THE ABBÉ DOMENECH AND HIS CRITICS.

AMONG the long annals of literary blunders and imposture there is surely no more amazing chapter than that which recalls the facts attendant upon the publication of the so-called 'Manuscrit Piéctographique Américain,' by the Abbé Domenech, who styles himself 'Missionnaire apostolique' at the foot of his dedicatory letter to Paul Lacroix, the eminent Bibliophile Jacob. This work, which was issued in 1860, is stated on the title page to be one published under the auspices of 'M. le Ministre d'État et de la maison de l'Empereur,' and it was thus one for which the French Government made itself responsible. The copy before us, as we write, is bound in the style of similar official publications, and was evidently one specially prepared for the author, since it contains an autograph inscription: 'À son excellence monsieur le duc d'Hamilton hommage respectueux de l'auteur, Em. Domenech, Paris, 13 avril, 1861.' It has, moreover, the duke's bookplate with his arms, which, it will be remembered, bears the royal motto, very appropriate in this particular case, of 'Honi soit qui mal y pense.'

The appearance of this remarkable book was the signal for a storm of hostile criticism from a wide

circle of literary and other experts, and a careful examination of the contents cannot fail to prove that its opponents had ample grounds for their adverse comments. It seems difficult to believe that those responsible for its issue failed so completely to recognise its real character, and that it should have been thought worthy of the careful facsimiles of its 228 pages of drawings, together with the author's learned treatise on Mexican and other documents ; as also a detailed account of Indian hieroglyphics. The Abbé was content to consider his treasure to be the historical records of some tribe of Redskins, while his critics regarded it as in reality 'a child's copy-book, full of rude drawings by some evil-minded German school-boy.' Whatever it was, the facsimile appears to have been speedily withdrawn from circulation, and this may probably account for its rarity, though it is certainly not a book suitable for the open shelves.

The author was by no means willing to abide by the opinions of his detractors, and he published under date of 10th October, 1861, an illustrated pamphlet of some seventy pages, entitled 'La Vérité sur le Livre des Sauvages,' from which it is possible to glean many curious details concerning the original work, and the way in which it was procured. The Abbé appends also an eloquent vindication of his motives in the reproduction of the 'Manuscrit,' and concludes with the following peroration : 'Je ne travaille que par conscience, devoir et nécessité; ma plume ne se souille jamais par des injures; je ne le trempe jamais dans le fiel qu'on pourrait à mon insu distiller en moi, et ma devise sera toujours la

vieille devise française. FAIS CE QUE DOIS, ADVIENNE QUE POURRA.'

Some brief record of the Abbé Domenech's career will enable us the better to appreciate his attitude towards the subject-matter of his work, and to see how his strange infatuation may have arisen ; indeed, much may be learned on this score from his various writings. There can be no doubt that he had laboured long in the mission-field, and that during his wanderings on the American continent his attention had frequently been attracted to the picture-writing of the various Indian tribes. He was thus to some extent saturated with curiosity concerning these singular signs, and the accidental discovery of the manuscript came to a mind steeped in Indian lore. In his first book, the 'Journal d'un missionnaire au Texas et au Mexique,' he describes his efforts to convert the native tribes in those countries, and he writes with interest on Mexican antiquities ; while in his later and more ambitious work, entitled 'Seven Years' Residence in the Great Deserts of North America,' he devotes considerable attention to Indian ideography, together with hieroglyphic and other inscriptions. This latter book first appeared in English, and was published in two volumes by Messrs. Longman & Co. in 1860. It is amply illustrated, and contains many coloured plates. He says in the preface that it is 'but a detailed programme of what I hope to publish gradually on this subject,' and in his pamphlet of vindication, already referred to, he announces as shortly to be issued, 'Langues Américaines comparées,' in four octavo volumes.

In the dedicatory letter addressed to the Bishop of Montpellier, which is prefixed to the 'Deserts of North America,' the Abbé alludes to the period, when, 'worn out by my missionary labours, I tried my first timid steps in the paths of literature, with no guide or stimulus but stern necessity,' and he thanks the Bishop for creating him a canon of his cathedral, at a time when he was 'solitary, friendless, and unknown.' It appears that he was at this period preaching in France to enlist the sympathy of his countrymen for his 'much-loved savages,' and after he had written his Mexican experiences he would seem to have returned to America to explore fresh areas in the mission-field. He had, however, literary as well as missionary yearnings in his breast, if we may judge by his letter to Lacroix, which is in many respects a singular document. He herein describes the growth of his powers as an author, and shows that 'though honours and competence have not yet visited his dwelling-place, his brow is no longer bent earthwards by anxieties, by isolation, or by hard necessity; he still dreams, but with less of sadness; his work is no longer fruitless and unrewarded; the circle of his friends is gradually being extended, and even the Government comes forward to his aid, with not less of kindness than of generosity.' In this last clause he refers to the patronage of the State in the publication of the work under notice.

It seems time, however, that we should give an account of the book, concerning which we learn, in the introductory notice by the Abbé, that it was found in a box in the library of the Marquis of

Paulmy, where it was catalogued as the 'Livre des Sauvages.' It consisted of 114 quarto sheets of stout paper of Canadian manufacture, covered with clumsy drawings and hieroglyphics in black-lead and red chalk. It would appear that it was pointed out to its editor by Lacroix, the conservateur of the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, after the acquisition by the State of the Paulmy library. At just about the same period the manuscript had been seen by another missionary, recently returned from the United States, 'who made a facsimile copy of it and recognised its extreme importance.' The Abbé confidently assumes that the work was executed in the seventeenth century by some native of the French territories of North America, perhaps a Huron or Iroquois Indian, and he expatiates on its great rarity and interest. It seems that it was accompanied by a dictionary of the Iroquois tongue, when it was received by the Marquis de Paulmy.

Before attempting any interpretation he enters upon a lengthy disquisition with respect to the symbolical inscriptions of the Redskins, as also upon Indian practices and mysteries and, having indicated the lines upon which he considers the study should proceed, he expounds his theories of the nature of the book, divided by him into fourteen chapters or sections. It is not necessary to follow out his arguments very minutely, as they were for the most part based merely on surmises, or on fancied resemblances to certain previously-recorded Indian documents or drawings. He asserts, however, that the manuscript contains 'a mass of signs or combination of signs that have been

nowhere else found,' and he awaits suggestions from the learned, which may aid in deciphering them. The German words scattered through the pages did not apparently alarm him, for he considered them either to be the result of contact with some missionary from that country who was labouring among the Redskins, and under whose influence they were converted to Christianity, or they might have been placed there intentionally by the Indian warrior scribe, who may himself have been a German captive, adopted by a native squaw during his early years, when he had fallen into the hands of some savage tribe. He regards certain of the conventional emblems as being no doubt derived from missionary teaching, and he finds in the documents references to the baptismal ceremony and the Seven Sacraments of the Church.

As we have already seen, the issue of the 'Manuscript' provoked a very hurricane of abuse for the unlucky Abbé, and the controversy concerning the authenticity of his book assumed European dimensions. In reply to his detractors the author published late in the following year a pamphlet already noticed, addressed 'Aux Savants Français, Anglais, Allemands et Belges,' in which he requests that it may be considered as an answer to all the arguments brought against him by his adversaries. He admits that those who have come forward in his defence, whose names are given, are few in number, and he says that a letter addressed to the various publications in which he had been assailed had, so far as he knew, only appeared in 'Notes and Queries,' or at any rate that the editor of that

journal was the only one who had been courteous enough to send him a copy of the number in which this letter had been printed.

The delay in his reply is explained by his absence in Ireland on a tour of enquiry into the character of the Irish forts and tumuli, in order to make a comparison of these remains with certain other similar ancient ruins scattered over the American deserts. While engaged in these researches he had lost touch with his correspondence, and only became aware of the abuse and ridicule with which his work had been received on his return to Dublin after a two months' absence.

He takes his opponent seriatim, and seems specially indignant with the 'Athenæum,' which had sided with the German savants in holding him up to scorn. The various reviews of the 'Manuscript' must have been rather spicy reading, to judge from certain extracts herein reproduced, but we may content ourselves with the following notice from the 'Athenæum' of 13th July, 1861, p. 53: 'Quotation from the "Vossische Zeitung" of Berlin.—The book got by chance into the hands of a German, whose astonishment one may imagine when he discovered that the pretended hieroglyphics of the Red-skins turned out to be nothing more nor less than the sketchbook of a child, probably of a German emigrant, of from five to seven years of age, proved by the writing in German current hand, such as a child would write when beginning to write—a genuine German schoolboy hand. . . . The absurdity of the whole production has probably never been equalled. There

are many German compositors engaged in the French printing offices; had one of them but by chance seen the plates before they were issued, he would at once have recognised the fatherland of the author, and thus have saved the *Ministre d'État et de la maison de l'Empereur* the disgrace of having published, at the expense of the State, a facsimile of the scribbling book of an infant and issuing it as the hieroglyphics of the Red Indians.'

In a subsequent notice at p. 410 of the '*Athenæum*' of the same year we read that M. P. Lacroix maintains the genuineness of the '*Manuscrit*,' which he considers was 'drawn by an *Iroquis* converted by a German missionary. . . . The Abbé Domenech, who has seen all that exists of books and manuscripts on the North American Indians, knows his business better than anyone; but it is possible his commentary may be subject to revision and correction.' The editor adds: 'We should suppose so; but the French Government appear to think otherwise, for we understand from recent letters, that the book has been withdrawn, and the copies bought up, in order to suppress, as far as possible, the whole publication.' In certain Continental libraries this work is preserved with care as a curiosity of the first water, and we well remember the pride with which it was produced to the Members of an English Royal Commission, when on a visit to Germany, as an instance of the credulity of a French government official of the highest rank.

Notwithstanding all that has been said on the subject, the Abbé made several good points in his

defence, and there is no doubt that some of the features of the work cannot be explained in the summary fashion we have indicated. It is a matter well worthy of attention that many of the emblems and drawings have been repeatedly changed, revised and corrected, and this would hardly be the case with childish scrawls. The Abbé states that no less than fifty alterations have been effected by pasting pieces of paper over the original drawings. Moreover, so far as we are aware, no attempt has ever been made to explain the significance of certain arbitrary signs or characters, which are used over and over again, apparently to denote times or places. Many of these seem rather outside the capacity of even the precocious child who is credited by German writers with the authorship of the work, or still more that of the little German gutter-snipe who would produce, so say the critics, 'similar scribbles on the walls of Munich, Dresden, or Berlin.'

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