

*On the Establishment of Free Public Libraries in Canada.*

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[Abstract.]

In the machinery of modern progress now in operation, whether in Europe or America, free libraries, accessible to all classes, occupy a conspicuous place. But it is only within the last half century that the attempt has been made in England to introduce these useful institutions to public notice. In 1849 a select committee of the House of Commons was appointed to inquire into existing public libraries in the kingdom, and into the best means of extending their number, especially in large towns. Upon the close of this inquiry an Act was passed authorizing municipalities in towns and cities to levy a small rate for this object. The Act was afterwards applied to Scotland and Ireland. It has since been amended so as to give it a wider operation; and a measure is now before the Imperial Parliament to consolidate the existing law, and to increase its utility. It is proposed to extend the Act to the rural districts, so that thinly settled neighbourhoods may combine with places adjacent in order to secure the benefits of a free library.

From recent information we gather that most of these infant depositaries of knowledge, though they have usually commenced their operations in a very humble way, have gradually become flourishing and well frequented. There has been a steady increase in the demand for free libraries, especially in English towns. In some populous places, such as Birmingham and Manchester, the libraries have proved a marked success. Under admirable management they have attracted crowds of readers, which is a substantial proof of their educational value. The books have been selected with special reference to the wants of the particular district, or to the pursuits of the students. The mechanic or inventor, the lover of art, the social reformer, the budding politician, have each been provided with the necessary works for instruction in their respective branches of knowledge. And for the general reader, to whom books are a mere recreation, agreeable and wholesome literary food has been supplied, which has helped to preserve them from grosser temptations, and to enlarge, if not to elevate, their mental vision.

With such decided benefits attending the introduction of free public libraries into the United Kingdom, it is obvious that it would be a great desideratum if we could establish similar institutions amongst ourselves. The time has undoubtedly arrived when efforts in this direction, if judiciously made, might be expected to succeed.

Already the Province of Ontario has taken the initiative in this good work. At the last session of the Local Legislature, an Act was passed (Ont. Stat. 1882, ch. 22), to which his Honour the Lieutenant-Governor, in his prorogation speech, referred in the following appropriate terms:—"I congratulate you upon the passage of an Act which is intended to enable the municipalities to found free libraries, and maintain them in an efficient condition by levying a rate, so small as to be almost inappreciable in its incidence. The