

LETTERS OF THOMAS ERSKINE, of Linlathen.  
 Edited by William Hanna, D.D., Author of  
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 David Douglas.

These "Letters" are the genuine expression of a very remarkable and rare character, and give at least the fragmentary portraiture of a remarkable and ideally beautiful life. "Thomas Erskine, of Linlathen" (a small estate on the east coast of Scotland), is well known to a limited class of readers, who combine high culture and earnest thought with a warm and evangelical Christianity. By not a few of these Mr. Erskine's theological writings are still read and appreciated, and those who are acquainted with the growth of theological thought, not only in Scotland but in England, know how largely Mr. Erskine and his friend and fellow-labourer in the highest sense—John McLeod Campbell—have given impulse and form to the best theological thought of the present day.

Thomas Erskine, a descendant of a line of illustrious Erskines, including Colonel John Erskine, and Erskine of the "Institutes," was a young advocate in Edinburgh when Walter Scott, then a clerk of the Court of Session, was beginning to draw attention as the author of "Waverley," while the "Edinburgh Reviewers"—Jeffrey, Cockburn, Fullerton, his own own intimate friends—were at the height of their professional fame. The young man of twenty-three, thrown into the brilliant intellectual society of that day, passed through an "eclipse of faith" more common now than it was then. Writing in advanced age, and referring to this period of his life, he says: "Like many in the present day, I came in after life to have misgivings as to the credibility of this wonderful history (that of the miraculous in connection with the person and life and teaching of Christ). But the patient study of the narrative, and of its place in the history of the world, and the perception of a light in it which entirely satisfied my reason and my conscience, finally overcame these misgivings and forced on me the conviction of its truth." His legal career was cut short by the death of his elder brother,—an event which was a heavy blow to him, and which involved his succession to the family estate, with new duties and responsibilities. With the view of leaving to his legal friends some expression of his own warm re-established faith, he prepared the first of his theological writings, which, however, was not published till some twelve years afterwards, when it appeared as an introductory essay to the "Letters of the Rev. Samuel Rutherford," its author being by that time favourably known as a writer. In this earliest production, he strikes the key-note of the theme which, during his whole life, and throughout these "Letters," he loved to elaborate and impress. "It follows," he says, "that a restoration to spiritual

health, or conformity to the Divine character, is the *ultimate object* of God in His dealings with the children of men. Whatever else God hath done with regard to men has been subsidiary, and with a view to this; even the unspeakable work of Christ, and pardon freely offered through His cross, have been but means to a further end; and that end is, that the adopted children of the family of God might be conformed to the likeness of their elder brother; that they might resemble Him in character, and thus enter into his joy. The sole object of Christian belief is to produce the Christian character, and unless this is done nothing is done."

From 1816 to 1870 Mr. Erskine lived at Linlathen a comparatively uneventful life, so far as outward events go; never marrying, but forming around him a household, of which two married sisters were the most prominent and permanent members—both nobly gifted as to intellectual qualities and Christian character. The quiet country life at Linlathen, of which the leisure was devoted to writing the books he has left to perpetuate his religious teaching, was varied by frequent winters in Edinburgh, and by continental tours, much enjoyed by a mind so keenly alive to the beautiful in nature and art, as well as so richly stored with classical learning and historic associations. He was a connoisseur and collector of pictures, and his drawing-room at Linlathen contained a choice, though small collection, in which were a number of originals by time-honoured names. On one of his first tours he thus expresses the only half-approved-of delight with which he studied the art treasures at Florence. "My dear sister, what a strange world it is. It seems most extraordinary to myself that I can, in the midst of such a world of death, and sin and sorrow, find enjoyment in marble cut into certain forms, and colours laid on canvas; and yet I really find immense enjoyment in it. I feel almost as if I had gotten a new sense." And then follows an enthusiastic appreciation of the "surpassing genius of those old Greek sculptors." But however alive he might be to the fleeting beauty of what he himself would have called the transient and phenomenal, no man ever walked under a more solemn and abiding sense of spiritual realities, as the only realities; to no one was the spiritual world more fully and vividly present. An enthusiastic student of Plato, he might be described as a Christian idealist—finding in God's great purpose for man, and in Christ as the manifestation of that purpose, the key to all problems, and what he believed would prove to be the satisfactory solution of all mysteries.

Wherever Mr. Erskine went he made the power of his strong spiritual influence felt. The large collection of letters which fill these volumes are evidence of the wide influence he wielded; and the fact that they are addressed