An outline history of English literature

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AN OUTLINE HISTORY
OF
ENGLISH LITERATURE

BY
WILLIAM HENRY HUDSON
STAFF LECTURER IN LITERATURE TO THE EXTENSION BOARD
LONDON UNIVERSITY

This purpose and plan of this little book may easily be gathered from the introductory chapter. Only a few words of preface, therefore, brief, should still be a fact as
well as in name, and be a fact, as far as it can be, than a list of authors and their works in chronological order, combined with critical appreciations. The outline is made up of the works of the writers, and for the ordinary purposes of study may be considered from their surroundings and treated separately. But we cannot get a history of such literature unless and until each one is put into his place in the sequence of things and considered with reference to that great body of literary production of which his work must now be regarded as a part. A history of English literature should be inclusive, and should aim at giving a clear and systematic account of the progress of successive great writers merely, as such, with changes and development.

This does not imply neglect of the personal factor. On the contrary, it brings the personal factor into relief, for it each writer is to be regarded as a whole, one main subject of enquiry must be the nature and value of his particular contribution to that whole. But it does mean

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THE purpose and plan of this little book may easily be gathered from the introductory chapter. Only a few words of preface, therefore, are needed.

As I conceive it, a history of English literature, however brief, should still be a history of English literature in fact as well as in name; and for a history something more is required than a list of authors and their books, and even than a chronologically-arranged collection of biographical sketches and critical appreciations. It is true that a nation’s literature is made up of the works of individual writers, and that for the ordinary purposes of study these writers may be detached from their surroundings and treated separately. But we cannot get a history of such literature unless and until each one has been put into his place in the sequence of things and considered with reference to that great body of literary production of which his work must now be regarded as a part. A history of English literature, then, must be interested primarily in English literature as a whole. Its chief aim should be to give a clear and systematic account, not of the achievements of successive great writers merely, as such, but of national changes and development.

This does not imply neglect of the personal factor. On the contrary, it brings the personal factor into relief; for if each writer is to be considered with reference to literature as a whole, one main subject of enquiry must be the nature and value of his particular contribution to that whole. But it does mean
that, together with the personal factor, the great general movement of literature from age to age has to be investigated, and that every writer has to be interpreted in his connection with this general movement. To exhibit the interplay of the personal and the impersonal in the making of history is, indeed, one of the fundamentals of the historian’s task; and since history, properly understood, is as much concerned with the explanation of facts as with the facts themselves, it follows that a history of English literature must also include some record of the forces which, period by period, have combined in the transformation of literary standards and tastes.

I have put these ideas into different, and perhaps rather simpler language in my introductory chapter. Here, therefore, I have only to say that this Outline History represents a modest attempt towards a real history of English literature in the sense which I attach to the term. One special feature of the book may be noted. It appears to be an accepted principle with many critics that literature is produced, as it were, in a vacuum, and by men who stand outside all conditions of time and place, and that therefore it may best be studied as a thing in itself. I, on the other hand, believe that the literature of any age is necessarily shaped and coloured by all the elements which entered into the civilisation of that age. So far as the limits of my space would allow, therefore, I have tried always to suggest the vital relationship between English literature and English life.

WILLIAM HENRY HUDSON.
# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTORY</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. ENGLISH LITERATURE BEFORE CHAUCER (500-1340)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. THE AGE OF CHAUCER (1340-1400)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. FROM CHAUCER TO &quot;TOTTEL'S MISCELLANY&quot; (1400-1557)</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DRAMA TO 1561</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. THE AGE OF SHAKESPEARE (1558-1625). VERSE</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. THE AGE OF SHAKESPEARE—Continued. THE DRAMA</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII. THE AGE OF SHAKESPEARE—Concluded. PROSE</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX. THE AGE OF MILTON (1625-1660). MILTON</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X. THE AGE OF MILTON—Concluded. OTHER POETS AND PROSE WRITERS</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XI. THE AGE OF DRYDEN (1660-1700). VERSE</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XII. THE AGE OF DRYDEN—Concluded. PROSE AND THE DRAMA</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XIII. THE AGE OF POPE (1700-1745). VERSE</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XIV. THE AGE OF POPE—Concluded. PROSE AND THE DRAMA</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XV. THE AGE OF JOHNSON (1745-1798). GENERAL PROSE</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONTENTS

CHAPTER                        PAGE

XVI. THE AGE OF JOHNSON—Continued. The Novel 174
XVII. THE AGE OF JOHNSON—Concluded. Verse 191
XVIII. THE AGE OF WORDSWORTH (1798-1832). The Older Poets 218
XIX. THE AGE OF WORDSWORTH—Continued. The Younger Poets 235
XX. THE AGE OF WORDSWORTH—Continued. General Prose 246
XXI. THE AGE OF WORDSWORTH—Concluded. The Novel 256
XXII. THE AGE OF TENNYSON (1832-1887). Verse 265
XXIII. THE AGE OF TENNYSON—Continued. General Prose 284
XXIV. THE AGE OF TENNYSON—Concluded. The Novel 298
CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

1. What is a History of English Literature? Perhaps it seems hardly worth while to put this question, because the answer to it is so very obvious. A history of English literature, we reply without a moment's hesitation, is simply a chronological account of the books which have been written in the English language, and—since we cannot think of a book without thinking also of its author—of the men who wrote them.

In a rough way, this answer is all right so far as it goes. But it is too vague, and it does not go far enough. It will be well for us, therefore, to pause at the outset of our own work to consider a little closely what it is that a history of English literature, however brief, really involves.

Stress may first of all be laid upon the personal element in it which our answer already recognises. We cannot, we say, think of a book without thinking also of its author. Every book, in other words, takes us back immediately to the man behind it, of whose genius it is a product, and whose thoughts and feelings it embodies. In a history of English literature, therefore, we must fix attention upon the personalities of the men by whom this literature has been made. In a short sketch we cannot, of course, examine in detail their lives, experiences,
and characters. This must be left for a more extended study. But we must try none the less to understand the distinctive quality in the genius of each man who comes before us. The reason of this is clear. Genius means many things, but at bottom it means strength of personality and, as a consequence, what we call originality. Every great writer, it has been well said, brings one absolutely new thing into the world—himself; and it is just because he puts this one new thing into what he writes that his work bears its own special hall-mark, and has something about it which makes it unlike the work done by anyone else. In the detailed study of any great writer this essential element of individuality is the chief feature to be considered, and in an historical survey, no matter how slight, it must be carefully noted too, for otherwise we cannot learn why such a writer counts as he does in the literature of his nation. A history of English literature, then, is concerned to indicate the nature and value of the particular contribution which each writer personally has made to that literature.

This, however, is only a small part of its task. A mere list of authors, taken separately, and of their books, does not constitute a history of literature, for literature as a whole grows and changes from generation to generation, and in tracing this growth, history must show the place which each writer occupies in it, and his relations with those who went before, and with those who came after him. A writer of exceptionally powerful personality is certain to stamp his impress upon his age, and amongst those who follow him many will always be found who, whether they are conscious of it or not, reveal his influence in their thought and style. Moreover, the popularity obtained by any writer with a particular kind of work will naturally breed imitations, and what has once been