

AN INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN LITERATURE.*

A thoroughly good book for young people is almost invariably one of the best books that grown people can read. Similarly, an introduction to any study, if done as it should be, by a man capable of writing not merely the introduction, but also the study itself, is certain to be of interest to the most advanced student.

Mr. Brander Matthews's volume on American literature is a piece of work as good of its kind as any American scholar has ever had in his hands. It is just the kind of book which should be given to a beginner, because it will give him a clear idea of what to read, and of the relative importance of the authors he is to read; but it is much more than merely a book for beginners. Any student of the subject who wishes to do good work hereafter must not only read Mr. Matthews's book, but must largely adopt Mr. Matthews's way of looking at things; for these simply written, unpretentious chapters are worth many times as much as the ponderous tomes which contain what usually passes for criticism of our literary work; and the principles upon which Mr. Matthews insists with such quiet force and good taste are those which must be adopted, not only by every student of American writings, but by every American writer

* An Introduction to the Study of American Literature. By Brander Matthews. New York: American Book Co.

if he is going to do work that is really worth doing.

In his opening chapters Mr. Matthews very happily defines literature as "a written record so skilfully made as to give pleasure to the reader." It seems rather odd that it should be necessary to insist upon the fact that the essence of a book is to be readable; but most certainly the average scientific or historical writer needs to have this elementary proposition drilled into his brain. Perhaps if this drilling were once accomplished, we Americans would stand a greater chance of producing an occasional Darwin or Gibbon; though there would necessarily be some havoc in the ranks of those small pedants who with laborious industry produce works which are never read excepting by other small pedants, or else by the rare master who can take the myriad bricks of these myriad little workers and out of them erect one of the great buildings of thought.

Perhaps the best, because the most original, point made by Mr. Matthews is his insistence upon what American literature really is. He shows that it is a branch of English literature, but not a branch of that portion of English literature which is created contemporaneously in the British Isles, and which he very appropriately calls British literature. American literature of this century, like British literature of this century, is a branch of the great stock of English literature, the literature common to all the English-speaking peoples. In the past not only English, but also American authors have often seemed to take it for granted that the literature produced in Great Britain at the present day was in a peculiar sense the English literature of the present day, and the representative in the direct line of the English literature of the past. This is, of course, not true. A New York novelist is no more and no less the heir of the creator of "Moll Flanders" than is a London novelist. The Biglow papers contain as much of the broad humanity of Chaucer as any contemporary poem published in Great Britain, and their author was as much influenced, consciously or unconsciously, as his average British contemporary, by the man who five centuries before had written high thoughts in a homely tongue.

It seems extraordinary that it should have been left to Mr. Matthews to formulate what so many Americans had felt—namely, that the American has precisely the same right to the English speech as the Briton. He is not the Briton's younger brother, any more than he is his elder brother. Each has an equal claim to a common inheritance—the inheritance of the great language and literature which are the most precious possessions of the two nations. If the present-day literature of either America or Great Britain depart in any way from the standards of the past—as depart it must—the departure must be judged purely on its own merits, and without the least regard to what course literature is taking in the other country at the same time. England has no more right to set the standard for America than America has to set the standard for England. The standard is set partly by the great masters of the past, partly by the force and good taste of the masters of the present day; it has nothing to do with any artificial standard raised in the other country; and neither country has the slightest right to treat a variation from its own standard as being a variation from the true standard of English literature. These points have been successfully elaborated by Mr. Matthews in his "Americanisms and Briticisms," which is by far the most noteworthy critical or literary essay which has been published by any American writer for a score of years.

American literature must naturally develop on its own lines. Politically, Americans, unlike Canadians and Australians, are free from the colonial spirit which accepts, as a matter of course, the inferiority of the colonist as compared to the man who stays at home in the mother country. We are not entirely free as yet, however, from this colonial idea in matters social and literary. Sometimes it shows itself in an uneasy self-consciousness, whether of self-assertion or self-depreciation; but it always tacitly admits the assumption that American literature should in some way be tried by the standard of contemporary British literature. Mr. Matthews, with entire good temper, and with complete absence of literary Chauvinism, shows the folly of this view.

In dealing with the authors whom he has chosen as representatives of American literature, Mr. Matthews has sketched briefly the life and life-work of each. He has accomplished the difficult feat of writing so as to be "understood of the multitude," without conveying any impression of writing *down* to the multitude. Each chapter is eminently readable and interesting; but it also always contains a singularly just estimate of the author's real worth. Mr. Matthews's wide and deep acquaintance not only with American literature, but with the literatures of other countries, enables him to place each author about where he belongs. Of course there must be individual differences of opinion. The present reviewer, for instance, is inclined to think that the relative importance given, on the one hand, to Halleck and Drake, and on the other, to Motley and Prescott and Walt Whitman could with advantage have been reversed, and that more stress might have been laid upon some of Longfellow's ballad-like poems, such as "The Discoverer of the North Cape," and, especially, the "Saga of King Olaf;" but these are matters of detail. There is very little room for division of opinion as to the excellence of Mr. Matthews's arrangement as a whole and as to the soundness of his judgments. He preserves always the difficult proper balance between sympathy and justice. He deserves especial credit for recognising in Parkman the greatest American historian. No better little sketch of Franklin has ever appeared than that which he gives; he is profoundly impressed by Franklin's greatness, and yet he shows, in a sentence in which he contrasts him with Abraham Lincoln, his appreciation of that side of Franklin's character wherein the philosopher fell short. His power of appreciating infinitely different qualities is shown by his capital sketches of Cooper and Hawthorne. Where all the work is so good it is difficult to choose, but the chapters on Lowell and Holmes are singularly appreciative and just.

In short, Mr. Matthews has produced an admirable book, both in manner and in matter, and has made a distinct addition to the very literature of which he writes.

Theodore Roosevelt.