

THE LETTERS OF LORD DE TABLEY

The name of John Byrne Leicester Warren, third Baron De Tabley (1835-95), ceased to have any popular significance during the Second World War, yet his verse found a place in anthologies as late as 1939, when W. B. Yeats included a selection in the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, and found no room for Oscar Wilde. In his day, however, De Tabley's ancestry gave him an immediate claim to attention, for he was descended from William the Conqueror, and he was, along with Byron, the noblest of the poets of the nineteenth century with a succession to a hereditary seat in the House of Lords. He included among his friends George Eliot, G. H. Lewes, Gladstone, Theodore Watts-Dunton and Edmund Gosse; he had a reputation as an authority on federal Greek coinage, on bookplates—his volume on bookplates is still a standard text—and on the flora of Cheshire; and he was ranked second by Swinburne among the candidates for the Poet Laureateship after the death of Tennyson in 1892. Some years ago the Turnbull Library acquired a collection of his letters to the London publishers, Elkin Matthews and John Lane, principally the latter, covering two periods, the first, 31 July 1892 to 22 May 1893; the second, 11 May to 6 September 1895; that is, until shortly before his death.

Their interest is threefold: they provide a revealing picture of a complex personality during the last four years of his life; they illustrate the alternating moods of pleasure and despair in a gifted but minor poet who at last found publishers to give him an appreciative public such as he had never enjoyed before; and they demonstrate the vagaries of fortune which attend the papers of a publisher when his literary effects are dispersed.

To appreciate the poignancy of the full range of the letters we need to see them in the context of the obituaries of November-December 1895, by Edmund Gosse, Theodore Watts-Dunton and Sir Grant Duff. All pay tribute to De Tabley's breadth of interest in numismatics, botany, rare books and bookplates—and to his Keatsian command of the glittering phrase; and all regret the intense and morbid sensitivity which inhibited his public and private relationships. De Tabley was born in 1835, the eldest son of the second baron and of Catherina Barbara, daughter of the Count de Salis. Gosse, with an eye for picturesque detail, had heard that he was baptized in water brought from the Jordan by his godfather, and that soil from the Holy Land was scattered on his coffin in the churchyard of Little Peover, near his ancestral home, Tabley House. His childhood was unconventional: the first twelve or so years were spent with his mother in Southern Europe, where his taste in the fine arts was encouraged by his godfather, Robert Curzon. After Eton and Oxford