

THE BOOKMAN'S TABLE

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE. A Biographical Study.
By M. E. Lowndes. New York: Longmans, Green
& Co.

An enormous critical literature has grown up about Montaigne, the chief works of which, M. Malvezin's, M. Grün's and M. Bonnefou's, can be known only to a few specialists among us. Mr. Lowndes is not exactly an investigator at first hand; but he is what we wanted even more, a cool and critical examiner of what the essayist's countrymen have done to elucidate his life and work. He has gone with them, or rather after them, to the sources, and gone with an awakened judgment, correcting their inferences and drawing his own with independence and sobriety. His book is, therefore, far more than a recapitulation of other people's labours. His grasp of the man's character is firm; and out of the few facts actually known he has virtually made a new biography. At least, he has shown Montaigne, the subject of many private experiments in education, and the participant in the great educational revival of his time, to be something of a rebel against all systems, and a sceptic in this more even than in other matters. Just how far and how little he was a courtier, just how his ideals and his practice of citizenship and public work were at variance, has never been so plausibly and precisely stated before.

On the critical side it is a singularly able and an original book. There is hardly a superficial word in it. There is no rhapsody. It will not satisfy the new enthusiast, perhaps, as does Emerson's eloquent and somewhat fanciful essay. But whether one likes it or not, the truth lies mainly in Mr. Lowndes's sober pages. One would like to quote again and again to show the points he makes, to prove his discrimination, and the fine shades of his criticism. To the careless reader Montaigne is a man out of whose mouth anything can be proved. This reader needs to follow the composition of the essays with this elucidator, who calls them "the accumulated reflexions, if not of a lifetime, at least of a whole maturity and age—reflexions not modified one by another, nor moulded to a dominant scheme, but set down as occasioned by all variety of incitement, and at often considerable intervals of time;" he needs to learn that they are a "progress of humours," that their writer is no guide to opinions, but a great master of the practical methods of thought. And Mr. Lowndes has flashed a clear light on Montaigne's order of mind by doubting whether he, "interested chiefly in those ultimate questions of life and death to which science at length admits herself unequal, would have been so much impressed even had he foreseen the whole structure of experiential knowledge," otherwise modern science. Never before has the Italian Journal been used as a "witness to Montaigne's Bohemianism and capacity—not of his time—for purposeless and light-hearted wandering."

There can be no serious fault-finding with the book. But a few things have surprised us. He repeats the eulogy of La Boétie somewhat conventionally. La Boétie lives for us still because Montaigne loved and idealised him. He was an able man of high character, but he had more of pedantry than Mr. Lowndes will admit. Perhaps his character was "at once stronger and more simple" than his famous friend's. He was safeguarded by his simplicity; but the comparison suggests a defect in Montaigne, who yet would not have been Montaigne had he been simple—perhaps only a pettifogging magistrate. Then his attitude to Christianity is somewhat over-elaborately explained. There, indeed, he was simple. When you have mentioned that the essayist was always inclined to uphold, in moderation, existing things, you have said all. There is not a line in him that can seriously be taken to have a genuinely Christian meaning. We think, too, there is a good deal that is fanciful in finding Montaigne philosophically systematised in Descartes. Then there is a needless insistence on his want of exact scholarship. His plentiful loose Latin and his meagre Greek have served us excellently. This is the kind of criticism not worth making about imaginative writers; and Montaigne was such as much as if he had used the dramatic form, and Mr. Lowndes owns it. And here is a passage in which more than any other in the book we find convention uppermost and the critical spirit astray. "He was of that order of mind which, however readily active in response to external stimulus, is wanting in the inner springs of action, and, having neither the co-ordinating nor the volitional impulse, is content to accept the world fragmentarily, as it is presented in experience, and seeks neither to remould it in actuality to an ideal nor to reduce it to unity of thought. His was the order of mind that falls into place naturally as a spectator, not as an actor in life, etc." This sounds almost like a complaint. Whether it be such or not, is it accurate? Is it not mostly empty words? What is meant by "action?" Montaigne took his place among the workers, the actors—though in a debonair and unobtrusive fashion—when he set the example of clear judgment, when he set the fashion of realism in the attitude towards existence. His observation of life brought material to his singularly active and inciting mind. If he had set about reforming the world—the little scrap of world within the most gifted vision—would his notions have been less fragmentary? They would not have been less consciously so. True, he is with all the natural science pioneers in his fragmentary contributions to knowledge. But neither was he, nor are they, of necessity, intellectually "content to accept the world fragmentarily," though they may be so, as Montaigne was, by temperament. The passage simply means that he did not invent a system which would vaguely contain

the world, otherwise the contents of the inventor's imaginings. But he dug diligently in his own little garden, and his system of cultivation is still that in use by such active observers of life as are more concerned with truth than with sentiment.

These are meagre criticisms; but a careful reading of Mr. Lowndes's book has called for none more serious.

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