

ENGLISH SOCIAL REFORMERS

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English social reformers by H. de B. Gibbins

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H. DE B. GIBBINS

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ENGLISH SOCIAL REFORMERS

BY
H. DE B. GIBBINS, M.A., LITT.D.

UNIVERSITY (CODDEN) PRIZEMAN IN POLITICAL ECONOMY,
OXFORD; AND AUTHOR OF "THE INDUSTRIAL
HISTORY OF ENGLAND," ETC., ETC.

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PREFACE

THE object of these few sketches is to elucidate the chief influences for social and industrial reform that have been active in England in the past, and, in one or two cases, to show their relation to problems of the present. In writing of the men from whom these influences proceeded, I have tried to let them, where possible, speak for themselves. If, therefore, it should seem that too large a portion of the text in certain places is in inverted commas, it is because the present writer recognizes that the words of the reformers he quotes are much better than his own.

I feel also that, in several cases, the sketch I have given of a reformer's life and thought is exceedingly inadequate. In the case of Ruskin it is hopelessly so. Nevertheless, I have tried to point out, without obtrusiveness, one thing throughout this book: that social reform of any kind, to be effective, must proceed from a change in the individual himself as well as a change in his material environment.

H. DE B. G.

*Nottingham,
March, 1892*

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

A FEW verbal changes have been made in the second edition, but it is otherwise the same as the first.

H. DE B. G.

March, 1902

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ENGLISH SOCIAL REFORMERS

THE REFORMERS

OF THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

Introductory

THERE have been many sudden changes and revolutions in the development of English social and industrial history ; for although the main current of evolution is generally gradual it is also, at times, accentuated and hastened by sudden rapids and cataracts in its course. History, after all, is occasionally dramatic, and in the acts of the great drama men pass across the stage, who stand out head and shoulders above all their fellow-actors in the permanent influence which they exercise upon the development of their time. Among these great dramas, or revolutions in our history, we have here to deal more especially with some two or three only, which affected our social development. They are the Peasants' Revolution of the fourteenth century, the Social Revolution of the sixteenth, and the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth. In each of these periods we find one or two characters who either voiced audibly the problems and difficulties of their day, or who, not content

2 REFORMERS OF THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY.

with being merely voices, aspired also to solve the questions of which they spoke. The two men whom the troublous times of the fourteenth century thus forced to speak and to act were John Ball, a mad priest, and William Langland, a poverty-stricken poet.

§ 1. *Mediæval England and its troubles.*

But before we see how these two men came to be numbered among the social reformers of our country, we must glance for a moment at the state of England in the first half of the fourteenth century. Almost up to the reign of Edward III. (1327—1377) the course of English history was one of regular and steady development. There had indeed been struggles and racial wars, but since the days of William the Conqueror, Danes, Saxons, and Normans had settled down peaceably together, and considerable progress had been made in our economic life. Towns grew up, and with them grew industry and wealth; merchants and artisans organized themselves in guilds;¹ the sobering influences of the Church and of Parliamentary government were being felt; the growth of the country as a social whole was going on apace.² But growth implies change, and the industrial growth of the nation both in agriculture and manufactures was sure to cause a disintegration of the old, essentially local, institutions of former days, and of the intimate relations between men of different classes which the old system produced. The close personal union, for instance,³ that existed between the lord of the manor and his villein tenants was being rapidly broken up; for the richer tenants

¹ Cf. the author's *Industrial History of England*, pp. 27—29.

² Cunningham: *Growth of English Industry and Commerce*, p. 334 sq.

³ *Industrial History of England*, pp. 40, and 68 sq.