

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER

VOL. XXXVII (No. 2) FEBRUARY, 1923

No. 801

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The Open Court Publishing Company

122 S. Michigan Ave.

Chicago, Illinois

Per copy, 20 cents (1 shilling). Yearly, \$2.00 (in the U.P.U., 9s. 6d.)

Entered as Second-Class Matter March 26, 1887, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under
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ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE

Frontispiece to the Open Court

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THE RELIGION OF SWINBURNE

BY J. V. NASH

THE YEAR 1870—momentous in European history, a date whose ominous shadows fell athwart the years to 1914—found some seven hundred prelates,—gray haired patriarchs, most of them,—representing all the far flung provinces of the Roman spiritual empire, gathered at the Vatican in oecumenical council. The purpose for which the council assembled was to determine and declare the orthodox doctrine on the long disputed question of papal infallibility. Was the Roman pontiff alone the recipient of direct, divine guidance, and did his pronouncement on questions of faith and morals override the opinions of bishops and councils; or, when he spoke, was it merely as the mouthpiece of the church at large, in which infallibility rested? There were able and eloquent exponents of both points of view. Gallican—Liberal—ecclesiastics contended against Ultramontanes,—Jesuits and reactionaries. The spirit of Port Royal still lived.

After many stormy sessions, the Ultramontanes triumphed; the council voted to promulgate, as a doctrine binding on all the faithful, the dogma of Papal Infallibility, independent of and superior to the voice of council or bishop; transcending, indeed, the authority of book or tradition. Not a few distinguished prelates, when the long roll-calls were taken, had dared to register their "*Non placet*," but these were but as leaves borne along in the wind. Absolutism reigned on the Tiber.

Those, however, who had eyes to see might have discerned a pregnant portent in the fact that the Vatican Council was dissolved, before a regular adjournment could be taken—indeed before many of the details of the doctrine of Infallibility could be worked

out—by the troops of Victor Emmanuel battering at the gates of Rome (deprived of its French protection by the debacle at Sedan and the downfall of Napoleon III) to dispossess the Roman Pontiff of the temporal sovereignty which had survived a full thousand years, and to place United Italy on the map as one of the great powers of the nineteenth-century political world.

While the Roman theologians were participating in the recondite discussions eventuating in the enunciation of a decree asserting in the most unequivocal language the spiritual autocracy of the Holy See, a young man of thirty-three in distant England was penning a passionate defiance of everything held sacred by the historic Church. The youthful knight errant of spiritual emancipation was Algernon Charles Swinburne; the poem was the "Hymn of Man."

To the Fathers, seeking vainly for agreement at the Vatican, Swinburne cries:

"Foot after foot ye go back and travail and make yourselves mad;
Blind feet that feel for the track where highway is none to be had.
Therefore the God that ye make you is grievous, and gives not aid,
Because it is but for your sake that the God of your making is made."

In impassioned lines he challenges the priests to call upon their Deity to prove His existence and to demonstrate His potency, as He was wont to do in the days when He led the Chosen People to victory over their enemies:

"Cry out, for his kingdom is shaken; cry out, for the people blaspheme;
Cry aloud till his godhead awaken; what doth he to sleep and to dream?
Cry, cut yourselves, gash you with knives and with scourges, heap on to you dust;
Is his life but as other gods' lives? is not this the Lord God of your trust?"

He will demand expiation by the Deity for the afflictions which humanity has endured at the hands of the priests:

"Thou hast sealed thine elect to salvation, fast locked with faith for the key;
Make now for thyself expiation, and be thine atonement for thee; . . .
By the children that asked at thy throne of the priests that were fat with thine hire
For bread, and thou gavest a stone; for light, and thou madest them fire;
By the face of the spirit confounded before thee and humbled in dust,

By the dread wherewith life was astounded and shamed out of
 sense of its trust,
 By the scourges of doubt and repentance that fell on the soul at
 thy nod,
 Thou art judged, O judge, and the sentence is gone forth against
 thee, O God."

Although the challenge was specifically thrown at the theologians of the papal infallibility, it was likewise a defiance of all orthodoxy, both Catholic and Protestant. Never before had a poet of recognized standing in England—a product of the University of Oxford—thus openly arraigned the Church and indicted its Deity by name. The arraignment was scathing, the indictment unprecedented in Christendom. God Himself was made to stand before the bar of justice, with Man as the accusing witness. To the reader of the "Hymn of Man," there floats down the centuries a faint echo of the reproachful lines of the great Moslem dissenter, whom Tennyson condescendingly dubbed "that large Infidel,"—Omar Khayyam:

"O Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make,
 And ev'n with Paradise devise the Snake:
 For all the Sin wherewith the face of man
 Is blacken'd— Man's forgiveness give—and take!

Algernon Charles Swinburne, whose fiery radicalism and defiance of authority both religious and political, again and again shook Victorian England out of its smug and complacent conservatism—though in many ways he himself was curiously Victorian in his prejudices and limitations—traced his spiritual ancestry to the French Revolution. His kinship with that great upheaval was not inspired by the mere reading of books, such even as Carlyle's throbbing story of the mighty cataclysm which rocked Europe to its foundations and overturned so many venerable institutions.

It was from his own grandfather that Swinburne doubtless derived the revolutionary spirit and imbibed the gospel of human emancipation which breathes through all his greatest writings, though from none of his forebears could he have inherited his marvelous poetic artistry.

His ancestry was of all possible ones that which might least have been expected to produce a Swinburne. The Swinburnes were an old English Tory family who had clung to the ancient faith in the days of Henry VIII and Elizabeth with the same uncompromising spirit with which, a century later, as Jacobites in politics, they had espoused the cause of the royal house of Stuart, for whose sake they suffered persecution, ostracism, and the attainder of ancestral estates antedating the Norman Conquest. Upon the dethronement of James

II in 1688, the Swinburnes followed their liege into exile in France, firm as ever in their devotion to the Old Religion and the Divine Right of Anointed Kings.

In a delightful and characteristic letter, Swinburne gives us this intimate picture of his grandfather, Sir John Swinburne:

"My father, Admiral Swinburne, is the second son of Sir John Swinburne, a person whose life would be better worth writing than mine. Born and brought up in France, his father (I believe) a naturalized Frenchman—we were all Catholic and Jacobite rebels and exiles—my grandfather never left France till called away at twenty-five on the falling-in of such English estates (about half the original quantity) as confiscation had left to a family which in every Catholic rebellion from the days of my own Queen Mary to those of Charles Edward had given their blood like water and their lands like dust for the Stuarts.

"I assume that his Catholicism sat lightly upon a young man who in the age of Voltaire had enjoyed the personal friendship of Mirabeau. . . . He was (of course on the ultra-Liberal side) one of the most extreme politicians as well as one of the hardest riders and best art patrons of his time. . . . It was said that the two maddest things in the north country were his horse and himself, but I don't think the horse can have been madder, or at least the harder to kill; for once when out shooting he happened to blow away his right eye with a good bit of the skull, but was trepanned and lived to see his children's children (and a good many of them), and after more than ninety-eight years of health and strength to die quietly of a week's illness. We all naturally hoped to see him fill up his century, but the fates said no."

Swinburne was a precocious, imaginative child. His small body, large head, and great shock of red hair lent to his figure a peculiarly goblin-like appearance. Old beyond his years, he was a special confidante of his amazing grandfather. One may fancy this extraordinary youngster sitting wide-eyed at the feet of the wrinkled old patriarch of ninety, in whose remaining eye the fire still smouldered, drinking in the tales of the great Revolution,—how the down-trodden peasants of France rose in their might against their oppressors, how the Bastille was taken, how the guillotine was set up in the Place de la Revolution, how the tumbrils rumbled over the cobblestones bearing the proudest aristocrats of the *ancien regime* to the scaffold, and how the market women of Paris sat knitting in the sun, before the horrible engine of death, their busily plying needles keeping count of the heads as they fell into the bloody basket.

So childhood ripened into youth and Swinburne went up to Oxford. "Mad Swinburne" he was dubbed by matter-of-fact col-

lege mates who could not fathom this elfin personality. His brilliant but restless mentality could not brook the academic restraints of the University, and he left without taking a degree. He carried away from Oxford, however, something better. This was the warm friendship of Benjamin Jowett, the Master of Balliol, whom for thirty years Swinburne continued loyally to address as "Master," and who remained a constructive and steady influence upon his erratic disciple.

In 1866, while yet in his twenties, Swinburne threw his first great bombshell into Victorian England, by the publication of "Poems and Ballads." The appearance of this little book produced the greatest sensation of a generation. It was denounced on every hand as an unspeakable mixture of blasphemy, political incendiarism, and sexual wantonness. Prosecution threatened the publishers; Moxon, thoroughly frightened, withdrew his imprint from the title page, and retreated to the cyclone cellar. Finally the storm subsided; a few champions came out in defense of the book. When, however, the American edition appeared, within a year, the popular prejudice against it was still so strong that the publishers felt under the necessity of apologetically pasting upon the title page the following defense of the book, quoted from the *London Examiner*:

"There is a music of strength in these poems, outspoken honesty, a sturdy love of freedom, earnestness, poetic insight, truth and beauty of expression, beyond anything attained to by other of the young poets of the day. In some of the poems are the passions of youth fearlessly expressed, and stirring depths that have been stirred hitherto by no poet in his youth. . . . He is a young poet with sterling qualities, and the outcry that has been made over his volume is not very creditable to his critics. . . . It is the ferment of good wine, and we must think they are no skilled judges of the wine of thought who shake their heads over it."

In "Poems and Ballads," Swinburne, as he hints in the famous "Dedication," gathered together verses which had been accumulating since his early youth:

"Some sang to me dreaming in class-time,
And truant in hand as in tongue;
For the youngest were born of boy's pastime,
The eldest are young."

In this volume are included, "A Song in Time of Order—1852," and "A Song in Time of Revolution—1860." Both may have been composed very early; yet we find in them, already fully developed, the uncompromising radicalism of later years. The first of these

two poems also breathes the passionate love of the sea which became inseparable from Swinburne's poetic art:

"Push hard across the sand,
For the salt wind gathers breath;
Shoulder and wrist and hand,
Push hard as the push of death. . . .

"They have tied the world in a tether,
They have bought over God with a fee;
While three men hold together
The kingdoms are less by three.

"We have done with the kisses that sting,
The thief's mouth red from the feast,
The blood on the hands of the king
And the lie at the lips of the priest."

In the "Song in Time of Revolution," he sings:

"The heart of the rulers is sick, and the high priest covers his head:
For this is the song of the quick, that is heard in the ears of the
dead. . . .

"They are grieved and greatly afraid; they are taken and shall not
flee:
For the heart of the nations is made as the strength of the spring
of the sea. . . .

"There is none of them all that is whole; their lips gape open for
breath;
They are clothed with sickness of soul, and the shape of the shadow
of death."

In the decade between 1860 and 1870, when Swinburne's genius was at its flood tide, the struggle between liberty and autocracy in Europe was concentrating itself in Italy. Mazzini, the great Italian apostle of freedom, became Swinburne's hero, at whose feet he worshipped with all the blind devotion of a neophyte. Napoleon III, who had overturned the Second Republic in France by the famous *coup d'état* of 1852, and set up an Empire in alliance with the Church, appeared to Swinburne the very incarnation of that Autocracy and Priestcraft which he loathed. With passionate pen he glorified Mazzini and anathematized Bonaparte. Then, too, he had early conceived an intense admiration of Victor Hugo, beginning in the early 'fifties, when at the age of fifteen he first read, "Notre Dame de Paris." When Napoleon III, stung to the quick by Hugo's biting satire, banished the latter from France, Swinburne's admiration of the exile in Guernsey became an obsession and his hatred

of "Napoleon le Petit"—as hugo had sarcastically immortalized the tinsel successor of the great Corsican—grew well-nigh frantic.

Recalling Swinburne's days at Oxford, in 1857, Prof. T. E. Holland wrote:

"I well recollect his dancing round the table, screaming abuse and, I think, advocating the assassination of the Emperor."

This was at a meeting of his undergraduate club, the Old Mortality. He even hung up in his sitting room at Oxford a portrait of Orsini, a fanatical Italian republican who soon after had attempted the life of Napoleon III, and danced before the picture, "in ecstasies of enthusiasm." On a visit to Paris some years later, Swinburne, while driving in the Blois, met the arch enemy face to face. Napoleon probably did not know him from Adam, but with Gallic politeness raised his hat to the occupants of the passing carriage. Here was Swinburne's opportunity to crush the tyrant. He rose heroically to the occasion. In a fervor of virtuous indignation he kept his hat firmly down on his head as the imperial equipage went by. This was worthy of Mr. Pickwick at his best.

In Victor Hugo's exile, Swinburne found a new bond of union and sympathy with the author of "Les Miserables." In his "Ode to Victor Hugo," he expressed his feeling of kinship as follows:

"Not without thoughts that ache
For theirs and for thy sake,
I, born of exiles, hail thy banished head;
I, whose young song took flight
Toward the great heat and light,
On me a child from thy far splendor shed,
From thine high place of soul and song,
Which, fallen on eyes yet feeble, made them strong."

Mazzini, too, went into exile for his opinions, and during his wanderings visited England. Swinburne was elevated to the seventh heaven of beatitude by having the privilege of meeting face to face this object of his political idolatry. He immediately fell prostrate before his deity, like Moses in the presence of Yahweh on Sinai. In a letter penned in the access of enthusiasm following the first meeting, he wrote:

"I, unworthy, spent much of last night sitting at my beloved Chief's feet. He was angelically good to me. I read him my Italian poem all through and he accepted it in words I can't trust myself to try and write down. . . . Today I am rather exhausted and out of sorts."

The poem to which Swinburne refers in this letter is "A Song of Italy," and as it contains nearly one thousand verses, we should per-

haps sympathize with Mazzini's condition the next day, as well as with Swinburne's. The poor man died a few years later.

It has been a source of some wonder that whereas Swinburne was an ardent apostle of revolution and of the bitterest opposition to monarchy in other lands, he accepted monarchy in England with seeming equanimity. Apparently revolution, unlike charity, should not begin at home. This was, indeed, one of the inconsistencies which are but too often noted in men of genius. But then consistency as Emerson remarked, is a bugaboo of little minds.

The fact was that in Swinburne's day the monarchy in England had become a thing of form rather than of substance. The trappings of royalty remained but the power had been slowly leached away. The bearded despots of Russia and Austria, the dissipated adventurer on the imperial throne of France,—these were fair game for Swinburne's bag, but there could be little glory in going gunning after a lonely, dowdy old widow in Windsor Castle. In "An Appeal" (1867), he urges England to "put forth thy strength and release" revolutionists in other lands, but he manifested no interest in the troubles of radicals at home. In "Perinde ac Cadaver," we find a partial key to his complacency with the *status quo* in England:

"We have filed the teeth of the snake, Monarchy, how should it bite?"

It was not in hope of any selfish gain or pecuniary emolument that Swinburne yielded such unreserved allegiance to the Queen. He never sought nor received any mark of royal or governmental favor. A poor man all his life, dependent almost entirely upon the royalties from his books for his living, a pension would doubtless have been as welcome to Swinburne as it had been to Tennyson. On the death of the latter, in 1892, many indeed hoped that the laureateship might pass to Swinburne. In discussing the matter with Mr. Gladstone, it is reported that Queen Victoria remarked: "I am told that Mr. Swinburne is the best poet in my dominions." Mr. Gladstone objected that Swinburne's "turbulence" and his bitter attacks upon European monarchs with whom the British government maintained friendly diplomatic relations rendered his selection for the honor politically unthinkable.

Swinburne's love for England was passionate and finds beautiful expression again and again in his verses. For instance, in "The Armada," he apostrophizes her thus:

"England, Queen of the waves, whose green inviolate girdle enrings
thee round,

Mother fair as the morning, where is now the place of thy foemen
found?

Still the sea that salutes us free proclaims them stricken, acclaims
thee crowned."

In the latter part of his life, which was passed under the guardianship of Theodore Watts-Dunton at Putney, just outside London, Swinburne's views underwent a marked change. Watts-Dunton was a lawyer turned litterateur and dilettante; he had little use for "democracy," either in politics or in literature. He detested Walt Whitman. Swinburne and Whitman had been ardent admirers of each other's work in earlier days. They considered themselves apostles of the same radical gospel, the one in the old world, the other in the new. But Watts-Dunton soon infected Swinburne with an unreasoning dislike of the American poet-iconoclast. He spat across the Atlantic at Whitman—and Whitman spat back. He compared Whitman to "a drunken apple-woman, sprawling in the gutter amid the decayed fruit from her overturned cart." Whitman retorted by likening Swinburne to a man who invited him to a magnificent banquet. He approached the table loaded with steaming dishes, but when he took the covers off the silver tureens, lo, there was nothing within!

Watts-Dunton's influence over Swinburne increased as the years went by. He became more and more conservative. No longer did he throw his shining lance at the old enemies. Yet the loss of the freedom of former days no doubt brought poignant heart-ache to him, as we may surmise from the opening and closing stanzas of "To a Seamew," written while on an excursion to Beachy Head in September, 1886:

"When I had wings, my brother,
Such wings were mine as thine:
Such life my heart remembers
In all as wild Septembers
As this when life seems other,
Though sweet, than once was mine;
When I had wings, my brother,
Such wings were mine as thine.

"Ah well were I for ever,
Wouldst thou change lives with me,
And take my song's wild honey,
And give me back thy sunny
Wide eyes that weary never,
And wings that search the sea;
Ah, well were I for ever,
Wouldst thou change lives with me."

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, Swinburne became increasingly unsympathetic toward political changes; more and more did he approximate to the type of the confirmed British Tory. He violently opposed Mr. Gladstone's Home Rule for Ireland program. It is reported that a Fenian emissary, having heard of Swinburne's reputation as a "revolutionist" in years gone by, once visited "The Pines" with the request that Swinburne compose an ode "On the Proclamation of an Irish Republic," as a companion piece to his famous "Ode on the Proclamation of the French Republic" in the early '70's. Swinburne, on learning the emissary's mission, became fairly apoplectic with passion and bade the emissary begone before he should "overcome his repulsion sufficiently to kick him downstairs."

When, in 1899, the Boer war broke out, many English Liberals who were by no means "revolutionists"—including even Mr. Lloyd George—opposed the policy of the Government. The luckless South African republics found no friend, however, in Swinburne. He advocated the most ruthless severity toward the Boers and penned a fiery sonnet closing with the adjuration: "Strike, England, and strike home."

One can but surmise what Swinburne's attitude toward Germany would have been, had he lived just five years longer. Before his death, in 1909, it would seem that he had already scented the coming conflict, for he writes bitterly of "strong Germany, girdled with guile,"—a typically Swinburnian alliterative rhythm.

In this connection, and in the light of the present European situation politically, it is interesting to learn Swinburne's views on the Franco-Prussian war. The recent publication of his private correspondence throws some hitherto unavailable light on Swinburne's dealings in practical "Weltpolitik." His letters show that he was keenly alive to the blunders of Continental diplomacy and perceived with almost prophetic instinct the dynamite which the Peace of Frankfort was to hide away in the soil of Alsace-Lorraine. In a letter to his mother, dated September 22, 1870, Swinburne wrote:

"On Sunday evening I had a long talk on European prospects with Karl Blind at his house. I am afraid the old fatal anti-German feeling in France has yet more of evil seed to bear, and I can hardly feel as much surprise as sorrow. One only, he says, of the Republican French papers has protested against it and the war which is its present fruit; the others, if they have attacked it, have not attacked it as a crime, but as a Bonapartism!

"I cannot wonder that the leaders of German intellect and action should feel as it appears Bismarck does towards France as the

enemy to be disabled under peril of fresh aggression; and therefore I can see no probable term at hand to ruin and bloodshed which will not be the germ and the beginning of more ruin and bloodshed. . . .

"I know only one German—a very able and ardent patriot—who is utterly opposed to the seizure of Alsace and Lorraine as worse for Germany than even for France. I hope such opinions may soon be commoner than I fear they can now be among his countrymen. J. Faure will do what honesty and moderation can do, but no more; and just now that is not very much."

Swinburne's opposition to "priestcraft," though it found less and less expression in later years, apparently remained unchanged to the end. But he was not a crass atheist, nor was his philosophy one of mere negation. Many, perhaps, have drawn that conclusion from such poems as the "Hymn of Man" and "The Garden of Proserpine." The haunting melancholy melody of the latter is probably unequaled in English verse. The two last stanzas certainly express a mood which is more general than commonly supposed and which at times even the most robust believers doubtless feel:

"From too much love of living,
From hope and fear set free,
We thank with brief thanksgiving
Whatever gods may be,
That no life lives for ever;
That dead men rise up never;
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea.

"Then star nor sun shall waken,
Nor any change of light:
Nor sound of waters shaken,
Nor any sound or sight:
Nor wintry leaves nor vernal,
Nor days nor things diurnal;
Only the sleep eternal
In an eternal light."

Theodore Roosevelt, for instance, that strenuous preacher of muscular Christianity, would be about the last person in the world to whom one would imagine that the poetry of Swinburne could carry any appeal. Yet his sister, Mrs. Douglas Robinson, in her recently published reminiscences, tells us: "I find among my papers, painstakingly copied in red ink in my brother's handwriting, Swinburne's poem, 'A Forsaken Garden.' He had sent it to me, copying it from memory, when on a trip to the Maine woods. . . . He always loved the rhythm of Swinburne."

At heart Swinburne was a pantheist. He felt God everywhere in Nature,—in the blossoms of spring, in the perfumed breezes of summer, in the sea-gull's flight, in the rippling laughter of childhood. Like Spinoza, he viewed all earthly things *sub specie aeternitatis*. The sea especially, was for him at once the symbol and the embodiment of eternity:

"All delicate days and pleasant, all spirits and sorrows are cast
Far out with the foam of the present that sweeps to the surf of
the past. . . .
Will ye bridle the deep sea with reins, will ye chasten the high sea
with rods?
Will ye take her to chain her with chains, who is elder than all
ye gods?
All ye as a wind shall go by, as a fire shall ye pass and be past;
Ye are gods, and behold, ye shall die, and the waves be upon
you at last."

Swinburne's concept of immortality was that of eternal life gained, not through a selfish concentration upon saving one's own little individual soul, but rather through forgetfulness of self in defense of right and in service to humanity. He was at one with the apostle Paul that "he who loseth his life shall find it." We have this idea clearly and beautifully expressed in the following stanza from "Thalassius":

"How he that loves life overmuch shall die
The dog's death, utterly:
And he that much less loves it than he hates
All wrongdoing that is done
Anywhere, always, underneath the sun,
Shall live a mightier life than Time's or Fate's.
And the inspiration of the transcendent life is Love:

" . . . Love that turns
God's heart toward man as man's to Godward; . . .
Love, that though body and soul were overthrown
Should live for Love's sake of itself alone,
Though spirit and flesh were one thing doomed and dead,
Not wholly annihilated."

Perhaps the best expression of Swinburne's theology—if it may be termed such—systematically set forth, is to be found in the poem "Hertha," the name being taken from the Earth Goddess of the ancient Teutons from whom the Anglo-Saxons sprang:

"I am that which began;
Out of me the years roll;
Out of me God and man;
I am equal and whole;
God changes and man, and the form of them bodily; I am the
soul. . . ."

“A creed is a rod,
And a crown is of night ;
But this thing is God,
To be man with thy might,
To grow straight in the strength of thy spirit, and live out thy life
in the light.

“I am in thee to save thee,
As my soul in thee saith,
Give thou as I gave thee,
Thy life-blood and breath,
Green leaves of thy labour, white flowers of thy thought, and red
fruit of thy death.”

Here Swinburne's faith rested to the end, careless of and indifferent to the formal dogmas of the churches. Like other men of genius, Swinburne transcends complete analysis of character; his was a personality that defied measurement by the yardsticks of common mortals. In the consummate perfection which he displayed in the combination of poetic forms, in lilting alliteration, in fecundity of rhyme, in richness of imagery, in colorful metaphor and musical rhythm, he was without a peer. In him many diverse intellectual and emotional qualities were fused together in the white heat of poetic inspiration. One can appreciate Swinburne even when one cannot always understand or assent.

Swinburne will live not only as a great literary artist, but also because, with due allowance for all his inconsistencies and Pickwickian attitudes, he stands as an apostle of human emancipation. In a difficult day and generation he helped to keep alight and aloft the torch of liberty. His biting invective left a scar on European absolutism which never healed. The autocrats whom he assailed in their heyday of power,—the Emperors of France, of Austria, and of Russia,—are gone forever, and today England's far-flung empire, by a peaceful process of evolution proclaims itself the British Commonwealth. He was an industrious worker through a long life of more than seventy years, and his voluminous writings in both prose and verse are contributions which have permanently enriched English literature,—a perennial spring at which a freedom loving world may find spiritual refreshment in never failing abundance.