

Review.

Boswell's Life of Johnson. Edited by GEORGE BIRKBECK HILL, D.C.L.
Oxford : at the Clarendon Press.
Wit and Wisdom of Samuel Johnson. Selected and arranged by G. B.
HILL, D.C.L., Pembroke College, Oxford. London : Henry Frowde,
Oxford University Press Warehouse.

IN respect of laborious industry, Dr. Hill may truly be said to occupy the first place among editors. I doubt whether in the whole range of English and foreign literature we shall find one who has expended the same amount of labour on the work which he has undertaken to edit. Even the labours of the most distinguished editors of classical authors, such as Bentley, Porson, Heyne, Gaisford, and Arnold, have (as far as they were undertaken for the direct purpose of elucidating the works on which they were engaged) not equalled those of Dr. Hill. It is no disparagement to them to say this, nor does it prove that they have not fulfilled their tasks with equal efficiency, for the fact is that there scarcely exists another book which gives such scope for laborious research as Boswell's "Life of Johnson." The characters introduced into it, either as actors or speakers, the personages alluded to, the authors quoted, are so numerous, that to rectify mistakes, to fill up gaps, to ascertain the truth of the facts related and statements made, to search out for whatever may throw additional light on any circumstance or character which may occur in the narrative, seems an arduous task, and would seem also an endless one, if it were not that the editor has come to the close of his labours. And what increases our wonder at Dr. Hill's industry is that (as he informs us in the Preface) he has read all the books to which Johnson alludes. Then I must not forget to mention the labour of making an exact and voluminous index of all the matter contained in the six volumes. But in order to do full justice to Dr. Hill's exertions, everyone who reads his book ought also to read the Preface, where he gives us a full statement of the pains which it has cost him to hunt out hidden facts, and to ascertain the real truth about the points which he is investigating. Otherwise, we might (as we often do in like cases) see merely the result of his toil without thinking of the debt of gratitude which we owe him for his labours in producing such a result. But there are also some particular results of his investigations to which he calls our especial attention. These are enumerated in page 18 of the Preface. I shall merely mention the additions to Boswell's Life which his researches in the British Museum enabled him to make. These are as follows:—"Fifteen unpublished letters relating to Johnson's College compositions in Latin prose; a long extract from his manuscript diary, containing a suppressed passage in the narrative of his journey to the Western Islands; Boswell's letters of acceptance of the office of secretary for foreign correspondence to the Royal Academy; proposal for a publication of a geographical dictionary issued by Dr. Bathurst; record of a conversation with Johnson on Greek metres."

To throw much additional light on the character of either Boswell or Johnson (unless it be by analyzing them) would be impossible, for we are already as well acquainted with these two men as if they had been our personal friends. And it is because it enables us thus to know Johnson, that Boswell's so far excels every other biography. It is a case (as Macaulay has observed) of "Eclipse first, the rest nowhere." But this biography is not only superior in excellence, it is more or less different in kind from

every other work of the same sort. Other biographies are (for the most part) pictures of the person whom they memorialize, though, of course, with the addition of the circumstances of their life, and, perhaps, some of their conversation and letters. But Boswell's Johnson is a photograph.

Much one wishes that Macaulay's analysis of Boswell's character had been as completely fair and as completely perfect as it is brilliant and piquant. But such it is not. Besides the fact that he speaks too bitterly and acrimoniously of a man to whom we certainly owe a debt of gratitude, and who (with all his faults and follies) was, at least, "no one's enemy but his own," he does not do him justice. A great part of what he says about him is undoubtedly true, though couched in harsh language; but his love of contrast and antithesis has led him here (as it has in other cases) into exaggeration and injustice, *e.g.*, while he allows poor Bozzy the merit of a retentive memory and quick powers of observation, he says that these qualities immortalized him only because he was a dunce, a parasite, and a coxcomb. This is an exaggeration. It is true, indeed, that Boswell's merits, had they been separated from his follies and weaknesses, would never have immortalized him. It is true, also, that he was a coxcomb. But he was neither a dunce nor a parasite. A dunce could never have written such a biography as he wrote. The ideas are well expressed, and couched in an easy and pleasant style. A dunce could not have understood and appreciated such a mind as Johnson's, for Boswell was not like the wife described by Tennyson, of whom he says, "she darkly feels him (her husband) great and wise." No, he understood Johnson's strong points, and many of his weak ones, though he may, perhaps, have overrated the former. He understood how to draw him out, and how to manage him when he wanted to lead him in a given direction. As an instance of this, I cannot forbear referring to the manner in which he secured an amicable meeting between him and the notorious Wilkes, a man whose moral character and political principles he detested, though the account of it, as given in the *Life*, is probably known to many, if not most, of my readers. Boswell had engaged Dr. Johnson to go to a dinner-party at Dilly's, the bookseller. Now, had he, when he delivered the invitation, said, "Sir, will you dine with Jack Wilkes?" Johnson would have answered (so Boswell conjectures) in a passion, "I would as soon meet Jack Ketch," instead of which, he put in this proviso, "supposing that the company be agreeable to you," a remark which roused Johnson's pride, and rather irritated him, but obliged him to receive amicably the information that Jack Wilkes might be of the party. Thus Boswell gained his point.¹ A dunce would never have managed the affair with such tact. Moreover, a stupid man, even if he had a good memory, would hardly have been able to retain in his mind so much that was worth relating, while he recorded so little that was worthless and trashy. His own observations taken by themselves are not, indeed, generally worth reading, except where they serve to draw out Johnson, but occasionally they show a certain amount of judgment and discernment. They are not, indeed, profound, but they are not the remarks of a fool. And yet certainly the poet Gray seems to have thought him such, as is shown in a letter to Walpole, quoted by Dr. Hill in a note, vol. ii., p. 46. It is about a pamphlet on Corsica written by Boswell, a pamphlet which (by the way) was well received not only in Corsica, but in England, and that by persons of some note. "The author," Gray says, "is a strange body, and has a rage for knowing everybody that is talked of. The pamphlet proves, what has been always maintained, that any fool may write a most valuable book, if he will only tell us what he has heard and seen,

¹ See vol. iii., p. 66.

with veracity." If Gray had substituted the word "goose" for fool, though it is rather too opprobrious a term, in reference to Boswell, he would have been nearer the mark. But if Gray really thought him an absolute fool, it may have been because his overweening conceit and vanity, unaccompanied as they were by any sense of fitness or propriety, and not veiled by any feeling of shame or self-respect, wore the appearance of absolute stupidity. But these deficiencies and faults were moral rather than intellectual. Some of them were, if not engendered, at least fostered, by the manner in which he was brought up, as is shown by his description of his early training, which Dr. Hill quotes in a note (vol. i., p. 426): "He" (his father), he says, "made his son live under his roof in such bondage that he was not only afraid to stir from home without leave, like a child, but dared scarcely open his mouth in his father's presence." Now, this sort of treatment, which would have cowed a humble and retiring nature, acting on a character like Boswell's, produced that singular combination of servility and self-importance, without self-respect, for which he was distinguished. He was too much accustomed, from his youth upwards, to be snubbed, to mind the snubs which, in after-life, his obtrusiveness brought upon him. He yielded like india-rubber to a pressure, but, like that same substance, he rose up again as soon as the pressure was removed. Had his father, instead of treating him as he did, endeavoured to teach him to respect himself; had he, instead of continually suppressing him, administered a wholesome degree of praise where it was deserved, his faults and follies would at least have been modified. But though he might have been the gainer by this, we might have been losers, for it was these very faults which contributed to make his "Life of Johnson" interesting and amusing. But it was not these alone which enabled him to worm himself into the acquaintance and the friendship of distinguished men. If they had stood alone, they would have only caused him to be disliked and despised, and his society sought for only because men like to have somebody whom they can make their laughing-stock. That he was ridiculed by some of Johnson's circle of literary friends there is no doubt. But it is equally true that he was very popular with many persons. Paoli, we learn from Dr. Hill, had a real value for him. And though Macaulay tells us that Beauclerk considered him a bore, this could not have been the general feeling about him, for Johnson, in a letter where he endeavours to raise Boswell's spirits by making him look on the bright side of his life, tells him that one of his friends spoke of him as a man whom everybody liked. Now, a bore is not generally liked. In fact, he must have possessed qualities which, if they did not cover, at least were a compensation for his defects, and that in the eyes of some persons of distinction. A man who has nothing but his servility to recommend him may be employed as a useful servant, but is not considered as a friend by most persons, and certainly not by the great. "*Præcipue placuisse viris non ultima laus est.*" And this proverb applies not only to men distinguished for their rank and position, but also to those remarkable for their abilities. To attain this object, a man must possess tact, good humour, good temper, a pleasing address, and the power of understanding those whose friendship he courts. All these qualities Boswell possessed, and, in spite of his silliness, he had a superficial cleverness, which must have made him an agreeable companion.

But I cannot agree with Dr. Hill in considering Boswell a man of genius. Perhaps he was led away by appearances. He quotes, in application to Boswell, what Gibbon says of Tillmont (see note in vol. i., p. 7): "His inimitable accuracy almost assumes the character of genius." To this remark Dr. Hill adds that Boswell's truthfulness was probably learned

of Johnson. But it must also have been the result of the accuracy of his memory. In any case, however, it was a valuable quality, and it inclines us to believe his version of any incident in Johnson's life rather than that of Mrs. Piozzi, where their accounts differ. And we are glad to be able to do so, for he softens down some of the stories which she relates illustrative of Dr. Johnson's rudeness. And as, with all his admiration of his friend, Boswell never tries to conceal his faults, we are all the more ready to believe him, where he defends his friend against what he considers as misrepresentations. And even setting aside the inaccuracy of some of Mrs. Piozzi's version of certain incidents which she relates, we cannot but agree with Boswell, that it is unfair to the memory of a great man to collect together in a bundle all the foibles and weaknesses which you can recollect of him. In a regular biography of some length, like Boswell's, these incidents appear as they really were (comparatively speaking), few and far between. But in Mrs. Piozzi's work they are like a nosegay of nettles. And yet, though she does this, and though she exaggerates her friend's faults and defects, she speaks of him as a man whose virtue was almost superhuman, and beyond the reach of any other mortal being. So that what Peter Pindar (in one of his poetical squibs) says of her is perfectly true: "First you gibbet him, and then embalm him." Now, this cannot be said of Boswell, ready as he was to exhibit his friend's faults to the public. Of him, it would be more correct to say, "You gibbet yourself that you may more effectually embalm Johnson;" *e.g.*, he does not scruple to tell us how on one occasion during their tour to the Hebrides he got excessively drunk, and how he dreaded Johnson's displeasure, and how relieved he was to find himself leniently dealt with. And his apology for introducing this incident is that it brings out a trait in Johnson's character. If he had been more like other men, we should say that such a revelation was a piece of most unparalleled self-sacrifice; but in that case he would not have made the sacrifice. To him it was no sacrifice, for he is constantly gibbeting himself, where his doing so answers no purpose except to make himself ridiculous and perhaps also to make his narrative more amusing by exhibiting the irregularity of his character.

I must now notice another epithet which Macaulay applies to Boswell, and which, I remarked, was not really applicable to him. He calls him a parasite. This he was not, in the received sense of the word. The term is derived from the Romans, and I think we have no authority for changing the meaning which they attached to it. They applied it to those who courted the favour of a rich man for the sake of some substantial profit, generally for the sake of a dinner. Horace speaks of "edaces" parasites. A mere tuft-hunter, or a man who makes himself the hanger-on of a great and eminent man for the sake of nothing more substantial than the honour of his friendship, cannot be called a parasite. The difference between these two classes of persons is, analogically speaking, very much the same as that which exists between a parasitical plant and a climbing plant. The one fixes its roots in the stem of a tree and derives from its sap substantial nourishment, the other climbs round the tree only for the sake of the support which it affords it. Now, Boswell was a climbing plant, not a parasite, for there was nothing substantial which he could get from Johnson. Perhaps we may call him a toady, but if we looked at him only in his relation to that great man, we should say that his toadyism was as respectable as such a thing could be. For though it arose partly from vanity, it also arose from a genuine admiration of Johnson's talents and character, and a right appreciation of them, and a personal affection for him. I said right appreciation, but it must, perhaps, be owned that he rather overrated his abilities. Yet he

was not blind, either to his faults or his prejudices. He did not scruple either to dissent from him or to express his dissent from many of the opinions which he enunciated. But, indeed, it was not possible always to agree with one who expressed such opposite views at different times. I believe that Johnson may have sometimes done this because his mind was not decidedly made up on many points, or because he occasionally changed his opinions. But, as is well known, he very often talked for victory, or for the sake of opposition, a practice which is not quite honest unless the speaker makes it clearly understood that he is not in earnest, and, moreover, it diminishes the weight of his influence. It is related of him that once a man, whose opinion he had opposed, told him afterwards that his arguments had convinced him, to which Johnson replied, "No, sir, you were perfectly right; I only talked as I did in order to see what could be said on the other side." Now, I think that for this, as well as for other reasons, Dr. Hill was perfectly right in giving us extracts from Johnson's works which are now seldom read, for he says, and probably with truth, that Johnson was too honest to say in print anything which he did not really believe. It would have been, however, still more honest if he had never said such things, even in conversation. But I must leave all further notice of him for my next paper.

E. WHATELY.

Short Notices.

Academische Vorträge. Von J. VON DÖLLINGER. Nördlingen, 1888. Pp. iv, 427.

EVER since Baron Liebig, the great German chemist, died, Dr. Döllinger has been President of the Royal Bavarian Academy of Sciences, which is somewhat analogous to our Royal Society. From time to time he has had to deliver addresses to the Academy, or rather to a large audience consisting mainly of members of the Academy and other persons of culture. These addresses have generally been published at the time, either in pamphlet form, or in the literary supplements of the *Allgemeine Zeitung*. Those who have had the privilege of hearing them will rejoice that they are now being collected in a more permanent and accessible form. The present volume is only an instalment. Another is to follow, which will contain some of Dr. Döllinger's addresses as Rector of the University of Munich.

With a portion of the contents of the present volume readers of THE CHURCHMAN are already acquainted; for the last paper in it is the essay on Madame de Maintenon. There are twelve addresses in all, of which the following are likely to prove most generally useful and interesting: "The Significance of Dynasties in History," "Dante as a Prophet," "The Influence of Greek Literature and Culture on the West in the Middle Ages," "The Jews in Europe," "The Policy of Lewis XIV." For the sake of those who cannot read German we hope that this collection of addresses, the fruit of more than half a century of reading and observation, will soon find a translator.

The Life, Teaching, and Works of the Lord Jesus Christ. Arranged as a continuous narrative of the four Gospels according to the Revised Version. By GEORGE WYLD, M.D. Second Edition. Henry Frowde: Oxford University Press Warehouse.

A suggestive work; will be helpful to many. The arrangement shows great pains and good judgment.