A Political Club Library.¹

THE intention of the founders of the Gladstone Library at the National Liberal Club was that it should be mainly historical and political. There can be no doubt of the soundness of the principle which thus bases politics on history. If I may quote some words which I have used elsewhere:—"In proportion as mankind advances in a scientific conception of humanity and of the laws which govern its progress, so will men learn the importance of studying present problems in the light of past experience; and the history of men and of movements in past centuries will more and more furnish food for reflection, and thereupon motives for action." In a well-known phrase of Professor Freeman's, "History is past politics, and politics present history." But I venture to think that the relation between the two is even more intimate. Politics are the embryonic stage of history. The present, as to-day continually passes into yesterday, is contemporary history. Politics are not history, but are the strivings of the present to make the history of the future; they are contained in the womb of present history; but we cannot say that they will emerge thence alive. Many of the embryos of politics, are, as everyone knows, still-born, in spite of the promise of fecundity which once they gave; others are born into the historical world, and, in the course of a longer or shorter life of usefulness or of mere obstruction, beget their own political children, and then find their place in the stillness of the historical past, and for the most part are soon utterly forgotten. The point, however, of my illustration is this, that the connection between history and politics is a closer one than that indicated by the mere relation between present and past time, and that therefore, in the study of political problems, their historical parentage must never be left out of sight; while in regard to the problems themselves, we must recognise their necessarily plastic character, their liability to assume a character as yet unforeseen from the influence of the environment into

¹ Read before the Library Association, June 17th, 1889.

which they will be born, while that environment itself, we must remember, is only in process of formation, and will not be precisely that which we see around us to-day. It would be interesting to follow up this general idea by taking certain concrete political questions, such as that of the relations of Ireland to Great Britain, the connection between Church and State, and so on, and to consider what light it would throw on their probable ultimate solution; but I must be content to have submitted it only as furnishing a guide as to what should be the contents of a political library; and the upshot of it is this, that in seeking to form a prudent judgment on political problems we need not only the vast storehouse of past history available in a form for convenient and ready reference, but we need, even more, easy access to present facts, to trustworthy and intelligible statistics—to whatever may inform us accurately as to the immediate conditions of the given problem, and if possible may even enable us to make a reasonable forecast of what those conditions will become in the not distant future. More than this is unattainable.

A political library then should be, first and foremost, a nineteenth-century library. No doubt it would be of immense advantage to our political party if we could make it a twentieth-century library; but, that being impossible, we must be content with the nineteenth, always taking care that we are well up to date. Ancient history is all very well in its own proper place, and it may even be serviceable to illustrate contemporary political questions. It is pleasant, no doubt, to be familiar with the life and thought of ancient Athens or Rome, and like the late Matthew Arnold to speak of Mr. Gladstone as Cleon, or with Prince Bismarck to describe Lord Randolph Churchill as "a twopenny-halfpenny Catiline." These things give an agreeable classical spice to the treatment of our somewhat prosaic problems. But they do nothing really to clarify the situation, since the conditions, old and new, are so entirely diverse.

Of course I do not imply by the emphasis placed on the nineteenth century that other centuries are to be excluded. I only mean that the first aim of those whose business it is to fill our library shelves should be to start with the nineteenth century, and to make that fairly complete; and then, as opportunity offers, to work backwards, and to illustrate the past with the best standard works available. And among standard works I should include original authorities, and historical tracts and

pamphlets, whatever might be their literary value. But one thing should be strenuously avoided, and that is the spirit of mere antiquarianism or of bibliomania, which would squander the somewhat slender funds available on literary treasures, rare editions, early printing, choice old binding, and the like—things which have their value, as I should be among the first to admit, and their legitimate place elsewhere, but which in a library of the type now under consideration would be altogether beside the purpose.

Proceeding, then, to certain details of the proper contents of a political library, and passing over some about which there can be no question—such as Parliamentary history and debates, political speeches and memoirs, foreign treaties, Acts of Parliament, State papers, and the like—I should like to make an apology for the binding and preservation on a liberal scale of periodical publications. On the principle of being up to date, nothing better deserves to be placed in a political library than reviews, magazines, and certain of the more important weekly journals, as they are somewhat incorrectly called. Further, it must be borne in mind that most of the best writing on political questions now appears in the monthly magazines, and not only the best, but the most influential, for it is far more widely read than ninety-nine-hundredths of the books and pamphlets that are published. What in the seventeenth or eighteenth century would have been printed as a tract, and, if well written and if dealing with some burning question, would have had a wide circulation and would have made its mark on affairs, would now, as a matter of course, appear in the *Nineteenth Century*, the *Contemporary*, or the *Westminster*. Nor is this all. I said the magazines contained most of the best of the contemporary writing, and this is strictly true, for it is mainly the writing of specialists that has undergone editorial revision. But, further, in the hurry of modern life, and especially of modern political life, few men are able to devote time and research to the first-hand study of whatever subject may at the moment be uppermost, and we all have to trust to specialists. Magazine articles are mainly monographs by specialists, who can give us the case in a nutshell. And I will say it—though I say it with the fear before mine eyes of the learned men who will rise when I have finished my paper and will criticise this most heterodox opinion—I say that when a man's general and professional education has been completed on a fairly liberal scale, there are very few subjects on

which all that it is worth while for him to know cannot be contained in twenty octavo pages. Of course, I am not speaking of the pleasures of reading, as such, or of the influence exerted on the character by the study of literature; I am speaking only of knowledge in the sense of mere information.

There is only one other plea I have to urge on behalf of periodical publications, and that is in reply to the objection that if you keep and bind and shelve them, you soon fill your library with stuff which (however valuable) is buried behind its uniformly bound covers. Well, as to the first part, I think I know a library where worse things might be done than the filling of the shelves; and as to the second, that was very true until six years ago, when the immortal Poole published his *Index to Periodical Literature*, that colossal monument to American industry in the task of facilitating reference to monographs on every conceivable subject; and this book we have in our Library, and I have been careful to obtain the supplemental volume, and the quarterly parts, which bring it up to date; so that nothing in our library is on the whole better catalogued and indexed than such sets of periodicals as we have. I confess that when I turn over the pages of Poole's Index I wish we had more of them. He began with cataloguing some two hundred and thirty periodicals, English and American, dating from the year 1802; and later, nearly three hundred were included in his lists; but the number now indexed by the American Library Association is considerably smaller (about one hundred), but being more select, it is, I think, in proportion more valuable. The present aim (as stated in a prefatory note) is to give "a full set of references on the vital questions of the day, in philosophy, social science, politics and literature;" and a glance down any one of the columns shows how well this promise is fulfilled, and how serviceably perhaps every one of the periodicals indexed might find a place on the shelves of a political library. The entries are at present, however, only of service to us here when they refer to the *Edinburgh*, *Westminster*, *Quarterly*, *Fortnightly*, *Nineteenth Century* and *Contemporary*—all of which we have complete. I should add that the accession to the *Index* of the contents of the principal French and German periodicals is necessary to make it perfect; but these being added (as undoubtedly they will be some day), a very serviceable and by no means an uninteresting library might be made of periodicals alone, with an index like Poole's for its catalogue. No library would have its contents in the matter of subjects more readily accessible.

What I have been saying about periodical literature applies, I fear, also to Parliamentary papers, as these have an annual officially-published index. The index, however, not being published till the August of the following year, the great mass of the papers have lost their interest (which is for the most part ephemeral) by the time it appears; but in a library professedly political it is almost essential to bind the whole; especially as one never can be sure what subject that seems dead and buried one year may not the next become a burning question. In practice, however, I have found that Parliamentary papers are seldom asked for except within the first month of their publication. Indeed, they are mostly asked for before they have been published, a report being sometimes laid on the table of the House in MS., or early copies being sent to some of the principal newspapers some days before they are issued to the public.

As to pamphlets, I have already remarked that much of the most important matter which in old times would have been published in pamphlet form, now sees the light through the medium of periodical publications. Nevertheless there appear from time to time vigorous and important *brochures* on political questions, which their authors may not have cared to submit to editorial supervision, or which editors may not have had the wisdom to accept, and these it is certainly the business of a political library to procure and to keep. And since nothing is more difficult to obtain than a pamphlet when once out of print, or even before it is out of print, since booksellers will not trouble about what costs but a trifle, I will note in passing that well-wishers of our Library would do a great service by sending us copies of such publications, which are seldom advertised, and are often printed by local men, and so may not come under a librarian's notice.

As to the arrangement and *preservation* of pamphlets, the system of storing them in boxes—the one I have adopted, or, more correctly, am in process of adopting—has various advantages, as it admits of subjects being added to, or of being subdivided anew, without inconvenience; but binding is of course much safer, for it is a matter of experience in all libraries that readers who have the most unexceptionally high principles, and who would never dream of removing a heavy book or a bound volume of magazines, may yet, in a moment of abstraction, slip an interesting little pamphlet into their pockets; and what is thus lost can perhaps never be replaced.

I pass rapidly over certain other sections of a political

club library's contents, about which there can be no possible question. History in all its branches—ancient and modern, English, Scotch, Irish, European, Colonial, American and Oriental—must of course be liberally represented. The same is true of political economy, which should not, in a library, be interpreted in its narrower scientific sense, as referring only to the somewhat mechanical laws of supply and demand, but should cover the whole field of sociology, as well as the less elastic sub-divisions of commerce, finance, statistics, and the like. I have reason to hope that this section in our Library will soon become, with the aid of members of the Political Economy Circle, one of the most complete and important collections in London. It is essentially the field of study for the serious politician; and here, if anywhere, the reputation of a political library for usefulness may be won.

As to encyclopædias, dictionaries, concordances, and all similar works of reference, the only thing to be said is, the more numerous they are, the more various they are, and the more recent they are, the better. On the other hand, in regard to law books, speaking under correction, I submit that, unless there is a constant determination to devote a large proportion of the space, and a large proportion of the funds, to this department of literature (if literature it be), it is best excluded altogether. Here, in London, at any rate, admirable law libraries are within easy reach of all who have occasion to make professional use of them, and we could not compete with them to any purpose. Complete collections of statutes, whether repealed or in force, should no doubt be found in a political library, as also works on jurisprudence, both historical and scientific; but the technical study of the law is another matter.

There is, however, a department of literature—and a very important one—concerning which one may have very serious doubts whether it has rightly a place in a political library or not; and I trust that the discussion which follows will elicit some expression of opinion on this question. I refer to fiction.

To begin with, the writings of certain novelists would presumably be found there, because they belong to standard literature; and a library, political or otherwise, can hardly be termed a library, if it exclude on principle anything, either in prose or poetry, that is acknowledged as a classic. Then again, novels written by a prominent politician—such as those of Lord Beaconsfield—would doubtless be admitted, apart from all

question of their literary merit, on account of the position occupied by their author. But I am thinking rather of the fiction of the day, and whether it should be excluded entirely or receive a discriminating welcome. The former alternative is the present practice in the Gladstone Library; the latter is what I am about to advocate. Of course I am not advocating the admission of ephemeral trash—in other words, I am for the exclusion of perhaps nine-tenths of the novels which form the stock-in-trade of the circulating libraries. But we have to recognise the steady growth of a variety of fiction, styled by the Germans "*Tendenz Novellen*"—stories written with a definite purpose, to inculcate some doctrine, philosophical, theological, social or political; and here a policy of exclusion is surely suicidal. For, without going so far as an eminent French writer, who holds that the time is at hand when all knowledge will be communicated beneath the guise of fiction, it is clear that this method of stating and recommending new views on the most serious subjects is growing in popularity, and that not to recognise the fact is to cut oneself off from one of the most agreeable sources of information—and of information, too, which has often an important bearing on political questions. Take, for example, the case of *Robert Elsmere*. Of course its tendency is mainly theological, and this is developed at tedious length. But the story is a picture of what actually occurs in that ecclesiastical world of which the professional politician knows so little; and if he would ponder it over, it would throw a light on one aspect of the relations between Church and State, about which no statistics published by the Liberation Society can ever give any information. He would find that the State is less liberal than the Church in its unwillingness to repeal an Act of Uniformity passed 220 years ago: and that it is the oppressive burden of this Act, and not the lack of intelligent sympathy on the part of ecclesiastical superiors, which sometimes compels a clergyman, for conscience' sake, to withdraw from his professional position, and to run the risks of beginning his life anew outside the Established communion. Fiction, then (I take it), that aims at illustrating philosophical, ecclesiastical and social problems, has as legitimate a place in a political library as have Parliamentary debates. Of the two, the fiction is probably the more true to the realities of life.

I must be brief in what I add about the apparatus and management of a political library—indeed, there is not very

much that would differentiate it markedly from what is required in other libraries of similar size. There should, however, be special facilities for rapid reference, for it may be assumed that a politician is in a hurry. He has no time to study treatises; he does not come provided with the names of authors whose works he wishes to turn over. He does not always want to encumber himself with too profound a knowledge of the question that is the controversy of the day; he would be paralysed for action if he were to become familiar with all the facts and arguments urged by the other side. He wants to refresh his memory, to verify quotations of which his recollection is vague; he would like to lay his hand on little known but trustworthy statistics, which strikingly bear out the contentions of his side; he would gladly unearth damaging admissions made by the Opposition when they were in power; or finally, he wants a few apt illustrations to strengthen and elucidate his arguments. In his political club library therefore a catalogue according to authors is of little or no use to him. He wants an index of subjects, and of subjects in minute detail. He does not want to be referred to So-and-so, who has written on the question; he must be pointed to the book, to the chapter, to the page where the question is discussed. This index should refer him not only to books, but to pamphlets, to magazine articles, even to newspapers, and it should continuously be kept up to date.

Now here it is obvious that we are approaching, if we have not reached, the impossible. A catalogue according to subjects is always difficult to compile, even in a small library. It has been successfully managed in America in the case of one or two large medical libraries. But where the library is large and the contents are various, I do not see how it is possible without the co-operation of a large staff of readers, who shall study every book in the library, keeping abreast of all its accessions, including pamphlets and periodicals, and shall methodically tabulate the results on a common system, based on the plan of the card-catalogue. This could be done, but the labour would be enormous, and the results hardly adequate; for hundreds and hundreds of subjects would be indexed to which no reference would ever be made. What in my judgment is practicable is this: the librarian should make a list of contemporary political questions; to begin with he might take the subjects dealt with in Mr. Sydney Buxton's admirable handbook, and he should enter under each heading what he knows the library to

contain, adding daily the results of his investigations in other quarters, where he hopes to find further information. He should be on the look out for other subjects that are likely to come up for discussion, so as to be ready in time; and this index should lie open in some conspicuous place in the library for the inspection of readers. I do not say that the work could be done quite satisfactorily. Amidst the ordinary routine of receiving and acknowledging books given to the library, of selecting, purchasing and settling for others, of cataloguing and arranging them, and of looking to the daily arrival of Parliamentary papers and other ephemeral literature, there would be some danger of its not being continually kept up to date, and so of losing its value. Still, if intelligently done it would be worth the doing, and it would be turning the librarian to better account than was usual in former times.

A hundred years or so ago he was commonly a mere custodian, whose business it was to keep the books dusted and in order, and to take good care that nobody touched them. His position was somewhat raised when he became a kind of reader's long arm, to get down the books that were asked for. Now he has been invested with functions that are altogether honourable, and he is expected to be a fount of information, not only on the fact of a book's being or not being in the library, but on the nature and value of its contents; and generally, to advise as to what should be read on any given subject. In a political club library the ideal librarian would be, not only all that he is expected to be elsewhere, but also cognisant of affairs abreast of political movements—something, in short, of an "old Parliamentary hand."

To conclude, there are one or two points of practical interest and importance to which I will only refer. The "Gladstone Library" is the library of a political club; but members of a political club are after all human, and it would be hard if, because they have taken in hand the formation of a political and historical library on a magnificent scale, they should be less well provided than ordinary clubmen are with books that are attractive to what is called the "general reader." There is room for improvement in this respect upstairs, although a good deal was done to remedy the deficiency by purchases made with Mr. Armitstead's donation. We ought, moreover, to increase fourfold our circulating library subscription, so that practically every new book of importance might at once be laid on the table.

Much smaller clubs than ours subscribe to the extent that I have indicated ; and it is the presence of the new books that makes a library popular.

So far as I have been able to ascertain, it was the original intention of the founders of this club that the Gladstone Library should be of a semi-public character—certain restrictions as to hours and the like being of course understood. It has often been remarked to me that it would be of great advantage to Liberal political associations if their officers could, under certain conditions, be allowed access to it ; and the same has more than once been urged with reference to the Women's Liberal Federation. Doubtless these points will be considered by the committee when the occasion arises.

It has been complained that the number of members who use the library is comparatively insignificant. There is less truth in this now than there was a few months ago ; but there would be nothing remarkable in the circumstance if it were so. I recollect a pious monkish chronicler who, in recording the partial destruction of his monastery by lightning, dwells on the divine wisdom which directed the thunderbolt to fall on the library, which was empty, and not on the refectory ; for in the latter case hardly one of the community would have escaped. A library used mainly for reference may be really of the utmost value, though readers do not remain long in it ; while a students' library, in which books would be written, would hardly be looked for in connection with a political club.

Meanwhile, in their annual report, the committee congratulate the Club on the progress that has been made during the past year, which has indeed been very considerable, the number of volumes having increased from some 1,500 to upwards of 8,000. It is not necessary that so rapid a rate should be continued for the Gladstone Library to become very shortly a credit and an attraction to the Club, and an institution of real service to the Liberal party, and one not unworthy of the honoured name that it bears.

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