

**THE POETS AND
PEOPLES OF
FOREIGN LANDS**

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The Poets and Peoples of Foreign Lands by J. W. Crombie

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BY
J. W. CROMBIE.

'Bards who died content on pleasant sward,
Leaving great verse unto a little clan'

KRATS.

LONDON:
ELLIOT STOCK, 62, PATERNOSTER ROW.

1890.

HIGHGATE
LITERARY & CO.

1850

TO
My Father and Mother
THIS LITTLE VOLUME
IS
AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED.



P R E F A C E .

'THE use of foreign literature,' wrote Mr. Bagehot some thirty years ago, 'is like the use of foreign travel. It imprints on us . . . a deep impression of great and strange and noble objects.' There have been great modifications in the conditions of foreign travel since these words were written. The practical development of steam and electricity, joined to the business energy of Messrs. Cook, have brought within reach of those whose incomes are slender the impressions of 'great and noble' objects alluded to; but the 'strange' are daily growing more difficult to find. Everything abroad is tinctured with cosmopolitanism. We seem like snails to take our homes about with us wherever we go. Nowhere can we flee from the face of our fellow-countrymen. Singly, or still worse, gregariously, he breaks upon our reveries in the Halls of the Abencerrages, or dispels the poetry of

loneliness from the Temples of Pæstum. His presence makes these places none the less 'great and noble,' it is true; but it materially detracts from their 'strangeness.' Like Michael Angelo, we are ever struggling to rid ourselves of our own shadow, which falls on every object we contemplate, distorting and marring its natural effect; but unlike the sculptor, we cannot escape from it by any expedient so simple as carrying a candle in our hats. Jaded with the cares of civilization, we crowd abroad in search of some fresh spot and foreign people, where we may revel in all that is primitive and quaint and picturesque: a sojourn in whose midst we fondly hope

'would be enjoyment more than in the march of mind,
In the steamship, in the railway, in the thoughts that shake
mankind.'

But the search is vain, the hope delusive. We find over all the shadow of ourselves, and return, railing, with Napoleon, at this '*veille Europe qui m'ennuie.*'

While the facilities of foreign travel have thus increased, the study of foreign literature has happily developed along with them; and in the latter, I maintain, will be found the dock-leaf, which is said, by a merciful dispensation of Providence, to grow apace with the nettle. The late Mr. Darwin sought relaxation from his scientific

labours in the reading of novels; but he always regretted that he had not rather cultivated a taste for poetry; maintaining that its study was the most restful pastime for a busy mind, since it afforded the greatest change from the prosaic business of life. If Mr. Darwin's reasoning be correct, it must follow that foreign poetry—the poetry of a people who even in their prosaic moods seem strange to us—must offer the completest change, and therefore the greatest possible rest and refreshment. Moreover, it supplies the very object we now seek in vain from foreign travel. There is no channel through which we can more readily reach the intimate life and thought of a primitive people than through their popular poetry. It is the Asmodeus whose magic art unroofs for us not only their houses, but their hearts; the confessional where their inmost secrets stand recorded.

By popular poetry I do not mean the great classics—the Dantes, Goethes, Molières. These are cosmopolitan rather than national. They speak for all times and all peoples. They are members of the Great Federal Senate of Literature, a chamber where nationality is merged in humanity. It is rather to the local, though humbler, representatives of poetry that our purpose directs us.

There are some nations where the whole people is its own poet—*Landesgemeinden*, as it were—who need no representative, but represent themselves.

Such is Spain, of whose folk-poetry the first paper in this volume treats. Such, too, were the Moors, of whose poetry the Spanish is but a fainter echo. While cases like these are exceptional, every people, however humble or obscure, who are bound together by a common tongue (though it be but a *patois*), a common origin, and common interests, can boast of a poet among themselves who has sung their local ballads and traditions, and thrown a halo of poetry round the simple pleasures and sorrows, fears and aspirations, that make up the drama of their life.

The study of this popular poetry I have always found to fitly combine with and enhance the charm of travel abroad; while at home it affords a refreshing relaxation from the prose of business. With the hope that more may turn to it, I publish the few essays which this volume comprises. None of these subjects have been dealt with fully by English writers—most of them not at all. I have attempted no subtle literary criticism, my object being to describe rather than analyze. Each poet is fully illustrated by translations from his works, for which in every case I am wholly responsible. But, except in the paper on Moorish poetry (where my versions are paraphrases rather than translations), the originals will always be found below. While I am well aware that to invite the attention of my reader to these originals is only to court a condemnation of my

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translations, I shall think myself fully compensated if their study awake in him some of the interest and pleasure they have given to me.

Three of these papers have already appeared, in a less extended form, in *Macmillan's Magazine* and the *Edinburgh Review*, to the kindness of whose editors I am indebted for permission to republish.

