

CRITICISMS

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Criticisms by John M. Robertson

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JOHN M. ROBERTSON

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BY

JOHN M. ROBERTSON

FIRST FAGGOT

LONDON

A. AND H. BRADLAUGH BONNER

1 & 2 TOOK'S COURT, E.C.

1902

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

- ESSAYS TOWARDS A CRITICAL METHOD.
NEW ESSAYS TOWARDS A CRITICAL METHOD.
MONTAIGNE AND SHAKSPERE.
BUCKLE AND HIS CRITICS: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY.
THE SAXON AND THE CELT: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY.
MODERN HUMANISTS: STUDIES OF CARLYLE, MILL,
EMERSON, ARNOLD, RUSKIN, AND SPENCER.
THE FALLACY OF SAVING: A STUDY IN ECONOMICS.
THE EIGHT HOURS QUESTION: A STUDY IN ECONOMICS.
THE DYNAMICS OF RELIGION: AN ESSAY IN ENGLISH
CULTURE HISTORY. (By "M. W. Wiseman".)
A SHORT HISTORY OF FREETHOUGHT, ANCIENT
AND MODERN.
A SHORT HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY.
CHRISTIANITY AND MYTHOLOGY.
STUDIES IN RELIGIOUS FALLACY.
LETTERS ON REASONING.
AN INTRODUCTION TO ENGLISH POLITICS.
PATRIOTISM AND EMPIRE.
WRECKING THE EMPIRE.

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NOTE.

THE following papers are all reprints, more or less inexact. I am naturally the last person to lay any invidious stress on the fact that the periodicals in which they originally appeared are now without exception defunct; but the acknowledgment seems fair, as well as expedient by way of explaining the absence of "the usual acknowledgments". For the act of reprinting there are several excuses, of which perhaps the best is that in even the most juvenile papers there are some things that seem to need reaffirming.

J. M. R.

November, 1902.

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CRITICISMS.

HERRICK.

(1891.)

THE spirit of contradiction must surely be roused in many a reader of the new edition of Herrick,* by the preface of Mr. Swinburne. An exquisite edition it is, incomparably printed at the Aberdeen University Press, and laudably edited by Mr. Pollard; and if there is any incongruity in the entire production it is perhaps the selection of Mr. Swinburne to do the critical introduction. Not that Mr. Swinburne may not be trusted generally to appreciate any English poet: he has the most catholic of palates; but, somehow, to set the author of 'A Study of Ben Jonson' to praise or appraise the author of the 'Hesperides' seems a fantastic proceeding. The only visible plea is that Herrick admired Ben even more than Mr. Swinburne does. How shall Herrick's toying touches be celebrated aright by grape-shot adjectives, and chain-shot superlatives, and the machine-guns of alliteration and antithesis? Really, to turn Mr. Swinburne on Herrick is like setting the oak-rending elephant to pick up sixpences—if we may compare Mr. Swinburne to anything at once

* Lawrence and Bullen: 'Muses' Library,' 2 vols.

massive and good-tempered. One pictures—to change the figure—Herrick's fleets of toy-boats driven before the wind and tide of Mr. Swinburne's polylogous rhetoric like sticks on a spate. And in plain fact, the characterisations here given of Herrick's work are so deafening that even where, being interpreted, they are partly just, they sound monstrous. This for instance: "The fantastic and the brutal blemishes which deform and deface the loveliness of his incomparable genius are hardly so damaging to his fame as his general monotony of matter and of manner." What a way to write of Herrick! This is verily that Mr. Swinburne who sounds the praises of babies with a trombone. And take again this: "The sturdy student (!) who tackles his Herrick as a schoolboy is expected to tackle his Horace, in a spirit of pertinacious and stolid straightforwardness (!), will probably find himself before long so nauseated by the incessant inhalation of spices and flowers, condiments and kisses, that if a musk-rat had run over the page it could hardly be less endurable to the physical than it is to the spiritual stomach." Some men might be allowed to say this unhidden: Doctor Johnson, for instance, or Mr. Justice Stephen; but from the lips of the most aromatic and amoristic (one catches his own style) of all English poets, the most cloying of sensuous verbalists, it is insufferable. Herrick has his faults, plenty of them; but Mr. Swinburne, in the character of "sturdy student", is not decently to be accepted as his accuser.

Even when he is giving praise, and here much

more amazingly, Mr. Swinburne is in the wrong key. It makes one gasp to read such criticism as this: "Herrick, of course, lives simply by virtue of his songs; his more ambitious or pretentious lyrics are merely magnified and prolonged and elaborated songs. Elegy or litany, epicede or epithalamium, his work is always a song-writer's; nothing more, but nothing less, than the work of the greatest song-writer—as surely as Shakspeare is the greatest dramatist—ever born of the English race." And after speaking, as above cited, of the monotony of Herrick's manner, the critic goes on to intimate that "the apparent or external variety of his versification is, I should suppose, incomparable". Now, this description of Herrick as a great song-writer is simply an incredible misrepresentation. He wrote songs as he wrote epigrams, and litanies, and epistles, and dialogues, and apostrophes; but to call all these things songs is as uncritical as to call them all epigrams. And Herrick is no more the greatest English song-writer than he is the greatest English theologian. He wrote some beautiful songs; but he is not even typically a lyrist. On the contrary, he almost wholly lacks the most eminent essential of a great lyrist, to wit, passion; and he is just as much lacking in the next greatest essential, namely, pathos. This is the rebuttal of even the judgment passed on Herrick by Mr. Lowell—that he is the most Catullian of poets since Catullus. One of the prime qualities of Catullus is pathetic passion: witness the *Coeli, Lesbia nostra, Lesbia illa*, the laments for the dead brother,