

NEW BOOKS.

TWO HISTORIES OF LITERATURE.*

A rare occasion it is which brings to the reader's hands within a few weeks of each other two histories of literature as typical as these volumes by M. Lanson and Mr. Robertson. It is not too much to say that they are model books; for the French work is a model of all that a history of literature ought to be, and the British work is a model of all that a history of literature ought not to be. Indeed, one may even go a step farther and declare that M. Lanson's history of French literature is a good book of the right kind, and that Mr. Robertson's history of English literature is a bad book of the wrong kind.

To write a satisfactory history of literature is to accomplish a most difficult feat—a feat, indeed, so difficult that the number of those who have accomplished it in any modern language in the past half century may almost be counted upon the fingers of one hand. Taine's great work is inspiring, invigorating, indispensable; but those who respect it the most would hesitate long before calling it wholly satisfactory. Ticknor's solid tomes set forth the story of Spanish literature quite as solidly and far more soberly—perhaps, indeed, too soberly to be stimulating.

The most satisfactory of recent histories of literature are two primers, the marvellous little books into which Mr. Stopford Brooke and Professor Jebb managed somehow to pack not only the salient facts of English literature and Greek literature, but also to get not a little of the essential spirit of English and Greek character. Inasmuch as a national literature at its best is but the expression of the national life, what any history of that literature should do is to make the reader see and understand and feel that life. Dates and facts and anecdotes are needed, of course, but they

are not prime necessities; the one thing needful is such a presentation of literature as will show it alive and living with its own life; such a presentation as will set forth its growth and its development; such a presentation as will arouse in the reader a strong desire to know the literature for himself and as will send him straight from the mere history to the actual books themselves.

It is a work of this kind that M. Lanson has written. His book is worthy of comparison with the very best histories of literature. It has the knowledge, the scholarship, the depth, the insight which we find in Mr. Brooke's little book and in Professor Jebb's; while the larger scale on which his volume is planned has allowed him to make his history far richer and more rounded than theirs could be under the limitations imposed on them. M. Lanson's book is actually a history of French literature from its earliest beginnings to its latest decadents and symbolists; and it is not merely a collection of biographies of authors, as are so many books purporting to be histories of literature. M. Lanson even goes so far as to relegate to a footnote the formal biography of every author whose works he considers and whose influence on the development of French literature he sets forth at length. It is the evolution of literary art in France that M. Lanson has taken for his theme; and he traces this evolution with exact logic, with unflinching freshness, and with contagious interest. The readers feel that M. Lanson is discussing French literature because he loves it, and they see the reasons for his affection. Space fails here to dwell on the details of M. Lanson's scheme or on the excellent mechanical execution of the book. There is an abundance of bibliographical information; the best editions are pointed out as well as the best biographies and the best critical studies. There are also an elaborate and most useful chronological table, an ample index, and a full analytical table of contents.

In marked contrast to a history of literature like Mr. Brooke's, Professor Jebb's, and M. Lanson's, intended to stimulate the student and to help him to enjoy the writings of great authors,

* *Histoire de la Littérature Française*. Par Gustave Lanson, Professeur de rhétorique au Lycée Louis-le-Grand, Docteur ès lettres. Paris: Librairie Hachette; New York: Drysen & Pfeiffer.

A History of English Literature for Secondary Schools. By J. Logie Robertson, M.A., First English Master Edinburgh Ladies' College. Edinburgh: Blackwood; New York: Harpers.

and to see for himself how the literary art grew to maturity, is a book written "to meet the requirements" of classes in British schools "in their preparation for the Leaving Certificate, the University Local, and other Public Examinations." This is what Mr. Logie Robertson's *History of English Literature* is. It is a mere cram-book, intended to help a student to memorize a lot of names and titles and dates, so that he can pass an examination without really knowing anything about the subject. So far from arousing any interest in books, so far from inciting a student to any reading for himself, a volume of this kind tends to deaden all liking for literature. If a schoolboy can be kept long enough over work of this sort, he will come to hate the sight of a book. He may pick up a few second-hand opinions about certain authors, but he will not be helped to any grasp of the principles of literary art.

Not only is Mr. Logie Robertson's book wholly mistaken in its scheme, it is also grossly deficient in its execution. It is clumsy and muddled in its arrangement; it lacks proportion; and it abounds in blunders of omission and of commission. The account of Shakespeare exhibits a total lack of understanding of Shakespeare's position or of his merits. The account of Fielding suggests a doubt whether Mr. Robertson has ever read *Tom Jones*, so beside the mark is his criticism. He gives a page to Aytoun and only four lines to Clough. He gives three lines to Rossetti and five to Mr. Robert Buchanan! He gives three lines to the poetry of Mr. Theodore Watts, and he does not give the ballads of Mr. Rudyard Kipling a single line. He gives more than two pages to Lord Beaconsfield, and less than six lines to Miss Austen. In nothing is Mr. Robertson's incompetence revealed more clearly than in his treatment of American authors. He discusses Charles Reade in half a page, and he dismisses Nathaniel Hawthorne in six lines,—the same number he gives to John Galt. He grants six lines also to Mr. George Saintsbury, and the same to Mr. Edmund Gosse, both working men of letters of to-day, while four lines is all he can spare for Thoreau, and eight all he can devote to Poe. The evil effects of subordinating all education to a system of examinations have often been dwelt on, and nowhere to-day are those bad results

more obvious than in Great Britain. That such a history of English literature as Mr. Robinson's should be written is one of the worst of them.

Brander Matthews.

THE AMERICAN COMMONWEALTH.*

We may now consider that we have Mr. Bryce's great work before us in its permanent form. From first to last it embodies the results of about twenty-five years of close observation and thorough study. Taken as a whole, it may be said to include at once a critical analysis, a descriptive view, and a philosophical estimate of American political and social institutions for the period extending from the close of the great Civil War to the opening of the twentieth century. It must always remain as the one great contemporaneous recital and interpretation of the essential facts about the working of our constitutional system and about the characteristics of our civilisation. Other works deal ably and brilliantly with certain themes and phases. The future historian may endeavour, from his different time-point, to produce a work covering this same field and period; but there can be no disavowal of Mr. Bryce's place and tenure.

The American Commonwealth may indeed claim distinction on a further ground. So far as we are aware there exists for no other country a similarly complete and authoritative summing up of the national life and character. An American like Mr. John Fiske, if he were disposed to bestow the necessary time and labour, might prepare a book of similar scope upon British institutions. Such an observer as the late Professor Émile de Laveleye, of Belgium, might have given us a work of comparable method and range upon the contemporaneous political and social institutions that belong to the French people. But in point of fact, such works—complete, authoritative, impartial, and objective, while sufficiently sympathetic—have not been produced.

Mr. Bryce's first edition of *The American Commonwealth* appeared in 1888. It is evidence of the sane judgments and

* *The American Commonwealth*. By James Bryce, M.P. Third edition, completely revised throughout, with additional chapters. 2 vols., 8vo. New York: Macmillan & Co. \$4.00.