

W. R. THAYER'S "LIFE OF JOHN HAY."

HON. THEODORE ROOSEVELT, '80.

A BIOGRAPHY of the first rank can only be written about a man whose career warrants the book and by a man with the knowledge, the training, and the gift of expression which will enable him to deal in adequate fashion with the subject. It has been many years since an American has died whose career was as well worth writing as John Hay's; and of all living men the author of the *Life of Cavour* was the man best fitted to write the *Life of John Hay*. Mr. Thayer has produced a book which is a permanent addition both to American history and to American literature; and surely it is hard to give greater praise.

In addition to his really great *Life of Cavour*, Mr. Thayer has previously written charmingly on various Italian subjects. Italy he necessarily approached purely from the standpoint of the scholar and the traveler, the man of cultivated mind who is given to historical research. In dealing with John Hay he has also, and rather unexpectedly, shown a sympathetic understanding of what John Hay did, which could only come from a first-hand knowledge, if not of political life, at least of many of the men who do the actual and important work of political life. Without this knowledge it would have been quite impossible for any man to write adequately of John Hay. As an instance of sound insight, it may be mentioned that Mr. Thayer is entirely right when he says that it was a misfortune that John Hay had not himself served in Congress, so that he might have practically understood the rough-and-tumble life of the political world and have been better able to gauge what could and what could not be expected of the men who take part in the life of practical politics.

John Hay was one of a very limited number of American public men who have possessed marked literary ability and that high and fine quality of intellectual eminence which Matthew Arnold would have characterized as "distinction." In consequence of a rather curious tradition of American public life, ambassadors and ministers have frequently been appointed because they were distinguished men of letters. There would have been nothing unusual in Hay's having come purely in this class. But John Hay, in addi-

tion to serving abroad in various diplomatic positions, including that of Ambassador at the Court of St. James, began his public career by being the private secretary of Abraham Lincoln during the tremendous crisis of the Civil War and ended it by being Secretary of State during the years which saw the United States, for good or for evil, forced to take her part among the great powers of the world and begin to deal with world questions.

There are, as Mr. Thayer acutely points out, two distinct phases in John Hay's career. During the first phase all his instincts and ways of thought were radical. During the second they were conservative. It is, of course, hardly necessary to say that this fact does not in itself mean that he was wrong in either attitude. Nothing is surer proof of the label-giving habit of mind than the effort to class a great man either as a mere conservative or a mere radical, or the tendency to speak as if either conservatism or radicalism was in itself always right. Indeed, as regards many actions, the use of the words "conservative" and "radical" indicates inexactitude in terminology, for the same action may be radical from one standpoint and conservative from another. At different stages of their careers, and on different questions, Washington and Lincoln both occupied very radical, and again very conservative, positions; and each was right, both when he was radical and when he was conservative.

While serving under Lincoln, and for several years afterwards, John Hay was the ultra-democrat, the ultra-republican, the believer in the rights of man and in popular rule and an ardent sympathizer, not only with the Americans who had followed Lincoln in his contest for human rights as against property rights, but also with the advanced German and Italian friends of liberty. The almost nationwide outburst of violence and lawlessness which accompanied the railroad riots of 1877 marked the occasion, and was largely the cause, of the change — which, however, had doubtless already been slowly in process of preparation. From that time forward his horror of lawlessness and disorder, and of the brutal violence unleashed by demagogues who were then powerless to control it, drove him into an attitude towards the rights of wealth which would unquestionably have seemed very strange, indeed, to the young secretary of Lincoln's day. It was this attitude which made him write his solitary novel *The Breadwinners*, a really powerful presentation

of one side of our complex social and industrial problems; a side which needs to be stated, but which there is a certain irony in having stated by Lincoln's biographer.

Hay's services as Secretary of State were great; but it may be doubted whether his services as Lincoln's biographer were not even greater. At any rate, the monumental work, in which he was partner with Nicolay, taken together with the two volumes of Lincoln's letters which they subsequently edited, will always remain a storehouse, wherein not merely the American historians of the period of the Civil War, but American politicians anxious to deal in proper fashion with national problems, will find a wealth of material that they can find nowhere else.

As Secretary of State Hay occupied a unique position. To a high standard of personal integrity, which made him expect and believe that the nation should observe the same standard of national integrity, he added a fastidiousness of temper, of taste, of refinement, which was a very real benefit to American public life when exhibited in high public place by a man of signal and conceded capacity as a public servant. This sensitive refinement of nature, like the sheer massiveness of Lincoln's character, made it impossible for Hay to tolerate what was meretricious or sentimental¹ or offensive to morals. The rugged simplicity of Lincoln had in it not one touch of that cheapness or vulgarity which in a democracy is unfortunately sometimes accepted either as a mark of efficiency or as a sign of sympathy with the common people; and John Hay's mere presence in public life was an antidote and corrective to this cheap form of spurious democracy. His purpose was single. It was to serve his country. But he desired to serve his country by making that country rise level to the most exacting standards of courage and of honesty, of faith to its plighted word, of refusal either to wrong others or tamely to submit to wrong by others.

The one weakness of Hay was, as his biographer points out, his inability to get on with the certainly somewhat exasperating political leaders with whom he was obliged to transact business. His extreme sensitiveness and his innate good breeding, joined with other traits, made association with masterful but often coarse and selfish politicians peculiarly distasteful to him. His attitude of mind was humorously but quite truthfully expressed when, in

¹ I use sentimentality as the antithesis of sentiment.

response to a question, which Senator he hated most, he instantly answered, "The one I have seen last."

One of the distinctive services rendered by Mr. Thayer, which shows his peculiar fitness for writing this particular biography, is his presentation of Hay's relations with the little knot of people who were his close associates in Washington. The Adamses, the Lodges, and the Camerons were the other members of the little group, those in whose houses he was as intimate as they were in his house. But in addition there were many others who did not live in Washington, but who were continually guests either at John Hay's or at his next-door neighbor's, Henry Adams; John LaFarge, the artist; Richardson, the sculptor; and, above all, Clarence King, whose friends always pathetically believed that his brilliant and infinitely varied promise would some day take shape in performance. In addition there were all kinds of transients, including very charming people of every kind from Europe; and at one period, for many months, a particularly cultivated and delightful Polynesian prince.

The biography contains an admirable selection of Hay's letters. He was one of the very limited number of men who, in notes written on the spur of the moment, and in remarks, made equally on the spur of the moment, really did say things which every one of us would like to say but never think of until after the opportunity for saying them has passed. Unfortunately the charm of such conversation is necessarily evanescent; and the charm of the correspondence itself loses a little of its bloom, because of the very fact that it *was* so apt, so unforced, so fitted into the thought and expression of the moment. Nevertheless it has a permanent value in the letters of John Hay as in the letters of Thackeray or of Lamb.

Again let it be said that there was a real need of a biography of John Hay, and that no other living man could have met this need as Mr. Thayer has met it.

DECEMBER, 1915

71

THE HARVARD GRADUATES MAGAZINE



VOL. 24



NO. 94

PUBLISHED BY
THE HARVARD GRADUATES
MAGAZINE ASSOCIATION
BOSTON, MASS.

Entered at the Post Office, Boston, Mass., as second-class mail matter, October 19, 1894.
Copyright, 1914, by THE HARVARD GRADUATES' MAGAZINE ASSOCIATION.