

BOOK REVIEWS

ELIZABETH AND ESSEX. By Lytton Strachey. (Chatto and Windus; 17/-.)

This book is so manifestly a work of art that it must prove disturbing to historians of the graver sort who measure success by the number of new facts brought to light and Mr. Strachey's liberal bibliography of well-known works is a confession that nothing new is to be expected here. History for him is 'an imaginative comprehension of the past,' and he thinks our interest in the Elizabethans is 'to worm our way into those strange spirits,' and 'move with ease among their familiar essential feelings.' His book is a 'tragic history' of two individuals, no longer for us flat names on a page of the past, but our contemporaries, full of the pulse of life, real to us because they share our actual thoughts and feelings. Mr. Strachey has authority for his view. ' . . . History is . . . somebody's image of the past, and the image is conditioned by the mind and experience of the person who forms it. Only such things as dates, names, documents, can be considered purely objective facts. The reconstruction which involves the discovery of causes and motives, which it is the historian's business to attempt, depends on subjective elements which cannot be eliminated.'¹ We may complete this opinion of the late Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge by the words of the supreme Catholic exegete, ' . . . all history is to a certain degree an interpretation . . . But (the historian) must be so absorbed in his work as to lose sight of himself, lest the mirror of the ages should merely reflect his own picture.'² 'Somebody's image of the past,' 'an interpretation'—thus History demands a mind able to perceive an order in the multitudinous happenings of the past, and a creative imagination to produce not a photograph but the inner significance of things. It differs totally from romance because the historian must be ever obedient to his objective material—dates, names, and documents; its exigencies bind his art.

The unity of conception in this tragedy is flawless. We watch this woman and this man; the two march towards their doom—their figures becoming ever more definite as they pass

¹ J. B. Bury: Introduction to Gibbon's *Autobiography*, p. XIV.

² *Christ and Renan*, M. J. Lagrange, O.P., iii, p. 50-51.

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through the series of brilliant incidents until the man is executed and the woman a 'haggard husk.' There are other actors; the Cecils, the Bacons, Raleigh—the great Elizabethans—each marvellously alive; but they are kept subordinate. Their intrigues and machinations step by step promote the tragedy; they were not allowed to obscure it. Their voices are low. Elizabeth and Essex stand out upon the horizon brutally clear until the end.

For the first time, through Mr. Strachey's analysis, we can understand the personality of Elizabeth. It is not a pleasant one. It is not without pathos. She was implacable, fascinating, utterly selfish—a grim cliff of jet against which the generous nature of Essex bounded and rebounded in vain. She was a Queen; her culture dazzling, her intellect of an extreme finesse. Isolated on the most dangerous throne in Europe she neither flinched nor rushed into romanticism, but gazing hard and steadily upon the facts, she ruled by an unalterable policy of deliberately and infinitely cautious tacking. It was not courageous, but she escaped the currents and won incredible devotion.

She was also a woman. The ghastly circumstances of her childhood wrought in her a permanent repulsion to marriage. She grew up an egoist. She liked to play with love. It was a distraction like dancing or the virginals. It was a game. But Essex turned the game into a battle. She had to choose—between her egoism and self-surrender. She chose to sacrifice her lover. She paid the penalty: her own life was ruined. The career of Essex touched her like lightning on an ancient tree. His passage was brief enough—but it blasted.

The value of a work of art does not depend upon the truth of its maker's personal philosophy. Its success is due to a great conception greatly realized. From this essential point of view a critic avoids foolishness only by acknowledging his gratitude for this perfect work.

Mr. Strachey writes great English prose, lucid, austere, structural, incandescent. 'The deliciousness of sheer style' is a phrase he applies to the writing of Francis Bacon. Anyone who has read this book will have felt how admirably it fits his own.

Mr. Strachey still shares the conviction—Victorian enough, and dating from the cultus of natural selection—that the Universe shows no sign of purpose. The ultimate futility of existence is an assumption worked into the tissues of this history. It helps him, doubtless, to comprehend the Elizabethans—all

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of whom (Shakespeare included) with no certain doctrine of philosophy, lived ever haunted by the sinister shadow of mortality. But a universe without purpose is a universe without order; for order implies at least 'two terms and a relation to a principle which is anterior to the creation of the order.' Thus Mr. Strachey has made this book—so luminously ordered—in spite of his philosophy.

His irony indicates also that, in his view, it is the function of grace to destroy nature, that religion is the enemy of human endowments and human feelings. Spain with its theologians and its praying king are ironically compared with robust Englishmen and the terrestrial Elizabeth. The comparison is unfair because the persons are unequal. Elizabeth was certainly lacking in grace but the morbid Philip was lacking in nature. The purpose of grace is not to destroy but to fulfil, to perfect human nature. 'I came that they might have Life, and life more abundantly.' It does not, however, make up for natural deficiencies. And there is only one Exemplar in history whose life was perfectly divine and perfectly human. Nevertheless, He showed forth the Ideal and supplied the means to attain it. Mr. Strachey must surely agree that, with this 'tragic history' in mind, a little grace would have been no misfortune for Elizabeth despite her statesmanship and virile magnificence.

A.M.

DARKENED ROOMS. By Philip Gibbs. (Hutchinson, 7/6.)

The theme of Sir Philip Gibbs' latest novel is spiritualism, which, without any other qualification, should be sufficient to make it interesting. But the book as a whole takes it for granted that the basis of spiritualism is money-making and fraud, and it does not attempt to explain at all clearly what there may be genuine in this 'science.' The author starts his story immediately with an apparently successful séance, at which all the main characters of the book are introduced to us. Yet although it is represented as successful in a way, as are indeed nearly all the subsequent séances and phenomena described in the story, it has about it the air of a rather sordid and played-out game.

To take this taste of dulness out of our mouths there are some amusing passages such as introduce Mrs. Laveray, the medium, asthmatic and garrulous, who calls herself 'aunty,' and who, as a sideline to her crystal-gazing, thrills her clients by claiming to be under the influence of her 'guru.'