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AN ECCENTRIC ENGLISH POET.

Few Swiss, and for that matter, few English people have heard of Thomas Lovell Beddoes, yet his writings rank among the finest examples of English poetry. They have been published in Routledge's "Muses Library" and extracts are to be found in most anthologies. A biography by Gosse and a collection of Beddoes' letters were issued a few years ago, but he has never achieved popularity.

To the Swiss student, if he cares for these things, Beddoes' poetry offers, apart from its literary merit, an added interest because much of it was written in Switzerland where the poet lived for many years and where he died, by his own hand, in 1849.

It was left to the B.B.C. to bring him out of his obscurity when, a few weeks ago, the "Bride's Tragedy," a drama in blank verse, was broadcast in the third programme. This play, and another "Death's Jest Book," have established Beddoes' reputation, such as it is, and mark his eminence as a master of dramatic blank verse.

For some reason or other, this poetry has failed to receive any popular recognition, but it has attracted the attention of Lytton Strachey, the famous critic, who, in a long analytical essay, paid tribute to the poet's genius. Strachey, who was no mean judge in these matters, admits Beddoes' claim to distinction and deplores the fact that his poetry has suffered so much neglect. He calls him "the last Elizabethan" and attributes his obscurity to the circumstances that he was born in the nineteenth century and not in the sixteenth. His proper place, Strachey says, is among that noble band of Elizabethans who, in Shakespeare's time, gave to England the most glorious heritage of drama that the world has known.

Beddoes was born in Bristol in 1803. His father, a distinguished physician, was a remarkable man in many ways, but most eccentric in his conduct, a trait which the son inherited. It is reported, for instance, that he was in the habit of having a cow introduced in his patients' bedrooms in order that they might inhale the animal's breath. At tea-parties he brought his own sugar because, being an abolitionist, nothing would induce him to eat the kind produced in Jamaica by slave labour.

Young Beddoes was educated at Charterhouse and at Oxford. At the age of 21 he entered the University of Göttingen where he took his medical degree. He became involved in the revolutionary movement which

at that time agitated Europe and was expelled as a dangerous liberal. He moved to Switzerland and became a great friend of Hegetschweiler, one of the liberal leaders, and was present in Zurich when a body of several thousand peasants overturned the Government. In this affray, Hegetschweiler lost his life and Beddoes was forced to fly the canton. He was next found in Basel, he appeared in London once or twice, then in Frankfurt and again in Zurich and Basel, a strange figure with tangled hair, smoking a meerschaum pipe, practising medicine, indulging in politics and, all the time, writing poetry. Eccentricity had grown on him; he shocked his relatives by arriving at their houses astride a donkey, once he tried to set fire to Drury Lane Theatre with a lighted five-pound note and at times he would fall in fits of depression and shut himself in his room for days.

In 1848 he stayed at the Cigogue Hotel, in Basel, where he attempted suicide by opening an artery in his leg. He was taken to hospital and recovered but his leg had to be amputated. Early 1849, he was found dead in his bed. He had taken poison. Eccentric to the end, he had made a will in which, with sardonic humour, he bequeathed to his doctor, Dr. Ecklin, the best stomach-pump that money could buy. What induced him to take his life is not known; he was still young, rich, talented and highly educated, and seemed to have everything worth living for. One can only surmise that the mental instability which often accompanies genius clouded a mind already obsessed with a taste for the macabre.

Poetry is an elusive art. The most accomplished verse, however dexterous, is not necessarily poetry. There is a subtle and inexplicable line which divides the sham from the real. Beddoes has crossed this line and his blank verse, that difficult form of poetry, is perfect. The following lines were written in his twenty-second year:

How glorious to live! Even in one thought
The wisdom of past times to fit together,
And from the luminous minds of many men
Catch a reflected truth; as, in one eye,
Light, from unnumbered worlds and farthest planets
Of the star-crowded universe, is gathered
Into one ray.

There are few who possess the inclination and the leisure for poetical reading or who can absorb it otherwise than small doses. But those who make the effort will find themselves richly rewarded. For, man does not live by bread alone and good poetry, like good music, satisfies his craving for higher things and contributes in no small measure to the enjoyment of life.

Dr. Beddoes has produced such poetry. It has been neglected and it almost forgotten, but one can apply to it the beautiful lines by Keats:—

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever,
Its loneliness increases, it will never
Pass into nothingness.

J.J.F.S.

OUR NEXT ISSUE.

Our next issue will be published on Friday, July 25th, 1947.

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