Matthew Arnold on continental life and literature

Kelso Alexander Peebles
MATTHEW ARNOLD
ON CONTINENTAL LIFE AND LITERATURE
Matthew Arnold
on
Continental Life and Literature

THE MATTHEW ARNOLD MEMORIAL PRIZE ESSAY

1913

BY

ALEXANDER P. KELSO, B.A., B.Sc.
SOMETIMES RHODES SCHOLAR AT WORCESTER COLLEGE
OXFORD

Oxford
B. H. BLACKWELL, BROAD STREET
MCMXIV
PREFACE

It seems like the irony of fate that Matthew Arnold should have to suffer his views of the Continent to be presented by an American, when we remember his criticisms of America and things American—criticisms, less virulent, but no more complimentary than those of Dickens or that enfant terrible, Kipling. But Dr. Warren’s statement, in his essay on Arnold, that so far we only have a series of snapshots of that fascinating figure, has encouraged me in believing that the publishing of this study is not entirely needless. It puts us in possession of what the modern German seems to believe to be the basis of all true understanding—the Quellen.

I must express my thanks here for the aid which the President of Magdalen gave me in pointing out certain omissions in the essay as originally written.

The references are to the complete edition of 1904.

A. P. Kelso.

828 Ridge Avenue,
Allegheny, Pennsylvania.
Jan., 1914.
CONTENTS

I. Introduction - - - - - - - - - - - - - - 1

II. Why Matthew Arnold Revised his Judgment of France - - - - - - - - 6

III. Germany—The Triumph of System - - - - - - 25

IV. The Italians - - - - - - - - - - 41

V. Conclusion - - - - - - - - - - 50
MATTHEW ARNOLD

ON

CONTINENTAL LIFE AND LITERATURE

I.—INTRODUCTION.

Matthew Arnold was, by the grace of God, a critic. As a critic, he combined two different and, at first glance, discordant rôles. With the instincts of a Hebrew prophet, he was by the compulsion of circumstance an English schoolmaster, although of a higher order. The irony of the situation lies in the fact that he had no great respect for either of these parts. Forced from a life of purely literary workmanship, he was compelled to view literature and life not as products whose origin might be ignored, but as products whose value lay largely in the source from which they came. Not men as they are, but their education, not character as it is, but its creation, is the phase of life which a school inspector is bound to consider. Pushed out of the main stream he had the advantage of a freer estimate of the tendency of modern English life than would have been possible if he had been caught in the rush of politics, religion, or so-called society. But with this there was bound to come a
slight loss of perspective; the outlines of Salem Chapel and the Classical, Commercial Academy dominate his horizon, and do not dominate English life. He was saved from the devitalizing influence of a complete absorption in educational problems by his Hebraic temperament. Professor Saintsbury’s hesitating suggestion of a Semitic tinge in the Arnolds is hardly required to make us note it; the thoroughly un-Hellenic passion with which Matthew Arnold proclaimed his gospel of culture is exactly what we would have expected in a Jew who had deserted the disquisitions of the Synagogue for those of the Porch and the Academy. It is unnecessary to try and trace this temperament by a genealogy of the Arnold family; for the Hebraic spirit was to be found—only too plentifully Arnold himself thought—in English literature; and Matthew Arnold had drunk deeply from that source. Just as his vehemently cordial admiration of the Continent, his apparent disparagement of ways English are but further proofs of how genuine an Englishman he was; so his advocacy of Continental Hellenism would only have been possible for a thinker with a firm grasp on the peculiarly Hebraic philosophy of the English. Like all converts he tended to minimise the past, though he was not ready to discard it entirely.

We find him dissociating himself from the attitude of the average young aristocrat, who returns from his travels on the continent with an ardent admiration for the firm dealing with the multitude which prevails there, but who ‘manages completely to miss the