

THE LIVES OF MEN OF LETTERS.

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IN his delightful Introduction to "The Essays of Elia," which Mr. Augustine Birrell has edited, this critic has raised an exceedingly interesting question, and touched upon a thought that must have frequently forced itself upon the true lover of literature.

"It would be hard to explain," says Mr. Birrell, "why the lives of men, so querulous, so affected, so centred in self, so adverse to the probing of criticism, so blind to the smallness of their fame as most authors stand revealed in their biographies and letters to have been, should yet be so incessantly interesting."

It is frequently asserted that the various epochs of literature, with their effect upon general movements in the history of the world, together with the story of the lives of the writers of a particular age, are of quite secondary importance to a study of the works which we owe to the genius of those writers. Excellent as this precept is, in a general sense those who urge this practice are liable to forget the value of an author's life in its relation to his work. To follow strictly such a rule may even cause a great misunderstanding as to the purport of a work of art. By refusing to gain some knowledge of the details of an author's life we undoubtedly lose a large part of the interest which attaches itself to his work. We wish to know how a man has been helped by his predecessors in his life of thought, we long to trace the progress of his mental activity and power; and it may be said with truth, that with an even stronger interest, we follow him in the ups and downs of his journey from obscurity—perchance to fame. Our

knowledge of the life of a man of letters, with even those minor details and incidents which are in themselves, perhaps, insignificant, has a certain charm about it which we are unable to recognize in the lives of other men. In the present day it would be folly to add to that "talk" of the kind that has been wisely designated "chatter about Shelley," and "prattle about Lamb." Even worse is that repellent kind of criticism which suggests the idea of poking your finger into the breakfast room, the study, or the house generally, of a modern poet or novelist. The intense pleasure which some readers find in the knowledge that "Lord Tennyson had a cup of coffee for his breakfast on Monday morning," or "Mr. George Meredith was seen in the stalls of a London theatre on Tuesday evening," or something that very nearly approaches twaddle of this description is amazing; but it is a criticism—save the mark! that will die a natural death.

The story of Goldsmith's happy-go-lucky existence—the wild escapades of his boyhood, the ever cheerful temper and generosity of his manhood—this life touches a tender chord of sympathy, blended possibly with humour, in the hearts of all admirers of the work he left us—the immortal "Vicar of Wakefield."

Dr. Johnson's life, apart from its almost inseverable connection with the name of Boswell, is to many readers of far greater interest than are the works his mighty brain brought forth as the result of his patient and laborious toil. Carlyle has reminded us that this sturdy, independent Samuel Johnson was "yet a giant invincible soul." It is difficult to pass over