
DR. RYERSON.*

A REVIEW AND A STUDY.

BY

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NOTE.—This Review was written by Mr. Allen for *The Week*, as stated on page 10. It is worthy of careful study, as it gives an admirable estimate of the life and labours of Dr. Ryerson. It also presents a brief yet comprehensive view of the value of the services which that distinguished man rendered to his native country.

The Literary Trustees and Publisher desire to append this note, and to thank Mr. Allen for his candid and impartially written paper.

TORONTO, March, 1884.

* "THE STORY OF MY LIFE." By the late Rev. Egerton Ryerson, D.D., LL.D.; being reminiscences of sixty years' public service in Canada. Prepared under the supervision of his literary trustees—the Rev. S. S. Nelles, D.D., LL.D.; the Rev. John Potts, D.D.; and J. George Hodgins, Esq., LL.D. Edited by J. George Hodgins, LL.D., with portrait and engravings. Toronto: William Briggs, 78 and 80 King Street East. 1883.



DR. RYERSON.

I HAVE been engaged lately in reading "THE STORY OF MY LIFE," and if that which stimulates the mental and moral faculties and stirs the best sympathies of our nature in behalf of the good man struggling with all the force that is in him against the deadly might of manifold wrong, results in profit to us, then do I most heartily recommend to the public this excellent work.

I am myself glad I have read it; for though I always felt that what came from the pen of Dr. Ryerson was sure to be stamped with the marked idiosyncrasies of his vigorous mind, yet I knew nothing of his private life or early history, and saw nothing in the few letters of his, chiefly controversial, which had drifted in my way, that seemed calculated to endear to me the man himself. I was the subject, too, of misconceptions impressed on me from without, through persons who honestly entertained the views which they expressed, and who, I thought, must have had good grounds for entertaining them; and though I never penned a line against him, yet unacquainted as I was with his true history, I had little friendly feeling towards him; and I hope that those who regarded him as a thorough-paced politician and self-seeker, using his ascendancy over a large religious denomination to achieve his own ambitious ends, will, shaking themselves loose from every prejudice, with an honest desire to learn the truth respecting him, peruse this book with the care which it deserves. If they do so, they can, I think, hardly fail to see that a half-view of the man—seen too, perhaps, under specially unfavorable circumstances, and when their own minds were disturbed by what they deemed a wilful or contemptuous disregard on his part of the force and truth of the reasons urged by them, and which to their minds carried full conviction—that a half-view of the man so seen is like seeing the moon on its dark side only.

But let them read these pages without prepossessions of any kind, and I think it will be found that they bear such an unmistakable stamp of sincerity that, unless the reader be wholly incapable of appreciating character and of weighing, and being affected by, moral evidence, they must bring conviction home; especially as I know that to every generous mind anger and indignation are a heavy and galling weight, which the good man will gladly shake from him when he can.

I am no Methodist, nor connected with any party in Church or commonwealth, but simply a looker-on, who is happy to welcome good wherever he sees it; and I see it in this man in so high a degree that I cannot help saying so, and if I failed in my judgment in respect of the living man, I will at least be true to his memory, and so make the only reparation in my power.

The struggle of high minds for predominance has too often a tendency to produce a certain vitiation of moral character. The very eminence of another puts him into a kind of antagonism to ourselves, and if he have any faults, self-love backed by ambition is sure to pounce upon and exaggerate them, until at last we become almost blind to the virtues of a powerful opponent; and if he stands in the way of our ambition, or if he hurts our sensibilities, we are too apt to regard him as an enemy; and thus is the man of pre-eminent ability made to pay the penalty of his own high gifts.

*“ Urit enim fulgore suo, qui prægravat artes
Infra se positas.”*

But now that the battle no longer waxes hot, I trust the closing words of the verse will also prove true, “*extinctus amabitur idem;*” and that the mists of misconception having lifted themselves out of our horizon, we may see the man himself, in the dry light of the understanding, as he really lived and acted, and take measure more accurately of his true proportions.

And, indeed, there is hardly a foot-length of our civilization on which he has not left his mark. For those who believe that, on the grounds of expediency, a government is justified in interfering with the ordinary working of the great human life-struggle, and so, in taking one man's money to benefit another man's children, that is to a majority so overwhelming

as to come almost under the category of universal, as to be every one's belief—what system of general education can recommend itself more fully, or work more smoothly, than does his? In his struggles in this direction, neither seduced by friends, nor cowed by enemies, nor damped in his ardour by the vastness of the undertaking—turning neither to the right hand nor to the left—he has raised to himself a "*monumentum perennius ære.*" and has bequeathed to us and posterity a system of public and high-school education second to none anywhere, and, making some deductions for possible mistakes incident to our weak humanity, a system almost as perfect as we in this generation are perhaps capable of generally acquiescing in.

But great as were his achievements, I am more really concerned with the man himself than with what he effected. I once had a slight tussle with him, when, in the indignation of his heart, he handled me not over gently, using the Queen's English, as he could do it, with incomparable skill; and though I *thought* that I had treated the matter with a truer insight and a farther-reaching analysis, yet he came down upon me so like a whirlwind, and with the hammer of a Thor of terrible pointed invective, that, in the opinion of the impartial public, I doubt not, I lay wholly crushed.

But, indeed, I care very little what opinions men hold, provided only that they *do* hold them—hold them honestly. To be honest with ourselves in the formation of our opinions is the true touchstone of character. That we send not the cunning intellect in search of arguments to serve the interests of the passions is the real heart of the matter, and not the opinion held. Motive is the all in all; not the action done, but the spirit that underlies and prompts it. And so, though differing with Dr. Ryerson, *toto cælo*, in many things, yet I cannot withhold my admiration from one who thought so honestly and worked so vigorously and fought his life-battle to the end so valorously and well, and I am proud of the humanity which was equal to giving birth to such a man.

Nor ought we, while wishing to bring them to a better mind, to entertain the slightest ill-feeling towards those who think differently of him. They thought of him as they did, natur-

ally, perhaps necessarily. Possibly they saw the one side of his character, and this at his worst moments, and perhaps, also, when they were at their own worst moments, too. He took them not, as he ought to have done, into his confidence—perhaps he was too proud for that. It might have shaped itself to his mind, falsely, as unnecessary humiliation. He showed them not his whole heart. They never once entered the “Holy of Holies” of the man, possibly believed there was no “Holy” there at all, nothing at bottom but the mere hardpan of pretence. But now, having in our hands this beautiful “Story of My Life,” with his inward anatomy bared to view, we have an opportunity of seeing him as he was really, and of reversing our judgment of him; and I think we ought to be glad of it, for no Sinbad would carry, if by any possibility he could shake him off, his old man of the sea of bitter feeling for his fellow-man.

But we must not try to impose on ourselves either. There may be a wide-yawning chasm here hard to leap; for it is hard, especially hard to some men, to acknowledge, save in general terms, that they are not infallible. When we descend to particulars the case is altered quite. Then those who have held long-formed opinions and expressed them, or have long nursed honest feelings of hostility, which all in process of time, imbedded in the very brain-substance, have come at last to be entertained by them as moral certainties—these, I say, do not readily resign their opinions so formed; and they are to be pardoned if they do not at once capitulate. But as true men are touched by truth, and noble men by nobility, and as by the straightness of our own minds we are led to recognize straightness in others, so do I trust that eventually every one who feels within the pulse-beats of a true and noble manhood will come to recognize the same in him.

For in his yearning and inextinguishable love of liberty and fair play, in his ardent patriotism, in his devotion to those interests he regarded as the highest—in these and for these he lived and wore out his life, working almost to the last with the old untiring energy and unconquerable spirit.

“The Story of My Life” is not a biography merely, but a

history of our times ; for so intimately are his doings and writings interwoven with all the transactions of the times in which he lived, that he scarcely says or does anything that is not of public concern. And when in the long future some one undertakes to write the history of our country, where will he find such ample and trustworthy materials on which to found a judgment of the manner of life of its early settlers, and of the struggles of parties for ascendancy on the one hand, and for liberty on the other, and when what this man did such fierce battle for shall have come to be recognized everywhere as the merest elementary principles of common right—the very a, b, c, of legislation, imbedded firmly in the ordinary habits of thinking of the people—I can hardly think that this foremost champion of these principles will not be made to stand out in his true proportions. We may try to belittle him, but the calmness of the future makes his place secure.

For though there are no positive criteria by which we can form such an *ex cathedra* decision respecting the purity of the motive that seems to influence any man, as there are of the purity of a metal by its proper tests ; yet where there is the genuine man, there will be generally recognizable, by at least cognate souls, the ring of the true metal ; for in his words, and ways, and actions, will keep cropping up from time to time, and constantly, such convincing evidences of real inward worth, that every pale ghost of a doubt vanishes from our minds, and we accept with gladness the man for what he is. And in this man are those evidences not abundant ?

When a very young man, instead of joining, as it was urged upon him, the respectable and time-honoured Church of England, he, in obedience to the voice of conscience, and throwing all worldly considerations to the winds, cast in his lot with an unrecognized and humble people ; and when his Father, in stern anger and disappointment, bade him leave the Methodists or leave him, he takes the latter alternative, though not knowing whither to betake himself ; and when, after a little, he obtained the place of assistant school-teacher, and his Father accused the Methodists of having stolen his son from the farm-work and from him, he hired out of his pittance a farm-labourer

for his Father, and when this proved unsatisfactory, and his Father bade him come home again, fearing that, if he did not obey the summons, his religion might be held up to reproach, he returned to his Father and worked like a very slave; yet with the cheerfulness of a man who felt the smiles of an approving conscience. And what a hunger and thirst for knowledge, and what a brave determination to conquer every disadvantage, overworking the poor brain till a brain-fever laid him low. Still he moves on undauntedly, resolved to furnish and polish his mind; to be no smatterer, but a fully equipped man: and what tasks he set himself, and to what a height he finally attained! Indeed, few could measure swords with him in the battle of life.

Say that in his over self-confidence he attempted something which only the disciplined specialist is equal to, and which none else should attempt. What, then? He only did in a few instances what thousands are in many cases doing every day—writing about what they know little of, or, if possible, have thought less.

Allowing, too, that he hit hard sometimes, writing sharply and stingingly. Well, but was he not struck hard at and wounded deeply, and if the wound spurted back again sometimes gall with the blood, is it to be wholly wondered at?—*nemo mortalium omnibus horis sapit*. He was, indeed, a thorn in the side of all monopolists of special privileges, but the warm, gentle ally of all who loved the open sunshine, and the free, wholesome air of equal human rights.

Then he was narrow-minded in some things! Well, are we all so broad-souled that we can afford to cast the stone? Are we all able to say with a clear conscience that we are willing to lie passive on the waters, and let the currents of truth and right carry us where they will?

But narrowness is rather an evasive term, its meaning, when used in connection with men, being as widely different as are the minds and judgments of those who employ it. A, without deeming himself narrow, may feel himself bound by stricter rules of interpretation than B, who, laying claim to a wider liberty, deems A narrow; while C, who grants himself still greater indulgence, or even gives full swing to the mental pendulum, pronounces B narrow. Thus the meaning of narrow

is as *we* are, and changes as we change, ever growing as we grow, or the contrary. Thus are men right or wrong, wide or narrow, according to the tape-line of our infallibility!

But how kind and loving he was to his friends, and how love begat love, true, deep, and abiding, this loving tribute to his memory by his most cherished friend, Dr. Hodgins, proves; and in this charming biography the two friends go down together to posterity, bound heart and hand by the bond of like principles, and by the like love of what they ever held to involve the highest interests of humanity. So warm, indeed, and glowing are the feelings of Dr. Hodgins, who knew him intimately, and so jealous is he for his good name, that to many a reader his work may seem, possibly, a picture too highly coloured for the prose of our ordinary life.

But look for a little into the diary of Dr. Ryerson. How abounding in zeal for Christ and human well-being, wherein we see, as through a transparency, bared to our view the very heart of the man himself. Certainly, he must be strangely compounded who can doubt the deep sincerity of this able man. And when, towards the close of his career, at the ripe age of seventy-five, he reviews his past life, he adds, "I have no melancholy feelings or fears. The joy of the Lord is my strength. I feel that I am now on the bright side of seventy-five. As the evening twilight of my earthly life advances, my spiritual sun shines with increased splendour. . . . Here on bended knees I give myself, and all I have and am, afresh to Him whom I have endeavoured to serve, but very imperfectly, for more than three-score years,"—and so on. Does this, then, with one foot in the grave, go for nothing? I pity the man, if such there be, who thinks so.

Dr. Ormiston, too, after "an intimacy of nearly forty years," witnesses to "his lofty intellectual endowments, his great moral worth, and pervading spiritual power," and adds, "I owe more to that noble, unselfish, kind-hearted man than to anyone else." The last letter he ever wrote, with trembling hands and almost illegible, contains these latest written words, "I am helpless myself . . . but God has been with me, my strength and my comforter."

To make the story of his life complete, to show the diffi-

culties of his position, the enemies he had to contend with, the aspersions of his motives by the revolutionary leaders of the period, the falling away of friends, and his final triumph, Dr. Hodgins has been at vast pains to collect materials from all sides from which to select the most important, and to so arrange them in serial order as to form out of them a connected and luminous whole; and this he has done with such painstaking skill and ability—that the full picture of the chief actors in the drama and of the state of mind of the general public of the time stands out before us in such clear colouring and distinctness—that every one may understand for himself the fears, and hopes, and aspirations and plottings of the restless minds of this troublous and eventful period. But to enter into details would carry me far beyond the limits I have assigned to myself in this paper. Those who wish to study the matter fully must have recourse to the book itself.

Now I close this most interesting book. Dr. Ryerson had his faults, say: Who has not? But the *habit* of the tree is the main thing,—its trunk erect and pointing upward,—and though the storm may disfigure it and the winter nip its leaves; yet if only life be there and the constitution sound, it soon renews itself with fresh vernal growth. Even so with ourselves; it is the normal habit of the soul, the vitalizing principle within, that is of chief account in judging of character, and not what happens occasionally, when the gusts of passion take us at unawares, and mar to some extent the beauty of our lives. So let him be thought of.

J. ANTISELL ALLEN.

NOTE.

This review of "THE STORY OF MY LIFE" was written for, and accepted by, the Editor of *The Week*. But on the resignation of the then Editor it was withdrawn as he had intimated that if it were to be inserted at once, he would be obliged to shorten it, otherwise it could not be published for some time, owing to the quantity of material in advance of it.

It was not thought desirable either to shorten the article, or to defer its publication, hence its appearance in its present form.

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