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Current Topics

AT HOME AND ABROAD.

OUR contemporary the Dunedin *Evening Star*, in pursuance of the object he has so much at heart—namely, that of exterminating the *odium theologium*, carries out his time-honoured course by following up his attack on Dr Moran by the publication of a voluminous budget of letters, in which, as usual, correspondents fortified by a profound and difficult study of controversial manuals, wherein they find extracts compiled by authorities as profound as themselves, display their second-hand coruscations for the Bishop's mortification and confusion. We do not attempt the task of examining the reproductions of these correspondents at any length, or of replying *seriatim* to the musty stuff they reproduce. It would be as well to attempt to repel the blow-flies that swarm in the neighbourhood of a stock-yard on an Australian station. Hunt them off by ever so well-directed an effort, and back they come the next minute as lively as ever. Your controversial correspondents carry their itching burden of maggots *in perpetuum*, and, do what you will, they must necessarily deposit them. The *Evening Star*, with his peculiar abhorrence of the *odium theologium*, always affords them a congenial means of easing themselves. A feature that, in this instance, seems to distinguish the onset alluded to is a supreme reliance on the conclusions of the historian. Robertson, or Prescott, or Hallam or Froude, has said something, and, therefore, they think it must be infallible. De Maistre tells us, nevertheless, that for the last 300 years history has been a huge conspiracy against truth. Denham, in his "Germanic Empire," confirms De Maistre, and tells us that the falsification of history for particular ends is sickening to those whom research into original documents has made acquainted with it. We have now before us a number of the *Academy*—that for August 8th, 1891—in which Professor Karl Pearson deals with the subject, and as referring more particularly to the time of Luther, the very time of which in the *Star* correspondence there is question. "Perhaps," writes Professor Pearson, "few things are more tantalising to the scientific student of history than the card-houses, which emotional and market-place historians run up with such a show of substantiality that they often suffice to deceive several generations of a trusting public—a public which has small means of investigating the real foundations of our historical knowledge." "The operation of destroying card-houses," the writer goes on to say, "may not be very laborious, but it is thankless; they have already served to create an impression, and, too often, as soon as they are knocked down on one site, they reappear in another, and perhaps more inaccessible spot."—"The historical jerry-builder," he continues, "is generally a strong political or theological partisan, and he thus finds an audience already inclined to accept his sectarian view of the growth of civilisation. In Germany he not uncommonly brings to the support of his structure an appearance of learning which in itself carries conviction to the minds of the uninitiated. It is this party-spirit which in the last three hundred years has produced as rich a crop of myths as were ever brought together even in the childhood of civilisation." Professor Karl Pearson, Freethinker and Socialist, as our readers will perceive, echoes almost the very words of the Catholic De Maistre. "Notably Germany," he adds, "the very booksellers of which are able to asterisk in their catalogues the distinction between Protestant and Catholic historians, is largely responsible for the fabrication of myths. It must, however, be confessed that other countries have not been unwilling to accept as substantial her historical card-houses." "Take, for example," he says, "the whole range of Luther myths and especially the Luther Bible myth. It used to be asserted, hardly forty years ago, that Luther refound the Latin Bible as a rare book in the Erfurt Library. This card-house toppled down so soon as it was demonstrated that the Vulgate had been printed in hundreds of thousands of copies within the first thirty years of the printing press. Then a new card-house arose, Luther had first given the Bible in the vernacular to the German people.

This toppled down also when it was shown that the German Bible had been printed eighteen times before Luther's version appeared, and that his September Bible was but a slight modification of the old text." "The next card-house," writes Professor Pearson, "was the theory that the pre-Lutheran German Bible was not only due to Waldensian heretics, but that the very printers and illustrations were tainted with heresy." This is the card-house that Professor Pearson in his paper in the *Academy*, a review of a German treatise, by Herr Konrad Lange, declares to be now finally destroyed. Briefly, the treatise in question deals with a wood cut found in the Augsburg Bible, and which under the name of the "Pope-donkey" was supposed to be the work of Protestant hands. Herr Lange proves that the wood-cut was copied from an old pagan image of a monster which had been found in the Tiber in the year 1496, as mentioned in a certain Venetian chronicle, brought to light by the writer, and of which a relief has recently been discovered by him also on one of the pedestals of the North door of Como Cathedral. Speaking of these discoveries made by Herr Lange, Professor Pearson says, "For these we are only too grateful. They suffice to demolish the card-house of the Lutheran historians which we had several years ago declared unstable." It must be added, nevertheless, that Herr Lange himself, without a scrap of evidence, as Professor Pearson points out, and contrary to what seems possible, attributes to the monster in the wood-cut an anti-Papal significance, in turn building up a card-house to be destroyed hereafter by somebody else. "I believe," says Professor Pearson in conclusion, "that scarcely any engraving has afforded, or is likely to afford such an interesting study of the manner in which historical card-houses are run up by partisan writers as Luther's 'Pope-donkey.'" The buzzing of the blow-flies, which our contemporary, the *Evening Star*, in his detestation of the *odium theologium*, lets loose in his columns, deals, it is true, with Tetzl and the indulgences, but that is a card-house often overturned, and which has been finally destroyed by the late Professor Johannes Jansson in his "Geschichte der Reformation." We can hardly venture to hope, however, that these correspondents will change their tune, those controversial manuals on which they rely are an inheritance too precious to them to be lightly resigned. And then, if they ceased their murmurs where could our contemporary the *Evening Star* find congenial aid in his great task of demolishing the *odium theologium*? Our contemporary, we may add, is a homoeopathist in the literal sense of the word, and believes in curing like by like.

AMONG the names that have been mentioned in the correspondence of the *Evening Star* as those of HISTORIAN? torians whose authority it would be outrageous to question, that of Mr Froude appears. We should have thought that the book published by Mr Froude relative to his personal experiences in these colonies some few years ago would have made people here chary as to quoting his testimony. Mr Froude, as we have had occasion before to remark, is a man whose moral sense seems all awry. To him, for example, the conduct he reported of Mr Trench seemed completely charming. The London Press were unanimous in condemning it as enough to disgrace a Choctaw Indian. Mr Trench, though hardened by a course of the autocracy of an Irish land-agent, and further strengthened by the sublime conceit of a vessel of election, went to describe his privileges from the Evangelical stump, basted to repudiate it as ruinous to him—and Lord Digby Mr Trench's employer, so expressed himself on the matter as to make it evident that, if the charge were confirmed, he would seek another employee. Mr Froude again swept together every bit of ill-natured back-biting that he could find among the papers of his late friend, Mr Carlyle, and published it with the full conviction that it must add to the honour of the deceased's memory among the English people. A writer in the *Athenaeum* of November 7, reviewing Mr Froude's latest work, "The Divorce of Catherine of Arragon," says of him—"The only thing that is at all extraordinary is that one of the foremost writers of the day should have published a substantial book to show us how blind he can make himself to the moral significance of facts that he himself confesses." But we have shown that such behaviour is Mr Froude's rule, and, for our part, we do not believe the blindness is voluntary. It seems to us to arise from some defect of which he is unconscious, in the moral constitution of the man.

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