

PHASES OF HISTORY.

ABSTRACT OF MR. R. N. WORTH'S PAPER.

(Read November 21st, 1872.)

PREMISING that he did not intend to allude, except incidentally, to any historical fact, but that his object was to consider some of the phases through which what they called history had passed, Mr. Worth said that at bottom the various branches of his subject resolved themselves into two—recorded history and unrecorded. By this he did not mean written and unwritten. Unrecorded history was generally regarded as rather the material of history than history itself. Yet here and there an interpreter arose to whom its language was familiar, and in truth it was but a difference in language after all. Whatsoever perpetuated the memory of the past was really history, by whatever name it might be called. Thus, from the creation downwards, every age was included in its domain, and little tinkling rills of tradition flowed towards man from a period so remote that national life was but a thing of yesterday in comparison, whilst their primal sources were for ever removed from human ken. History was a record chiefly of the dealings of man with man. It treated of man's outer life, and concerned itself with nature only so far as nature was connected with action.

Recorded history commenced everywhere with the marvellous. The facts were not seen face to face, but through the distorting media of uncultured minds. The distant and the obscure were always wonderful, and from the childhood of the individual they learnt to understand the childhood of the race. In both they saw a strong faith combined with a weak judgment. All that was beyond his faculties the savage attributed to powers superior to himself. All the causes with which he was acquainted were personal; to persons therefore he ascribed those causes which he only knew by their results. The bearing of this upon traditional and legendary history was obvious. Moreover, men in all ages were prone to exalt their belongings and surroundings; and one of the most universal beliefs of the world was the belief in the

"good old times." The barrenness of the present was always apparent, that of the past was forgotten, and its incidents forced themselves into unreal prominence. Were traditions or legends based solely upon fact, knowing thus the process of their growth, it might be hoped by analysis to reduce their fiction to a minimum. Not only, however, did ancient man dress up his scraps of history in these fantastic garbs; he attired therein his poetical fancies; and the dreams of one age, hardening into a definiteness never intended, became the historical creeds of the next.

The transition from tradition to record was simple, but took place in many ways. Written history might broadly be classified under three heads—the chronicle, the pictorial, and the philosophic. The first gave the bare facts; the second the facts in an agreeable dress; the third superadded the consideration of motive and consequence. But it must be borne in mind that the historian could only introduce his readers to that which he saw himself. Moreover, when full allowance had been made for errors, there remained the fact that historians were of necessity fallible beyond almost every other class of writers. The lecturer had a great respect for the old chroniclers, and thought the absence of the critical faculty in them one of their greatest merits. They had preserved all that they came across for people who were better able to winnow the chaff from the wheat.

As the critical, which in this sense was identical with the sceptical, spirit came in, chronicling in its representative character went out, though the race of Dryasdusts would never cease in the land. Shakspeare was England's first really good historical writer. In pictorial power he had never been equalled, and the bulk of the English people believed rather in his dramatic creations than in the actual historical personages whose names they bore. Now-a-days the historical novel supplied the place of the drama. Philosophical history was necessarily a plant of slow growth. Raleigh was the first English historian of this class. But, whether as pictorialists or philosophers, the English-writing historians of the present day were quite the best the world had ever seen.

Unrecorded history lay hid where their fathers never thought of looking for it. Men now read history in the material vestiges of human existence which every race had left; in habits and in customs; in physical and mental characteristics; scored indelibly in the solid earth; vital in inherited forms, ceremonies, tastes, and

proclivities. Pre-historic archaeology revealed primitive man little removed above the brute in physical needs or in intelligence, yet evidencing, in his treatment of his dead, the germs of feelings, hopes, and fears, which carried with them the promise of great things beyond. No deed was ever lost, and the world not more surely bore the impress of the geologic changes through which it had passed than it did the traces of human action. The earliest races of man had left little but their graves; but these, rightly considered, were wells of the fullest and the truest information concerning the characteristics, mental and moral, of their silent tenants, and the physical nature of their surroundings. As they descended the stream of time, the materials of the unrecorded history of man rapidly increased. They found not only graves but dwellings; and, oddest feature of all, turned scavengers and ransacked the refuse heaps hard by. There was not much poetry about a dust-bin; but it was astonishing what a halo of romance surrounded a kitchen midden. And, taking a leap over many centuries, they had an unsystematized history of England in the English common speech; and that even was a mere dead letter compared with those suggestive relics of the past—customs, outworn creeds, obsolete superstitions—which had yet a kind of dubious or unrecognized existence, and some of which had been so aptly termed “survivals.” Wonderful was the vitality which attached to almost everything that any considerable body of mankind had agreed to think or do.

After quoting a number of striking instances of “survivals,” current in every day life, the lecturer concluded by saying that his motive had been twofold. First, that, by an elucidation of the nature and progress of history, he might inculcate the necessity for something like independence of thought in consulting their historians. Second, that by pointing out how the materials of the most vital history of the past were not merely found in musty muniment rooms, in chaotic archives, among dusty parchments, but lay scattered on every hand,—he might direct attention to the suggestiveness of common things. History was everywhere; and nothing could be really unimportant or uninteresting that had once been important or interesting to any portion of the human race. And he laid the more stress upon this because there was a danger in these days of rightful devotion to science, lest, in contemplating the great world of nature, they might be all too regardless of the little world of humanity.