

**BOOKS
CONDEMNED
TO BE BURNT**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649167074

Books condemned to be burnt by James Anson Farrer

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Cover @ 2017

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JAMES ANSON FARRER

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The Book-Lover's Library.

Edited by

Henry B. Wheatley, F.S.A.


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BY
JAMES ANSON FARRER.



LONDON
ELLIOT STOCK, 62, PATERNOSTER ROW
1892

P R E F A C E.

HEN did books first come to be burnt in England by the common hangman, and what was the last book to be so treated? This is the sort of question that occurs to a rational curiosity, but it is just this sort of question to which it is often most difficult to find an answer. Historians are generally too engrossed with the details of battles, all as drearily similar to one another as scenes of murder and rapine must of necessity be, to spare a glance for the far brighter and more instructive field of the mutations or of the progress of manners. The following work is an attempt to supply the deficiency on this particular subject.

I am indebted to chance for having directed me to the interest of book-burning as an episode in the history of the world's manners, the discursive allusions to it in the old numbers of "Notes and Queries" hinting to me the desirability of a more systematic mode of treatment. To bibliographers and literary historians I conceived that such a work might prove of utility and interest, and possibly serve to others as an introduction and incentive to a branch of our literary history that is not without its fascination. But I must also own to a less unselfish motive, for I imagined that not without its reward of delight would be a temporary sojourn among the books which, for their boldness of utterance or unconventional opinions, were not only not received by the best literary society of their day, but were with ignominy expelled from it. Nor was I wrong in my calculation.

But could I impart or convey the same delight to others? Clearly all that I could do was to invite them to enter on the same road, myself only subserving the humble functions of a signpost. I could avoid merely compiling for them a bibliographical dictionary, but I could not treat at length of each offender in my catalogue, without, in so exhausting my subject, exhausting at the same time my reader's patience. I have tried therefore to give something of the life of their history and times to the authors with whom I came in contact; to cast a little light on the idiosyncrasies or misfortunes of this one or of that; but to do them full justice, and to enable the reader to make their complete acquaintance, how was that possible with any regard for the laws of literary proportion? All I could do was to aim at something less dull than a dictionary, but something far short of a history.

I trust that no one will be either attracted or alarmed by any anticipations suggested by the title of my book. Although primarily a book for the library, it is also one of which no drawing-room table need be the least afraid. If I have found anything in my condemned authors which they would have done better to have left unsaid, I have, in referring to their fortunes, felt under no compulsion to reproduce their indiscretions. But, in all of them put together, I doubt whether there is as much to offend a scrupulous taste as in many a latter-day novel, the claim of which to the distinction of burning is often as indisputable as the certainty of its regrettable immunity from that fiery but fitting fate.

The custom I write about suggests some obvious reflections on the mutability of our national manners. Was the wisdom of our ancestors really so

much greater than our own, as many profess to believe? If so, it is strange with how much of that wisdom we have learnt to dispense. One by one their old customs have fallen away from us, and I fancy that if any gentleman could come back to us from the seventeenth century, he would be less astonished by the novel sights he would see than by the old familiar sights he would miss. He would see no one standing in the pillory, no one being burnt at a stake, no one being "swum" for witchcraft, no one's veracity being tested by torture, and, above all, no hangman burning books at Cheapside, no unfortunate authors being flogged all the way from Fleet Street to Westminster. The absence of these things would probably strike him more than even the railways and the telegraph wires. Returning with his old-world ideas, he would wonder how life and property had survived the