MEN, WOMEN, AND BOOKS

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BY

AUGUSTINE BIRRELL

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DEAN SWIFT.

OF writing books about Dean Swift there is no end. I make no complaint, because I find no fault; I express no wonder, for I feel none. The subject is, and must always remain, one of strange fascination. We have no author like the Dean of St. Patrick's. It has been said of Wordsworth that good-luck usually attended those who have written about him. The same thing may be said, with at least equal truth, about Swift. There are a great many books about him, and with few exceptions they are all interesting.

A man who has had his tale told

both by Johnson and by Scott ought to be comprehensible. Swift has been, on the whole, lucky with his more recent biographers. Dr. Craik's is a judicious life, Mitford's an admirable sketch, Forster's a valuable fragment; Mr. Leslie Stephen never fails to get to close quarters with his subject. Then there are anecdotes without end—all bubbling with vitality—letters, and journals. And yet, when you have read all that is to be read, what are you to say—what to think?

No fouler pen than Swift's has soiled our literature. His language is horrible from first to last. He is full of odious images, of base and abominable allusions. It would be a labour of Hercules to cleanse his pages. His love-letters are defaced by his incurable coarseness. This habit of his is so inveterate that it seems a miracle he kept his sermons

free from his blackguard phrases. It is a question not of morality, but of decency, whether it is becoming to sit in the same room with the works of this divine. How the good Sir Walter ever managed to see him through the press is amazing. In this matter Swift is inexcusable.

Then his unfeeling temper, his domineering brutality—the tears he drew, the discomfort he occasioned.

'Swift, dining at a house, where the part of the tablecloth which was next him happened to have a small hole, tore it as wide as he could, and ate his soup through it; his reason for such behaviour was, as he said, to mortify the lady of the house, and to teach her to pay a proper attention to housewifery.'

One is glad to know he sometimes met his match. He slept one night at an inn kept by a widow lady of

very respectable family, Mrs. Seneca, of Drogheda. In the morning he made a violent complaint of the sheets being dirty.

'Dirty, indeed!' exclaimed Mrs. Seneca; 'you are the last man, doctor, that should complain of dirty sheets.'

And so, indeed, he was, for he had just published the 'Lady's Dressing-room,' a very dirty sheet indeed.

Honour to Mrs. Seneca, of Drogheda!

This side of the account needs no vouching; but there is another side.

In 1705 Addison made a present of his book of travels to Dr. Swift, in the blank leaf of which he wrote the following words:

'To Dr. Jonathan Swift,
The most agreeable companion,
The truest friend,
And the greatest genius of his age.'

Addison was not lavish of epithets. His geese, Ambrose Philips excepted,