

*Buckle and his Critics: A Study in Sociology.* By JOHN MACKINNON ROBERTSON. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co. 1895. Pp. xv., 565.

THE volume before us affords a valuable analysis by one of Buckle's most thorough-going admirers of both the philosophical system embodied in the *History of Civilization* and also of the best criticism which that epoch-making work has since evoked. Adequately to assess the value of the criticism to which Mr Robertson in turn subjects the critics, would require a volume of corresponding dimensions; we can here only briefly note one or two of his main objections to their several points of view and describe, as concisely as may be, the main features of his own. In his preface he does not scruple to affirm that "to read Buckle's detractors is an education in the knowledge of human perversity, fallibility, and profligacy of blame;" and declares himself "convinced that the common depreciation of Buckle in recent years is in a large measure the result of slovenly reading and slatternly thinking on the part of men wont to sit in judgment on their fellows." It is perhaps somewhat to be regretted that at the outset he should have given such strong expression to his views, when throughout the following 500 pages it is his aim at least to appear as an impartial arbiter between his author and his critics. Nor, indeed, is it easy to resist the impression that in the great majority of the criticisms to which he here in turn successively subjects each hostile writer, Mr Robertson may at least claim to be fairer to his author than those have been whom he encounters in his defence. As regards Buckle and his great work it might, at first sight, well appear that the *argumentum ad verecundiam* is almost irresistible. When writers of such high attainments and various renown as Dr Tylor, Darwin, Macaulay, Matthew Arnold, Mr Leslie Stephen, Mr Gladstone, Mr John Morley, Mark Pattison, Sir Henry Maine, Bishop Stubbs and Vorländer, combine in almost unanimous disparagement of this immature production of a comparatively young writer, dying at Damascus at the age of forty, whose views had been formed in no school and his intellect disciplined at no university, it requires some moral courage to call in question the verdict of such a tribunal. On calmer consideration, however, it may fairly be said that the impression produced by so formidable a consensus of opinion becomes considerably modified. In the first place, it is certain that Buckle, young as he was, knew a great deal more than the majority of his critics. Lookers on, thinking mainly of his youth, were apt to forget how much a mind of great power and originality, with every advantage of leisure and opportunity, working continuously and connectedly for a lengthened period, is able to achieve. Between his father's and his own death, Buckle led an almost uninterrupted career of quiet, concentrated, independent study extending over nearly twenty years. When we remember that it

took Gibbon about the same time from the commencement of his *History* to carry it to completion, we are reminded how much can be achieved under such circumstances; and "since Gibbon's time," in Mr Leslie Stephen's opinion (which Mr Robertson cites) "no Englishman of letters has devoted himself so systematically and vigorously to erect a literary monument worthy of the highest abilities as did Henry Thomas Buckle." In fact, Buckle's mental powers throughout his literary career were all aglow, and Mr Robertson appeals very justly to his known remarkable linguistic acquirements and his singular skill as a chess player as proof that in two very different fields of acquirement his merits were incontestable:—in the former case, as possessed of an extraordinary memory and a singular aptitude for mastering the technicalities of language,—in the latter, as endowed with admirable powers of synthesis. From Abelard, downwards, minds thus precocious and of intense luminosity, have, at rare intervals, flashed meteor-like across the domain of human thought, concentrating in a few years the energy and achievements of many a well spent life of ordinary duration. In the next place, the agreement of his critics cannot be regarded as cumulative evidence. It was the outcome very largely of jealousy and dislike,—supercilious contempt for a young man, who, not having taken a first class at either University, ventured to lay down the law for those who held themselves intellectually his betters. That agreement was the result also, far too frequently, of ignorance rather than of knowledge. "Nothing," says Mr Robertson, "has struck me so much in the investigation of the criticism passed on Buckle as the sheer ignorance of his book on the part of most of his assailants" (p. 36). And, thirdly, it is to be remembered that Buckle, dying in 1862, just missed, as did J. S. Mill, that development of the Darwinian theory of evolution, which, could he have lived to grasp it as applicable to social phenomena, must have afforded him new and invaluable guidance in formulating his bold generalizations. As it was, those generalizations, sometimes hasty and often imperfect and consequently in part erroneous, but rarely without some germ of valuable truth and always eminently suggestive, were assailable at various points to an extent of which his numerous antagonists were not slow to avail themselves. It was not a fort or a strong castle but a city, whose walls in their entire and vast circumference might scarcely be surveyed from its loftiest watchtower, that Buckle had to hold and defend. Since then, a generation has passed away; and Mr Robertson, calling to his aid a new literature and many a notable utterance, has undertaken the task (certainly no light one) of demonstrating that on all the more important questions at issue the weight of evidence is still in favour rather of Buckle than of his assailants. To preserve the metaphor, the defences of the city were, after all, constructed on more really scientific principles than most of the engines of the besiegers. Mr Robertson gives us, accordingly, seriatim, the various arguments and objections of the

writers above-named and subjects them to a very rigorous and minute criticism. Intellectually, he appears to resemble his author but slightly. If Buckle's foible was rash and imperfectly considered generalization, his defender's is certainly that of excessive refinement and subtlety. Duns Scotus himself could scarcely, in some cases, have further prolonged the argument; and when Mr Robertson is to be found stopping to cavil at Mr Leslie Stephen's employment of a somewhat careless "indeed," the reader is apt to grow impatient and to hurry by more real and serious criticism. Briefly, however, to sum up the writer's chief indictments,—we find Mr Leslie Stephen arraigned on various points: his arguments against Buckle's theory of the relation between climate and civilization,—his misrepresentation of Buckle's opinion that "a permanent and continuous development of man's moral and intellectual qualities" is still, scientifically, unproven,—his assertion that he "cannot help feeling that more philosophy is held in solution in a few pages of *Old Mortality* or the *Heart of Midlothian* than in a hundred such volumes as Buckle's,"—and, finally, his criticism of Buckle's somewhat vague and contradictory language with regard to the employment and comparative value of the inductive and deductive methods. On the first of these questions, Mr Robertson certainly appears to have the better of the critic. Mr Leslie Stephen objects to Buckle's theory of the influence of climate, that "the relation between climate and civilization is not constant" (p. 50). To this Mr Robertson rejoins that it is "like saying that the law of gravitation ceases to operate when you climb a ladder"; and his argument in reply is certainly supported by the principles laid down by Professor Ratzel in his *Anthropo-Geographie*.

In dealing with Theodore Parker's criticisms,—which challenged alike the plan of the *History* and the List of Authorities cited by the author, the stress laid by Buckle on the influence of natural phenomena (as seen in the terrorism of the Hindu religion) and of diet, as shown in the greater or less activity of imagination—Mr Robertson urges arguments the force of which is undeniable. "We must take," he says, "all the phenomena into account together, for the complete explanation. The distance between the athletic Greek and his Gods was comparatively small, in terms of his self-confidence as well as in terms of the less awful aspects of his environment; the distance between the Hindu and his Gods was great, in terms of his physical abjection as well as in terms of the tremendousness of Nature; the effect of Nature on thought being thus seen to be operant through physique as well as through ideas" (p. 86). As regards the elements which went to build up the phenomenal development of ancient Greece, he points out that "while the mythology of India grew or fructified in the vast Indian regions, a world in themselves, with no definitely foreign interference, the cultures of ancient Greece represent a complex of four civilizations."

In dealing with certain "Academic Criticisms," Mr Robertson

points out that Gibbon, Grote, Finlay, Lawes and Huxley owed nothing to Universities, and he holds that Professor Fiske has "not been prudent in prompting an inquiry which reveals that a great deal of the most original and important research and thinking done in England for generations has been achieved by men who either never attended a University or got next to nothing for such attendance" (p. 105). "When we admit," he says elsewhere, "that Buckle missed what disciplinary good the school and the University can yield to youth, we must not forget that he probably was what he finally was in part because he wholly escaped the averaging influence of the English public school and University training, so strangely potent for the destruction or restriction of all originality of mind" (pp. 520-1). Passing by the chapter on the "Anti-scientific View of History" (in which Dr Stubbs and Professor Froude figure as the chief offenders), we come to Chapter XI on "Buckle's real Errors." In this Mr Robertson sets forth "a number of faults" which he has himself discovered in his author's pages, but which he holds when corrected "leave the main values of his book only the more certain." One of these corrections strikes us as singularly happy and just. Buckle, in his first chapter, ventures on one of those dangerous generalizations which so frequently shake our faith in his guidance. "The most celebrated historians," he observes, "are manifestly inferior to the most successful cultivators of physical science: no one having devoted himself to history who in point of intellect is at all to be compared with Kepler, Newton, or many others that might be named" (p. 362). Mr Robertson rightly says that "on any view the proposition will not stand. Newton and Kepler represent one great kind of capacity; but they also had a great capacity for quite commonplace error, and it is quite impossible to make any relative measurement of their powers as compared with those of Gibbon" (pp. 362-3). In fact a unit of comparison is altogether wanting.

The concluding chapter on "Buckle's Personality" is of considerable interest; and not the least valuable portion of the volume is the Summary of Buckle's theory, as Mr Robertson interprets it, presented in the Appendix, together with the "Additions and Modifications" which he would himself suggest.

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