

A FIRST SKETCH OF ENGLISH LITERATURE.

By Henry Morley, Professor of English Literature at University College, and Examiner in English Language, Literature and History to the University of London. Cassell, Petter & Galpin : London, Paris and New York.

The number of books of this class which have issued of late from the English and American press, afford a gratifying evidence of the increasing attention now devoted to our own language and literature. The English language has at length come to be recognized as a no less useful means of intellectual culture than the dead languages in which ancient classical literature survives ; while it is at last universally admitted that in the writings of Chaucer are materials invaluable for philological study ; and in those of the great Elizabethan writers a literature unsurpassed by anything in ancient or modern times.

Two special characteristics distinguish Professor Morley's "Sketch of English Literature." He clearly recognizes that the language and literature of a people are inseparable from its history. "The literature of a people tells its life. History records its deeds ; but literature brings to us, warm with their first heat, the appetites and passions, the keen intellectual debate, the higher promptings of the soul, whose blended energies produced the substance of the record." Starting with this conviction, he begins with a history of the people : first Celts, including the Britons and the Gaels ; then the Teutons from beyond the German Ocean ; and the obscure strifes of Celt and Saxon, in the era of King Arthur and his race. Next comes the true Anglo-Saxon era, with its great King Alfred, with the rude Pagan Dane, and the Norseman, transformed by their abode in later centuries on the banks of the Seine, into the Norman and Plantagenet of English history.

The element of race thus made clear, Celtic and Saxon influences are next traced, alike in rivalry and in combination. The older Celtic literature, with legends of its Cymric bards, out of which have been framed the Idylls of our own living Laureate ; and those of the Gaels, which Macpherson wrought into the Ossian poems. Then follow the literature of the

Saxons, including not only Beowulf, the poems of Caedmon, and other examples of the native Teutonic language ; but also the Latin writings of Saxon scholars, and especially the ecclesiastical history of the venerable Bede. Such points have, of course, received due attention before ; and by none more so than by Professor Spalding, in his admirable "History of English Literature." But Professor Morley recognises, more clearly than any previous writer, the intimate relations between the political history and the contemporary literature of each period. The reigns of the Edwards, followed by the troubled transitional era of Richard II., abound with incidents all-important for a clear understanding of the writings of Langland and Wyckliffe, of Mandeville, Gower, and Chaucer. So is it with the later eras of Henry VIII. and Elizabeth ; of James I. and Queen Anne. The history cannot be separated from the literature of the times, without the latter losing much of its original significance. All this Professor Morley clearly recognises ; and he has skilfully compressed into the briefest space an admirable epitome of those historical events best calculated to illustrate the literature which came into being under their influence.

The fact that the author of this work is one of the Examiners of the University of London will doubtless contribute to the popularity of his work at home. Nor is it a slight recommendation even here. The experience of an examiner is admirable training for clearly understanding the difficulties and the requirements of the student ; and we can confidently recommend this volume as an admirably condensed summary of useful knowledge.

One novel feature must not be overlooked. Compressed into the very smallest compass is a minute record of the chronological details of English literature, from the close of the eighteenth century, under the title of *Annals*. Beginning with Henry Mackenzie, it follows down the long list of poets, essayists, historians, &c., to Lord Lytton, who has just closed his long and brilliant literary career. From all this it is obvious that Professor Morley's "First Sketch of English Literature" is a welcome addition to the available materials of our modern manuals for higher education.