A literary history of the English people

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A Literary History of
The English People

From the Origins
To the Renaissance

By

J. J. Jusserand

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T. Fisher Unwin

[Published]
PREFACE

Many histories have preceded this one; many others will come after. Such is the charm of the subject that volunteers will never be lacking to undertake this journey, so hard, so delightful too.

As years go on, the journey lengthens: wider grows the field, further advance the seekers, and from the top of unexplored headlands, through morning mists, they descry the outlines of countries till then unknown. They must be followed to realms beyond the grave, to the silent domains of the dead, across barren moors and frozen fens, among chill rushes and briars that never blossom, till those Edens of poetry are reached, the echoes of which, by a gift of fairies or of muses, still vibrate to the melody of voices long since hushed.

More has been done during the last fifty years to shed light on the origins than in all the rest of modern times. Deciphering, annotating, printing, have gone on at an extraordinary pace and without
PREFACE.

interruption; the empire of letters has thus been enlarged, according to the chances of the explorers' discoveries, by gardens and deserts, cloudy immensities, and boundless forests; its limits have receded into space: at least so it seems to us. We laugh at the simplicity of honest Robertson, who in the last century wondered at the superabundance of historical documents accessible in his time: the day is not far distant when we shall be laughed at in the same way for our own simplicity.

The field of literary history widens in another manner yet, and one that affects us more nearly. The years glide on so rapidly that the traveller who started to explore the lands of former times, absorbed by his task, oblivious of days and months, is surprised on his return at beholding how the domain of the past has widened. To the past belongs Tennyson, the laureate; to the past belongs Browning, and that ruddy smiling face, manly and kind, which the traveller to realms beyond intended to describe from nature on his coming back among living men, has faded away, and the grey slab of Westminster covers it. A thing of the past, too, the master who first in France taught the way, daring in his researches, straightforward in his judgments, unmindful of consequences, mindful of Truth alone; whose life was a model no less than his work. The work subsists, but who shall tell what the life has been, and what