

Literature

The Autobiography of Moncure D. Conway*

AMONG the many interesting experiences narrated in Herbert Spencer's Autobiography, one of the most curious is the well-meant but fruitless efforts of his friends to select for the philosopher a congenial consort. They made the mistake of choosing an austere intellectual woman, and after a trial conversation with her, Spencer remarked that instead of impressing him as a great mind, she seemed rather to be "a small brain in a state of intense activity." It would be unfair to speak of Mr. Conway's intellectual endowment as small; but, after reading his Autobiography, one sees that his mind is certainly more active than profound. He has been, indeed, a literary Jack-of-all-trades—Methodist and Unitarian minister, lecturer, biographer, novelist, historian, scientist, journalist, editor and war correspondent. The record of his busy life, as pleasantly narrated in these two thick volumes, fills over nine hundred pages, and while some matters receive too much space, the work as a whole is highly entertaining. It has the faults and virtues of the journalistic ^{formal}

In the preface, which is modestly and frankly written, he quite properly describes himself as a "surviving witness to developments and events which have made momentous chapters of history." We do not read Boswell's "Life of Johnson" primarily because we are interested in Boswell; and it is the Boswellian character of this book which makes it so attractive. We soon lose interest in the author's own mental struggles, and his opinions on slavery and religion seem emotional rather than well-considered. He believes the Civil War could have been prevented; and his own motto was and is "Liberty first and union afterward," which Webster right-ly called "words of delusion and folly."

* AUTOBIOGRAPHY. *Memories and Experiences of Moncure Daniel Conway.* In two volumes. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co. \$6.00.

Like Wendell Phillips, he attacked President Lincoln fiercely during his lifetime, and refuses to worship him now that he has received the martyr's crown. And yet in the conversations that he reports between himself and Lincoln it seems to us that the latter had the lion's share of both wisdom and patience. In politics Mr. Conway shows all the idealism and zeal of the true Mugwump, joined with the characteristic lack of good sense and practical efficiency. He voted for Lincoln in 1860, and adds: "It was the only vote I ever did cast for a President, having in Washington had no vote and in later years no faith in any of the candidates or in the office." After reading a few statements like that one ceases to have any respect for the political opinions of the author, or any curiosity to know how they may develop.

In religion, one may sum up Mr. Conway's stormy career by adapting the words of Paul: "I have fought the good faith." His hatred of Christianity enlivens nearly every page. Beginning as a Methodist minister, he went into Unitarianism and finally into what he would probably regard as complete emancipation. Like the late Professor Clifford, whom he idolized, his hostility to religion is as dogmatic in utterance as his previous defense had been. For example, speaking of John Brown's raid, he remarked in 1863, "But God's plan was a different one," etc. His maturer comment on his own speech is:

"I am now certain that no god had anything to do with the affair, except the phantasmal god of war worshiped by Brown, and that the biblical captain, who revived that deified wrath, inflicted on America sequels of slavery worse than the disease."

It must be pleasant to be sure of something, even if that something is nothing.

This Autobiography differs from most of its class by the fact that it would be exactly as interesting if it had been published anonymously. Its interest is, we repeat, journalistic, objective; the author's mind is not powerful enough to

hold our attention, but when we find that he knew personally Browning, Carlyle, Tennyson, Darwin, Huxley, Tyndall, Thackeray, Dickens, Mill, George Eliot, and all the other intellectual giants of the Victorian Age, we listen with breathless attention to what he has to say. It is a case of "Ah, did you once see Shelley plain?" His work is a series of interviews with tremendously interesting people, and Mr. Conway, who is a born journalist, has the art of writing up an interview to perfection. The long evenings he spent with the Carlyles, and the walks on the crowded London streets with Browning; the sobbing multitude at the funeral of Charles Dickens, and the handful of distinguished men with whom he saw Carlyle interred at lonely Ecclefechan; his admirable description of Daniel Webster in action; an amusing adventure in the dark with Tennyson, after an exceedingly good dinner; a talk with Bismarck during the war; Mark Twain's first appearance before a British audience; hundreds of lively anecdotes, and brilliantly executed pen pictures keep the reader in a state of steady enjoyment and confident anticipation of the next page.

We note very few typographical errors and few slips. In view of the Appendix to Spencer's recently published Autobiography, he ought not to be classed among the Englishmen who were "silent" during the Civil War (Chap. 26). The Brownings did not call their son "Pinna" (Chap. 29), but "Pennini," or "Pen," after his mispronunciation of "nini." Nor, in view of the popularity of Page and Mark Twain, is it quite fair for Mr. Conway to explain the failure in America of his novel "Pine and Palm," by saying, "The American people could see no picturesqueness in the old South, and were rather irritated by attempts to revive the subject." A number of misplaced accents and trifling slips occur in the French words, which are somewhat frequent in the narrative; thus, "*Malgre*" occurs once for *malgré*, "*la votre*" for *la vôtre* (II, 263), "*dêjeuner*" for *déjeuner* (II, 186); the most famous street in the world is called the *Champs d'Elysée* (II, 146), and other minute errors are "seceeded" (II, 64), "Christie Johnston" for "Johnstone"

(II, 166), and the "Rev. Dr. Twitchell" for the "Rev. Mr. Twichell" (II, 144), which ought to be noted, for this distinguished preacher objects to the "Dr." more than he does to the misspelling of his name, and it is his fate constantly to hear the former and to see the latter.