Literature.

The prompt mention in our list of "Books of the Week" will be considered by us an equivalent to their publishers for all volumes received. The interests of our readers will guide us in the selection of works for further notice.]

GEORGE TICKNOR CURTIS'S LIFE OF BUCHANAN.*

It is the misfortune of President Buchanan that he is destined to be remembered by his connection with the disgraceful side of a peculiarly disgraceful line of our national history. Mr. Curtis acts the part of a loyal biographer when he dwells on his domestic virtues, his private excellence, and the early disappointment, so touching in itself and which in its history and in Mr. Buchanan's fidelity to his lost love, throws a shade of pathos over a life otherwise unromantic. Mr. Buchanan is entitled to the credit of what he was as a man, to the fame of a strong debater, to the honor of his public missions and distinguished services. No one acquainted with the fifteenth President can be surprised that up to a certain point Mr. Curtis carries his readers with him.

But this is only while he detains them on that part of the picture which is out of central relations and in something of the haze of pictures not in focus. The illusion ceases when we touch the main current and find ourselves among the matters which are of real importance in the President's career.

Mr. Curtis gives us two engraved portraits of Mr. Buchanan; one young, and which it is not difficult to associate with his private biography, but hard to identify with the man as we knew him, and very different from the second portrait, the seasoned politician, exact to life, with the black clothes on which came so near involving us in a diplomatic snarl with Great Britain, with the lofty white cravat so much in keeping with the wearer's oft-repeated assertions of purity and independence, the cast in the eye, and the pitch to one side in the pose of the head so characteristic of the mind that looked aslant upon Kansas. It is the hard but just fate of Mr. Buchanan that this alone will be received for his portrait, and that his identification with the measures that brought on the war is the material fact of his career.

It is not fair to charge him with the whole responsibility of having ruined the Democratic Party during the four years of his presidential administration. That party was already tottering when he was elected. Its fate and that of the policy it had come to represent were decided when the Free Soil party was formed. Its victory in 1856 was more apparent than real, and though Mr. Buchanan was constitutionally incapable of such perceptions, notice enough had been given him that the majority which carried him in did so only in the lingering hope that he was more the man for the hour than he was.

Mr. Buchanan's responsibility went further back and covered the whole development of the secession policy, which he opposed from the beginning in the same futile way he did at the end, promoting its opportunities if not its principles, and protesting on all occasions that the provocations to it were great. It is easy to name other statesmen whose measures were bolder, whose force was greater, and who drove on the fatal policy of their party to more purpose. But among the whole list of Democratic leaders there was not one who represented so well the fatal policy of the party as Mr. Buchanan. He had been active in its affairs and in promoting its development, but without having had any considerable shaping influence on it, and, indeed, without definite ideas of his own to impress on it. He was a leading-follower by nature, who took on so completely the policy and the complex and contradictory character of his party, with its protestation of purity and its hot-bed of corruption; with its declamations about justice, fairness and freedom, and failure to maintain one of them; and with its bluster against secession while fanning its provocation and providing it with opportunities, that when we are seeking for a definition of the Democratic Party from Jackson to Lincoln, the best reply to be made is: Know James Buchanan and you have it all.

For the biographer of Daniel Webster it would seem an unpromising task to undertake the defense of Mr. Buchanan. But the noblest men have in their lives points where they connect with those of baser sort. On one such point Webster connects with Mr. Buchanan, and belittling as it was to the great fame of Webster, it has proved large enough to transform the biographer of Mr. Webster into the eulogist of Mr. Buchanan.

The material he was required to arrange and sift for the purpose was enormous in amount. Mr. Buchanan was an industrious annalist, especially in the autobiographic line. He belonged to the class of men who put their defense on paper and find in their notes something of the luxury of a good conscience. They have been brought to Mr. Curtis by the basketful if not by the cart-load, and we may be sure that Mr. Buchanan could say nothing more for himself than is contained in these two heavy octavos.

His biographer has so far identified himself with his subject as to have made Mr. Buchanan's position his own, an achievement which, however it may reflect on him, diminishes the temptation to soften the facts

The man who can write at this late day of Buchanan's annual message to Congress, December 3d, 1860, "After long familiarity with our constitutional literature, I know of no document which, within the same compass, states so clearly and accurately what I regard as the true theory of our Constitution as this message of President Buchanan; had I the power to change it I would not alter a word," has at least the courage of his opinions.

The salient points of Mr. Buchanan's public life are his championing of General Jackson, as to his partisan use of the civil service and his assault on the National Bank and his general course as to slavery. On the two first of these points Mr. Curtis has done his duty as a biographer with impartial ability and without compromising himself. He gives us Mr. Buchanan's speeches on the subject. They show him at his best in a limited range and wholly incapable of comprehending that monumental system of public finance which had been elaborated by Hamilton and which raised the Federal Treasury to an honorable independence, which has never since been doubted, except in the closing years of the administration which these volumes glorify.

The speech in the Senate on the interference of Federal officers, Feb. 14th, 1839, reveals the democratic theory of the public service at that time, and is in addition an admirable example of the commingled sense and sophistry, morality and immorality, honest boldness and crafty duplicity and self-delusion which characterized the entire party to whose fortunes Mr. Buchanan was committed. With the subsequent history of the country before us we can read between the lines and understand what political immoralities were implied in his propositions better than the speaker himself. Its greatest moral obtuseness lay in the assumption that political corruption required the use of money and did not apply to bargaining when politicial measures were the consideration. Mr. Douglas became a master in this art, and had a conscience that permitted him to avow it. He once, at least, claimed credit with his constituents that, without using a cent of money, but only by bargaining one railway charter against another, he had carried a desperate measure through Congress.

Mr. Buchanan's notion of political morality and of the use to be made of the public service and servants was wholly Van Burenish.

The speech to which we refer is excellent for the times. It glows and kindles with the subject, and lacks nothing to make it a stalwart piece of official eloquence except the striking figure of the modern "Boss." In it speaks the voice of a now popular sentiment which did not then fully understand itself, and from which, in its honest democratic bluntness, the reformers of the civil service have already learned that they must come to an understanding.

Mr. Buchanan made his start with a strained doctrine of the Constitution and a loosely-drawn political conscience. His profession of principles and of integrity of all kinds and in all shades was abundant enough to give the impression that he suspected himself. His mind was overflowing with principles; but they were neither deeply rooted nor deeply thought out. It is easy to believe that they were taken up in his contact with others and in his choice of party and leaders. His advocacy is that of the pleader who has been brought into the case. The talent his speeches display is that of the diplomat who is insinuating a policy which he is sent abroad to promote.

With more conscience and more recognition of the higher ends of government he would have carried his doctrine of State Rights unharmed, as Democrats did before and have done since. But his inert political conscience cut him off from high views of the end of government and doomed him to an impotent interpretation of the Constitution. On the floor of Congress he once said: "By the by, this Constitution is a terrible bugbear. Whilst a member of the other house I once heard an old gentleman exclaim, when it was cited against one of his favorite measures: 'What a vast deal of good it prevents us from doing'!" The phrase is as good as a volume in Mr. Buchanan's political biography—"What a vast deal of good the Constitution prevented him from doing"!

We have given Mr. Curtis credit for honesty in his opinions and for boldness in the assertion of them. We wish that we could always find in him a candor equal to his ability. It is repeatedly argued in those pages, for example, in Mr. Buchanan's favor, that he opposed the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. He was out of the country at the time and gave no sign either way.

Afterward he did frequently express an unfavorable opinion of the measure. But this was done in a cheap fashion, as a concession he could easily make to northern sentiment. It cost him nothing and might conciliate voters. And along with it went his gratuitous and outrageous interpretation of the Dred Scott decision, which reduced the Missouri Compromise to a nullity and asserted the slaveholder's right to carry his slaves where he would in the territories. Mr. Buchanan's opposition to the repeal of the Missouri Compromise amounts to this: It was wrong to repeal it; but it was a nullity from the beginning.

Mr. Curtis does not agree with Mr. Buchanan's interpretation of the Dred Scott decision, nor with the decision itself, as we understand him. But he does not scruple to make the fullest use, both of the decision and of the President's interpretation of it, in his vindication, as if both were good law. All he claims is that the President believed it to be good law in the case of political action. But this is a vindication which does not vindicate, unless he was right in his belief; and Mr. Curtis concedes that he was wrong.

The treatment of the Kansas difficulties is incomprehensible. The history of the Lecompton and Topeka constitutions is skated over on icy views of the terrible outrages which lay under the heartless tale. One by one Buchanan's governors desert him and come home. One by one his chosen agents refuse to perform their part, and become witnesses against him in the case which the nation were trying at their bar. But Mr. Curtis holds on to Mr. Buchanan's old plea of legality and is again prevented from telling the truth and from uttering the generous indignation of a man by this fiction of law and the Constitution.

How far his sympathies carry him we see later, when, by a majority of more than 10,000 votes the Constitution was rejected, Mr. Curtis, in blind eagerness to show that the Lecompton party commanded the state, presses the point that there were land questions involved in this majority which swelled it. True; but when the issue was made clearly in the question, Free or Slave? there were no land issues to swell the majority of between four and five thousand which forever took the question out of feeble hands, like Mr. Buchanan's.

One example more of Mr. Curtis's uncandid statement of facts is all we have room for. On page 401 of volume II we read, in the account of the breaking up of the old traitorous Cabinet and the formation of the new and loyal Cabinet, that

"Mr. Thomas, who had been Commissioner of Patents, was made Secretary of the Treasury in the place of Mr. Cobb, on the 8th of December. He resigned on the 11th of January, and the President immediately invited General Dix to fill the office. General Dix at once repaired to Washington, and during the remainder of the administration he was the guest of the President at the White House."

Any one who is curious to know what sort of history this is may compare it with the account of the same transactions in the Life of Gen. Dix, by his son Morgan Dix (Vol I, p. 361–64). It appears then that the conduct of the administration awakened such alarm in New York that

"The President was given to understand distinctly that not one dollar would be forthcoming from the banks and financial institutions of the metropolis until he should have placed in his Cabinet men on whom the friends of the Union could depend."

The President asked what would satisfy them. A meeting at the Bank of Commerce decided to require the appointment of General Dix to the Cabinet. The Treasury was considered the place for him; but from motives of delicacy the meeting refrained from saying so. January 8th General Dix was summoned to Washington by the President and offered the War Office (well and loyally filled by Mr. Holt). This position General Dix declined, observing to the President that no change was needed there, and that "he could be of no service to him in any position except that of the Treasury Department."

"The President asked for time. The following day he had Mr. Thomas's resignation in his hands, and sent General Dix's name to the Senate. It was instantly confirmed. The news was received in New York and elsewhere with profound satisfaction. The financial deadlock was at once broken. The Government found itself in possession of all the money that it wanted, and the country saw a strong Cabinet and a Union Administration."

On the 11th General Dix returned to New York. It appears then that Mr. Thomas did not "resign on the 11th," but on the 9th; that the President did not "immediately invite General Dix to fill the office," but that General Dix was already offered to him as a kind of ultimatum from New York; that to save himself the necessity of dismissing an untrusty man from the Treasury, Mr. Thomas, he proposed to put a thoroughly trusty one out of the War Office, Mr. Holt; that Mr. Thomas did not simply resign, but was required to do so, and that after all this Mr. Buchanan nominated General Dix. Then, on the 11th, General Dix instead of "immediately repairing to Washington," (Mr. Curtis) returned to New York to make hurried arrangements for the ensuing six weeks.

The suppressions throughout this exemplary passage are small, but they are sufficient to change its whole character and make an impression of loyal vigor and decision in behalf of a man of whom General Dix wrote in a letter to Mrs. Blodgett, published in his Life:

"He was timid and credulous. His confidence was easily gained, and it was not difficult for an artful man to deceive him."

There is every reason to believe that he was himself thoroughly loyal and upright in his purpose. General Dix was impressed with his conscientiousness. But in men of the class to which he belonged conscience is more a scruple than a conviction, and the life he had led could have no other result than that of leaving his mind confused and his will imbecile.

We say nothing of Mr. Curtis's review of the anti-slavery agitation, nor of the original views advanced on his own authority of the course that should have been pursued. We should be as much surprised to learn that any one cared to refute it as we were to find that a man of learning and sense could write it.

The attempt to shift the responsibility for the war into the Lincoln administration is so feeble that Mr. Curtis abandons it half made and smothers it before fairly born with the malicious assertion that the new administration gave reluctant testimony to the wisdom and statesmanship of Mr. Buchanan by adopting his policy of treating the seceding states.

These two volumes contain, we may as-

* Life of James Buchanan. Fifteenth President of the United States. By George Ticknor Curtis. In Two Volumes. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1883. 8vo. Vol. I, pp. xiv, 635; Vol. II, pp. viii, 707.

sume, the whole of Mr. Buchanan's case. They are put together with skill and pains, and at the trying point in a somewhat unscrupulous way. But they will mislead no one. The facts which Mr. Curtis is at so great pains to conceal shine out on every page. Mr. Buchanan's great opportunity, his failure to see it, and his responsibility for the events which it lay in his power to prevent, remain just as they did before these volumes were published, unless we may say they are confirmed by the testimony of a witness who supposed himself able to deny them.