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Simon de Montfort - Creator of the House of Commons (Annotated)

Georg Rheinhold Pauli

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Dr. Paulis observation at the opening of the Preface of his work, that every great movement in human Society is embodied and illustrated in the character of one pre-eminent man, will hardly be objected to by any order of readers; but it probably approves itself most warmly to those who are the oldest, as well as the most worthy. The relish of the study of History follows the same law in the case, in regard to age, of a people and an individual. In the youthful days of a nation the Historical interest is implicated in the suspense and romance of war and conquest, in the poetry of adventure, and the triumph or grief of mighty revolutions of fortune. As a community grows older in experience, the character of its interest in History changes essentially. Institutions and Laws become more attractive than invasions and battles; a stage in civilisation is seen to be more valuable than an extension of territory; and the general mind opens to a sense of the qualities necessary to the acquisition of a higher good. Just in the same way does the interest in the study of History change its ground with lapse of time. The child asks only for fairy tales; the school-boy devors narratives of adventure and conquest; and his attraction to any consideration of character lies in its daring first, then in its magnanimity, and, when the conceptions coalesce, its heroism.

These conceptions, however, are exhaustible; and a whole realm of wisdom lies ready to be entered upon when the community on the one hand, and the individual student on the other, becomes qualified by experience and contemplation to appreciate acquisitions from the richer field. The conception and growth of good institutions and laws become interesting to Society; and in due time Society inquires, first as a matter of course, and at last with more or less eagerness, about the origin of political amelioration, and the head, heart, and hands by which it was wrought.

At the corresponding age attained by the individual student, he finds his best road to knowledge of History in Biography, if it be but attainable. It is not merely that human character is always and everywhere supremely interesting to meditative men : it is that in a man’s life we see his mind; and that the more we see of his life the better we understand his mind, and can interpret his ideas, designs, and acts. Thus we see the grey-haired student lay eager hands on the smallest fragment of newly discovered records which can disclose any feature in the character conduct of political philosopher or statesman who may have lent a hand to the formation or working of the constitution of his own or another country.

It is easily said that Political Biography naturally combines two different orders of interest, that of narrative the unfolding of a story; and that of individual experience and portraiture of character: this is true enough; but the point before us regards the interest and efficacy of the study of History itself, by the road of Biography. If evidence of this fact had been necessary of late years it would have been found in the gratitude with which our own country and people, and some abroad, have received the inestimable gift conferred by the Master of the Rolls in rendering accessible to us documents illustrative in all manner of ways of the reigns of our sovereigns for successive centuries.

Amidst the wealth of that disclosure, one of the most prominent gifts is that which Dr. Pauli avows to have .been his immediate stimulus to the production of his Life of Simon de Montfort. So noble a boon is fittingly

acknowledged by the frank gratitude of the biographer; but we, his readers, owe a double debt. The new materials are one boon; but many of us would have known little of them if the Historian had not presented to us the great period following the event of Runnymede as the influences of that period were reflected in the lif

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