Lives of great English writers from Chaucer to Browning

Hinchman Walter Swain
LIVES OF
GREAT ENGLISH WRITERS
FROM CHAUCER TO BROWNING

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INTRODUCTION

Not long ago, Mr. Walter S. Hinchman, who had been teaching English at Groton School for five years, called my attention to the need of a book which should give in succinct but comprehensive form the lives of the great English authors. Both for the student, who is required to show his real knowledge of these authors in examination, and for the general reader, who wishes to come at the heart of their work with as little hampering as possible from books about books, the main object should be first-hand acquaintance with good literature. But this first-hand acquaintance is too often delayed, clouded, endangered, by the preliminary courses in literary history, with their third-hand comments on aesthetic and critical questions, and their efforts, by phrases and formulas, often hopelessly mixed in the reader's memory, to impress literary values on minds that have not yet encountered literature. Some sort of preparation is needed; no one doubts that; but the preparation should be direct, inciting, practical. To prepare the student or the general reader for the various works which he is to undertake, to give him a perspective of them, and to rouse his interest in the men who wrote them, as well as to save actual time for this first-hand reading of them, he needs, not barren formulas and catchwords about aesthetic values, but a series of biographies of the great writers, shorn of all literary criticism save that which serves to characterize the writers and give them their due places. These biographies must