Thomas Frederic Dixon, Jr. Collection 

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Byline:

Mr. Dixon’s Romance of Jefferson Davis – Latest Fiction by Hugh Walpole, Baroness von Hutten, and Others

The Victim: A Romance of the Real Jefferson Davis, by Thomas Dixon. D. Appleton & Co.

Nearly ten years ago, when the publication of “The Clansman” and certain public utterances of its author on the negro question had evoked much adverse comment, Mr. Dixon replied to his critics in an open letter to The New York Times Review of Books. In the course of it he thus described his own system of writing:

I never write a book unless I have something to say, and never say it as long as I can keep from it. When at last I have become so full a great dramatic idea that I shall die unless it is uttered, that others may know the might of its truth and the glory of its beauty, I write the story – write it simply, sincerely, boldly, passionately.

It is interesting to contrast this with the confession of one of the greatest living masters of prose, Joseph Conrad:

I have a positive horror of losing even for one moving moment that full possession of myself which is the first condition of good service. I have always suspected in the effort to bring into play the extremities of emotions the debasing touch of insincerity. In order to move others deeply we must deliberately allow ourselves to be carried away beyond the hound of our normal sensibility – so great sin. But the danger lies in the writer becoming the victim of his own exaggeration, losing the exact notion of sincerity, and in the end coming to despise truth as something too cold, too blunt for his purpose.

Mr. Conrad is an able psychologist as well as novelist, and in this passage he has diagnosed the case not only of the Thomas Dixons, but of the Marie Corellis, the Hall Caines, and the rest of the multitude who mistake their own opinions – or, it would be more accurate to say, their own tastes and inclinations – for revelation from on high.

In the same letter Mr. Dixon complains that, while his novels are admitted to be powerful, they are at the same time called “thoroughly inartistic,” and says quite frankly that to him the critic is “talking is an unknown tongue.” In other words, he is unable to see that a book which succeeds in getting an emotion “over” to the reader is not necessarily literature. He forgets – perhaps he would consider it an empty saying – that not to lose possession of one’s self “even for one moving moment” is the “first condition of good service.”

But whether “The Victim” is or is not literature, Mr. Dixon has done a useful thing in writing it – he has drawn attention to the lamentable lack of a great biography of Jefferson Davis. Of the existing biographies, all except W.E. Dodd’s little-known work are merely contemporary eulogies – the stuff of biography, but not the completed thing.

In the present book the President of the Confederacy is pictured as a hero, a saint, and a martyr. Wherever, during the civil war, a scheme miscarried or a General failed in his duty, it was a scheme adopted contrary to Mr. Davis’s advice, or a General kept in place by a “junta” antagonistic to him, while each success was due to his effort and inspiration.

Whether that is good history or not – and there will be at least as many in the South as at the North who will dispute it – it is certainly poor human nature. Mark Twain’s homely adjuration to the portrait painter to draw him “with all his warts on” is an excellent thing for any man to remember who is not trying to depict a stained glass window saint or a wax effigy. After reading the story, one falls back on the title as being after all the feature that best describes its hero. Jefferson Davis was undoubtedly a victim: the victim of other men’s envy and jealousy to a considerable degree, and also the victim of his own poor judgment. Alfriend claims that he bore the imputation of neglecting to make the battle of Bull Run decisive by pushing on after the demoralized Federals, out of “devoted patriotism

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and knightly magnanimity. Any explanation acquitting himself must have thrown the responsibility upon Gens. Johnston and Beauregard, and be preferred rather to suffer an undeserved reproach than to excite distrust of two officers then enjoying the largest degree of popular confidence.”

Mr. Dixon follows Alfriend in this truly remarkable explanation of the Confederate President’s failure to deal with his incompetent and practically insubordinate Generals as they deserved, and though now and then he deprecates his hero’s extra-generosity, his constant demand upon the reader’s admiration for him becomes irritating. For though we may pity a victim, and it is not difficult to love him, it is always hard to admire him.

As a romance the tale is sufficiently entertaining. Its plot is improbable enough to be true, and its development affords a picturesque birdseye view of the civil war. Here and there a scene is painted not only vividly but finely, as where the boastful spirit of each section immediately before Bull Run is described:

The North was marching southward with ropes and handcuffs with which to end in triumph their holiday excursion on July 4. The South was marching to meet them with eager pride, each man afraid the fight would be over before he could reach the front to fire a single shot. And behind each gay regiment of scornful men marched the white, silent figure of Death.

The dialogue generally lacks distinction, and sometimes simply stands up and falls down, as the old saying goes. Early in his career Jefferson Davis is ordered on recruiting duty in a cholera-stricken-district, and goes to say farewell to his sweetheart:

The good-bye scene that night at the lovers’ trysting place, the little tent reception room of the McCreas, was long and tender and solemn.

“Oh I feel dreadful about this trip, dear,” his sweetheart kept repeating with pitiful despair that refused to be comforted.

“You must be brave, my own,” he answered with a frown. “A soldier’s business is to die. I am a soldier. I go where duty calls-”

and so on, though it is only fair to say that this is one of the worst specimens.

There is little in “The Victim” to fan the flame of smoldering sectional antagonisms, and there is much which is calculated to interpret the North and the South as they were fifty years ago to each other. It may be regretted that Mr. Dixon has seen fit to revive in an aggravated from the charges of hypocrisy and brutality on the part of Gen. Nelson A. Miles toward Jefferson Davis while the latter was a prisoner at Fortress Monroe. It seems hardly possible, as Gen. Miles has pointed out, even if testimony to the contrary were lacking, that a man nearly sixty, had he been subjected for two years to the tortures claimed, and reduced to such a state of extreme weakness that is was dangerous for him even to sink into deep slumber, should have lived, in reasonably good health, for twenty-four years after his release. This is one of several points released in Mr. Dixon’s book which show the need for a thoroughly impartial study of the man and his time, which shall at the same time not be merely a student’s monograph. Whether Jefferson Davis was or was not of truly heroic stature, he occupied the centre of perhaps the vastest and most crowded stage of tragedy the world has ever seen, and if to the most of us he is a misunderstood and shadowy figure, it is only because American literature has not yet produced a man big enough to paint him upon his background of blood and flame without undue exaggeration or belittling.