

A Distinguished Editor and Litterateur.

A Sketch of Dr. W. Robertson Nicoll, of London, England.

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Ian Maclaren has become sufficiently conspicuous and popular to command a respectful hearing, whatever the nature of his deliverances; and, when in sober speech he says of a man "he is a wonderful man, he sees what nobody else sees, he's just 'no canny,'" our curiosity is piqued, and we are quite sure that the man characterized is worth knowing. The man thus described by the author of the "Bonnie Briar Bush" is W. Robertson Nicoll, M. A., LL. D., already famous in England rapidly gaining recognition in America. As Dr. Nicoll, if he lives, is destined more and more to exert a powerful influence on the best thought and life of England, especially from the Nonconformist side, it will be no presumption if one who has been for years an ardent admirer, should venture to pay a tribute to him in this public way.

1. Maclaren's descriptive phrase "A wonderful man" would be appropriate as applied to Dr. Nicoll, if for no other reason than that he is one of the most prodigious workers in the literary world. He is the editor of the British Weekly, perhaps today the most influential non-conformist weekly published in England. He is the editor of the Bookman, a monthly literary journal of great merit. He is the editor of the Expositor, a critical theological monthly, probably the best known and most widely read theological magazine in the English-speaking world. In 1891 he founded The Woman at Home, a monthly for English women, answering to the Ladies' Home Journal on this side the water. The active editorship was placed later in the hands of Annie S. Swan, but we suspect that Dr. Nicoll is still the supervising genius. His editorship of the first three of these publications is not perfunctory or merely directive, it is dominating and all-pervasive. Usually, in the British Weekly, for example, there appear two elaborate articles from his pen, one a religious leader, in bold print, filling the first page, the second a more familiar article, dealing with literature in general, and literary men and women. In addition to these articles, he contributes week by week, discriminating and trenchant notes upon current topics, which have to be reckoned with by thinking men both in church and state, and often an exquisite poem, modestly styled "Sunday Afternoon Verses." Of such quality are the religious leaders, that for years they have been reprinted in book form, under the title "Ten-minute Sermons by Dr. Nicoll." A collection of the poems has also been published. His thought and influence are equally the inspiring and controlling spirit of the other publications named.

This journalistic work, however, represents but a portion of his literary activity. He has edited many popular series of volumes, conspicuously "The Expositor's Bible," and "Little Books on Religion." He has compiled a very valuable anthology of religious poetry, entitled "Songs of Rest," and, in conjunction with Mr. Thos. Wise, two large volumes of "Literary Anecdotes of the Nineteenth Century." He has also written not a few most successful books, notably "The Key of the Grave," "The Lamb of God," and "The Life of Christ." As a Brontë specialist he is now engaged upon his edition of the Brontës, which will contain a mass of new material, and is expected to prove the most important contribution made to Brontë literature. Besides this varied literary work, Dr. Nicoll is in frequent requisition as a speaker at theological colleges, and at various religious and literary functions throughout the country.

2. In addition to this extraordinary capacity for work, Dr. Nicoll enjoys the distinction of a unique and important connection with the newer Scottish school of writers. Nothing more phenomenal has occurred in recent literature, than the rise, swift recognition, and vast popularity of this school, as represented by Ian Maclaren, J. M. Barrie, and S. R. Crockett.

Ian Maclaren's recent book "The Potter's Wheel," is dedicated "To W. Robertson Nicoll, who Constrained Me to Write." How much that means was explained in an interview granted to James Ashcroft Noble, and published in the Bookman last year. Maclaren tells how Nicoll bothered him to write some sketches of Scottish life, insisting that he could do it. "He kept on—talk, talk, talk,—in that queer quiet way of his, and I answered nothing, because there was nothing to say. Then he began to write letters, and finally to send telegrams." At last Maclaren wrote a story, which Nicoll promptly returned, with an accompanying note which ran: "I shall not print this story. It is not what I want, and not what I know that you can do. Write something else in your true vein, and send it to me soon." The outcome was the sketch "Domsie," and then the other articles which make up "The Bonnie Briar Bush," and "Auld Lang Syne," all of which the readers of the British Weekly had the delight of reading, before the world at large was taken captive by their publication in book form, and Ian Maclaren had become a household name. It was in connection with Nicoll's insight and persist-

ency as above described, that Maclaren said of him, "he is a wonderful man, he sees what nobody else sees, he's just 'no canny.'"

Less romantic, but hardly less significant, was Dr. Nicoll's connection with the early work of J. M. Barrie, and his struggles for a place. In "Margaret Ogilvy," among the delicate and delicious disclosures of that book, which an authority has said "stands unmatched in literature as an idyll of the divinest of human feelings—a mother's love," Barrie acknowledges his obligations to two editors, whose names are reserved, in the following fashion: "at last publishers . . . were found for us by a dear friend, who made one woman, (Barrie's mother) very uplifted. He also was an editor, and had as large a part in making me a writer of books as the other editor in determining what the books should be about." For the key to this passage we are indebted to the report of an American interview had with Mr. Barrie, when, in 1896, he was on this continent, the guest of Mr. G. W. Cable; also to the introduction to the complete edition of Barrie's works, published in 1896. The editor who was the first man to take any interest in the Thrums sketches, was Frederick Greenwood of the St. James Gazette; and the other editor, the "dear friend," who clearly discerned the young Scotsman's genius; who opened the columns of his paper to the Scottish sketches; who first gave him the chance to sign his sketches, "which," says Barrie, "was a big step for me;" who induced Hodder and Stoughton later on to accept for publication the "Auld Licht Idylls," after they had been refused by other houses, even when offered as a gift; and who finally gave the book a magnificent send-off as soon as it appeared;—the editor who did all this was Dr. Nicoll. These many obligations Mr. Barrie at one time or another, has acknowledged in the most open and grateful fashion. It is a pardonable satisfaction, not to say boast, of the editor, now that Mr. Barrie has become famous, that the British Weekly had the glory of publishing in its columns, before the articles were made into books, part of the "Auld Licht Idylls," a large part of the "Window in Thrums," the novel "When a Man's Single," and the series "An Edinburgh Eleven."

To complete the distinguished connection of Dr. Nicoll with the recent development in Scottish literature, Mr. S. R. Crockett also has confessions to make of indebtedness, and right frankly and warmly does he make them. In the Christmas number of the British Weekly for 1897 appeared numerous brief messages from the more distinguished contributors to the paper, among them one bearing the signature, S. R. Crockett. "You ask me," he writes, "for a word of greeting. What more can I say than that I was an original subscriber and a constant reader ever since the first number appeared, and that the British Weekly said the first good word for my first book. You showed kindness unspeakable to a man unknown and discouraged. You are, sir, of the great company of the encouragers who make the wheels of the world go round. More power to your elbow."

That these three writers should have been virtually discovered, and started on the highroad to fame, by one and the same man, of itself marks him as a man of extraordinary discernment and force.

3. But having spoken of Dr. Nicoll's phenomenal insight in the foregoing particular, we are led to remark that this gift of insight is a feature of every department of his work, and constitutes a leading mark of his distinction. If genius consists in doing what nobody else has done, but which, being done, everybody recognizes as just the natural and right thing, so natural indeed that men wonder why they did not instinctively think of that very thing themselves, and do it, then Dr. Nicoll's insight amounts to genius.

The British Weekly, for example, was in several respects a creation in English religious journalism. The leading articles in the religious journals were wont to deal mainly with ecclesiastical matters, or politics, or literature. Discerning this defect, the Weekly set out with the ideal of making its conspicuous leader a religious article, a purpose which has been gloriously fulfilled. We know of nothing in contemporary journalism, or periodical literature, to surpass these weekly leaders, in the purity and beauty of their style, or the freshness and grasp of their thought. Again, there was formerly a remoteness between nonconformist religious life and literature, nonconformists behaving too much like "exiles from the world of culture." To wed literature and a deep, enlightened evangelicalism was the ambition of Dr. Nicoll, and how triumphantly he has done, and is doing, every reader of the Weekly knows.

The Woman at Home supplied what everybody now sees was a great lack in the periodical literature of England. The Expositor's Bible projected and edited by Dr. Nicoll, was a creation in the realm of theological literature. Prior to its production there were critical commentaries in plenty, keen, scholarly, but often excessively analytical and disconnected, devoid of the flow and flavor of literature, the last books in the world that any man, save the critical theologian, could find use for. There were also sermons in plenty. But preachers worth the name prefer to make their own sermons. What was

needed was a creation which should stand half way between the critical commentary proper and the sermon, and be at once a critical and searching exposition, and a book possessing continuity, readability, warmth, life style, and all the best qualities of literature. Just such a series of books is the Expositor's Bible, in which the Scriptures have received a richer and more attractive exposition than ever before. The insight which recognized this need, and how to meet it, was matched by the insight Dr. Nicoll exhibited in his choice of the men for the respective parts of his great task. What could be more perfect than Dr. Alexander McLaren as the expositor of the Psalms and Colossians, Dr. Marcus Dods of Genesis and the Gospel by John, and Dr. George Adam Smith of Isaiah?

Just as truly was the series, "Little Books on Religion," born of insight. There has been no lack for a good while past of small books of a devotional sort; but for the most part they have been pietistic in their thought and spirit, sweet and good, but lacking in freshness and virility of thought and style. As a consequence they have failed to accomplish much among thinking and cultivated people. The new series, created and edited by Dr. Nicoll, precisely fills the gap. The writers are such men as Ian Maclaren, Dr. Denny, Dr. Alexander Whyte, Dr. Marcus Dods; the subjects such as "The Upper Room," "Gospel Questions and Answers," "The Four Temperaments," "Why Be a Christian?" while the treatment is uniformly marked by strength, freshness, beauty and spiritual penetration.

4. A few biographical facts, respecting the early career of one who at forty-seven has achieved such eminence, will not be without interest. At this point we are chiefly indebted to the report of "An Interview with Dr. Nicoll," by Henry Dixon, published in the "Sunday Magazine," May, 1896. Dr. Nicoll was born in 1851 in the Parish of Auchindoir, Aberdeenshire, where his father was Free Church Minister. There were four children, of whom Dr. Nicoll is the sole survivor. The eldest sister was a gifted poetess, and the youngest brother a brilliant author and journalist. Dr. Nicoll's father possessed one of the finest libraries in Scotland. All his life he had been a diligent collector of books, and at his death the manse contained over 15,000 volumes. His children thus became acquainted with all the greatest books in the language, and it was from the many rare and quaint books in the collection that Dr. Nicoll acquired his unique knowledge of the by-ways of English literature.

At the age of fourteen Dr. Nicoll went to Aberdeen University, where he spent four years. (It was Aberdeen which in 1891 conferred the degree of LL. D.) The four years at the University were followed by four years at the Theological Hall. At the early age of twenty-two he was ordained as minister of the Free Church at Duftown in Banffshire. From a recent article on "Criticism and Criticism," by Dr. Nicoll himself, we learn that he began the work of literary criticism in earnest while yet a youth of seventeen at the University. Throughout his ministry at Duftown he was a versatile contributor to many of the most popular weekly and monthly periodicals of Scotland, and during these four years published his first volume of sermons, entitled "Calls to Christ," other devotional works, and the first edition of the "Songs of Rest." A full knowledge of these early years would go a good way towards explaining the amazing fertility and facility of Dr. Nicoll's pen today.

In 1877 he removed from Duftown to Kelso, where he became the third minister of the Free church, of which Dr. Horatius Bonar was the first minister. He remained at Kelso for seven years, and became universally recognized as one of the ablest preachers in Scotland. The highest honors of the Free church seemed well within his reach. Abating nothing in devotion to his ministerial duties, his literary activity became more and more conspicuous and influential. It was during this pastorate that he was appointed editor of the "Expositor," in succession to the famous Dr. Samuel Cox, deceased, and undertook other important literary work for Messrs. Hodder and Stoughton. In 1885 illness obliged him to resign his charge at Kelso, and for a year he rested on the continent. Returning to England, he entered upon his great literary career.

It was in November, 1886, that Hodder and Stoughton decided to publish the British Weekly under Dr. Nicoll's editorship. A recent statement of his, meant as a tribute to the publishers, reveals at the same time the large confidence reposed in a man of thirty-five summers by this experienced firm. Dr. Nicoll says, "No editor was ever more generously treated by his proprietors than I have been. My hands were left absolutely free. There was no dictation; there has even been no suggestion. The proprietors have confined themselves to using their great business enterprise and energy to advance the paper, and everything else has been left to the editor." The paper attracted attention from the first by its brilliant articles and the freshness of its news. Gradually the most distinguished men in the different churches gathered round it as contributors, and in twelve years it has been developed into a journal of first-class influence in Britain, and has become, as Dr. Clifford on his return to England