

The Literature of the Day

The British Constitution

Mr. Leonard Courtney's *The Working Constitution of the United Kingdom** describes that unwritten, somewhat indefinite and still changing organism, which nevertheless exercises such a distinct, comprehensive and powerful control over the political thought and development of the British empire. It tells of all the different functions and applications of the constitution, explains the methods of its practical operation, exhibits both its weaknesses and its advantages, and gives one in brief compass a candid and lucid expert study of the sometimes puzzling theme. For the student of constitutional history in general, or of that of England or our own country in particular, the book possesses exceptional value. But the subject is of interest to a circle of readers much wider and ever enlarging.

The absolute supremacy of parliament is the fundamental fact upon which the British constitution is based. This renders Great Britain practically a democracy, no matter how long she retains a sovereign as her figure-head. He reigns, but does not govern except in a limited and rigidly defined manner. And nowhere else in the world is the supremacy of the people, as asserted and exercised through a parliament, guarded more jealously. How this state of things came to be and the powers and functions of the Lords and Commons, how Scotch and Irish political history has become intertwined with English, how the army and navy and the civil service stand related to it, how political parties are carried on and how elections are conducted, how legislation is effected and how the church and the judiciary are factors in the great scheme—all these things are set forth admirably.

There is not much argument. The book is a statement rather than a defense of or a plea for the constitution. But here or there suggestions of reforms are considered, *e. g.*, the late Mr. Hare's proposition for rendering the House of Commons far more than it is at present absolutely representative of the electorate of the kingdom, the special feature of which is the making the election of a candidate depend merely upon receiving a certain previously settled number of votes; no matter where cast, a scheme certain to be opposed stoutly by political managers and equally certain to overthrow most of their power and to enable all kinds of views and all classes of voters to have a fair chance of representation. The subject of imperial federation also is discussed at some length but not exhaustively. American readers will find the volume of great value in more than one way.