

EARLY PERSIAN LITERATURE.<sup>1</sup>

To write a literary history of Persia is to chronicle the thought and development of the land of Iran, from the time of the prophet Zoroaster and the laws of the Medes and Persians down to the latest minstrel in whose ear echoes the soft note of the nightingale's song or on whose lip still lingers the praise of the rose. In short, it is to sweep with rapid glance over a period whose age counts little less than three thousand years, and whose works number hundreds on hundreds, though the names of the authors are sometimes sunk in oblivion, or the author's name is known and his writings have long since perished. The theme cannot fail to be an attractive one, especially when we consider that of the early Asiatic peoples which came into closer touch with the history of ancient Greece and Rome, Persia alone has maintained a real degree of independence, and her present Shah may well boast of sitting on the throne of Cyrus the Great. Lessons are to be learned, moreover, from Persia old and new, and to present the history of that interesting land, from the literary standpoint, is a worthy task, and worthily has Professor Browne accomplished it.

The scope of the work is broad enough, and is indicated in the sub-title "from the Earliest Times until Firdawsī," — for so the author prefers to transliterate the poet's name rather than Firdausi (with *u*), which most scholars favor. But as in the title of Edmund Gosse's interesting volume *From Shakespeare to Pope* one is sometimes a bit disappointed in finding little if anything regarding the two catching names, so in the present volume there may be a moment of disappointment in discovering there is so little about Firdausi, although

there is an abundance about the earlier times that preceded him. But this momentary regret is at once dispelled when we learn that the author has in preparation a succeeding volume, which is to begin with Firdausi and to complete the history of Persian literature in the narrower sense of the term down to our own times. The present work Professor Browne regards practically as the *Prolegomena* of the one to follow; we must join him therefore in so considering it.

As to the aim, which is in keeping with the rest of the series, we can give hearty accord to the author when he states that his purpose is to write the intellectual history of the Persians. It is his wish and desire to trace the movements that have made Persia what it was and is, and the various ways in which the genius of its people manifested itself in religion, philosophy, and science, quite as much as its expression in the domain of literature in the more restricted application of that term. Well has he carried out his design, almost too well some might claim, who are unwilling to see the historical side at times outweigh the literary side. But such critics forget that this is not unnatural in the period covered, where we are dealing with *Prolegomena*.

In extent, arrangement, and disposition of material we may note that over a third of the volume, or practically two of the four books into which the work is divided, is devoted to the earliest history of Iran from ancient days down to the Arab invasion in the seventh century of our era. For this earlier period of Iranian literature Dr. Browne professes himself no specialist, but when he reaches the Arab invasion of Persia

<sup>1</sup> *A Literary History of Persia*, from the Earliest Times until Firdawsī. By EDWARD G. BROWNE, of the University of Cambridge,

England. (Library of Literary History Series.) New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1902.

(seventh century A. D.) we can see at once he is on his own ground. The Muhammadan conquest meant a mighty change for Persia, religiously and politically. In church and state a new faith supplanted the old. Zoroaster gave place to Muhammad, the Avesta to the Quran, and the chanting voice of the Magian priest in the fire temple was drowned by the muezzin call of the Moslem to prayer from the top of the high-domed mosque. The author here goes out of his way to show, as far as he can, that the conversion of the Persians from Zoroastrianism to Islam was less a matter of compulsion and force than is generally supposed. This is unquestionably true in a measure, and it is well to have it brought out; the impartial judge must give due weight in the picture to the claims which this unintentional barrister makes in the pages devoted to the rise of the Crescent of Islam, even though he may feel it is a case of special pleading, or an over-emphasis of the defense in order to offset the extravagant claims made on the other side. In any event the question is ably argued, whatever the decision may be.

Most important in the author's entire treatment of the Arab conquest is the stress he lays upon the influence it exercised on Persian thought and the counter influence of Persian ideas on Arabic literary development. That the Norman conquest was a factor beneficent as it was great in the history of the English race, English letters, and English speech is generally conceded by every one, even though he may have some hesitancy in granting the last point of the three. Professor Browne might perhaps find some suggestive parallels to draw in the matter of his presentation of the Muhammadan conquest of Iran. Almost the entire second third of his book is divided between Arabs and Persians, so that at times the reader might fancy that he had a history of Arabic literature before him, so great is the

attention given to that branch. But one of the things that the author is seeking to demonstrate is how much of what we call Arabic literature really is the work of Persians using the tongue of their conquerors as a medium of expression. This is a matter which is often lost sight of, or not given sufficient consideration; and it becomes quite striking when we learn that nearly a third of the most celebrated contributors to the classical period of Arabic literature were really of Persian extraction. To scholars who may think that Dr. Browne has laid undue weight on the Muhammadan side because of his growing predilection for Arabic studies we may perhaps respond that the Venerable Bede is always included among early English writers, though he wrote almost entirely in Latin. Nor again in tracing the development of the English mind would any one think of disregarding the Latin writings of Bacon and Milton; no, nor during the twelfth, thirteenth, and early fourteenth centuries following the Norman conquest should we discard those British writers who employed French until Chaucer reopened the well of English undefiled.

In following the courses of the different streams of religious and philosophic thought which played a part in developing or changing the national character of Persia, special stress is laid by the author on the various heresies that arose from time to time. The great Manichæan schism which was anathematized alike by Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews is duly recorded; and consideration is given to the less known heresy of Mazdak with all its communistic ideas. Among the great Persian heresiarchs, moreover, there is an opportunity for including "the Veiled Prophet of Kurasan," and the pages devoted to the rising which he headed will be read with interest by all who care for Lalla Rookh.

The fourth book into which the volume is divided treats of the period from

A. D. 850 to A. D. 1000, or from the decline of the caliphate to the accession of Firdausi's great patron, Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna, whose capital was situated in the territory which would now be called Afghanistan. In connection with this period our scholarly guide has chosen to anticipate a part of his second volume, and to devote a chapter to Sufi mysticism. The beginnings of this he thinks he can trace back as far as the Sasanian period or earlier, and he believes that the full development of this idealistic, pantheistic, and theosophic system of thought owes more to Greece and Neo-Platonism than it does to Indian Vedantism and Hindu philosophic pantheism.

For those who have some acquaintance with Hafiz and Omar Khayyam, or have dipped into the Shah Namah, it will be interesting to see how much more information we are gathering about the forerunners of the poet of the great epic. There were brave men before Agamemnon, and neither Chaucer nor Shakespeare was without predecessors, nor was Firdausi unheralded. Scholars of course well know of Rūdāgī and Daqīqī, and will be glad to have more general information made accessible regarding these two poets. Daqīqī, we may remember, was Firdausi's direct predecessor, the herald of the dawn. He had conceived the plan of rendering into epic verse the glories of his ancient race; but he was cruelly slain before he could fully carry out his plan. Some think that the assassin's dagger was used because of the poet's strong leaning toward the old Zoroastrian creed, — too strong to meet with Muhammadan approval. However that may be, a thousand of Daqīqī's verses have been rendered immortal because Firdausi has incorporated them into the Shah Namah. They are the very portion in which Firdausi himself would have had to deal with Zoroaster and the development of fire-worship — a delicate subject to treat in the midst of Moslem believers.

And some have thought there was as much wisdom on Firdausi's part as loyalty to his dead predecessor in adopting this chapter instead of committing himself on the situation.

Another point that is well brought out in various parts of the volume which touch upon the great Persian epic is the dependence of the Shah Namah on the earlier Pahlavi chronicles. Students in the field are thoroughly acquainted with this fact, but Dr. Browne has emphasized still more that Firdausi — so true a Persian at heart — drew directly from the old stock of Iranian traditions when he composed in melodious verse the spirited descriptions of the valorous deeds of his heroes that make up the Book of Kings. Parallels with the use of old British legends by Layamon in his Brut, or of Celtic themes by Geoffrey of Monmouth and Sir Thomas Malory, would not be far to seek.

In the name of Rūdāgī, as mentioned above, we have one of the pioneers of Persian poetry. He lived in the early part of the tenth century of our era, and is said to have written no less than a million and three hundred thousand verses! Most of these have perished, but Professor Paul Horn, of Strassburg, has recently been doing grateful service in restoring some scattered verses and *dissecta membra* of this early poet, by collecting chance quotations preserved in later Persian writers, so that some day we may have an edition of the fragments of this minstrel and know more about his character and life. From what is already known, however, Dr. Browne finds certain striking resemblances between him and a bard that is dimly visible in the old Sasanian days under the name of Barbad or Bahlabad. Regarding the latter he quotes a delightful tale of the king who swore he would slay the man that brought him tidings of the death of his favorite horse. The difficult mission was entrusted to the child of the Muses, and he contrived so skillfully to weave the story into

verse that the king divined the truth, and in anguish of heart himself cried out, "My favorite steed is dead!" This exclamation at once removed the necessity of carrying out the menace, for otherwise it must fall upon his own head.

In conclusion, if we make due allowances for the emphasis given to the Arabic side of literature, as is proper on the premises laid down above, we may rightly regard this work as the

most important that has appeared in English, or elsewhere, in the particular field that it covers and in the way in which it is done. We shall look forward with lively interest to the second volume, as that will treat more fully of Firdausi than does the present, and will deal with all the great lyric, romantic, mystic, and didactic poets that have given Persian literature a high place in the general literature of the world.

*A. V. Williams Jackson.*

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### COÖPERATIVE HISTORICAL WRITING: THE CAMBRIDGE MODERN HISTORY.

THE eager historical activity of the half-century just past has been applied chiefly in two directions: first, in bringing to light and presenting in usable form the documentary material on which, in the last analysis, all history must rest, and then in telling with much detail the story of many small sections cut out of the vast record of human progress. The historical monograph in all dimensions, from the pamphlet to the stately volume, has been the ideal of the modern historian. He has set that ideal over against another earlier one to which he alludes with a fine contempt as the "literary," and has been proud to rank himself with that great company of investigators in natural science to whom also anything savoring of "literature" has been an unpardonable offense. It has been a splendid service on the one side and on the other. The spirit of accuracy, of honesty, and of thoroughness it has engendered has been a contribution of inestimable value to our modern world. Some, indeed, have even fancied that with this change of method the last word in historical as well as in physical science had been spoken, and that we were to go on indefinitely piling up the record of observation and experiment before a world

of men who have long since passed the limit of possible first-hand comprehension of what is offered them.

But now, as was to have been expected, a reaction is beginning. Our world is asking itself, where, after all, is its share in this genial activity, and it is demanding that somehow the meaning of it all shall be made plain to its unprofessional understanding. And here it is that we touch once again the function of literature. Every science must find its art, whereby the crude material in which it works, which it observes and classifies and tries to understand, shall be transmuted into a something finer and more subtle. It is this finer perception, this subtler gift of expression, that makes the artist, and that brings him into closer sympathy with the mass of listeners, seers, or readers, and, so far as the world has gone, nothing but this art will do that. The science of the musician is impotent until the art of the composer finds its way to the heart of the listener. The science of line and color, with all the added lore of harmony, rhythm, and what not, is lost until the incommunicable sense of form and shade that makes the painter compels the wonder and the interest of every one who has