

Goldwin Smith on "Shakespeare: the Man."

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UNDER this arresting title a slender volume has just appeared from the pen of Mr. Goldwin Smith; the publishers being Morang and Co., of Toronto, and the English agent Mr. T. Fisher Unwin. The author's object, according to his sub-title, is "to find traces of the dramatist's personal character in his dramas." But this is not what the author really attempts. Such an enterprise would involve the most careful and subtle analysis, and the result would extend to far more than these seventy-seven pages of type, of twenty narrow lines each, surrounded with extraordinary and extravagant margins. Mr. Goldwin Smith merely endeavors, in a rather cursory fashion, to deduce some of Shakespeare's opinions from his writings. In doing this he prints several long quotations, which help to make a small book of his little essay. By way of "apology" he expresses a doubt whether "familiarity with Shakespeare is so common as it was in former days"—a negative phenomenon which he associates with the "tidal-wave of popular and sensational fiction now flowing." But is not this a mistaken idea? Nothing in the London publishing world is so remarkable as the multiplicity of editions of Shakespeare. Library editions and pocket editions pour forth almost every season. That they are purchased goes without saying; and that they find readers is at least presumable. We will allow that the vast bulk of the British public are ignorant of Shakespeare's works; but that is only because they are ignorant of all high and serious literature. Yet the people who do read such literature are certainly, if slowly, increasing in number; and we venture to say that there are many more students of Shakespeare to-day than there ever were before.

Professor Smith remarks that materials connected with Shakespeare's personal history have been "gathered with the most loving and persevering industry." "Unhappily," he adds, "they amount to very little." Strictly speaking, this is true; relatively speaking, it is false. Shakespeare was not a public man, in the then prevailing sense of the expression. He was not a soldier, a politician, a diplomatist, or even a religious sectarian. He belonged to a profession that was more or less disreputable, and as a man of letters he could only win distinction within a very limited circle. It is not to be expected, therefore, that we should be able to learn as much about him personally as we can about Lord Bacon, for instance, or Sir Walter Raleigh. Both these men were great writers, but they were also public men in the fullest sense of the word. Bacon was Lord Chancellor of England, and Raleigh was a renowned adventurer and explorer. Considering who and what Shakespeare was, it is wonderful that we know so much about his personal history. We have more ample and precise records of his life than we have of the life of any other dramatist of the period; or even of the life of a splendid courtly poet like Spenser, who was patronized by Elizabeth, and had several other patrons amongst the proudest nobility. It is high time, in our opinion, to drop the common, but rather silly, astonishment at the paucity of the materials for Shakespeare's biography. And, after all, as Emerson said, Shakespeare is revealed to us, as far as he can be revealed, in his writings. "Speak, that I may know you," is a grand old saying. The printed page is a mechanical accident. It is the thought, the imagination, the language, purely in themselves, that come from a great writer's brain. And they disclose his essential

genius and character far more surely and intimately than any exterior records. All that a biography does is to corroborate in this or that way, or in many ways, the impression which is formed of a great writer by the "judicious reader," as some of the old poets used to say in their prefaces and dedications. We have set biographies of Dickens and Tennyson, and a scattered biography of Thackeray. Very interesting they are, for we all love to read about great men. But what do they amount to in comparison with the total volume of their work? Dickens, Tennyson, and Thackeray live for us in their writings, and Shakespeare lives for us in his writings too. He made a purchase like other men, or gave instructions to his lawyer about a suit, or signed a lease or a will, or arranged the business details of his theatre. All that sort of thing is by the way in the life of a man of genius. Where he is like other men he is very much like them. His distinctive quality alone is individual. What he is like when his genius is aroused into full activity, when his highest emotions are kindled, when his intellect takes his loftiest flights, can only be known from his creations. And to search for this information in biographical records is to seek the living amongst the dead.

Notwithstanding that "unhappily," Mr. Goldwin Smith has a perception of this truth. Instead of investigating municipal records, registers, leases, wills, and inventories, he sees that it is "better worth while to consider under what general influences—social, political and religious—the life was passed." Accordingly he points out, as a professor of history might be expected to do, that between 1580, when Shakespeare was sixteen, and the time of his death, there were "thirty-six years full of momentous events." The Papal curse against Elizabeth, the Armada, the conflict in France between the League and the Huguenots, the insurrection of Essex, the death of the great English queen, the accession of James, the union of the Crowns of England and Scotland, the Gunpowder Plot, the opening of the struggle between Parliament and the Stuarts, and the beginning of the Thirty Years' War, make a crowded period of history. But was it really these events that moved the mind of Shakespeare? We think not. There was something mightier behind them all. Printing had only recently been invented, America had but lately been discovered, and it had just been ascertained that the world was round, that the sun was the gigantic centre of our planetary system, and that the heavens were strewn with countless other constellations. This was the mighty revolution in human knowledge, and therefore in human thought, which preceded the exercise of Shakespeare's incommensurable genius. It was another instance of the man and the hour. Such a revolution is not likely to occur twice in the history of our planet, and such a genius as Shakespeare may never be born again; almost certainly not in similar conditions and with the same opportunities. For the first time in the world's history, it was possible to perceive man's true position in the universe. Shakespeare had the amazing intellect, not only to perceive it, but to accept it absolutely in the moral sphere. He took human nature as his province—that human nature which is eternal, and outlasts all dynasties and systems. Banishing the supernatural, except occasionally for mere stagecraft, he brought human nature into the presence of All-Nature; and showed that as the earth shared the movement of the universe, so man shares the life of the earth; and that although his soul is swept by tides of thought and passion, those very tides are like the ocean tides in this, that they are under the sovereign sway of absolute and universal law. It was the great principle of moral