

Frank Harris' Great Book

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It is a little hard to be asked to review "Contemporary Portraits," since it has already been done by the "Philadelphia Evening Ledger," whose tame Master of English writes of England as Frank Harris' "once native land." One can hardly be expected to compete against that, however. The majority of books about great men have been written by little men, by men so little that though they "stand tiptoe upon a little hill," and strain, and strain, their vision never rises higher than the seat of the pants of their hero. The view afforded is apt to be inadequate. But Frank Harris is himself one of the circle which he describes. Frank Harris is no Arnold Bennett, who scribbles fragments of the conversation of the great men with whom he happens to be thrown, God knows how, upon his shirt-cuff, and makes what at first sight looks like a book about it. And here I must admit that I took up "Contemporary Portraits" with some fear. I have known Frank Harris well for some years; and I have often found his kindness of heart interfering with his critical judgment. He even published some of my poetry. And, with regard to this same Arnold Bennett, I have heard him speak of his laborious ant-heaps as if they were cathedrals. But, however intoxicated upon the good wine of friendship Mr. Harris may be in his leisure moments, when he comes to put his views on paper and to revise and polish them with that meticulous conscientiousness which is the despair of his publishers, the critical faculty, which, as Wilde says, is identical with the creative faculty, leaps forth unimpaired. If there be an exception to this rule, it is peculiarly excusable. I do think that the tragic deaths of Davidson and Middleton made it impossible for him to write what I feel sure that he must think. These men had a sort of genius, but in an extraordinarily limited degree. And I think that Frank Harris has done about all that he could do by the quotations from their works which he has picked out. There is nothing in either which could make their writings the companions of a life.

The whole style in which this book is written is amazingly vivid, one may say the best chiseled English that one has read for a long time. There is a great quality of reality and luminosity in the portraits. The men stand out as living. It is all the

difference between a stereoscopic view and that of the single lens camera. The men walk and talk. Incidentally, too, they are singularly complete. Frank Harris has understood and expressed the curious inter-relation which exists between the man and his work. He explains Carlyle by his impotence, Renan by his sensuality, Whistler by his build, Wilde by his obesity. But he does not fall into the error of regarding the body as the sole fountain of the spirit; he understands equally that the spirit moulds the body. It is the dove-tailing of these elements which makes the man. Nor does he neglect what I may call the trimmings of environment. He points out the influence of poverty and neglect on Davidson, of disappointed ambition on Burton. And if there be an omission in this volume, I think it is that there is no reference to the ataxia of Meredith.

The view of Carlyle is extraordinarily fine. But here I think that the fact of Mr. Harris' own youth at the time of his friendship with the prophet, has made him take too high a view of Carlyle as a philosopher. The world cannot be run by mere intellectual clarity, especially when ill-temper and cynicism jaundice it. The world needs heart as well as head; and the heart of Carlyle was full of envy and bitterness. It is impossible to run a postoffice properly unless you sleep with Keats under your pillow!

The picture of Renan is singularly alive, but here again I think that the estimate is a little high. It is impossible for me to credit that Mr. Harris believes in the historicity of Jesus, and it appears an unworthy concession to that Anglo-Saxon cant and hypocrisy, which in other places be castigates, to pretend even for a moment to do so. If there were ever an imaginary portrait, it is that which Renan draws. If there were ever a sentimentalized phantom, it is the Christ of Renan.

The sketch of Whistler is in my judgment the best in the book. I think it is not saying too much to maintain that it is the finest portrait sketch ever executed.

The essay on Oscar Wilde bears marks of pain. It is evident that the tragedy of the friend to whom Frank Harris was so loyal has made the subject too intimate for perfect detachment. Human sympathy creeps in to the detriment of aesthetic and intellectual sympathy. And the result is a certain sadness which lends a tone of tragedy to the career of Wilde; this I regard as factitious. Wilde was far too insincere to be a great artist. He hardly wrote a word which was not stolen deliberately from his immediate predecessors. Nor at any point did Wilde touch a genuine cosmic chord. "The Sphinx" is merely Gautier.

"Salome" is a mixture of Moreau, Flaubert and Maeterlinck. And he did not even write French himself. He drafted it in school-boy French, and had it made over by Marcel Schwob. As for the "Ballad of Reading Gaol," it is only "Eugene Aram" spoilt; and De Profundis is really so bad that, as I could never read it, I am prepared to believe it original. The plays are the bright spots. They do really represent the manners of the English of the period. And the reason for this is that society with a capital S was the genuine spot in Wilde's huge mass of humbug. He was the incarnation of all snobbery. He was not more homo-sexual than Adam. He adopted his vices because they were "good form" at Oxford.

The portrait of Sir Richard Burton is magnificent, and the comparison of him to Sir Walter Raleigh peculiarly apt and striking. The political criticism is also vividly acute; and it reads especially well at this moment, when it is being justified by events. I could wish, however, that this essay were double the length. In my judgment Burton was the greatest man, as a man, of all the Victorians. Few people are aware that he wrote over a hundred volumes. And each of these volumes contains a wealth of knowledge and a depth of philosophy so great as to be almost beyond our belief. How a man of action, engaged without intermission in the most arduous explorations, could have found time to write even one-tenth of what he did, or to acquire one-thousandth part of the knowledge which enabled him to write what he did, is a miracle in real life which all religious fables cannot match. A little more, too, might have been made of his domestic relations, of the tragedy of that enormous soul spending itself in brainless sentimentality over the peevish dolt who not only ruined his career, especially by her tactlessness at Damascus, but actually defiled his deathbed by causing the last sacrament to be administered to him, a sceptic, or, if he was anything at all, a Mussalman, after the breath was out of his body; and, not content with this ridiculous crime, violated the inmost soul of him by destroying his diaries and manuscripts.

The estimate of George Meredith, and that of Robert Browning, are singularly shrewd and just, but that of Swinburne appears to me to overlook the cardinal. Mr. Harris says that Swinburne was the soul of the new Paganism, the Poet of Revolt, but he does not emphasize it. Swinburne overthrew Victorianism. He is as important as, nay, more important than, Martin Luther. He did not influence his contemporaries, of course. No great man can. But those who were born with the first ech-

oes of his song ringing in their ears were born free. We are all Pagans today; and Swinburne is our father. I think, too, that the tragedy of Swinburne might have been presented with more emphasis. The Swinburne who wrote *Laus Veneris* was killing himself in the manner proper to those whose souls too obviously outweigh their bodies. That unspeakable animal, Watts-Dunton, rescued him, reformed him, ruined him. Owen Seaman, the tapeworm of the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union, was able to make him say:

"I have sung of the Spanish Armada,
I have posed in a Jubilee pose;
I have babbled of babies, and played a
New tune on the turn of their toes.
Washed white from the stain of Astarte,
My books any virgin may buy."

This is surely as epic as the poisoning of Hercules.

I am very grateful to Frank Harris for putting Mathew Arnold in his place.

So much for the English.

The study of Guy De Maupasaant is wonderfully fine. One recognizes the exquisite art of Mr. Harris' reticence with regard to the actual facts connected with the Vampire. But for all that I confess to many pangs of unsatisfied curiosity. In the study of Paul Verlaine one might have wished for a deeper appreciation of his art. The wonderful portrait of the man somewhat obscures the fact that he was just as great in France as Shelley, Blake or Keats in England. The music of Verlaine amounts to a reconstruction of the French language. He has not the profound passion and profundity of Baudelaire. The thoughts that he expresses, pathetic, delicate, exquisite as they are, have no intense virility behind them. Verlaine was rather a small man, just as the nightingale is rather a small bird. But he certainly did in French what no one else had ever done or even thought to do, that is, to raise the language from articulate speech to melody.

The essay on Fabre is a little disappointing, but the reason is apparent. There is nothing very much in Fabre, no personality for Frank Harris to describe. He is a very charming, simple, shrewd old man; and that is all. We consequently find the essay more concerned with the marriage of the scorpion than with the naturalist who observed it.

It is very refreshing to find Maurice Maeterlinck made visibly absurd. Maeterlinck is after all nothing but an atmosphere. So far as he is anything definite he is a thief. He is almost as much the successful tradesman as Arnold Bennett or Holbrook Jackson. I remember in one of my early meetings with the latter light of literature how he told me that he had given up a position in linendraping worth £800 a year for literature. I shook my head sadly. "No," I said, "once a linendraper, always a linendraper." And the tragedy is that I do not even know whether he thought me rude!

I am not particularly pleased with the sketch of Rodin. Fortunately Rodin had done his life's work before success came to him. His subsequent commercialization and vulgarization have no interest for us. It should have been beneath Frank Harris to notice the rubbish written about him by such creatures as Gsell. He says, however, that Rodin is "a French peasant . . . with a tremendous sensual endowment." Put shorter, as Frank Harris does in conversation, the description is more pungent and more true. But he should have emphasized the fact that Rodin has no power of speech whatever. I once went to stay with him to study him for a book that I was writing and I looked to him for Views on Art. He told me nothing that his own gardener did not know. And this is the great strength of Rodin. His mind has not been spoiled by education. Almost the only thing of interest that he told me was that in order to study his Balzac he furnished himself with all possible documents and portraits, and made laborious sketches from this material. After all that nonsense, the God in him suddenly asserted itself; he threw everything out of the window and produced the masterpiece we know, which is no more like Balzac than it is like Pontius Pilate, but which is the very incarnation of "La Comedie Humaine." All the things that Rodin is supposed to have said about art are the inventions of parasitic journalists. It reminds one of the story of Harry Vardon, when he had to write his book on golf. Three literary persons, thirsting for "copy," foregathered in the master's cottage with plenty of pens, ink, and paper. After about an hour's continuous smoking, the great golfer removed his pipe and said: "Gentlemen, golf is a very funny game." There the book began and ended. It had to be written without the cooperation of the author.

This great book ends finally with the study of Anatole France. The sketch is very slight, but it is extraordinarily endowed with insight and just appreciation.

To conclude, I wish to emphasize the fact that this book is no mere collection of sketches, hastily drawn and hurriedly flung together. It has a value for all time. It will last historically as not merely the best, but the only attempt to formulate sane judgments, based on perception of eternal truth, concerning the great men of the period. These estimates will endure; for not only are they on practically every point so right that I have no doubt whatever that time will endorse them to the full, but they are carved so richly and delicately in such pure marble that if every word of them were a lie, the book would still stand on its own base as a monument, if not of its modes, then of the figure of Frank Harris.