

WHAT TO READ

Suggestions for the Better Utilisation of Public Libraries

SUBSTANCE OF AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BEFORE THE
TYNESIDE SUNDAY LECTURE SOCIETY

BY

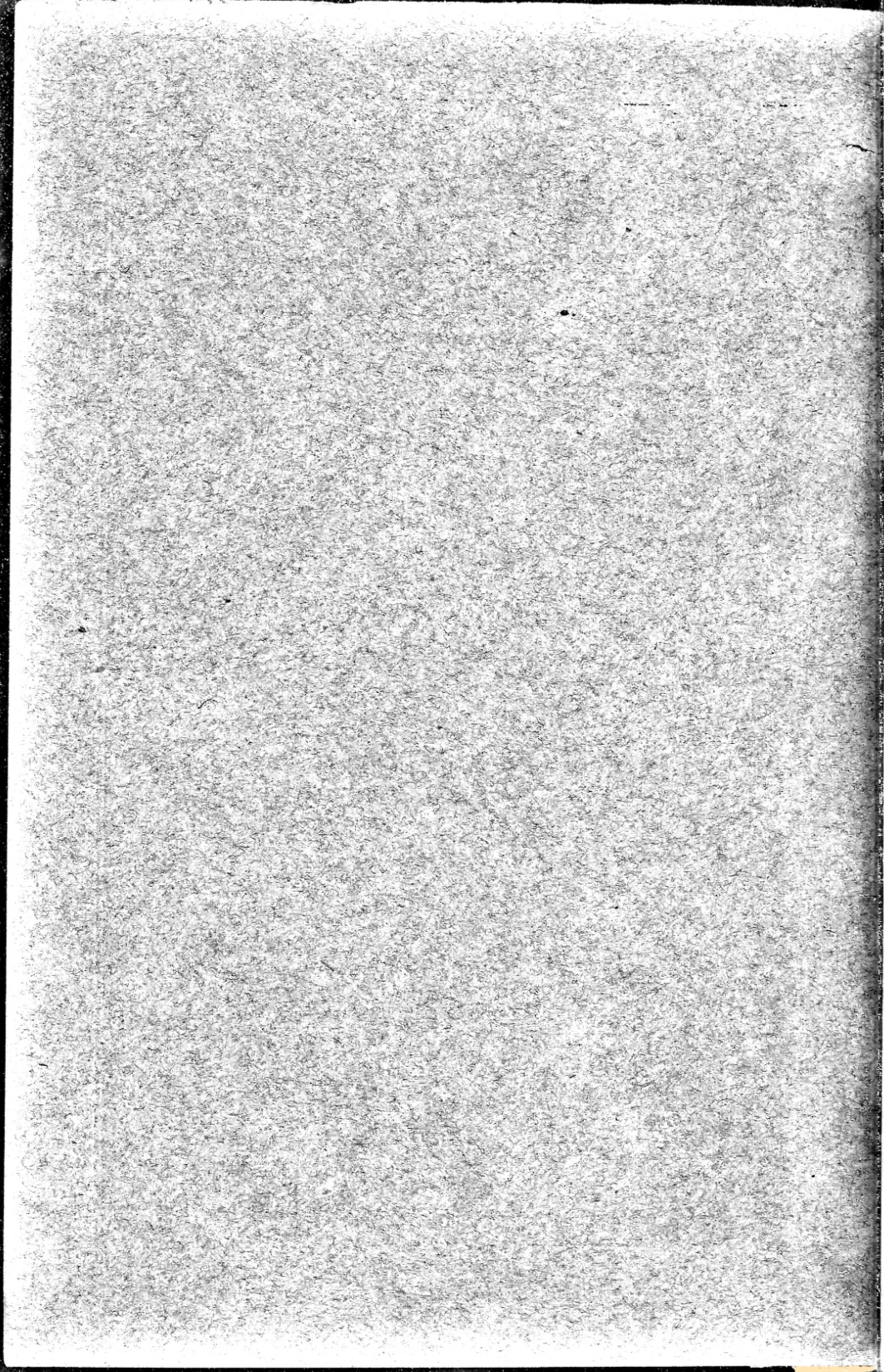
JOHN M. ROBERTSON

[ISSUED FOR THE RATIONALIST PRESS ASSOCIATION, LIMITED]

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NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

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OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

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WHAT TO READ :

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE BETTER UTILISATION OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

I.

A GOOD many years ago I was one of a band of amateur assistants to the librarians of the People's Palace in East London, upon one Sunday afternoon, when there was tried the experiment of throwing open the reading-room to the general public, with miscellaneous lots of books placed on all the tables. The business of the assistants was to try to gather from the visitors their preferences as to reading, and to supply them with something to their taste. As was to be expected, most comers wanted stories, and of these the supply was abundant. At my table a few read steadily for an hour or two, but no one, I think, the whole afternoon; and the majority kept their places for only a short time. To have a book was one thing, to read it was another.

How the plan thus started has fared since I know not; but I then received a strong impression of the need for some more systematic and continuous guidance to the great majority of the readers. A rich treasury lay at their disposal; but they needed some steady help to enable them to develop a sufficiently enduring desire to enjoy it. For the most part they were as sheep without a shepherd.

Many librarians, I do not doubt, give much of the needed assistance day by day to many readers; and in populations less restless than those of East London

public libraries are probably better used than by those in the ordinary course of things ; but my conviction remains that in general they are not nearly as much utilised as they might be, and it is on that view that I want to offer some suggestions, on the one hand to any young people who may care to listen, and on the other hand to those elders who may accept my view and be desirous of giving guidance to the young people of their circle.

I would begin by planning for a boy or girl who has just left school, about thirteen or fourteen, and who may have, as all ought to have, some hours of leisure every day—leisure that is apt to be either wasted or devoted too exclusively to amusement. To all such, with access to a public library, there is open in some degree the possibility of becoming fairly well informed, and no less cultured (as the phrase goes) than the majority of middle-class people, whose schooling usually lasts a good deal longer than that of working folks. Young people of the working-class must not suppose that, because they do not get a college education, they can never be well educated. It is only too easy for a youth to go through an English public school and university without being well educated. Not only do the majority never really learn the dead languages on which they spend so much time ; they do not have their minds well opened to the knowledge and the entertainment that is possible to them in their own language. And what they miss may in large measure be attained by poorer people outside of universities.

Remember the saying of Carlyle : “ The true university of these days is a library of printed books.” Carlyle said that what his own university did for him was to teach him to read in various languages ; and as a matter of fact the languages through which he did most of his work (French and German) were not in his university curriculum. You will not suppose me to deny that a

good university—or even a faulty university such as Oxford or Cambridge—may do a great deal for a youth who takes an interest in his studies. And you will not suppose me, on the other hand, to be satisfied with the education given in our ordinary popular schools, or with the social state of things in which young people have to begin (as I began) to work for a living at thirteen, or with the amount of leisure that is thus far possible to the mass of the workers at any age. I am far from being content on any of these points. But what I seek to do now is to help some to make more use of the limited possibilities that do exist, even for working folks' children.

II.

TAKING the ordinary boy or girl of thirteen, then, and assuming only an ordinary degree of intelligence, I would try to set up a habit of reading by offering stories. That is the natural way for ninety-nine out of a hundred: you must operate on curiosity, and you must first take it as you find it. The great thing is to set up the simple sense of pleasure in reading. Let the stories be as juvenile as you please; let them even be school-boy serials, so long as they are not mere romances of highway robbery, such as some traders are not ashamed to put in the way of poor boys. I do not know much about present-day literature for the young; but in my own early boyhood I spent many happy hours in reading the books of the late R. M. Ballantyne, and I should think these cannot yet be superseded. They are for many reasons much to be preferred to some later literature in which the young idea is in a disastrously literal sense taught to shoot, and to think of bloodshed as the most admirable of human activities. Ballantyne's books have for young people both interest and information: they recount both adventures and facts, giving them a fairly true idea of some aspects of actual life—the

life of explorers, hunters, firemen, railway-men, and so forth—with enough of episode and excitement to keep them enthralled. I still keep an affectionate recollection, too, of a certain work of the last century entitled *The Swiss Family Robinson*. It tells how a Swiss pastor and his family were wrecked on an island—one much better stocked than that of Robinson Crusoe; and the life they lived, as I recollect it, came as near the level of Paradise as a healthy boy or girl wants to reach. They found everything they wanted, in the light of the father's amazing knowledge—meat and drink, sago in a fallen sago-palm, natural lemonade in the green cocoanuts (which they tempted the monkeys to throw down at them), turtles, bread fruit, material for clothing, for housing, for luxury; every day brought a new discovery; and when, after years of this boundless happiness, the eldest son of that family discovered a neighbouring island on which there was a shipwrecked young lady, and left his Paradise to go and get married and settle down in Europe, no words could express my juvenile contempt for his bad taste.

Well, after a boy has read such a book as that he is better fitted to appreciate our own *Robinson Crusoe*, which is really a much greater book, going deeper into human character, and, what is very important, written in finer English than the other, which is an ordinary translation.

I doubt whether this sense of literary quality can be too soon appealed to in young people—at least, after thirteen. As soon as the boy reader can be got away from stories like Fenimore Cooper's and W. G. Kingston's and Mayne Reed's and Henty's, and the girl reader from her equivalent pleasures, let them try, or try them with, the works of Dickens—first the more amusing, later the more serious. I admit—though I am not at all a Dickens-worshipper—that a boy or girl of fifteen cannot properly appreciate the power of Dickens; but I do say

that when they can be brought under his spell they have begun to taste of the fountains of the higher literature; they begin to undergo a strictly literary effect; they begin to be concerned with character rather than with incident, to brood on life, to realise to some extent what society is. I can remember comparing notes, about the age of fifteen, with a fellow clerk, on the subject of Dickens. Our verdict was: "He makes you think"; and we used to quote his phrases, appreciating their dexterity, their humour, their quaintness. And if a boy does not take to Dickens, he may take to Kingsley; and that will serve.

But above all, the sense of style, which is the choicest of all the joys of reading, is to be cultivated through the reading of poetry. Here, again, we must begin with the simple, the easy. Let it be stories in verse—always rhyme for the beginner—ballads, patriotic songs, anything that will take the youthful palate. But a boy or girl of fourteen or fifteen can appreciate the clear charm of a great deal of Longfellow, or the vigorous tramp of verse like Scott's *Marmion*, or his *Lady of the Lake*, or *Lay of the Last Minstrel*; and gradually, when the ear has come to delight habitually in cadence, a higher order of pleasure will be found in the greater poets. Tennyson and Mrs. Browning are perhaps more readily enjoyed—at least as regards their rhymed verse—than Shelley; but any young taster of poetry will soon take delight in such a poem as Shelley's *Cloud*; and if you thereafter get him or her to perceive the mastery and the glamour of Keats and Coleridge, you have made a lover of poetry who is not likely to be unfaithful.

After that, give the young reader his head in poetry: set him at Milton, Spenser, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Browning, Wordsworth, Arnold: so long as you start with modern verse, and enlist the natural appetite, you are nearly safe. And though some people fear to interest young readers much in poetry, you will in all

likelihood find that it makes them not less but more concerned for education of a more utilitarian kind. All fine poetry promotes at once imagination and thought; and the sense of the delightfulness of beautiful speech is sure to extend itself to fine prose. Certainly we must guard against limiting culture to the æsthetic side, to the elements of form, style, cadence, and vocabulary; on this I shall have something to say later; but let us first and foremost insist on the need to cultivate imagination, even for the purpose of training the critical and scientific intelligence. So practical a thinker as Buckle has gone so far as to say that the poets are among the best trainers of the scientific intelligence; and you will remember that so distinguished a man of science as Tyndall has to a great extent corroborated him.

Even that, however, is not the final "defence of poetry." Its great vindication is that for all of us it may be a life-long ministry of refined enjoyment, an inward music that can transfigure jarring circumstance and lighten sombre hours as nothing else can; a music that the poor man can command when he has no access to the other joy of actual sound. I believe that, if you were to ask Mr. Thomas Burt—whose whole life does honour to the countryside to which he belongs—what it is in books that he has valued most since he began to read them, he would tell you that it is poetry. And I leave you to judge whether his love of poetry has made him unpractical, or inexact, or careless about the working side of life. He could get pleasure from remembered poetry in the coal-pit, and through taking such pleasure he was the sooner qualified to leave the coal-pit and to work with his brain for his fellows in the council-chamber of his country.

III.

EVEN then, on the side of pure enjoyment, books can be highly and truly educative ; and if the young reader be so hard worked that he or she does not readily take to what we call dry reading, let not the elders be discouraged. To mothers in particular I would say, do not fret if your daughter in her spare hours shows a passion for novels. If you can only lead her taste upwards on that path—and the best plan is always to travel that way yourself—she will grow wiser and better, not more flighty and indolent. A great novel is a piece of education ; and even some that are hardly great, such as the *Little Women* of Louisa Alcott, can do much to stimulate the intellect of young people. But those who have read Mrs. Oliphant and Charlotte Brontë and Jane Austen and George Eliot, have gained some real serious insight into life, and are better fitted to live it. And when readers of either sex are able to appreciate the work of the greatest masters of fiction—Thackeray or Hawthorne or Meredith in England, Balzac in France, or any of the great Russians (and they are perhaps the greatest of all) in translation, they have acquired some really vital culture—the kind of culture that deepens character and adds new meaning to all experience.

But there are some people, we know, who go on reading little else than novels all their lives—reading them indiscriminately, of course, for no one with a good taste can read new novels all the time ; and even if our taste be not very good, it is well to be warned against that sort of thing. It is a finding of delight in mere dissipation. Let the ingenuous young reader, then, be warned to mix “serious” reading with his literary pleasures as often as he can bring his mind to the effort. If he have a spontaneous taste for science, so much the better : such a taste is a rich possession, making rela-

tively easy the attainment of kinds of knowledge that to most people is hard of acquirement. But let not the grown-up guide be distressed if the youngster does not readily take to science. I can remember my father reproaching me, when I was about twelve, for not reading such a book as Hugh Miller's *Old Red Sandstone* in the time I was spending on *Robinson Crusoe*. I am not at all sure that he was very deep in the *Old Red Sandstone* himself, and the title certainly did not allure me to geology. In a great many minds, as in mine, the scientific interest is late to awaken.

A common and easy way of advance, however, is to pass from literature, as such, to history. A mind that has been interested by the novel is open to the historical novel—Dumas, say, to begin with, or Scott, or Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities*, or George Eliot's *Romola*—and from the historical novel to the history is an easy step. At first the young reader will care chiefly for the romance of history—I remember being intensely interested as a boy by Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico* and *Conquest of Peru*—and from such beginnings a boy may read history till he begins to realise that conquest is *not* the noblest side of it. Every boy, of course, should be taught the history of his own country; and as the ordinary school-books do little in that direction, set him as soon as may be to read John Richard Green's *Short History of the English People*. It is not so very short, but it is none the worse for being as long as two big novels; and though it has plenty of faults from a scientific point of view, it is still the most alive history of England that you can put in a young reader's hands. After that, let him try, with Freeman's *General Sketch* for a finger-post—or better, if he can follow it, Mr. Bryce's *Holy Roman Empire*—to get an idea of the historical development of Europe; and thereafter let him read all he can of the history of the great nations, extending his knowledge of later British history through Macaulay, whose

Essays, further, will be found among the best appetisers for European history in general. If he have a strong historic taste, he will turn with pleasure to Hallam for English constitutional history, and for his general *View of Europe in the Middle Ages*; but not all will take to the subject so kindly. The essential thing is that the reader be interested. If he is not concerned about history on a larger scale, try him with Carlyle's *French Revolution*. It will not exactly make him understand the Revolution, but it will set his mind and imagination to work; and political comprehension can come later.

If interest be once thus roused, history may be made a much more interesting thing than it usually is by taking large views of it. When you have got past the stage of reading it for its romance, you are not necessarily prepared to read with close attention the ordinary chronological narrative, in which kings and queens and generals and statesmen still count for so much, and the masses of men and women for so little. If you feel like this, let me counsel you to go to my early master, Buckle, for the most rousing stimulus that is yet available to the beginner in historical studies. From his *Introduction to the History of Civilisation in England* you will learn that there are large meanings in history; that the broad movement of civilisation can become as fascinating as any story of conquest; that the welter of historic events, which looks like a great chaos or measureless sea, has its laws, its intelligible sequences, as truly as any department of nature; and that as you begin to understand these laws the events themselves become newly interesting, even as all plants or forms of life or landscapes do when once you have got a grasp of botany, or biology, or geology.

And Buckle has this further merit, that he interests you in the natural sciences in the act of interesting you in the science of human affairs, were it only because he

is himself so intensely interested in them all. For him history is not a mere series of battles and conquests, of kings and dynasties, and religious or political quarrels ; it is also a series of advances in knowledge, of appearances of wise men, of thrilling discoveries, great inventions, aye, and of great books. And when once he has held you with his glittering eye, his glittering rhetoric, it is only lack of time that will withhold you from trying to follow him on all the paths he has so eagerly trodden. He is steeped in literature as such ; he delights in poetry ; he cannot contain himself when he writes of Shakespeare ; and all the while he is closely intent on the progress of the sciences, which he follows in every detail.

IV.

LET us not count too hopefully, however, on the deepening of our young reader's tastes ; or, rather, let us allow reasonable time for his growth in seriousness. After all, the young mind, as a rule, turns more spontaneously to the artistic than to the scientific side of things ; and our concern should be not to have things otherwise, but to see to it that the normal line of movement is followed in a progressive fashion. If the young reader cares specially for the charm of literature, for poetry, for drama, for romance, for style, let him be helped to get the best from all these. Show him, to begin with, that they can be studied critically, and with exactitude. What marks the scholarly study of any subject is just painstaking, the making sure of understanding all the details ; and to that end the young reader, after first getting his enjoyment from the poetry as such, should read his Shakespeare, his Milton, his Chaucer, in the annotated editions that are now common, mastering the obscure allusions, the peculiar idioms, the special uses of words, the archaisms. In this fashion he can give himself, with no great strain, a

good deal of the kind of discipline that is undergone by careful students at the universities.

If, further, he is to get the best from literature, he will do well to read the good critics. Quite young readers can get much stimulus from the essays of Hazlitt. Later, they will get an abundance of both stimulus and guidance from the essays of James Russell Lowell, from those of Matthew Arnold, from the *Hours in a Library* of Sir Leslie Stephen, from the volumes of the late Professor Minto, and last, but not least, from the *History of English Literature* by the distinguished Frenchman Taine. I rather think that Taine and the American Lowell make English literature more vividly interesting than do any of our own critics and historians. And as all good criticism is a criticism of life as well as of books and styles, the young reader is in this way also led to the deeper meanings of things. He will go to Emerson as literature, and he will find bracing counsel for life : seeking fine writing he will get great precepts, and the atmosphere of a noble spirit—the best thinking that has yet been yielded by the life of the New World. It is not exactly a coherent philosophy, but it is something nearly as great—an example in consistent magnanimity, incomparably stimulating to young minds. And Emerson gives a kind of introduction to literature that no one else supplies—an introduction to its spirit rather than to its forms, which leaves a sense of special intimacy of appreciation.

No man, of course, is an efficient guide on all paths ; and in some directions Emerson is a little narrow, so that you would not learn from him to value Goethe or Gibbon or some other great masters. The young student, accordingly, must learn to give his attention to different prompts, and to care as much as he can for all literatures. If he will learn a foreign language or two, so much the better ; it is no very hard undertaking, and in all large towns there are facilities for it. It is a much

simpler thing to learn French or German, or even Latin or Greek, than to become a master of the violin or the piano ; and many men spend on billiards an amount of attention and effort that would in a year or two give them fluency in Sanskrit. I might add that a command of foreign languages ought to be, in our country, a means of commercial advancement, for we are nationally deficient in that matter, though we have special need to be proficient. But I limit my appeal, at present, to the interests of the intellectual life, urging simply that the power to read in other languages is an opening of new windows upon life, and a means to mental pleasures that are otherwise hardly attainable. Poetry, in particular, hardly bears translation ; there is a fragrance that evaporates, a beauty that vanishes ; they must be found in the original tongue, if at all. Many excellent books, besides, do not get translated ; it is well worth while, in such a case, to be independent of help. But whether you are so or not, make it a part of your aspiration to know something of other literatures than your own ; and whether or not you master the classic dead languages, make it a point to know something of the classics, and to realise how men thought and felt in other ages, with other beliefs and sanctities, under other skies.

There is no great danger, I think, that the ordinary unscholarly man who rises above mere novel-reading will in this way be led to care unduly for what we call *belles-lettres*, fine letters, and to see culture solely in the knowledge of that. Such miscalculation is the mistake, mainly, of literary men and university dons ; the ordinary citizen is usually withheld from such one-sidedness. If, however, our young reader should chance to be specially biassed to the purely literary view of things, let him be warned that even that is, after all, an ignorant view ; and that literary men who know only poetry and artistic or entertaining prose, or at most the literature of unscientific human experience,

are simply ill-educated men. There can be no sound culture in these days without some connected knowledge of the subject-matter of the natural sciences ; just as, on the other hand, there can be no truly scientific thinking on social and political matters without a good knowledge of " humane letters "—the lore of feeling and aspiration—as well as of history. In both directions we see many men miscarry. Some, versed only in poetry and fiction, the literature of taste and feeling, passionately seek to impose their essentially ignorant ideals upon the world of politics, where they are only more refined specimens of the average man of passion. A poet who, by force of natural nobleness, transcends that average, is a great aider of civilisation ; a poet who merely turns into song the passions of commonplace men is but a blind guide of the blind. But when a cultivator of the physical sciences in turn thinks to rank as a guide in problems of public conduct on the mere strength of his knowledge of physics, he is no better accredited. There is far more of true political wisdom in a Shelley, with all his vagaries, than in a Tyndall, with all his science. The science of civic life is to be mastered only from the side of civics ; though every science may indeed help to the mastery of every other.

It is by bringing to bear on civic problems the temper, the patience, and above all the *veracity* which builds up the natural sciences, that the gains of modern " science " in general are to be socially reaped. Human society, the crown or flower of animal life, is to be understood not by interpreting it in terms of the special laws of the lower grades of evolution, but by learning to see it as a further evolution, for every step of which the laws have to be newly generalised. Sociology is not simple " Darwinism " ; and Darwin is only partially a sociologist. He even miscarried through assuming that his generalisation of the conditions of formation of species yielded a final prescription for the control of the

human species. But if our politicians, who are by way of being the specialists of social science, would but bring to their problems a moiety of the vigilant patience with which Darwin surveyed his own field, to say nothing of the benign temper in which he worked, they would be on the way to a signal betterment of public action. And towards such progress the disinterested study of science is potentially a precious discipline.

V.

NOR is this all. No man of fair intelligence and strength of character can reach manhood without spending some thought on the ultimate problems of life—those which are stated on the one hand through religion and on the other hand through philosophy. To be indifferent on the great issues of life and death is to be wanting in the essential seriousness which is needed to make a human being either good or wise; and some of the special force of the words “religion” and “religious” in the past has come from the feeling that mere indifference on these matters implies shallowness. Now, if there is anything made clear by the discussions of the past century, it is that the standing debate on religious questions can be efficiently entered on only on a basis of knowledge of the generalisations of the sciences—the “human,” that is, as well as the natural. To this conclusion all the capable disputants come. Orthodox religion is latterly being defended, not by rejecting the sciences, but by seeking to found on them; and that lately evolved science in particular which we broadly term Anthropology is being included in the orthodox purview no less than the sciences of Biology and Physics. To know something of Tylor and Lubbock and Spencer and Frazer, or of what they have established, is becoming an acknowledged need on all hands,

even as it has long been an acknowledged need to know the drift of Darwinism.

To have religious or philosophical opinions worth mentioning, then, we must found on some scientific knowledge of those aspects of life and nature which first moved men to frame religions and philosophies. Beginning in this way, the young student will haply stick to the true path of inquiry, which is the *historical*; that is to say, he will look always to the historical evolution of beliefs in order to shape aright his assent or dissent. And in that way, there is cause to hope, he will best learn the great lesson of tolerance. One thing becomes, I think, quite certain to all students who in any degree proceed upon critical reason—that on each side in every great intellectual strife there has been *some* error. Whichever side may be relatively right, it has some “blind spot,” some misbelief; and sometimes, looking back, it is much easier to see error on both sides than truth on either.

To realise this is to feel, surely, that absolute rightness is no more attainable than absolute happiness, and that the working ideal for thoughtful men is simply that of loyalty to reason, which means constant concern to avoid the snares of prejudice that beset us all, and willingness to admit that, as the best general is said to be merely the one who makes fewest blunders, so the truest thinker is the one who takes most precaution against error. He who has learned this lesson will not readily become a persecutor; and to abstain steadfastly from persecution is a great part of civic wisdom and virtue.

VI.

IN getting knowledge and broadening his mind, then, our young reader is preparing not only to make the best of life for himself, but to better it somewhat for others. For no culture is truly sound, scientifically

speaking, that does not tend to make men and women better citizens. Of what ultimate avail are individual "culture" and book knowledge if they do not save or further civilisation? What profits it men in general if they gain their own souls, so to speak, and lose their world?

As I put it before, the problem of civic or corporate well-being is as truly matter of science as any subject-matter commonly so-called. The trouble is that this, the very science of sciences, the ultimate practical problem for men, is so seldom studiously approached. You must spend tedious years in exact study, and give proof of having learned something in them, before you are permitted by law to prescribe medicines for the troubles of the mere individual body. But for the immensely complicated "body politic," so hard to anatomise and understand, every elector is as it were a chartered physician. How many men ever doubt their own fitness to doctor it? How many men take any pains to know scientifically the nature of the frame they prescribe for? In any one of the principal political disputes of the day, how many deem it necessary to make a careful study before they form an opinion and cast a vote? To take the principal issue of the present moment, how many on *either* side of the fiscal controversy have felt the necessity of carefully studying economics before coming to their conclusions? I fear they are but a small percentage.

Yet for an industrial State such as ours, economics, "political economy," is plainly the key science. Every elector should try to get some grasp of it. I am not going in this case to prescribe manuals: it is well to read more than one, comparing one with another; and if you should begin with the splendid rhetoric of Ruskin, who teaches rather as a prophet than as a man of science, there is no harm, provided you remember that eloquence is not necessarily truth, and that it is well to

take further counsel. As to the different economic schools, guidance can best be given otherwise; but I will offer the suggestion, which I have in some measure tested in teaching, that the young reader should try to take up his economics with his history. Here Buckle will help him. Let him remember that economics is the science of how things actually happen in industry and commerce, in the production and the distribution of wealth, in the creation of riches and poverty. To understand these things is a main part of the interest of history; and the true understanding of them works out as economics. Political economy, in fact, to be worthy of its name, should be a comprehension of some of the main forces which are shaping the history of our own day. And to do this all round, I need hardly say, is the practical end of the science which we call Sociology—that which I have already called the science of sciences—on the practical or human side, even as philosophy is the science of all the sciences on the cosmic side.

The young listener or reader may perhaps smile if I call this a fascinating science; and I do not expect him to be allured to it all at once, though he will find such a book as Spencer's *Study of Sociology* surprisingly interesting; but I promise him—and her—that the day comes when it grows to be fascinating for all who really take any happiness in thinking. And to take happiness in thinking is the gain that comes to all who have been concerned to make any worthy use of that great heritage of books. You may attain it, of course, in other ways as well—in looking on the face of Nature; in studying flower and rock and tree and cloud; in watching the pageant of the stars. All of these things, however, you will see better with the help of books; and if you grow, as we all should, equally on the side of thought and feeling, of heart and head, you will find in the troublous drama of the human life around you your most lasting practical concern. You will care more and

more to mend matters, to succour the feeble and the wretched, to bring it about that there shall be less of wretchedness and more of joy. And the scientific way of going about that task—the way of the trained physician as against that of the ignorant amateur or the quack—lies in thoroughly understanding how the social body is constituted, how civilisation grows, how States and races prosper or wane. Such knowledge is sociology.

VII.

WHEN all is said, however, the good of life to ourselves is to be had in the living of it; and while the desire to better the world for the sake of others is the most sustaining of aspirations, it would hardly be so if in cherishing it we did not find our own inner lives made better for us by the effort. And here it is that the attempt to grasp and master the science of human affairs, the science of society, yields to us that personal reward which is the peculiar ministry of all good literature. It is one of the ways in which we can best triumph over life's frustrations. Of these there is an abundant supply for all of us; but when you look reflectively in the face of frustration, you realise that it stands for the mere coincidence of things as well as for your own miscalculation; and against that blind and purposeless face of fortune you have in yourselves the resource of *mind*, which must prevail, if only you decline to surrender. Thus, for him or her who will use it, literature is a heritage which nothing can take away.

The great French writer Montesquieu, who in his chief works did so much towards the scientific interpretation of social development, has left to us the declaration that he never in his life had a *chagrin* which half an hour's reading would not put away. It is to be feared that he was not a very sensitive soul; he must have been a good deal at his ease in Zion, and he can hardly

have been much given to caring about other people's sorrows. And, indeed, however insensitive he was, he must have been exaggerating somewhat in that assertion: we cannot go through life, any of us, on such easy terms. But, after due deductions have been made, Montesquieu's avowal remains for us the revelation of a precious secret. He has pointed to one of the great anodynes for the pains of the mind.

And this anodyne, remember, is not a thing purchasable by wealth; it is the treasure of the poor, if they will steadfastly claim it. I have read that a distinguished American millionaire has recently declared that he would give a million dollars for a new stomach. Well, that too is a point at which millions of poor men have the better of him; but possibly his million may buy him relief. The doctors can do wonders with our stomachs now; lately, I read of their taking a man's stomach out and somehow mending it or making him develop a new one; and happily they can help us by less extreme measures also. Of another American millionaire it is told that, finding himself growing blind, he has offered a million dollars to anyone who will save his eyesight for him; and here again, though the case is more nearly desperate, wealth may one day buy what would now seem a miracle, such astonishing advances do our oculists make in their mastery of their mystery. But I am very sure that, if a millionaire should offer all his fortune for a new *mind*, there is no human skill that can supply him; for the making of a mind that is to be worth having in old age must be the work of all our preceding years. He might buy condensed information, or an assortment of ready-made opinions; but what he cannot buy is the thinking and judging faculty, the power to *enjoy* the stores of wisdom and beauty treasured up in books.

It is only the perverse, or those who cannot appreciate what they disparage, who make light of books; either

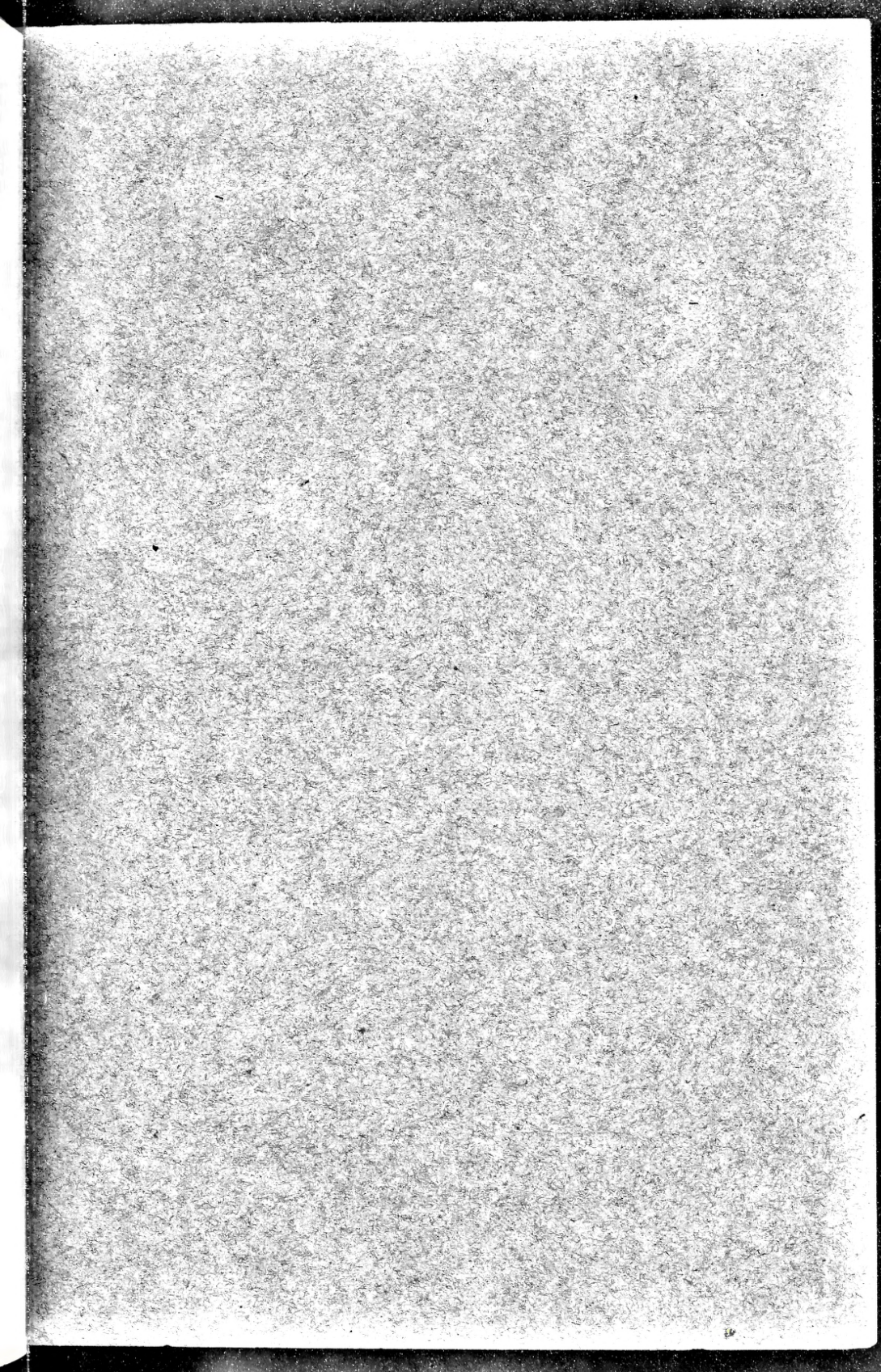
they are ungratefully ignoring what books have done for themselves, or they have not the patience to compass the boon they depreciate. Consider what a library is. It contains so many thousand books, many written merely to entertain, many merely to make money, many by dull people, but also many written by the wise and the witty, the good and the learned, with the purpose of making permanent their best thoughts and their happiest fancies. Sift down your store to these, and what do you possess? The best thinking and the most felicitous utterance of the people best worth knowing; living with them, you live in "the best of all good company." All that they have is yours. Turning your back on the noise and emptiness which makes up so much of daily life, you can dwell with them in an enchanted air. While the storm blows outside you can sit with the curtains drawn, and be led by Gibbon, at your own will, through the tremendous drama of the ancient world, or by Darwin, through the far vaster vistas of those dim ages in which the human world took its rise. Shelley will sing for you; Keats will pipe on his Grecian flutes; and Milton will roll forth for you the strains of his great organ. If the fancy take you, you can be in Mayfair with Thackeray; in the New England woods with Hawthorne; or in the mapless Europe of Shakspeare, behind whose magic curtain there goes on forever a transfigured life, which is that of humanity turned into poetry. You may chop logic with Mill, and argue your fill with Herbert Spencer; and you have this comfort all round, that when you dispute with the writer you read, whether you be right or wrong, he will always leave you the last word.

Nay, believe me, it is no fairy tale I am telling you. The fairy gold, in the stories, turns into dead leaves; but those dead leaves of books reverse the magic, and pay you spiritual gold every time you have faith to draw. All you need is to care about it. It is given to few of us to save much money; but it is open to the poorest to

save a great deal of time. You do it by turning time into knowledge, a deposit of which no fraud or commercial disaster can deprive you. And if you still shake your head, and say that fine words butter no parsnips, let me ask you in final challenge how you expect the world's parsnips are ever to be buttered better than now if men do not attain to a better comprehension of their own existence? And how are they to rise to that unless they read more, remember more, and think more?

Whatever the nations of the world have too little of, there is one thing they all have in superfluity: be their population dense or thin, growing or dwindling, they all have too many blockheads to the square mile. And I notice that on one point the politicians of all our parties are agreed. Whatever they advocate or oppose, whatever they say of each other, they all admit that in high places and in low we want more of what they call "efficiency." And whatever end they may have in view, we may be certain of this, that higher efficiency means more knowledge, more study, more comprehension, more intelligence, more brains. Then let us all do what we can, each for himself, to get some.

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IN THE PRESS.

Courses of Study

By J. M. ROBERTSON.

This work is expected to extend to between four and five hundred pages. It is an attempt to provide some systematic guidance to post-graduate students on all the main lines of book-knowledge. The scheme originated over a dozen years ago from the frequent requests made to the editor of the *National Reformer*—which post Mr. Robertson held after Mr. Bradlaugh, until the cessation of the journal—for advice on lines of reading. Such requests seemed to show a commonly felt need, and it was partly met by a series of "Courses" published from time to time in the journal in question. About the same period this need was recognised by the publication of Messrs. Sargant & Whishaw's *Book to Books* and the first of Mr. Swan Sonnenschein's classical bibliographies; but it has been felt that the original plan of "Courses" is worth reviving. Those published have accordingly been carefully revised, and expanded by inclusion of the latest literature of importance, and a much larger number of entirely new courses has been added, completing the undertaking. The book does not claim to be a complete bibliography for specialists, but by its aid any diligent student who has access to a fair public library can so follow up his studies in the main branches of knowledge as to attain competence therein. The Courses cover anthropology, mythology, hierology (with special courses on Judaism and Christianity), mental and moral philosophy, psychology, philology, æsthetics, history (in a series of separate courses on political economy, sociology, histories of literatures, and the natural sciences).

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