

The Old English Christian Epic by George Arnold Smithson

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REVIEWS.

The Old English Christian Epic. By GEORGE ARNOLD SMITHSON.
(University of California Publications in Modern Philology, Vol. 1,
No. 4.) 1910. 4to. 98 pp.

Mr Smithson states his method of attack with refreshing naïveté. He summarizes the historical and literary evidence of Latin scholarship among the English up to the end of the eighth century, and concludes 'when we examine the Latin prose of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and the Latin verse of Alcuin's *De Pontificibus* we become convinced that men like Cædmon and Cynewulf must have been impressed profoundly by Latin literature.' This very incautious reasoning leads to a correspondingly unscientific method of procedure; Mr Smithson first formed his 'conviction,' then—in vain—sought evidence in its support: 'when I came to look for evidence to prove my conviction that the form of the Cynewulfian poems was profoundly influenced by that of the Latin, I was forced to admit that that conviction, although it is a natural one, is in most respects a mistaken one.' The dissertation has therefore taken the form of a commentary on the plot-technique of the four poems named, each section concluding with a comparison between them and *Beowulf*, and a summary account of possible Latin influence.

Mr Smithson's chief conclusions may be summarized: 'Of all the methods of development by far the most important is direct discourse'—formal in *Elene*, formal but with some tendency to become dramatic in *Juliana*, distinctly more dramatic and more natural in *Andreas*. The characteristics of the technique of the Christian epics are explicable as natural developments of those of the earlier native epic, without Latin influence. 'The Old English poems were practically uninfluenced by the Vergilian epics'; but 'we find that the Latin prose legends of the saints confirmed the author or authors of the *Juliana*, the *Elene*, and the *Andreas* in the natural tendency to unify the plots of these poems and in the characteristic Old English tendency to digress from the main line of action; and that the Latin hymns and dramatic colloquies of the early church confirmed the author or authors in the tendency to increase the lyric and dramatic elements in these poems.'

The selection of material seems arbitrary. *Gudlac* is excluded, without explanation; though its two parts offer particularly interesting

illustration of the various treatment to which a saint's legend might be subjected. The Exeter Book *Harrowing of Hell* and the Cædmonian *Crist and Satan* are ignored, while *Crist* is included. Worse, Mr Smithson treats *Crist* as a whole, because it shows 'unity of tone,' and writes of it throughout as being in its entirety the work of Cynewulf. 'Differences in style may be due to copyists,' he observes in a footnote; and beyond this he does not even discuss the matter. Patriotic feeling may have urged Mr Smithson to follow Cook, but his attitude suggests ignorance of the work of Trautmann, Binz, and Holthausen, and of the dissertations on the subject during the last ten years. The punishment fits the crime; Mr Smithson is compelled to waste much space on the differences in technique between *Crist* and the other poems treated. Repeatedly he acknowledges lyrical tendencies in *Crist*. Frank recognition that it is composite, and that each of the three parts is a hymn-cycle, not an epic fragment, would have saved much vain labour. The assumption that *Andreas* is quite certainly the work of Cynewulf is also unwise; though the probability is strong enough for Mr Smithson's purpose.

Mr Smithson surveys his material from the standpoint of what epic should be, without allowing enough for the purpose of the poems in question. Of course he admits the intrusion of didactic purpose; but he does not recognize that didactic purpose was the poet's dominant motive, and that artistic considerations would quite deliberately be subordinated. *Juliana*, *Elene* and *Andreas* are not art-epics on Christian subjects, but didactic tales in verse, borrowing much of epic technique. Hence the repeated digressions in all the poems; certainly blots artistically, but perfectly natural to the type. Even the shifting of interest in *Elene* from Constantine to Elene, and finally to Judas, causes only an apparent breach of unity. The hero throughout is the Christian champion, though his person changes. The transfer of interest is less violent than that from Satan to Adam in *Paradise Lost*. Much of the detailed criticism similarly suffers through persistent application of the ideal epic standard. Every poem, surely, must be judged in regard to its author's purpose. That purpose may be criticized, and its effect on the work must be noted; but it is unprofitable to estimate achievement without regard to what is attempted.

The points at which Mr Smithson's detailed comments need modification are too numerous to mention in a brief review. In general, he does not make enough allowance for the influence, on the one hand of traditional phrase and of traditional epic technique; on the other hand, of the nature of the material. In dealing with *Andreas*, he does not recognize the deliberate imitation of *Beowulf*, noted by Brandl. The best section of the book is that dealing with methods of plot development (v), especially the interesting and valuable account of the use of dialogue. Except for this, Mr Smithson offers no new material of importance; but his minute investigation confirms current views on the main characteristics of the plot technique of the poems in question, and adds some interesting

details. The lists of references to illustrative passages in the poems are full, and, to judge from a score taken at random, accurate. Indeed the whole work shows very patient labour, and it is unfortunate that the results are in some degree vitiated through Mr Smithson's narrowness of outlook.

A. R. SKEMP.

BRISTOL.

Robert Herrick, A Biographical and Critical Study. By F. W. MOORMAN. London: John Lane. 1910. 8vo. xiv + 344 pp.

In this comely volume Professor Moorman has turned a tempting opportunity to excellent account. He has recognised that the work of biographers, editors, and essayists during the last fifty years has prepared the way for a comprehensive study of Herrick's life and writings. He has supplemented the labours of his predecessors by researches of his own, and the result is a volume which, in spite of some curious inaccuracies, hereafter noted, is throughout worthy of its delightful theme.

The book is divided into two approximately equal parts, 'The Life' and 'The Works.' Anyone who will take the trouble to compare the biographical chapters with the similar section of Grosart's 'Memorial Introduction' to his edition of Herrick (1876) will note at once the difference between them. Though Grosart's valuable pioneer work must always be gratefully remembered he gives us little more than the raw material of biography. Dr Moorman attempts in a series of descriptive chapters dealing with the poet's life at Hampton, Cambridge, London and Dean-Prior to re-create the man and his surroundings. It is a fascinating game to play, and it is here carried through with spirit and skill. There are, however, two criticisms that may be made on Dr Moorman's biographical method. Except in the case of the letter belonging to Canon Egerton Leigh (pp. 37—8) he does not make it sufficiently clear where he is contributing new material discovered by himself, and where he is building upon older bases. Some additional foot-notes would have been a help here. And when filling in the background of the poet's life he at times gives his fancy too free rein. Thus while it is right to remind us that the boy was brought up after his father's death at Hampton, and 'therefore, though city-born, was country-bred'; and while it is legitimate to suggest that 'he may have caught sight of the old queen as she rode over Kingston Bridge' to or from Hampton Court in 1599, it is mere trifling to add that he 'perhaps saw something of the characteristic incident recorded by Lord Semple of Beltrees, the Scottish ambassador on this occasion,' and to quote in full the account of the incident (pp. 16—7). Again in reference to the performance of *Ignoramus* before James I at Cambridge in March, 1615, Dr Moorman says 'as a fellow-commoner of the University, Herrick was entitled to