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Book Reviews

JUDAH P. BENJAMIN, CONFEDERATE STATESMAN, by Robert Douthat Meade, Oxford University Press, New York, 1943. Pp. ix, 432. \$3.75.

The biography of Judah P. Benjamin by Robert Douthat Meade, admittedly the result of painstaking and exhaustive research, is a distinct addition to Americana. In it is to be found a wealth of data regarding "The Lost Cause;" as well as the recreation of a distinguished personality of that period of American history. It makes easy, pleasant, and informative reading.

The selection and arrangement of the material used is excellent and the story of the life of Benjamin is unfolded in an orderly and attractive manner and in language marked by simplicity and fitness. As one reads chapter after chapter, he almost feels like an actual onlooker, if indeed not a participant, in the always exciting and at times hectic events which followed each other in such quick succession in that period of our history—a period which served once and for all to fix and cement the bonds of a "lasting union" of our sovereign states.

Benjamin was a man who believed in democracy and the giving of opportunities to the people. His keen interest in the public schools and the necessity of popular education impresses the reader. His statement that "with public education you may extend democratic principles without danger" is just as applicable to our present day as it was when he made it. His advocacy of public schools for girls as well as boys demonstrates his advanced ideas, as at that time the popular conception was that it was not necessary to give public education to the women of our country.

If one seeks ground for criticism, it may be found, perhaps, in the author's estimate, or lack of estimate, of the character of Benjamin. Pictured as a cheerful optimist, whom adversity could not "down" or even discourage, Benjamin's life is rightfully made to appear as a remarkable successful struggle against constant and ever increasing obstacles; but one is left in doubt whether this success was the result of strong character or the lack of it. The author too often fails to appraise Benjamin's character or motives, after depicting some important act or decision which

had a momentous effect on both his career and the cause he served.

It is also to be regretted that we are in doubt as to the truth of certain charges brought against Benjamin by his enemies. It may be that evidence is lacking, but the author somehow leaves the reader with a feeling that the author suspects that the charges were true. Benjamin, as depicted, is also seemingly without fixed opinions on the great issues of his times; at least one is left to wonder whether self-interest did not, especially in great crises, actuate his conduct. The book may be said in a sense to be unsatisfying in that we are unable to appraise the character of Benjamin. Little incidents are related and these are followed by comments which serve to create doubts, not fixed opinions; and we are somehow led to believe that Benjamin was an opportunist, which probably was not altogether true.

This may or may not be just criticism of a biography—but such were the impressions created in this reader, which may probably be shared by others.

One is also inclined to raise the point that too much emphasis is placed on Benjamin's religion or, as the author wishes to put it, his race. After all, America is the world's "melting pot" and here in America there is no valid reason to marvel at the rise of a member of any race or creed; it is as it should be. True, it is a tribute to our institutions and to our democracy, but it calls for no special comment, and least of all constant reiteration. Indeed, such continued comment would seem to indicate that such success is extraordinary and not to be expected, and that I believe is to take an un-American attitude and one which is to be deplored. The success of a Disraeli in England may be remarkable, but a Benjamin in America—certainly not.

But such criticism is not intended to condemn the work or dissuade others from reading it; for the book certainly otherwise deserves high praise and will find permanent place in the literature of the south and should be read and studied by all those who are interested in the history of the Confederacy. It is almost a "must" book for the lawyers, for Benjamin's rise to the leadership of the English bar is practically without parallel; and this, because he went to England at the age of fifty, a fugitive and practically penniless. The honors and tributes he received there and his rise and success are truly remarkable. Benjamin was indeed an extraordinary man.

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