

A GOOD BIOGRAPHY.*

A GOOD biography may be made out of very indifferent material. The author may so idealize his subject that a very commonplace personage will almost appear sublime. It might also happen that a splendid subject for biographical treatment may fall into the hands of one who lacks discernment, who, in place of clothing his subject with the heroic attire which properly belongs to him, may dress him in a suit of misfit, rendering him, almost in spite of his great proportions, an object of ridicule. It is a good thing when a good man obtains a good biographer. This is manifestly the case with the life of William B. Robertson, D.D.

Shortly after his death was announced, the hope was expressed in these columns that a biography should appear in due time, and that his intimate and appreciative friend, Dr. Brown, might be fittingly chosen for the task of writing it. Both expectations have been completely realized. The work is done admirably. In presenting his view of the life of his departed friend, Dr. Brown has observed the laws of proportion. The arrangement of material is admirable. All temptation to expand or to exaggerate has been firmly and successfully repressed. There is no unnatural outburst of exuberant eulogy, nothing false or unreal about the book, as there was nothing strained or artificial about the noble man whose memory is so fittingly and so lovingly perpetuated in this entrancing volume.

Dr. Brown has done his work well. The life of a thoughtful, earnest and even original student and preacher of the Gospel is not usually full of striking incident or abrupt surprises. Matters of intense interest to the quiet and reflective student may appear tame and unimportant to the average reader who desires objective movement and life. Of the materials at his disposal Dr. Brown has made a judicious use. He has done the best that can be done, and the result is a finely limned likeness of a remarkable man. The likeness is good, faithful and true, but it is only a likeness after all. The reader to whom Robertson of Irvine was unknown can gather no adequate idea of the man he was from this book with only, alas, here and there brilliant fragments that have been preserved by the loving care of personal friends, or that by chance have escaped loss, amid the miscellaneous contents of the gifted writer's study. Had Dr. Robertson set to himself the task of producing a work worthy of his powers, it is no exaggeration to say that it would have found a permanent place in the literature of the Victorian age, as the few exquisite poems and the no less rich and ornate prose selections that appear in the volume attest.

Dr. Robertson affords another illustration of the value of careful parental training and home education. He may not have inherited wealth from his parents, but he owed to them what no wealth could in itself procure. They were intelligent, sincere, practical Christians, and their precepts and example were carefully noted and fondly cherished by the young student as well as by his brother, Dr. James Robertson, of Newington, Edinburgh, a man beloved, respected and honoured. There was nothing extraordinary in his boyhood and youth to distinguish him from his fellows. He was sent to Glasgow University at the preposterously early age of twelve. As might be expected he did not attract much attention as a scholar of distinguished merit. He did not even study hard in the ordinary sense, but from first to last he was a most diligent reader and the range of his reading was wide and varied. He came in contact with Thomas De Quincey who seems to have exercised a wonderful influence over him at the most susceptible period of his mental development, and his subsequent visit to Germany for the purpose of pursuing a special course of study at Halle, where he came under the benign influence of Tholuck marked the full awakening of those remarkable powers with which he was dowered by nature, and which subsequently were so perceptibly hallowed by grace.

After his return to his native land, and after receiving license, he was soon called by the congregation of Irvine, where he became endeared to his people by the thorough consecration and adaptiveness of his ministry. His preaching was of the highest order. It was in a style completely his own. He was the imitator of no man, and no man could make his style of preaching a model for his own. Dr. Guthrie excelled in the vividness of his pictorial illustration, and William Arnot united with power of illustration a massive solidity of Scripture doctrine, but Robertson's sermons were prose-poems in which the truth and beauty of the Gospel were blended by a power and inspiration peculiarly his own.

*LIFE OF REV. WILLIAM ROBERTSON, D.D. With Extracts from his Letters and Poems. By Rev. James Brown, D.D., Paisley. (Glasgow: J. Maclehose & Sons; Toronto: Williamson & Co.)

When communion seasons were "great occasions," the question for years in Edinburgh and Glasgow was, Where is Candlish to preach, where Cairns, where Robertson? And wherever Robertson did preach, he had a congregation as large as the building could contain and an audience that hung on his words till the closing amen was pronounced. While he was most faithful in his preparation for the pulpit, and devoted so much energy to the work of preaching, he was no less deeply interested in the religious training of the young in Bible class and Sabbath school. Most conscientiously also did he preform the work of pastoral visitation, and in homes where sickness, death and bereavement were, he was in the truest sense a son of consolation.

He was called to several important city charges, but these he felt it be his duty to decline. He was strongly attached to his people, and they to him, and he felt that the sphere of labour assigned him was one of no ordinary importance. As an illustration of the spirit by which he was animated, the following brief extract from his address in Presbytery, declining the call to Shamrock Street Church, Glasgow, may serve as an example:

Some worldly people may give me credit for making a sacrifice. They know nothing of the lofty, spiritual regions in which such questions are discussed. To them it is a mere question of a lower or higher position, of a less or greater salary; therefore, I crave leave to say the question in this form has never been present to my mind, and I will not take credit for making sacrifice when I do not feel in my heart that I am doing anything of the kind. Some Christian epicureans seem to think that the way of duty is always that which is lighted with the silver and golden lamps, while Christian stoics think it is that which is marked with the most numerous crosses and the sharpest thorns. For my part, I believe that it is neither, or that it may be either, but that it is always that on which the spirit of the Lord leads, whose prayer-sought guidance I seek to follow, undeterred alike by the splendour on the one side, or the comparative obscurity on the other.

After a period of retirement from the active duties of the ministry and a lengthened continental visit, Dr. Robertson was able, though still in feeble health, to preach with something of his old-time power for a short time at Cambridge, where his discourses were much appreciated. His final illness was protracted, but when the end came he fell asleep enjoying the hope and faith it was the delight of his heart and the work of his life to commend to others. His memory will be lovingly cherished by all who knew him.

ALESSANDRO GAVAZZI.

A CABLE despatch last week announced the death of a man who held for many years an important place in the public estimation. The clerical leader of the national movement in Italy, popularly known as Father Gavazzi, has ended his long, eventful and distinguished career. He was born at Bologna in 1809, so that at the time of his death he had nearly reached his eightieth year. At an early age he joined the monastic fraternity of the Barnabites and while still a young man was appointed professor of rhetoric at Naples, in which position he soon attracted public attention because of his gift of eloquence and his earnest desire to see religion freed from the corruptions with which in the Roman Catholic Church it had become encrusted. Even in Naples he soon evoked the enthusiasm of the progressive party, and his earnest advocacy of civil and religious freedom gained for him the ardent attachment of those who were in sympathy with the movement whose cause he so eloquently advocated. While he attached the enthusiastic devotion of the Nationalists, he roused against himself the fierce opposition of the reactionary and clerical parties. For the time, however, liberalism was in the ascendant at the Vatican, an abode to which it has almost uniformly been a stranger, and where now it meets only with the most uncompromising opposition.

With the accession to the so-called chair of St. Peter of Pio Nono, there was the brief vision of a reforming Pope. For a time young Gavazzi was in favour with the Vatican, and was appointed by the Pope in the first fervour of the national movement during the revolutionary year 1848 as almoner to the Roman volunteer army who went to the Lombardo-Venetian campaign. So stirring were the eloquence and energy of Gavazzi that he was popularly known for a time as the modern Peter the Hermit. Pius IX., either from constitutional timidity or insincerity, or the determined force of ultramontane influences behind the Papacy, or perhaps by all these combined, began to temporize and withdrew the Roman legion, and then came his troubles thick and fast. The flight to Gaeta, the brilliant but brief-lived triumvirate, consisting of Mazzini, Armellini and Saffi, papal protests and appeals to foreign powers, the despatch of French troops to the Pope's assistance, the siege and fall of Rome, and the flight of the revolutionary leaders followed in quick succession.

During the continuance of these agitations Gavazzi was appointed almoner-in-chief to the National Army, and was able to equip a most efficient hospital service for the care of the sick and wounded. When the Roman Republic was overthrown the hero-priest had to take refuge in flight. He found a safe asylum and an enthusiastic welcome in England where he lectured on the Italian question to immense audiences in all the large cities and towns of Great Britain. In those days he had not acquired the mastery of the English language which he subsequently achieved, but even in his own mellifluous speech he was able by his remarkable oratorical powers to convey to the average hearer no inconsiderable part of his meaning. There was a charm in his eloquence which never failed to arouse his hearers.

Gavazzi made a visit to Canada and the United States, where he also met with a most enthusiastic reception. Such a welcome however was not universal. The memory of the Gavazzi riots in Montreal and Quebec, which unfortunately resulted in a serious loss of life, will not soon be forgotten.

Though Alessandro Gavazzi was politically opposed to the Papacy, he was reluctant to break with the Roman Catholic Church, having the same longing that many of the best of her sons have cherished, that she might herself work out her own reformation from within. In this opinion, such men as Père Hyacinthe, and the leaders of the Old Catholic movement have shared. Pure and lofty as their motives and aims have been, they have reason to doubt the correctness of the course they have pursued. At all events, Gavazzi was at length driven to renounce the religion, as well as the rule of Rome. His position was one essentially Protestant. He held the fundamental doctrines of evangelical Christianity, but stood aloof from all other Protestant bodies, though on fraternal terms with them all, and founded the Free Church of Italy, which became respectable in numbers and influence. Of late years, efforts have been made to bring about a union of this body with the grand old historic church of the Waldenses, and though it has not yet been effected, the indications are favourable now to its speedy accomplishment.

In 1881 Gavazzi paid his last visit to the American continent, taking Toronto on his way, where he preached vigorous and stirring discourses in Erskine and Cooke's Churches, which moved the usually grave and decorous worshippers in these churches to occasional outbursts of applause. Now his eloquent voice is silent, and his stalwart form is removed from the ranks of living men, but his memory and example will long remain a vital force in the Italian nation, for whose progress in civil and religious liberty he gave the labours of his long and self-denying life.

Books and Magazines.

FAIRY AND FOLK TALES OF THE IRISH PEASANTRY. Edited and Selected by W. B. Yeats. (London: Walter Scott, Toronto: W. J. Gage & Co.)—What Dean Ramsay did for Scottish anecdote, illustrative of national character, Mr. Yeats in this attractive and fascinating little volume has done for the Irish people.

IN the December number of *Knox College Monthly* there are a number of excellent contributions; one of them, the opening paper, by Mr. William Houston, on the "Pulpit and English Scholarship," deserves careful perusal from its own intrinsic excellence, and especially because of the sound conclusions expressed by a writer and thinker of his mental acuteness, varied and extensive reading and educational experience.

THE CANADIAN EDUCATIONAL MONTHLY. (Toronto: The Educational Monthly Publishing Co.)—The January number of this well conducted and useful educational magazine is one of more than average excellence. Dr. McLellan has a paper on "The Art of Questioning." Professor Gregg, in every way a competent authority, gives a "History of Knox College." There are other valuable papers, and much serviceable information in this month's issue.

THE ENGLISH ILLUSTRATED MAGAZINE. (New York: MacMillan & Co.)—This attractive magazine gives special attention to art. The frontispiece for the January number is a reproduction of Lorenzo di Credi's picture of the Virgin and Child, in the National Gallery. The other illustrated papers are "Glimpses of Old English Homes—Berkeley Castle;" "Gwalior," by Hon. Lewis Wingfield, and "London Models," by Oscar Wilde—There are two serial works of fiction in progress—"The House of the Wolf," by Stanley J. Weyman, and "Sant' Ilario" by F. Marion Crawford.