

George Paine Rainsford James, 1799-1880 - a popular historical novelist in his time



A well known and popular historical novelist in his time, GPR James lived at Quoitings (then known as The Cottage) in Oxford Road, from January 1836 until the autumn of 1837. His son, Francis Scott, was baptised in All Saints Church on 28th July 1836.

George Payne Rainsford James' father was a London doctor who became physician to the Prince Regent. On his own admission, James was a bright but idle boy at school. As a boy he knew Byron, who called him "Little Devil". On their first meeting, James described Byron as "A damned ugly, fat

pasty-faced man - a great disappointment to me". Nevertheless he became his devoted friend. After leaving school aged 13, James studied medicine for a while, then went into the army. Arriving at Waterloo shortly after the battle, whether as a soldier or a messenger is not quite clear, he was wounded in a skirmish and taken prisoner. An intended political career came to nothing, and although he was to the end of his life a Tory, he took an active part in politics, and campaigned against Free Trade. From early literary dalliance, he became a professional, if somewhat laborious man of letters.

His first notable work, considered his best, was "Richelieu", published in 1829. He received encouragement from Washington Irving and Sir Walter Scott. He became a most prolific writer, turning out two or three books a year - romantic novels, biographies, and popular historical works. Like many of his contemporaries, he aimed at combining "amusement with moral instruction". Several of his novels began with two horsemen, and Thackeray parodied him as "the solitary horseman".

He married Frances Thomas, the daughter of a London physician, in 1828. They never lived in one house for more than a few years, and travelled frequently on the continent. One of the most amiable of men, he was on good terms with his fellow writers. He held a prominent position in the literary profession, and had hosts of notable friends, including Charles Dickens, Washington Irving, Sir Walter Scott, and the Duke of Wellington, but his chief pleasure was in rural life, surrounded by his family and vast numbers of dogs and

horses. A respected historian, James was appointed Historiographer to William IV, and later to Queen Victoria, and published several official pamphlets on historical matters.

Despite his prolific literary output, James spent his money as fast as it came in, and the family fortunes dwindled, until, in 1850, he decided to emigrate to America (with an introduction to Longfellow), where he lectured, and arranged the publication of his works in America. He continued writing, while also farming in Massachusetts, but still lost money.

In 1852 he became British Consul in Norfolk, Virginia. In failing health, James, reported as being in favour of the abolition of slavery, had to endure unpopularity from the slave owners. He continued to write, although not on the scale of previous years. The British Consulate was moved to the healthier climate of Richmond in 1856. In 1858 James was appointed British Consul in Venice. His health, both mental and physical, declined rapidly, and he died in Venice in 1860.

Among James' novels are

Richelieu (1829),

Philip Augustus (1831)

The Huguenot (1838)

The Robber(1839)

Henry of Guise (1839)

The Man at Arms (1840)

The King's Highway (1840)

Agincourt (1844)

The Smuggler (1845)

In addition he wrote *Memoirs of Great Commanders, A Life of the Black Prince*, and other historical and biographical works.

From The Marlow Society Newsletter, July 1987, author not named.

Produced by John Evans for the Local History Group of the Marlow Society, February 2008.