INTRODUCTION

History has often suffered at the hands of its professed exponents. In a measure, it has been almost falsified. It has sometimes been converted into a record of the doings of the great men of this world, of the lives of kings and statesmen and their peers. But if history is anything, it is the record of a nation's life, and a nation is made up rather of its more insignificant members than of its heroes. To know the deeds of a Frederic or of a Napoleon is not to know the history of Prussia or of France during the epochs upon which those conquerors left their impress. That history can be learned only if the feelings and lives of the masses in each country are understood and appreciated.

It is the peculiar merit of J. R. Green that he realised this fact, that he dared to discard the chronological landmarks of his predecessors, and to write a history of the English People, a history of England rather than of English kings. It is his distinction that he grasped the true nature of his subject more fully than the majority of his fellows, and this circumstance alone would suffice to make his work great and enduring. He made no mere addition to the numerous "histories" of England. He wrote what was, and in a measure still is, the only History of England that has been penned by a single man.

But Green's Short History is more than a history. It is a literary achievement, written in a style at once vivid and picturesque and simple. No one can read it wholly unmoved, without being thrilled and inspired by its eloquence. It may be added that no one can read it without feeling that after all it is worth while to be born an Englishman, without finding his patriotic sense fired by the wonderful story of this island race.

Defects in the work there are. Of those defects, no one was more acutely conscious than the author. Yet when the whole book is considered it will be found that its faults are akin to merits. Green was an enthusiast, and his errors were the outcome of his temperament. He had read with sympathy the great English master of history, and the Decline and Fall of the Roman
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Empire taught him, as it has taught many others, to love his subject. That love led him to seize upon the illuminating story: it led him, perhaps, to “confound brilliant hypothesis with sober fact.” But the mistakes of the enthusiast are preferable to the mediocre accuracy of the pedant, and Green shines in his lack of pedantry. Critical scholars may find assertions not verified by the available data; they will not find a paragraph which is bathos. And however much it may be criticised, Green’s work will remain the most illuminating essay upon English History that has ever been written.

Such a book deserves to be within the reach of all. To bring it within this reach is the purpose of the present edition, which has been reprinted from the first edition of Green’s work and does not contain those changes and additions which have been made by his editor in later reprints. It thus contains the words and views of Green as he wrote in the first enthusiasm of realising that he had discovered his life’s work. Nothing that he wrote has been altered or omitted, though notes have been added at the end of various sections to indicate points upon which later research necessitates a correction of views and statements in the text. The lists of authorities have also been modernised.

Green ended his book, for all practical purposes, with the battle of Waterloo: his “Epilogue” is not intended to be more than a sketch of the events from that date to 1874. That the book may not be thus incomplete, Mr. R. P. Farley has written an Appendix, carrying on the story to the present day. In accordance with the scheme of the whole work, he has insisted upon the social side of the period, tracing with ability and clarity the development of the English people from the close of the “Great War” to the outbreak of a still greater conflict.

L. CECIL JANE.

PUBLISHERS’ NOTE

In reissuing this History, the Publishers have taken the opportunity of continuing the historical summary begun by R. P. Farley, and short sections dealing with Britain 1918-39 and 1945-60 are now included, together with chronological lists of the principal military and political events of both World Wars.

1960.

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