

A BOOK AND ITS WRITER.

I.—Samuel Butler's "EREWTHON."

By EDWARD KEMPE.



FEW months ago a man died in London whose death created little notice except in literary circles. He was, nevertheless, one of those men who will probably be talked of and written of when those who have made more stir in the world have been forgotten. He was a man of character and genius, a highly original man. I own candidly that I know almost nothing of his life, and would gladly read more from the hands of those who have been in the way of knowing. Yet those fragments that I have gathered from obituary notices and the internal evidence of his books are highly tantalising.

This man, it appears, wrote learnedly on music, science, Darwinism, religion, biography, criticism, painting and sculpture, as well as works of imagination; he composed remarkable music, painted pictures, translated Homer, and at one time in his life farmed sheep—was besides a brilliant talker and humorist. Of these many and various works it may be said that his books, all but one or two, did not sell—never got beyond a first edition; his pictures have passed unnoticed; his music, good as it was, belonged to a different century, that of Handel, and so it had no audience; his science and scholarship did not "supply a long-felt want." He lived in London chambers, and died a bachelor.

Perhaps it was a misfortune that a man of so much ability was

rich; perhaps he was cursed too much with the spirit of contradiction and liked too much to say "No" to other people's "Yes." At any rate he piped to the public and they did not dance, and he probably cared very little. But who wants arguments against Darwin, or music in the style of Handel? or proofs that Homer was a woman? Possibly he made fun of the British public, and they avenged themselves by turning their backs, and so both were satisfied.

Nevertheless, as I said above, this man's memory is likely to last. "A man's permanent value," says the great Goethe, "consists not so much in what he leaves behind him, as in his activity and capability of enjoyment, and his power of inspiring others in the same direction." That is just the characteristic of the book which I am to discuss in this article. It is stimulating, and on that account it is the more to be regretted that its author did not do more of the same kind.

So far as I know, speaking from a limited knowledge of his books not more than two or three will ever be of interest to New Zealanders. That there is little enough interest at present I can testify, after hunting in vain through the largest city in the colony for a copy of "Erewhon." And this is the one book which up to the present time New Zealand has had any share in adding to the great procession of English literature.