

The Lives of Dr. John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Mr. Richard Hooker, Mr. George Herbert, and Dr. Robert Sanderson (Classic Reprint)

Izaak Walton

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England. There is, of course, the general reason that the history of a notable man possesses an inevitable interest for men who live under conditions similar to his, nay, for men in every estate, the greatest circumstances of life being common to all. For a second reason, I am not sure that many a reader of a biography does not feel himself in a position superior to the subject of it. He reads and criticises, condemns and praises; and if he choose to publish his judgment there is none to say him nay. The biographer has stated his case, the evidence has been given, judgment is challenged, any man may be the judge. The vain mind flies to such opportunities. We may find another, a humaner reason in what may be called the personal interest in biography. A trait of character or a passage of events may correspond to something in ones own experience, and community of interest creates sympathy. Such a contingency disarms the reader and. conquers him. The parallel flatters or disconcerts him, but in any case he is supremely interested. Finally, as to our own literature, there is the particular reason that an Englishman is commonly devoted to matters of fact, thinks them more reputable than fiction, and, though taking pleasure in the latter, gives them a place of greater dignity. And so, in spite of the inferiority of biography as a form of literature, its popularity is briefly explicable.

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