

THE CULT OF INCOMPETENCE

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The Cult of Incompetence by Emile Faguet & Beatrice Barstow & Thomas Mackay

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THE CULT OF INCOMPETENCE

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TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
BEATRICE BARSTOW

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
THOMAS MACKAY

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

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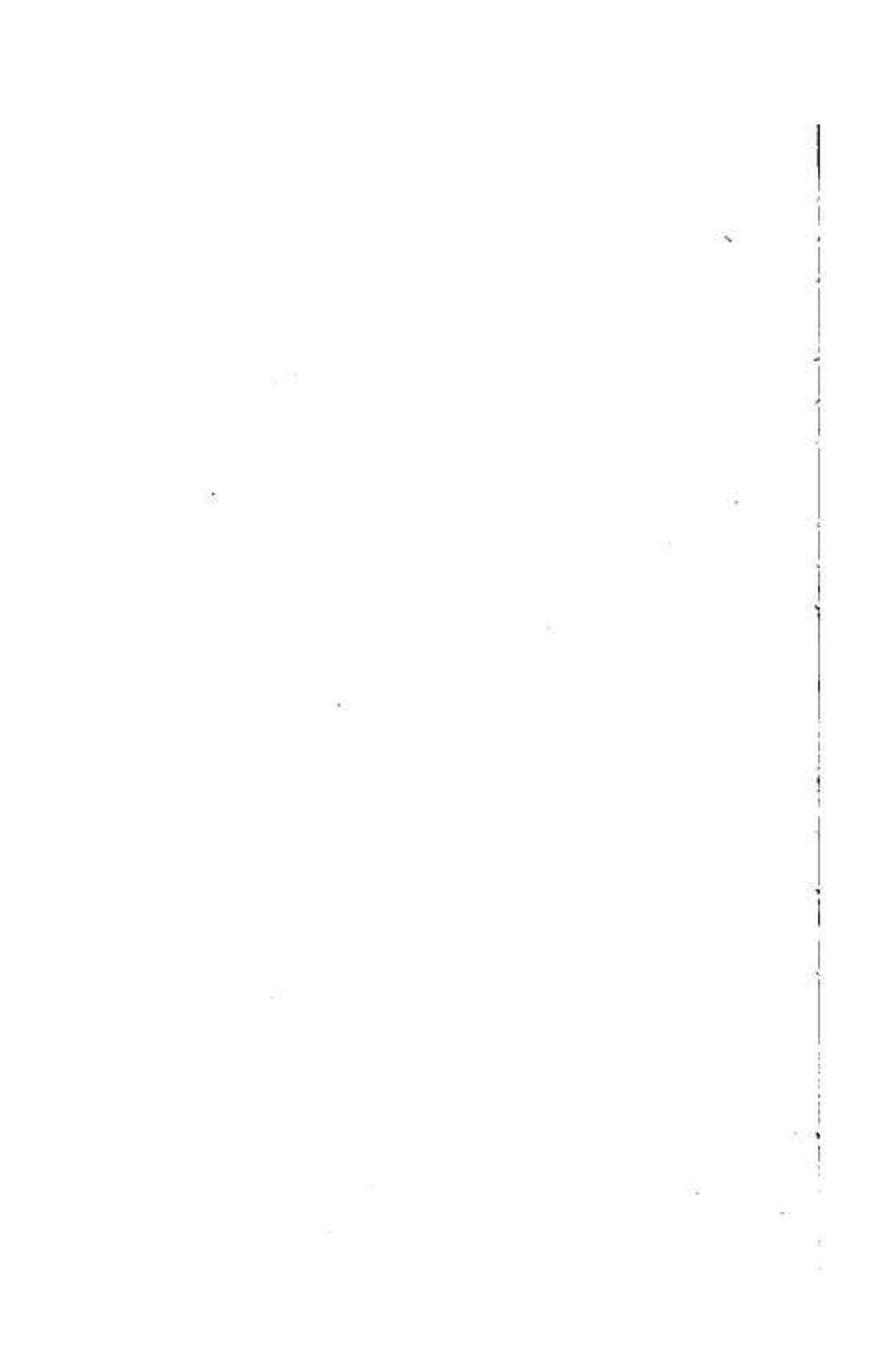
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INTRODUCTION.

THOUGH it may not have been possible in the following pages to reproduce the elegant and incisive style of a master of French prose, not even the inadequacies of a translation can obscure the force of his argument. The only introduction, therefore, that seems possible must take the form of a request to the reader to study M. Faguet's criticism of modern democracy with the daily paper in his hand. He will then see, taking chapter by chapter, how in some aspects the phenomena of English democracy are identical with those described in the text, and how in others our English worship of incompetence, moral and technical, differs considerably from that which prevails in France. It might have been possible, as a part of the scheme of this volume, to note on each page, by way of illustration, instances from contemporary English practice, but an adequate execution of this plan would have overloaded

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ANNONCE

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the text, or even required an additional volume. Such a volume, impartially worked out with instances drawn from the programme of all political parties, would be an interesting commentary on current political controversy, and it is to be hoped that M. Faguet's suggestive pages will inspire some competent hand to undertake the task.

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If M. Faguet had chosen to refer to England, he might, perhaps, have cited the constitution of this country, as it existed some seventy years ago, as an example of a "demophil aristocracy," raised to power by an "aristocracy-respecting democracy." It is not perhaps wise in political controversy to compromise our liberty of action in respect of the problems of the present time, by too deferential a reference to a golden age which probably, like Lycurgus in the text, p. 73, never existed at all, but it has been often stated, and undoubtedly with a certain amount of truth, that the years between 1832 and 1866 were the only period in English history during which philosophical principles were allowed an important, we cannot say a paramount, authority over English legislation. The characteristic features of the period were

a determination to abolish the privileges of the few, which, however, involved no desire to embark on the impossible and inequitable task of creating privileges for the many; a deliberate attempt to extirpate the servile dependence of the old poor law, and a definite abandonment of the plan of distributing economic advantages by eleemosynary state action. This policy was based on the conviction that personal liberty and freedom of private enterprise were the adequate, constructive influences of a progressive civilisation. Too much importance has perhaps been attached to the relatively unimportant question of the freedom of international trade, for this was only part of a general policy of emancipation which had a much more far-reaching scope. Rightly understood the political philosophy of that time, put forward by the competent statesmen who were then trusted by the democracy, proclaimed the principle of liberty and freedom of exchange as the true solvents of the economic problems of the day. This policy remained in force during the ministry of Sir R. Peel and lasted right down to the time of the great budgets of Mr. Gladstone.