

NAXOS
AudioBooks

Montaigne • Swift • Carlyle • Addison • Johnson

Favourite Essays

Read by **Neville Jason**

**NON-
FICTION**



NA493712D

	Michel de Montaigne (1553–1592)	
1	Of Idleness	3:50
2	Of Slow Speech	6:35
3	That We Should Not Judge of Our Happiness until After Our Death	8:00
	Francis Bacon (1561–1626)	
4	Of Truth	6:26
5	Of Riches	8:37
6	Of Wisdom	3:37
	Jonathan Swift (1667–1745)	
7	A Modest Proposal	8:20
8	– I have already computed the charge...	8:19
9	– Many other advantages might be enumerated...	7:01
	Joseph Addison (1672–1719)	
10	The Tombs in Westminster Abbey	8:43

	Richard Steele (1672–1729)	
11	– It is an inexpressible pleasure...	7:36
12	– The day of people of fashion...	5:33
	Samuel Johnson (1709–1784)	
13	Solitude not eligible	6:13
14	– Others consider solitude as the parent of philosophy...	5:37
15	Good Humour	6:02
16	– There are many whose vanity...	4:21
	Oliver Goldsmith (1730–1774)	
17	On National Prejudices	4:51
18	– Among all the famous sayings...	4:02
	David Hume (1711–1776)	
19	Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature	7:24
20	– It is also usual to compare one man with another...	7:45
	Charles Lamb (1775–1834)	
21	Dream Children – A Reverie	6:22
22	– Here John slyly deposited...	5:23

	Charles Lamb (1775–1834)	
23	Old China	8:05
24	– You are too proud to see a play anywhere...	7:32
	William Hazlitt (1778–1830)	
25	On Going a Journey	6:56
26	– Now I never quarrel with myself...	7:57
27	– One may take one's choice...	8:20
28	– To return to the question I have quitted...	5:53
	Leigh Hunt (1784–1859)	
29	A 'Now'	6:03
30	– Now sounds in general are dull...	6:19
	Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822)	
31	On Life	6:59
32	– What follows from the admission?	6:34
	Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881)	
33	Midas	6:56

	Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881)	
34	Midas (cont.): Why dwell on this aspect of the matter?	8:44
	William Makepeace Thackeray (1811–1863)	
35	Ogres	7:30
36	– Yes; they were conquered in the end...	7:03
37	– I say we all of us know ogres.	7:34
	Charles Dickens (1812–1870)	
38	The First of May	7:45
39	– The romance of spring...	6:46
40	– Granted. We are ready to acknowledge...	7:07
	John Ruskin (1819–1900)	
41	The Extension of the Railways in the Lake District	6:09
42	– The arguments in favour of the new railway...	8:44
	G.K. Chesterton (1874–1936)	
43	On Lying in Bed	4:49
44	– The tone now commonly taken...	4:46

Total time: 4:55:35

Montaigne • Swift • Carlyle • Addison • Johnson

Favourite Essays

An Anthology

Those fortunate enough to have had a classical education will know that the word 'anthology' comes from the Greek and means literally a collection of flowers – a bouquet. So here is a bouquet plucked from the garden of literary blooms first planted in the 16th century by Michel de Montaigne.

Like any bouquet, this one does not include every available horticultural specimen (the garden is a large one) and it has no criterion of choice other than the fancy of the gardener and his attempt to include some of the more famous and popular specimens. I offer my sincere apologies to anyone whose favourite essay does not appear here, and to the shades of any of the great authors whose work has not been included.

It may seem strange that a collection

of essays by English authors begins with those of a Frenchman, but without this particular Frenchman there would be no such thing as an 'essay' because Montaigne is the father, the inventor, the 'onlie begetter' of this particular literary form, and it was he who gave it its name.

When Montaigne decided to retire from public life in 1571 at the age of 38 he was still, by our standards, a relatively young man. But he writes of 'what little remains of his life', as he consecrates it to setting down on paper his thoughts and impressions. His innate modesty and the knowledge that what he was doing was highly personal and informal led to his naming his writings 'essais', or trials.

The 'essay' is now so familiar to us from school, university or newspapers that it requires some mental adjustment

on our part to see it as a new and significant departure from the accepted literary forms that existed before. It has been observed that the essay, like the lyric, is the expression of an individualism that first awoke in Western Europe at the end of the Middle Ages. Drama, oratory, epic, narrative and moral poetry stretch back to the Greeks and beyond, but with Montaigne's attempts to express his thoughts, opinions and observations in a manner so deeply personal as to be autobiographical, a new form of literary expression was born.

Maurice Hewlett wrote, 'If one had to define an Essay it would be as the written, after-dinner monologue of a well-read, well-satisfied man of, at least, five and forty. Years don't matter: the spirit of years matters very much. You must be mature enough to pontificate, and wise enough to do it tactfully...' He might have added 'wittily', because humour appears as a very important ingredient of the essay, whether it is used by the writer to make a point or simply to entertain. The first instance of humour in this collection may be found in Swift's *A Modest Proposal*. Here it is the

scorching humour of the satirist using his wit to arouse horror and disgust in the reader over the poverty and starvation that existed in the author's native Ireland. How different from the 'good humour' recommended by Samuel Johnson, or the cockney humour of Dickens's chimney sweeps, or the light-hearted humour of G.K. Chesterton's witty defence of lying in bed.

The charm of the essay, and part of its novelty when first introduced, is that it can be about anything at all, serious or frivolous. An author may use the medium however he wishes: to make a political or social observation, such as in Ruskin's *The Extension of the Railways in the Lake District* or Goldsmith's *On National Prejudices*; to describe a personal experience, as in Steele's *A Day in London* and Addison's *The Tombs in Westminster Abbey*; or to evoke an atmosphere, as Leigh Hunt does of a freezing cold winter's day, in *A 'Now'*.

By its very nature the form is elastic and deeply personal, and changes its tone according to the personality and style of the writer. The originality of its ideas and

the felicity of the writer's expression can save an essay from being merely topical and ephemeral, and ensure it a place on bookshelves years, decades, even centuries after its author has made his exit from the world. Montaigne's example gave rise to a distinguished and prolific school of followers in his own country and the rest of Europe. On this side of the Channel his influence was powerfully felt; Bacon and Leigh Hunt refer to their debt to Montaigne in their writings, and Addison devoted an essay to him.

From Montaigne, writing in the 1570s, to Chesterton, writing in the 1930s, there is a span of some three and a half centuries, and over time styles, subjects, people and fashions changed enormously. To judge from the examples contained in this anthology, essays on the whole seem to have become progressively lighter in tone and less serious in terms of subject matter during that period.

But perhaps we should remember that Montaigne and Bacon were writing for a very small number of educated readers. By the 18th century, newspapers and periodicals such as Steele and Addison's

Tatler and *Spectator* had become established, and numbers of readers, no longer limited to the scholarly, had increased dramatically.

However, if I am not mistaken, now, at the beginning of the 21st century, a revival of the serious essay seems to be taking place. Among the acres of newsprint on trivial and worthless subjects may be found articles written with a profundity and wit which bears comparison to the work of the notable essayists of the past. A new generation of writers is publishing volumes of essays, the wisdom and intelligence of which are not diminished by being expressed in the less formal English of today. It would seem that the spirit of Montaigne is alive and well, and continuing to inspire those working within the literary form he invented and to which he gave a name.

Notes by Neville Jason



Neville Jason trained at RADA where he was awarded the Diction Prize by Sir John Gielgud. He has worked with the English Stage Co., the Old Vic Company and the RSC as well as in films, TV and musicals. He is frequently heard on radio. For Naxos AudioBooks he has read *War and Peace*, *The Life and Works of Marcel Proust*, *Remembrance of Things Past*, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Once and Future King* and the part of Antonio in *The Tempest*.

Credits

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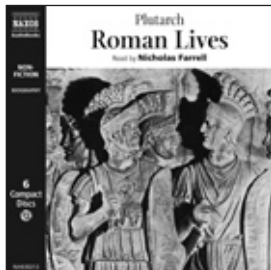
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Favourite Essays

An Anthology

Read by **Neville Jason**

Favourite Essays is a collection of some of the best-known essays in the English language. Part of an essay's charm is that it can be about almost anything, and this selection spans a wide variety of subjects both serious and light-hearted, ranging from Swift's scorching satire on poverty in Ireland to G.K. Chesterton's witty defence of lying in bed. Including pieces by the great exponents of the genre, these essays deserve a place in the library of every lover of literature.



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