

ELIZABETHAN LITERATURE

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Elizabethan literature by John Mackinnon Robertson

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JOHN MACKINNON ROBERTSON

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LITERATURE**



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LITERATURE

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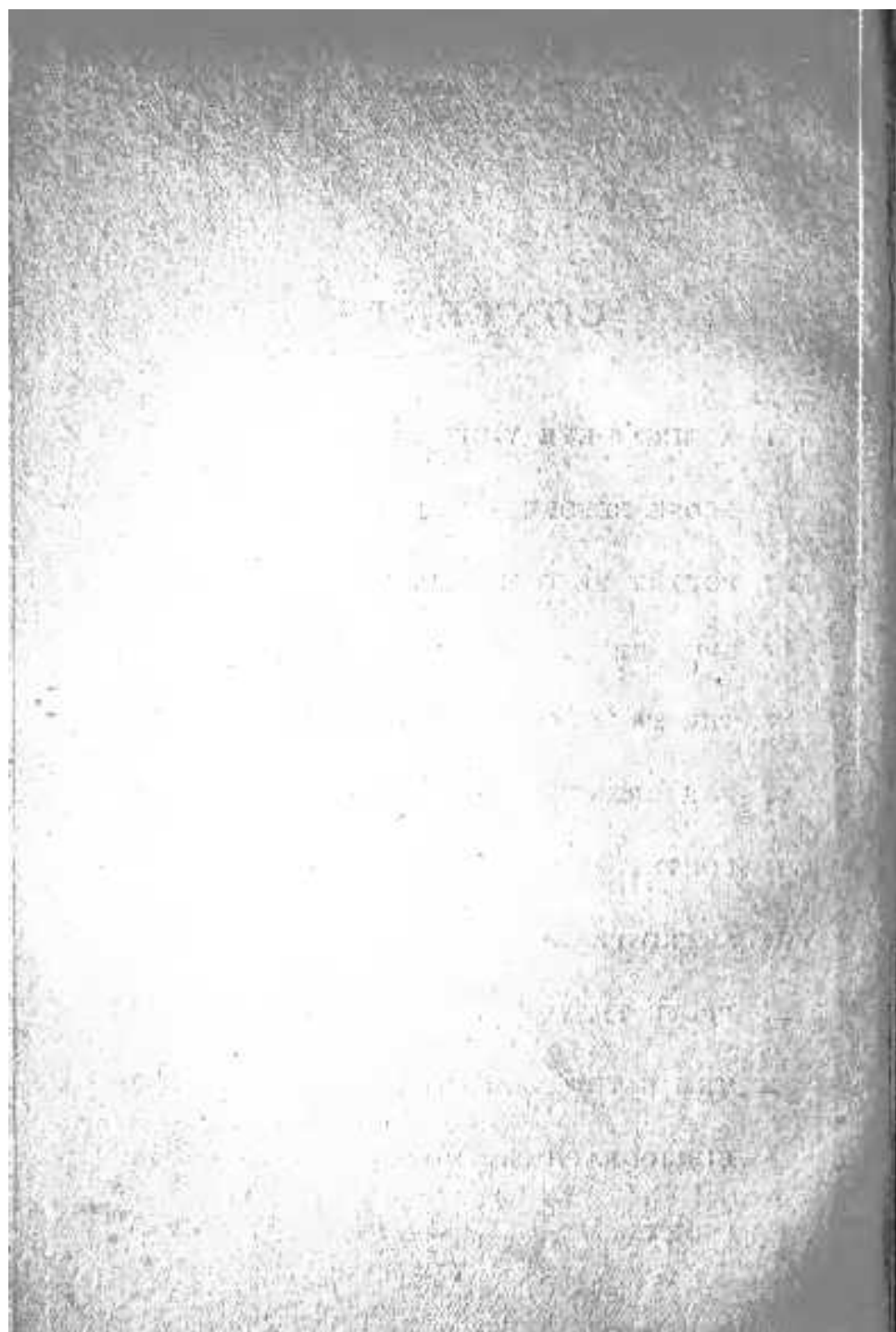
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ELIZABETHAN LITERATURE

CHAPTER I

A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW

IN following the growth of a literature, we find ourselves after a time driven to narrow the working definition of the subject-matter. For scientific purposes there is indeed no ultimate dividing line between what the French call "belles lettres"—what used to be known in English as "polite letters"—and other kinds of writing. Even handbooks of "literature" in the academic sense usually deal with the writers of history and philosophy; and a history of nineteenth-century literature could hardly omit Darwin, though that great man is not remarkable for his style. But as books multiply and their makers specialize, the survey of them tends to divide between histories of "thought" and histories of the kinds of writing which have an æsthetic or artistic aim. Even here, the separation is an artificial one, a matter of convenience rather than of fundamental distinction. We cannot

omit to consider the way of thought of the men who write plays, poems, and novels ; and even if we concern ourselves mainly with the art of verbal expression we cannot ignore the development given to that art in scientific or didactic treatises. But there emerges for us in such a survey a general conception of "literature" as one of the fine arts ; a matter of putting sincere thought or feeling in fine form ; and the term "fine letters" might fitly be used to describe it.

It is to this aspect that any short survey of "Elizabethan literature" must necessarily be addressed. It is of an artistic aspect that we think, first and last, when we use the phrase. When there began to come over English literature the change which broadly marks off that of the nineteenth century from that of the eighteenth, an eager return to the age of Shakespeare was at once a symptom, an effect, and a cause of the alteration. The generation which in its youth fed upon Wordsworth and Keats and Coleridge and Scott found itself, as it were, spiritually detached from the age of Addison and Pope ; even from the nearer age of Gray, Goldsmith, and Johnson. It reached out spontaneously to the beautiful free way of writing which it saw in Spenser and Shakespeare, finding there a kind of delight that was not given by the prose and poetry of the eighteenth century, which in comparison is so straitened and constrained. Keats, who so

rejoiced in Chapman's translation of Homer, sounded the note of revolt against a mode of poetry which he (mistakenly) regarded as having been imposed upon his race by the French influence of Boileau. And that revolution in taste has in the main been permanent, though we can now realize that what happened in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was not so much a wilful adoption of French models as a development of a kind of literary bent which is clearly present in the literature of Elizabeth's age.

In that literature there are "two spirits." From the first, it runs, even in point of style, to a precise and pedestrian kind of verse and phrase, as well as to a free and beautiful way of writing. The Popean couplet, the prosaic and didactic way of viewing and describing life, the constrained way of singing, are all to be found in Tudor prose and verse down to the Jacobean period; and they never disappear. Only, there is the broad difference that in Elizabeth's later days an inspired kind of poetry and a stately and powerful prose bulked largely; whereas in the seventeenth century the fettered and formal kind of verse gradually got the upper hand, leading up to the general acceptance of the somewhat ill-named "heroic" couplet as the best verse-form; and the noble and beautiful way of writing prose, though it was even perfected by the great writers of the seventeenth cen-