How great, how varied and agreeable, are the riches of English historical literature. Perhaps not quite so copious as the French; but there is no modern literature other than French that compares in this respect. Yet there are classics of our literature of which few enough have heard, let alone read. How many have read Clarendon’s History of the Rebellion, or his Autobiography, or Lord Herbert of Cherbury’s, or Hervey’s Memoirs, or the Verney Letters?

Horace Walpole knew a good thing when he saw one and pounced upon Clarendon’s Life when it appeared. He wrote to Montagu, on 19 July 1759, ‘Have you read my Lord Clarendon? I am enchanted with it; ’tis very incorrect, but I think more entertaining than his History. It makes me quite out of humour with other mémoires.’ (He meant his own.) It is true that Clarendon’s Life is in some ways a finer work even than the History, and at the same time it is far less well known. There are several reasons for this; the chief, perhaps, being that Clarendon did not intend the Life for publication, but for the private instruction of his children, and so he plundered the completed Life ruthlessly to enrich the History. The story of the composition of the History, of the reliability of different parts of it and of its relation to the Life, is a complex one, which has been worked out by Sir Charles Firth in the English Historical Review (1904). Most of the famous character sketches in the History really come out of the autobiography. What Clarendon did was to leave the latter a torso, by robbing it of much of what he had written about the Civil War and Commonwealth period; though the latter part, from the Restoration onwards, is very full. The result is that we are left with only half of what would have been perhaps the finest of English autobiographies, if we had it complete.

Then, too, it has never been properly edited. The only edition we have, published at Oxford in 1857, is an inadequate
text, with no notes at all, no indication of the large passages which have been transferred to the History or of others that have not been printed in either. A new edition is what is wanted: a good job of work for some young scholar in this field to tackle.

All the same the Life, even as we have it, is a wonderful book. Clarendon wrote it when his powers were at their height, freed from the daily preoccupations of politics by his second and final exile from the country. The taste for character drawing, which people did so well in the seventeenth century, had grown upon him since his original composition of the History twenty years before; now he could let himself go, and the most fully-developed portraits all belong to this period. Since he was not writing for publication, he could afford to be far more frank than in the History, where one of his main objects was to defend Charles I. Clarendon's deep-seated loyalty prevented him from being too outspoken — besides he had the essential justice of mind and devotion to truth of the real historian; but the Life is more revealing of the hidden causes of events as he saw them. The sense of the play of personalities is absorbing; the somewhat ponderous politician turns out to be a subtler psychologist than the nimble wits that got him turned out of power. There is an exquisite feeling for the atmosphere of that chosen time before the Civil War when such personalities as Falkland, Sidney Godolphin, Selden, Chillingworth, George Herbert, Nicholas Ferrar had come to flower. Most of them had been friends of Clarendon's — close friends to whom his mind and heart were attuned. No wonder he was a laudator temporis acti, who spent much of his activity in politics on trying to make those good days come again, and when that failed him spent his last years in the dream of what that time had been — out of which he recalled the figures of the past with all their rich, warm colouring and made them live again for posterity. Above all, his Life is what an autobiography should be, a complete portrait of his own personality, with all his qualities and limitations, his fidelity, integrity, honesty, his ability and courage, his warmth of heart — and the truly monumental self-satisfaction which cannot but amuse the modern reader.