

THOMAS CARLYLE.*

BY THE EDITOR.

THE rugged, gnarled old oak has at length fallen, and the home of his fathers takes back to the dust all that once was mortal of Thomas Carlyle. The news of the death of this great Censor of the age, as he has often been called, was not unexpected, but there are few educated minds of this or of the last generation to whom the passing into the silence of the other world of Thomas Carlyle does not come home with the force of a personal loss. So large a space does he fill in the written and spoken thought of the past fifty years, and so greatly has his influence entered into the mental warp and woof of all enthusiastic students of modern literature, that the hand of death is begrudged its prey, even though it be considerably to remove its victim from the burden of life and reverently to lay his bones in the bosom of kindly Mother Earth.

Heine says, that to ask a man what he thinks of Goethe is to ask him what he thinks of the universe; and though it may sound like hyperbole to say this of either of the men, yet to ask it of Carlyle is to ask something of almost boundless scope and suggestiveness—so much does the question embrace of the wide field of modern English civilization. A criticism upon Carlyle necessarily implies a criticism upon his works, and what these touch upon is well-nigh every topic that has for two generations engaged the British mind, in every

phase of practical or philosophic thought. Much as he has exhorted the world to silence, and ever axiomatically as he has urged that "the tools are only for him who can use them," he stands forth himself as the emphatic spokesman of his generation, and commands that attention to his words which their uncouthness and frequent exaggeration, and the iteration with which they have been presented, would have closed to them the ears of the English-speaking people had they come from any other teacher. What message he had for the race had its power heightened by the moral earnestness and Titanic force of the man, which gave him that hold upon the spirit and intellect of the age, which few who have taken up the rôle of the reformer have hitherto possessed and fewer still have so potently exercised. This force too often carries him away, as we have hinted, into exaggeration, and gives to his wit and imagination a grandiose character which, but for the magnificence of the notes which his pen occasionally strikes on the key-board of thought, would have turned the ears of many possessed of a fine sense of the niceties of literary form away from rather than towards him. Still, despite the ruggedness of his diction, and we had almost said the affectation of his style, were it not that there was no such thing as affectation about him, but ever an abiding horror of anything that smacked of it, Carlyle was a great, if not always a healthy and accurate, thinker. Though he makes sad havoc

* A slight, hastily prepared paper read before the "Toronto Athenæum Club" on the 10th March, 1881.