

INTRODUCTORY MEMOIR

LORD ACTON was in his lifetime dimly known to the general public as a prodigy of learning. The publication of his lectures at Cambridge was posthumous, and he was often quoted as an example of natural gifts buried under an accumulation of excessive knowledge. The image of a Dryasdust, of a bookworm, of a walking Dictionary, was excited by his name among those to whom he was a name and nothing more. To those who had the privilege of his acquaintance he appeared almost the precise opposite of a picture too unlike the truth to be even a caricature. For Lord Acton was a thorough man of the world. An insatiable, systematic, and effective reader, he was anything but a recluse. No man had a keener zest for the society of his intellectual equals. No one took a stronger interest in the events of the day, and the gossip of the hour. His learning, though vast and genuine, was never obtruded. Always ready to impart information, he shrank from the semblance of volunteering it. Indeed, if no direct appeal were made to him, he would let people without a tithe of his knowledge lay down the law as if they knew everything, and would betray no other sign of amusement than an enigmatical smile. He had something of Addison's tendency, exhibited in a much more remarkable and somewhat less genial form by Mr. Froude, to draw out rather than to repress the sallies of conceited ignorance. But for any one who wished to learn his resources were in their fullest extent available.