

**REVIEW OF TICKNOR'S
HISTORY OF
SPANISH LITERATURE**

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Review of Ticknor's History of Spanish Literature by George Ticknor

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GEORGE TICKNOR

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*From Mr. J. D. Wilson
Nov-96*

REVIEW

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OF

TICKNOR'S HISTORY OF SPANISH LITERATURE.

By S. Hillard

[From the Christian Examiner for January, 1850.]

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REVIEW.

History of Spanish Literature. By GEORGE TICKNOR.
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pp. 568, 552, 549.

THERE are two points of view from which every book may be observed; one from without and the other from within. In the former case, it is compared with other books upon the same subject, or exposed to the test of an ideal standard. The critic ventures to assert whether a better book might not have been written with the materials at command, whether all the sources of information have been examined, whether the ground has been gone over superficially or thoroughly, and whether a spirit of accuracy presides over the minor details of names and dates. A judgment of this sort supposes in the critic a knowledge of the subject equal at least to that of the author whom he is reviewing.

But, on the other hand, every book furnishes to some extent the means of forming an estimate of its merits. Every book is a work of art, and of books of history and science we have a right to inquire both as to their substantial and their formal claims. A man of taste may know nothing of Sanscrit, and yet, if he read a treatise on Sanscrit literature, he will be able to say whether the style be good, and the general treatment of the subject judicious. Turner's *History of England* is very elaborate and learned; Hume's, on the contrary, is rather superficial. Yet, with the most moderate knowledge of English history, a reader is competent to decide that Hume is greatly the superior in the sagacity of his observations, in the philosophical tone of his understanding, and in the easy grace of his style. Robertson's *Charles the*

Fifth is not esteemed by those who are learned in the subject to be a very profound or a very accurate work. Few men are able to give an opinion on this point, but every scholar may venture to say that the author has treated the subject with great judgment, and commended it by a style of sustained and elaborate polish.

We think it no more than fair to our readers to state at the outset, that, in summoning Mr. Ticknor's book before our literary tribunal, we mean to try it upon the evidence which its own pages furnish. Our acquaintance with Spanish literature is far too slight to attempt any thing more. Indeed, we do not know the man on this side of the water who is competent to examine this work from a point of knowledge on a level with that which the author has reached. Mr. Ticknor's residence in Spain, his personal relations with many of its most distinguished scholars, the studious years he has devoted to the subject, and the command of an unrivalled Spanish library, give to his opinions and statements upon Spanish literature an authority which the most confident critic will hardly venture to resist. We aim at nothing higher than to give what shall strictly be a review of the work, to tell our readers what the author has aimed to accomplish, and with what success his efforts have been crowned, and to venture a modest judgment as to its literary merits of style, method, and arrangement. We feel the burden of our incompetence the less, because the work is not addressed to those who are learned or even curious in Spanish literature, but to all classes of intelligent and cultivated men. The author's purpose has been to present the literature of Spain as the true exponent of its civilization and the manners of its people, and to infuse into it that animating life-blood which flows from the great national heart of the country. Thus, while he has never lost sight of the cardinal points of accuracy and thoroughness, he has aimed to produce a book which shall be something more than a work for reference and consultation, — which shall be found in the drawing-room as well as in the study, — which shall be read by all who have a taste for literary history, or an enlightened curiosity as to the causes which have raised Spain so high and brought her so low.

In his arduous enterprise of writing the history of

Spanish literature, Mr. Ticknor has had no pioneer in English literature. This is rather a remarkable fact, as the Spanish peninsula has always been a favorite ground with the writers of England and of our own country. From his early travels in Spain, the vivid mind of Southey derived influences and impressions which tinged his whole literary life. Lockhart's versions of the Spanish ballads will preserve his name longer than any of his original works. The laurels of Prescott have been gathered on the soil of Spain and that of her colonies. In the same romantic land, Irving found the materials for his most elaborate historical work, and some of the most charming of his fictions. To these names may be added those of Robertson, Watson, Lord Holland, Napier, Lord Mahon, and Ford, as proofs of the interest which Spain has always awakened among the men of letters of England. But no one has yet written a history of Spanish literature in the English language. Nor, indeed, is any such work to be found in the Spanish language itself. That country has never been wanting in patient and laborious scholars, who have accumulated ample materials for literary history, and written with learning and ability upon particular authors and detached portions; but no one has arisen among them who has traced the growth of that rich and picturesque literature from its remote origin, through its splendid and vigorous prime, down to its mournful decay and decrepitude. The reader of Mr. Ticknor's volumes will be able to judge how far this may be owing to the fact, that, before the age of literary retrospection was reached in Spain, the spirit of the people had so withered away in the cold shade of the throne and the Inquisition, that men of letters had lost their heart, cheered neither by the genial patronage of the crown nor the animating voice of public opinion. It is thus rather a curious circumstance, that nine English readers out of ten get all their knowledge of Spanish literature from two writers who were neither Englishmen nor Spaniards. We need hardly say that we refer to Bouterwek and Sismondi.

Bouterwek, a name never to be mentioned without respect, was one of those laborious and conscientious German scholars who begin to write books before they are out of their teens, who labor in their literary vocation

with the patient industry of a mechanic toiling at his daily trade, and die at last with a proof-sheet in their hands. His History of Spanish Literature forms a part—a single volume only—of an elaborate work on the entire history of elegant literature in modern times, which appeared in twelve volumes, published at various periods between 1801 and 1819. The portion devoted to Spanish literature is very well done, characterized by just general views and a healthy tone of criticism, but is imperfect in many particulars, not only because a subject so extensive rendered it impossible to treat any part of it with any thing like minuteness, but also because in this particular department the author was embarrassed by the want of access to a complete Spanish library, which compelled him in many instances to rely upon extracts and second-hand opinions. In 1823 it appeared, together with its author's brief History of Portuguese Literature, in an English translation, made with taste and skill, by Miss Thomasina Ross.

We will not so far disparage our readers as to presume that they require to be told who and what Sismondi was. His lectures on the literature of the South of Europe, comprising an account of the Provençal and Portuguese, as well as the Spanish and Italian,—a work which would have exhausted the literary enterprise of many authors, but served only as an agreeable interruption to the severe historical researches of this eminent writer,—were delivered at Geneva in 1811, and published at Paris in 1813. The whole work has secured to itself a permanent place in European literature, and will always be read with interest, from the beauty of its style, the tasteful tone of its criticism, and the generous humanity of its sentiments; but in whatever relates to Spain, Sismondi was even less provided with original authors than Bouterwek, and he was consequently under obligations to his predecessor, which, though they are generously acknowledged, lessen the authority of his own labors. The whole work was translated into English, with notes, by Thomas Roscoe, and published in 1823.

Mr. Ticknor has been fortunate in the selection of a subject as yet unattempted by any writer in our own language, and in another respect he has also been fortunate. The literature of Spain presents a rich and fruitful theme

to a writer who looks upon literature as the expression of national feeling, and treats it in the spirit of a philosopher, and not of a bookworm. Perhaps no nation in Europe has so distinct and individual a character as the Spanish, and in no other is the literature more strongly marked by the national peculiarities. Its power and its weakness, its beauties and its defects, are alike drawn from the soil in which it grew. The Spanish character was formed in a period of struggle and contest with a race alien in blood and in religion, which lasted from the overthrow of the Gothic monarchy, in the eighth century, down to the capture of Granada, in the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella. When, after the memorable defeat of Roderick in 711, the remnants of the nation, stripped of every thing but faith and hope, retreated behind the mountain fastnesses of the Asturias, leaving nearly all the Peninsula in possession of the Moorish invaders, every thing seemed to portend the extinction of the Gothic race and the Christian religion. But under the stern nurture of adversity, a new class of virtues was called into being, — hardihood, enterprise, indomitable courage, and inflexible perseverance. In the unequal struggle which commenced, the Spaniards, though often baffled, were always successful. Slowly, inch by inch, the land was wrested from the grasp of the Moorish invader. What was won by fiery valor was defended with wakeful obstinacy. The Moors were gradually driven into narrower circles, till in the fifteenth century they ceased to exist as a separate people.

In this protracted struggle, continuing for more than seven centuries, the Spanish people were supported by an exalted sense of patriotism and devotion, which under ordinary circumstances would have been extravagant and fanatical. Every Spaniard lived and acted as if specially dedicated to the service of his God and his country. No motives less powerful, no pressure less strong, would have sustained the people in the arduous task which Providence had assigned to them. Under these influences there were developed in the Spanish character a fiery courage, an heroic constancy of purpose, and a fervor of religious faith, which made the nation for a long time the dominant power in Europe, which reared an empire upon which the sun never set, which inspired the romantic en-

terprises of Cortés and Pizarro, and chained victory to the car of the Great Captain.

But from the same fountain flowed both sweet and bitter waters. Few nations have paused for any length of time at that point in their progress in which the vertical sun of power and prosperity casts no shadow. That inevitable law of the natural body, by which the principle of decay begins its corroding work so soon as the full maturity of development has been reached, prevails also in political societies. The generous loyalty of Spain, which had led to such efforts and such sacrifices, degenerated into a blind and weak submission to the encroaching spirit of the crown, fatal to independence, to self-respect, and to all the manly virtues. The devotional feeling, which breathes in strains of such celestial purity through the poetry of Manrique and Luis de Leon, which upon a thousand fields of battle kindled the eye of the dying soldier with rapturous gleams of triumphant faith, and brought all the glories of heaven before his swimming gaze, became a fierce fanaticism, which made war alike upon true religion and constitutional liberty, converting the strong into rebels and the weak into hypocrites. The glory of Spain seemed at its height during the reign of Charles the Fifth; yet even at that time the throne and the Inquisition had begun to cast those poisonous shadows under which all the vital virtues of the country gradually withered away, until the Spanish monarchy became aptly typified by its own Escorial, a gloomy structure, half palace and half monastery, frowning over a desolate waste.

To these influences, which had so important a share in forming the Spanish character, must be added the effect of a tropical climate, with its alternations of passion and languor, and the Oriental element derived from the long residence of the Moors in the Peninsula, who, for a considerable period at least, were superior to their Christian rivals in cultivation and social refinement. The result of all this was a certain intensity of feeling, ever tending to the extremes of fanaticism and extravagance, and seldom checked by a keen sense of the ludicrous. The virtues of the Spaniard were always fluttering upon the verge of exaggeration, and breaking out in fantastic and absurd forms. In his true type, for example, he is honorably