

REVIEWS

PAGANISM AND THE WESTERN EMPIRE.

Roman Society in the Last Century of the Western Empire. By SAMUEL DILL, M.A., Professor of Greek in Queen's College, Belfast. (London, 1898 [2nd Edit. 1899].)

THE Fall of the Empire in the West is a neglected subject. The classical scholar shrinks from a repulsive literature, the ecclesiastical historian cares only for his controversies, and even the student of history prefers a later period. Yet the story is a very modern one, for the evils which ruined the Empire are rife in modern Europe. We see the same unsettlement of religion, the same increasing contrast and antagonism of rich and poor, the same growing burden of taxation and militarism, the same hatreds of nations, the same tendency to stereotype education in a barren routine, the same impotence of governments to cure the evils caused by superficial Christianity and selfish greed in all classes. No period of history is more full of warning to ourselves, for if these things get beyond control, neither science, nor culture, nor nominal Christianity, will save civilization from a second overthrow.

So much the more heartily we welcome (and that in a second edition) Professor Dill's masterly analysis of the Empire of the West in its last decay. Its attractive style is the least of its merits. He begins by asking why heathenism was able so long to delay the final triumph of the Gospel. The answer is, that Greece had cast her spell even on the Christians, so that their ways of thinking differed little from the heathen. Only the monks were revolutionists. Hence the strange tolerance of the age. Ambrose and the heathen Symmachus, Augustine and the astrologer Lampadius, are on the best of terms, and the old heathen pontiff Albinus listens graciously to his little granddaughter singing hymns to Christ.

Our author next traces the pagan reactions of Eugenius and Attalus (just baptized to please the Goths), the struggles of the Church against the obscenities of the stage and the bestialities of the amphitheatre, and the shock of the sack of Rome by Alaric. Then he comes to his estimate of paganism itself, pointing out that it worshipped Mithras

now rather than Jupiter, and showing how greatly it had gained in moral force since the rise of Neo-Platonism.

Next comes a careful estimate of the heathen senatorial aristocracy. In this he agrees generally with Fustel de Coulanges, and differs widely from popular ideas. He rightly prefers the incidental revelations of Symmachus and Macrobius to the ascetic tirades of Jerome and Salvian. Slave-holders are not likely to be models of virtue: but there are no signs of widespread and outrageous immorality; the dinner parties, for instance, are much more decent than in classical times. They were commonly refined and cultured gentlemen, fond of country life, and even fonder of their literary elegances. If the Empire shut them out from war, they were not therefore imbeciles or cowards—witness Tonantius Ferreolus, or the defence of Auvergne by Ecdicius. This is worked out in successive chapters on Symmachus the senator and administrator, Ausonius the poet and professor, and Sidonius the poet turned bishop. There is a real charge against these aristocrats, as we shall see; but it is not the popular one of utter vileness.

The next part is a searching analysis of the government. Its legislation is full of earnest purpose and general humanity. The emperors were absolute and commonly well-disposed, had good advisers, and quite recognized the evils which oppressed the State. Law after law strikes straight at them with fierce energy, and sometimes even delivers gross offenders to 'the avenging flames'; and there was no want of honest governors who did the best they could. But the emperor had lost control of the machine. The *curiales* had been crushed by taxation; the smaller landowners had been squeezed out by the stress of the times; there remained the senators and the officials, and their passive resistance made every reform nugatory. The officials ran riot in peculation and malversation, and the great landowners either corrupted them or evaded inconvenient laws. Even in the great crisis of the invasion of Radagaisus, when the very slaves were called to arms for the first time since Cannae, the senators defrauded the Empire of recruits, and sheltered deserters wholesale.

But why was not the impending fall of the Empire more clearly recognized? Because the invasions were nothing new. They had always been repulsed, and were repulsed still; and if the barbarians came in, they came in as servants and allies of Rome. They were proud to serve her, and often reached her highest dignities. Richomer and Bauto moved among the Roman nobles as their equals, and the Empress Eudoxia was Bauto's daughter. So there seemed but little change. The shock indeed of the sack of Rome was terrible; but in a few years it was forgotten. Orosius could say that the world was only 'troubled with fleas.' In the next generation Orientius and Salvian sing

another song—that devastation had searched out all the corners of the land: yet when we get a fair view of Gaul again from Sidonius, we do not find things nearly so bad as we should expect. There was something even in the ‘Gothic peace’ which had replaced the Roman.

There remains for examination the culture of the age, and this was in a hopeless state. The old pagan education was still dominant—treason to the Muses was treason to civilization—but it was rapidly decaying even in Gaul. The grammarian indeed had to expound questions of etymology, of history, of antiquities, of criticism in his author: but what might have been a solid foundation was turned into a literary drill; a perfunctory preparation for the serious work of the rhetorician. And that serious work was utter trifling. Form was everything, matter nothing. So literature is full of nothing but servility, mutual admiration, strange twists of language, and fantastic mythology. Progress was impossible. Just as faith in Rome killed faith in mankind, so trust in words killed truth of thought. The leaders of society were heathen literary men with a slight varnish of Christianity, so that their thoughts moved in the past; and when that past was exhausted, they had no outlook to the future. Culture like that was doomed.

This is the outline which Professor Dill has worked out with admirable thoroughness. He covers the ground much better than Boissier in his charming *Fin du Paganisme*, while he is not less careful of detail and accuracy than Fustel de Coulanges, and defends fewer questionable positions. He has laid under contribution most of the writers of the time, and his use of the *Codex Theodosianus* in particular deserves high praise. Yet perhaps he has not made all that he might have made of Christianity, even on so secular a subject as Roman society. He might, for instance, have clinched more than one of his points by comparing Claudian's philosophy of history with that of Prudentius, or the Christian conception of worship and priesthood with the heathen. Indeed, he has neglected Claudian, though Claudian hardly yields to Virgil in his sense of the grandeur of Rome. Again, he treats Christianity too much as a solid unit, without taking account enough of its variant forms of thought. Even the illiterate fanaticism of the monks had affinity enough to some kinds of heathenism. In short, he has not clearly enough borne in mind that Christianity and heathenism were more mixed up together, and influenced each other in that age more freely than they ever did before or since, so that neither of them can be rightly understood without taking full account of the other. But enough of criticism. The book is already much the best we have on the subject; and we may hope that Professor Dill may reach a third edition to make it better still.

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