

## TWELVE BOOKS OF SOME IMPORTANCE

### I.

#### MR. BALFOUR'S "LIFE OF STEVENSON."\*

Mr. Graham Balfour's *Life of Stevenson* is a book to be received with respect and gratitude, if scarcely with enthusiasm. It is written from an official point of view, but with honesty and frankness. Though it is not without fresh information, little or nothing is added to our understanding of Stevenson, and whoever reads his letters practically knows all. What Mr. Graham Balfour has done is to put together the autobiographical passages in Stevenson's books, to place them in their setting, and to supplement them by personal recollection and the reminiscences of friends. All this is done carefully and sufficiently. Not a word is said to wound any one's feelings, and on some points there is an evident and intelligible reserve, a reserve always to be respected, even when it tantalises. Mr. Balfour does not pretend to great literary or critical power. Had the life been written by Mr. Colvin, it would no doubt have been a much more important contribution to literature. But Mr. Balfour has the advantage of knowing Scotland and Scottish life, and of having lived with Stevenson in his Samoan home. The biography, though apparently lengthy, is not really so. There are only some 450 pages in all, though the thick paper and large margin might possibly mislead the reader.

A few notes may be made. We learn that it was from his nurse, Alison Cunningham, that Stevenson first heard of the writings of the Covenanters, who so greatly influenced his mind and style. A special favourite was an old copy of *A Cloud of Witnesses*, which had belonged to his nurse's grandmother, and it was from her that he learned to love McCheyne, a Presbyterian writer of the strictest orthodoxy, but with a true touch of poetry. Isaac Williams was among the High Anglicans who read McCheyne, as may be seen from his biography of the young priest Suckling. Like many others in her station, Alison Cunningham

\*The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson. By Graham Balfour. Two volumes. Charles Scribner's Sons.

read Cassell's *Family Paper*. It is worth while recalling that this journal contains some of Mayne Reid's best work, including *The Maroon*, and that in its pages was published anonymously R. D. Blackmore's first novel, *Clara Vaughan*, by no means the worst of his productions. It would be interesting to know whether Stevenson came across *Clara Vaughan*. One curious point is that when Stevenson was a mere child he spent five months abroad with his uncle, visiting Rome and Venice. To this journey he made no allusion in his writings, and even in discussing Venice with Mr. Horatio Brown he never even said that he had once set foot in Italy. German he scarcely knew, but he made himself a fair French scholar. The *Saturday Review* declined his essay on "Roads," which was afterward accepted by Hamerton. Hamerton became afterward, though this is not mentioned, one of the first appreciative reviewers of Stevenson, predicting great things for him in the *Academy*.

The details of his co-operation with Mr. Lloyd Osbourne are given by Mr. Balfour. It is very surprising to hear that in *The Wrecker* that excellent character Pinkerton, who was drawn from a well-known American publisher, was Mr. Osbourne's "to a large degree." Stevenson's hard work may be estimated by the fact that his prose works run to nearly 8,000 pages of the Edinburgh edition, 300 words on a page. That makes 2,400,000 words, equal to about twenty-four ordinary novels. He was in the habit of writing and re-writing, so that his final copy sometimes involved ten times the actual quantity of writing. It is more clear than ever that style to him was a matter of life or death. Whether of life or of death, future generations must decide. The essential note of his character appears very plainly. He was full of generosity, mercy and compassion. He found it very hard to keep up any quarrel. Above all—and this ought to be insisted on—he avoided the attitude of contempt or disdain. It would be difficult to find any passage in his writings written with the purpose of giving pain to others. Mr. Balfour says with much discernment that "he was the only man I have ever known who possessed charm in a high degree

whose character did not suffer from the possession." It is pleasant to read of his delight in the companionship of J. A. Symonds. We are not told what he really thought of Symonds's way of writing.

The story of Stevenson's life is by no means completely told as yet. There is very much manuscript material, to our knowledge, of which no use has been made. There are friends who survive who have noted and remembered a great deal, but have not been asked for their recollections. Yet we have enough for years at least. Some day, no doubt, the whole theme will be taken up again and discussed as it cannot be discussed now. Meanwhile we are grateful to Mr. Balfour for his pious labour, and to the publishers for these seemly volumes.

*W. Robertson Nicoll.*