



THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

IN treating of the Eighteenth Century, or—to speak more exactly—of the Eighteenth Century in English Literature, the historian is confronted at the outset by a difficulty of definition.

What is meant by the Eighteenth Century in English Literature? The natural (though possibly Beotian) reply would be—from the end of the Seventeenth to the beginning of the Nineteenth. But this ingenuous answer will not serve especially with certain modern critics. According to these, the literary Eighteenth Century cannot be confined within the limits indicated, but must rather be held to correspond with a different period of time, beginning earlier and ending earlier, and characterised throughout by specific features which distinguish it both from the period which precedes and the period which follows it. Some authorities date this period from the English Revolution of 1688, and close it with the French Revolution of 1789. Others, with equal show of reason, go farther back, and commence at the Restoration. In a philosophical essay these divisions are defensible,

and possibly useful, although they are always open to the commonplace objection that no great change in thought can be said to begin as invariably and inevitably as Grouse-shooting or the Law Terms. And even if they should be scientifically accurate, they present insuperable objections to matter-of-fact people, inasmuch as—to name but one very intelligible drawback—they involve the assignment to the Eighteenth Century of events which took place before that century begins in the calendar. Furthermore, they involve the assignment to the Nineteenth Century of other events which demonstrably happened in the Eighteenth. For these reasons—and notwithstanding the fact that the present volume, for convenience, includes a portion of an earlier period—we shall take leave, in this survey, to regard the Eighteenth Century in Literature as concurrent with the Eighteenth Century in Chronology—that is to say, as extending from the end of 1700 (the year in which Dryden died) to the end of the year 1800 (the year of the death of Cowper).

The period intended having been thus defined, it will be well to indicate the nature of its special gift to letters—such gift, for