MR. LECKY

Mr. William Edward Hartpole Lecky was born in Ireland in February, 1838. He was educated at Cheltenham and at Trinity College, Dublin, where he graduated B.A. in 1859, and M.A. in 1863. After taking his degree he spent some four years on the continent of Europe, reading largely in foreign libraries and 'deriving great profit as well as keen pleasure from the study of Italian Art.' He had originally intended to take holy orders; but growing doubts, which made it impossible for him to subscribe the Thirty-nine Articles, induced him to abandon the Church for literature. In 1859 he published anonymously a small volume of poems; in 1860, also anonymously, a short book on *The Religious Tendencies of the Age;* and in 1861, again anonymously, *The Leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland*, a book which he recast and enlarged towards the close of his life, and which good judges are disposed to place in the forefront of his historical writings. This book was followed in 1865 by *The Rise and Influence of Rationalism in Europe*; in 1869 by *The History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*; and, in instalments from 1878 to 1890, by *The History of England in the Eighteenth Century.* A volume of *Poems* followed in 1891; *Democracy and Liberty* in 1896, and *The Map of Life* in 1899.

Passages in *The Leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland*, and in *The History of England in the Eighteenth Century*, had induced the belief that Mr. Lecky was disposed to look with favour on the claims of Ireland for some kind of autonomous institutions; and his readers were, therefore, surprised when he came forward as the strenuous opponent of Mr. Gladstone's Home Rule Bill. The Unionist party, delighted at securing the services of so distinguished an advocate, naturally facilitated his entrance into Parliament; and, in 1896, Mr. Lecky was elected to represent his old University. He continued in the House of Commons till the closing months of his life: and though his thin voice, a disability in debate, and his tall willowy figure, which made him a favourite subject for caricature, placed him under disadvantages, he succeeded in attaining an almost unique position in the House of Commons. In 1897 his status in politics and literature was recognized by his admission to the Privy Council; in 1902 he was selected as one of the original members of the new Order of Merit. He died, after a protracted illness, in October, 1903. His death removed the last of the great English historians or eminent writers on historical subjects—Buckle, Freeman, Froude,

Gardiner, Green, and Stubbs—whose work was chiefly done in the last half of the nineteenth century. It may be too soon to appreciate the position which he will ultimately fill in historical literature, but his fame must rest on four books: *The Leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland*, *The Rise and Influence of Rationalism in Europe*, *The History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, and *The History of England in the Eighteenth Century*.

The second of these books was an explanation of a change of thought in the author himself. His faith in dogmatic religion, and the aspirations which had been possible while he still believed in the dogmas of the Church, had been destroyed by philosophic doubts, the result of his wide reading. 'The decadence of theological influence,' so he discovered, 'had been one of the most invariable signs and measures of our progress'; and Mr. Lecky accordingly set himself to expound what Mr. Birrell has called 'the beneficence of Scepticism, the good done to the world by the man who first had the courage to say "I don't believe you."' The conclusions which he formulated in this work led him perhaps naturally to examine in his next book the rival merits of Paganism and Christianity. *The History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* is an inquiry into the Ethics of Pagan Rome and Christian Europe. Reverently as Mr. Lecky approached his subject, willingly as he acknowledged that Christ in 'three short years of active life had done more to regenerate and soften mankind than all the disquisitions of philosophers, and all the exhortations of moralists,' he evidently thought that, with Christianity, the ultimate standard had been lowered by theological dogmata of questionable morality, some of which, like 'the Augustinian doctrine of the damnation of unbaptized infants,' surpassed in atrocity any tenets that have ever been admitted into any pagan creed. On the other hand, he paid Paganism a striking compliment by saying that philosophy had made a Pagan Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, who had 'embraced the fortifying "principles of Zeno in their best form," as nearly a perfectly virtuous man as has ever appeared on our world.'

The books were fortunate in the time at which they made their appearance. The controversy which had followed the publication of *Essays and Reviews*, and the doubts which a colonial bishop had thrown on the authenticity of the Pentateuch, had accustomed the reading public to a little freer criticism than would have been readily tolerated a dozen years before. Mr. Lecky spoke to an age which was prepared to listen, on a text which had not previously been made the thesis of a work. But the two books also commended themselves by their matter and their manner. So far as their matter

was concerned, they were constructed on a mass of authority which reminded their readers of Buckle's methods. And it is certain that Buckle's example had a large influence on Mr. Lecky at this period. There is, indeed, a wide difference in the use which the two men made of the vast stores of information which they had acquired. Buckle, like the deductive reasoner that he was, frequently made his facts fit his theories. Mr. Lecky, on the contrary, like a true Baconian, invariably builds up his conclusions on his facts. So far as manner was concerned, Mr. Lecky's style had always a quiet dignity of its own. But in his earlier works he occasionally rose to an eloquence from which his sensitive nature shrank in his later writings. The description of St. Peter's, for example, in the first volume of the *Rationalism*, might have proceeded from Macaulay himself.

It is doubtful whether the two works, to which brief allusion has thus been made, were a good preparation for the longer history which was to occupy so many of Mr. Lecky's maturer years. The plan on which both of them had been constructed was not altogether suited for the history of a nation. For history depends upon narrative; and in Mr. Lecky we get a luminous and comprehensive survey rather than the narrative which we expect from the historian. If in civil affairs his narrative is deficient, military affairs are almost wholly neglected. Mr. Lecky, indeed, dealt adequately with the causes and the consequences of the great wars which occurred in the century. But the reader cannot hope to find in his pages any informing account of the strategy of a campaign or the tactics of a battle-field. The eighteenth century, however, was largely occupied with foreign wars and foreign conquests; and a writer who dismisses Blenheim in a sentence, and who records the death of Wolfe and Montcalm in a parenthesis, can hardly hope to make his readers' blood tingle. It is fair, however, to recollect that this omission was intentional, and that Mr. Lecky deliberately stated in his preface that he had not attempted to 'give a detailed account of military events.'

It is not difficult to see why Mr. Lecky selected the eighteenth century as the theme of his longest work. For it was the century in which the lay mind, strengthened by the discoveries of Kepler and Newton, by the progress of scientific knowledge, and the evolution of scientific thought, shook itself free from many of the worst superstitions on which the Church had insisted; and with Mr. Lecky the decadence of superstition was a sign of progress. And there was one other reason which attracted Mr. Lecky to this century. For in that century the misgovernment of Ireland by England, which his admirable series of biographies of great Irishmen had impressed on him, reached its climax. Unluckily, this consideration induced him to

devote an excessive amount of space to Ireland (the two first volumes relate the history of England from 1700 to 1760, the two last volumes are exclusively concerned with Irish history from 1793 to 1800), and the history, in consequence, lacks proportion. Mr. Lecky himself was so sensible of this defect that in his later editions he separated his English from his Irish chapters, and turned one book into two histories. But if in one sense his work gained, in another sense it lost, from this division. For it is no more possible to separate the affairs of Ireland from the history of England than to relate the story of Napoleon's military achievements from 1809 to 1814 without referring to the Peninsular War.

When, however, all this has been said, the fact remains that there are few histories in the English language which are so conspicuous for fullness of research, lucidity of treatment, and sobriety of judgement. Mr. Lecky used to say that he had no patience with the historian who 'scamped' his work. It is, at any rate, certain that the rule, which he expected others to observe, he applied rigorously to himself. 'Turn wheresoe'er you may' the book is based on wide reading and careful thought. The reader is everywhere equally impressed with the author's knowledge and his impartiality. Epithets, which have proved a fertile source of danger to other writers, are almost always rigorously excluded. In no place does the work fall below the high standard which the author evidently set up for his own guidance; while in some passages, for example in the account of the administration and character of Sir Robert Walpole, of the religious revival of the eighteenth century, of the causes of the American War, and of the conditions which preceded and led to the Irish rebellion of 1798, it rises to a level which has been attained by few other historians of England.

In one respect, Mr. Lecky was surpassed by no other historical writer. He possessed to an eminent degree that essential characteristic of all great historians: the love of truth. He complained in his *European Morals* that the Church had exchanged 'the love of truth for what they call the love of the truth.' It was truth, not the truth, for which Mr. Lecky strove. 'To love truth sincerely,' so he wrote himself, 'means to pursue it with an earnest, conscientious, unflagging zeal; to follow the light of evidence to the most unwelcome conclusions. . . . To do this is very difficult, but it is clearly involved in the notion of earnest love of truth.' When he laid down his pen on the completion of his history in 1890, he must have had the satisfaction of feeling that from the first page to the last of his eight volumes he had worthily followed the rule which he had prescribed in 1869.

S. WALPOLE.