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Mandell Creighton, Bishop of London

AN event like the death of the Bishop of London, at the same time depriving English literature of one of the most eminent of living historians and the English Historical Review of its first editor and constant counsellor and supporter, cannot be allowed to pass without especial notice in these pages. We must, of course, speak principally of the Bishop in his character as an historian. If this affords a theme less striking and suggestive than his action as a public man and a ruler of the church, it has at least the advantage of offering to view a symmetrical, even if an interrupted, career. At the time of his unexpected death, the prelate seemed still to belong in great measure to the future: the historian's work had for some years reached, if not its intended, still its appointed term. Even could it have been resumed, which is most improbable, it is unlikely that much could have been added to modify materially the estimate of Dr. Creighton's peculiar gifts and special mission derived from the historical work which he was actually able to accomplish.

All who knew Bishop Creighton knew that he was, before all things, a statesman, and would expect to find him classed as an historian with the school of which Ranke is the acknowledged head. Such a classification would be legitimate; yet the distinction between Ranke and Creighton is wide, and, in so far as regards character painting and sustained interest of narrative, mainly to Creighton's advantage. Both are historians of the cabinet: while not neglecting stirring events and public transactions, their object is not so much to detail these as to go behind them, and penetrate the counsels of the rulers and statesmen whose policy brought them in its train. Hence, as regards general popularity, they are at a disadvantage with historians like Macaulay, endowed with the faculty of brilliant narration; and are, on the other hand, liable to be taxed with superficiality by that other school which slights individual action in comparison with the general causes by which it is supposed to be inflexibly determined. Creighton's great advantage over Ranke is that he approaches more nearly to both these competing types. Though devoid of pictorial power of Macaulay and the majesty of Gibbon, his narrative is more picturesque and animated

than that of the unimpassioned Ranke; and he fully recognises the existence of general laws controlling individual action, while his good sense shows him that the action is more easily ascertained than the law. He thus avoids the besetting sins of some modern schools of history, the substitution of mere disquisition for narrative, and the ambitious reconstruction after merely subjective data. Nor did he belong to the more serviceable if less speciously gifted class of writers who imagine themselves to be writing history while they are merely purveying its materials. He aimed and he attained to present a faithful picture of the age he delineated; but this was a picture not from the point of view of the dramatist, or the observer of manners, or the sympathiser with the general condition of the people, but from that of the statesman: and perhaps no reflexion upon his History has so frequently visited the minds of those personally acquainted with him as one upon the part he might himself have performed had his lot been cast in an age when the ecclesiastical profession was rather a help than a hindrance to effective participation in public affairs.

From the excessive detachment of his master Ranke, Creighton is preserved by one of the most amiable features of his moral character, his strong human sympathy. The character of his personages is no matter of indifference to him. He records their laudable actions with complacency, and seeks for the explanation of their errors. This human feeling brings its reward along with it, for it induces him to examine those currents of circumstance which tend to interpret and in a measure justify the actions of rulers, and creates a link between him and the philosophic school of historians which, had he been content with simple narrative, might easily have been missing. He seems to be continually putting himself into the place of his principal characters, even the least commendable, and asking himself whether in that situation he himself could have acted otherwise. This gift of sympathy goes far to compensate for the absence of the faculty of vivid presentation. We do not see the pope or the prince in bodily semblance as Macaulay would have shown him, but we obtain a fairer perception than Macaulay could have given of the brain at work underneath crown or tiara. The person is not a shadow as with Ranke, or an automaton as with a disciple of the fatalistic school; and the historian is more inclined to deduce the general tendencies of an age from the facts of its history than to reverse the process. If it should appear that the significance of the momentous epoch he delineates has not been sufficiently brought out, it must be remembered that his narrative never reached a period mature for a general judgment. The new political system of Europe, the final division of Christendom, the enslavement of Italy, and the transference of her intellectual

supremacy to the trans-Alpine nations, existed, at the period under the Bishop's review when he laid down his pen, still but as the shadows of events to come.

Creighton's first historical work was characteristic alike of his moral and intellectual nature ; it was a privately printed biography, dictated by gratitude, and inspired by genuine admiration for a type of character congenial to him. It related with simplicity and feeling the life of Sir George Grey, thrice Home Secretary, and filling that important office for thirteen years altogether. Unostentatious and averse to display, Grey occupied a less conspicuous place in the public eye than many statesmen of far less real influence, and Creighton's treatment of him showed how well he could appreciate the qualities of the efficient and single-minded administrator.

A much more important work followed. In 1882 Creighton issued the first two volumes of 'A History of the Papacy during the period of the Reformation.' This might have been interpreted as simply denoting the interval from Luther's revolt to the termination of the Council of Trent ; but the historian had set himself a far more arduous task. He went back to the shipwreck of the medieval papal ideal in the Great Schism, which required him to travel for a hundred and forty years before encountering the friar of Wittenberg. The decision was undoubtedly sound. To begin the History with Luther is to magnify inordinately the hero of the Reformation—a great man assuredly, but greater by force of character than by force of intellect—and to assign to him the part which the poet (with more reason, but still hyperbolically) assigns to Newton in the scientific order of things :—

Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night :
God said, 'Let Newton be,' and all was light.

A great deal of light had been slowly breaking in before Luther, and without it he could hardly have effected more than had been effected by Wycliffe, whose interesting figure, as if placed at this period for the purpose of contrast, stands at the very portal of Creighton's history. To render justice to the subject, the period of revolutionary incubation must be exhibited as well as the more brilliant and stirring period of revolutionary conflict. Bishop Creighton was before all things a statesman, and the fifteenth century was in an especial sense the era of statesmanship, ere the origination of those overwhelming popular currents which in the following century so frequently deflected policy from the course it would have preferred to follow. He liked mixed and variable characters, and was more at home with Pius II, subtle and self-interested but able to rise to the height of a great responsibility, than with the passionate grandeur of Luther or the

official majesty of Charles V. He was above all things a man of culture,¹ and had more sympathy with learning pursuing her own ends by her own methods in the fifteenth century than with learning pressed into the service of religious reform and religious conservatism in the sixteenth.

The fifteenth century was also a period congenial to Bishop Creighton from the intellectual character of its most striking incidents and most momentous revolutions. His strength did not by any means consist in depicting the 'pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war;' but he was admirable in describing the intellectual or moral influence that passes through men's spirits 'as silent electricity goes.' Such, within this period, were the impairment of the prestige of the papacy by the Great Schism and the growing impatience with the rapacity of the Roman officials, the spread of humanistic culture, and the long train of consequences that flowed from the invention of printing. Though the century was full of wars and battles, these were the influences that really shaped it; and political events, comparatively speaking, only affected the fortunes of church or world in a minor degree until the French and Spanish conquest of Italy in the early years of the sixteenth century. Then, indeed, the age of great battalions begins, and the theatre of action is amplified in proportion. As a statesman, Bishop Creighton is entirely competent to deal with the changed circumstances of the new age; as a narrator he suffers from an inability to rise to the height of ardour and emphasis demanded by the more picturesque aspect of the times. In everything that constitutes his strength he is as admirable as ever, but the course of his narrative has conducted him to a new and less congenial region. Italians suit him better than Germans, statesmen than warriors, scholars than prophets. This is merely to repeat that he was best qualified to exhibit the era he described in its relations to state policy and to culture. Ecclesiastical historians have in general been otherwise gifted, and Creighton's dissimilarity to them is one of the circumstances which will most contribute to preserve his History.

We may well claim for the Bishop that he has, beyond all the historians of his day, exemplified the virtue of impartiality. Whether this should always be made as much the pole star of the historian's course as he has made it is a question admitting of some discussion. It is impossible in the case of an epical history, when some stirring theme like the revolt of the Dutch against the Spaniards or the rebellion of 1745 is conceived in the spirit of a poem; nor is it easily practicable when the centre of the historian's canvas is occupied by some commanding figure like Gustavus

¹ When Bishop of London he hardly ever missed a meeting of the Trustees of the British Museum, rarely attended by his predecessors.

Adolphus or Peter the Great, to whose renown everything else inevitably becomes subservient. Throughout Bishop Creighton's period, however, there is, in so far as his special theme of religious reform is concerned, no such commanding personage until we arrive at Luther. His incapacity for hero-worship has rendered his treatment of Luther the least satisfactory part of his work; but the defect is more than compensated by his success in dealing with the crowd of miscellaneous figures in whom an ordinary historian might have taken no interest. It is not too much to say that there is no one of the multitude, ecclesiastic or statesman, warrior or scholar, devoid of some touch to show that the Bishop understood and appreciated him—not in virtue of a creative imagination, which Creighton did not possess in any eminent measure, but by the endowment of a lively sympathy with human nature, the same gift which made him beloved and efficient as the ruler of a diocese. His impartiality, therefore, is not the chilly impartiality of a Ranke, but takes the form of a cordial recognition of all the salient qualities of whatever kind possessed by his *dramatis personæ*, and the same equitable assignment to each of its due share in the composition of the men as to the men of their share in fulfilling the behests of the spirit of the times. It was absolutely impossible for Creighton knowingly to misrepresent anything; and this natural candour was reinforced by so exemplary a diligence in dealing with the historical authorities upon which his work was based (he wisely refrained from that exhaustive investigation of manuscript records which might have befitted an historian of another class), that Lord Acton, whose lofty ideal and vast knowledge render him a severe critic, is able to say, 'It is not easy to detect a wrong quotation, a false inference, or an unjust judgment.'²

It was impossible that the Bishop's impartiality should not draw censure upon him from those who would have wished him to have taken a different view. The most important of these criticisms relates to the historian's apparent calmness in narrating some of the most discreditable actions of the personages of his story, particularly popes, and the comparatively slight degree in which these seem to affect his general judgment of the perpetrators. Dr. Creighton was the last man to be indifferent to the moral qualities of actions, but he knew that men must be judged with reference to the circumstances of their times, and that the moral standard of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had been depressed by causes which had come into operation before the personages of his history were in existence. As concerned the popes in particular, he had to point out that the needs of their age had made them secular princes, and would have compelled better men to conform

² *English Historical Review*, ii. 579.

their action to a secular standard. Under the circumstances of the time the creation of a strong temporal power in the Papal States was a good and even a necessary work; and although motives of family aggrandisement may have had more part in it than enlarged conceptions of policy, it is significant that the pope who most vehemently promoted it was a pope who had no family to aggrandise. The fact that a pope who enters the sphere of secular politics must, and does, behave like the other secular princes of his day, if it proves that there is no supernatural virtue in the office, proves equally that there is no supernatural depravity in the pope.

It would be unjust, in commending Bishop Creighton's impartiality, to omit reference to the peculiarly favourable circumstances under which he wrote. Other qualifications being equal, no one is so well placed for writing ecclesiastical history as a liberal and enlightened divine of the church of England. The Roman catholic historian on one side, the anti-clerical historian on the other, may be scrupulously fair in intention; but neither will be able to forget that the cause he has at heart will be helped or harmed by his labours. In the history of every church but his own, and even of this down to Puritan times, the church of England divine can afford to be perfectly impartial. He may have his preferences and his aversions; but at all events he need be under no invincible bias. His church, moreover, is not, like others, isolated from the rest by peculiar doctrines or exclusive pretensions; there is no Christian community in the world with which it has not some point of contact from which a sympathetic point of view can be obtained, and which is not in some measure represented within its communion. It is the praise of Bishop Creighton to have risen to the occasion, and to have manifested all the candour and equity which may be reasonably expected from the representative of a church so fortunately placed. Had not his historical labours been interrupted by ecclesiastical preferment, he would unquestionably have proved himself equal to subjects so difficult from the point of view of impartiality as the institution of the Order of Jesus and the proceedings of the Council of Trent.

Bishop Creighton's fame as an historian must undoubtedly rest upon his *History of the Papacy*, but some notice must be taken of two minor works in which his especial characteristics are no less apparent. The difficult subject of the reign of Queen Elizabeth is made a triumph by the endowments, which we have already noted, of a lively sympathy and a statesmanlike instinct. He has enough of the former to desire to put himself into the queen's place, and enough of the latter to enable him to do so. He in no way dissembles her failings, such as her mean behaviour on the occasion of the execution of the Queen of Scots; but he sees that

these were subordinate details, and that the mainspring of her actions was that thorough identification of her own interests with the interests of her people which had been conspicuous in the greatest of her predecessors, and was to be equally so in her great modern successor. There are no Spanish matches, no French subsidies, no Hanovers to set up a counter-attraction in the mind of the sovereign. From this central point of view the incidents of her reign harmonise with the total impression of her character as this was estimated by her contemporaries, and, slight and brief as the biography is, one lays it down with the feeling of having got to the root of the matter. Almost as much may be said for Creighton's treatment of Laud, who might be thought to have been annihilated by Macaulay's scathing ridicule. Here again, without overlooking Laud's obvious failings, he grasps the central principle of attachment to the interests, often much misunderstood, of the church of England, and shows that it was the reverse of ignoble and selfish. A word, too, should be given to the Rede lecture on the early Renaissance in England, which indicates what high rank Bishop Creighton might have gained as a literary historian.

The establishment of the English Historical Review was determined upon in 1885; and Creighton conducted it from January 1886 to April 1891, when his retirement became imperative through his elevation to the see of Peterborough. Of the position which it held under his direction it would not become us to say more than that this was fully as much due to his editorial diligence and capacity as to the prestige imparted by his reputation. Engrossed as he was with his duties as Dixie professor at Cambridge, as canon of Worcester and examining chaplain; as one in continual request for sermons, speeches, addresses, examinations; as one, moreover, whose scanty leisure was already pledged to the great historical work on which he was labouring, he was unable to contribute any essay of very great compass to the Review, but frequently wrote minor articles, and continued his literary co-operation until his translation to London. Among those in his own special class of subject may be noted reviews of Thuasne's edition of Burchard's Diary; of Mr. Burd's edition of Machiavelli's 'Prince,' with Lord Acton's preface; of the concluding volumes of Symonds's 'Renaissance,' of Beard's 'Luther;' of Pasolini's biography of Caterina Sforza; and of Nitti's review of the political action of Leo X. His interest in other fields of historical research led him to notice Bishop Stubbs's lectures on medieval and modern history, Father Gasquet's and Mr. Gairdner's researches in the dissolution of the monasteries, and Mr. Law's book on the dissensions between the Jesuits and the Roman catholic regular clergy. These reviews were necessarily brief, but those of Symonds and Machiavelli were highly suggestive

of important moral problems and of an ethical background for history. His last contribution was one on a subject of much humanistic interest, the literary correspondence of Humphrey duke of Gloucester.

The remarkable feature in the numerous notices of Bishop Creighton which have appeared since his death is not that they are eulogistic, but that they are unanimous. All unite in laying stress not merely on those domestic virtues which happily may always be expected in men of his station, but on a peculiar type of character by no means common, whose keynote is a spirit of sunny cheerfulness, finding expression in kindness, urbanity, good-humour under trying circumstances, condescension towards intellectual inferiors, generous confidence cordially but judiciously bestowed, and an elasticity enabling its possessor to bear up under exhausting labours with seeming, perhaps, alas! deceptive ease. It is even more significant that the warmth of the encomium is usually in proportion to the length and intimacy of the acquaintance. This is but to say that Bishop Creighton gained by being known. The Archbishop of Canterbury, who remarked, in his excellent speech at the Mansion House, that he never met Dr. Creighton without fancying him grown wiser and better, would no doubt allow that the cause may not have been so much the Bishop's growth in grace as the Archbishop's growth in knowledge. It is certainly the fact that Dr. Creighton held a higher place in public esteem as bishop, and especially as bishop of London; and this may be accounted for, not merely by the more conspicuous eminence of the situation, but by the perception that he was at length finding scope for his highest intellectual qualities, for which his previous career had afforded no adequate exercise. He was too pre-eminently the statesman and diplomatist for these characteristics to escape recognition at any period of his life; but for long they seemed almost out of place, and not until his latter years was it apparent for what high ends they had been entrusted to him. The feeling that his special faculties, so late revealed to the world at large, had missed their due appreciation, accounted in great measure for the universal sorrow at his death, and the universal desire to render some special honour to his memory. It is to be hoped that this will take a form which he himself would have approved; and there can be little doubt which form would have had his own preference. The episcopal office came to him unsought, and was accepted with some reluctance; but it was his strenuous effort to gain a place among historians. Without prejudice, therefore, to any other worthy form of commemoration for which means may be available, it would certainly seem that the first object should be the encouragement of historical study in some manner connected with his name, and adapted to raise up successors in his work.

R. GARNETT.