

From Dawsey Adams, Guernsey, Channel Islands, to Juliet

Miss Juliet Ashton
81 Oakley Street
Chelsea
London SW3

12th January 1946

Dear Miss Ashton,

My name is Dawsey Adams, and I live on my farm in St Martin's Parish, Guernsey. I know of you because I have an old book that once belonged to you – *The Selected Essays of Elia*, by an author whose name in real life was Charles Lamb. Your name and address were written inside the front cover.

I will speak plain – I love Charles Lamb. My own book says *Selected*, so I wondered if that meant he had written other things to choose from? These are the pieces I want to read, and though the Germans are gone now, there aren't any bookshops left in Guernsey.

I want to ask a kindness of you. Could you send me the name and address of a bookshop in London? I would like to order more of Charles Lamb's writings by post. I would also like to ask if anyone has ever written his life story, and if they have, could a copy be found for me? For all his bright and turning mind, I think Mr Lamb must have had a great sadness in his life.

Charles Lamb made me laugh during the German Occupation, especially when he wrote about the roast pig. The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society came into being because of a roast pig we had to keep secret from the German soldiers, so I feel a kinship to Mr Lamb.

I am sorry to bother you, but I would be sorrier still not to know about him, as his writings have made me his friend.

Hoping not to trouble you,

Dawsey Adams

P.S. My friend Mrs Maugery bought a pamphlet that once belonged to you, too. It is called *Was There a Burning Bush? A Defence of Moses and the Ten Commandments*. She liked your margin note, 'Word of God or crowd control???' Did you ever decide which?

From Juliet to Dawsey

Mr Dawsey Adams
Les Vaux Lavens
La Bouvée
St Martin's, Guernsey

15th January, 1946

Dear Mr Adams,

I no longer live in Oakley Street, but I'm so glad that your letter found me and that my book found you. It was a sad wrench to part with the *Selected Essays of Elia*. I had two copies and a dire need of shelf-room, but I felt like a traitor selling it. You have soothed my conscience.

I wonder how the book got to Guernsey? Perhaps there is some secret sort of homing instinct in books that brings them to their perfect readers. How delightful if that were true.

Because there is nothing I would rather do than rummage through bookshops. I went at once to Hastings & Sons upon receiving your letter. I have gone to them for years, always finding the one book I wanted – and then three more I hadn't known I wanted. I told Mr Hastings you would like a good, clean copy (and not a rare edition) of *More Essays of Elia*. He will send it to you by separate post (invoice enclosed) and was delighted to know you are also a lover of Charles Lamb. He said the best biography of Lamb was by E. V. Lucas, and he would hunt out a copy for you, though it may take a little while.

In the meantime, will you accept this small gift from me? It is his *Selected Letters*. I think it will tell you more about him than any biography ever could. E. V. Lucas sounds too stately to include my favourite passage from Lamb: 'Buz, buz, buz, bum, bum, bum, wheeze, wheeze, wheeze, fen, fen, fen, tink, tink, tink, cr'annch! I shall certainly come to be condemned at last. I have been drinking too much for two days running. I find my moral sense in the last stage of a consumption and my religion getting faint.' You'll find that in the *Letters* (it's on page 244). They were the first Lamb I ever read, and I'm ashamed to say I only bought the book because I'd read elsewhere that a man named Lamb had visited his friend Leigh Hunt, in prison for libelling the Prince of Wales.

While there, Lamb helped Hunt paint the ceiling of his cell sky blue with white clouds. Next they painted a rose trellis on one wall. Then, I further discovered, Lamb offered money to help Hunt's family – though he himself was as poor as a man could be. Lamb also taught Hunt's youngest daughter to say the Lord's Prayer backwards. You naturally want to learn everything you can about a man like that.

That's what I love about reading: one tiny thing will interest you in a book, and that tiny thing will lead you on to another book, and another bit there will lead you on to a third book. It's geometrically progressive – all with no end in sight, and for no other reason than sheer enjoyment.

The red stain on the cover that looks like blood – is blood. I was careless with my paper knife. The enclosed postcard is a reproduction of a painting of Lamb by his friend William Hazlitt.

If you have time to correspond with me, could you answer several questions? Three, in fact. Why did a roast-pig dinner have to be kept a secret? How could a pig cause you to begin a literary society? And, most pressing of all, what is a potato peel pie – and why is it included in your society's name?

I am renting a flat in Chelsea, 23 Glebe Place, London SW3. My Oakley Street flat was bombed in 1945 and I still miss it. Oakley Street was wonderful – I could see the Thames out of three of my windows. I know that I am fortunate to have any place at all to live

in London, but I much prefer whining to counting my blessings. I am glad you thought of me to do your *Elia* hunting.

Yours sincerely,

Juliet Ashton

P.S. I never could make up my mind about Moses – it still bothers me.

From Juliet to Sidney

18th January 1946

Dear Sidney,

This isn't a letter: it's an apology. Please forgive my moaning about the teas and luncheons you set up for *Izzy*. Did I call you a tyrant? I take it all back – I love Stephens & Stark for sending me out of London.

Bath is a glorious town: lovely crescents of white, upstanding houses instead of London's black, gloomy buildings or – worse still – piles of rubble that were once buildings. It is bliss to breathe in clean, fresh air with no coal smoke and no dust. The weather is cold, but it isn't London's dank chill. Even the people on the street look different – upstanding, like their houses, not grey and hunched like Londoners.

Susan said the guests at Abbot's book tea enjoyed themselves immensely – and I know I did. I was able to unstick my tongue from the roof of my mouth after the first two minutes and began to have quite a good time.

Susan and I are off tomorrow for bookshops in Colchester, Norwich, King's Lynn, Bradford and Leeds.

Love and thanks,

Juliet