The Educational Value of the Public Library Movement, and a Reply to some Views advanced by Mr. Charles Welch.¹

TO bring study and recreation into close correlation as an educational force has always been the aim of the promoters of the public library movement. The equipment of a library intended to meet the varied needs of a populous community would be doomed to failure if it did not include provision for the two factors mentioned. The pioneers of the movement never contemplated making the libraries either narrow academic repositories for specialists, or mere purveyors of light literature for the indolent. They were intended to be, what they are increasingly becoming, institutions to assist the student, and generally to inspire a love for literature, thus giving to the many what had hitherto been reserved for the few.

There is, in the experience already gained, a remarkable weight of evidence which goes to prove that the public libraries, while providing for all kinds of readers, have yet kept steadily in view the higher aspirations of literary culture. This is forcibly evidenced by the preponderating supply of studious books compared with those of an entertaining character. I am not now concerned in pointing out the educational value of much that is called fiction; but it is well to remember that the literature of childhood comes within that category. It gives the first start, operating with wonderful effect on the imagination and the memory. In the period of adolescence the same characteristic is manifested in tales of travel and adventure, followed by ramblings into deeper things, according to varying predilections. At such times the librarian is often able to guide young readers to certain "live" works which, if thoroughly digested, lead to a goal and a possession frequently missed by omnivorous gourmands of literature. Pope's "bookful blockhead ignorantly read, with

¹ Read at a Monthly meeting of the Library Association, on November 12, 1894.

lots of learned lumber in his head," is not a pleasant personage. He is too important and self-contained. The knowledge of the universe is there, but it cannot be got at. You knock, but the owner can never find the key to his reputed possessions :

" Knowledge is proud that he has learned so much ;
Wisdom is humble that he knows no more."

To preserve the mind's equilibrium in reading there should be no divorce between study and the stimulating sensation of pleasure. The latter is a vital element of successful reading. Once alienate the association of pleasure from study, and the pursuit of knowledge becomes irksome. For this reason I often urge students to vary their reading with a book of prose fiction or poetry. In the same way many who read as an intellectual pastime act wisely by going from fiction to biography, history, and the popular sciences, finding in these changes the recreation they most need.

The primary advantage of a public library is in the fact that it affords facilities for reading without regard to narrow distinctions of study or recreation. Only a comparatively few persons can pursue a definite and elaborate course of study; but the commonwealth of books is broad and deep, embracing resources which meet the aspirations of psychological curiosity. Man is a "curious" animal, and this explains why the public libraries have become so popular that the income, which it was thought would be adequate for all demands, is scarcely sufficient to maintain them even in decent poverty. Unlike tradesmen, whose ability to supply the needs of their customers increases, as they increase, library committees are bound to check development so as to keep within the limit of a penny rate.

The spread of elementary education has stirred up a healthy thirst for knowledge which it would be wise to meet in a comprehensive spirit. The danger in our great communities is that the people, finding no vent of elevating pastime, seek relief from the monotony of their daily toil by a recourse to pleasures (?) which make them less able to sustain the burden of life. In this connection the libraries may become the safety-valves of modern civilization. Without them masses of the people would be confined as in windowless rooms, with no outlook into the past and no hope-vista into the future. Such conditions are likely to breed discontent and anarchy of the direst description. But with libraries, as centres of pacific influence, there is the stirring of a

spirit of brotherhood. Books are not dead, but living things. They strip us of many delusions. They somehow link the past with the present and the future, making both the poor and the rich man see that there are compensations in life more solacing and enduring than even material prosperity. These compensations are calculated to steady the balance of many social problems which await solution. In our libraries numerous secrets of men and things are revealed. Readers are having a natural curiosity satisfied. They are finding that the emotions of good and evil are recorded in the written messages of men of like passions as themselves. The student, the artizan, the shop-boy, are holding fellowship with veritable kings of men. They enter within the veil of their pleasures, their toils, their achievements and their follies. They see them triumph, or they see them vanquished, and are beginning to understand better the majesty of life's conflict, by realising that

"Man is man, and master of his fate."

This, I submit, is education. It is the education which the libraries were intended to give, and it is the process by which they become instruments in moulding the many-featured growth of our mental stature.

That the scope and facilities of our public libraries, as I have depicted them, are real conditions, I will emphasise later on by a reference to specific facts. From the diminishing number of the opponents of educational agencies a voice is occasionally heard deprecating the libraries on the ground that they do not satisfactorily fulfil some indefinite expectations. Usually, it is sufficient to let such critics answer themselves. Recently, however, a recruit appeared in the person of Mr. Charles Welch (Librarian to the Corporation of London). Now Mr. Welch is a well-known member of the Library Association of the United Kingdom, so that he would be regarded by the public as speaking with some authority. I venture, therefore, to trespass on your patience by referring to a paper recently read by him at the Mansion House. More than two-thirds of it included extracts and matters of common knowledge, which scarcely needed the amplification given to them. If a full and careful examination of facts had been exercised in referring to the administration of rate-supported libraries no serious objection could have been taken to the conclusions arrived at. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Mr. Welch had much to say about pre-

judice. "London," he remarked, "might be regarded all along as engaged in the distasteful process of overcoming its prejudices on the subject." That is correct. "It is worth while," he said, "to make the attempt to ascertain what those prejudices are." I admire the assiduity displayed in collecting the prejudices of "councillors, ratepayers, readers, and men of all sorts and conditions." We were happily spared a detailed recital of their opinions. It is sad to think of the "deep-seated objection" to the movement "held very widely among men of culture, and lovers of good literature, and loyal promoters of education, men whom it is of the highest importance to gain over to the support of the free library." All this is delightfully vague, and deserves the full weight of anonymity. It is not, however, convincing, because these men of extraordinary light and leading are unknown to us; but we do know the able men of our time, the giants in literature, science, art, and even politics, who are not blinded by a selfish prejudice, and who recognise in our public libraries open doors to multitudes who are gradually becoming partakers of the rich heritage of the world's literature.

The library movement in London did not actively set in until six or seven years ago, and yet at the present time half the boroughs within the county of London, and rather more than half the outer suburban districts, have adopted the Acts. This is really an encouragingly rapid advance. But why, we are asked, do some of the northern parishes remain obdurate? Well, it may be that "councillors, ratepayers, and men of all sorts," who are more governed by prejudice than reason, live in those districts. Probably the political colour which has recently operated in local elections of all kinds has, for the moment, unhealthily affected the popular mind on what should be essentially a non-party question. But, whatever the reason, the assertion that the check is due to the inordinate favour extended to the fiction reader, and to the consequent ousting of the student, is a baseless reflection on librarians and library committees. There is not a scintilla of evidence to support the assertion, as I shall subsequently prove by something more logical than prejudice.

Does Mr. Welch forget that even the rudimentary education of many thousands of children was bitterly opposed by "councillors, ratepayers, and men of all sorts"? Surely he must know that if Forster's beneficent Act of 1870 had been framed on the

same lines as the various Libraries Acts, we should have had districts long remaining deplorably deficient in elementary schools. It is easy to translate the prejudices of such persons, some of whom were probably educated in institutions endowed with funds intended for the poor, and who yet think the poor man's child over-educated by a Board School curriculum. These are the authorities of prejudice who raise up a fiction bogie against the libraries. These are the men who affect to be shocked that the majority of the people are not students, when they have hindered the culture of the masses, which would have enabled them to enjoy the higher branches of literature. This phantom of prejudice hovering about Guildhall appears to have found the librarian in a susceptible condition and deluded him. After this experience, Mr. Welch seems to have thought it necessary to fortify himself with a quotation. Stress of circumstances caused him to cut an isolated paragraph from a certain newspaper which, by the way, is not regarded as a safe oracle at Guildhall. This extract about the issue of fiction at seventeen libraries he used without analysis or context as his concrete malediction. Verily, Master Shakespeare was right :—

“ And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness
[councillors, ratepayers, and men of all sorts]
Win us with honest trifles, to betray us
In deepest consequence.”

The fiction issue is an honest trifle. I have some lingering spark of hope that Mr. Welch's aberration with regard to it may not develop into a chronic complaint. Here are his words :—

“ Let us now see how far the Free Libraries at present established in the county of London have carried out their functions in consonance with the clear intentions of the legislature.”

Then he parades the fiction issue as the indication and measure of the ousting of the student. The only inference to be drawn by the uninitiated was that the library authorities had departed from their high mission by providing only 25 per cent. of studious books to give the inordinate favour of 75 per cent. to the devourer of fiction. That would, indeed, have been “ ousting the student ” ; but the reverse of this is the fact.

I have communicated with a large number of London and provincial librarians, in reference to the stock of fiction as compared with literature of a more studious kind. There is absolute

unanimity in the replies to Mr. Welch's allegation. In the London libraries, with which alone I intend to deal specifically, the studious readers have been provided with at least 70 per cent. of the total stock, while the fiction readers, who are said to have been inordinately favoured, have to be satisfied with not more, and often less, than 30 per cent. If it is admitted that the majority of readers are not of the studious class, then the fallacy of the charge is the more apparent and unwarranted, as it makes the provision for the minority correspondingly more liberal. It has been explained, with frequent iteration, that the issue-record of fiction is high simply because books of this kind lend themselves to rapid perusal, and are issued again and again, while other works remain in the students' hands. Mr. Welch could not, I presume, have been ignorant of this when he wrote, but he ignored it, and also the more important fact of the stock, which alone is the test of whether or not the claims of students have been ignored.

In further refutation of this reckless imputation I instance the return, from a typical London borough, of non-fictional books actually in the hands of borrowers on a single day. This return represents 4,394 volumes of a distinctly intellectual character which were in circulation on November 1st. Perhaps Mr. Welch will consider the educational value of such works, studied in the homes of the people, compared with the relatively few solid readers, and the many time-killers, who occupy seats and a writing pad at the Guildhall Library for the purpose of studying a volume of *Tom Jones*, *Pickwick*, or one of *Lytton's* novels. The figures I have quoted are by no means exceptional, but may be regarded as a fair indication of the educational influence of the young libraries of the metropolis; and I do not think there is a single library within the county of London, or in the provinces, which could not refute the unwarrantable charge made against those responsible for the administration of a public trust.

The happy-go-lucky style of Mr. Welch's discrimination would not serve any librarian who had to make a comprehensive selection of books, suited to a mixed community, at a small cost. In all cases great foresight and care are needed in selecting the initial stock of a library. Supposing this has been efficiently done, it will be found that the subsequent annual accessions need not be very numerous in philosophy, history, theology, poetry, or even travel; but in the arts and sciences the number of books which ought to be added will be very

considerable. The librarian is wise who makes his stock as complete as possible at the start in those classes in which the works are not subject to become out of date. This cannot be avoided in the physical sciences and chemistry, owing to the expansion and consequent sub-division of works of this class. The same applies also to technology; for not only are fresh treatises on old-established handicrafts being issued, but new trades are added every year as "science, fashion, or necessity calls them into existence," 139 having been added to the list in the London Directory during last year. In my opinion, the stock of fiction should be full up, or nearly so, at the start of a library, because there are not likely to be many new works in this class which it will be imperative to add. Hence, by getting all the standard writers and the most popular of living authors represented, the catalogue would not be seriously affected by accessions for some considerable time. If the course I have indicated is followed, as I believe it is to a very large extent, then the ratio of fiction would necessarily be reduced as the accessions are made. This is borne out by my own experience, and it is emphasised by the older provincial libraries. In my judgment, however, it would be unwise to allow the stock of fiction to fall much below the present ratio, because it is the recruiting ground from which the students come. The new generation of readers will not differ very materially from the present with respect to their taste for fictional writing; and a library which ignored it would not increase, but would really diminish the number, of those who rise to the higher plane of reading.

I am unable to discover a single practical suggestion in Mr. Welch's paper. Its slipshod history is irritating. Mr. Welch does not even appear to know that the Ewart Act of 1850 proved abortive; for he read a long string of extracts from speeches, apparently oblivious that they referred to an Act which was repealed within six years by the useful Act of 1855. He does not seem to remember that there were people with narrow prejudices forty-five years ago, who spoilt the first statute; but they no more represented the pioneers of the movement than the Librarian to the Corporation of London can be said to represent the living, intelligent appreciation of the movement to-day.

Although circumstances have greatly changed, the intentions of the early promoters are wonderfully akin to the administration which generally prevails at the present time. To

prove this, let me quote a brief extract, written in 1849, which will be found in Chambers' *Papers for the People*:—

"At the present time the best books on all subjects are to be purchased at a moderate rate ; and in the formation of *new* libraries attention should *first* be paid to the supply of works most generally in demand. It will neither be wise nor just to the public to purchase, at the outset, rare and curious works : when a sufficient supply of really useful and generally read publications has been obtained, it will be quite time enough to think of indulging bibliomania."

This is exactly what has been done ; and it shows how completely Mr. Welch has missed his way in history as in statistics, when he asserts that there has been a departure and a declension in the modern development of the library movement.

With respect to reference and special collections, Dr. Garnett pointed out that the libraries in the different colleges of Oxford offered no analogy to the conditions within the wide area of London. Special collections have been accumulated where local handicrafts make them particularly useful. This has been done all over the country, and it is being done in the young libraries of London, including such districts as Bermondsey, Clerkenwell, Shoreditch, &c. The self-constituted "guide, philosopher, and friend" knocks himself against pillar and post in his peregrinations over the "haphazard system in which London libraries are growing up." It must "end in confusion, perhaps (in some cases) in partial or complete failure." But this catastrophe may be avoided "if," said Mr. Welch, the question is "settled on lines similar to those which I venture to lay before you." These lines are hard to find and they are so woefully tangled that even their author desires to bequeath them to a conference to be unravelled.

When I heard his all-embracing exordium, I was reminded of the chapter in natural history relating to snakes in Iceland. As I listened I wondered if it were possible to draw out the "thread of verbosity" without the staple of an argument. He advanced absolutely no evidence to prove that the student had been "ousted." Where, too, is there "haphazard system" and "confusion" in the administration north or south of the Thames? Chelsea is well to the fore ; Clerkenwell is healthy, if fractious ; Hammersmith has an expectant eye on a penny ; Hampstead is robing itself ; Kensington is wide-awake ; St. George, Hanover Square, is well equipped ; St. Martin-in-the-Fields is letting no grass grow there ; while Shoreditch and

Whitechapel are in a perspiring state of energy. I affirm from what I know of these libraries, and testify from what I have seen. Then in the great area of South London, from Putney on the south-west across to the south-east, there is no confusion arising from a plethora of books or money. Here, as elsewhere, reference collections are growing. Battersea has never given a cold shoulder, but a warm hand, to the student. Its reference library, however, would not be conveniently accessible to Lambeth people, who, therefore, have one of their own. So, also, has the adjoining borough of Camberwell, which is big enough to need it, and collections are likewise being formed in Newington, Bermondsey, Lewisham, Southwark, &c., which will not conflict with other districts.

Now, the reference collections all over London, though comparatively small, are increasing as rapidly as library authorities can make them. But that is not all. They are augmented by facilities offered to readers, who are permitted, in most cases, to use any books (other than fiction) that may be on the shelves of the lending department. Thus a library, with six or seven thousand volumes specially reserved for reference, may have twice or thrice that number available at any moment. This may be regarded as the "minutiae of the problem," which, apparently, does not concern, and cannot be expected to concern, the Librarian to the Corporation of London. His mind, naturally, soars above such trifles, even as it cannot descend to weigh and analyse statistics. He is, as Byron was, in a crowd, "among them, but not of them"; and so the pose of his authority is really an interesting study. My inherent reverence for authority restrains me from criticism, except of the mildest kind. This I was encouraged to give by Mr. Welch, who looked forward with interest to the discussion to follow his paper, and I have made some attempt to save him from disappointment.

Mr. Welch's paper was first read at Belfast. It was next heard in the Egyptian Hall. It is now having its third reading. Having raised a false cry about "ousting the student," of giving "inordinate favour to the devourer of fiction," knowing that prejudice is strongest where the pocket is touched, Mr. Welch yet made the insidious suggestion of a twopenny rate, in order to remove the prejudices of "councillors, ratepayers, and men of all sorts." I am not surprised at the tenor of the communications received on the paper. It has been weighed in the balance and found wanting. What will he now do with it? I scarcely

like to give advice; but Hamlet's advice to the players might be of service :—

“ O, reform it altogether.”

But whether it is revised, suppressed, or goes forth as it was read, the writer can no longer plead ignorance as an excuse, for the evidence adduced at least proves :—

(1) That the public libraries, as at present administered, are doing a valuable educational work, practically on the lines anticipated by those who initiated the movement ; and

(2) That the claims of studious readers have received primary attention by the provision of at least 70 per cent. of the total stock of books against not more than 30 per cent. for readers of fiction.

I have yet to meet the librarian or commissioner who is not desirous of raising the general tone of reading. That the libraries have greatly checked the circulation of certain pernicious literature, particularly that read by the young, is strikingly apparent to those who have observed the changes of the past few years. While we want the Miltonian spirit, the “ Vigilant eye on bookes that demeane themselves,” we need also to avoid a too narrow view of literature. Books should, in a measure, do for us individually what they have done for mankind collectively, by developing what Wordsworth designates “ the mind's excursive power.” The accumulated wealth of knowledge waits to be claimed, and there is no hereditary succession. It is being claimed by thousands who are drawn to the public libraries ; but the appreciation of the best cannot at once be universal. Those who have been nursed in darkness may stumble in the light, but anon they will walk steadily along the upward track. With all the aids that may be given it must yet be a gradual and peculiarly personal evolution. Each individual aspirant must gather his own stores, and delve for his own nuggets :—

“ So build we up the beings that we are !
Thus deeply drinking in the soul of things
We shall be wise perforce, and, while inspired
By choice, and conscious that the will is free,
Unswerving shall we move along the path
Of order and of good.”

EDWARD FOSKETT.