Portraits of the Nineties

PORTRAITS OF THE NINETIES. By E. T. Raymond. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1921.

THE fact that Mr. Justin McCarthy wrote "Portraits of the Sixties," Mr. G. W. E. Russell "Portraits of the Seventies," and Mr. H. G. Hutchinson "Portraits of the Eighties," is advanced by Mr. Raymond—with modest deprecating of any suggested comparison—as a reason why he should himself give us "Portraits of the Nineties." Perhaps the argument that the chronological sequence needs to be thus completed is as good as any other plea that the author could have devised. Prefaces often speak of that "long felt want" which is to be supplied by the volume they introduce. It may, however, be doubted whether the precedents which Mr. Raymond quotes are as well known or as much valued as he seems to suppose, and whether the gap in the historical narrative which he has set himself to fill has been generally deplored as a serious omission. There is, of course, some arbitrariness in the choice of any period for special study, and it may be argued that the isolation of this or that decade is as artificial a proceeding as one can imagine of the kind. What can any serious critic make of Mr. Raymond's first chapter, in which we learn that "The Nineties" were a golden age, with prettier women than we see now, with a special zest and flavor in life, with no thought of wars on a great scale, with old men still dominant in State affairs but beginning to yield before Ibsen's "League of Youth," with the middle classes eating and drinking and singing as in the days of Noë, and with little or no conception of the new forces at work underground? Did these features, one may ask, belong in any special sense to "The Nineties," rather than to the sixties, seventies, eighties that went before, or to the units and tens that came after? Mr. Raymond is the bond slave of his title. He chose a particular decade for himself, for the excellent reason that this was in a literary sense "No Man's Land," and he had to construct for it some theory of specific characteristics.

However, he has done his work well. He had things on his mind to say about some notable figures like Lord Rosebery and Mr. Gladstone, George Meredith and Herbert Spencer, Archbishop Temple and C. H. Spurgeon, Cecil Rhodes and Oscar Wilde. They are a mixed lot, and a thread of connection was hard to discover. Obviously the years between 1890 and 1900 were not the time of chief significance for some of them, but they all lived into that time, and the book had to be advertised as having some sort of unity. Publishers are notoriously shy of "Miscellaneous Essays."

But the reader will forgive Mr. Raymond for this. What difference does it make whether a book has been suitably named, when contents are so good? It is a wonderful gallery of portraits, and they are all worth studying. We have statesmen and soldiers, actors and lawyers and journalists, prelates and explorers and novelists, empire-builders and philosophers and artists. Almost every taste and interest are catered to. One meets in these pages with Lord Randolph Churchill and Bishop Creighton, with Lord Kitchener and Mr. W. T. Stead, with General Booth and Aubrey Beardsley. These and a host of other personages are made to live before us. Nor is Mr. Raymond given to complaisant acceptance of current opinions about such people, even when these have been made current by high authority. One recalls how in his earlier book "All and Sundry" he said some straight and independent things about the work of Mr. Rudyard Kipling. In the present book the Meredithians will read, one hopes to their profit, how "Meredith's genius lay in the direction of making the simplest things obscure and the most ordinary things out-of-the-way." The writer, too, has what Mr. Wells has called the sole justification for writing, "the gift of the creative and illuminating phrase." Who, for example, that ever saw the late Lord Salisbury can miss the apt application to him of Disraeli's words about another—"the majesty of true corpulence"? Is there a better name for the Thames Embankment than *via dollarosa?* Is there a neater summing up of the English sporting morality than this: "We have always a weakness for the strong man who shows his strength by smashing the Ten Commandments, so long as he satisfies us in his observance of all the taboos and ordinances contained in that greater table of the law which we call 'cricket' "?

Someone has said about James Anthony Froude that in the title of his book "Short Studies on Great Subjects" he should have heavily underlined the two words "Short" and "Great." Not a few will be struck with a similar inadequacy in Mr. Raymond's work, a like contrast between the magnitude of some problems he has raised and the slightness of the comments with which he forces us to be content. But we have perhaps no right to complain, for the author has given us in the text at least as much as he promised on the title-page. We learn little about a man from looking at his portrait on canvas, though it tempts us to guess a great deal, and often our view of him—when we have really some evidence to form one—is colored by the persisting image of his features which the painter left upon our memory. "Pen Portraits," executed in rapid journalese, have the same defect. When the subject is a man of real significance, the real truth about him is hard to tell, and it cannot be told briefly. The character is always mixed, the motives are always doubtful and changeable, the achievements are partly good and partly bad. Readers need someone to protect them from the "brilliant" essayist, who has a keener eye for the vivid antithesis than for cautious analyzing, to whom

those copious qualifying parentheses—so essential to accuracy—are a thing that his craft bids him avoid, and who deals on every page in that biting epigram or sparkling paradox in which truth can so seldom be told.

These points need to be noted amid the present deluge of books that sum up great thinkers and statesmen and artists with that crispness which the cheap newspaper editor desires for "a pithy paragraph." Mr. Raymond's book is the type of which these editorial horrors in our time are the corruption, but it must not itself be thus lightly dismissed. It is indeed unequal. For instance, the chapter on C. H. Spurgeon is a monument of the very smartest failure to understand. That the author himself is aware of the risks in his kind of writing one cannot doubt. No one has put the point better than in Mr. Raymond's own phrase, "a mere essay in instantaneous photography, with its mad foreshortenings and irrelevant emphasis," though he does not acknowledge that what he has himself given us is of this order. But even for this there is a place, and we would not for a good deal have missed Mr. Raymond's photographs.

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