

Robert H. Tener

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING HUTTON

ANYONE WHO DEVOTES considerable time to the study of a minor literary figure probably feels the need to justify his work. I would certainly not except myself, for I have often observed a response of blank unrecognition when I inform scholars that I am engaged in research on Richard Holt Hutton. And since this response is frequently enough exhibited by specialists in Victorian literature, I feel that I owe them some information, if not an explanation. More positively, I am convinced that Hutton has been undeservedly neglected, and that an indication of his importance is therefore overdue.

One method of suggesting the significance of a critic is to show how he has been regarded by those whose opinions we can respect. It is this method that I employ here. I consider two main bodies of opinion on Hutton's dual functions of editor and critic: the views of his contemporaries, and then the attitudes of more recent writers.

For thirty-six years from 1861 to 1897 Hutton was co-proprietor and literary editor of the weekly *Spectator*. When his colleague, Meredith Townsend, purchased the paper early in 1861 he acquired a depressed property. But though the *Spectator's* championship of the North during the American Civil War further jeopardized circulation, by the end of the war the paper had recovered its ground, and thereafter moved from strength to strength.¹ The stages of its growing readership and influence can be traced in contemporary opinion. William Cory, for instance, in a letter to a friend on February 1, 1863, wrote:

... I have been myself benumbed a little by reading for so many years hardly anything that served as an antidote to the *Times* and the *Saturday Review*. I now read the *Spectator*, which is edited by Hutton, who used to edit the *Economist*, and I find myself once more heart and hand with true lovers of freedom.²

Henry Crabb Robinson, who began to read the *Spectator* at the beginning of 1863, recorded in his diary in October of the following year that Lord Grey had said that

the *Spectator* and the *Economist* "were producing a greater effect on public opinion than any other periodicals."³ At the end of 1865, the publisher Alexander Macmillan wrote to Gladstone to declare that the *Spectator* was "perhaps the ablest and most influential of the weeklies."⁴ Edward Dowden, in announcing to a correspondent in 1866 his decision to switch from the *Athenaeum* to the *Spectator*, affirmed:

*It is the one sincere weekly periodical in existence It has an overruling intellectual conscience and an understanding heart in politics which one can feel apart from its opinions*⁵

In his survey of the newspaper press, James Grant wrote in 1872 that in ability, interest, variety, and tone the *Spectator* stood at the head of the weekly papers published in Great Britain.⁶ A generation later the poet William Watson went even farther; the *Spectator*, he declared in 1893, was "the most entirely respected newspaper printed in the English language."⁷ And the American publisher, George Putnam, concurred.⁸ Rather more soberly Hugh Walker wrote, "There is probably no English journal that wields a stronger influence over thoughtful men than the *Spectator*."⁹ And John Buchan expressed agreement in declaring that at the time of Hutton's death "the *Spectator* was the chief weekly organ of the educated classes throughout the Empire."¹⁰

When the *Spectator's* political rival, the *Speaker*, ran a series on the modern press in 1893, it expressed views similar to those just given. For instance, it said that the *Spectator* "set an example which every other critical newspaper in the Empire would do well to follow . . . [for] it has been the thinking people whom it has influenced."¹¹ But the *Speaker* went on to identify the person responsible for the *Spectator's* success:

Without saying anything derogatory to the high character of his partner, we may at once observe that it is Mr. Hutton who, in the eyes of the present generation, represents the *Spectator*. His individuality it is which we find impressed upon every page of the review.¹²

William Watson agreed:

To discuss Mr. Richard Holt Hutton's work in criticism—either literary, political, or ethical criticism—is practically to discuss the *Spectator*. Probably no other case of equally close identification of a great organ of opinion with the spiritual personality of its editor can be adduced. In fact, Mr. Hutton is the *Spectator*.¹³

The success of the *Spectator* was in part due to Hutton's power of mind. Of his intellectual stature several contemporary opinions survive. Perhaps not much weight should be attached to Herman Charles Merivale's—that Hutton was the

"wisest" man and "most all-round brain" of his time—but Lord Acton, reputed to have been one of the most learned men in Europe, numbered Hutton among his "most intelligent acquaintances."¹⁴ Possibly we should discount T. H. S. Escott's remark that Hutton was "a prodigy of diversified culture."¹⁵ But Escott provides us with a story which is rather more impressive:

The Roman historian, Mommsen, now Professor at Berlin, delivered in Hutton's time some lectures at Bonn. The first question which the Teuton savant put to an English visitor in the year 1883 related to the British student who had attended his classes, and who had since become known throughout Europe alike by his newspaper and his independent writings. "That young man," were Mommsen's words, "took away from my lectures not only all the knowledge I could give him, but much mental nutriment for which he was indebted to his own genius."¹⁶

It was this range and power of mind that gave Hutton his commanding position in English journalism. If "English journalism has a chief", the *Speaker* declared, "he is to be found in Mr. Hutton"; and W. T. Stead wrote, "The ablest pen that was constantly employed in British journalism for the last thirty years" was R. H. Hutton's.¹⁷

It is obvious that the writers just cited were not thinking merely of the managerial aspects of Hutton's editorship, but also of the critical. Here a number of other testimonials are available. Gladstone, for example, roundly declared Hutton to be the "finest critic of the nineteenth century."¹⁸ And John Morley, in a letter of condolence to Townsend, remarked of Hutton, "In him we certainly lose the finest and bravest English critic of this generation, for he was better equipped in many respects and had a wider range than our dear M. Arnold."¹⁹ An "admirable critic," Leslie Stephen called him; the subtlest of his time, Escott added.²⁰ And even the hostile A. W. Benn conceded that Hutton was a "considerable writer."²¹

In estimating Hutton's place among the critics of the age, Gladstone had in mind more than his literary criticism, for that statesman's main interests lay elsewhere. Doubtless he was thinking of Hutton's writings in politics and theology. Unfortunately, few contemporary opinions on Hutton's political articles survive, largely owing to the fact, I would conjecture, of the *Spectator's* policy of anonymity, and of Hutton's modesty concerning his achievement as a critic of politics, albeit for thirty-six years he contributed to his paper an average of two leaders on home politics each week.²² Nevertheless, Anthony Trollope, whose political novels have attracted increasing admiration in recent years, remarked of Hutton's *Studies in Parliament* (1866): "These sketches are excellent. Nothing probably so good in their way has ever before appeared in the columns of an English newspaper."²³ Even

the cynical *Saturday Review* asserted, "Few people can have taken so keen an interest in politics as Mr. Hutton has evidently taken for many years . . . [and the result is] a very interesting book" ²⁴ A. J. Church, one of the *Spectator's* most prolific reviewers, thought Hutton's sketches of the proceedings of the House of Commons, which he attended weekly, were "highly illuminating" and that a collection of them ought to be made. ²⁵ Robertson Nicoll records that the paper was "remarkable for its shrewd estimates of politicians" ²⁶ In its obituary assessment, the *Times* thought *Studies in Parliament* to be one of the first, and probably the most brilliant, of a class of sketches that later became common, adding, "There are not many portraits by Carlyle or Macaulay more vivid than that of Brougham in the "Studies". Eliminate a little prolixity, and they are equal to Hazlitt at his best." ²⁷ Hutton's value as a commentator on the social scene may be indicated by the response of Arthur Hugh Clough to his essay on Buckle's *History of Civilization* in the *National Review* for January, 1858; it was, Clough declared, superior to Fitzjames Stephen's in the *Edinburgh*. More significant is the response of the historian, J. R. Green, to "The Political Character of the Working Classes" which Hutton contributed to *Essays on Reform* in 1867. Green thought this study (along with one other) by far the ablest in the collection, although Leslie Stephen, James Bryce, Goldwin Smith, and A. V. Dicey were among the contributors. ²⁸

Hutton as a commentator on religion and philosophy was widely recognized. John Stuart Mill referred to him as "an intelligent reviewer" when replying to his "Mill and Whewell on the Logic of Induction" in the *Prospective Review* for 1850. ²⁹ F. D. Maurice regarded Hutton's review of his *Theological Essays* as "masterly". ³⁰ Matthew Arnold's opinion of the *Spectator* as a religious journal is contained in a letter of August 15, 1873, which he wrote to M. Fontanès:

Vous avez bien gout, je crois, de vous abonner à la *Contemporary Review*, mais je vous engage à supprimer l'*Inquirer* et de mettre à son place le *Spectator* Le *Spectator* a des côtés faibles dont vous vous apercevrez bien vite, mais c'est un journal écrit en vue du grand public et lu par le grand public; en même temps, il s'occupe beaucoup de choses religieuses, qu'il traite d'un esprit large et libéral. ³¹

In 1884 Cardinal Newman said of Hutton, "I have now for twenty years held him as a journalist to be a good friend of mine." ³² And Robertson Nicoll explained,

When Hutton came on the *Spectator* his place had to be created. Religion had never been prominent in the journal, but Hutton at once began to preach, and he preached to a great and listening and picked audience until he died. ³³

Nicoll added:

Mr. Hutton did his greatest service in the years when Huxley and Tyndall were in their plenitude of power. He was an adversary that could not be ignored or despised, and week by week he maintained unflinchingly the cause of a spiritual faith.³⁴

Of Hutton's powers as a literary critic a number of testimonials survive. In its obituary article the *Times* declared,

Mr. Hutton deserves to be remembered as a literary critic. With a vigilant and acute perception of beauties and excellence of many orders, he was sympathetic . . . in discovering merit; and he had a rare faculty for delineating with fine, often-repeated strokes the moral atmosphere wherein a writer moved and dwelt.³⁵

H. H. Asquith was more eulogistic; Hutton, he wrote, "had few if any superiors among his contemporaries—Matthew Arnold alone excepted—in the fine art of literary criticism. . . ."³⁶ The creative writers of the day themselves attested to Hutton's value in this connection. When the *British Quarterly Review* published "The Poetry of Matthew Arnold" in its number for April, 1872, Arnold wrote to the editor to say, "Hutton has written . . . an estimate of my poems far more careful, graver and abler than any which has yet appeared"³⁷ Browning's contempt for critics is notorious; yet on October 12, 1865, he wrote to Hutton concerning a certain Mr. Jones:

He is quite at liberty to make use of whatever pieces will serve his purpose. As for the 'introduction,' any friend of yours will always be heartily welcomed by

Yours ever,

Robert Browning.³⁸

Perhaps it is safe to conjecture that the cordiality expressed here arose from the pleasure Browning experienced in reading Hutton's reviews of his poetry in the *Spectator* for September 5, 1863, and in the *National Review* the following month (both incorporated into Hutton's *Essays Theological and Literary* of 1871). If Browning read these reviews he must have been pleased with Hutton's estimate of him as second to none but Tennyson among living poets. He had been bitterly disappointed with the reception of *Men and Women* in 1855, and though his fame was growing, a twelve-month was to pass after the publication of Hutton's reviews before he saw for the first time a new volume of his poems go into a second edition within one year, and five years before the *Ring and the Book* brought full recognition of his greatness.³⁹ George Eliot was so pleased with Hutton's *Spectator* review of *Romola* that she broke a firm rule in corresponding with him about it.⁴⁰ Later, in August, 1878, she read Hutton's just-published English Men of Letters volume on Scott, whereupon G. H. Lewes confessed that although Scott's was an almost sacred

name to her, "she was so delighted with Hutton's largeness of feeling and sympathetic insight that, as she told a lady yesterday, 'she was in a glow all the time she read it'."⁴¹ Tennyson, who did not always agree with the *Spectator's* literary articles but who thought its philosophy was good, nevertheless acknowledged that Hutton had written some of the best criticisms of his poems.⁴² And Trollope wrote of Hutton, "of all the critics of my work he has been the most observant, and generally the most eulogistic."⁴³

So much for the views of some of Hutton's contemporaries. What about twentieth-century opinion? Perhaps Alastair Buchan provided an acceptable view of Hutton's contribution to the *Spectator* when he wrote that in the course of thirty-six years of joint editorship Hutton raised it "from a good paper to the best and most influential weekly of its day."⁴⁴ Perhaps the representative judgment of Hutton's critical achievement would be that of Batho and Dobrée, delivered in 1938 and unchanged in the latest edition of their survey of the period:

R. H. Hutton might almost stand as a type of the best Victorian reviewer: a man of strong and independent judgment, deeply affected by the great problems of his day, and expressing his convictions with gravity and a sense of responsibility. His essays are guides to contemporary opinion, and also contain much general and literary criticism of permanent value.⁴⁵

Some years before, the historian, D. C. Somervell, said that the two volumes of Hutton's *Criticisms on Contemporary Thought and Thinkers* "are extremely valuable to the student of Mid-Victorian thought on moral and religious questions. . . ."⁴⁶

A. W. Brown, the recent historian of the Metaphysical Society (1869-1880), which brought together "more of the most distinguished minds and personalities of the age than any similar group in history", has declared that the first paper—it was given by Hutton—provided the society with its most important subjects, and set the tone and temper which were to prevail in all its future deliberations. He further points out that only Fitzjames Stephen exceeded Hutton in the number of papers presented, and he remarks on the brilliance of Hutton's reconstruction of a typical meeting of the society in the August, 1885, number of the *Nineteenth Century*. This reminiscence, Brown says, not only manifested

the very kind of temperamental restraint and dialectical ingenuity which was cultivated by the Society itself [but also] dramatized the views of eight representative members in a discussion typical of the whole of the Society's intellectual history.⁴⁷

And with narrower focus J. H. Buckley has pointed to the "skillful dialectic" with which "Hutton set out to expose not only the fallacies of Comtism, but the errors of every 'rationalistic' attack on a supernatural metaphysic."⁴⁸ L. E. Elliott-Binns,

the historian of religion in the Victorian era, wrote a generation ago that Hutton's *Spectator* defence of a theistic faith against the growing attacks of rationalism, materialism, and agnosticism was a work that must never be forgotten.⁴⁹ More recently E. D. Mackerness stated,

It would not be claiming too much, indeed, to say that Richard Holt Hutton was one of the great preachers of the century; he is all the more symbolic in that he did not occupy a pulpit, but delivered his "sermons" in print to the readers of the *Spectator* week by week.⁵⁰

Of twentieth-century views of Hutton's qualifications as a critic of Victorian poets, novelists, and essayists there is this to record. Lionel Trilling has written of Hutton as "as an intelligent and too-little-known contemporary" of Matthew Arnold.⁵¹ Walter Bagehot's most recent biographer has remarked that Hutton's various memoirs are the best estimates of Bagehot's personal qualities.⁵² W. C. DeVane has referred to the penetrating remarks on Browning's life-long eccentricity in Hutton's *Spectator* review of *Asolando*.⁵³ In 1959, Walter Houghton said that the best criticism of Clough's poetry was written by three Victorians, one of whom was R. H. Hutton.⁵⁴ When the sixth part of *Middlemarch* was published in 1872, Hutton remarked that it bade "more than fair to be one of the great books of the world", and he clinched this by stating in 1885 that this novel was George Eliot's masterpiece. Some years ago Joan Bennett pointed out that this estimate was not shared by most Victorians, and that Hutton's judgment is therefore prophetic of ours.⁵⁵ Geoffrey Tillotson has applied the epithet "brilliant" to Hutton, and has expressed agreement with him that the Victorian writer, William Caldwell Roscoe, produced criticisms as fine and subtle as any in his age. To date, Hutton is Roscoe's sole biographer.⁵⁶ Hutton, like nearly all of his contemporaries, overrated Scott; nevertheless, the historian of Scott's reputation has written that "R. H. Hutton distilled from Lockhart the one necessary brief biography."⁵⁷ Finally one should perhaps observe that in a short bibliography of Tennyson, Douglas Bush included only two Victorian critics of the poet, one of whom was Hutton.⁵⁸

This survey of Hutton's reputation is admittedly selective. It does not, for instance, give the unfavourable judgments that could be mentioned: Alfred Austin's remark in 1870 that Hutton was "an ignorant and presumptuous scribbler, wholly unentitled to give an opinion on poetry at all;" or Virginia Woolf's that Hutton's style was "as a plague of locusts."⁵⁹ Nevertheless, what has been given should suggest that Hutton deserves rather more attention than he has received: only one comprehensive scholarly survey of his work has been published since his death, an article by Gaylord C. Le Roy in *PMLA* in 1941. Surely there is need for a more thorough study.

NOTES

1. A. J. Church, *Memories of Men and Books* (London, 1908), p. 210; Harry Quilter, *What's What* (London, 1902), pp. 783-4, 1123.
2. *Extracts from the Letters and Journals of William Cory*, ed. F. W. Cornish (Oxford, 1897), p. 86.
3. MS *Diary* (for January 3, 1863 and October 13, 1864) in the Dr. Williams's Library. I am grateful to the Trustees for permission to publish extracts relevant to Hutton.
4. C. L. Graves, *Life and Letters of Alexander Macmillan* (London, 1910), p. 243. In the privately printed letters edited by George Macmillan in 1908, Alexander Macmillan stated to the historian, E. A. Freeman, in March, 1863, that he thought the *Spectator* "quite the best paper going" (p. 133).
5. *Letters of Edward Dowden and his Correspondents*, ed. E. D. and H. M. Dowden (London, 1914), p. 34.
6. James Grant, *The Newspaper Press* (London, 1872), III, 73.
7. William Watson, *Excursions in Criticism* (London, 1893), p. 119.
8. George H. Putnam, "Memories of an Old Reader of the 'Spectator'", *Spectator*, June 13, 1925, p. 972.
9. Hugh Walker, "Living Critics IV.—Mr. R. H. Hutton", *Bookman* [London], II (February, 1896), 498. Later Walker wrote that to do justice to Hutton "we have to remember that he was . . . the man who, for more than a generation, inspired one of the best and most influential of English literary periodicals." *The Literature of the Victorian Era* (Cambridge, 1921), p. 980.
10. John Buchan, "'Spectator' Memories", *Spectator*, Centenary Number, November 3, 1928, p. 21. Cf. Stephen Gwynn, *Experiences of a Literary Man* (London, 1926), p. 133: ". . . incomparably the best weekly I have ever seen, and the most influential, for it was read with care."
11. "The Modern Press IX—"The Spectator'", *Speaker*, March 4, 1893, pp. 242-3.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
13. Watson, p. 113. Cf. Justin McCarthy, *Reminiscences* (London, 1899), II, 199: Hutton made the *Spectator* "one of the most powerful organs of public opinion in England."
14. Herman Charles Merivale, *Bar, Stage & Platform: Autobiographic Memories*, Second Edition (London, 1902), pp. 13, 32; *Letters of Acton to Mary Gladstone*, ed. H. Paul (London, 1904), p. 70.
15. Quoted in John Hogben, *Richard Holt Hutton of 'The Spectator'* (Edinburgh, 1899), p. 18.
16. T. H. S. Escott, "R. H. Hutton—An Estimate of his Life and Work", *Bookman* [London], XIII (October, 1897), 5.
17. *Speaker*, p. 242; Hogben, p. 46.
18. Malcolm MacColl, *Memoirs and Correspondence*, ed. G. W. E. Russell (London, 1914), p. 324.
19. Letter of September 14, 1897; copy in the possession of Michael Graham-Jones, formerly of the British Council, to whom I am indebted for permission to publish. Cf.

- Hogben, p. 61. In his *Recollections* (London, 1917), II, 74, Morley refers to Hutton as "a fine English critic."
20. Leslie Stephen, *George Eliot, English Men of Letters* (London, 1902), p. 130; T. H. S. Escott, *Anthony Trollope* (London, 1913), p. 232.
 21. A. W. Benn, *The History of English Rationalism in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1906), II, 439.
 22. As I pointed out in "The *Spectator* Records, 1874-1897", *Victorian Newsletter*, Spring, 1960, p. 35, Hutton averaged two political leaders a week during his association with the *Spectator*. They outnumber his combined theological and literary articles. For his modesty concerning his political writings cf. "Mr. Watson's Essays", *Spectator*, April 15, 1893, p. 488.
 23. Anthony Trollope, review of *Studies in Parliament* in *Fortnightly Review*, IV (April 1, 1866), 511.
 24. "Studies in Parliament", *Saturday Review*, February 24, 1866, p. 241. Hutton's interest in politics goes back at least to 1843 when he was seventeen; cf. Mrs. Russell Barrington, *Life of Walter Bagehot* (London, 1914), pp. 116-17.
 25. Alfred John Church, *Memories of Men and Books* (London, 1908), pp. 210-11.
 26. W. Robertson Nicoll, *The Day Book of Claudius Clear* (London, 1905), p. 311.
 27. "Death of Mr. Richard Holt Hutton", *The Times*, September 11, 1897, p. 6.
 28. *Correspondence of Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. F. L. Mulhauser (Oxford, 1957), II, 549-50; Green to E. A. Freeman, *Letters of John Richard Green*, ed. Leslie Stephen (London, 1901), p. 184.
 29. Mill's reply takes the form of an extended footnote in his *System of Logic*, Third Edition (London, 1851), I, 344 ff.
 30. Henry Solly, "*These Eighty Years, or, the Story of an Unfinished Life* (London, 1893), II, 272. Hutton's review was "Theological Essays", *Prospective Review*, IX (November, 1853), 560-99.
 31. *Letters of Matthew Arnold, 1848-1888*, ed. G. W. E. Russell (London, 1895), II, 105.
 32. Hogben, p. 98.
 33. Nicoll, pp. 303-4.
 34. *Ibid.*, p. 313.
 35. *The Times*, September 11, 1897, p. 6.
 36. H. H. Asquith, *The Earl of Oxford and Asquith, Memories and Reflections 1852-1927* (London, 1928), I, 67. Cf. his *Occasional Addresses, 1893-1916* (London, 1919), p. 23.
 37. *Letters to a Victorian Editor, Henry Allon*, ed. Albert Peel (London, 1929), p. 171.
 38. Myers & Co. Ltd., *Catalogue of Scarce and Interesting Autograph Letters, Historical Documents, Etc.*, Catalogue No. 341 (London, 1941), item 38.
 39. On the growth of Browning's fame at this time see W. C. DeVane, *A Browning Handbook*, Second Edition (New York, 1955), pp. 25, 29, 30, 210-11, 283, 346-8.
 40. Gerald Bullett, *George Eliot: Her Life and Books* (London, 1947), p. 152.
 41. *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven, 1956), VII, 65.
 42. William Knight, *Retrospects* (London, 1904), p. 57; Herbert Warren, "The Real Tennyson", *The Nineteenth Century and After*, XCIV (October, 1923), 508.

43. Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography*, ed. Frederick Page (London, 1950), p. 205.
44. Alastair Buchan, *The Spare Chancellor: The Life of Walter Bagehot* (London, 1959), p. 39.
45. Edith Batho and Bonamy Dobrée, *The Victorians and After, 1830-1914* (London, 1938), pp. 340-1. See Third Edition, 1962, p. 332.
46. D. C. Somervell, *English Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1954), p. 136, n. 1 (first published in 1929).
47. A. W. Brown, *The Metaphysical Society, Victorian Minds in Crisis, 1869-1880* (New York, 1947), pp. xi, 47, 60, 70, 318-37.
48. J. H. Buckley, *The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture* (London, 1952), p. 195.
49. L. E. Elliott-Binns, *Religion in the Victorian Era* (Cambridge, 1936), p. 331.
50. E. D. Mackerness, *The Heeded Voice: Studies in the Literary Status of the Anglican Sermon, 1830-1900* (Cambridge, 1959), p. 125.
51. *Major British Writers*, Enlarged Edition, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York, 1959), II, 592.
52. Alastair Buchan, p. 39.
53. W. C. DeVane, p. 527.
54. *Victorian Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Walter E. Houghton and G. Robert Stange (Boston, 1959), p. 340.
55. "George Eliot's Moral Anatomy", *Spectator*, October 5, 1872, p. 1262; "Mr. Bray on George Eliot", *Spectator*, January 10, 1885, p. 43, and see R. H. Hutton, *Modern Guides to English Thought in Matters of Faith* (London, 1887), p. 201; Joan Bennett, *George Eliot, Her Mind and Her Art* (Cambridge, 1948), p. 160.
56. Geoffrey Tillotson, *Thackeray the Novelist* (Cambridge, 1954), p. 19, n. 1.
57. James T. Hillhouse, *The Waverley Novels and their Critics* (Minneapolis, 1936), p. 4.
58. *Major British Writers*, II, 380.
59. Alfred Austin, *The Poetry of the Period* (London, 1870), p. 292; Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*, First Series (London, 1948), p. 269.