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THE SWIFT BICENTENARY

By Gilmore Warner*

THE two hundredth anniversary of the death of that "most fascinating and dominating figure between Milton and Blake," Jonathan Swift, will be observed by an appropriate exhibition in the Colby Library. This occasion gives us an opportunity to glance along our Swift shelf and to consider what basic materials we have for the study of his mind and art. For a working edition of Swift's whole works, a Colby student must go back to the decade preceding the founding of his Alma Mater, when two editions were published. John Nichols, who "in addition to many other activities ... busied himself with Swift over a period of nearly fifty years," brought out his edition in 1808. And six years later Sir Walter Scott, having completed his great edition of Dryden, followed it with one of Swift. Mr. Harold Williams characterizes the latter as "even now, in some respects, the most useful working set of the Dean's complete writings"; and he adds that "despite all shortcomings, his editions of Swift, together with those of Nichols, are of permanent value to the critic and scholar as well as good library sets for the general reader."

The Colby Library possesses a nice copy of Nichols' edition, dating from its "Waterville College" days. The Library does not possess Scott's edition of 1814, nor the enlarged second edition of 1824, nor even the reprint of 1883, each of them, like Nichols' edition, in nineteen volumes. There is in the Colby Library, however, an odd volume of the Life of Swift by Scott (1829) from a Boston edition of

* The editor of this Quarterly takes pleasure in here presenting to its readers the newly appointed librarian of Colby College, Dr. Gilmore Warner, who comes to Colby from Middlebury College. He automatically becomes secretary of the Colby Library Associates.

1 The lack of this edition at Colby is more than compensated by the sumptuous Nonesuch Press edition of Dryden's Dramatic Works presented by the Library Associates three years ago.
Scott's works. Near Nichols' edition on our shelves is Dr. Elrington Ball's edition of Swift's *Correspondence* in six volumes (1910-1914), the work of one of the greatest Swift scholars of all time.

Passing several editions of less importance, we come to the beautiful Shakespeare Head edition of Swift, of which five volumes in the projected set of fourteen have thus far been published by Basil Blackwell in Oxford. President Davis of Smith College is the editor. Borrowed copies of these five books, owned by a Colby Library Associate in Waterville and inscribed by the editor, are in our exhibit, and an order for the entire set is in the mail.

Mr. Williams' splendid three-volume edition of Swift's *Poems* (Oxford, 1937) next claims our attention. What? Swift, a poet! Hear the words of Dr. Ball, whose essay on *Swift's Verse* (1929) is on the list of our desiderata: "Without knowledge of his verse a true picture of Swift cannot be drawn. In his verse he sets forth his life as in a panorama, he shows more clearly than in his prose his peculiar turn of thought, and he reveals his character in all its phases . . . . Before the testimony of his verse the work of many of his biographers cannot stand." In his edition Mr. Williams gives for the first time a reliable text, freed from spurious attributions and distributed in a clear and logical order. The Introductions to the individual poems, like those of the new Clarendon Press edition of Dr. Johnson's *Poems* (1941), are a literary biography in themselves, containing much new information about Swift. Whether great poetry or not, this is an exciting work.

Of various other critical editions mention may be made of the *Tale of a Tub* edited by Messrs. Guthkelch and Nichol Smith (1920) and of Swift's recently-discovered *Letters to Charles Ford*, also edited by Mr. Nichol Smith (1935). The *Draper's Letters* (1935) we have yet to acquire.

Space does not permit a listing here of studies of Swift; but it is interesting to see what a distinguished group of scholars have of late been drawn to study the man and his
art, and to note the range of countries which they represent—England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Germany, Italy, Holland, and America. Among many we may note the following: Bonner, *Bredvold, *Davis, Eddy, Gläser, Gwynn, Handro, Heidenhain, *R. F. Jones, Korn, *Leslie, Pons, *Quintana, Reimer, *Taylor, and *Carl Van Doren. The Colby Library already possesses at least one separate publication on Swift by each of the scholars and critics whose names are starred. Herman Teerink’s Bibliography of Swift we hope to add to the Colby shelf before long.

One indubitable mark of a man’s greatness is his power to stir the minds of thoughtful readers. The other day, as I drove through mile after mile of forest in this lovely state of Maine, I was moved to recall those pregnant lines of Swift’s which set Carlyle to working out his Sartor Resartus: “What is that which we call land... but a fine coat faced with green?... Observe how sparkish a periwig adorns the head of a beech, and what a fine doublet of white satin is worn by the birch.” At that moment, for me, two hundred years after his death, Swift became a Maine author!

ANNIVERSARIES

SEPTEMBER 28 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Louis Pasteur, and October 31 will mark the sesquicentennial of the birth of John Keats. If we had Harvard’s wealth of Keats material or could borrow Pasteur’s Oeuvres from the Bibliotheca Osleriana in McGill University, we might do more than merely mention these dates. But we don’t and can’t. Trimming our memorial sails to a more modest breeze, we shall on October 19 open an exhibition which has been assembled in observation of a double anniversary. On October 19, 1845, the first performance of Wagner’s Tannhäuser took place at Dresden; and on the same day in 1745, Jonathan Swift, the fiery and enigmatic Dean of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Dublin, died.