

MACAULAY, THE ESSAYIST.

The most noted feature in the history of the literature of the present century, and that which distinguishes it most clearly from the past, is the ability employed upon the Reviews. Although such periodicals had been in existence before, they were considered as mere taskwork, but at the beginning of this century they began to be chosen in preference to any other vehicle of communication, and in them have appeared some of the best essays of the ablest prose-writers in the language. The "Edinburgh" was started in 1802, with a more brilliant staff of contributors than has ever been brought to the support of any periodical, and immediately took a rank never before conceded to any. Able papers in science, history, and political economy, as well as the mere criticism of literary efforts, were contained in it, and discussion of a most vigorous kind, and on almost every conceivable subject, arose in consequence. It ruled the tastes of the reading public, and attempted also to direct their political proclivities. This gave rise to the "Quarterly," in 1809; since which time others have sprung up, representing particular parties in politics and religion. Although vast masses of knowledge have been collected, eloquent disquisitions set forth, and much energetic thought displayed, the authors most frequently were unknown, seeming to disdain notoriety; and it is only after many years have elapsed that the public have become aware to whom they were indebted for the masterly effusions, while the writers of some of even the best papers are forever merely to be guessed at. The subjects which have been most freely discussed in the Reviews, and which, in fact, are more ably handled in them, than they have ever been anywhere else, are literary criticisms, especially that of poetry, and speculation in social and political economy.

Thomas Babington Macaulay entered the ranks of the great Whig, the "Edinburgh," in 1826, and for nineteen years was a contributor, more or less steady; and although he is outlived, and outwritten in one sense, by one of the originators, Henry Brougham, yet

he produced the most impressive of all the essays, which this species of literature has given birth to. He opened with a paper on Milton, showing in it his learning, his terseness of style, and his decided Whiggism. Historical subjects most frequently employed his pen, and when engaged upon these, that looseness of style and scarcity of depth and labour, which have been objected to in Review-writing, found no place. Partizanship can be traced in almost every one of them, but it is shaded so finely, that it never seems ought save fair. He had a plausibility and a seeming generosity to those who held views upon Church or State antagonistic to his own, that he requires to be closely watched, as the bias sets in against them so tenderly, and diverges so gradually, that one is astonished to find all at once, that what was white before, and had all along maintained something of a whitish appearance, is now of the jettiest black, and that the scintillations of a lighter color, which flickered about the object while approaching it, were mere reflections, as there is now no trace of purity whatever. He arranged his data so minutely, drew his inferences with such decision, and displayed his picture with such a life-like and natural light, that it requires no mean intellect to detect the gentle shading by which he has hid those facts which would have militated against the general colouring, while none can pass without observing the strongly marked outlines which are expected to be taken as the real and true picture. To his extraordinary power of impressive representation, he adds extensive and valuable information never before equalled in this walk, and with an astonishing facility he pours forth the rich stream, illustrating every object contemplated. In the criticism of poetry, however, he showed to poor advantage beside the able editor. He did not possess that keen and pure appreciation of poetical quality, which distinguished that great critic, but used poets and their works as a mere foothold for speculations on man and manners; so his curious dissertations do little to fill the space which Jeffrey