

*BRIEF LITERARY NOTES.*

[Carefully selected from various sources and compiled specially for THE OWL.]

History, to the glance of the young, has the interest of an exciting spectacle, and, to the eye of the old it is as inspiring and instructive as the lessons of a patriarch. It is obvious, therefore, that the two classes will approach a work on history with very different feelings. This divergence of inclination, founded as it is upon the advance of age, a continuously changing factor, renders it no easy matter to prescribe a course of historical reading for a single individual, even though he is an intimate friend, whose character and culture, whose aims and habits, whose leisure and opportunities are all supposed to be familiarly known to the writer. It is more difficult to do so for many persons each of whom may differ from all the others. All that is purposed in the following paragraphs is a brief statement of a few simple principles which, it is hoped, the less experienced reader will find it to his advantage diligently to apply.

A thorough mastery of the field of history is not the work of a day nor of a month. To fix in the mind the dates of the most important events, to impress the events themselves upon the memory so that they shall be permanent and familiar, to settle the great questions which are in dispute in respect to facts and principles, to be able to summon at call the great pictures which make up the diorama of the world's past, can be achieved only by the few students to whom historical research is the exclusive occupation of their life. It is quite true that one may learn a compend of events, a table of dates within a few months. One may commit to memory an outline history of Greece and Rome, of Europe in the Middle Ages, of Great Britain and the United States. But outlines alone do not constitute pictures nor do dates and figures taken separately make up history. To master the history of the countries just named so as intelligently to enjoy it and derive instruction from it, requires a far longer period, and must be at the shortest, the work of several years of earnest and awakened attention. If these contentions are correct, and they have never been questioned, they point to the fact that the extensive and detailed study of history requires time.

The needs of each individual should be allowed to indicate where his course of historical reading is to begin. Books are instruments by which knowledge may be obtained. It naturally follows, therefore, that the book on which every man should first lay his hands is the book which will instruct, amuse, or elevate him most in any direction in which his needs are the most imperative, whatever the subject matter may be. This general rule applies with extraordinary force to historical reading. If we assume that the entire field is to anyone unoccupied and unknown, there are yet certain countries, personages or events—one or all—of which every man has some immediate interest to know something. The history you desire most to know something about is the history which you should read first. But suppose a person has but few historical needs, at least few of which he is conscious, and little or no curiosity, what shall be said to him? Should there be such a person, we have only to say, that it may be the time has not come for him—and it may be it ought never to come—to read history at all. It may be safer to recommend the man who imagines he is sufficiently versed in such lore to put to himself a few test questions bearing upon the affairs of some country. He will soon find out, we venture to say, that if all that he does not know about the subject were written out in volumes, his ignorance would furnish a large library with a variety of valuable material.

History should be read after the laws and habits of the sort of memory with which the reader is naturally endowed. To force the mind is cruelly to coerce a good friend. Some memories retain dates and numbers, others prefer actions and scenes. Comparatively few possess a marked retentiveness for both combined or separated. It must not be forgotten, though, that history may inscribe many most valuable lessons upon the memory of those who can remember the dates of but few of the great events which it records. It is perfectly true, also, that to any person who reads history with a moderate degree of intelligence and reflection, the chronology of the subject-matter may be invested with a high in-