

REVIEW

VERNEY LETTERS OF THE 18TH CENTURY

Edited by Margaret, Lady Verney: 2 vols. London: E. Benn, 1930. 2 gs.

The great debt which students already owed to the four volumes of *Verney Memoirs*, issued between 1892 and 1899, has been further increased by these later letters which cover the less eventful years between the close of the 17th century and the close of the 18th century. The exciting events of the Civil War are here replaced by more quiet times, but it is not so much on this account that the two volumes form tamer reading as because they lack the dominant personality of Sir Ralph.

In the worldly sense his son, who became Lord Fermanagh, his grandson the first Earl Verney, and his great grandson the second Earl Verney, all far outshone the domesticated Sir Ralph; perhaps indeed pomp and circumstance occupied too much of their attention, and caused the second and last Earl Verney to over-reach himself in his endeavour to compete with his neighbour at Stowe in political power and in ostentation of building which brought about his ruin. The late Margaret, Lady Verney, who should know if anyone does, evidently appreciated his good qualities, for she says: "Of all the owners of Claydon, his name is the best remembered and beloved."

At all events he had the merit of possessing taste, whether one admires it or not, Lord Fermanagh and the first Earl on the other hand appear to have been rather ponderous, and the most human person in these volumes seems perhaps to have been Sir Thomas Cave, who married the first Earl's sister. He was a

great sportsman; after horses and dogs his greatest interest seemed to be in contesting an election, for himself or his friends. Having won it he found attendance in the House very irksome and always chafed whilst he was in London; thus in 1714 he writes to Lord Fermanagh:

" Tho' tis probable this Script may be the Envoy of my Presence, yet I must ask leave to take notice of one dubious expression at the beginning of the last to me, viz. that I love London like the Women; I hope soon to ask your Lordship which is the most Rationall construction of the foregoing phrase, whether to love the town as the Women love it, or for me to love the town as I love Women; I'm sure if tis given for the first, I shall never depart from it, if the second that may still be taken two ways, much or little, and when women is taken in the Plurall number I don't love em much, for the Singular number is Sufficient for me, and then I love it dearly, which cannot be truly said of me as to this place."

This will show that Sir Thomas jokes " wi'dee-ficulty," but he is more amusing than most of the correspondents, who, after all, are often writing business letters. But if we lack some of the delightful characters which made the older volumes so entertaining we gain a good deal in local matters, as when Lord Fermanagh explains why he stood for Buckingham in 1712 (and failed to get in):

"I well remember at the last County Election severall, and amongst others Sir Roger Hill, asked me why I did not stand at Buckm. seeing that townsfolk come in so unanimously for me; but I answered that Sir Richd. Temple and Alex. Dentn. were the late Members and

both my Kinsmn. and that I thought it not handsome to indeavour to josle either of them out; but now there is a vacancy by death I putt in for it, else they would say twas pride in me that I would be a Kt. of the Shire only, whereas I might be a Burgess for asking."

In 1738 there is a letter from the second Lord Fermanagh to his steward telling him to buy some of the " wainscott" at the demolition of Salden; eventually he acquired " the Great Parlour and Drawing Room Wainscott" from that great mansion.

In 1744 the third Lord Fermanagh writes to tell his father, then Earl Verney, that he attended Buckingham Assizes on Tuesday, but was not called to serve upon the jury: " I hear the Gentlemen" [he gives a list of familiar county names], " staid till Friday, tho' there was little or no Business except Drinking. There was only one Prisoner and he was acquitted."

We hear something of the ambitious lawyer, Charles Pilsworth, of Oving: " he had a great reputation among the Justices of the Peace for his clear head and fair mind, a verdict in which he himself fully concurred." The neat criticism implied in the last eight words is in Lady Verney's best manner.

With the enormous mass of the Claydon MSS to draw from, it must have been difficult to make the selection which fills the present work but some of the family letters about nothing at all might have been spared to make room for more by Browne Willis; one of very great interest is printed, writing on 14 Feb., 1756, he says that he has "as yet sold only about 39 copies " of his " last Book of Bucks Town and Hundred "; he adds that after sending the money he received to the printer he still owed him £80. He goes on to say:

" I have drawn up Cottesloe and Newport Hundred more voluminous than Bucks Hundred but with pretext to print them. Ashenden and Aylesbury Hundreds are above the better part done of each and I have two Folios pretty closely wrote of the Chilton Hundreds which I shall leave to Oxford. "

Lady Verney had finished the book,—a fitting close to her many contributions towards our County history,—before she died; that may explain why pedigrees are printed without dates, and why the index is compiled fully but without great intelligence; it does not excuse her publishers. The illustrations, whilst ample in number, do not compare favourably with those which truly adorned the older volumes. One does not want to quibble about small points however when there is so much of solid and direct interest for which to be thankful. No historian of Bucks, no student of Georgian England will be able to ignore these fruits of a ripe but active old age.

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