

**INTRODUCTORY LECTURES
ON THE OXFORD
REFORMERS, COLET,
ERASMUS, AND MORE**

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Introductory Lectures on the Oxford Reformers, Colet, Erasmus, and More by W. Hudson
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ON THE
OXFORD REFORMERS
Colet, Erasmus and More.

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BY

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LECTURE I.

John Colet.

" A good man was ther of religious,
And was a poor Persoun of a town ;
But riche he was of holy thought and werk.
He was also a lerned man, a clerk
That Cristes gospel gladly wolde preche ;
His parischems devoutly wolde he teche.

This noble ensample unto his sheep he gaf,
That first he wroughte, and after that he taughte :
Out of the gospel he the wordes caughte,
And this figure he addid yit thereto,
That if gold ruste, what schude yren doo ?

A bettre preest I trowe ther nowher non is.
He wayteed after no pompe ne reverence,
Ne maket him a spiced conscience,
But Cristes lore, and his Apostles twelve,
He taught, and first he forweod it himselfe."

—CHAUCER'S Prologue.

" The awakening of a rational Christianity, whether in England or in the Teutonic world at large, begins with the Florentine studies of John Colet. From the first it was manifest that the revival of Letters would take a tone in England very different from the tone it had taken in Italy, a tone less literary, less largely human, but more moral, more religious, more practical in its bearings both upon society and politics. The vigour and earnestness of Colet were the best proof of the strength with which the new movement was to affect English religion It was his resolve to fling aside the traditional dogmas of his day and to discover a rational and practical religion in the Gospels themselves, which gave its peculiar stamp to the theology of the Renaissance. His faith stood simply on a vivid realisation of the person of Christ. In the prominence which such a view gave to the moral life, in his free criticism of the earlier Scriptures, in his tendency to simple forms of doctrine and confessions of faith, Colet struck the key-note of a mode of religious thought as strongly in contrast with that of the later Reformation as with that of Catholicism itself."—J. R. GREEN.

LECTURE I.

AT the outset of these three lectures on the Oxford Reformers of the early sixteenth century, it may be well, perhaps, that I should indicate their scope and intention, and explain why I think your time will not be altogether wasted in examining the life-histories of such men as John Colet, Erasmus and Sir Thomas More. It will be my fault surely, and not due to the nature of the subject itself, if you do not recognize in the records of these three lives one of the most interesting and stimulating portions of English history. It is true enough that from the point of view of those historians who care only for war and politics, for the doings of kings and statesmen and diplomatists, these Oxford scholars played a very unimportant part in the world, and are scarcely worthy of notice. They never slew anybody, or gained advantages over their foes by judicious lying, or stole territory that did not belong to them. Moreover, if Professor Seeley is right when he says that history is concerned only with the development of States and has nothing to do with individuals except in their capacity of members of a State, then certainly Colet and Erasmus and More have no special claim upon the attention of historical students. We had better inquire into more important matters, such as the wars of Henry VIII., in France, or the intricacies of Cardinal Wolsey's foreign policy. But those of us who have been unfortunate enough to receive our training in Oxford, that antiquated and Old-world University, that home of lost causes and exploded ideas, who acknowledge as our master in history, John Richard Green, and sympathize alike with the scorn which he showered upon "drum-and-trumpet" theories of historical writing, and his daring heretical attempt to set the figures of the

poet and the philosopher, the merchant and the missionary and the discoverer, in places of equal honour with those occupied by princes and warriors, cannot consent to see history narrowed down to a mere branch of politics. It is very improper, no doubt, but I feel certain that the majority of those here present, who care for the study as it bears upon human lives and not as a means of passing an examination or obtaining a degree, find much more genuine interest in the history of ideas and great movements than in the history of wars and treaties and faction fights. You would rather solve the problems of the Renaissance than know accurately all the intrigues and diplomatic schemings of the eighteenth century. The Hundred Years' War of England against France, and the exploits of tinsel heroes like Edward III. and the Black Prince have become inexpressibly wearisome to you. Like Macaulay's criminal, who preferred the galleys for life to the enforced reading of Guicciardini's History, you would rather endure many woes than be condemned for long to the Wars of the Roses. Wycliffe and More, Lord Bacon, Raleigh and John Milton, the men of ideas, are more attractive to you than innumerable brave and stupid fighting barons of feudal times. If this be so,—if there seem to you greater utility in studying the lives of thinkers and scholars who have powerfully influenced the thought of their race, its religion and its morals, than in busying yourselves perpetually about battles and sieges and the doings of selfish conquerors and ravagers,—then these Reformers of four centuries ago will possess for you a strong and powerful attractiveness.

For, in the first place, all three of them were good men as well as great. One hears it said often enough that history is chiefly a record of crimes and cruel deeds, of tyrannies and rebellions, of falseness and turpitude; and that the more deeply read people are in the life of the past the less belief they have in mankind. Certainly if the moral sense has not been dulled by hard experience of evil, if the conscience is still sensitive and delicate, there is pain enough in human records. A life like Henry VIII.'s, or Pope Alexander VI.'s, or Charles II.'s, a book like Machiavelli's 'Prince,' a self-revelation like the autobiography of Benvenuto

Cellini or Rousseau, is a hideous nightmare to most of us, which we would gladly forget if we could. We turn with a sense of relief to the biographies of men like these of whom I have to speak, who, living in a corrupt and immoral time, in that transitional epoch when the Middle Ages were dying and the New World which we know had scarcely come into being, demand little of that charity which historians find it necessary to accord to great men of the past. Emphatically, whatever may have been their faults, Colet and Erasmus and More were, for their generation, the very salt of the earth. It has been claimed for John Colet, who died before the Reformation had fully come to the birth, that he was the founder of that rational Christianity which the Teutonic races have in the main accepted. He was also our English Savonarola, scarcely inferior to the great Dominican in courage and boldness, a preacher of righteousness who did not flinch from denouncing the mad war-schemes of an ambitious king or from exposing the worldliness and corruption of the order to which he belonged,—in his own manner of life pure and blameless amid almost universal degradation. Erasmus was not only the most brilliant man of letters of his age, the recognized leader of the scholars of Europe, the Catholic who helped to make possible the success of Luther by his merciless denunciations of monks and clergy; but he was also a man, who in spite of some lamentable failings, wins our admiration by his large-mindedness, by his single-hearted devotion to learning, his scorn of low ambitions, his hatred of war and tyranny and cruelty, his genuine piety and love of goodness. As for Sir Thomas More, it is difficult to speak of him in words which will not seem to you strained and exaggerated. Against him history has one charge to bring and only one. For the rest, it seems to many of us that his is absolutely the most perfect and lovable character in English annals, King Alfred's not excepted. A man of vast intellect and powers, yet of exquisite simplicity: a despiser of pomp and luxury, yet devoted to culture and refinement: courted by kings and princes, yet happy only in his home with his children: the first thinker of modern times, who yearned with passionate longing to ameliorate the lot of the toilers of the world: