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AN HOUR'S TALK ABOUT HISTORY.

In the opinion of the mass of mankind, there is no species of literary labour so easy as writing History. To the aspirant for distinction in every other department, there are obstacles as stern and forbidding, as the rugged hill Difficulty that rose before the pilgrim to the Eternal City. He who delves in the rich mines of natural science, needs not only the sturdy arm, but the analytic eye to detect the pure metal amidst the surrounding deposite. The poet must first assure himself of his *birthright*, and when that title is ascertained, he must submit to a kind of exstatic delirium, which extends too often to the ordinary affairs of his life. Oratory requires certain external advantages; and the dramatist must possess the art of all arts—that of making the things that are, appear as though they were not, and those that are not, appear as though they were. All these difficulties are seen and appreciated. The historian, on the other hand, needs but go down into the treasure-house of the past,—unroll despatches and trace out genealogies; guage the dimensions of battle-fields, and sum up the dead and the wounded, and then arrange the results of his labours in chronological order. Such a *compilation* would unquestionably be very easy, but it would differ from true history, in the same way that a view of Dr. Wordsworth's Pictures of Ancient Cities, would differ from a walk through the excavated streets of Pompæi. Dr. Wordsworth has certainly given us splendid specimens of art, but they contain only the stateliest temples, and the

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loftiest towers, and those on a scale extremely reduced. We discern no Corinthian capital, or Doric entablature—none of the matchless friezes of Phidias, or the delicate touches of Zeuxis; in short, we see nothing but an *outline of the most striking objects*. Now, descend with us into those abodes of *living death*, where we can see, and feel what the olden Romans saw and felt; where we can handle the very utensils from which they eat and drank—kneel at the very altars where they knelt, and stand over the decayed embers, around which their ancient families held converse. The striking difference that exists between these two sources of antiquarian knowledge is precisely the difference between history as it is, and history as it should be—between a description of a few things great in themselves, and a description of many things small in themselves, but all-important in the aggregate.

Let us employ a farther illustration. The history of Rome tells us at considerable length that Caesar fought the Helvetii for a certain number of months, and gained a certain number of victories—all which we care very little about; and then disposes of his marriage with Calphurnia in a single line. We hear nothing of the great conqueror's courtship, or correspondence, or marriage, or family, or their education, or the thousand minutiae that go to determine his own character, and that of the times in which he lived. In fact, we know very little of this wonderful man, except as writing commentaries in Gaul, and hewing off heads at Pharsalia. But you may say, this is not the province of history; she is occupied with affairs of more dignity and importance. Now, we do not deny that history should be dignified, but we *do* deny that the affairs of which she commonly treats, are of the *very highest importance*. It is certainly quite as important for us to know how a whole people were educated, as to know who was the royal tutor; quite as important to determine the dimensions of a nation's intellect, as the dimensions of a heathen temple. We are quite as much interested in the thousand *treaties* that were daily ratified between *the sexes*, as we are in the treaty of Aix la Chapelle, or the Quadruple Alliance; we are as desirous to know how people have always made love, as to know how they made war. And yet on these fundamental points, our

histories are uniformly and culpably deficient. And we are not alone in this opinion. The vast majority of the literary world are with us, as appears from the fact that the two most popular writers of modern times, are the most minute and faithful in their portraiture of men and of manners. The one was led to this course by his strong sense and sagacity; the other blundered upon it, and thereby blundered into a distinction which has been denied to men, immeasurably his superiors. The one was *Walter Scott*; the other was "*Corsica Boswell*." They were neither of them professed historians, and yet they have written better histories than Mitford or Clarendon. Ask any schoolboy where he got his ideas of the cavaliers and the covenanters, of James of Claverhouse, and Richard of the Lion-heart. Will he tell you, from Hume or Smollet? No. He got them all from Old Mortality, and Waverly, and Ivanhoe. History told him of a Queen Elizabeth, but he *saw* her in "*Kenilworth*;" she spake of the covenanters, but he *heard* them in "*Davie Deans*;" she told him of chivalry but he gazed on its stately form in the "*Knight of the Golden Cross*."

But, you will exclaim, where shall we find another chronicler with such surpassing powers of impersonation, and description; a magician, who "could touch the tomb with a divining rod, and the turf streamed out ghosts"? Very true. But, again, where shall we find the unlucky wight who was cursed with such a scanty allowance of these very qualities, as that drivelling sycophant of whom Johnson wittily said, that "He missed his only chance for immortality, by not being alive when the *Dunciad* was written"? And yet Boswell was the model biographer—the *model annalist* of his time! We are better acquainted with Dr. Johnson at this moment, than we are with any of our cotemporaries. We know every part and parcel of his uncouth figure, from the scorched wig, to the gouty toe; from the scarlet coat that flamed in Grosvenor-square, to the threadbare vestment in which he carried wretched vagrants to his den in Bull's-lane. And we know his character, as well as his figure, and not only his, but that of London society during his time. But what is the secret of this wonderful success, by which the common butt of one generation becomes the cherished favourite of the next,

and without whose charitable efforts, we *never should have heard* of many a man who once contemned and reviled him? The answer is simple and conclusive. Boswell revered his heroes with the truthful reverence of a child; he watched every movement, caught every word, and stored up every relic, and when he had spent a lifetime in the collection, he bequeathed to posterity a casket the most rare and curious that glitters in her treasury.

But the last sand is dropping through the glass, and we must bid you, dear reader, farewell, with the fervent hope that this boastful nineteenth century may yet produce, what no other century has produced—a perfect specimen of historical composition. L.

“For men verily swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife.”

There can be no doubt that the great doctrine of a religious oath is too little understood by a large number of persons, and hence this act of religious worship has been much abused. This being the case, we deem it of high moment, that all persons who wish to become good citizens and patriots, should form just and correct ideas in regard to the scriptural oath. There are four great points, which may be considered as comprehending the whole, that appertain to the oath. First, the nature of the oath. Secondly, the form in which the religious oath is to be used. Thirdly, we must mark out the dispositions and views which all persons should cherish, who come forward to swear in a scriptural manner. Finally, we are to explain the rule of interpreting the meaning of the words used by persons thus swearing. We must aim to condense both thoughts and expressions. The first high and important point, which demands our consideration, is the nature of an oath. The oath, we would define to be an act of divine worship. This definition, then, must be considered as the general signification, that we are to attach