



History of Western Europe

James Robinson

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History, in the broadest sense of the word, is all that we know about everything that man has ever done, or thought, or hoped, or felt. It is the limitless science of past human affairs, a subject immeasurably vast and important but exceedingly vague. The historian may busy himself deciphering hieroglyphics on an Egyptian obelisk, describing a mediæval monastery, enumerating the Mongol emperors of Hindustan or the battles of Napoleon. He may explain how the Roman Empire was conquered by the German barbarians, or why the United States and Spain came to blows in 1898, or what Calvin thought of Luther, or what a French peasant had to eat in the eighteenth century. We can know something of each of these matters if we choose to examine the evidence which still exists; they all help to make up history.

The present volume deals with a small but very important portion of the history of the world. Its object is to give as adequate an account as is possible in one volume of the chief changes in western Europe since the German barbarians overcame the armies of the Roman Empire and set up states of their own, out of which the present countries of France, Germany, Italy, Austria, Spain, the Netherlands, and England have slowly grown. There are, however, whole libraries upon the history of each of these countries during the last fifteen hundred years, and it requires a volume or two to give a tolerably complete account of any single important person, like St. Francis, Cromwell, Frederick the Great, or Napoleon. Besides biographies and general histories, there are many special treatises upon the Church and other great institutions; upon the literature, art, philosophy, and law of the various countries. It is obvious, therefore, that only a very few of the historical facts known to scholars can possibly find a place in a single volume such as this. One who undertakes to condense what we know of Europe's past, since the times of Theodosius and Alaric, into the space of six hundred pages assumes a very grave responsibility. The reader has a right to ask not only that what he finds in the book shall be at once true and clearly stated, but that it shall consist, on the whole, of the most important and useful of all the things which might have been selected from the well-nigh infinite mass of true things that are known...

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