Pascal as a Man.

Portrait of Pascal. By Mary Duclaux (A. Mary F. Robinson). Pp. 232. (London: T. Fisher Unwin, Ltd. (Ernest Benn, Ltd.), 1927.) 10s. 6d. net.

THIS new short life of Pascal—for we must call it that in spite of Mme. Duclaux—will take its place suitably beside the little books on Newton and Descartes which have been recently noticed in our columns. In some ways the Pascal book ranks above the others, because Pascal was so much more interesting as a man than either Newton or Descartes. He died younger, less than forty years of age, and he had all the fascination for his contemporaries of a dreamy delicate man, full of great thoughts and divided in his allegiance between his passion for physical experiments and mechanical inventions and religious solicitude for the welfare of his soul. It was the latter interest that finally prevailed, and—with all reverence be it said—it was not the higher interest, for the religion of Port Royal, which carried off first his sister Jacqueline and then himself from the parental moorings, was not of the highest or most inspiring order. It was morbid and introspective, and put the salvation of the individual sinner above all other thoughts, human or divine. That Pascal was equally open to the other side of religion and morals—the social and humane—is evident from the tenderness of his private life and many strains in his writings; but for eight years before he died the pietistic strain was uppermost. The root cause was physical. He had suffered from childhood from a paralytic nervous weakness, and this was aggravated by a carriage accident in 1654, from which he never really recovered.

It is the struggle and the contrast between the two sides of Pascal's nature which gives the penetrating charm to all his writings, and especially to the "Pensées." Something like Shelley in personal appearance, he was like him too in the conflict between the positive and the dreamy tendencies in his thinking, but whereas Shelley sets free his imagination in picturing and glorifying the powers and future of man, Pascal is oppressed by the thought of the infinite pettiness of the individual, face to face with the immensities of space and time. The seventeenth article of the "Pensées" gives the best expression to this feeling. It ends with the quietist doctrine, that being unable to comprehend the whole or pass beyond that middle point between nothing and the infinite, true wisdom is to be found in repose, each in the place where Nature has placed him.

As the man of science it is difficult to estimate Pascal's contribution with certainty, owing to the share taken by others in his most famous work. The first idea of the pressure of the air, which was suggested by Torricelli's tube, came no doubt from Galileo. Pascal plunged into the discussion with all the ardour of his scientific, inquisitive nature. It was he probably who first thought of the decisive experiment on the Puy-de-Dôme, though Descartes claimed the credit in a conversation with Pascal. Such questions are often insoluble, when some new question is being eagerly canvassed by a group of men in close contact with one another. We may be quite sure of one or two points in this much-discussed story. One is that Pascal, being the retiring and self-centred person, was likely to have thought much more about it than others who made more noise in the world, and that he was the indefatigable experimenter on any subject in which his interests were engaged. He made fifty models of the calculating machine which was to help his father in reckoning the taxes payable by the individuals in his district. Above all, it is certain that, had his life been prolonged and had he been free from the religious obsessions which secluded him for years, and took up most of his writing time, he would have done far more for the advance of physical science.

At twelve, Pascal had been found by his father making out for himself the thirty-second proposition of Euclid on the equality of the angles of a triangle to two right angles. At sixteen he had written a complete treatise on conic sections. Nothing but good health and concentration were needed to make him the greatest geometer of modern times, the 'New Archimedes,' as Father Mersenne called him. As it was, he remains a brilliant and tragic figure, the broken column in the history of science. Mme. Duclaux catches this aspect of him admirably in her book, but she should have found a prominent place for the inspiring thought which he develops at some length in the preface to the "Traité du vide": "Toute la suite des hommes, pendant le cours de tant de siècles, doit être considérée comme un seul homme qui subsiste toujours et qui apprend continuellement." This he points out is the distinguishing characteristic of human intelligence. The 'fragile science' of bees and ants does not grow greater with the generations. But man is born for infinity. It was the thought which, had he followed it through-out, would have given the grand consistent purpose to his life.

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