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Lytton, Edward George Earle Lytton Bulwer
[*formerly* Edward George Earle Lytton Bulwer], first Baron Lytton (1803–1873), *writer and politician*
by Andrew Brown
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Lytton, Edward George Earle Lytton Bulwer [*formerly* Edward George Earle Lytton Bulwer], first Baron Lytton (1803–1873), writer and politician, was born on 25 May 1803 at 31 Baker Street, London, the third and youngest son of Colonel (later General) William Earle Bulwer (1757–1807) of Heydon and Wood Dalling, Norfolk, and Elizabeth Barbara Lytton (1773–1843) of Knebworth, Hertfordshire. His elder brothers were William Earle Lytton Bulwer (1799–1877), who inherited the Bulwer family estates in north Norfolk, and (William) Henry Lytton Earle Bulwer (1801–1872), who was knighted in 1848 and raised to the peerage as Baron Dalling and Bulwer in 1871. His daunting array of names is a source of frequent confusion. His forenames were Edward George Earle Lytton (the last of them being his mother's maiden name). For the first forty years of his life his surname was Bulwer though out of respect for his mother's family, to whose estates he was heir, he often styled himself Edward Lytton Bulwer. When his mother died in 1843 and he came into his inheritance, he changed his surname by royal licence to Bulwer Lytton (without a hyphen, though others sometimes supplied one), thus becoming Edward George Earle Lytton Bulwer Lytton. He was created Baron Lytton of Knebworth in 1866. For consistency, and concision, he is referred to below simply as Bulwer, the name by which he was longest known.

Both sides of Bulwer's family were of ancient descent. Turold Bölver, who appears as one of William the Conqueror's retainers in Bulwer's novel *Harold* (1848), was assigned the manor of Wood Dalling in Norfolk as part of the Norman settlement. The Bulwers prospered, but established themselves among the county's most prominent landed gentry only in the mid-eighteenth century, when they married into the wealthy Earle family, owners of the neighbouring Heydon Hall. Bulwer's father, William Earle Bulwer, who inherited both estates, was enrolled at Pembroke College, Cambridge; more inclined, in his son's words, to Bacchus than Minerva, he left without taking a degree and embarked on a military career. The Lyttons were of similarly ancient lineage, having given their name to the village of Lytton (now Litton) in the Peak District of Derbyshire, where they settled soon after the conquest. (In *Harold* another of William's guard at Hastings is named de Littain.) Their seat at Knebworth in Hertfordshire was purchased in 1490 by Sir Robert de Lytton, who had fought alongside Henry Tudor at Bosworth, and who, predictably, appears in Bulwer's novel *The Last of the Barons* (1843). In the mid-eighteenth century Knebworth descended to Bulwer's maternal grandfather Richard Warburton Lytton, an accomplished but eccentric scholar of classics and oriental languages who separated from his wife soon after the birth of their only child Elizabeth in 1773. Shuttled back and forth between her estranged parents, Elizabeth Lytton grew into a young woman of uncommon intellectual accomplishment and considerable social hauteur. In 1798, after a brief courtship, she married William Bulwer, colonel of the 106th regiment, the Norfolk rangers. It proved an ill-starred union. An energetic and ambitious soldier, Colonel Bulwer

was also self-willed, short-tempered, and chronically subject to gout. He had little time for his children, least of all for the infant Edward, on whom his unhappy wife lavished maternal affection in proportion to her husband's brusque indifference. In 1804, having raised two regiments at his own expense, he was promoted to the rank of general and entrusted with the defence of the north-west of England in the anticipated event of a French invasion. He was expecting a peerage from a grateful government when, in July 1807, he died from a stroke.

Early life, 1807–1827

Left comfortably off, the widowed Mrs Bulwer moved to London. The two elder boys were sent away to school, and Edward was effectively brought up as an only child. Under his mother's devoted tutelage he was reading by the age of four and writing verse at seven. The most significant event of these early years followed the death of Richard Warburton Lytton in December 1810, when his grandfather's vast library was transferred to London. For the next twelve months, before his mother sold the collection that had all but taken over her house, Edward explored his grandfather's books, delighting especially in chivalric romances but dipping also into all manner of scholarly tomes and obscure treatises, thus acquiring a taste for both romantic legend and antiquarian enquiry that he was never to lose. Already precocious, he was stirred by this voracious browsing to new levels of intellectual pretension, and when, aged eight or nine, he is reported to have asked 'Pray, Mamma, are you not sometimes overcome by the sense of your own identity?' (Lytton, 1.36), his mother decided it was time he was sent to school.

Over the next two years Bulwer attended three separate establishments, but learned little and failed to make a single friend. Then, at eleven, he was enrolled at Dr Hooker's fashionable academy at Rottingdean, where boys were prepared for entry to Eton College and Harrow School. There at last he drew inspiration from his teachers and found comradeship among his peers. He discovered Scott and Byron, wrote poetry for the school magazine, and excelled at boxing. Four years later, in September 1818, Dr Hooker confessed to Mrs Bulwer Lytton (who had thus changed her name after inheriting the Lytton estates from her father) that there was no more he could realistically offer her son, and recommended that he be sent to a public school. In the event, following an interview with Dr Keate at Eton, the fifteen-year-old Bulwer persuaded his mother that he was altogether too grown-up to continue in formal education, and that he should be allowed to 'leap at once from Master into Mister, from the big boy into the young man' (Lytton, 1.46). Tall and athletically proportioned, already sporting whiskers and a moustache, at fifteen Bulwer carried himself with a self-assurance verging on arrogance. The outward air of confidence, however, masked a nature which at heart was acutely self-conscious and deeply insecure. It was a contradiction that increased with the passage of time.

From 1819 to 1821 Bulwer studied with a private tutor, the Revd Charles Wallington at Ealing, under whose enlightened care he came to love the classics, and was taught swordsmanship by Byron's fencing-master Henry Angelo. While at Ealing he fell in love with a girl a year or two older than himself, but the romance was abruptly severed when her father took her away without warning and forced her to marry against her wishes. Bulwer was heartbroken, and for several months was plunged into a desperate melancholy. He dramatized the experience in several of his stories, most strikingly, fully fifty years later, in the Lily Mordaunt episode in his novel *Kenelm Chillingly* (1873). The other major event of his time at Ealing was the publication of his first volume of poetry, the Byronic *Ismael: an Oriental Tale*, which was issued by Hatchards at his mother's expense in April 1820.

Bulwer went up to Cambridge in January 1822 aged eighteen and a half. After a term at Trinity, which he found stiffly academic, he transferred to Trinity Hall. As a fellow-commoner there he read widely in philosophy, political economy, and social history. His closest friend was Alexander Cockburn, later lord chief justice, who introduced him to the union. After a nervous start Bulwer developed into a regular and not unsuccessful speaker, and served successively as the society's secretary, treasurer, and president. He also maintained a steady literary output during his time as an undergraduate. In 1823 the Cambridge firm of Carpenter & Son published his second volume of rather undistinguished imitative verse, *Delmour, or, The Tale of a Sylphid*, and later that year he was invited by W. M. Praed to write for the newly launched *Knight's Quarterly Magazine*, to which he contributed both poetry and prose under the pseudonym of Edmund Bruce. In the long vacation of 1824 he made a pilgrimage to Ullswater, to visit the grave of the girl he had loved and lost at Ealing, who had written to him on her deathbed. Having passed an overnight vigil on her tomb, he spent several weeks in the Lake District immersed in a self-conscious philosophical solitude similar to that of Erasmus Falkland, the hero of his first novel, which he was drafting at the time. On his return home, in September he renewed an earlier acquaintance with Lady Caroline Lamb, whose house at Brocket Park was just a few miles from Knebworth, and who was recovering from the news of the death of her former lover Lord Byron. Dazzled by her talk of Byron, and intoxicated by the idea of taking his place at her side, the 21-year-old Bulwer, eighteen years her junior, was readily enslaved and rapidly seduced. Throughout the Michaelmas term at Cambridge they exchanged intimate letters, but soon after he came down for the Christmas vacation she cast him off for a new admirer.

Vain and hypersensitive, Bulwer was deeply offended by the malicious gossip that had attended this liaison, and soon after he left Cambridge in summer 1825 (though it was not until the following year that he proceeded to his ordinary degree) he took himself indignantly off to France. In the Paris of the restored monarchy he indulged for a while in the conventional dissipations of a monied young blood. For all his dandification and exquisite airs, however, Bulwer was too intellectually inclined and too subject to melancholy reflection to be satisfied for long by mere pleasure seeking. After a few months in Paris he moved to the romantic solitude of Versailles, where he read Rousseau and Mill, and completed a new volume of Byronic and satirical verse (*Weeds and Wild Flowers*, privately printed later in 1825). The day he returned to London, on 25 April 1826, a week before his twenty-third birthday, he attended a soirée and there met the woman who became his wife. Beautiful, headstrong, and extravagant, Rosina Anne Doyle Wheeler [*see* Lytton, Rosina Anne Doyle Bulwer (1802–1882)] was the youngest child of Francis Massy Wheeler, who had inherited a crumbling house and impoverished estate in co. Tipperary, where he lounged by day and drank by night, and Anna Doyle Wheeler, an Owenite socialist and advocate of women's rights. Rosina's parents separated when she was nine. After a tempestuous upbringing with her mother in Guernsey and France, in 1825 she was introduced into London society by her great-uncle Sir John Doyle. Mrs Bulwer Lytton disapproved strongly of her son's liaison, which cut across her plans for him to make a brilliant marriage as a stepping-stone to a public career. She regarded Rosina as a vulgar Irish adventuress, and did all in her power to prevent the relationship from developing. Bulwer's genuine desire not to upset his mother was reinforced by a prudent assessment of the practical consequences of marrying against her wishes. By the provisions of his father's will his independent income was barely £200 per annum; that he was living at ten times this level was due solely to his mother's generous allowance. In the event, and though Rosina's private income was less than half his

own, the courtship continued and they were finally married on 29 August 1827. Obdurate to the last, Mrs Bulwer Lytton refused to attend the ceremony, and for a full year thereafter would neither receive her son nor answer his repeated and anguished letters. She also terminated his allowance. The couple set up home in the country, at Woodcot House in Oxfordshire, 6 miles from Reading, an imposing residence whose rent and upkeep accounted for virtually their entire combined income. With his allowance suspended and a luxurious lifestyle to support, Bulwer immediately set about earning money by the only means that seemed appropriate—namely by writing. During the next decade he published a dozen novels, two dozen short stories, five plays, two volumes of poetry, a history of Athens, a sociological survey of English life, and at least a hundred periodical essays and reviews. By 1834, barely ten years after Bulwer the undergraduate was awarded the chancellor's medal for English verse at Cambridge, Bulwer the literary lion and best-seller was hailed by the *American Quarterly Review* as ‘without doubt, the most popular writer now living’ (16.507).

Literary career, 1827–1840

Bulwer's professional literary career began modestly, when Henry Colburn issued his first novel, *Falkland*, in March 1827. A lurid tale of adultery and gloomy philosophical posturing, it attracted little attention and sold poorly. Despite this, Colburn recognized the potential of his new recruit and offered £500 for another novel. Utterly different in character, *Pelham, or, The Adventures of a Gentleman*, published in May 1828, became a huge best-seller (George IV is reported to have ordered several copies to ensure that it would be available in each of his residences). Henry Pelham is the most consummate dandy in the canon of ‘silver fork’ fiction, his affectation of wearing black for dinner setting a fashion for evening dress that has persisted to the present day. Significantly, however, he is unsatisfied by the empty extravagances which he has elevated to an art form, and his tireless exertion to clear a friend of a charge of murder measures his transformation from self-indulgent fop to productive citizen. This pattern of growth from egotism to an awareness of social obligation marks the beginning of a moral agenda that was to dominate several of Bulwer's novels over the following decade. In the first of these, *The Disowned* (December 1828), which replicated the formula of social satire intermixed with sensational incident, the hero is a soberly contemplative scholar who learns that self-fulfilment proceeds from philanthropic action rather than solitary thought. Less didactic in its conception, *Devereux* (1829) is a rambling tale of political intrigue and Gothic melodrama set in the early eighteenth century, whose chief interest lies in its portrayal of the good and the great of the period: Swift and Pope, Bolingbroke and Voltaire, Louis XIV and Peter the Great. It is notable also for the rhetorical excesses of its apostrophic style: ‘Wild brooklet … Fortune freights not your channels with her hoarded stores, and Pleasure ventures not her silken sails upon your tide’ (1.63). This mannered floridity of diction, accompanied by the persistent capitalization of abstract nouns, was to become a distinguishing and disfiguring feature of Bulwer's prose.

Paul Clifford (1830) represented a radical new departure. Its eponymous hero was a highwayman, and its leading aim was to expose the pointless barbarity of the penal code of the day. The book's guiding moral was neatly expressed in its final sentence: ‘The very worst use to which you can put a man is to hang him’; though more recently, and far less seriously (such being Bulwer's late-twentieth-century fate), attention has focused rather on its opening words—‘It was a dark and stormy night.’ In *Eugene Aram* (1832) Bulwer took Newgate fiction into unprecedented territory by fashioning a hero out of a notorious murderer. The historic Aram was an itinerant provincial schoolmaster (he had briefly been tutor to Bulwer's aunts in

Norfolk) who was hanged for murder in 1759. In the novel he is presented as a high-minded philosopher who, ground down by poverty, had been induced to take part in a robbery which turned to murder. Wracked for years by guilt, he is subsequently redeemed by love, only to be arrested on the day of his wedding. Predictably, the book gave rise to a storm of indignant protest, even as it ran through numerous editions. Bulwer's condescending aristocratic manner and air of intellectual superiority had already provoked the hostility of reviewers such as Lockhart, Maginn, and Thackeray, who had mounted a barrage of vituperative attacks on him in the *Quarterly Review* and *Fraser's Magazine*. Now the entire tribe of London literary journals rose almost as one to condemn the immorality of the book and the hypocrisy of its author. Smarting from this experience, Bulwer issued his next novel (*Godolphin*, 1833) anonymously. The tactic backfired. Without the talismanic name of Bulwer to commend it, the story of Percy Godolphin's progress from intellectual self-absorption to the altruistic vision of a great and gifted soul proved a rare commercial failure, despite the blood-curdling catastrophes that crowded its pages. The reviews, at least, were merely lukewarm—even, deliberately so, that in the *New Monthly Magazine*, which was written by Bulwer himself. He had been editing the journal since November 1831, responsible for regular features such as the ‘Monthly commentary’ and ‘The politician’, as well as for numerous individual essays and reviews, some of which were later collected in *Asmodeus at Large* (1833) and *The Student* (1835).

In summer 1833 the strain of incessant work led to a breakdown in Bulwer's health. In August he resigned the editorship of the *New Monthly*, and in September he set out with Rosina on a recuperative visit to Italy. That same month saw the publication of his most original work of non-fiction, *England and the English*: a survey of the current state of politics, society, and manners; education, morality, and religion; art, literature, and science. Few of his contemporaries could have attempted so ambitious an account of the national character; still fewer could have carried it off with such consistent *élan*. On his return from Italy in February 1834 he brought with him the near-completed manuscript of what became his single most successful book, *The Last Days of Pompeii*. Published in July 1834, it rapidly achieved classic status and remained a best-seller for the rest of the century; it was translated into at least ten languages (no fewer than sixteen French impressions had been issued by 1864), was frequently dramatized, and twice adapted as an opera. Two years after the death of Scott, Bulwer's epic tale of Roman indulgence, Christian martyrdom, and the cataclysmic eruption of Vesuvius established him as the most popular historical novelist of the day. This standing was confirmed by *Rienzi, Last of the Tribunes* (1835), about the rise and fall of the demagogue who briefly seized power from the warring baronial factions of late-fourteenth-century Rome. Gibbon had dismissed Rienzi as a mixture of the knave and the madman; for Bulwer he is a hero and visionary, whose fanatical pursuit of popular liberty is fired by the inner strength of his aspiring spirit. An amalgam of careful scholarship and wilful invention, of political allegory, philosophical idealism, and extreme melodrama, the novel was the direct inspiration of Wagner's opera of the same name.

As already indicated, Bulwer's literary output during this period was not restricted to novels. His other major publications included the narrative poem *O'Neill, or, The Rebel* (1827) and the verse satire *The Siamese Twins* (1831); a loosely connected set of short stories entitled *The Pilgrims of the Rhine* (1834); the historical study *Athens: its Rise and Fall* (1837); and the illustrated novella *Leila, or, The Siege of Granada* (1838). Between 1836 and 1840 he wrote five plays for his friend the actor–manager William Macready. Two of these, *The Duchess de la Vallière* (1836)

and *The Sea-Captain* (1839), were merely successful; the melodrama *The Lady of Lyons* (1838) and the comedy of manners *Money* (1840) proved among the most resilient stage works of the Victorian era; while the historical verse drama *Richelieu* (1839) contains the most famous words he ever wrote:

> Beneath the rule of men entirely great
> The pen is mightier than the sword.
> (II.ii)

After parting company with the *New Monthly* he continued his journalistic career by contributing regularly to the *Edinburgh Review* and, from March to October 1838, by editing the short-lived *Monthly Chronicle*. It was in the latter that he published his long essay 'On art in fiction', a pioneering account of the theory and practice of the genre which marked his most significant contribution to the literature of the 1830s. This contribution was appropriately crowned by *Ernest Maltravers* (1837) and its sequel *Alice, or, The Mysteries* (1838), whose 2000 pages are filled to overflowing with the grand passions, romantic adventures, and philosophical disquisitions that had come to characterize Bulwer's fiction. The most exemplary and programmatic of his *Bildungsromane*, the story of Maltravers's six-volume apprenticeship to politics, literature, and love examines (in the capitalized words of the preface) the effect of worldly experience on 'those great principles by which alone we can work out the Science of Life—a desire for the Good, a passion for the Honest, a yearning after the True'. Time and again, it was the intellectual content of Bulwer's fiction which his contemporaries singled out as its main distinguishing feature. Whether anatomizing the social causes of crime, exhuming representative episodes in history, or analysing the dynamics of spiritual aspiration, his novels were habitually grounded in a rigorous examination of moral, political, and philosophical issues. Each in its own way was designed as much to educate as to entertain; by 1837 he had become 'the metaphysician-novelist of England' (*Monthly Magazine*, 24.541).

Private and political life, 1827–1841

After two years at Woodcot, where their daughter Emily was born in June 1828, the Bulwers moved to London. Effeminately handsome and languidly aristocratic, with his long auburn hair in ringlets and his six-foot frame resplendent in the latest fashions, the author of *Pelham* was fêted to a degree which must have gratified even his vanity. He had been paid £900 for *The Disowned* and a princely £1500 for *Devereux*, all of which and more he laid out in late 1829 on the purchase and extravagant furnishing of 36 Hertford Street, just off Park Lane. There, neglecting his wife and child, he devoted himself to political networking and literary endeavour. He worked incessantly, like a man possessed. Exhausted and explosively irritable, he was described by a family friend as seeming 'like a man who has been flayed, and is sore all over' (Lytton, 1.249). The domestic quarrels that inevitably ensued were exacerbated by the restoration of more cordial relations between Bulwer and his mother (who had finally agreed to receive him soon after the publication of his significantly titled novel *The Disowned*). Already jealous of his fashionable friends such as the young Disraeli and Lady Blessington, and excluded from his career aspirations, Rosina now felt increasingly supplanted in his emotions by her domineering mother-in-law. It was in this inauspicious context of literary drudgery, mounting debts, and marital friction that Bulwer embarked on his political career.

In April 1831 Bulwer was elected MP for St Ives in Huntingdonshire, as an independent radical. His maiden speech on 5 July was in support of the second reading of the Reform Bill, one result of whose passage in the following year was to

sweep away his own constituency. At the general election of December 1832 he successfully stood for Lincoln, which he represented until 1841. As a back-bencher he promoted legislation on issues of literary, intellectual, and libertarian interest. His bill to establish dramatic copyright was enacted in 1833; his campaign against the monopoly of London's patent theatres (Covent Garden and Drury Lane) led to the abolition of the royal patent in 1843; his persistent call for the reduction of stamp duty on newspapers (the so-called 'taxes on knowledge') finally bore fruit in 1855, when the duty was repealed. Only in the boldest of these initiatives was he frustrated: first mounted in 1832, his impassioned challenge of the crown's right to censor plays, through the office of the lord chamberlain, remained unrealized for well over a century. (By a nice irony, the last lord chamberlain to exercise this power before its abolition in 1968 was the husband of Bulwer's great-granddaughter.) As a speaker Bulwer was unimpressive: his voice was weak, high-pitched, and betrayed the occasional stammer; his style of delivery was self-conscious and oratorically mannered. Appropriately, it was the power of his pen that marked the most influential moment of his political career. When the king dismissed Lord Melbourne's ministry in November 1834 and invited the duke of Wellington to form a government, Bulwer wrote a pamphlet in support of the whigs (whom, as a radical, he disliked rather less than the tories) entitled *A Letter to a Late Cabinet Minister on the Current Crisis*. Within six weeks it had run through twenty-one editions, sold 30,000 copies, and was widely believed to have influenced the result of the ensuing election. In recognition the victorious Melbourne offered Bulwer a junior lordship of the admiralty, which he declined—presumably as insufficient inducement to change his party affiliation. By the late 1830s, however, Bulwer's opposition to household suffrage and the repeal of the corn laws signalled a break with the mainstream radicals. In July 1838 Lord Melbourne recommended him for a baronetcy (ostensibly for services to literature) in Queen Victoria's coronation honours, but at the general election of 1841 he lost his seat to a tory. He did not return to parliament until 1852.

The demands of Bulwer's political career placed further strain on a marriage which had rapidly ceased to be as romantic as the courtship that preceded it. His neglect of his wife and family was unchecked by the birth of a son, Edward Robert Bulwer-Lytton (1831–1891), in November 1831, and his ostentatious philandering with the society beauty Mrs Robert Stanhope in 1833 threatened to break the marriage apart. Later that year, hoping to rekindle their relationship, the Bulwers left the children with a governess and travelled to Italy. The trip was a disaster. He was fascinated by the country, she detested it. In Rome, which she described as 'dirty, barbarous and dismal' (Lytton, 1.266), Bulwer left Rosina to her own devices and threw himself into work on *Rienzi*; in Naples, while he studied with the archaeologist Sir William Gell, she flirted outrageously with a Neapolitan prince. They quarrelled violently and returned to England. There, by degrees embittered, recriminatory, and hysterical, they decided on a trial separation, whereupon he promptly embarked on another affair (with a Miss Laura Deacon, who remained his clandestine partner for many years and by whom he had three children). Extremely provoked, in February 1836 Rosina raided his apartments at the Albany and publicly accused him of entertaining his mistress there. The die was now irrevocably cast. On 19 April 1836 they signed a formal deed of separation, citing 'incompatibility of temper'.

Literary career, 1841–1873

Bulwer's creative energy remained undiminished, despite increasing problems with his health, and in the early 1840s he published three major novels in quick succession. The sensational melodrama *Night and Morning* (1841) turns on the

moral distinction between socially induced criminality and socially respectable vice. *Zanoni* (1842), arguably his most original work of fiction, is set during the French Revolution and steeped in the occult lore of which he had become a serious student. The eponymous hero is a Rosicrucian sage who has mastered the secret of immortality but relinquishes this gift to save the life of the woman he loves. The spectacular dénouement, in which he dies in her place on the guillotine, clearly anticipates that of *A Tale of Two Cities* almost twenty years later. In *The Last of the Barons* (1843), which follows the career of Warwick 'the Kingmaker' in the Wars of the Roses, Bulwer portrays the eclipse of baronial power in the late fifteenth century as prefiguring that of the landowning aristocracy in the nineteenth—in each case by middle-class commercial interests. His poetic output in the 1840s was similarly wide-ranging. The miscellaneous collection headed *Eva, a True Story of Light and Darkness* (1842) was followed by a translation, *The Poems and Ballads of Schiller* (1844), prefaced by a long biographical essay; then by *The New Timon* (1846), a discursive romance of contemporary London in heroic couplets; and finally by *King Arthur* (1848–9), a gargantuan epic in twelve books which proved an embarrassing failure. After a hiatus of almost four years, in December 1846 he returned to prose fiction with *Lucretia, or, The Children of Night*, another sensational tale of criminal low life (based on the true story of the forger Thomas Wainewright) which prompted another round of indignant critical attacks, to which Bulwer responded in his pamphlet *A Word to the Public* (1847). *Harold, the Last of the Saxon Kings* (1848) addressed less contentious ground; the novelistic product of painstaking research, its account of the Norman invasion exemplified the heavily footnoted, scholarly antiquarian style which Bulwer had made his own. In a distinctly lighter vein, and scaling new heights of popular success, *The Caxtons* (1849) chronicles the domestic life of an amiably eccentric family, focusing in particular on the youthful experiences of the outlandishly named Pisistratus Caxton, who eventually emigrates to Australia to retrieve the family's fortunes.

With the renewal of his political career, Bulwer's literary activity in the 1850s was restricted to just one play, two novels, and a handful of essays and stories. The comic drama *Not so Bad as we Seem* was written to raise funds for the Guild of Literature and Art which he and Dickens had established to support impoverished authors. It was first produced at a gala performance before the queen and Prince Albert at Devonshire House in May 1851; besides Dickens himself, the amateur cast included Wilkie Collins, Douglas Jerrold, John Forster, Mark Lemon, John Tenniel, and Augustus Egg. The sprawling four-volume sagas of English provincial life *'My Novel'* (1853) and *What Will he Do with it?* (1859), each billed as 'by Pisistratus Caxton', sought to extend the winning formula of *The Caxtons*, but their invention was less spontaneous and their humour more laboured. Though his new publications were few, the commercial value of Bulwer's backlist was growing in proportion to the ever greater demand for cheap fiction from an ever larger reading public. In 1853 George Routledge paid the unprecedented sum of £20,000 for a ten-year lease of the copyrights to his nineteen existing novels. Of the various cheap formats in which these were then reissued, the 1*s.* 6*d.* Railway Library proved the most successful, and in 1857 W. H. Smith reported that Bulwer was the most requested author at his station bookstalls.

Bulwer's next novel, *A Strange Story* (1862), was commissioned by Dickens—for many years past a personal friend and literary admirer—for the weekly magazine *All the Year Round*. A powerful tale of murder and madness, of magic and the *elixir vitae*, its underlying aim was to reveal the inability of natural science to explain supernatural phenomena. It is better known today, however, for providing Bulwer with the opportunity of persuading Dickens to alter the ending of *Great*

Expectations (as a *quid pro quo* for Dickens's editorial advice on the conclusion to *A Strange Story*). Characteristically, the novel was underpinned by voracious reading in the relevant scientific and philosophical literature, much of which is more explicitly manifest in his essay collection *Caxtoniana* (1863). Further volumes of verse, *St Stephens* (1860), *The Boatman* (1864), *Poems* (1865), and *The Lost Tales of Miletus* (1866), were followed by two plays, *The Rightful Heir* (1868) and *Walpole* (1869), and then by a translation, *The Odes and Epodes of Horace* (1869). His short novel *The Coming Race* (published anonymously in 1871), a dystopian satire on evolutionary theory and the emancipation of women, is one of the earliest English examples of science fiction. An American mining engineer descends into the centre of the earth and encounters a subterranean people whose extraordinary technological and telekinetic power derives from their control of a mysterious energy called vril. The book proved so popular (it ran through eight editions in eighteen months) that the word vril briefly entered the language, signifying a strength-giving elixir: the name of the famous beef extract product Bovril is a composite of ‘bovine’ and ‘vril’. *Kenelm Chillingly*, a throwback to Bulwer's philosophical *Bildungsromane* of the 1830s, was issued just days after his death in January 1873; its first impression of 3150 three-volume sets sold out on the day of publication. *The Parisians* (1873), a tale of politics and society set during the last days of the second French empire, and the unfinished novel of ancient Greece *Pausanias the Spartan* (1876) were both published posthumously, thus bringing to a close a career that had spanned six decades at the forefront of English letters.

Very few of Bulwer's contemporaries were as prolific, and none was as successful in so many genres. During his lifetime he was outsold only by Dickens, and only Dickens was more widely translated. For thirty years after his death he remained a pillar of the literary establishment; besides innumerable cheap reprints, no fewer than twenty-five multi-volume collections of his complete novels were issued in Britain and America between 1875 and 1900. The twentieth century, however, witnessed a sharp decline in Bulwer's popularity. The reasons for this eclipse are closely bound up with those for his earlier success. Bulwer's great gift was to anticipate and define contemporary taste. With his ornately rhetorical style and lofty moralizing manner he was pre-eminently a writer for his own time, and as that time passed so did his special appeal. In certain quarters he had been roundly condemned for both tendencies from the outset: no other Victorian writer of note attracted such consistent critical animosity or was more cruelly parodied. As Ruskin noted in 1840, ‘Everybody has a spite at Bulwer because the public think him clever, and they don't’ (*The Diaries of John Ruskin*, ed. J. Evans and J. H. Whitehouse, 3 vols., 1956–9, 1.82). When he ceased to appeal to the common reader his reputation sank almost without trace. Nevertheless, his historical significance was immense, for he epitomized that category of writers who, in his own words:

> form a link in the great chain of a nation's authors, which may be afterwards forgotten by the superficial, but without which the chain would be incomplete. And thus if not first-rate for all time, they have been first-rate in their own day. (*Ernest Maltravers*, 1.286)

Public and private life, 1839–1873

When they separated in 1836 the Bulwers were both thirty-three. Nine turbulent years of marriage now gave way to nearly forty of unrelenting misery. Rosina exacted a furious revenge for being cast off by her husband, and being denied access to her children, doing all in her power to blacken his name and poison his happiness. Whatever the merits of her case, her remorseless litany of abuse struck

home, and to the end of his days Bulwer was humiliated and embittered by the spectre of scandal. By the deed of separation Rosina was granted an annuity of £400, a sum she considered grossly inadequate to her needs and expectations. Like Bulwer himself ten years earlier, she turned to literature to supplement her income, and in novels such as *Cheveley, or, The Man of Honour* (1839) and *The Budget of the Bubble Family* (1840) she ridiculed thinly veiled representations of her estranged husband and his pretentious family. Acutely embarrassed at thus being held up to public derision, Bulwer grew ever closer to his mother, whom he had come to venerate as his one constant support against the malice of the world. When she died in December 1843 he was overcome by grief. ‘All that I have ever met in the world of sympathy, generosity, and faithful friendship’, he wrote to a friend, ‘is identified with the name of Mother. The thought of that loss seems to me like the taking away of the candle from a child who is terrified at the dark’ (Lytton, 2.21). Four years later his daughter Emily died of typhus fever at the age of nineteen. Rosina, recently returned from a nine-year exile on the continent, accused him of precipitating her death by wilful neglect. Painfully aware that he had done little to secure Emily's happiness by consigning her to a succession of governesses, Bulwer was doubly distraught. The trauma of his daughter's death encouraged him to cultivate the affection of his son (who was later to become viceroy of India and first earl of Lytton) and for the remainder of his life he derived great satisfaction from their intimacy. Meanwhile Rosina intensified her campaign of abuse. On the occasion of the royal première of *Not so Bad as we Seem* in 1851 she wrote to Prince Albert threatening to pelt the queen with rotten eggs for supporting the work of a scoundrel. She also had playbills pasted up around Devonshire House advertising *Even Worse than we Seem* by ‘Sir Liar-Coward Bulwer Lytton, who has translated his poor daughter into Heaven, and nobly leaves his wife to live on public charity’. Six years later, with his political career in the ascendant, she further embarrassed him by issuing a pamphlet entitled *Lady Bulwer Lytton's Appeal to the Justice and Charity of the English Public* (1857). Worse was to follow. At the parliamentary election at Hertford on 8 June 1858 (which was to confirm him in the recently offered post of colonial secretary), in the midst of his address from the hustings Rosina pushed her way through the crowd and denounced him as a monster who should himself have been transported to the colonies long ago for mistreating his wife and murdering his daughter. Deeply humiliated and sorely provoked, he reacted by having her committed to a private asylum. He had, however, underestimated the influence of her friends, and of his enemies: mobilizing the anti-government press on her behalf, she was released within the month, whereupon Bulwer felt obliged to increase her settlement and pay off her debts. Despite this concession, in 1864 she embarked on another round of public attacks, addressing spiteful letters to his political colleagues and literary friends (to Wilkie Collins, for example, she insisted that Count Fosco in *The Woman in White* was a poor representative of villainy when compared to her husband). Rosina died in obscurity in March 1882, still obsessed by her ill treatment at his hands. Each of them the product of an unhappy union, their own marriage proved among the most publicly acrimonious of the century.

After losing his seat in parliament, during the early 1840s Bulwer showed little interest in party politics, but towards the end of the decade his renewed friendship with Disraeli and his growing sympathy for Disraeli's brand of toryism rekindled his ambitions. In spring 1851 he published another influential pamphlet, *Letters to John Bull*, which criticized the notion of free trade as a universal panacea for social and economic ills. In thus attacking both the whig administration and its radical supporters, he had little option but to align himself formally with the Conservative opposition. The electors of his home county of Hertfordshire invited him to stand

as their representative, and at the general election of July 1852 he re-entered parliament as a tory. Despite the deafness which inhibited his performance in debates, he soon became a front-bench spokesman, notably in his bellicose advocacy of the army's cause in the Crimean War. In 1858 Lord Derby offered him the post of secretary of state for the colonies in the new tory government. Though cut short by illness, his brief period of office was marked by two notable achievements: the establishment in 1858 of the new colony of British Columbia, and the separation from New South Wales in 1859 of the new colony of Queensland (there are towns named Lytton in all three territories). Ill health forced him to resign his office in December 1859 but he retained his seat until 1866, when Lord Derby offered him the peerage he had long coveted in recognition of the public distinction of the Lytton family as well as of his own political service. In the event, isolated and increasingly infirm, he never spoke in the Lords.

Bulwer's health had never been robust. From the age of sixteen he had suffered from an irritation of the middle ear which caused severe pain and progressively impaired his hearing, while the pressure of incessant work and the nervous tension engendered by his domestic troubles took a heavy toll on an already fragile constitution. Frustrated at the ineffectiveness of the drugs, purgatives, and bleeding recommended by his physicians, in the early 1840s he began to read widely in medical and quasi-medical literature. When, in January 1844, he suffered another complete collapse in the wake of his mother's death, against all professional advice he turned to Dr Wilson's hydropathic establishment at Malvern. He recorded his appreciation of hydrotherapy in the pamphlet *Confessions and Observations of a Water Patient* (1845), and for the rest of his life he maintained a keen interest in ‘alternative’ medicine, particularly as concerned the diagnosis and treatment of nervous disorders. When the vogue for spiritualism crossed the Atlantic in the early 1850s, he attended séances by the prominent mediums D. D. Home, Alexis Didier, and Charles H. Forster. In 1853 he confided to his son that ‘there are wonderful phenomena in our being all unknown to existing philosophy’ (Lytton, 2.44), and though sceptical of fashionable clairvoyants he was convinced that agencies of spiritual communication known to the magi of old were still recoverable if one could but penetrate their mysteries. He attended experiments conducted by the hypnotist James Braid, the phrenologist John Ashburner, and the mesmerist John Elliottson, seizing on them as a potential key to a ‘scientific’ understanding of the hidden life of the spirit, which he had earlier sought through exhaustive research into the hermetic tradition of the ancients and the occult arts of the middle ages.

To the end Bulwer remained a bundle of contradictions: at once hugely ambitious and painfully shy, generous of spirit but haughty in manner, profoundly intellectual yet regularly dismissed as superficial. Though craving recognition, he hid behind a protective mask of lofty self-assurance and aristocratic superiority which provoked exactly the opposite response. Over the course of a long career he made the acquaintance of most of the leading writers and politicians of the day, but he had very few close friends (most notably Disraeli and Dickens, Lady Blessington and John Forster). He received his share of public honours—baronetcy and peerage, knight grand cross of St Michael and St George, honorary doctorates at both Oxford and Cambridge—but in his private life he became an increasingly retiring and lonely figure, whose chief satisfaction derived from solitary study rather than from social intercourse. From the 1840s onwards he spent long periods abroad, most often in Germany and the south of France. Though he kept up a London residence (taking a succession of houses in Mayfair and Park Lane), he was always happiest out of the public gaze at his ancestral home of Knebworth, which in the mid-1850s he gothicized with turrets, domes, and gargoyles. He was equally solicitous of his

personal appearance, dyeing his hair and resorting to corsets and make-up to disguise the ageing process. In 1874, when describing Charles Greville as the vainest man who had ever lived, Disraeli added 'and I don't forget Cicero and Lytton Bulwer' (W. F. Monypenny and G. E. Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli*, 1910–20, 5.348). Bulwer died at Argyll Hall, Torquay, on 18 January 1873, probably from a cerebral abscess brought on by the middle ear complaint which had afflicted him throughout his adult life. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, and obituaries marked the passing of England's foremost man of letters. Fifty years later G. K. Chesterton provided a more cautious epitaph when he remarked that, quite simply, 'you could not have the Victorian Age without him' (*The Victorian Age in Literature*, 1916, 1925 edn., p. 136).

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Wealth at death under £70,000: resworn probate, Sept 1874, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales* (1873)

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