

## THE WRITINGS OF OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES.

**I**T is generally recognised by statisticians and students of literature that certain counties and towns have raised up more than an average number of men and women of genius. Why this extraordinary concentration of great men should take place in certain localities it is difficult to say; but that there has been such concentration is indisputable. Mr. Havelock Ellis, in his suggestive "Study of British Genius," states that the district of East Anglia has produced the greatest number of English geniuses. Be this as it may, the Eastern and Midland Counties are noted for their great writers. Lincolnshire has its Tennyson; Suffolk, its Edward FitzGerald and Sir Thomas Browne; Warwick, its Shakespeare, Landor, and George Eliot. Of English towns, London is not only the metropolis but the brain: in it or its environs have been born most of our best writers, among whom may be mentioned Chaucer, Spenser, Ben Jonson, Milton, Pope, Browning, Ruskin, Arnold, Morris, and Swinburne.

If this is true of England, it is not less true of America. Ever since the Pilgrim Fathers landed at Plymouth Bay, the State of Massachusetts has been the most hallowed part of the American continent, and the towns of Boston and Cambridge

the most interesting places in that State. At Boston was held that memorable 'tea-party' which signalized the outbreak of the American Revolution; and here were born Emerson, Motley, Franklin, and Poe. Cambridge, distant not very far from Boston, is the home of Harvard University, from which there graduated in the early years of the last century, a group of scholars and poets whose influence on American literature was very great indeed. Three of these—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, and Oliver Wendell Holmes—won international fame; and a fourth—Professor C. E. Norton—has endeared himself to all Dante students by his translation of the 'Commedia.'

Oliver Wendell Holmes was born at Cambridge in 1809, and came of the 'Brahmin caste of New England,' his father, the Rev. Abiel Holmes, being a descendant of the Puritans who colonized the province. Graduating at Harvard in what became the famous 'Class of 29,' he began the study of the law, but gave it up at the end of a year for the more congenial profession of medicine. After the usual course he spent two years at Paris, walking the hospitals, and attending the lectures of Louis and others. On his return to America he set up his red lamp, and obtained the chair of Anatomy and Physiology at Dartmouth College; vacating this in 1847 for a similar position at Harvard. As an instructor he was highly respected and beloved; but as time went on he became less of a physician and more of a man of letters; and it is as a writer that he is remembered at the present day.

At a very early date Dr. Holmes, unlike most members of his profession, turned to poetry. As an undergraduate he had a reputation for writing clever comic verses; but, outside the college classrooms, he was practically unknown till he published, in the year of his graduation, the stirring ballad of 'Old Ironsides.' The patriotic fervour of these lines electrified the public at once, and had the desired effect of postponing the breaking up of the old frigate 'Constitution' for a number of years. While in the law school, he contributed occasional pieces to the 'Collegian,' a students' paper; and in after years read poems before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, of which he was a life-long member, and at the annual gatherings of 'the boys.' Whether these effusions, or the more serious compositions of his prime bear the marks of the highest poetry remains to be seen.

Matthew Arnold in a well-known essay avers that 'the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life,' and in another equally well-known paper, he says that 'Poetry is interpretative both by having natural magic in it, and by having moral profundity.' Judged by these standards, much of Holmes's poetry is found wanting; but if the lesser standard of its power to amuse and please be admitted, it will pass. Professor Beers—a sound critic—says: 'It is mostly on the colloquial level, excellent society verse, but even in its serious moments too smart and too pretty to be taken very gravely; with a certain glitter, knowingness, and flippancy about it, and an absence of that self-forgetfulness

and intense absorption in its theme which characterize the work of the higher imagination. This is rather the product of fancy and wit.' Above all things Holmes is a humorist in his verse, and a humorist of a delicate titillating kind. This quality is writ large in such pieces as 'My Aunt,' 'The Stethoscope Song,' 'The Ballad of the Oysterman,' 'The Deacon's Masterpiece,' 'Rip Van Winkle, M.D.,' and 'The Last Leaf'; passing in the last from laughter to tears. Poets do not often range from rollicking humour to pathetic humour; yet this is what Holmes does in 'The Height of the Ridiculous,' and 'The Last Leaf.' The story of the servant who bursts five buttons off his waistcoat with laughing at his master's merry lines has evoked many a laugh, and the picture of the funny old man in his queer breeches and three-cornered hat, dreaming of past days and old renown, has often released a tear. This specifically human element—the sense of tears in human things—is never far from Holmes's verse. It is present in 'The Voiceless,' that tender lament for the unloved ones of the world; in 'Under the Violets'; and to an affecting degree in 'Homesick in Heaven,' a poem in which the yearning of the departed for their bereaved parents, wives, and children, is touchingly expressed.

In one department of poetry Dr. Holmes stands at the head of American and English writers—the poetry of festival and compliment.' For half a century he continued to write, with undiminished energy and unflinching touch, poems to be read or sung at all kinds of meetings, public and private,

commencements, inaugurations, centennials; meetings of medical societies, Burns' clubs, agricultural societies; dinners of welcome or farewell to Bryant, Dickens, Lowell, Whittier, Longfellow, the Prince of Wales, the Grand-Duke Alexis; layings of foundation-stones, dedication of cemeteries, birthday celebrations, and funeral orations. In short, he performed the duties of an official Laureate of the American people, receiving instead of crowns and Canary wine, the wages of love and regard.

This kind of poetry may seem impermanent when compared with that of Milton and Browning, but it is excellent of its kind; and though it does not pretend to justify the ways of God to men, it assuredly justifies the ways of man to man, in his friendlier moments at least; and this is something.

As a prose-writer Holmes made his *début* in the pages of the 'Atlantic Monthly.' When Lowell became the editor of that magazine in 1857, he made it a condition of his acceptance that Holmes should be put on the staff. This gave the genial Doctor his chance, and he was not slow to avail himself of it. The twelve numbers of 'The Autocrat at the Breakfast Table' began to appear in the 'Atlantic,' and it is not too much to say that they contributed in no small degree to the success of that brilliant periodical. Elated with the reception given to the 'Autocrat,' he continued the talks in 'The Professor at the Breakfast Table' in the following year; and twelve years later the last ooziings of the grapes were served up in

‘The Poet.’ In his old age the Doctor tried to repeat his early triumphs in ‘Over the Teacups’; but the result was hardly encouraging.

These four volumes of table-talk (for that is what they contain) are remarkable, not so much for their uniqueness as for their originality and real human interest. Other and greater men have written something of the sort; but no one has quite succeeded in combining knowledge, criticism, epigrammatic wit, and sentiment so well and so abundantly. This he is able to do by the simple device of selecting his talkers from different orders of society, and grouping them together at the breakfast-table of a city boarding-house. In this way we are introduced to a dozen or more persons of varying physiognomies and accomplishments, ranging from the garrulous landlady and her daughter to the Professor, the crab-souled divinity-student, and the beetle-loving Scarabee. Besides the male boarders there are others of the opposite sex; and it is around three of these—the shy schoolmistress, the amber-eyed, tremulous-souled Iris, and the lonely Young Lady—that the emotional interest of the reader gathers. Few love-idylls have been so delicately recorded as that in which the Autocrat and the schoolmistress agree to take the ‘long path’ together on one of their little walks from the boarding-house to the school:

‘At last I got out the question, “Will you take the long path with me?” “Certainly,” said the Schoolmistress, “with much pleasure.” “Think,” I said, “before you answer: if you take the long path with me now, I shall interpret it that we are to part no

more!" The Schoolmistress stepped back with a sudden movement, as if an arrow had struck her.

One of the long granite blocks used as seats was hard by,—the one you may still see by the Gingko tree. "Pray sit down," I said. "No, no," she answered softly, "I will walk the long path with you!"

The old gentleman who sits opposite met us walking arm in arm, about the middle of the long path, and said very charmingly, "Good morning, my dears!"

Of the innumerable topics discussed at the breakfast-table by the Autocrat and his successors, none occupies so much space or is so important as that of religion. This is not to be wondered at, if we remember that Holmes was the son of a Cambridge minister, and had an hereditary as well as an acquired interest in divinity. Though a doctor by profession, he frequently ascended the secular pulpit as a lay preacher, and served his time and generation in a way in which only we, who have inherited the doctrine of evolution and the historical and psychological criticism of the Bible, are in a position to appreciate.

In his day the rigid Calvinism of the orthodox multitudes forbade all discussion of religion; like the divinity-student they said that 'there was danger in introducing discussions or allusions relating to matters of religion into common discourse.' Holmes, on the contrary, held that religion, like politics, should be Americanized. 'When the people of New England stop talking politics and theology,' he makes the Professor say, 'it will be because they have got an Emperor to teach them the one, and a Pope to teach them the other!'

He likened those obscurantists who stuck to their fixed creeds and formulas to tadpoles under water in the dark: removed from the natural stimulus of light, they swelled into larger tadpoles, instead of developing legs and lungs, and becoming frogs. He, at any rate, preferred the whole range of the earth to the narrow circle of a stagnant pond, and he could certainly see farther and better than those who refused to be free. He believed that there was much to be discovered in religion which the orthodox did not dream of, and which they tried to prevent others from suspecting:

‘I find that there is a very prevalent opinion among the dwellers on the shores of Sir Isaac Newton’s “Ocean of Truth,” that salt fish, which have been taken from it a good while, split open, cured, and dried, are the only proper and allowable food for reasonable people. I maintain, on the other hand, that there are a number of live fish still swimming in it, and that every one of us has a right to see if he cannot catch some of them. Sometimes I please myself with the idea that I have landed an actual living fish, small perhaps, but with rosy gills and silvery scales. Then I find the consumers of nothing but the salted and dried article insist that it is poisonous, simply because it is alive, and cry out to people not to touch it. I have not found, however, that people mind them much.’

This is iconoclastic no doubt, but it is not irreligious. Holmes had as strong a belief in the immutability of the religious instinct as most folk; but he held that adaptation was as necessary to its health and life as it is to the life of the body. ‘What we want in the religious and in the political organism,’ he wrote, ‘is just that kind of



vital change which takes place in our bodies—interstitial disintegration and reintegration.’ He therefore, was not surprised to find that every man had a religion peculiar to himself:

‘Iron is essentially the same everywhere and always; but the sulphate of iron is never the same as the carbonate of iron. Truth is invariable; but the Smithate of truth must always differ from the Brownate of truth.’

Such was his general attitude to sacred things. But this was not all: he made some pregnant observations and suggestions which influenced thinkers and scholars who came after him, as ‘that the heart makes the theologian’; ‘that theology must be studied through anthropology, and not anthropology through theology’; and that ‘sin must be studied as a section of anthropology.’

This last axiom he proceeded to exemplify in two ‘medicated’ novels, published during the period that elapsed between the writing of the ‘Professor’ and the ‘Poet.’ In the ‘Autocrat’ he averred that every man had the stuff of one novel in him; and the idyll of the schoolmistress, above referred to, proved that he at any rate had the talent and the sympathy to write one. But few, I imagine, were prepared for such a singular and moving tale as ‘Elsie Venner,’ whose heroine united with her wild beauty and fascinating ways something of the serpentine nature of Coleridge’s ‘Geraldine’ and Keats’s ‘Lamia’; her mother having been bitten by a rattlesnake a little while before the birth of the girl, and kept alive in the meantime by powerful antidotes. As Elsie grew up

she showed unmistakable signs of her serpent ways : biting her cousin suddenly ; dancing in wild ecstasy, and making a noise like a rattlesnake's tail with her castanets ; curling herself up on mats and under trees ; and staying out all night on Rattlesnake Ledge with the ophidians she had learnt to charm. Myrtle Hazard, the heroine of 'The Guardian Angel,' had nothing of the reptile in her, but she was not less lawless than Elsie, having Indian blood in her veins. When only fifteen years old she ran away from home, and sailed down the river in a canoe in the night, just as her painted and plumed ancestors had done before her. Later, at school, whilst acting in an Indian play, she threatened to stab a girl who had torn a wreath off her head in a fit of jealousy.

Both these books are studies in spiritual pathology, and preach Dr. Holmes's favourite doctrines of heredity and the limitation of free-will by transmitted tendencies—doctrines which all must accept in part of necessity, but which most of us, especially theologians and practical moralists, feel to be dangerous. He makes Dr. Honeywood, the warm-hearted preacher, say :

'He did not believe in the responsibility of idiots. He did not believe a new-born infant was morally answerable for other people's acts. He thought that a man with a crooked spine should never be called to account for not walking erect. He thought if the crook was in his brain, instead of his back, he could not fairly be blamed for any consequences of this natural defect, whatever lawyers or divines might call it.'

This all doctors believe, and most laymen not bred

in Geneva reluctantly admit—reluctantly, because they know that to tell the drunken son of a drunken father he is not responsible for his weakness is to become an advocate of the devil and a destroyer of mankind. Holmes himself felt this, and warned his readers not to abuse the doctrine by ascribing all their sins to their grandfathers. He did not deny the sovereignty of the conscience where it was active and healthy; but he knew that in a great many cases the human will was ‘tied up and darkened by inferior organization, by disease, and by all sorts of crowding interferences.’ No doubt he insisted too much on these limitations; but being a doctor, he could not help seeing that sin bears a strong likeness to disease, and that the sinner, like the sick patient, is not always responsible for the disturbance. At any rate he showed, what some theologians are only just discovering, that ‘sin is in the will,’ and that where the will is weak and puny it needs food and medicine, not hell-fire and damnation. Instead of the devil’s blast-furnace and lethal chamber, he wished to set up a dispensary and a school.

All this, of course, occurs incidentally in ‘Elsie Venner’ and ‘The Guardian Angel,’ and is appropriately put into the mouths of old Dr. Kittredge, Elsie’s physician, the Rev. Dr. Honeywood, and Byles Gridley, A.M., author of ‘Thoughts on the Universe.’ The real interest of the stories is human and not theological. If Holmes had not made his heroes and heroines beautiful and loveable, and their trials many and real, his books would have been dropped in Time’s waste-paper

basket, as Gifted Hopkin's poems were dropped by the publisher's 'butcher.' As it is, he has been accused by the critics of caricaturing the Yankee characters, and overdrawing the satirical pictures of New England country life. Certainly he seems to come perilously near caricature in Colonel Sprowle, Silas Peckham, and the Rev. Joseph Bellamy Stoker; but doubtless such persons lived then as now, and it is a pardonable offence in an author to pillory them when he finds them.

In his purely biographical work, however, Dr. Holmes was as painstaking and impartial a recorder as the best; and though he had no great talent for this kind of writing he acquitted himself well, as he was bound to do. His *Lives of John Lothrop Motley and Ralph Waldo Emerson* are admirable if not finished studies of two of America's greatest writers.

Of the brilliant historian of the Dutch Republic he knew a great deal. They were fellow-students at Harvard, and corresponded with each other during Motley's absence in Europe as the Ambassador of America, and after his shameful recall from Vienna. When, therefore, he was asked to write a memoir of Motley for the Massachusetts Historical Society, he came forward as the late Ambassador's apologist and defender; and though he was a devoted citizen of the Republic, he did not hesitate to condemn, in the strongest terms he could command, a government that could insult its minister—and that minister one of the most distinguished of its great men, and one of the most confirmed believers in its institutions—by asking him to

refute the charges of a pseudonymous spy. But this was not all. Three years after the Vienna affair, Motley was recalled from the London Embassy by President Grant, ostensibly for misrepresenting his Government on the Alabama question, but really for supporting one of the President's political opponents. As Motley's confidant, Dr. Holmes exposed the whole pitiful business, bitterly lamenting that the accredited representative of a people should be sacrificed to the hatred of a political sect. To him the affair seemed monstrously unjust; and he firmly believed that Motley's untimely death was accelerated by the President's undignified and unchivalrous conduct.

Happily he had no such painful task to perform in writing his 'Life of Emerson.' The Concord sage never aspired to ambassadorial rank, and consequently never had an enemy; and if he had so aspired, there is no doubt he would soon have resigned any local or national position for the more important one of God's ambassador to the world. For such Emerson was, and as such Dr. Holmes reports him in his monograph. 'Every human soul,' he says, 'leaves its port with sealed orders.' That Emerson's 'sealed orders' instructed him to be a mystic, an optimist, a lover of the truth, 'a gentle iconoclast,' a hater of cant and hypocrisy, a believer in personalities—whole men, not fragments of men—he has no difficulty in showing, and does not stop to discuss. Emerson, according to the Doctor, expounded no consistent system of philosophy like Kant, Hegel,

or Spencer; but studied how to 'free, arouse, dilate.' When he has said this Holmes has finished. He is not so much an apostle of Emerson as a catechist—a Silas, not a Paul. 'He presented,' says Mr. Stedman, 'with singular clearness and with an epigrammatic genius at white heat, if not the esoteric view of the Concord Plotinus, at least what could enable an audience to get at the mould of that serene teacher, and make some fortunate surmise of the spirit that ennobled it.' Nor was he very critical of Emerson's writings. He recognised his mysticism, and if he did not always agree with it, he took care to show that it was more intellectual than emotional. 'Emerson,' he says, 'never let go the string of his balloon,' except in the poem of 'Brahma' which he pronounces 'the nearest approach to a Torricellian vacuum of intelligibility' he knows. He is not so lenient, however, with the minor Transcendentalists, calling them a 'Noah's ark full of idealists,' and pointing out that there was occasionally an air of bravado in some of them 'as if they had taken out a patent for some knowing machine which was to give them a monopoly of its products.' We have all met these amateur philosophers and self-advertised initiates of Heaven, and can smile at the witty Doctor's satire, knowing that no patent Absolutometer will ever register the multitudinous thoughts of God. Emerson himself, the Doctor tells us, made no such oracular claims as his disciples, but was content to diffuse that 'genial atmosphere' and odour of piety which flowed into him from above.

Here, I think, we may pause. Having reviewed Holmes's chief writings, in the order in which they naturally fall, we can go on to discuss their style, and to estimate their influence on American life and letters.

Omitting his poems, which have been dealt with in the first part of this paper, we come to his prose. With regard to this, Time, I think, has confirmed the opinion of Holmes's contemporaries in adjudging 'The Autocrat at the Breakfast Table' and its two successors his best and most characteristic work. There is nothing in his later works that is not contained in these; hence all criticism of his style must necessarily be a criticism of these. And what a style it is!—racy and fluid as Addison's conversational prose, and splendid with some of the colour—though with little of the pomp—of Sir Thomas Browne! It is not invariable; but at its best it is extraordinarily brilliant, scintillating with imagination and jewelled thought. The fact is, whether discussing poetry or Puritanism, pun-making or divinity, phrenology or the Great Secret, Holmes's prose spurts up like a fountain, so to speak, breaking into a shower of gleaming amethysts, rubies, emeralds, and pearls. Here, as elsewhere, one cannot help noticing his tenderness and grave wit; the felicity and propriety of his similes, metaphors, and apologues; and his natural aptitude for turning epigrams and proverbs. Of his beautiful and apposite similes there is to my mind, no finer specimen than that in which he describes the super-abundant wealth of the poet. I give it here because it illustrates better than anything

else I know the Doctor's habit of loading every rift with ore :

'Life is so vivid to the poet, that he is too eager to seize and exhaust its multitudinous impressions. Like Sinbad in the valley of precious stones, he wants to fill his pockets with diamonds, but, lo ! there is a great ruby like a setting sun in its glory, like Bryant's blue gentian, seems to have dropped from the cerulean walls of heaven, and a nest of pearls that look as if they might be unhatched angels' eggs, and so he hardly knows what to seize, and tries for too many, and comes out of the enchanted valley with more gems than he can carry, and those that he lets fall by the wayside we call his poems.'

It is not as a clever writer of *vers de société*, or as a vivacious retailer of after-dinner oratory,—that Holmes will come to be valued, though these things will always attract the majority of readers—but as a New England prophet of 'sweetness and light.'

We have seen that under Calvinism religion in Massachusetts had become as hard, unlovely, and illiberal as the Inquisition itself. Discussion was forbidden, and all scientific study of Scripture savagely condemned. Like Canute, to quote Lowell on Theodore Parker, the orthodox bore

'With sincerest conviction their chairs to the shore ;  
They brandished their worn theological birches,  
Bade natural progress keep out of the Churches,  
And expected the lines they had drawn to prevail,  
With the fast rising tide to keep out of their pale ;  
They had formerly damned the Pontifical Sec,  
And the same thing, they thought, would do nicely for P.'

Holmes in calling for the Americanizing of religion



was only doing what had already been done at the Reformation and the Revolution by the fathers of those who anathematized him. His demands, no doubt, seemed heretical and subversive to them; but they were essentially national and republican, and were bound to prevail in the end. Just as the people of the United States had demanded liberty to make their own laws and impose their own taxes, he demanded freedom to think his own thoughts, and worship in his own way. Having won this right for himself, he proceeded to cut off the excrescences, and to excise the morbid growths of religion as if he were at work in his surgery. As a doctor he saw that theology needed its epidermis to be cleaned of superstition and lichenized dogma, and as a man that it wanted 'de-diabolizing.' In the one operation he used the strigil of his keen intellect and caustic wit, and in the other he injected some of his own rich heart-blood and generous heat. That theology needed humanizing no one who has read the lurid and pitiless sermons of Jonathan Edwards will deny. Not content with cursing the wicked and the unconverted, he damned the souls of innocent children, showing immeasurably less mercy to the unbaptized than even that 'stern Tuscan,' Dante. Driven by the terrible logic of his creed, Edwards saw in God a beast with bloody maw, not the merciful Father of us all. Holmes showed that this conception of God was an obsession of the logical intellect, and was at bottom as barbarous as that held by the dragon-worshipping Chinese. Religion to him was primarily an affair of the heart—a thing of

sentiment and emotion. Professional theologians, equipped with the camera and the geologist's hammer, made prospecting expeditions into the Kingdom of God; Holmes went on a pilgrimage. He held that not by searching, but by yearning and agonizing, could men find their way into the holy place. The information that the searchers could give might be very necessary, but it was hardly what the soul desired. He knew that sentiment was the source of life and the director of conduct: and if he placed it before reason and will in his psychology of religion, he had the experience of the whole race of believers to justify him. This emotional attitude led him to say that 'the real religion of the world comes from women—from mothers most of all, who carry the key of our souls in their bosoms. It is in their hearts that the "sentimental" religion some people are so fond of sneering at, has its source.' Above the noisy disputations of Churches and Theologians he heard the ineffable words of Jesus, 'Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.'

This then was his purpose: like Luther he called upon men to think for themselves, knowing that the active mind of the century was tending more and more to the two poles, 'Rome or Reason, the sovereign Church or the free soul, authority or personality, God in us or God in our masters.' In the New Reformation which was then opening in America and Europe, and which is now moving slowly on to a consummation, he fought not with the heated dialectic of Luther,

but with the incisive wit and deep common-sense of Erasmus. Humaneness and truth, 'sweetness and light'—these qualities inspired his writings and guided his conduct; and if at any time there has been any progress made in the 'Liberation War of humanity,' it has been and will continue to be, by the virtue of these.

JAMES ORMEROD.