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THE SOCIAL ASPECT OF ENGLISH LITERATURE—A REVIEW.

THE organic nature of human experience is one of the great principles whose clear enunciation is due to modern evolutionary thought. Human experience is best preserved in literature, and hence it is natural to turn to this in order to observe and study the growth implied by the word "organic." The literature of primitive ages deals almost exclusively with individual struggle, but as time goes on and the race grows older, another aspect becomes more noticeable—this is the social aspect. Viewed from this standpoint, literature may be regarded as a series of social documents.

In these days of unrest and perplexity, it is good to look back over our own past experiences as a people, and if possible, through the eyes of those imaginative men who have felt and seen more intensely than other men; and as we follow from generation to generation those dreamers who are the truest prophets, we shall be able to trace the gradual awakening of the social consciousness, the perception of social problems and the creation of social ideals.

Such appears to have been the object of Vida D. Scudder, the author of a recent work called "Social Ideals in English Letters," which book will form the subject of this review.

As the title indicates, the purpose of the book is to consider English literature in its social aspect. This is accomplished by a general and brief review of the development of the English people and literature, and a somewhat more detailed consideration of those writers whose works are pre-eminently social in thought. In a short article like this, some conception of the scope and contents of Mr. Scudder's book may best be obtained by first glancing rapidly at the main plan, and then considering more at length two or three of the chapters. This must necessarily be very inadequate, but if it induce some students of literature and life to read the work, its purpose will have been fulfilled.

Chap. I., Part I., starts with a consideration of the great social change wrought by the Christian force in the lives of our barbarous Anglo-Saxon forefathers, and traces in the fragmentary records of the time the wonderful working of the new social ideal implied in the religion of Jesus Christ. Then it goes on to show the gradual tainting of Christianity and degeneracy of the Church, laying special emphasis upon the character of such revivals as the Franciscan movement of the 13th century. Brief reference is made to the great animal epics, veiling audacious social criticism under the form of entertaining allegory, and finally "The Vision of Piers Plowman" is analyzed somewhat minutely.

Chap. II. treats of the "Utopia" of Sir Thomas More, and, generally, of the spirit of the Renaissance. In contrasting the work of Langland with that of More the author says: "The 'Vision' speaks from the people; the 'Utopia' speaks for them. Langland has the impassioned sympathy of a comrade of the poor; More has the disinterested thoughtfulness of the scholar statesman. He lived at the desk, not at the furrow; he moves among abstractions, and we infer rather than see the laborer in his work. But in compensation we know the author of the later book as we cannot know Langland. Through More's speculations shines a personality full of sweetness and light. . . . Langland's enormous book is the monument of an entire civilization, the symphonic expression of a mighty social class. More's short and compact work is the record of individual thought. . . . It is to all practical intents the book of the modern man. The 'Utopia' is the first original story by a known English author. That this earliest English novel should deal with the romance, not of a private life, but of society at large, is curious enough; it is even more curious that this first coherent conception of an ideal social state in our literature should be the outcome of the new individualism of the Renaissance."

Chap. III. is entitled "The Age of Jonathan Swift." After pointing out the absence of any marked indication of social unrest in Elizabethan Literature, and discussing the causes for this lack, the author goes on to consider the predominant tendencies of the great Puritan 17th century. Then he describes the characteristics of 18th century thought, dwelling carefully upon the life of Swift, and the significance of his work.

The author now passes to Part II., "The England of our Fathers," and in Chap. I traces concisely the development of the revolutionary spirit in its application to English life and thought, and to the literature of our own century. Speaking of the three great men of pure letters he says: "Three men of any modern nation more diverse in antecedents, temperament, interests, than these three essayists it would perhaps be impossible to find. Carlyle, the prophet, was of peasant origin, indifferent to beauty and delicacy. Ruskin, the dreamer, was the son of a rich merchant, softly born and bred. Arnold, observer, scoffer, silenced poet, sprang from the professional class, the intellectual élite of England. Carlyle's kinship was with Germany, Ruskin's with Italy, Arnold's with France. Carlyle's eyes were in his conscience, Ruskin's in his heart, Arnold's in the normal place, his head. Each turned away from the dominant interest of his youth—history, art, criticism, or poetry—to focus the most earnest thought of his prime sternly and earnestly on the social anomalies and paradoxes of modern life." After referring to the general characteristics of the Victorian novel he continues: "Beneath all this literature with its strong social pre-occupation, lies what? A strange and contradictory civilization which we cannot yet interpret; tingling with self-consciousness, yet unaware of much of its own tendencies; decadent and infantile, with the mighty force of youth and the tremulous caution of age; a civilization with a fuller ideal of freedom than was ever before known for its hope, and a new form of bondage in which millions are held for its achievement. Our literature has confronted a social situation dramatic, difficult and complex. Many episodes of this situation it expresses directly. Now, history shows Chartism, and in Carlyle's essay, in 'Alton Locke,' in the correspondence of Kingsley and Maurice,