

P R E F A C E.

THE object of this book is to give a sketch of the social and economical development of England from the fifteenth century to the present time. In doing this, it has been necessary to treat of political economy from a point of view which of late years, at any rate, has very rarely been taken by English writers. Political economy is that branch of human knowledge which deals with the production and the distribution of wealth; but the relations in which such production and distribution are carried on vary greatly in different ages and in different countries. Moreover, the manner in which wealth is produced, the power, that is, which man has over the forces of nature, is the basis of the whole social, political, and religious forms of the period at which the examination is made. Forms of social intercourse, custom, law, political institutions, and religion no doubt influence even economical methods long after their origin has been forgotten, and constitute the conservative side of human society, keeping back the changes made necessary by the more or less rapid modification of the system of production below; just as in the evolution of species the hereditary tendency struggles with the growing adaptation to altered conditions of life. My endeavour has been to apply these theories without fear or prejudice, and certainly without the slightest bias in favour of any existing political party, to