‘An Old Member’. Letter to the Editor of The Christian Observer and Advocate. 30 (December 1830): 759-60.

I observe in the Report of the Society for promoting Christian Knowledge for 1829 a plan laid down for the revision of the Society’s publications, and the addition of such new tracts as may be considered expedient. I should be grieved to impede this desirable object by any unnecessary objection; but I beg leave to notice the very first volume which appears on the supplemental list, namely, an Abridgment of De Foe on the Plague in London, with Evelyn on the Great Fire. I am not one of those severe censors who would altogether exclude fictitious narrative from the Society’s Supplemental Catalogue; though, considering the Society’s dignified and religious character, I could have dispensed with Robinson Crusoe and some others. But one principle, I think, ought to be clearly adhered to, namely, not to confound fact and fiction, so that the reader does not know which of the two he is perusing. The volume just mentioned errs in this respect; for it contains De Foe’s fictitious account of the Great Plague, with Evelyn’s sober History of the Great Fire. Robinson Crusoe deceives no one; but De Foe expressly intended his account of the plague to deceive, and to be taken for truth, just as he did his invention of Mrs Veal’s ghost, which he drew up to puff off Drelincourt on Death, to benefit a bookseller who had published that work, but found no sale for it till De Foe’s ghost story pushed it into notoriety. De Foe’s ability in making fiction pass for truth was never perhaps equalled: one of his fabulous histories deceived even Lord Chatham; and his ironical Short Way with the Dissenters was actually thought, both by the Sacheverell party and the Dissenters, to be a genuine Church-and-Tory work, and as such cost him the pillory and imprisonment. But a religious society ought not to encourage literary frauds, or allow its readers to sup full of horrors on a tale, not one page of which – though founded on truth, as is Crusoe – is veracious history. I have not seen the Society’s volume, and will therefore assume that the editor of the Society’s abridgement has apprized the unsuspecting reader that he is to believe Evelyn and disbelieve De Foe; the one writing from facts, the other from his imagination; but even were this so, the juxtaposition of the two, without a hint of the matter in the title-page, is an inadvertence which ought to be noticed and remedied.

An Old Member