

B.A. First

Sir Richard Steele-English essayist and dramatist.

SIR RICHARD STEELE (1672-1729), one of the most active and prominent men of letters in the reign of Queen Anne, inseparably associated in the history of literature with his personal friend Addison. He cannot be said to have lost in reputation by the partnership, because he was far inferior to Addison in purely literary gift, and it is Addison's literary genius that has floated their joint work above merely journalistic celebrity; but the advantage was not all on Steele's side, inasmuch as his more brilliant coadjutor has usurped not a little of the merit rightly due to him. Steele's often-quoted generous acknowledgment of Addison's services in *The Tatler* has proved true in a somewhat different sense from that intended by the writer:—"I fared like a distressed prince, who calls in a powerful neighbour to his aid; I was undone by my auxiliary; when I had once called him in I could not subsist without dependence on him." The truth is that in this happy alliance the one was the complement of the other; and the balance of mutual advantage was much more nearly even than Steele claimed or posterity has generally allowed.

The famous literary pair were born in the same year, 1672,—Steele in Dublin, the senior by less than two months. Steele's father, who is said to have been a lawyer, died before he had reached his sixth year, but the boy found a protector in his maternal uncle, Henry Gascoigne, secretary and confidential agent to two successive dukes of Ormonde. Through his influence he was nominated to the Charterhouse in 1684, and there first met with Addison. Five years afterwards he proceeded to Oxford, and was a postmaster at Merton when Addison was a demy at Magdalen. Their schoolboy friendship was continued at the university, and probably helped to give a more serious turn to Steele's mind than his natural temperament would have taken under different companionship. Addison's reverend father also took an interest in the warm-hearted young Irishman; but their combined influence did not steady him sufficiently to keep his impulses within the lines of a regular career; without waiting for a degree he volunteered into the army, and served for some time as a cadet "under the command of the unfortunate duke of Ormonde." This escapade was made without his uncle's consent, and cost him, according to his own account, "the succession to a very good estate in the county of Wexford in Ireland." Still, he did not lack advancement in the profession he had chosen. A poem on the funeral of Queen Mary (1695), dedicated to Lord Cutts, colonel of the Coldstream Guards, brought him under the notice of that nobleman, who took the gentleman trooper into his household as a secretary, made him an officer in his own regiment, and ultimately procured for him a captaincy in Lord Lucas's fusiliers. His name was noted for promotion by King William, but the king's death took place before anything had been done for Captain Steele. He would seem to have remained in the army, though never on active service, for several years longer.

Steele probably owed the king's favour to honest admiration of the excellent principles of *The Christian Hero*, his first prose treatise, published in 1701. The "reformation of manners" was a cherished purpose with King William and his consort, which they tried to effect by proclamation and Act of Parliament; and a sensible well-written treatise, deploring the irregularity of the military character, and seeking to prove by examples—the king himself among the number—"that no principles but those of religion are sufficient to make a great man," was sure of attention. Steele complained that the reception of *The Christian Hero* by his comrades was not so respectful; they persisted in trying him by his own standard, and would not pass "the least levity in his words and actions" without protest. The sensitive and hot-

headed "hero" would seem to have been teased into fighting a duel,—his first and last, for he wounded his antagonist dangerously, and from that time was a staunch opponent of affairs of honour. His uneasiness under the ridicule of his irreverent comrades had another curious result: it moved him to write a comedy. "It was now incumbent upon him," he says, "to enliven his character, for which reason he wrote the comedy called *The Funeral*." Although, however, it was Steele's express purpose to free his character from the reproach of solemn dulness, and prove that he could write as smartly as another, he showed greater respect for decency than had for some time been the fashion on the stage. The purpose, afterwards more fully effected in his famous periodicals, of reconciling wit, good humour, and good breeding with virtuous conduct was already deliberately in Steele's mind when he wrote his first comedy. It was produced and published in 1701, was received on the stage with favour, and owing to its comparative purity helped, along with *The Christian Hero*, to commend its author to King William. In his next comedy, *The Lying Lover, or the Ladies' Friendship*, produced two years afterwards, in 1703, Steele's moral purpose was directly avowed; and the play, according to his own statement, was "damned for its piety." *The Tender Husband*, produced eighteen months later (in April 1705), though not less pure in tone, was more successful; in this play he gave unmistakable evidence of his happy genius for conceiving and embodying humorous types of character, putting on the stage the parents or grandparents of Squire Western, Tony Lumpkin, and Lydia Languish. It was seventeen years before Steele again tried his fortune on the stage with *The Conscious Lovers*, the best and most successful of his comedies, produced in 1722.

Meantime the gallant captain had turned aside to another kind of literary work, in which, with the assistance of his friend Addison, he obtained a more enduring reputation. There never was a time when literary talent was so much sought after and rewarded by statesmen. Addison had already been waited on in "his humble lodgings in the Haymarket," and advanced to office, when his friend the successful dramatist was appointed to the office of gazetteer. This was in May 1707. It was Steele's first connexion with journalism. The periodical was at that time taking the place of the pamphlet as an instrument for working on public opinion. The Gazette gave little opening for the play of Steele's lively pen, his main duty, as he says, having been to "keep the paper very innocent and very insipid"; but the position made him familiar with a new field of enterprise in which his inventive mind soon discerned materials for a project of his own. The *Tatler* made its first appearance on the 12th of April 1709. It was partly a newspaper, a journal of politics and society, published three times a week. Steele's position as gazetteer furnished him with special advantages for political news, and as a popular habitué of coffee-houses he was at no loss for social gossip. But Steele not only retailed and commented on social news, a function in which he had been anticipated by Defoe and others; he also introduced into *The Tatler* as a special feature essays on general questions of manners and morality. It is not strictly true that Steele was the inventor of the English "essay,"—there were essayists before the 18th century, notably Cowley and Temple; but he was the first to use the essay for periodical purposes, and he and Addison together developed a distinct species, to which they gave a permanent character and in which they had many imitators. As a humbler motive for this fortunate venture Steele had the pinch of impecuniosity, due rather to excess of expenditure than to smallness of income. He had £300 a year from his gazetteership, £100 as gentleman usher to Prince George, £800 from the Barbados estates of his first wife, [528-1] and some fortune by his second wife—Mrs Mary Scurlock, the "Dear Prue" of his charming letters. But Steele lived in considerable state after this second marriage, and was reduced to the necessity of borrowing before he started *The Tatler*. The assumed name of the editor was Isaac Bickerstaffe, but Addison discovered the real author in the sixth number, and began to contribute in the eighteenth. It is only fair to Steele to state that the success of *The Tatler* was established before Addison joined him, and that Addison contributed to only forty-two of the two hundred and seventy-one numbers that had appeared when the paper was stopped in January 1711.

Only two months elapsed between the stoppage of *The Tatler* and the appearance of *The Spectator*, which was the organ of the two friends from March 1, 1711 till December 6, 1712. Addison was the chief contributor to the new venture, and the history of it belongs more to his life. Nevertheless it is to be remarked as characteristic of the two writers that in this as in *The Tatler* Addison generally follows Steele's lead in the choice of subjects. The first suggestion of Sir Roger de Coverley was Steele's, although it was Addison that filled in the outline of a good-natured country gentleman with the numerous little whimsicalities that convert Sir Roger into an amiable and exquisitely ridiculous provincial oddity. Steele had neither the fineness of touch nor the humorous malice that gives life and distinction to Addison's picture; the Sir Roger of his original hasty sketch has good sense as well as good nature, and the treatment is comparatively commonplace from a literary point of view, though unfortunately not commonplace in its charity. Steele's suggestive vivacity gave many another hint for the elaborating skill of his friend.

The Spectator was followed by *The Guardian*, the first number of which appeared on the 12th of March 1713. It had a much shorter career, extending to only a hundred and seventy-five numbers, of which Steele wrote eighty-two and Addison fifty-three. This was the last of his numerous periodicals in which he had the assistance of the great essayist. But he continued for several years to project journals, under great variety of titles, some of them political, some social in their objects, most of them very short-lived. Steele was a warm partisan of the principles of the Revolution, ardent and earnest in his political as in his other convictions. *The Englishman* was started in January 1714, immediately after the stoppage of *The Guardian*, to assail the policy of the Tory ministry. *The Lover*, started some six weeks later, was more general in its aims; but it gave place in a month or two to *The Reader*, a direct counterblast to the *Tory Examiner*. *The Englishman* was resuscitated for another volume in 1715; and in the same year he projected in rapid succession three unsuccessful ventures,—*Town Talk*, *The Tea Table*, and *Chit-Chat*. Three years later he started his most famous political paper, *The Plebeian*, rendered memorable by the fact that in it he had to contend against his old ally Addison. The subject of controversy between the two life-long friends was Sunderland's Peerage Bill. Steele's last venture in journalism was *The Theatre*, 1719-20, the immediate occasion of which was the revocation of his patent for Drury Lane. So ready was Steele in this kind of enterprise, which he could always conduct single-handed, that apparently whenever he felt strongly on any subject he at once started a journal to give vent to his feelings. Besides these journals he wrote also several pamphlets on passing questions,—on the disgrace of Marlborough in 1711, on the fortifications of Dunkirk in 1713, on the "crisis" in 1714, *An Apology for himself and his Writings* (important biographically) in the same year, on the South Sea mania in 1720.

The fortunes of Steele as a zealous Whig varied with the fortunes of his party. He lost his gazetteership when the Tories came into power in 1710. Over the Dunkirk question he waxed so hot that he threw up a pension and a commissionership of stamps, and went into parliament as member for Stockbridge to attack the ministry with voice and vote as well as with pen. But he had not sat many weeks when he was expelled from the House for the language of his pamphlet on *The Crisis*, which was stigmatized as seditious. The Apology already mentioned was his vindication of himself on this occasion. With the accession of the house of Hanover his fortunes changed. Honours and substantial rewards were showered upon him. He was made a justice of the peace, deputy-lieutenant of Middlesex, surveyor of the royal stables, governor of the royal company of comedians—the last a lucrative post, and was also knighted (1715). After the suppression of the Jacobite rebellion he was appointed one of the commissioners of forfeited estates, and spent some two years in Scotland in that capacity. He obtained a patent for a plan for bringing salmon alive from Ireland. Differing from his friends in power on the question of the Peerage Bill in 1718, he was deprived of some of his offices, but when Walpole became

chancellor of the exchequer in 1721 he was reinstated. But with all his emoluments the imprudent, impulsive, ostentatious, and generous Steele could never get clear of financial difficulties, and he was obliged to retire from London in 1724 and live in the country. He spent his last years on his wife's estate of Llangunnor in Wales, and, his health broken down by a paralytic seizure, died on the 1st of September 1729.

A selection from Steele's essays has been edited by Mr Austin Dobson, who prefixes a careful and sympathetic memoir. Mr Dobson has since written a fuller biography in Mr Lang's series of English Worthies. (W. M.).

Question-Who proposed feminism?

Answer- In late 14th- and early 15th-century France, the first feminist philosopher, Christine de Pisan, challenged prevailing attitudes toward women with a bold call for female education.

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