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Cambridge University Press

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William John Law

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The Alps of Hannibal

VOLUME 1

WILLIAM JOHN LAW



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University Printing House, Cambridge, CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

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Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108079495

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This edition first published 1866

This digitally printed version 2014

ISBN 978-1-108-07949-5 Paperback

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

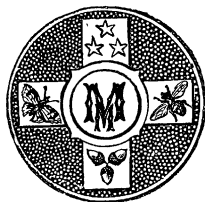
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THE ALPS
OF
HANNIBAL.

BY
WILLIAM JOHN LAW, M.A.
FORMERLY STUDENT OF CHRIST CHURCH,
OXFORD.

IN TWO VOLUMES.
VOL. I.

London:
MACMILLAN AND CO.
1866.

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Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-07949-5 - The Alps of Hannibal: Volume 1
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LONDON :
R. CLAY, SON, AND TAYLOR, PRINTERS,
BREAD STREET HILL.

Cambridge University Press
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THESE PAGES ARE INSCRIBED
TO THE MEMORY OF
MY REVERED GRANDFATHERS,
EDMUND LAW, BISHOP OF CARLISLE,
AND
WILLIAM MARKHAM, ARCHBISHOP OF YORK ;
MEN OF LEARNING AND PIETY,
AND SINCERE LOVERS OF TRUTH.
W. J. L.

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PREFACE.

SOME apology will be expected for treating at large this very old topic of dissension. A few facts must plead my excuse. At the end of July, 1854, I was sent for health to Aix-les-Bains, in Savoy; and I took with me Mr. Ellis's "Treatise on Hannibal's Passage of the Alps," then lately issued from the Cambridge University press, a work in which the march is carried over the Little Mont Cenis. At Aix I met with another new work by a savant of that country, who launches the invaders into Italy from the Col de la Seigne. A further circumstance presently kindled my interest in a subject which had been familiar to me: that an indication of one reputed track was in sight from the garden of my house. I borrowed from my physician the volumes of De Saussure, to help me in my French

and in my Alps, and amused myself during August with some comments, which I printed at Chambéry, on the speculations of M. Replat.

I left Aix on the 17th September with renewed impulse to a favourite theme, proposing for my daughter and myself a week's absence from my family, that we might cross the Little St. Bernard and return by the Col de la Seigne and the valley of Beaufort. The result was calamitous: I made my first and last descent into Italy in a state of serious illness: for nine weeks I lay within gunshot of the great precipice, without a hope of contemplating it. To avoid being snowed up for the winter at Courmayeur, I was at last moved slowly down the valley to seek a more favouring climate. So began and so ended the chance of contributing by personal investigation to a knowledge of the disputed track.

In my progress to convalescence at Nice, I found myself without employment; and a resource offered itself in the examination of Mr. Ellis's theory. I weighed its merits, and sifted them as well as I could under the circumstances; and on my return to England in April, immediately published the results. In 1856 Mr. Ellis defended himself in

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two numbers of the “Cambridge Journal of Classical and Sacred Philology;” and I replied promptly to each through the same channel. That warfare was to be excused; I was only criticising a new theory. If now I maintain a theory myself, and strive to overthrow all the rest, it may be asked, why further stir this worn-out controversy; has not too much been said already?

That sentiment would accord with a remark made by the last English writer of eminence who has touched the subject. Dr. Liddell says, “The controversy will probably last for ever: the data seem insufficient to enable us to form a positive judgment.” This feeling of despair may be alleviated if the inquiry shall enable us to account for the failure of a few marked men, whom the world would have expected to command assent on the question. Such were D’Anville and Gibbon. But improvement has been slow, and error obstinate. Many a year has passed since the very learned Thirlwall, reviewing the efforts of a distinguished commentator, spoke of “the enormous mass of literature which has been already piled upon this theme.” Mass, indeed, there is; but it is

accounted for in the remark of Niebuhr, “that even ingenious and learned men have opposed the most palpable evidence.” The theme is not worn out: men of learning continue to embarrass truth in their professions to illustrate it: popular and plausible arguments hold their credit, because unanswered; and reputed difficulties are looked upon with dismay, as if they were real ones. The subject is not exhausted, and the fact that it has been worked so much is the best proof that it needs to be worked more.

When one comes to interfere in a dispute which has lasted so long, the great discouragement is, that a fit treatment of it threatens to be too copious for the patience of a reader: and I expect censure for my prolixity. But who can have the vanity to hope that inveterate error may be exterminated with a few pages? Heresies must be attacked which took root in the first days of the Roman empire, which have been cultivated in various forms to the present time; nourished by men who have adorned the literature of modern Europe. Few there are who take pains to scrutinise what is plausible, or to sift what is obscure. The laborious effort of novelty, which I have mentioned as

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inviting me to the combat, has succeeded, as I know, in unsettling the faith of able minds.

In meeting with the strange contrivances offered for solving this question, one is apt to pause and say, “Must we consume time in combating such a notion as this?” But, if the notion which suggests the scruple should be countenanced by men like Schweighæuser, or Gosselin, or Letronne, or Arnold, or Ukert, there is no alternative: the unresisted sanction of such names governs the opinion of the world: and, though an error may in itself seem unworthy of refutation, the friend of truth cannot leave it unassailed. In this controversy there is nothing so extravagant that you may pass it by: the most perverse fancies are found in writers of formidable reputation. All obstacles then must be encountered: we dare not despise what the world esteems: the consequence is, that the subject must not be treated shortly, if it is to be treated safely.

Fortunately those very circumstances make the pursuit of it exceedingly entertaining. The strangeness of conceptions, whether in history, geography, logic, or grammar, which offer themselves to notice, provoke a never-ceasing interest, and entice you by degrees into the full current of the dispute. Such

has been my fate: and I offer, though not ripened as it should be, the fruit of my temptation. I have endeavoured to perceive the drift of each hostile argument: and, dealing freely with the opinions of others, may be thought not to bespeak indulgence for my own. But, in truth, I bespeak it earnestly. An old man, returning to Greece after long absence, cannot possibly be exempt from error; and when he finds, in the great names he has to deal with, none that he can in all points follow, he constantly has to apprehend error in himself. The danger is felt and acknowledged: but the fear of it will not deter from the utterance of thoughts honestly entertained. Whilst, among the varieties and complications of our subject, we are differing from those whom we greatly respect, in the process which discloses the errors of such men, we become convinced of the fallibility of all, and most conscious of the indulgence needed for ourselves.

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ERRATA.

Page 71, line 22, for "equæ" read "aquæ."
„ 93, „ 3, for "agreement" read "argument."
„ 118, „ 18, for "nom" read "nomme."
„ 122, „ 33, for "equivocal" read "equivalent."
„ 156, „ 29, for "marching" read "reaching."
„ 158, „ 10, "from Valence" to be omitted.
„ 221, „ 14, for "hushing" read "hashing."
„ 304, „ 2, for "but" read "best."
„ 319, „ 24, for "Vin" read "Viu."

Cambridge University Press

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