

## REVIEWS

*Retrospections of an Active Life.* By JOHN BIGELOW. New York, The Baker and Taylor Company, 1909.—Three volumes : xiv, 645, 607, 684 pp.

These three stout volumes are apt to discourage a reader when it appears that the period covered by them is but fifty of Mr. Bigelow's ninety-two years. Yet one who plunges into the current will willingly be borne with it to the end and will joyously greet the intimation of Mr. Bigelow's "Prelude" that opportunity for a further progress may be expected. Not that the journey thus far permitted is of a uniformly thrilling and absorbing interest. The course of Mr. Bigelow's *Retrospections*, like the course of the noble river on whose banks he has from birth found his greatest happiness, is at some points quite destitute of exceptional and striking features. The upper reaches of the Hudson are pretty, placid, not exactly commonplace, but at the same time not exciting. At the Highlands there is much picturesqueness and rugged grandeur. Mr. Bigelow's *Retrospections* reach their Highlands at the Civil War. It was largely with a view to contribute something to the record of this period of storm and stress in our national life that he undertook the preparation of his volumes.

It must be said, summarily, that the work adds no item of the highest grade of importance to our knowledge of the times. Yet in a multitude of ways Mr. Bigelow throws useful light on facts that have already been made known. The most distinctive feature of his work is, however, the revelation of himself. We see in full detail the character, spirit and achievement of a strong, balanced, sagacious patriot, whose labor in the time of the country's greatest need was of the utmost importance. Mr. Bigelow was a Van Buren Democrat. In the period of the Free-Soil movement he was on intimate terms with all the leaders of political thought and action in New York state and with many in other parts of the country. In 1848 he purchased a part interest in the New York *Evening Post* and became the efficient partner of William Cullen Bryant in the conduct of that journal. The paper prospered, and at the end of 1860 Mr. Bigelow, having raised his worldly possessions to the then magnificent proportions of \$175,000, retired from business at the age of forty-three. He felt himself wealthy

enough to provide for his family and cultivate the taste for scholarship and literature that had always been strong within him. A few months later the country was convulsed with civil war and Mr. Bigelow was peremptorily summoned to aid the government in its foreign relations. He gave up his plans for literary leisure, proceeded straightway to Paris, and there, first as consul-general and finally as minister, he did powerful service in combating the private prejudice and governmental malevolence that wrought incessantly for the cause of the Confederacy. Not until 1867 was he permitted to return to the United States and take up the life of leisure that he had sought long before.

The form of Mr. Bigelow's *Retrospections* is chiefly that of letters sent and received, with here and there the interpolation of a few explanatory and supplementary paragraphs. It is in these all too scanty paragraphs that we find the clearest expression of Mr. Bigelow's own judgments of passing events. We find here his latter-day philosophy of the great political movements in which he took part. There is in this philosophy, perhaps, rather much of the judgment of the older man as compared with the emotions of the younger and contemporary man. Read, for instance, his reflective avowal that, if he could have known in 1860 what streams of blood and what years of demoralization and corruption were destined to follow his light-hearted and confident anti-slavery propaganda, he would have willingly relaxed the eagerness of his demand for immediate abolition and would have been satisfied with some gentler and slower method of exterminating slavery (I, 391). Quite interesting, just at this point, is Bigelow's report of a prophetic saying of Samuel J. Tilden that made a deep impression upon him. Tilden was extremely sober as the election day approached in 1860 and the success of the Republicans became assured. The *Post* was supporting Lincoln and was indulging in the normal violence of election-time editorial attack on its opponents. Tilden, on intimate personal terms with Bigelow, entered the office of the *Post* one day and observed: "I would not have the responsibility of William Cullen Bryant and John Bigelow for all the wealth in the sub-treasury. If you have your way civil war will divide this country and you will see blood running like water in the streets of this city" (I, 292).

Among the correspondents whose letters appear frequently in Mr. Bigelow's volumes are Sumner, Thurlow Weed, John Lothrop Motley and others in conspicuous public positions. In the letters of these men are to be found some of the most suggestive and illuminating items of historical interest that Mr. Bigelow reveals. It is astonishing, for instance, to find, in a letter from Sumner, the opinion that "Soulé is a

generous, chivalrous character" (I, 129). When we recall that Soulé was one of the fiercest of the "slavocrats" and a participant in the promulgation of the Ostend Manifesto, this sentence of Sumner's gives us pause. In the letters of Thurlow Weed we find sundry passages that are particularly interesting when taken in connection with Gideon Welles's *Diary*, now being published. Mr. Welles, in his communings with himself which his son is now giving to the light of day, resorted very frequently to disparaging remarks about Seward and Weed and the whole of that old Whig combination in politics. That Welles's derogatory opinion of these men was reciprocated by them is established by various remarks in Weed's letters to Bigelow. For example, Weed writes, on March 15, 1863: "Charleston would have been taken a month ago if old Welles had been in Hartford and a true man in his place" (I, 609). And again, a few months later, Weed refers to "our immense navy with a bass-wood head" (II, 22). This unflattering opinion of the secretary of the navy does not appear to have been shared by Mr. Bigelow himself, whose relations with Welles were entirely friendly. It is indeed a striking fact of the whole war-time situation that Bigelow, though, like Welles, an *ante bellum* Democrat, never shared the antipathy toward Seward and Weed which was one of the most common attributes of the War Democrats. Whether Bigelow's favorable judgment of Seward's character and work was due primarily to the fact that Seward was his superior in administrative office, or whether it had a more impartial foundation, is an interesting question. To one who knows the intensity of the dislike with which most of the old Democrats regarded Seward and Weed, it seems odd that Mr. Bigelow, while sharing always the confidence of the Democrats, shared at the same time the confidence and respect of these bitterly hated old Whigs.

Part of the second and most of the third volume of the *Retrospections* are concerned with the affairs of the French mission during the negotiations with the French government, first, over the relations of Napoleon with the Confederacy and, second, over the situation in Mexico. Very little of this great mass of matter conveys information or suggests points of view that have not before been made familiar to students of history. There is interest in the matter from its clarification of Mr. Bigelow's own personality and ability. He shows himself to have been as efficient in diplomacy as previously in journalism. It is unnecessary, however, for the purposes of this review to dwell especially on this later phase of his public career.

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*L'Europe et la politique britannique, 1882-1909.* By ERNEST LÉMONON. Paris, Félix Alcan, 1910.—viii, 555 pp.

An attempt, such as M. Lémonon has made, to write a history of European diplomacy during the past quarter of a century arouses misgivings. At best one can hope only for something in the nature of good journalistic work, something like a correct recording of known events. The secret history behind these events is still locked up in the chancelleries of Europe; and any attempt to read the minds of ministers and the intentions which lay behind their actions, especially when these ministers belong to three or four alien nations as well as to one's own country, must necessarily fail. It is therefore not surprising that M. Lémonon's account of English policies should be as complete a surprise to an Englishman as his view of German affairs is to a German. The chief fault with M. Lémonon's book is that he is not content to leave anything unexplained. He must supply the motive and policy of every move and make every move a part of a continuously observed policy; and in trying to do this he leaves out of consideration, except in the case of his own countrymen, the character and individuality of the statesmen whose action he explains.

Even as a piece of journalism, M. Lémonon's work might easily have attained to a higher level of accuracy. British politics are undoubtedly difficult for a Frenchman to follow; but a man who aspires to write authoritatively on the relations of Great Britain to continental Europe should make sure that his statements are correct. The mistakes that M. Lémonon makes are many and obvious. He speaks of Rosebery as a Conservative in 1894—a statement that might be considered defensible as an anticipation but which is incorrect as regards that year, when Rosebery was prime minister of a Liberal administration. He attributes the Ballot Act of 1872 to Beaconsfield. He blames Gladstone for being indifferent to the cry for reform when he assumed office in 1880—ignoring the fact that dissolution must follow an act extending the franchise, and that it would have been the worst possible policy for the Liberals to pass a bill in 1880 that would have entailed another general election in 1881. He makes Majuba Hill a contest between the English and the Zulus under Cetewayo, and he says that Gladstone, seeing that the position of the English as regarded the Zulus was uncertain, restored Cetewayo to the Transvaal and withdrew from the country.

It will readily be seen that M. Lémonon's work cannot be taken as authoritative. Useful and suggestive it certainly is, if read with proper