

Half-hour Talks about Books with Library Readers.¹

LIBRARY lectures have proved to be a great boon to thousands of the middle and working classes. There is, however, a class which has not yet been reached by the efforts of the promoters of these lectures. It is not my purpose to specify the reasons for this, but it is my object to mention a scheme which might advantageously be adopted, not in place of the library lectures, but as auxiliary to them, and where the larger scheme cannot, for various reasons, be carried out.

The scheme of literary addresses, or "Half-hour talks with the people about books and their writers," has been in progress in Nottingham for four seasons. Loughborough, Hucknall Torkard, and Peterborough have followed in our wake in this respect, and other Midland towns have decided to follow suit next season.

Feeling that some readers were in need of guidance in their reading; finding that the literary lectures given in our University College were above their heads; also seeing a grand opportunity of bringing the advantages of our numerous libraries and reading-rooms before the inhabitants by means of the methods which might be adopted to advertise such addresses, and thereby increasing the usefulness thereof; and, further, feeling that the librarian ought to be brought into touch with all who use the institution under his care, I formulated a scheme which met with the approval of my committee in 1890. This has worked very advantageously, and is highly appreciated throughout our large town, and wherever it has been tried elsewhere.

The title, "Half-hour talks with the people about books and book-writers," explains the character and scope of the scheme. These short lectures are compressed within the period of thirty minutes or thereabouts. Shortness is a redeeming quality with many people in the matter of lectures and sermons. Many people can not only tolerate but enjoy a short lecture, where one of longer duration falls upon them. Being limited to that

¹ Read before the Annual Meeting of the Library Association, Belfast, September, 1894.

time, the "talker" gives the essence of what she or he knows upon the subject. The title forcibly suggests to speakers that the address should be given in a conversational manner, for there is no scope for "high falutin" language. The subjects are distinctly literary, and are taken up with the view of awakening an interest in the literature of the subject—not with the intention of satisfying, but with the desire of creating a thirst for further knowledge upon the subject.

These are delivered in twelve of our branch reading-rooms, so that the influence of the "half-hour talk" is felt throughout the whole of our extensive town of nearly 10,000 acres. Two are delivered at each during the season—one on each side of Christmas. These twenty-four annual lectures are given weekly, usually on Monday evenings, and commence at a quarter past eight promptly. Each is advertised by means of window-bills, which are displayed by shopkeepers in the vicinity of the reading-room in which the "talk" is to be given, and in the neighbouring reading-rooms and various workshops.

No difficulty is experienced in securing the services of capable speakers to give these "talks." Occasionally the same "talk" is repeated in two or three distant parts of the borough.

The reading-rooms are disturbed as little as possible for the giving of these talks, the object being to give as little formality as possible to them, and thus to make the readers feel "quite at home." Only a few minutes before they commence are the newspapers and magazines passed on to the ends of the tables, or papers collected from the stands.

For three seasons, local aldermen, town councillors, clergymen, ministers, or other well-known gentlemen, acted as "introducers"—the word indicating with precision the duties they were expected to perform—but during the fourth season, for certain local reasons, I assumed the position.

"Introducer" and "talker" occupy seats at the end of a centrally-situated table, the notes of the latter, if she or he has any, being appropriately placed on a pile of books.

The subjects deal with individual writers in various departments of literature, single books, and groups of authors, and literary works.

Care is always taken to have some literature on the shelves relating to the subject of the short lecture, and to have mention made by the lecturer, or the librarian, of collections at the central ending and reference libraries.

Votes of thanks are generally proposed and seconded by working men, and heartily carried, to the lecturer and introducer and occasionally to the library authorities.

These bright lectures are briefly reported in the local press, and add to the popularity of the scheme. The influence of a "talk" does not end with its delivery—the simple announcement that a certain author is to be, or has been, the subject of a "half-hour's talk" awakens an interest in the subject, and this causes a demand for books on the subject at all our libraries and reading-rooms.

Many working men have personally expressed their gratitude for the assistance afforded them in their reading, and for the opening out to them of channels which had hitherto been unknown to them, it having been pointed out to them how cheaply some of the books of some of our best authors are to be had. Many working men have commenced to form home libraries, and, generally speaking, the scheme of giving "half-hour talks" has been an abundant success to all concerned.

It should be added that the public librarian attends the whole of the lectures, and expresses his readiness to be consulted on any matters pertaining to books or the management of the libraries, at the close of the proceedings.

Having proved such a decided success, and not wishing to limit the advantages to Nottingham and the neighbourhood, I have sought this opportunity of laying the scheme of "half-hour talks about books and authors" before this meeting in the hope that others may be induced to adopt the scheme.

J. POTTER BRISCOE,
Public Librarian.

Public Libraries, Nottingham.

