EARL PERCY AND HIS DINNER-GUESTS.*

In "Earl Percy's Dinner-Table" Mr. Murdock has produced an unusual book — an historical monograph possessing both unquestionable authenticity and rare distinction of style. Its plan and the stately classicism of its style suggest Landor's "Imaginary Conversations"; its method of research, Mr Austin Dobson's "Eighteenth Century Vignettes." A light touch, a vivid imagination, a gift for the illuminating epithet that shall paint a character, picture a scene, or produce an atmosphere, — these are the qualities that distinguish Mr.

* EARL PERCY'S DINNER-TABLE. By Harold Murdock. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co.

Murdock's little book. Already known as the author of several important historical works, he now shows that he can clothe dry bones and make them live, — not in the hackneyed form of historical fiction but as a rare and refreshing bit of imaginative history. Issued as one of the Riverside Press special editions, the volume is printed and bound in a fashion that suits its unusual quality. The only illustration is the frontispiece, which shows an engraved portrait of Earl Percy by Sidney L. Smith, from a print in the author's possession, combined, within a graceful border, with a modern vignette of the Earl's dinner-table.

Mr. Murdock has chosen the dinner-table in Earl Percy's Winter Street house as a convenient vantage point from which to survey the life of Boston in 1774. The episode falls into three parts: the first, opening with a vivid account of the landing of Percy's regiment in Boston, characterizes the Earl and a group of his officers, and relates, as an extract from the (non-existent) journal of Captain William Glanville Evelyn of "The King's Own," the conversation at one of the Earl's dinners; the second is concerned with the battles of Concord and Bunker Hill and the dark days that followed, when, for obvious reasons, "dinner-giving was going out of fashion in Boston," and the evacuation of the town was only a matter of time; the third is in the nature of an after-piece, sketching briefly the future careers — in America, England, or India — of the gallant group of officers who had been wont to gather around Earl Percy's hospitable board.

The chief authorities for the more original features of the narrative are Earl Percy's own letters, those of John Andrews, Mrs. Boscawen, Lady Sarah Bunbury, and others, and the files of the Boston newspapers of the day, — sources which are indicated in an appendix of notes. A complete bibliography would extend to alarming proportions, and include every available book, pamphlet, and document; for it is evident that the easy, unstudied manner of the narrative is due to the author's perfect acquaintance not only with the episodes which his book touches upon but also with the entire history of the period.

In its main outlines, the story of the Boston siege is as familiar as any in our history; but with the stately Earl Percy in the foreground, in place of Paul Revere and the Concord minutemen, it takes on a fresh interest. The Earl wrote home of Boston, — its people, whom he called "a set of sly, artful, hypocritical rascalls, cruel, and cowards," and its climate, which took him to "the Torrid and Frigid Zone frequently in the space of 24 hours." In order that he might enjoy the scenery of the suburbs he bought a riding-horse, for which he paid £450, and sent to New York "for a pair of chaise horses that were to his mind." Then he rented a house, pleasantly situated within its garden at the head of Winter Street, and was ready to play the host "to the officers of the Line and occasionally the Gentlemen of the Country."

"It is pleasant to see him crossing the Common each afternoon to do the honors of his mansion, and day by day and week by week it is interesting to watch his guests passing in and out the great door. It opens to officers in scarlet and gold, and to officers in the blue of the Royal Navy, to gentlemen in silk and brocade, and to gentlemen in velvet and lace. Old Dr. Caner goes up the path leaning upon his stick, the great coach of Colonel Royall lumbers up to the garden gate, the chaise of Judge Lee waits in Winter Street to carry his Honor back to Cambridge. All those who love the King within this stern old New England town rejoice in the polite summons that brings them to Earl Percy's dinner-table."

At the particular dinner that Captain Evelyn describes, the civilian element was ably represented by the Reverend Mather Byles, preacher, poet, and wit, arrant Tory and so "in the eyes of the army the most sensible as well as the most delightful clergyman in Boston." The other places were filled by army and navy officers, invited to meet Lord Percy's boy friend, young Roger Sheaffe, who is about sailing for England to study for a commission.

"The Earl has presented him to-night to his future comrades of the army, and the radiant face of the boy must be a pleasant sight in his lordship's eyes."

Pleasant banter over the boy's ambition to "wear the red coat" runs around the table. Doctor Byles's witty sallies throw old Major Pitcairn into convulsions of mirth. Local affairs, London scandal and literary gossip furnish topics of conversation. The Earl, who presides gracefully, asks Dr. Byles if he admires the verse of Dr. Goldsmith, lately deceased.

"Dr. Byles replied that he regarded Goldsmith as an ingenious man of excellent promise, though not to be compared with his old friend and correspondent, Mr. Pope."

Then Earl Percy spoke of his family's connection with the poet, and Captain Harry Fox, Lord Holland's "only good son," recalled his brother Charles's acquaintance with him.

"He feared that the poet's death had been hastened by the burden of heavy debts. Here Gould muttered in my ear to wonder whether, if Lord Holland had not come to the financial relief of Charles Fox, that portly gambler would have been crushed as easily as the Duke's scribbling friend from Grub Street."

It is all very courtly and care-free; but when the time for work comes these leisurely diners-out prove themselves excellent fighters. As for Earl Percy's scornful estimate of the colonists, he was prompt to revise it on the evidence of April nineteenth, in writing of which he paid high and generous tribute to their courage and perseverance. Mr. Murdock describes the Earl reviewing his brigade on the morning of that fateful day.

"And the expression on his Lordship's face is not the one we find in Mr. Stuart's painting, nor that familiar to guests at his dinner-table."

But the Earl and his friends were not yet discouraged. Dinner-giving went merrily on in Boston, with the choice of guests greatly augumented by the advent of many frightened loyalists and the arrival of the frigate Cerberus.

"One is tempted to glance again into the old dining-room and mark the new faces that gather there, to hear Colonel Saltonstall and Mr. Vassall lament the inconveniences of the time, to hear Clinton tell his memories of the fighting Prince of Brunswick, and listen to Burgoyne's graceful and racy recital of the gossip that is amusing high life in London."

But soon came the disillusionment of Bunker Hill, and then, after a long cold winter — enlivened chiefly by Burgoyne's wit as a playwright — the evacuation, and the scattering of Earl Percy's dinner-guests to the four corners of the earth. It is the best possible evidence of Mr. Murdock's art that we read of their future careers with interest, and part from them, after so slight an acquaintance. as from friends.

EDITH KELLOGG DUNTON.