

FREETHINKER
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**The Legend of Aleister Crowley.
A Fair Plea for Fair Play.**

The portly and voluminous poet, mystic, magician, explorer, scholar and publicist, Aleister Crowley, here has his Legend given to the world before the trifling formality of his death.

It is at once the strength and weakness of this decorously-tempered panegyric that it is the work of an instructed advocate rather than an impartial judge. In considering, criticising and appraising this unique and bulky figure we have to bear in mind—and it is only fair that we should thus bear in mind—the character, or rather the characteristics, of his countrymen.

Critics of life so diverse as Jonathan Swift, Dean of St. Patrick's, and Thomas Babington, Lord Macaulay, have in their several ways noted the proneness of the English mob to single out an object of hatred, and to howl at that unfortunate figure until they have either slain it, or cast it into the limbo of unreturning exile.

For us Freethinkers, it should suffice to recall the names of certain of our own heroes and martyrs who have thus enjoyed the favour of this distinguishing mark of approbation at the stone-filled hands and patriotic voices of their grateful fellow-countrymen, who never forgive genius, originality, or Independence of thought. Byron, Shelley, Richard Carlile, Charles Bradlaugh, are names among a score or two that might be given that indicate what are the real feelings of the man in the street towards his saviours and benefactors. Mob psychology is an inferiority complex magnified to the nth power; and in England, at least, there are not enough people of exalted temperament to prevent the martyrdom of the "sports" and leaders among mankind.

At one time we knew Aleister Crowley pretty well, as is plain from this book; and although in some respects he was perhaps "not quite nice to know," as the slang phrase goes, we do not think that it is quite fair to charge him with murder, cannibalism, black magical practices, moral aberrations, treachery, druggery; as is the custom among the cunninger and more degraded jackals of Fleet Street. We know something of journalists, but we know very few members of the newspaper craft

who would not sell themselves for twenty guineas down if it were quite "safe."

Rigid moralists, like the good Horatio Bottomley and the Almost-Reverend James Douglas, it seems to us, really protest too much in their religious efforts to keep England pure and holy; and for this reason, differing as we do from very much that is taught and advocated by Aleister Crowley, we respectfully decline to join the howling mob of interested pietists who every now and then raise the wind in the Silly Season by shrieking with inspired vituperation at the poet under discussion. If a fraction of the charges brought against Crowley were true, he should be exiled from every country in the world, and, after judicious application to his reason of various Chinese tortures, he should be hanged, drawn and quartered first, broken on the wheel afterwards, and the remains sown with salt before being cast into the infernal pit; but somehow we have an instinct against accepting the unsupported assertions of the professional moralists of our popular journals, and we do not know that Mr. Douglas, Mr. Bottomley and the lesser lights of cheap journalism have not proved their case up to the hilt. In these circumstances we venture publicly to the record our opinion that the poet might be allowed to follow his paths in comparative peace until something definitely criminal can be proved against him, when the police, no doubt, will be quite capable of dealing with the case. Crowley is at least as important a figure as the late D. H. Lawrence and Mr. James Joyce, both unquestionably men of genius; and when we remember the kinds of things said against these artists in our cheaper prints, we hesitate to acquiesce in the Sunday newspaper verdict of Aleister Crowley.

Mr. Stephenson gives an amusing and interesting, if one sided and partial, account of his subject; and the book will have its place when the history, literary and social, of the early twentieth century comes to be written.

A final note: we ourselves differ profoundly on many points—on most points, indeed—from Crowley; we do not see why he should not have a fair share of this notice therefore is written solely in the interests of fair play, by one who is in no respect a follower or partisan. It is a plea from ordinary human tolerance addressed by a Freethinker to his fellow Freethinkers. Those of them who feel inclined to quarrel with this estimate of Crowley's genius might inform themselves by glancing at his latest published book, *Confessions*. This work, now in course of publication, is, in my considered judgment, the greatest autobi-

ography that the world has ever seen. We have not the least doubt that posterity will endorse this finding.

Victor. B. Neuburg.