THE UNITED STATES UNDER THE CONSTITUTION.*

FOR the last ten years Mr. James Schouler has been issuing, at intervals of two or three years, a valuable and much-needed history of our country since the adoption of the Constitution. Prominent authorities have not been slow to recognize the many merits of the author — his industry, his fair-mindedness, his ability to make the past stand before us with the color of life. Up to the very recent appearance of Mr. Adams' strong volumes on the administrations of Jefferson, Richard Hildreth's was the only American history of the constitutional era of the United States which had any claims to consideration. Hildreth covered but a portion of the wide field, and his work, now a generation old, was destitute necessarily of advantages gained from the explorations of the archives and from the changed views of the later historical school. There was ample room, therefore, for a readable and comprehensive survey of the long period, 1789–1861. Mr. Schouler's very successful attempt at a true history of our national life has now reached its fourth volume, covering the years 1831–1847, which has been issued this present season. With each new installment the author has seemed to take a firmer hold, and to present his subject in a more interesting manner. Von Holst, indeed, is his only serious rival in the later period, and the powerful German professor is a historian of the Constitution only, while Mr. Schouler covers the whole field of general history, paying first attention, of course, to political matters. The merits of his work have been hidden under a bushel until lately. All four volumes were published in a quiet way by a firm in Washington; but the seat of the national government is not a book-publishing center, and it seems to be a positive disadvantage for a volume to "hail" from that city. A leading New York firm has at length given Mr. Schouler's book the stamp of a name well-known in the trade and to the world of readers, and we trust that the work will now meet the warm reception which it deserves.

Beginning with a short introduction on the formation and adoption of the Constitution, Mr. Schouler divides his history into periods nearly equal in length. Volume I covers the years 1783–1801; Vol. II, 1801–1817; Vol. III, 1817–1831; Vol. IV, 1831–1847, and the concluding volume will bring us down to 1861, where the author proposes to halt. The volumes average some five hundred pages each; they are well printed, neatly bound, and fairly well indexed; an index to the whole work of more ample dimensions is an improvement which readers should demand when the work is completed. It is probably too late to ask Mr. Schouler to change his style somewhat for the better; but we cannot avoid noting two or three points in which it could easily be improved. Such journalistic jewels of expression as Washington Irving's "mateless nest," "wetting the cambric," and "catching on to society," are far too fine for a dignified history which is intended to outlive the slang of the day. "Nor was American President ever again inducted for a second term while lasted that union," etc., is a bad example of a style less common with Mr. Schouler than the journalistic. His native turn is not to rhetoric, but he seems to consider it a duty to introduce a metaphor, occasionally, of which good taste would advise the excision. "Though we still wandered through the pines, distant tree-tops were visible, whose silvery leaves danced in the sunshine," is not a real ornament to a sober account of the perplexities that preceded the Constitutional Convention.

Mr. Schouler is not to be accounted a historian of the first rank, such as has lately appeared in Mr. Henry Adams, but he must be rated high in the second class. He has a firm hold of the modern conception of history as the story of the life of the people, and his occasional paragraphs or chapters on the manners, customs, and character of the American people in its numerous varieties, are full of interest and instruction. He makes his first full survey of the condition of the country in 1809, and it is profitable to compare this with Mr. Adams' more philosophical characterization of the different sections eight years earlier. Again, in 1831 Mr. Schouler takes a fuller view, marking the progress in national development and the changes in national characters. His portraits of great men, while not drawn with a master's hand, are of very decided merit. Witness, for example, the descriptions of Jefferson, John Adams, Hamilton, J. Q. Adams, and Jackson. Mr. Schouler is more cordial in his admiration for Jefferson than Mr. Adams. Seeing his short-comings as a private person and as an administrator very plainly, the historian presses home, in this excellent summary of Jeffersonism, to the center of the thought of the great Democrat:

"Jefferson's original character has most powerfully contributed in forming that of his country. Liberal education, liberal politics, liberal religion; a free press; America for Americans; faith in the simple arts of peace, in science and material progress, in popular rule, in honesty, in government economies; no kings, no caste, room for the oppressed of all climes; hostility to monopolies, the divorce of government from banks and pet corporations; foreign friendship and intercourse without foreign alliances; the gradual propagation of republican ideas on this western hemisphere while gently forcing Europe out; meager force establishments, meager preparations for war in time of peace, the preference of militia and State volunteers for defense in emergencies rather than national troops and prætorian guards; faith in the indefinite expansion of this Union upon this continent — all this, though others inculcated some of these maxims too, is Jeffersonism, and Jeffersonism is modern America. . . . Ideas impress most through the individual who stands for them; and in Jefferson was personified, for the first time, the American idea in its full expression against prejudice, timid conservatism, historical experience, and the cherished traditions of Europe, the French Revolution, and the armed potentates of the world."

Among the special excellences of Mr. Schouler's history is his treatment of the spoils system, originating under Jackson, and of the reform movements of all kinds in 1830–1840. The Abolitionists especially are set forth in a manner which we believe posterity will decide to be fair and just to the facts of the case. It is easy now to be simply rhetorical in panegyric of Garrison and his associates; but the proper appreciation of his work and word demands more time and thought than sentimentalists are either willing or able to bestow. While the Abolitionists, says Mr. Schouler:

"Were untractable theorists to the last . . . not actors in affairs, but agitators, critics, comeouters, coiners of cutting epithets, who scourged men in public station with as little mercy as ever the slave-driver did his victim . . . they were morally right. . . . The essential gain of all this was to awaken the Northern conscience from its long sleep. . . . Better this agitation, though it sent a two-edged sword, than the poisonous lethargy before it. . . . Whether one shall admire most the bold denunciator, whose speech irritates thought into action, or the enlightened statesman, who accomplishes for reform all that his age will admit, and respects the limitations of social ordinance, or the grim warrior who wins the fight, his temperament must decide. History should do justice to all; and though timid and truckling at times, that public conscience is not to be despised which long struggled between moral obligation and loyalty, until loyalty itself opened the means of escaping the curse."

We have said enough, we trust, to indicate the unique value and high importance of Mr. Schouler's work as a full history of our constitutional life. Many excellent biographies there are which treat certain stages of it with great ability; but as an ordered narrative of the whole period, Mr. Schouler's book is not only without a superior, it has no companion.

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