A SHORT HISTORY OF FRENCH LITERATURE

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Trieste

Sincerely yours,

Lothrop H. Thomas

A SHORT HISTORY

OF

FRENCH LITERATURE

BY

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WILLIAM HENRY HUDSON

A MEMOIR

MR. HUDSON'S death on the 12th of August 1918, at Droitwich, came as a shock; but not altogether to those by whom he was best known as an unanticipated blow. In 1913 he had had a disabling attack of rheumatic fever, and he was well aware his heart was weak. Indeed, he once remarked to one who some eight years ago remonstrated with him for overtaxing his strength that he had good reason to suppose his span of life would be short, and that he had much that he wished to write.

This is the nemesis of the critical profession. Before one can criticise, one must have read and studied; and when at fifty "the ship is cheered," one may perhaps hear the evening bell. Not that Mr. Hudson's energy was in any degree abated. His last book on *Nineteenth Century Literature* was as ripe and easy as anything he had produced, a thing let fall from copiousness and a mind stored to the full.

Learning is a word that in this country has come to bear a very particular connotation. One must know more about some one subject, however minute or subdivided, than others do; or one must labour in the mine and bring to the surface what has not been properly accessible before. But leaving out of account this

limited meaning of Learning, there were few literary men in England more generally learned than Mr. Hudson : he knew more about everything than anybody else.

Starting life as secretary to Herbert Spencer, he had a sound philosophical basis, and wrote books on Spencer and Rousseau. In later years he told *The Story of the Renaissance*, or wrote of *The Man Napoleon*, just as when, in California, he had written *The Strange Adventures of John Smith*. In his list of books there are five with such titles as *Studies in Interpretation*, *The Meaning and Value of Poetry*, or *Idle Hours in a Library*. More directly in the line of his teaching is *An Outline History of English Literature*, with its accompanying volume of *Representative Selections*. One finds that he edited or wrote introductions to various works by Carlyle, Dryden, Goldsmith, Addison, Spenser, Bacon, Macaulay ; and in the admirable *Poetry and Life* series which he originated he was himself responsible for seven monographs. Besides these and many other writings he had to his credit a volume of original verse, *The Sphinx and other Poems*.

It would be idle to attempt here to assess the amount of good work, the product of an always living intelligence, enclosed in this little library (some forty publications that appeared mainly in some twenty years), but he himself had a fondness for his volume on Rousseau. Others would put forward claims for his Literary histories ; while there is one book—his *Introduction to the Study of Literature*—which is easily the best as it is also the most painstakingly simple introduction to the foundations of Literary appreciation. With this exception his specially original work was of a different character, the very modern and characteristically lucid introductions to those volumes of *The Elizabethan Shakespeare* which have been published in this country. Interest in these extended to Germany, and

it may safely be said that nowhere are the problems of modern Shakespearian criticism handled more competently or with a firmer grasp of the essentially modern issues.

Mr. Hudson did not write on out-of-the-way subjects. His business always was with the best, and his walk consequently almost always on trodden ground. But no one was less of the type that smoothly accepts the reigning opinion. He knew exactly what he wanted to bring out. He had the greatest powers of arrangement, and his own and very definite notions about his various subjects. If one wished to show the difference between Compilation and Exposition, one would only have to point to any one of his little masterpieces in the latter art—to his Milton or his Gray.

It was emphatically the skill of an expositor, of a teacher, and it was this skill that served him in peculiar stead throughout his career as an Extension Lecturer. He had started, very happily, as a definite professor in California, and it was there, in Stanford University, that for nine years he laid the foundations of the wide-ranging knowledge essential for his subsequent and more arduous career. When he came to London in 1902, Mr. Churton Collins, already overtasked, was in the evening of his Extension days, and from the first Mr. Hudson, *facile princeps* among his literary successors, took up without effort the work he was laying down. Dissatisfied with the fragmentary nature of Extension work, he fell in delightedly with Dr. Roberts' scheme of Sessional courses, and, excepting only Professor Gollancz's courses at King's College, it was he, almost unaided, who did the work of the University of London Diploma in Literature. He had two courses for this work: one purely English, 75 lectures covering the outline from Chaucer to Tennyson,

and one General, 25 on Ancient, 25 on Mediæval, and 25 on Modern European Literature.

Of the first course a fellow-teacher of English may be permitted to say that its circular and recurrent delivery was in itself an arduous task. Sometimes it happened that in one year he would be giving its first portion in one Centre, its second in another, and its third in a third. In any given week he might be lecturing, among his other duties, upon Bacon, Addison, and Burns. Besides, it always happened that the course on General European Literature was running concurrently, and in the Bacon, Addison, Burns week he would also be speaking, perhaps, on Horace, Cervantes, and Molière. As he lectured without notes, or with the scantiest, from a singularly full syllabus only, it meant that he had to have perpetually at his fingers' ends most of the chief books of the chief authors of Europe.

The powers needed to pursue such a life, and to pursue it with unvarying and even success, are not to be estimated easily. A much greater flexibility of spirit, a much greater control of nerves is required than is demanded from any College teacher. The perfect Extension lecturer (and surely if there is ever to be one Mr. Hudson was he) has no time to air crotchets or to run off on himself rather than on his subject; and yet how tempting are these diversions. What is one to say of Keats in an hour? It has been said; and the one thing that is interesting to oneself is one's own history of personal contact. Nevertheless for the auditor who has never even properly heard of the poet, and may not again properly hear, the one thing needful is that the foundations should be well and truly laid. It is difficult to do this constantly and on common topics. To do it as Mr. Hudson did it, and to preserve interest while doing it even in those who had

heard the main part of the story before ; to do this without ever descending to the popular or deviating from the seriousness of study, to promote always a liberal atmosphere while speaking without fence and so as always to be plainly understood, necessitates a forgetfulness of self and a care for one's auditors that is not only a literary but a social virtue. One does not find El Dorados by such conscientiousness, but one must not think, because the rewards in personal *réclame* are not immediate, that the real rewards are small. And, indeed, what social work, done unostentatiously among us, has been more fruitful ! I should imagine, without attempting a precise estimate, that in his sixteen years in London some ten thousand thinking people, and many of them often, must have heard his voice. These are small numbers, perhaps, when one remembers Robert Chambers or Charles Knight. But the spread of printed information is one thing, and that of personal education necessarily another. In his own sphere, dealing with a restricted public and working with his own method, he has a right to be classed with those great popularisers of knowledge.

This was the true work of his life, and he would wish it to figure in his epitaph. Among his numerous publications there are several that have already secured their hold in the educational world, and are likely to retain it. They will keep his memory green, as he wished, by the written and not the spoken word. His contributions to the understanding of Shakespeare will preserve his name in Scholarship ; but I am not attempting a presumptuous estimate, and it is true that his national service was as an Extension lecturer.

It is hard that he should have died just when the social greatness of the work he was doing was coming to be widely understood, and before the cessation of the