

BOOK REVIEWS

HISTORICAL ESSAYS. By Edward A. Freeman, M. A., Hon. D.C.L., late Fellow of Trinity College, Oxford. London: Macmillan & Co.

MR. FREEMAN may, we believe, be regarded as the greatest living authority on the period of history to which he has specially devoted himself, and which may be comprehensively designated as the Middle Age, between ancient history and modern, embracing the formation of all the European nations in the mould of the still surviving Empire, and the early development of their institutions, civil and religious. Not that his knowledge is limited to this period, for he has given us valuable proof of his profound study of ancient history and of the political history of modern times. His "Norman Conquest" is not only beyond comparison the best, it is in fact the only history of those events; for Thierry, though learned, picturesque and generous, is far too fanciful to hold his ground as an authority and a guide, nor does he present the Conquest and the Conqueror with the fulness of detail with which they are presented by Mr. Freeman, and which alone can lend life and interest to the history of the remote past. Mr. Freeman has high literary merits—a clear and thoroughly manly style, a vigour and a vividness in narration only occasionally marred by a slight tendency to diffusiveness and by the antiquarian enthusiasm which leads him sometimes to introduce into the text incidental details better suited for a note. But his supreme excellence lies in his thorough mastery of his materials, in his conscientious and discriminating use of them, and in the perfect soundness of all he writes. Whether you agree with his interpretation of facts or not, you may feel perfectly sure that you will find on investigation, that his authorities are correctly cited, and that their relative value has been duly weighed. In the latter respect he has greatly the advantage of Thierry, who always has an authority for what he says, but is by no means careful in determining the relative value of authorities, especially when he is under the generous but misleading influence of his sympathy with oppressed nationalities. Dean Milman's work is excellent, and deserves the highest gratitude of the student of history; but he may occasionally be caught tripping, and very excusably, considering how immense was the mass of facts which he had to embrace, and that he commenced his great work at an age when the physical memory begins to lose its strength. That the same thing may be said of Gibbon, notwithstanding his vast and genuine learning, is known to the few who have had occasion to compare him with his Byzantine authorities. But Mr. Freeman, though he has provoked searching criticism by his somewhat ruthless exposure of the inaccuracies of others, has never, so far as we know, been detected in any serious error even on a subordinate point. He strictly confines himself to narrating events in accordance with the evidence and to

tracing the connection between them, eschewing philosophic generalizations whether of the school of Buckle or of any other school. "We have thus tried," he says, at the conclusion of his essay on the Continuity of English History "to trace the outward sequence of cause and effect through a considerable portion of history. This outward sequence is all that we can profess to trace. We cannot submit the phenomena of English history, its course at home or its points of difference from that of other nations to any grand scientific law. If we are asked for the causes of the contrast between the steady course of freedom in England and its fitful rises and falls in France, we have no universal formula of explanation. We can only say that the causes are many and various; and some of those which we should assign are perhaps rather of an old-fashioned kind. We confess that we are not up to the last lights of the age: we have not graduated in the school of Mr. Buckle. We still retain our faith in the existence and the free-will both of God and of man. National character, geographical position, earlier historical events have had much to do with the difference; but we believe that the personal character of individual men and the happy thought, or happy accident, of some particular enactment has often had quite as much to do with it as any of them." One obvious advantage, at all events, of writing history on this system is that come what may of the conflicting theories and philosophies of history over which the world is now disputing, the facts ascertained and arranged by Mr. Freeman must always retain their value. Nor can any changes of opinion or of literary fashion impair the interest of a narrative which relies for its effect not on rhetoric or sensational pictures, but on the intrinsic importance and interest of the character and events. Mr. Freeman's writings are perhaps the very best school in which a young student of history can train himself. They redeem a generation which in its blindness has bowed down to the ignorant and mendacious sensationalism of Mr. Froude.

The essays contained in the present volume are revised republications from leading reviews. They relate mostly to Mr. Freeman's special period; but the last in the series "On Presidential Government" belongs to political philosophy, and reminds us that Mr. Freeman has published one volume of an excellent work on Federal Government, which we hope he will take in hand again as soon as he shall have completed his History of the Norman Conquest. There could not be a moment at which such a work would be more welcome or more likely to influence political action on a great scale than the present. Among a number of papers affording striking proofs of the writer's peculiar learning, the most remarkable perhaps is that on the Early Sieges of Paris, which derives additional interest from recent events, by which its subject was in fact sug-