

BOOKS

JOHN FISKE.

John Fiske. By Thomas Sergeant Perry. The Beacon Biographies. Small, Maynard & Co. Boston. Sold by The Public Publishing Company, Chicago. Price, 75 cents. Postage, 5 cents.

The various books known as the Beacon Biographies are, in the main, excellent little volumes and unite in themselves three very desirable qualities: notable subjects, well chosen authors, and a due regard for the limited time at the disposal of the average reader. We could not ask for a more interesting character than John Fiske, and an hour or two given to the reading of this small book is sufficient to put one in possession of the main facts concerning him. There is at times, however, a certain baldness of expression that leads us to wish for a more perfect blending of thought and style, a little more of that grace of utterance that characterized John Fiske's writing. But overlooking this defect, the reader will be given an epitome of a remarkable life, and will find himself looking eagerly for the fuller biography that is said to be in preparation.

Truly, John Fiske's was a remarkable life, but rather because of what he thought than in what he did. The marvelous thing about him was his mind—such a mind as is at once the admiration and the despair of those less gifted and less persevering. Something little less than omniscience seeming to have been his goal, few men in our day have come nearer to attaining it. What Bacon was in his age, that was Fiske in ours.

As a child he was precocious in the fullest sense of that term, and what is equally remarkable, the promise of those early years was never belied. There was no retrogression, no moral or physical deficiency, no eccentricity of genius to be accounted for and excused. His was an almost perfect instance of that rare combination of sound mind and sound body. Languages, classic and living, history, science, music—all were his; and he evinced what is not always a quality of the studious mind—an interest in men and material things. Though not what would be called a practical man, he was yet ever on the alert for information, and no journey of his many journeys but added some new fact or idea to his already rich store. And this store was not a jumbled heap of facts without order or sequence, as is so commonly the case with those possessing unusually retentive memories. His mind was essentially orderly, systematic. In his early years it was a pleasure for him to tabulate events and dates—usually considered the driest and most tedious of mental operations; and one of the strong points in his historical method of later years was the ease with which he grouped events and marshaled his facts.

His first important writings were philosophical, but he will be best and most widely remembered as a writer and lecturer on historical subjects. The Carlylean method of building history upon the lives of a few strong individuals had "had its day and

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ceased to be," and Fiske was one of the first to reverse the old order. Evolution had taught him a new method. "There are no life histories in his volumes: the generation before him had given that picturesque work abundant attention." Fiske conceived of history as the outcome of certain racial and inevitable social laws.

"To one trained like Fiske to see in the movements of mankind not merely the force of individual action, but also those greater impulses that sweep through all society, the work of the historian is different. It became his duty to show not merely what things were done and who did them, but to make clear why they were done."

There is no doubt that he gave a sensible direction to the writing of history and will be a model for future historians; yet it cannot but be regretted that he wrote history at the expense of philosophy. Our life and thought, it is true, are inextricably woven with those of the past, and the study of that past has its value; but philosophy has no age and is as vital to-day as it was yesterday. But Fiske was not free from the pressing and often dwarfing necessity of writing for a living—and philosophy "doesn't pay." We notice that in his travels over the country between the years 1888 and 1893 he delivered only 14 lectures on philosophy to 527 on historical subjects.

But what he did write will remain as a monument not less noble and enduring than the larger mass of historical works. Who that has read the two large volumes of *Cosmic Philosophy* but has felt his horizon broadened, his thoughts directed and clarified and his mental grasp strengthened? In this work he attempted to sum up the world's knowledge viewed in the light of the, at that time, recent researches of Darwin and Spencer. He published also four small volumes in which he set forth his philosophical and truly religious views; while several collections of essays give evidence of the vast extent of his knowledge and the breadth of his interests.

In all his books there is the same marvelous clearness and charm, the same ease and wealth of learning. One is somehow reminded, by very contrast, of Cowper praying to be defended "from the toil of dropping buckets into empty wells, and growing old in drawing nothing up." John Fiske's intellectual well seems bottomless and out of it the thinking world has drank and been refreshed.

MARY HEATH LEE.

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