

INTRODUCTION.

FROM the time of the venerable Bede onward all Western historians have been accustomed to date their annals by means of the centuries, counting forwards and backwards from that year 1 A.D. which Dionysius Exiguus wrongly fixed as the birth-date of our Lord. But it is only in comparatively modern times that we have begun to talk and think of those centuries as entities with individual characters and attributes. The usage by which we speak of a "nineteenth-century idea" or "a thoroughly seventeenth-century practice" would appear strange to a critic from the Middle Ages, whose landmarks in history were not connected with the centuries, and who reckoned by 'indictions,' or the 'Seven Ages of the World,' or the dynasties of his native kingdom, or the time that had elapsed since Augustus or Charlemagne. To see how entirely artificial is our conception of the centuries, we have only to remember that to a Moslem the year 1900 appears as 1317-18, while a Jew thinks of it as 5660. But during the last eight or nine generations the world has grown so familiar with the idea of the century as a real and natural division of time, that it is impossible for us to disregard it when dealing with history.

The practice of reckoning by the centuries has at least one excellent feature. It induces the historian from time to time to take stock of the current of events and the movement of the world during the last hundred years of the Christian era. When the century in which we have lived is slipping from us, we begin to endeavour to formulate our general views on its character, work, and meaning, even though its latter years are still too close to us to allow us to view them in accurate historical perspective.