Robert A. Colby

Thackeray's Canvass of Humanity

An Author and His Public
THACKERAY'S CANVASS OF HUMANITY
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By Robert A. Colby

One of the many admirers of William Makepeace Thackeray recalled his first acquaintance with the author: "As I travelled through these, to me, enchanting volumes, I became aware of a writer, whose name, so I opined, should have been Proteus, since he was continually assuming fresh incarnations." Employing the materials and methods used so successfully in his highly praised *Fiction with a Purpose*, Professor Colby provides, in this literary biography of a major Victorian, a systematic examination of this human panorama. He demonstrates persuasively how Thackeray's works can be read against, and as products of, the social and literary milieu in which they were composed, and how they reflect his perceptions of the readers for whom he wrote.

Thackeray served a long apprenticeship as a journalist, and was necessarily immersed in the occasional, largely ephemeral output of the presses — the transient best-selling novels, the topical nonfiction, and the popular magazines. Dr. Colby shows convincingly how Thackeray's early work fits into this wide and unstudied context, then goes on to apply the method to each of the later works of fiction. He affirms his conviction that "the caricaturist, artist, critic, traveler, lecturer, historian, and novelist are essentially parts of a continuum" — a unified body of work in which we see Thackeray acting, at every stage, as the general instructor and mentor of his public, as the novelist caught between his desire to educate his readers and his need to amuse them.

The unique commingling in Thackeray of thinker, aesthete, and entertainer, and his easy familiarity with all levels of Victorian culture — humanistic learning, journalism (Continued on back flap)
THACKERAY'S
CANDIDATE OF HUMANITY
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