

NIEBUHR'S POLITICAL OPINIONS AND
CHARACTER.

A Letter

ADDRESSED TO THE EDITOR BY CHEVALIER BUNSEN.

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CARLTON TERRACE, *Oct. 31st*, 1852.

MY DEAR MISS WINKWORTH,

You have kindly called upon me to write, for the second edition of your "Life and Letters of Niebuhr," a few explanatory words on some points which have lately come under discussion, and in particular on two which are of a very general interest. The one is Niebuhr's view of modern constitutional government, about which there exists a marked difference of opinion, both in England and Germany : the other, his going out of office in 1810, which latter has been made the object of an unwarranted attack in his own country.

To respond to any such call, coming from you, is a great gratification to me, were it only because it affords me an opportunity of expressing to you, my admiration of the talent and zeal which you have shown in preparing yourself for so arduous a task, and in accomplishing it so successfully. Nor can I deny that I am, in a certain manner, particularly called upon to commu-

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nicate to your readers, what I may have to say, on points, on which my great master has been misunderstood and attacked, in consequence of your publication.

Let me premise, however, that the discussion of the political opinions and life of Niebuhr is still beset with great difficulties.

The time is not yet come, when the public men of Germany, of the forty years which precede 1848, can be historically dealt with, and when the political conduct of the heroes of that period can be understood and fairly judged. Still, in the meantime, misrepresentations and calumnies are put forth, in that discreditable part of the literature of the day which is fed by lying memoirs or by simple ignorance, and carried on by hireling pens and party-men. Under such circumstances, it is certainly the duty of honest patriots to refute unjust attacks upon the great and good men of that age ; but it must not be forgotten, that they cannot bring to bear on the question all the facts that they may know.

As to the English public, every friend and admirer of Niebuhr cannot but be thankful for the impression which your "Life and Letters" have produced in this country. With the exception of a few persons, Niebuhr was hitherto known in England only as the historian of Rome, and the greatest critical author, and most learned man, of the age. But, let me add, as such, he was more generally studied than even in Germany. In that country, beyond the professional men of erudition, a much smaller number reads learned historical works than in England ; and a never-resting machinery is at work, exciting an immense number of incompetent writers and young men

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to make themselves a reputation, by doubting whatever has been said before them. Niebuhr's immortal merits in the restoration of Roman history, whether by his, alas ! incomplete great work, or by his more popular "Lectures," are at this moment incontestably more appreciated, and his works more generally read, in England than in Germany. Nowhere is this fact more apparent than at your Universities. Of the seven thousand copies or more, which have been sold in this country, of the "Roman History" alone, either in the excellent translation or in the original, full three-fourths have gone to the two great Universities ; and have been made the standing object of a careful and reproductive analysis, in those institutions, in which, according to the vulgar opinion, the young men of England only carry on the school themes of their boyhood.

Now that Niebuhr himself,—the affectionate husband,—the tender father,—the faithful friend,—the man of uncompromising integrity and antique truthfulness of mind,—is before the English public, the sublime virtue of the man has endeared him to this nation, fully as much as the unparalleled erudition and sagacity of the scholar, and the wonderful talents of the historian. This general impression has had, on the whole, a faithful, although an incomplete and hasty echo in the public Reviews. I think it unnecessary to dwell at any length on some scarcely serious whimsical reflections and charges, or to refute blunders arising out of sheer ignorance ; for instance, whether Niebuhr was not a Dane, and left his fatherland for a foreign country ! Nor will you expect

me seriously to discuss the point submitted by one of your reviewers,* how Niebuhr could say, "that it is only a little State which can have 'as such' a National Debt," whereas Niebuhr said no such thing, but only asserted in that marvellously misunderstood passage,† that a city, being a member of a State (as, for instance, Berlin or Magdeburg in Prussia), could not have such a National Debt as that under which the free German Republic of Hamburgh was groaning, in consequence of the bloody rapacity of Napoleon and his Marshal, Davoust. This blunder is as evident as the value of the wise conclusions drawn from it by the reviewer:—that Niebuhr "meant to say, that if the creditors of the State are citizens, and not foreigners, the debt was no evil." Or, shall I refute such attacks as the following, made by the same author upon Niebuhr the historian? The reviewer says,‡ "Niebuhr totally mistook the duties of an historian. He supposed it was his place to dogmatise, *and make no attempts* to convince the *understanding of his readers*; and if any one made objections, reply that he is an ignorant blockhead, and evidently incompetent to judge." Now, it is a fact that Niebuhr, in his second edition, has treated all objections made against his first, by really learned men,

* "Eclectic Review" for June, 1852. p. 656.

† "Life and Letters," vol. i., p. 401, (in the first edition, p. 395): "You [in Hamburgh] have enjoyed the advantages of independence: the helplessness of a city which stands alone as a State, is inseparable from them. In a great State, all may unite to raise up a single ruined city. It has, as such, no National Debt. For a single city to have a large National Debt, is to have a monster devouring its vitals."

‡ "Eclectic Review," p. 665.