

REVIEW.

"WOMEN IN SUBJECTION."*

A STUDY OF THE LIVES OF ENGLISHWOMEN BEFORE 1832.

A book to study, to possess, to treasure is "Women in Subjection," by Mrs. I. B. O'Malley, already known to readers of this Journal as the author of a Life of Florence Nightingale.

It is no slight book which Mrs. O'Malley has presented to us, but one which has involved much research before so lucid a presentment of the history of Englishwomen in the centuries that preceded the women's movement was possible. It thus is entitled to, and will no doubt receive, the admiration which is its due from those best qualified to appreciate its high merit.

In her introduction the author tells us that "English history as it was written till about forty years ago was the history of Englishmen; the few women who appeared in it were spoken of only in their relation to men. There were, of course, exceptions to the rule; between 1840 and 1849 Agnes and Elizabeth Strickland wrote the lives of the queens and princesses of England, and Harriet Martineau's "History of the Thirty Years' Peace," published in 1849, gave a good deal of space to the effect of economic changes on women. But on the whole the rule held.

"It could hardly be otherwise while the history that was written was mainly political and constitutional; for women had taken little part in the politics of the nation and had had no share in framing her constitution. But towards the end of the last century it began to be realised that economics and social changes were as important to the life of a country as wars and governments, and when this happened women could no longer be left out in the writing of history. . . .

"So far as I know, no attempt has hitherto been made to give a general picture of what women's lives were like in the age which preceded the (women's) movement. In this volume I have endeavoured to give such a picture. I have tried to show what the subjection of women was and to indicate its effect both on individual lives and on classes of women—such as mothers, writers, factory-workers, maidservants and schoolgirls."

So it comes to pass that women with whose names we are familiar, as of importance, become to us through the pages of Mrs. O'Malley's book vivid, eager personalities who loved and strove, agonised and achieved, pulsating with life, whom we take to our hearts as familiar friends, with their splendid virtues, and even their failings, for "a friend should bear his friend's infirmities."

Such an one is Mary Wollstonecraft, who in 1792 published "A Vindication of the Rights of Women." "To most English ladies the title of Mary Wollstonecraft's book sounded a little shocking, and also a little absurd. They had no idea that they were in subjection. If Mary had, as she intended, followed up her vindication with a detailed exposition of the legal enactments that concerned women, and if they had read it, they might have been undeceived. . . . Before telling her story it is worth while to examine the condition in which Englishwomen had lived up to her time." This the author does at some length, and shows that though theoretically the law, like the men who made it, protected women, and though "the great legal writers were convinced that woman was 'the favourite of the law,' . . . a modern reader may not unreasonably feel that many of the privileges of women thus enumerated do but emphasise the fact of her subjection. She was the property either of father or husband, and very careful rules had to be made so that their property should not at any time be damaged by irresponsible persons. She was, moreover, a kind of property

which might become burdensome, and the owners must therefore be held to their responsibility. The fear that poor women might be cast upon the parish for support was continually present in the minds of the eighteenth-century legislators. This fear was at the bottom of what was regarded as one of the most important of woman's privileges—namely, that of compelling an unwilling man to marriage. This privilege was not a legal right but a result of the law as it then stood. The Bastardy Act of 1733 enabled a woman to charge a man before a Justice of the Peace with having 'gotten her with child.' If the Overseers of the Poor backed her up, the man was forced to give security for maintenance, and if he could not do this his only way of escape from imprisonment was to marry the woman. Hence the forced marriages so distasteful to Parson Woodforde and Parson Crabbe. Those who have read the latter's description of the bridegroom's demeanour can judge whether the privilege was likely to be any real advantage to anyone except the ratepayers, who thus forced the bridegroom to take charge of the property he had injured."

Instances are given of the special cruelty of the savage criminal law to women. "This, no doubt, arose partly from the fact that the life of the family was felt to depend more on women than on men, and that women's misconduct was therefore regarded as specially dangerous to the community. But it seems also to have been largely due to the belief that women were subjects whose offences against their masters were in the nature of a revolt and must be put down with the severity usual in punishing the rebellion of slaves."

"Neither the ancient law of England nor the men who administered it were disposed to treat women offenders with any special gentleness. . . . A treatise on 'The Lady's Law,' published 1737, stated that, according to 'An Ancient Author,' all women were either married or to be married. Women who evaded their destiny and remained single might own property and be fairly independent . . . if they had no property they were until 1814 liable to compulsory domestic service between the ages of twelve and forty under penalty of imprisonment." The married woman "could neither own property nor make a will, and any goods she possessed belonged automatically to her husband. If she earned anything by her own work it was not hers to enjoy 'for the husband is entitled to the fruit of his wife's labours.' If she saved any money for her own or her children's maintenance, she could not keep it from an improvident husband 'for it is dangerous to give a Feme power to dispose of her husband's estate.' To put it in the formal language of lawyers 'By marriage the very being or legal existence of a woman is suspended, or at least it is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband, under whose wing, protection and cover she performs everything and she is therefore called under our law a feme covert.'"

"Marriage with a good and generous man was no doubt the state of natural happiness which it appeared to be in conventional thought and in the dreams of young girls. Marriage with a harsh and selfish man might be hell. The law did nothing to alleviate it, or to countenance the wife's escape."

"The fact that, during the greater part of their lives, most women were not regarded by law as independent units, had an important bearing upon their place in the economic life of the country. There can be no greater discouragement to industry than entire lack of control over the produce of one's own labour."

"It was not very easy to observe the loss during the many generations when industry and agriculture were family concerns. From the tenth century to the sixteenth, in all the farm work and almost all the growing trade and

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