

Rocco and Barbara Verrilli Collection of Charles Lamb

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1741-1932 (*Bulk:* 1798-1834)

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A poet, critic, and essayist, and close friend of Coleridge and Wordsworth, Charles Lamb was a popular figure in literary circles in late Georgian Britain. Born in London in 1775, Lamb began working in the accounting office of the British East India Company at the age of seventeen. Despite struggling with mental illness in his family, he built a reputation as a writer. With an elegant, eccentric, and somewhat antiquated style, he became known first for his poetry, but soon gained notice for prose and criticism. Written with his sister Mary, *Tales from Shakespeare* (1808) achieved notable success, however Lamb's fame rests primarily on the essays he wrote during the 1820s under the pseudonym Elia. Lamb died from erysipelas on Dec. 29, 1833.

From the 1960s through 2010s, Rocco and Barbara Verrilli built this extensive collection of first and early editions of Charles Lamb's writing. Among the volumes they acquired are Lamb's personal copy of his first publication, *Poems on Various Subjects*; a

rare copy of his first book for children *King and Queen of Hearts* (1806); and a presentation copy of his best known work, *Elia* (1823). The twenty-five manuscript items in the collection are particularly noteworthy. Displaying a characteristic combination of charm, wit, and insight, these include a long letter to Robert Southey discussing poetry; humorous letters to his admirer John B. Dibdin; an acrostic by Lamb on the name of Sarah Thomas; and two particularly fine letters to the poet Edward Dyer, including an eye-witness account of the agricultural rebellion known as the Swing Riots.

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Background on Charles Lamb

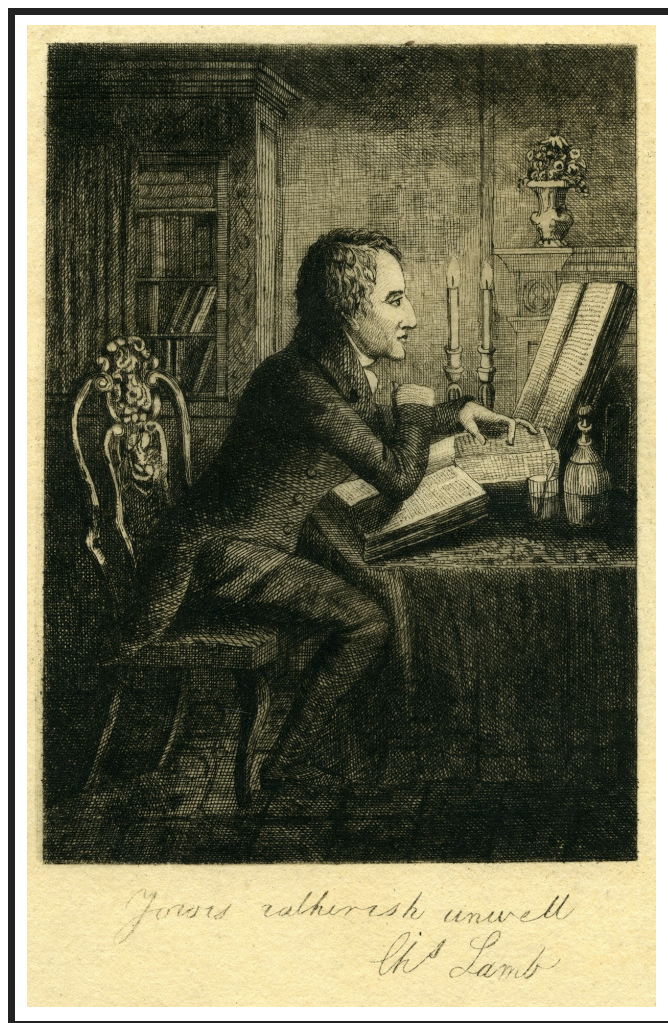
A vivacious, eccentric, and in some ways tragic figure in literary circles in late Georgian Britain, Charles Lamb was born in London in 1775, the son of clerk to a Bencher in the Inner Temple. While a student at Christ's Hospital between 1782 and 1789, he befriended Leigh Hunt and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, developing with them a love of poetry, drama, and prose that would fuel his desire for a literary life. Considered unsuited for the ministry due to a stutter, Lamb never attended university, embarking instead on a long career in the accounting office of the British East India Company when he was just seventeen.

For Lamb, the challenge of fitting his literary ambitions into a full work life was redoubled by the impact of mental illness. Love would be the first point of departure. While on holiday in Hertfordshire in 1795, Lamb fell in love with a young woman, Ann Simmons, and proposed marriage. When she rejected him, however, he fell into such deep despair that he was remanded to a madhouse for several weeks during the winter 1795-1796. The worst was yet to come. On Sept. 22, 1796, Lamb walked into his home to discover his elder sister Mary with a butcher knife, having stabbed their mother to death and wounded their father while in a manic fit. Barely 21, Lamb rose to the occasion, rescuing Mary from permanent institutionalization by agreeing to care for her personally. For the remainder of his life, Mary was his constant companion and burden.

Despite such hardships, Lamb began to build a reputation as a writer. His name first appeared in print during the year of tragedy when four of his sonnets were included in Coleridge's compilation *Poems on Various Subjects*, after which he published a collaboration with Coleridge's disciple Charles Lloyd, *Blank Verse* (1798). Though never reaching the success he had hoped for as a poet, he developed rich connections with British Romantic writers like Robert Southey and William and Dorothy Wordsworth, with whom he remained close for many years.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Lamb began to expand to other genres. He followed the success of his novella *A Tale of Rosamund Gray* (1798) with a rather less successful turn at drama with *John Woodvil, a Tragedy* (1802) and the spectacularly unsuccessful farce, *Mr. H* (1806). His fortunes improved in 1805 when William Hazlitt introduced him to William Godwin, who was planning a series of books for young readers. Collaborating with his sister Mary, Lamb produced *Tales Founded on the Plays of Shakespear* (1807), which became so popular that it has remained in print ever since, as well as *Poetry for Children* (1808) and *Mrs. Leicester's School* (1809). Lamb's reputation as a critic was also secured during this period through essays on the Elizabethan poets and dramatists he both admired and emulated.

As he became a fixture in the literary periodical press, Lamb fell in love for a second time, and was rebuffed for a second time. After actress Frances Maria Kelly rejected him in 1819, however, Lamb did not despair, bouncing back instead to reach the peak of his literary fame. Recruited by the *London Magazine* in 1820, Lamb spun out a series of essays under the pseudonym Elia, written with grace, humor, and passion on an eclectic range of topics from a dissertation upon a roast pig to a reflection on New



Charles Lamb, print after

Year's Eve. His writings were collected into *Elia* (1823) and *The Last Essays of Elia* (1833).

After taking a pension for twenty-five years' service with the East India Company, Lamb retired to the London suburbs in 1823, but the additional time to write that he had longed for did not work out as he had planned. Feeling isolated from the vibrant literary life he had enjoyed in London, he found himself increasingly weighed down and increasingly unproductive. On Dec. 29, 1833, he died of an erysipelas infection contracted after scratching himself in a minor fall in the street. At the age of 59, he died a bachelor.

Scope of collection

From the 1960s through 2010s, Rocco and Barbara Verrilli built this extensive collection of first and early editions of Charles Lamb's writing. Among the volumes they acquired are Lamb's personal copy of his first publication, *Poems on Various Subjects*; a rare copy of his first book for children *King and Queen of Hearts* (1806); and a presentation copy of his best known work, *Elia* (1823). The twenty-five manuscript items in the collection are particularly noteworthy. Displaying a characteristic combination of charm, wit, and insight, these include a long letter to Robert Southey discussing poetry; humorous letters to his admirer John B. Dibdin; an acrostic by Lamb on the name of Sarah Thomas; and two particularly fine letters to the poet Edward Dyer, including an eye-witness account of the agricultural rebellion known as the Swing Riots.

Inventory

Kelly, Frances Maria: **Letter to C. W. Granby**

1842 Feb. 7

3p.

Folder 1

"My will is good to do what you wish. But (little as it is) in my peculiar position at the present moment I dare not go quite so far. If you will be the one to get into the boat with me and I am once safely landed, I shall with the greatest pleasure increase your temptation to remain with me. Pray therefore let me have another five minutes Chat with you and if possible come to terms. I shall be home all day, and most anxious to see you."

Kelly, Frances Maria: **Letter to C. W. Granby**

Apr. 27

2p.

Folder 2

Impatiently asking for a decision from her correspondent, presumably a thespian: "My full bill must be out tomorrow -- and here sits a man watching me pen this urgent scrawl and 'Wishing a Sin' that you may disdain my offer, or break your neck in coming to comply with it. Pray therefore, Let us both be out of our suspense: Believe me (in dangerous frankness) most anxious for your decision to join my little troupe -- and very faithfully your Servt."

Lamb, Charles: **Letter to Robert Southey**

1799 Mar. 20

4p.

Folder 3

Discussing Southey's poem "The Spider" in comparing to Burns. "I would persuade you, if I could... to commence a series of these animal poems, which might have a tendency to rescue some poor creatures from the antipathy of mankind... I love this sort of poems, that open a new intercourse with the most despised of the animal and insect race. I think the vein may be further opened. Peter Pindar hath very prettily apostrophised a fly, Burns hath his mouse and his louse, Coleridge less successfully hath made overtures of intimacy to a Jackass, therein only following at unressembling distance Sterne & great Cervantes -- Beyond these I know of no other examples of breaking down the partition between us and our 'poor earth born companions...' Includes an 18 line poem, Marmor loquitor, on the death of a volunteer at home in bed and who wished to be buried in his regimentals.

Lamb, Charles: **Letter to George Dyer**

1808 July 5

1p.

Folder 4

Complaint about painters encroaching on the turf of poets: "More poets have started up since your departure. Your friend and mine Wm. Hazlitt is putting to press a collection of Verses chiefly amatory. Some of them pretty enough. How these painters encroach upon our province! There's Hoppner, Shee, Westall, and I don't know who besides, and Tresham &c. It seems a confession that they are not quite at the top of their own art, when they seek to eke out their fame with the assistance of another's; no large tea-dealer sells cheeses, no great silversmith deals in razor straps. It is only your petty chandlers who mix commodities. If Nero had been a great Emperor he would never have played the violincello!" See Marrs, Vol. II, pp. 284-285 for the full published transcript.

Lamb, Charles: **Letter to William Ayrton**

1817 Nov. 25

1p.

Folder 5

Invitation for "Dr. A." and Mrs. Ayrton to dinner at the Lambs': "my sister begs me to say we shall well consider the obligation double."

Lamb, Charles: **Letter to Bryan Waller Procter**

1821 summer?

1p.

Folder 6

"The Wits (as Clare calls us) assemble at my cell (20 Russell St, Cov-Gar) this evening at 1/4 before 7. Cold meat at 9. Puns at -- a little after. Mr. Cary wants to see you, to scold you. I hope you will not fail..."

Lamb, Charles: **Letter to Mary Novello**

1823 May 24

1p.

Folder 7

Accepting a dinner invitation for himself and his sister Mary: the viands shall be entirely of your providing -- let me suggest that the wine shall be orange, and the pye well seasoned -- and that the coach shall be our affair."

Lamb, Charles: **Letter to John Bates Dibdin**

1823 Oct. 28

3p.

Folder 8

Thanking Dibdin for a picture of a pig: "You Pig was a picture of a pig, and your Picture a pig of a picture. The former was delicious by evanescent, like a hearty fit or mirth, or the cracking of thorns under a put; but the latter is an idea, and abideth. I never before saw swine upon sattin. And then that pretty strawy canopy about him! He seems to purr (rather than grunt) his satisfaction. Such a gentleman-like porker too! Morland's are absolute clowns to it. Who the deuce painted it? I have ordered a little gilt shrine for it, and mean to wear it for a locket; a shirt pig... The panoply that covered your material pig shall be forthcoming. The pig editorial, with its trappings, domesticate me Tuesday..." Dibdin's gift of a pig picture was sent to Lamb for his popular "Dissertation on Roast Pig" (London Magazine, Sept. 1822), and was also printed in Lamb's Elia (1823). Lamb and Dibdin became friends in early 1823 after the latter, a much younger man employed as a clerk at India House, determined that Lamb was the anonymous Elia who contributed amusing articles to the London Magazine.

Lamb, Charles: **Letter to Thomas Allsop**

1823 Nov. 1

1p.

Folder 9

Declines an invitation: "Mary has got a cold & the nights are dreadful; but at the first indication of Spring (alias the first dry weather in Novr. early) it is our intention to surprise you early... Mary regrets very much Mrs. Alsop's fruitless visit. It made her swear! She has gone to visit Miss Hutchinson when she found out."

Lamb, Charles: **Letter to Taylor and Hessey (Islington, Eng.)**

1825 Jan. 7

1p.

Folder 10

"If you don't think this admissible, return it; I will send to a Theological Magazine. [NB] Don't make any apology for not admitting it, for I doubt its [sic] proper[?]. Your No. 1 greatly improved. Thank the Walladmor translator for me heartily" [i.e., Thomas De Quincey]. Taylor and Hessey were publishers of The London Magazine and Review and of several books by Lamb, including the Elia collection.

Lamb, Charles: **Letter to Thomas Allsop**

1825 Sept. 14

2p.

Folder 11

Thanking Allsop for his support: "Your kindness pursues us everywhere... I have plenty of cash. Thank you over & over for your offer... Last night I lay broad awake like an owl till 8 o'clock, then got a poor doze. Have had something like sleep and a forgetting last night. We go on tolerably in this Deserted House. It is melancholy, but I could not have gone into a quite strange one. Newspapers come to you here. Pray stop them. Shall I send what have come? Give mine and Mary's kindest love to Mrs. Allsop... This house is not what it was. May we all meet cheerful some day soon..."

Lamb, Charles: **Letter to Charles Ollier**

1826 June 14

1p.

Folder 12

On contributing to a journal: "I have received a most friendly letter from Mr. Colburn & you will be kind enough to give him the enclosed answer... I shall have nothing to send him for this month, but when I feel in a proper mood, he shall have the best my suck'd brains can bring forth."

Lamb, Charles: **Letter to John Bates Dibdin**

1827 Sept. 18

1p.

Folder 13

In part regarding his adopted daughter, Emma Isola, who married Moxon in 1833: "A letter has just come from Mrs. Wms. to say that Emma is so poorly that she must have long holydays here. It has agitated us so much & we shall expect here so hourly, that you shall excuse me to Wordsworth. for not coming up. We are, both, nervous & poorly. Your punctual newspapers are our bit of comfort. . ."

Lamb, Charles: **Letter to John Bates Dibdin**

1827 Sept. 18

1p.

Folder 14

On Dibdin's poetry: "Your verses are very pleasant, and have been adopted into this splended Emmatic constellation where they are not of the least magnitude. She is delighted with their merit and readiness. They are just the thing. The 14th line is found. We advertised it. Hell is cooling for want of company. We shall make it up along with our kitchen fure to roast you into our new House, where I hope you will find us in a few Sundays. We have actually taken it, and a compact thing it will be... My heart sometimes is good, sometimes bad, about it, as the day turns out wet or walky. Emma has just died, choak'd with a Gerund in dum. On opening her we found a participle in MS in the pericardium. The king never dies, which may be the reason that it always reigns here."

Lamb, Charles: **Letter to Samuel Laman Blanchard (Enfield, Eng.)**

1828 Nov. 9

1p.

Folder 15

Thanks for the gift of Blanchard's book Lyric Offerings: "I beg to adorn my acknowledgments for the present of your elegant volume, which I should have esteemed without the bribe of the Name prefixed to it. I have been much pleased with it throughout, but am most taken with the peculiar delicacy of the sonnets. I shall put them up among my poetical treasures."

Lamb, Charles: **Letter to George Dyer**

1830 Dec. 20

3p.

Folder 16

On the Swing Riots in Enfield: "Poor Enfield, that has been so peaceable hitherto, has caught the inflammatory fever; the tokens are upon her; and a great fire was blazing last night in the barns and haystacks of a farmer, about half a mile from us. Where will these things end? There is no doubt if its being the work of some ill-disposed rustic, but how is he to be discovered? They go to work in the dark with strange chemical preparations unknown to our forefathers. There is not even a dark lantern to have a chance of detecting the Guy Fauxes. We are past the iron age, and are got into the fiery age, undream'd of by Ovid. You are lucky in Clifford's Inn, where I think you have few ricks or stacks worth the burning. Pray, keep as little corn by you as you can, for fear of the worst. It was never good times in England, since the poor began to speculate upon their condition. Formerly they jogged on with as little reflection as horses. The whistling plowman went cheek by jowl with his brother that neighed. Now the Biped carries a box of phosphorus in his leather breeches, and in the dead of night that half-illuminated Beast steals his magic potion into a cleft in a barn, and half a county is grinning with new fires. Farmer Greystock said something to the touchy rustic, that he did not relish, and he writes his distaste in flames. What a power to intoxicate his crude brains, just muddlingly awake to perceive that something is wrong in the social system. What a hellish faculty above gunpowder! Now the rich and poor a fairly fitted -- we shall see who can hang, or burn, fastest. It is not always revenge that stimulates these kindlings. There is a love of exerting mischief! Think of a disrespected clod, that was trod into earth, that was nothing, on a sudden by damned Arts, refined into an exterminating angle, devouring the fruits of the earth, and their growers, in a mass of fire. What a new existence! What a temptation above Lucifer's. Would clod be any thing but a clod, if he could resist it? Why, here was a spectacle last night for a whole country, a Bonfire visible to London, alarming her guilty towers, and shaking the monument with an ague fit, all done by a little vial of phosphor in a clown's fob. How he must grin, and shake his empty noodle in clouds! The Vulcanian Epicure. Can we ring the bells backward? Can we unlearn the arts that pretend to civilise, and then burn, the world? There is a march of Science; but who shall beat the drums for its retreat? Who shall persuade the Boor, that phosphor will not ignite? Seven goodly stacks of hay, with corn-barns proportionable, lie smoking ashes and chaff, which man & beast would sputter out and reject like those apples of asphalt and bitumen. The food for the inhabitants of earth will quickly disappear. Hot rolls may say, Fumus Panes, fuit quartern-Loaf, et ingens gloria Apple-pastry-orum. That the good old munching system may last thy time and mine, good un-incendiary George!, is the devout prayer of thine, to the last crust. . ."

Lamb, Charles: **Letter to Edward Moxon (Enfield, Eng.)**

1831 Feb. 22

1p.

Folder 17

Complaint about painters encroaching on the turf of poets: "More poets have started up since your departure. Your friend and mine Wm. Hazlitt is putting to press a collection of Verses chiefly amatory. Some of them pretty enough. How these painters encroach upon our province! There's Hoppner, Shee, Westall, and I don't know who besides, and Tresham &c. It seems a confession that they are not quite at the top of their own art, when they seek to eke out their fame with the assistance of another's; no large tea-dealer sells cheeses, no great silversmith deals in razor straps. It is only your petty chandlers who mix commodities. If Nero had been a great Emperor he would never have played the violincello!"

Lamb, Charles: **Letter to Charles Ollier**

ca.1826

1p.

Folder 18

Lamb requests Ollier to send him copies of the New Monthly Magazine, to which Lamb contributed: "Will you let the fair Bearer have a magazine for me for this month (April) -- and can you let me have for my Chinese friend one of the last month, March, and of this month (in case only that something of his is inserted). Is such a privilege conceded to occasional contributors, of having the numbers they appear in? . . ."

Lamb, Charles: **Letter to Charles Ollier**

ca.1826

1p.

Folder 19

Writing his friend and sometime publisher regarding his contribution of 'Chinese jests,' presumably to the New Monthly Magazine: "You have some Chinese jests left, I think. Here is an introduction to two more . . . If 'tis thought better . . . the last line or two of the introduction may be modified by you. Send me a line if it will do without them. If not so well, I will write to him to send them. . ." The 'Chinese jests' mentioned are not included with the letter."

Lamb, Charles: **Letter to William Hone**

1827 Sept. 2

1p.

Folder 20

Lamb asks that Hone, editor of the Table Book, send him a back number of the journal: "Pray attend to this: & send me the Number before the present: page 225-256, which my newsman has neglect'd. Your book informs every week. I have written here a thing in 2 acts, & sent it to Cov't Gard." Postscript: he offers the following for the Table Book: "Lines for an album / 'Laura, too partial to her friends' ending / Requires from each a pattern of their writing: / a weightier trifle Laura might command / For who to Laura would refuse his -- hand?"

Lamb, Charles: Letter to James Hessey

undated

1p.

Folder 21

Transmitting a text (not enclosed), apparently written by a third party: "The packet is a Tour (for the Lond. Mag.) written by a particular friend of G. Dyer's, who sent him to me, who cannot convince him that I am not the 'Editor.' Will you glance over it, and if it won't do, transmit it to me, or to its author, Mr. Butler, Equitable Assurce. Office?"

Lamb, Charles: Charles Lamb letter to Rev. Daniel Cresswell, with an acrostic on Sarah Thomas and galley proof of a letter published in Cornhill Magazine

1831 spring or summer

O.S.

"My will is good to do what you wish. But (little as it is) in my peculiar position at the present moment I dare not go quite so far. If you will be the one to get into the boat with me and I am once safely landed, I shall with the greatest pleasure increase your temptation to remain with me. Pray therefore let me have another five minutes Chat with you and if possible come to terms. I shall be home all day, and most anxious to see you."

Bound in elegant Sangorski and Sutcliffe binding with calligraphic title page in red and blue

Lamb, Charles: "That handsome is as handsome does," from Last Essays of Elia

1833

1p.

Folder 22

"My will is good to do what you wish. But (little as it is) in my peculiar position at the present moment I dare not go quite so far. If you will be the one to get into the boat with me and I am once safely landed, I shall with the greatest pleasure increase your temptation to remain with me. Pray therefore let me have another five minutes Chat with you and if possible come to terms. I shall be home all day, and most anxious to see you."

Morning Chronicle (London, Eng.). Issue containing first advertisement for Lamb's Poetry for Children

1809 Aug. 8

4p.

Folder 23

Swinburne, Algernon: Letter to Bryan Waller Procter (London, Eng.)

1868 Sept. 1

1p.

Folder 24

Referencing a sonnet by Charles Lamb, a friend of the recipient. "I send you some verses written a day since on reading Charles Lamb's sonnet to you & remembering what you said (in jest) to Mr. Bayard Taylor and myself the other day about your poetry being now less well known than it had been. My tribute is less worth having, but not less sincere; so perhaps you will take it & excuse it -- as what it is, an impromptu."

Talfourd, Thomas Noon: Letter to Edward Moxon

1848 Nov. 25

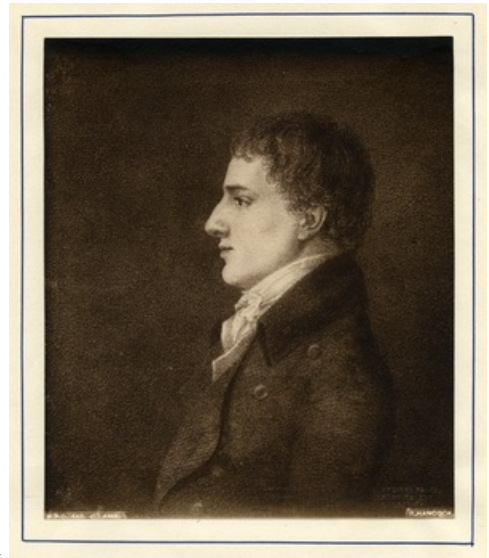
1p.

Folder 25

Glad for the copies of Lamb.

Portraits and miscellaneous

Folder 26

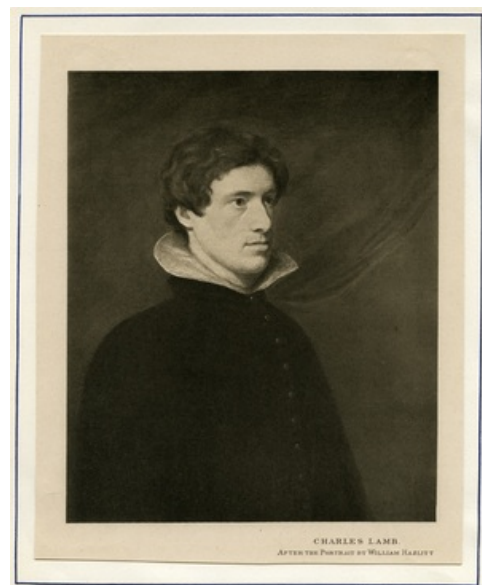


Hancock, Robert: Print of Charles Lamb after the portrait by Robert Hancock
ca.1900

Hazlitt, William: Steel engraving of Charles Lamb by Edward Smith after the portrait by William Hazlitt



ca.1850



Hazlitt, William: Print of Charles Lamb after a portrait by William Hazlitt
ca.1890



Weekes, H.: Engraving of Charles Lamb by A. Collas after H. Weekes
ca.1860



Maclise, Daniel: Portrait of Charles Lamb seated at desk
ca.1838

Proof on Japan paper

Folder 27

Proof on Japan paper, one of a series of portraits originally published in Fraser's Magazine, 1830-1838, under the title 'A Gallery of Illustrious Literary Characters.' Likely a later print.

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

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Subjects

Poets--Great Britain--19th century

Swing Riots, England, 1830-1831

Contributors

Lamb, Charles, 1775-1834 **[main entry]**

Allsop, Thomas, 1795-1880

Cornwall, Barry, 1787-1874

Dibdin, John Bates

Dyer, George, 1755-1841

Hone, William, 1780-1842

Moxon, Edward, 1755-1841

Ollier, Charles

Southey, Robert, 1774-1843

Swinburne, Algernon Charles, 1837-1909

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