

The Expedition of Humphry Clinker: The Last of the Picaresque Novels of Tobias Smollett,

The Expedition of Humphry Clinker



by
Tobias Smollett

The Expedition of Humphry Clinker by Tobias Smollett. The Expedition of Humphry Clinker was the last of the picaresque novels of Tobias Smollett, and is considered by many to be his best and funniest work. Published in London on 17 June 1771 (just three months before Smollett's death), it is an epistolary novel, presented in the form of letters written by six characters: Matthew Bramble, a Welsh Squire; his sister Tabitha; their niece and nephew, Jeremy and Lydia Melford; Tabitha's maid Winifred Jenkins and Lydia's suitor, Wilson. Much of the comedy arises from differences in the descriptions of the same events by the participants. Attributions of motives and descriptions of behaviour show wild variation and reveal much about the character of the teller. The setting, amidst the high-society spa towns and seaside resorts of the 18th century, provides his characters with many opportunities for satirical observations on English life and manners. The author's travels in Scotland, France and Italy helped provide inspiration for the plot. Matthew Bramble, his family and servants are traveling through England and Scotland. Although the primary motivation for the expedition is to restore the health of the gouty Matthew Bramble, each member of the family uses the excursion to achieve their ends. Leaving from Bramble's estate, Brambleton Hall, in the south-western corner of England, the family passes through many cities, making extended or significant stops at Gloucester, Bath, London, Harrogate, Scarborough and Edinburgh. The splenetic patriarch, Matthew Bramble, visits various natural spas to alleviate his health problems and ; he corresponds primarily with his physician Dr. Lewis. Through his letters and those of Jeremy, it is revealed that Bramble is misanthropic and something of a hypochondriac. Despite his frequent complaints, he is generally reasonable and

extremely charitable to the people he meets on his travels as well as to his servants and wards back at home. His letters introduce and ridicule significant eighteenth century concerns such as medicine, the growth of urban life, class, the growth of periodical press and the public sphere. His growing disillusion at the changing moral and social landscape of England, embodies his traditionalist perspective and reveals the absurdities of contemporary culture. His sister, Tabitha Bramble, is a foolish and cantankerous spinster who uses the expedition as an excuse to search for a husband. Through her correspondence with Mrs. Gwyllim, the house-keeper at Brambleton Hall, Tabitha reveals her selfishness and lack of generosity towards servants and the impoverished. Her social pretensions are rendered all the more comical by her frequent misunderstandings, misuse of common idioms and atrocious spelling.

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