and vulgar

manner, but they have adopted an unseemly ridicule, by conveying their sentiments in certain expressions peculiar to the religious sect to which Dr. Lettsom belongs. Such pitiful conduct was surely sufficient to stamp contempt upon the writer and his arguments, and to render both beneath the attention of the worthy character they opposed. We certainly never considered this journal as remarkable either for the erudition or the abilities of its conductors; but we did think they would not so far commit the credit of the work, as to render its pages subservient to low and unnecessary abuse.

We cannot in justice to the character of Dr. Lettsom omit to copy the account of a learned foreigner\*, who paid him a visit while on his travels in England.

"This celebrated physician has a collection of birds, insects, and minerals, some of which are very curious; but of all the objects that are to be seen and admired at his house, the most interesting is, without contradiction, himself.

"This friend of humanity, this virtuous Quaker, was the first to give the example of emancipating the negroes from slavery, by setting at liberty all that were employed in his rich possessions in America.

"He finds the most delightful recompence for this act of justice in the sensations of his own heart, and in the tender and filial attachment of those whose chains he has broken. They have become more inseparable from him since they have had the liberty of leaving him when they please. Happy is the man who places his felicity in doing good to others! We love to meet with such men. They console us for the injustice and the cruelty of so large a portion of our species.

---

\* *St. Fond*, now Director of the National Garden in Paris, and a Member of the Institute.

“ All the family of Dr. Lettsom participate of his amiableness and candour; every person with whom he associates is of the same description.

“ After employing a part of the day in administering comfort to his numerous patients, he returns home, to share in the enjoyments of friendship, and assembles around him persons whom he loves, and by whom he is beloved.

“ I supped one evening with him, when some of the most lovely women of London were of the party. It is true they were neither powdered nor perfumed, and had not, like most ladies, heads full of feathers or artificial flowers: but their beautiful hair floated with becoming gracefulness on handkerchiefs uncommonly white and fine. Their simple but elegant dress was remarkable for the excellent quality of the stuffs which composed it, and its only ornament was the charming countenances and unaffected graces of those who wore it.

“ Every thing in this house corresponded with that neatness and exquisite simplicity which characterises the Quakers. A young widow, of an elegant person and highly cultivated mind, was one of the company; her agreeable vivacity formed a pleasing contrast with the mild and tranquil sensibility of the other ladies, all of whom, however, possessed information and talents.

“ We supped without napkins, a circumstance which is not uncommon in many houses in England; but the best kinds of beer, plain though exquisitely flavoured meats, and the choicest vegetables, were served up in proper vessels of the most elegant form. The cloth was removed, and the desert, and fruits, comfits, and other delicacies, with a variety of wines in crystal decanters, were placed on a table of the finest mahogany. This is the luxury of the English. We

drank more than once in champagne and claret to the health of our fair companions, and they pledged us in madeira and confidence\*. A lively but decorous gaiety, a frank and pleasing simplicity, animated this scene.

“ Tea, punch, and other liquors, came in their turn. We should have passed the whole night at table, had we yielded to the pressing invitations of the Doctor. But notwithstanding his solicitations the party broke up at one o'clock. During the remainder of the night I meditated how I should become a Quaker; for, if happiness can be found any where on earth, it is among these worthy men.”

As a philanthropist, Dr. Lettsom must ever stand high in the regard and esteem of all good men. The writer of this article cannot boast the happiness of an acquaintance with Dr. Lettsom, or even a personal knowledge; but he has long considered him, in the privacy of his own thoughts, as one of those truly great men, whose eulogy is written in the hearts of the grateful, and whose benevolence is recorded in the smile, which chases away the gloom from the tear-moistened cheek of affliction.

Whether we contemplate him in his professional or in his moral character, he is alike estimable; alike calculated to give repose to the enfeebled body of the anxious valetudinarian, and to inspire with confidence the hopes of the half-doubtful yet half-resolved philanthropist.

On whatever subject he employs his pen, it assumes interest and importance from his forceful, clear, and impressive manner of treating it; and, if these qualifications were wanting, the objective scope of his intentions must inspire a degree of

---

\* This lively description of *Monf. De St. Fond* might impress upon the mind of the reader, that the Doctor is a *bon vivant*; but we know that his temperance is almost proverbial.

serious respect in the minds of his readers. We need only refer to his "*Hints*," a work which stands as a noble monument of the liberality of his principles, and the benevolent ardor of his mind. The reader who has perused these "*Hints*" will scarcely deem it possible that any man could not only censure the performance in general, "but also in a *particular manner the design of the Charitable Institutions* recommended in it, as well as the *promoters of them*!" This alone must convince every unprejudiced reader that the conductors of the "*Critical Review*" are influenced either by a most unworthy personal acrimony, or that they labour under a deplorable and, we fear, incurable stupidity.

If this were a convenient place, we would gladly raise our feeble voice in defence of the amiable object of these memoirs; we would expose the glaring fallacies of his opposers, and confound their pitiful evasions, and artful prevarica-

---

\* See Dr. Lettsom's "Appeal, addressed to the calm Reflection of the Authors of the *Critical Review*, &c." A spirited, liberal, and praiseworthy performance.

tions. But this task has been already ably and justly performed by the Doctor himself, to whom perhaps this revival of the remembrance of the controversy may be unpleasing. But truth and justice are superior considerations; and on their shrine no sacrifice, in our opinion, is too great.

We have thus endeavoured to trace the principal events of Dr. Lettsom's useful and active life with as much accuracy as possible, adhering candidly to facts, without indulging in the fruitful suggestions of fertile fancy. We are willing to hope nothing is erroneously stated; should there, however, be any thing in which we have been deceived, we shall be happy to supply deficiencies, and to correct inaccuracies.

It having been unjustly insinuated by one of the Reviews, that Dr. Lettsom was the author of an anonymous memoir of himself, published some time since, we think it necessary to state, that in the *present instance*, we have on the contrary to regret, that we could not derive any information from the Doctor, owing to our total want of personal knowledge.

---

## ORIGINAL COMMUNICATIONS.

---

To the Editor of the *Universal Mag.*

SIR,

**A**MONG the various sources of gratification to the human mind, and different means employed to perpetuate love and friendship, none are more universal, nor better satisfy the wishes of the heart, than epistolary writing. By this, friends may unbosom themselves, and impart, at any distance, the inmost secrets of their heart; by this, the languishing youth may breathe his sighs at the feet of his adored mistress, and tell her, with energy surpassing that of common conver-

sation, the pangs of absence, and the fears of jealousy; by this, the anxious parent may convey his salutary counsels to his youthful son, immersed in the toils of business; by this, refined intellects may communicate the results of laborious researches, and the beneficial effects of philanthropic study; by this, commerce is enlarged, nations preserved, and armies defeated.

The importance of epistolary writing has been frequently acknowledged: rules for its composition have been laid down, and its excellencies have been defined by

writers of taste and eminence. But wherein its beauties consist, yet remains to be decided.

I cannot, however, think, with Johnson, that the reason why so few volumes of epistolary correspondence, except those of business and in the discharge of public trust, have appeared in this country, is to be attributed "to our contempt of trifles, and our due sense of the dignity of the public." Surely the importance of epistolary writing is sufficiently great to place it upon a level with the innumerable tales, romances, and idle poetical effusions which daily issue from the press; and it may be allowed to advance as fair a claim to the public attention or esteem as the other desultory lucubrations of eminent writers; even the Rambler, of Dr. Johnson! It is not here supposed, that every idle letter which fondness may dictate, or idleness propose, to relieve the *ennui* of a rainy morning, is to be subjected to the public ordeal; but the epistolary correspondence of men of genius, in which enquiries are pursued, hints struck out on important topics, and moral sentiments conveyed (not to mention the satisfaction which the mind receives in reading, as it were, the man distinct from the author,) would, I conceive, answer every purpose for which books are written. In confirmation of this opinion may be advanced the letters of Walsh, Pope, Voiture, Shenstone, &c. &c., though perhaps those of Pope contain too much of *self* in them; yet in many of his letters there are numberless passages which deserve to be admired for the harmony of the language, the depth of the observation, and the soundness of the criticism\*.

\* Yet perhaps, without too much harshness, it may be asserted, that the letters of Pope were so many sacrifices to his vanity. He appears in them to be under an uniform struggle to conceal what he manifestly adored--*Praise*. His letters to Wycherly betray all the fastidiousness of a young

"Letters written from the heart, and on real occasions (observes an elegant writer), though not always decorated with the flowers of eloquence, must be far more useful and interesting than the studied paragraphs of Pliny, or the pompous declamations of Balsac; as they contain just pictures of life and manners, and are the genuine emanations of nature."

It is very certain that the advantages arising from epistolary writing are manifold, for many valuable hints, many disjointed ideas, and unconnected opinions, which are too trivial to form a distinct publication, are thus preserved, and transmitted to posterity. Nothing, in short, which comes from the pen of a man of genius and learning can be totally useless; some entertainment or some instruction it must infallibly present.

Of the precise style which ought to be adopted in this species of composition, nothing can with any certainty be said. It embraces such a variety of objects, and is written under such peculiar circumstances, that the style must inevitably be diversified. The only general rule which can be given, is, to study the *propriety* of the language you adopt; a rule which, indeed, is equally applicable to every kind of writing. It is not however requisite, as some imagine, that a negligent, loose manner of composition should be observed, for this can never afford any genuine satisfaction to a reader of taste; it were, indeed, better to err on the side of elegance and studied phraseology, for that would at least impress more strongly the object of your letter, and interest more the passions of

author, who, delighted with flattery, endeavours to allure it still stronger by artful and reiterated reprehensions. It may indeed be asserted, with some degree of confidence, that no man ever sought praise with greater avidity, and yet seemed to repel it with more apparent disgust, than did Pope.

the mind than a lax and feeble composition possibly could do: beside, there is a danger, that, in accustoming yourself to any mode of expression however common, or word however inelegant, a habit will be acquired, favourable to the natural indolence of man, of cloathing your thoughts in the most obvious language and in colloquial phrases; seeking only to be perspicuous, without any attention to either grace or harmony; and though *one* end may perhaps be attained by this, namely, the perspicuous communication of the thing discussed, yet much would certainly be lost in the torpid state of mind with which that communication would be received. It is the energies of language which awaken, as it were, the very soul; which make the reader weep, laugh, or moralize with the author, and enter with spirit into his feelings, and the nicety of his calculations.

Nothing is more certain than that, if I would command the attention of my reader, or make him feel the force and propriety of my arguments, I must awaken his mind, and in a manner transfuse the spirit with which *I wrote* the work into *him*: and this can be done only by an energetic and forcible mode of expression. I may probably interest his curiosity to proceed with me in a disquisition on some important topic, even though I use the most plain and simple style, devoid of elegance, of strength, of harmony; but that would be all: and it is not impossible, but that a reader of taste would lay my book down with disgust, and escape with pleasure from my simplicity and inelegance.

Every body knows how much more easily the mind commits to memory a terse and pointed apophthegm than a diffuse and labour-ed description; and a book written in strong emphatic language, and well-rounded periods, will be more frequently quoted, and its precepts

more frequently applied to the test of experience, than when wire-drawn and frittered into endless sentences. Let us exemplify this by the following line from Young:

“When such friends part, it is the survivor dies.”

Here is a beautiful idea compressed in a few words, yet conveying to the mind a conception pregnant with a thousand collateral images, and which the reader's fancy ramifies and enlarges at his pleasure.

Let us now view it in another light.

“When an esteemed and affectionate friend is torn from us by death, it is we who feel all the calamities of the separation; it is we, who, conscious of the loss we have sustained, hourly regret it; it is we, who, picturing to the imagination, yet weeping over his memory, all his virtues, his convivial excellences, his friendly attentions, his sympathizing sorrows, feel in all its accumulated misery the irreparable vacuity; it is we who die, in for ever weeping his death.”

Here is a simple amplification of the same idea; yet who cannot perceive, the supreme advantage which the original possesses over this last?

The preceding observations may be particularly applied to epistolary writing. Our letters to a friend, if on real subjects, may be supposed to breathe the purest and most genuine sentiments of the heart, undisguised by artifice; and it cannot surely become a question, whether or not we wish those sentiments to be fully apprehended, and vigorously entered into by our readers. The necessity of close, compressive, and energetic language to obtain this end has been shewn.

I shall conclude this letter with a quotation from Johnson, in which he speaks my own sentiments with more elegance than I could possibly do.



“ That letters should be written with strict conformity to nature is true, because nothing but conformity to nature can make any composition beautiful or just. Whatever elevates the sentiments will consequently raise the expression; whatever fills us with hope or terror will produce some perturbation of images, and some figurative distortions of phrase. Wherever we are studious to please, we are afraid of trusting our first thoughts, and endeavour to recommend our opinion by studied ornaments, accuracy of method, and elegance of style.”

I remain, &c.

F.

#### A LITERARY CHARACTER.

HE is a man possessed of some virtues, though not destitute of many of the vices which disfigure human nature. His heart is liberal, and his motives just; but fortune forbids him to display the qualities of the one, and vicious persons endeavour to vilify the other. Endowed with mental excellence superior to the general class of human beings, he seeks only the enlargement of virtue in his writings; and to this end *alone* are his feeble endeavours directed.

His temper has become irascible from intense study and reiterated misfortunes: easily provoked in trifles to anger, the impetuosity of his mind soon subsides if left to itself, but increases when opposed. Not gifted with fortitude, his heart soon sinks under distress; and the apprehension of misery paralyzes the most active energies of his heart. Proud perhaps to a fault, he scorns meanness in himself and in others: impressed with a nice sense of honour, he is alive to the minutest injury or insult, whether real or intended; he abhors injustice, and never fails to castigate it when found in others. Warm in his resentments, he can never bow

his feelings to others, even in those cases where the first atonement ought to come from himself; but, on the contrary, his heart is ever open to reconciliation, when proposed in a proper manner. Distinction is his idol, and this often leads him into eccentricities, which fools laugh at, and wise men pity: fond of colloquial eminence, he dreads an imaginary want of powers to shine in that respect; and, therefore, often sits silent in company, when topics are agitated on which his researches and his genius might enable him to throw light. Active in his friendships, he never shrinks from doing good, when the most remote means are within his reach: desultory in study, his mind loves to expatiate upon numerous objects; whence he cannot be said to possess solid information on any. Liberal in his conduct, pecuniary considerations are with him only a measure of prudence, as he heartily detests interestedness in engagements of mutual honour and liberality. Never prone to indulge in harsh opinions respecting other people, he always makes it a rule to neglect reports, trusting to his own experience as the most sure guide. This is an amiable principle, but it often leads into misfortunes.

As a husband, he is sincerely affectionate, but never displays any anile fondness; never expresses the same anxiety for trivial evils as for those of greater magnitude.---As a son, he feels and practises the most sacred of filial duties: he feels a real glow of exquisite happiness, when he can dispel for one moment the anxious solicitude of his mother.---As a brother, he experiences every sentiment of fraternal love, and sincerely values a sister, who is in many respects a prototype of himself.

Such a man there is, for this portrait is drawn with fidelity from the man himself!