

Reviews.



A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe; from the Earliest Times to the Present Day. By GEORGE SAINTSBURY. In three volumes. Vol. i.: "Classical and Medieval Criticism." Blackwood, 1900. Price 16s. net.

THIS is a most remarkable book in every way. It is, as the title-page shows, sufficiently ambitious in design; it is almost as bold in execution. But Professor Saintsbury is not the man to flinch in face of a formidable task—a task which, in the literary sphere, demands almost as much preparation and learning as did Gibbon's "Decline and Fall" in the sphere of history. And what has added to the difficulty of the work is the fact that practically Professor Saintsbury has had to move forward through the jungles of literature, as a pioneer cutting his way step by step, only reaching a point of view from which to survey the whole field of his labours after much toil and exploration. As an example of the thoroughness with which the Professor has worked, one may mention here—what is noted in the preface, p. vii—that, by way of preparation for such an immense task as he proposed to himself, Professor Saintsbury has read over "some four or five times" the "Poetics" and "Rhetoric" of Aristotle, the "Institutes" and the *Περί Ὑψους*, the "De Vulgari Eloquentia" and the "Discoveries," the "Essays of Dramatic Poesy" and the "Preface to Lyrical Ballads."

The fact is, the writer seems to have read everything; whether he has always completely digested the vast stores of his learning, or assimilated the finer spirit of literary criticism, is perhaps less certain. As a stylist, Professor Saintsbury leaves a good deal to be desired. He is not an entertaining writer; possibly entertainment is not to be looked for in a book like the present. But in a work which, for good or ill, must rank as Professor Saintsbury's *magnum opus*, we should have preferred a less awkward and encumbered form of literary diction. The gods, however, do not, save in the rarest instances, dower a writer with all the literary graces; and we must content ourselves with what Professor Saintsbury has done for us, rather than ask for what is, perhaps, the unattainable. Making every deduction, we still possess in this work an accurate, and indeed indispensable, guide to the history of literary criticism. The writer's encyclopædic knowledge and immense industry find full scope here, and, judging by the first volume, the remainder of the book ought to be worthy of the closest attention. It is a small point, but it deserves to be noticed, that the index—compiled by Professor Saintsbury himself—is a model of fulness; while the footnotes render useful aid to the student on almost every page.

E. H. B.

Shakespeare's Predecessors in the English Drama. By the late J. ADDINGTON SYMONDS. New edition. London: Smith, Elder and Co. Price 7s. 6d.

This book was originally issued some seventeen years ago; but unfortunately its accomplished and versatile author never lived to revise it. Yet a revision was needed. Mr. Churton Collins reviewed it on its first appearance in a masterly essay that was subsequently reprinted in "Essays and Studies." He pointed out very clearly its defects—defects, however, that might readily have been remedied with a little care and patience. Yet the book, even as it stands—and the present volume is merely a reprint, so far as we can see, of the original volume—is decidedly valuable. Mr. Symonds was peculiarly well fitted to undertake such a task as a literary history of Shakespeare's predecessors in the English drama. He was not only intimately acquainted with the classical drama of Greece—an acquaintance which is indispensable for a due knowledge of all subsequent dramatic history—but he, beyond all other of his contemporaries, was versed in the literary and artistic developments of the Italian Renaissance. His "Renaissance in Italy" (recently reissued in seven volumes) is a mine of information, and will not soon be superseded. But besides possessing these qualifications, Mr. Symonds had the further advantage of being extremely well read in English literature. As one of our "minor poets," too, he occupied a high position. Such a book, therefore, as the present volume must needs appeal to a wide audience. We feel instinctively we are in the hands of an accomplished writer and of a widely-read man of letters.

The *style* of the writer is, perhaps, overcharged with ornament. In his "Greek Poets" (perhaps his finest work) Mr. Symonds is seen at his best; but in "Shakespeare's Predecessors" there is a surfeit of "fine writing" and an exaggeration of diction which strike one as needless. Fulsomeness, specially in a critic, is always annoying. There are other faults: lapses of good taste are by no means as rare as they should be; possibly the writer, had he lived to revise his book, would have mended this. But the book, taken as a whole, is eminently suggestive, even though, as an effort of literary criticism, it falls far short of the highest place.

E. H. B.

Short Notices.

Talks with my Lads. Preface by Canon SEYMOUR COXE. Elliot Stock, 1900. Pp. 160.

A very useful series of eight addresses to young men on religious principle and practice in daily life, which will be particularly welcome to the many in these days who hold Bible classes and classes of instruction for youths.