

INTRODUCTION

BOOKS of selections from Walpole's letters show that his letters to Montagu are of more general interest than are those written to any other correspondent. This is due partly, no doubt, to their providing the key, as Saintsbury put it, to 'society';¹ it is due, also, to their gaiety. Richard West called Walpole's youthful style *allegro*, and that applies to these letters even when Walpole is most exasperated with Montagu, for Montagu was 'a good audience'; he stimulated Walpole to do his best, even when Montagu nodded off during the performance. It is illuminating to contrast Walpole's letters in this correspondence with those of the correspondence which followed it, the one with Lady Ossory. The tone and content of each are similar, the great figures of politics and society march across the paper, but in the later correspondence they do so more self-consciously; posterity has moved in from the next room and is sitting in a nearby chair.

Each correspondence, it is now clear, offers its own peculiar problems to the editor. The most difficult problem in the Montagu correspondence is to understand its private allusions. They include standing jokes which began at Eton and which multiplied during Montagu's London sojourn in the 'forties when he was, greatly to our surprise, a Member of Parliament. He and Walpole invented words and phrases: 'prance-aboutable,' 'touch a card,' 'greenth,' 'blueth,' 'lilac-hood.' These are immediately clear, but there are others which are not: 'Cudom,' for example, which means the Montagu family, and there is one paragraph in Montagu's letter of 30 Dec. 1765 (ii. 190) which even Walpole could make nothing of (ii. 193). This sort of thing has always been common among schoolboys with humorous minds and bookish tastes, and Montagu and Walpole retained something of the juvenile to the end of their days. Furthermore, their reading was wide and varied. Montagu surprises us with allusions to the

1. George Saintsbury, *The Peace of the Augustans*, 1916, p. 230.