

Goldwin Smith

Goldwin Smith, His Life and Opinions. To which is appended "U. S. Notes." By his Literary Executor, Arnold Haultain. New York: Duffield & Company. \$4.50.

THAT Goldwin Smith, who, as he once wrote me, remembered hearing the bells toll to announce the death of George IV, should have died less than five years ago, may come as a surprise to those who recall that in the early fifties of the last century he was already a distinguished figure in England. Thenceforward for ten years or more there was every likelihood that he would reach the top in politics, or in history, or in both. But in 1868, at the age of forty-five, he left England, migrated to the United States, and after serving as professor at Cornell University, settled at Toronto in 1871. There he died in 1910. So his life was divided into two nearly equal parts—the English and the American—and this division, coupled with his longevity, conditioned what he was and what he did.

At first it seems as if the Englishman was transformed in becoming an American; but if we look deeper we find that Goldwin Smith remained very much the same: the specific English side of him, like the American side, was a phase, an accident; Goldwin Smith was the essence, and that essence would have been unchanged had he migrated to Rome or Moscow or Calcutta, instead of to Canada.

What was the essence? Whatever went to make up a man whose controlling and insatiable interest led him to observe with his own eyes this business of living in which we are all employed for a longer or shorter term. He took nothing for granted, nothing on hearsay. He had many acquaintances, but few intimates. In him the intellectual predominated. The ordinary spectator of life either turns cynic or becomes indifferent; or, if his emotions prevail, he may end as a sentimentalist. In Goldwin Smith, however, reason was so impassioned that it took the place, or was the vehicle, of emotion. He was in love with ideas, and having a highly developed moral sense he made it his mission to spread broadcast those ideas which he had analyzed, tried, and accepted.

Next to his passion for seeing the cosmos as it is, was Goldwin Smith's desire to mix actively in the great affairs of the world; but partly circumstances and partly the more elusive shaping by temperament doomed him to remain a spectator all his life. While he inspired other men to action, he lacked the quality which would have persuaded them to elect him to a position where he could not only inspire but apply. Had he gone into Parliament at thirty-five or forty he might have won the highest political distinction; that he did not go suggests that the fault lay not only in the obtuseness of constituencies but in himself. This we may say without undervaluing his service on several important commissions.

Although he was much younger than Disraeli, Gladstone, Bright, and the other party chiefs of their generation, Goldwin Smith entered the lists with them outside of Westminster, and so long as he stayed in England his opinions on the questions of the day, or on general economic, social, and political principles, were quoted along with theirs. On coming to America he passed suddenly from an all-world to a parochial standard. He still followed with intense interest the currents of British and European life; but he devoted his energy to educating the Canadians in what he regarded as the true course in their development, and he studied the United States with all the more zest because he believed that Canada must inevit-

ably, and before long, become of her own choice a member of the American republic.

To propagate his teaching he established a weekly journal, into which during many years he poured not only his political views but himself. Neither before nor since has American journalism seen intellectual ability comparable to his engaged in its service. I cannot help feeling that his extraordinary talents were largely wasted on the *Week* and the *Bystander*—papers which were little read in British lands outside of Canada, and scarcely penetrated beyond the exchange editors' dens in New York and Boston. And yet who can say? A single grain of wheat may be the ancestor of an acre of ripened sheaves. Goldwin Smith's powerful insistence on the common interests and mission of the Anglo-Saxon race—the race which, above all others, has spread the ideal of liberty throughout the world—cannot fail to have influenced some of those who to-day are combating the twin ideals of the Teutonic race—vandal cruelty under the guise of war, and feudal despotism.

The danger of journalism for Goldwin Smith was that it tended to dissipate his fire. Whatever his target, he threw a large shell. He ran the risk of being so much occupied with the burning issues of the week that he might never concentrate his power on a single commanding work. No one can deny that he was a great publicist, in the same sense that Milton and Swift, Defoe and Tom Paine were great publicists; but, after all, except among a few scholars who now read their pamphlets, Milton, Swift and Defoe live on by reason of their other works. So, happily, before his vigor was abated by age, Goldwin Smith produced one indisputably commanding work, "The United Kingdom." The sub-title, "A Political History," misleads; for other elements besides the political are woven into his narrative.

Goldwin Smith belongs among the highest class of historians—that of the interpreters. There are many toilers in the field of history, who perform work of many different kinds and of various values. In architecture nobody confounds the laborers who dig the cellar or carry up the bricks and mortar with the architect who planned the building. But among historical workers for some fifty years past there has been such a misunderstanding of what is high and what low that the shovelers and hodmen have pushed themselves to the top and declared that they alone are historians. "Original research" has been worshiped as an idol, whereas it is only a servant. Original research is to history what excavation is to antique sculpture; yet no one would assume that the excavator who unearthed the Venus de Milo ought to rank above the sculptor who designed that statue. That fallacy, however, has long prevailed in Germany and among the German-made historical workers in America. So history has been written with the shovel instead of with the pen, and by the process of dumping instead of by selection. In England and France the saner ideal of history was never quite lost, and even during this period of glorifying the digger above the artist, England produced two great historians, John Morley and Goldwin Smith.

"The United Kingdom" has continuity, perspective, insight, logic. It is the interpretation by a thoroughly equipped interpreter of the development of the English nation. It evolves from within—which is a very different thing from the mere roster of external events in their chronological order. It gives what every history worthy of the name must give, both the fact and the motive behind the fact. It is alive.

Although Goldwin Smith necessarily takes long views, in generalizing he seldom becomes abstract. He cites freely the concrete cases from which he draws his inferences or conclusions. Not less remarkable than his power to de-

scribe an episode or to analyze a policy in a page or two is his skill in portraiture. He fills his two volumes with scores of portraits of historical personages—portraits which are as unmistakable as a gallery of Van Dycks. You may prefer Stubbs or Froude or Gardiner as a painter of Henry VIII or of Elizabeth, of James I or of Cromwell, but you cannot ignore Goldwin Smith; indeed, once seen, you can hardly forget his canvases.

I say nothing about his style as a writer, except that at its best it was better than that of any other historian writing in English during the last half century. He indulges in no purple patches, but he has jewel adjectives which, each in the place where he sets it, colors and qualifies the context.

Goldwin Smith's "United Kingdom" has not yet received due recognition here; partly because it was published at a time when the reign of the shovelers and hodmen was supreme, and partly because it abounds in ideas. Historical students felt almost defrauded, if not affronted, when they went to a book expecting to find information only and were deluged with ideas. Ideas require an exercise of the mind, whereas information, facts, can be accumulated without thinking, as a woman knits. But within twenty years a change is observable. The exact relation of excavators to historians is being more generally perceived. "Not that we respect the shovelers and hodmen less, but the architect, the artist, more," is the coming attitude. And, of course, when we cease to magnify the letter above the spirit, we shall welcome ideas. The future, therefore, for Goldwin Smith's historical masterpiece seems bright. Those who appreciate the "History" will be grateful that he has left it—a splendid star—instead of only the recollection of a shower of meteors, behind him.

WILLIAM ROSCOE THAYER.

On Behalf of a Book of Poems

Sonnets of a Portrait Painter, by Arthur Davison Ficke.
New York: Mitchell Kennerley. \$1.00 net.

WHEN a poet writes a sonnet-sequence he is likely to be suspected, by readers of "modernist" tendencies, of being too old-fashioned for their tastes. That, I fancy, is what has happened in the case of Arthur Davison Ficke's "Sonnets of a Portrait Painter." Revealing on casual examination no challenge to poetic conventions, no daring disregard of the formalities of rhyme and meter, being in fact as they are alleged to be on the cover, sonnets, they have been turned over to people who like the exquisite glacé sweetness of poetic pastries.

Such readers exist; but what are they to make of such a thing as this, coming to them in the guise of their favorite delicacy:

It needs no maxims drawn from Socrates
To tell me this is madness in my blood.
Nor does what wisdom I have learned from these
Serve to abate my most unreasoned mood.
What would I of you? What gift could you bring,
That to await you in the common street
Sets all my secret ecstasy a-wing
Into wild regions of sublime retreat?
And if you come, you will speak common words,
Smiling as quite ten thousand others smile—
And I, poor fool, shall thrill with ghostly chords,
And with a dream my sober sense beguile.
And yet, being mad, I am not mad alone:
Alight you come! . . . That folly dwarfs my own.

They will find here, in the first few lines at least, a heaviness of utterance, as though the poet were struggling with the expression of a thought; and as the thought gains wings and lifts free from its impediments, it is revealed as ironic, a piece of self-analysis touched with sober mockery. It is not wonderful and lulling. It is true—and disturbing. It has the uncomfortable intimacy and sincerity of a page from a modern novel.

And if they will read on—which such readers are not likely to do—they will find that this is not a collection of sonnets at all, but a sonnet-sequence; instead of a rose-garden, a house, with perhaps a lovely view from the bay-window, but with a cellar where the beer is kept; rooms in which people quarrel and make love or sit alone at night and think, and a garret in which a desperate man might hang himself. They will not find a patchwork of lovely dreams. They will find, to their chagrin, a serious attempt to express the quality of life, a faithful transcript, by turns harsh and eloquent, of a romantic soul in rebellion against its romanticism; the record of a mind prone to build and relentless to shatter its illusions; the moods, exalted, bitter or reflective, of a man caught in the trammels of a passion which he cannot quite accept nor quite reject; the twistings and turnings of a proud, mistrustful, troubled mind, in the labyrinths of emotion; in short, the story, true, representative and poignant, of an intelligent man in love.

Beauty, indeed, they will not fail to find, in some passages of melting sweetness and others of grave lyric splendor; but neither these, nor the occasional illusions to classical geography which have frightened the hasty modernist reader away, will win over these old-fashioned lovers of beauty. They will be the more grieved that a poet who can put Beatrice into a beautiful line, who has an obvious command of all the properties of romanticism, should use them in such an alien way and with such an unhallowed effect.

What, if they persist so far toward the end of this perturbing story, are they to say of this sonnet, in which the voice is the voice of romance but the meaning is the meaning of reality:

I needs must know that in the days to come
No child that from our Summer sprang shall be
To give our voices when the lips are dumb
That lingering breath of immortality.
Nay, all our longing compassed not such hope,
Nor did we, in our flame-shot passagings,
Push the horizon of our visions' scope
To regions of these far entangled things.
I knew not such desire. But now I know.
O perfect body! O wild soul a-flower!
We, wholly kindled by life's whitest glow,
Turned barren from our life-commanding hour . . .
Now while I dream, sweetness of that desire
Lies on my heart like veils of parching fire . . .

No, such readers will not find this draught seasoned to their taste; it has too much of the flavor of mortal life in it. So it comes back into the hands of the modernists. Will they drink it? Not without a protest, for the beaker has quaint romantic decorations—"Paestum" . . . "the halls of Amber" . . . "the Cornish sea" . . . Let me, however, commend it to them, by pointing out that there is more than one kind of modernism, modernism of form and modernism of content.

Attention is being generously given to the effort to break up the old forms of verse and create new forms, the experiments of Mr. Ezra Pound and the Blast school being