

English Literature To-Day

By Edward Dowden

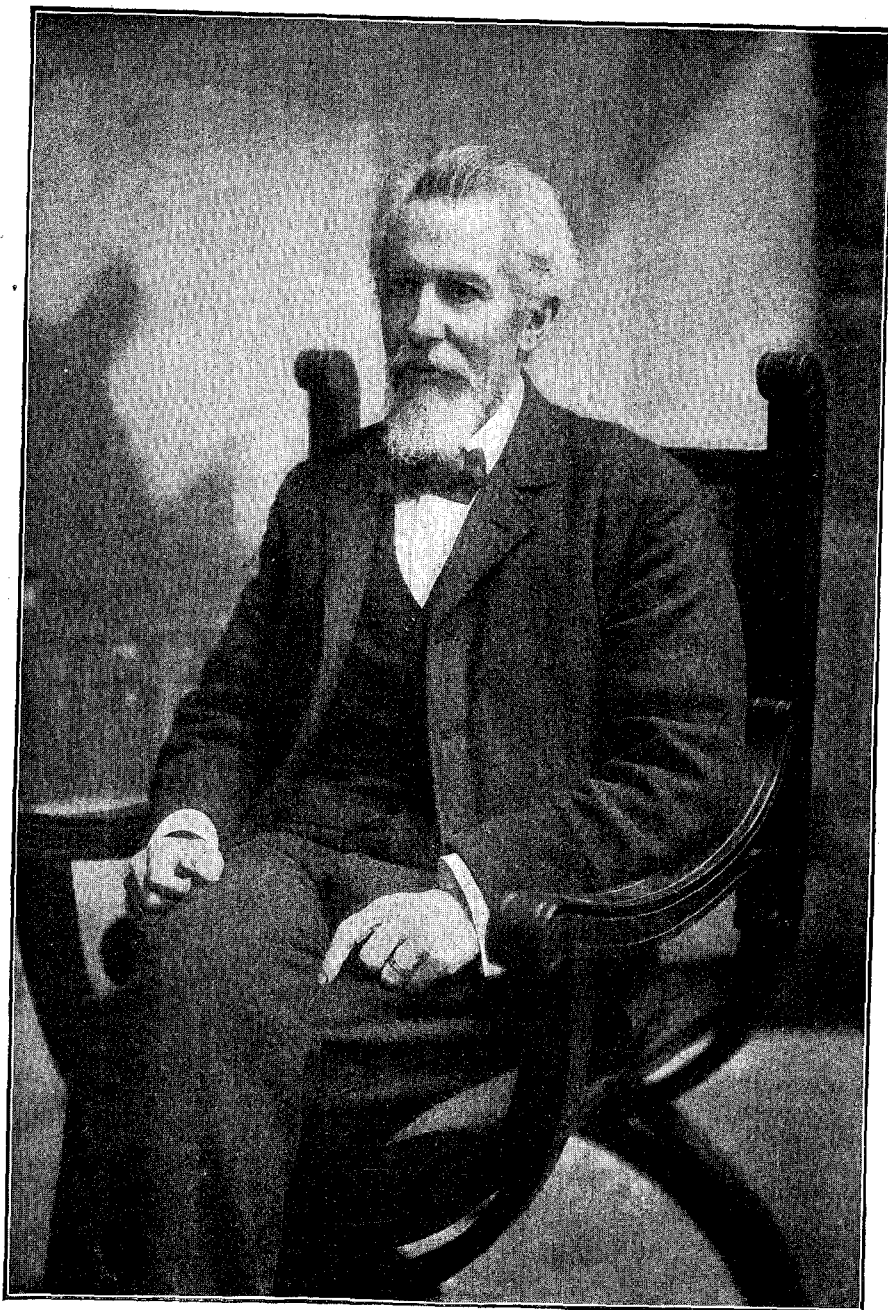
Author of "Puritan and Anglican," "New Studies in Literature," "Robert Southey," etc.

"IT has been so long the practice to represent literature as declining, that every renewal of this complaint now comes with diminished influence. The public has been so often excited by a false alarm, that at present the nearer we approach the threatened period of decay, the more our security increases." So Goldsmith, in 1759, in his first published work, "An Inquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning," began a desponding piece of criticism, in which the growth of criticism itself is represented as the surest symptom of literary decline. Yet, at that moment, seeds were germinating, buds were unfolding, for which Goldsmith had no regard. Within a decade "Tristram Shandy" was complete, and the Romantic movement had given to the world in Percy's "Reliques" and the pseudo-Ossian and Chatterton's early writings more than a vague promise of fruitage. At the present day we are sensible of our recent losses, of the withdrawal of important forces, the disappearance of eminent lights—Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Ruskin, Newman, Martineau. The time seems chill and bare; but in our imagination do we not set the accumulated possessions, the heaped-up glory, of a whole generation against the barrenness of a single year? As the nineteenth century was seen to approach its close, we heard now and again of decadence and decadents. They seemed the appropriate product of a waning century. Apparently they were the inventors of some new fashion, or the revivers of some fashion that was old, of weary sensuality or languid pessimism, atoning for a lack of ideas by paradox prepense and a preternatural vivacity in the turning of phrases. The so-called decadents were, like the conies of Scripture, "a feeble folk," and if they did not perish with the dying century, they seem to have scampered into their burrows. They leave us with a disturbing fear that the Tyrtæan patriotism of their successors may be but a newer mode.

It would be idle to deny the fact that

great personalities are rare in contemporary literature. To set over against our poverty in names of the first importance, we may safely assert that the general standard of good work in many departments is higher than it was fifty years ago, and that co-operative work of a scholarly kind—the building of coral islands by an industrious population—was never more diligently pursued or more wisely directed. Goldsmith viewed the results of criticism as destructive, or at least as a symptom of disintegration. Such great undertakings as our "Dictionary of National Biography" and our "New English Dictionary on Historical Principles" are essentially constructive, and, however popular reputations of to-day may suffer in the vicissitudes of time, these large achievements of learned industry will remain to guide, to inform, to control, and to stimulate future study.

The "New English Dictionary" is an excellent example of the tribute which literature pays to the scientific spirit of the age—or shall we say of the gains which literature has derived from the scientific spirit? In almost all directions there has been during the last thirty years a turning away from speculation—speculation that is not based on positive fact—and a growing distrust, which is unfortunate but for the time inevitable, of the imagination as an instrument for the discovery or confirmation of truth. If the imagination is to come to our aid, it must work upon the basis of accumulated fact. No poet nowadays would venture to put forth a prophesying like Wordsworth's "Prelude," like Browning's "Paracelsus," or, to descend lower, like Bailey's "Festus," with its vague and vaporous splendors. But in the place of these and the like of these, we have had the so-called "realist" novel, professedly founded on exact and positive knowledge, the prose medium lending itself better than verse to a materializing imagination. Our drama, also in prose, occupies itself much in discussing problems which are social rather than spiritual—that is, it strives to



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set forth the facts and laws of conduct in certain difficult and definite situations. Our leading Reviews, which thirty years ago dealt largely in questions of religion and philosophy, now inform their readers about affairs in Russia, China, Japan, naval construction, army reform, Röntgen rays, the newest bacillus, wireless tele-

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raphy. No group of contending thinkers is permitted to indulge in a symposium on human immortality; if immortality is to be proved, a well-accredited ghost must appear and witness to the fact. Our humbler magazines, with the assistance of the kodak, exhibit the evolutions of the motor-car, or exalt our bourgeois

imagination with a glimpse of the royal stables.

That is to say, contemporary literature cares for things more than for ideas, and for men more than for man. From the refinements and super-refinements of the psychological novel there was a recoil, not without its wholesome uses, in the novel of romantic action and adventure, of which the most admirable examples were those left by Robert Louis Stevenson. From both the industrial and the scientific spirit of the time there has been a certain reaction towards an art that styles itself "symbolist," with which is often associated a dilettante mysticism, a mysticism almost wholly without perception of the practical energy and strong common sense of the truer mystics—mystics of the light and not of the shadow. That great art suggests more than it can definitely express, and sends the reader or spectator beyond itself, is no new discovery; but the power of doing this is attained rather through its springing from the depths of elementary feelings, whose roots lie below all conscious thought, than by virtue of a theory or any series of tricks to be learnt from an adept. No; if science has wounded the idealism of art, its cure will not come from a pseudo-idealism; if the materialistic tendencies of the time have deprived us of romance, we shall not recover romance by turning away from reality. The wound of science may perhaps be healed by science itself, whose ultimate truths lead us back to an idealist interpretation of phenomena—"these our actors are all spirits;" what we behold is "a most majestic vision and harmonious charmingly." And the true romance, if we could but see it, lies not remote from, but *in*, reality. Let Wordsworth and let the painter of "The Sower" witness to the fact.

Both science, which, like the scholastic philosophy of the Middle Ages, is the common possession of many lands and peoples, and the widening of modern culture have tended towards the establishment of what Goethe dreamed of as "world-literature." In recent years wave after wave of influence has reached England from abroad. French novel and drama, old Norse legend, modern Scandinavian social plays, the Russian novel, the fantasy and mysticism of young Bel-

gium, have in rapid succession quickened, guided, disturbed the thought and the imagination of our country. But the ideal of a cosmopolitan literature is not opposed to a true and distinctive nationality in things of the mind. Free trade in ideas should in the end result in the production by each country of what it is best fitted to produce, and in a system of exchange in commodities which should stimulate national industry. Race, language, environment, together with the tradition of national life, must always suffice to preserve the special characteristics of the several literatures. The history of the past has shown that intellectual hospitality fosters the home-keeping virtues. Chaucer was not less English, rather he was more genuinely English, after he had learnt in the school of Boccaccio and Petrarch. The Elizabethan drama was able, without renouncing its national character, to put to use the two traditions of English history and the Italian *novella*; it could find a place for "Romeo and Juliet" by the side of "King Henry IV." Carlyle remained Scottish and Puritan even when his insularity and his theology had been transformed by the influence of Goethe.

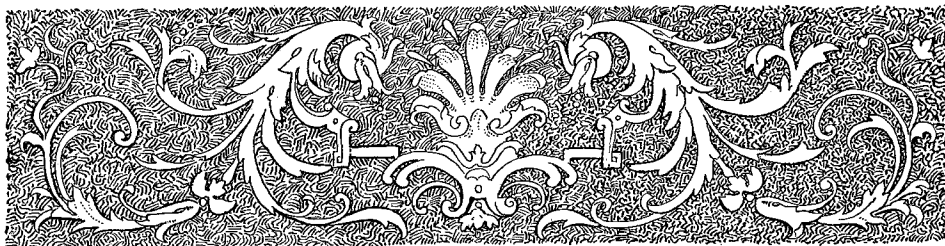
What holds good of the cosmopolitan and the national tendencies should hold good in even a higher degree of the forces of imperialism and provinciality within the Empire. England has of late discovered that, with the greater England of "his Majesty's dominions beyond the seas," it can in a sense be cosmopolitan without passing outside its own boundaries. But the imperial idea in literature, when it has passed from the stage of nebulous enthusiasm to the stage of a progressive realization, means that each several portion of the Empire should find a voice to utter its own characteristic thought, its own characteristic feeling. Even now our chief spokesman for empire is also the special spokesman for Anglo-India. The old sea-wife and her full-grown sons beyond the seas may not always have perfectly cordial relations. A good understanding must rest not only on good will but on knowledge—knowledge not merely of material facts, but also of passions, sentiments, ideals, hopes, ambitions, and even dreams. It may be reasonably expected that colonial literature,

less hampered by traditions, conventions, artificial creeds, inherited social prejudices, and more in touch perhaps with nature and the essential needs of life, will do something to render English literature more limber, alert, lithe, open-eyed and open-eared, more real in the better meaning of that word, and less a thing of accepted fictions and proprieties.

These are in part conjectures concerning the future. What cannot be questioned is that for the present we lack great leaders in literature. Mr. Archer has recently given us a volume of criticism on the "Poets of the Younger Generation;" they number considerably over a score, and there are few of these who have not done work of remarkable excellence both in feeling and in form. But which of them is a master of imagination and of thought? Which of them sways the mind and hearts of a people? Perhaps we may suggest as in part an explanation that they belong to a generation whose feeling for beauty is not organized and supported by an inspiring faith. Science has deprived us of—has at least disturbed—certain long-cherished convictions; it has not fulfilled all the hopes and promises uttered on its behalf; its most obvious and dazzling results are material or mechanical; its highest truths, where it has a kinship with philosophy and with religion, have not yet become a part of the general consciousness of men; and in this vacancy and waiting-time, while we have many dexterous and admirable singers, we can hardly expect a large and genuine prophecy. To affect it would be an act of folly or of fraud; in its place we may cherish our nosegay of blossoms, full of scent and color, and may construct at least a charming anthology.

And meanwhile, during this time of suspense, many experiments both in prose and verse are legitimately made. The rhetorical style of prose, in which Mr. Swinburne and the late Mr. Symonds attained their successes or half-successes, has had its day. The style of preciosity, with which Mr. Pater's imitators, possessing neither their master's power of thought nor his precision of sense and feeling, wearied their readers, is no longer the mode. The epigrammatic style, which whisks an idea or a paradox in one instant into and out of view, which is fatiguing in its petty cleverness and labored dexterity, may linger a little longer, for Mr. Meredith happily still lives to put the style to its best uses. Perhaps some day it will occur to the literary experimenter to try the virtues of a style that is plain and natural, luminous and transparent as sunlit air rather than heavy with the stains of cathedral glass.

The popular interest in the best literature increases rather than diminishes. The great masters in prose and verse of the Victorian period, and of periods more remote, appear and reappear in editions ever more and more attractive to the eye. With such national granaries as these we can have the best bread and can buy our loaf for little. It is absurd to point to our humbler journalism, with its trivialities and vulgarities, as indicating a decline in the general taste. A multitude of readers stir at least the surface of their minds with these, who formerly lay stolid and inert. They are upon the first rung of the ladder, and assuredly they will climb higher. It is not likely that any one in a serious hour will descend from Thackeray to "Tid-bits," and the way from "Tid-bits" to Thackeray lies open.



Recent Verse

MANY volumes of verse have appeared during recent months, and some of it has shown signs of promise if not of realized power. There are many indications that the present widespread interest in verse-writing is prelusive and will be followed by a genuine revival of poetry. Among recent contributions to this movement must be counted the impressive ode read at the Yale bicentennial last October. Mr. Stedman has very thorough knowledge of the technique of verse, and has more than once used the ode form with freshness and force. His fine interpretation of the history and spirit of Yale in the "Mater Coronata" is a very effective example of the academic ode. It has the slow movement of a well-planned unfolding of a large conception of the significance of the occasion in history, in achievement, and in promise. It is strong, dignified, gracious; touched throughout with imagination and rich in scholarly allusion. The binding of the poem is a fine example of the harmony which ought to be secured between the spirit or content and the form of a book. It is a thoroughly artistic piece of book-making, and bears the imprint of Messrs. Houghton, Mifflin & Co.

Mr. Stephen Phillips has given abundant evidence of the possession of the poetic temperament and of the poetic faculty; it remains to be seen whether he will pass out of the ranks of the minor into those of the major poets. His earliest volume, "Poems," contained a few poems of striking quality. "Marpessa" and "Christ in Hades" are distinctly powerful; they seemed to predict a new force in contemporary poetry. It is still uncertain how far Mr. Phillips will go in lyrical verse; his time and thought have gone entirely into another field—that of dramatic poetry. He has written three poetic dramas notable for beauty of phrase, for thoroughness of workmanship, for refinement of feeling, and for imagination. "Paolo and Francesca," "Herod," and "Ulysses" (Macmillan Company) are primarily poems and secondarily dramas; they are pervaded by lyrical feeling; they abound in lyrical

passages as distinctly as Shakespeare's lyrical plays; they indicate the supremacy, for the time being at least, of the poet over the dramatist. Time will ripen Mr. Phillips and reveal the deeper bent of his nature; meanwhile it is to be noted that he is doing his work with fastidious care, that he is a devout lover of beauty and a reverent workman, and that he is responsive to the deeper rather than to the superficial influences of his age. That age, in its emphasis on action and its tidal energies, is essentially dramatic, and Mr. Phillips is making a serious effort to revive the poetic drama in England. Among the younger English poets he is distinctly the most promising.

Mr. Robert Bridges happily combines a serious spirit with lightness and deftness of touch. His work in prose is unpretentious and bears so many marks of ease both of mood and manner that his clear-sighted and thoroughly sane criticism sometimes escapes the attention of those who confuse weight with solemnity. In the delightfully informal and witty talks in "Overheard in Arcady" and "Suppressed Chapters," and in the condensed and breezy criticism which appeared in "Life" over the signature of "Droch," there were admirable judgment, keen discrimination, and a happy faculty of getting at the essential thing. In his verse Mr. Bridges is always sane, manly, direct, and genuine; he is also sympathetic, responsive, and finely interpretative of the deeper sentiment at the heart of human relationships and experiences. "Bramble Brae," which bears the imprint of Messrs. Charles Scribner's Sons, has both the feeling and the restraint which its title suggests; the hold on realities and the insight of feeling in interpreting them which is characteristic of Scotch poetry. There are serious themes touched reverently and with a tender hand, there are poetic readings of incidents and events, there are fancies evoked by the flowers, and there are inscriptions in books which are friends and in books for friends; and in every line there are sincerity of feeling, directness of expression, wholesome restraint. The collection has a tonic quality,