Founder-editor of the *Cornhill Magazine*

**GEORGE SMITH AND ANNE THACKERAY RITCHIE**

(1) from Leonard Huxley, *The House of Smith, Elder* (privately printed, 1923) pp. 71–2, 104–9, 160; (2) from *Biog. Intros, xi, xvii*, and ‘The First Number of *The Cornhill*', by Mrs Richmond Ritchie, *Cornhill Magazine* n.s.1 (1896) 10. George Smith II (1824–1901) took editorial control of the firm of Smith, Elder & Co. in 1843, at the age of nineteen, and during his long career made it illustrious; he was indeed arguably the most important Victorian publisher. An early admirer of Thackeray, he had sent him a message, long before he was famous, inviting him to publish with the firm, but to no avail; later he reproached Thackeray for not offering them *Vanity Fair*. They first met in 1849, through Charlotte Brontë’s visit to London (see above, 1, 107), and Smith subsequently published *The Kickleburys on the Rhine* (1850), *The English Humourists* (1853), *The Rose and the Ring* (1854) and *Esmond* (1852). The latter collaboration between author and publisher was of special importance: see J. A. Sutherland, *Victorian Novelists and Publishers* (1976) ch. 4, ‘Henry Esmond: The Shaping Power of Contract’. In 1859 the idea of founding a magazine ‘flashed upon me suddenly’, as Smith recalled. He secured Thackeray, on generous terms, as its main serial contributor and then, having failed to find a suitable editor, persuaded him to undertake that task too, again for an excellent salary, though aware that Thackeray’s business qualifications were slight. (There was a vogue for eminent authors’ editing such periodicals, Dickens being the most notable instance.) But Thackeray was not its only star. ‘Our terms’, Smith recalled, ‘were lavish almost to the point of recklessness. No pains and no cost were spared to make the new magazine the best periodical yet known in English literature.’ As Leonard Huxley says, ‘No other group of writers equally brilliant had ever before been brought together within the covers of one magazine’ (*House of Smith, Elder*, pp. 95, 100).

From its inception in January 1860 it was an enormous success; for a full account, see Spencer L. Eddy, Jr, *The Founding of *The Cornhill Magazine*‘ (Muncie, Ind., 1970). Smith’s warm friendship with Thackeray survived the latter’s shortcomings as an editor and his resignation in 1862, and Smith Elder became the publishers of his works in the decades after his death. Smith’s manuscript ‘Reminiscences’, quoted here, appears in Huxley’s history of the firm. Earlier in his ‘Reminiscences’, describing the progress of *Esmond*, Smith mentions ‘Thackeray’s scrupulous dealings in matters of
business', instancing his returning a cheque when he had failed to finish the book by the contracted date, and he adds that ‘After his death, there was found in his desk a slip of paper which supplies an odd proof of this trait of his character. On it were written the words: “I.O. S.E. & Co., 35 pp.” (i.e. pages of the Cornhill still to be written)’ (Huxley, House of Smith Elder, p. 70).

(1) When [the Cornhill] proved a great success, and I felt that its editor ought to share in that success, I accordingly told Thackeray that I proposed to send him a cheque for double the payment that had been agreed upon for the editorship. This was so totally unexpected by Thackeray that, for a moment, he lost his balance. His lips quivered, and then he broke into tears. This was an experience, he said, to which he was not accustomed. A touch of kindness, however, would always melt Thackeray. Our friendship became very close and unrestrained. Thackeray was not a good business manager of his own affairs, and would confide to me his difficulties. ‘Well,’ I would say to him jestingly, ‘you know a bank whereon the wild thyme grows.’ But his self-respect was too keen to permit him to lean too much on others. His mode of suggesting to me that a cheque would be convenient was characteristic. He would walk into my room in Pall Mall with both his trouser pockets turned inside out, a silent and expressive proof of their emptiness. I used to take out my cheque-book and look at him enquiringly. He mentioned the sum required and the transaction was completed. . . .

We lightened our labours in the service of the Cornhill by monthly dinners. The principal contributors used to assemble at my table in Gloucester Square every month while we were in London; and these ‘Cornhill dinners’ were very delightful and interesting. Thackeray always attended, though he was often in an indifferent state of health. At one of these dinners Trollope was to meet Thackeray for the first time and was equally looking forward to an introduction to him. Just before dinner I took him up to Thackeray and introduced him with all the suitable empresssement. Thackeray curtly said, ‘How do?’ and, to my wonder and Trollope’s anger, turned on his heel! He was suffering at the time from a malady which at that particular moment caused him a sudden spasm of pain; though we, of course, could not know this. I well remember the expression on Trollope’s face at that moment, and no one who knew Trollope will doubt that he could look furious on an