EDMUND GOSSE AND LAFCADIO HEARN

Two well known and elderly men of letters have passed away within a few months—I refer to Thomas Hardy and Edmund Gosse. Gosse was, of course, the lesser of the two; still, he enjoyed a great renown, not only in England but also on the Continent. No Englishman was so well known as a critic. He was, in a manner, a representative of the English literary world, an ambassador for English literature to Europe. As in the case of Thomas Hardy, his career extends from the middle of the Victorian Age to our own. He was a friend of Rossetti’s and Swinburne’s, and, in a preface to his “Collected Poems,” wrote:—“If I am a poet at all, I belong to the age of the Franco-German War, of the introduction of Japanese Art into Europe...and of the Oxford lectures of Matthew Arnold.” Yet in his late years he sympathised with and encouraged new movements: he gave generous praise to Siegfried Sassoon and Edmund Blunden, the latter of whom till lately occupied the Chair which Lafcadio Hearn had filled years before.

When I entered the Tokyo Imperial University about twenty-six years ago Lafcadio Hearn was a lecturer there, and one series of his lectures was on the “History of English Literature”; its delivery took him three hours a week for three years. At the end of this series he touched on Gosse, who was one of the authorities he had frequently quoted. My attendance at his lectures lasted little more than half a year, because he resigned—only to die—not long afterwards. Yet the impression he made on my mind was very deep, because he was so enthusiastic, and such a good stylist.

Early this year I attended a course of lectures on Meredith, delivered by Prof. Baker at the University College in London, to commemorate the centenary of the novelist’s birth; and the chief attraction was an introductory speech made by Gosse. He was then hale and vigorous, and seemed to be about fifty-five years of age. He said that he was one of the few surviving friends of Meredith, and described his meeting with the novelist forty years before. I was surprised that one who was a friend of Meredith’s and whom Hearn had touched on in his lecture so long before, should seem so young. After my return to my lodgings, I found, in reading some papers, that Gosse was then 78 years old. It is marvellous that he was so exuberant and vivacious at that age; and though he was very old, it is sad that an operation should have cut off a life which still seemed to promise further fruitfulness.
What also interests me is that in the “Silhouettes” Gosse criticises Lafcadio Hearn's posthumous books, which were compiled from his students, notes. Gosse's criticism on those works is, so to speak, that of a master on his disciple, and is usually to the point. As Gosse says, Hearn, who seems to have had little opportunity of making a study of English literature until he had passed the age of forty, at that ripe age had, in a strange land to prepare his lectures on the subject quite unaided. He spared no pains; read voraciously and exhaustively, with a mind unbiased and unprejudiced: and the result is that the lectures are marked by simplicity and frankness. They may lack metaphysical ingenuity and subtlety of thought, but they are characterised by vigour of analysis and delicacy of taste. Enjoying no intercourse with acknowledged critics, and forming his opinions in isolation, it is natural that he should have sometimes emphasised views which had long been admitted, and propounded opinions which are not accepted now. Yet he was a fine writer and his lectures were always fresh and attractive. No wonder that his audiences were ever charmed and fascinated. “The merit of Hearn's lectures,” says Gosse, “depends on their freshness, their artless enthusiasm, and also on the vigour with which impressions independently made on the enthusiasm of the lecturer are passed on to his audience.”


Hideju Saji

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHIES (III)

(IV) WILLIAM BECKFORD OF FONTHILL

The Author of “Vathek” as he is perhaps best known, occupies an unique position in English literary history. He stands an isolated and grand figure between the great writers of the eighteenth century and those of the nineteenth. If he owed little or nothing to his English contemporaries such as Horace Walpole, neither did he exercise any appreciable influence upon the novelists who succeeded him; yet, in more than one sense he partook of the characteristics of both. He is an admirable summary of the age of transition—from the tale of terror to romanticism—in which he lived, an age which saw the decline and fall of the ancien régime of which he was a part. In his work as in his life he reveals a complete lack of sentimentalism, and cold intellectual brilliancy coupled with deep feeling for nature and a genuine humanitarian spirit. He belongs to that small minority of men in every part of Europe who, while being aristocrats, refused to bow down to the artificial