WILLIAM HENRY CHANNING.

Memoirs of William Henry Channing. By Octavius Brooks Frothingham. Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co. 1886.

"Then a man, one part flesh and four parts fire, rose up to speak." This was the description given by a gifted New York journalist (Mrs. Runkle) of a speech at the first Free Religious Convention. The speech was not made by William Henry Channing, but by John Weiss; yet no better description could have been given of the elcquence of Mr. Channing also. These two brilliant men were alike tinged with a certain Orientalism of temperament. Their utterance was as brilliant and flashing as the sword of Saladin, and made as fine a cut. Either of them, as in the fable of the Eastern monarch, could have sliced a man's head from his shoulders with a stroke so swift and keen that the victim would be unconscious until he shook himself. But, after all, the downright blow of King Richard does the surest work, or is, at any rate, best remembered.

These remarkable men, with their compeers, Samuel Johnson and David A. Wasson, are, to a certain extent, vindications of the poet's line, which says that

> "The world knows nothing of its greatest men";

that is, of those who seem to their immediate associates the greatest. Apparently, it is not enough that a man should have the loftiest purposes, the most copious training, the most original thought, the most unwearied labor, the finest penetration, the most commanding or fascinating utterance. Something else is needed to secure that uncertain and precarious possession called posthumous fame. "Of what use is genius," said Emerson, "if the focus be a little too short or a little too long?" This keen suggestion comes as near as we shall get to the solution of the conundrum. Thus alone can we account for the fact that four such men as these have probably left behind them no definite or permanent remembrance, while dozens of men incomparably their inferiors are already well intrenched in the columns of the encyclopædias.

It is a fortunate thing for the memory of Mr. Channing, at any rate, that he had Mr. Frothingham for a biographer; and it is fortunate for Mr. Frothingham that his latest book of biography is his best. In his former memoirs, he was hampered by a little want of sympathy. He heartily admired his sitters, but did not seem quite near enough to draw their portraits. The same fault existed in his History of Transcendentalism. It was criticised as unsympathetic, whereas the early or contemporary memoirs of a man or a movement should be sympathetic. The criticism will come soon enough, if interest in the theme survives. One would say that Mr. Frothingham had more in common with Theodore Parker or even Gerrit Smith than with William Henry Channing; and, if he has succeeded better with this last, the change must be in himself,—in the increasing mellowness and breadth of appreciation that come with added years. Mr. Frothingham has won laurels of his own as an extemporaneous preacher; his training, parentage, and surroundings have had much in common with Channing's; yet there never was a moment when their mental habits, their bearing, their elocution, their methods, their effects as produced, had anything in common with each other. They represented similar convictions very often, but always through two utterly alien temperaments. This makes it exceedingly interesting to read the analysis of the one by the other.

During his whole life, Mr. Channing was a natural leader in every sphere he entered,—a leader as distinct from an organizer. Paul might plant, but Apollos must water. He worked at a time when pulpits were held by a more permanent tenure than now, but none ever held him long. The fact is conclusive as to the temperament of the man. But there was something about him which was "in change unchanged," and that was the spiritual theory or formula which marked him. Geometricians tell us that a circle can be drawn through any three points. His three selected points were Christ, Swedenborg, and Fourier; and the circle which comprised his life was drawn through them

all. The combination was unique in him. No one else accepted the three points. The Unitarians left out one, the Swedenborgians one, the Fourierites one, the Church in general two, and the Radicals all. Hence, he was always alone; and hence, again, he was always in the same place, spiritually, while constantly changing his earthly habitation. *Cœlum non animum.* His dream outlived his own immediate generation, and he went on preaching it to the next; and that next generation heard it with the same glow as its predecessor, and with as little permanent result. During his very last visit to this country, in 1880, he preached eloquent extemporaneous discourses, beneath which young men and maidens sat hushed and spell-bound; while older hearers recalled the same phrases, the same symbols, that had appeared in his discourse, "The Gospel of To-day," given at his cousin's ordination thirty years before. Always the same "At-one-ment," the same "Combined Order," the same "Reorganization and Reinspiration of the Church of the Children of God." No wonder that his later years were tinged with a gentle, elevated, unselfish disappointment that so long a preaching had left his gospel still unappreciated. No wonder that he wrote, in 1880, "The many do not in the least comprehend the import of my earnest appeals." "The glowing, nation-wide, world-wide acknowledgment of the 'Better Day for Reconciled Humanity,' which was my Vision, like an Angel Form beckoning Westward, while crossing the Atlantic has ascended to the heavens in a golden cloud. 'Not yet' is the gentle inward whisper. Wait!" (p. 412.)

Like perhaps the majority of gifted extemporaneous orators, Mr. Channing was an exceedingly diffuse writer; and this makes it difficult for a biographer — especially one who is himself so terse as Mr. Frothingham — to exhibit such a man through his own words. As a result, in this case, the citations are too long; and many readers will be tempted to omit them. One suspects that some pressure from friends or kindred may have tempted the author to insert some things that his severer judgment would have pruned out.

Nothing of this applies, however, to Mr. Channing's abstract of his experiences as chaplain of the United States Senate and hospital nurse; for all this is written with a vividness which makes one wish for that volume of his war letters and diaries which is rumored as in the future. Nor does it apply to the delightful picture of his childhood, and his singularly graphic delineation of his maternal grandfather, Stephen Higginson, member of the Continental Congress and Federalist leader. Of him and his household, the picture (pp. 9–13) is like a Dutch interior, and forms one of the rarest and best glimpses at something of which we really know very little,—the actual life of the New England gentry, just before hair-powder, knee-breeches, and Federalism disappeared.

Mr. Frothingham's description of Mr. Channing's intellectua lattitude is admirable, but the sketch of his personal character leaves him less vividly defined. As to this, there was, no doubt, some embarrassment, from the fact that the memoir was written primarily for the immediate family of the person described. Both he and Dr. Hedge leave Mr. Channing too much in the light of the conventional saint of the religious biographies. In the most important points, this picture is true. A man never walked on earth with loftier dreams or purer from fleshly temptation. But this fineness of structure brings perils of its own; and the same "fiery temper" which made him in youth (p. 57) run after an adversary with a sword-cane, and then be grateful when the weapon sprang from his hands and fell over the bridge-railing into the water,—this followed him throughout his life, and made him impetuous, over-sensitive, sometimes unduly suspicious, and sometimes startlingly severe. Wendell Phillips, when goaded by opposition upon the anti-slavery platform, uniformly rose in eloquence and in power, and, though often persistently and even cruelly unjust, did not visibly lose his temper; while Channing, under similar circumstances, would both lose his temper and be disconcerted. Those who are old enough to recall the exciting meetings held in Boston in 1843, to discuss Communism

and Association, will recall the almost formidable invective which Channing at length brought to bear upon Collins, the communist leader. After all, this aspect of a saint is refreshing to the carnal mind, jealous of too monotonous an elevation. It is like learning that Washington sometimes laughed, and occasionally lost his temper; that he called General Putnam "Old Put," and that he once swore.