



TRUTH FOR THE PEOPLE

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CONCERNING POETRY.

We receive all sorts of verse at this office, and usually a private note with each contribution, couched in terms somewhat like this:

"Dear Sir, I send you a poem which I hope you will think fit for publication. I would like very much if you would tell me whether you think I have any poetical gifts; and whether it would be desirable for me to devote myself to the writing of poems."

Of course life is too short to enable us to write a critique upon every piece of verse that comes to us; therefore, we take an opportunity like this of working off our long accumulating and highly pent-up feeling upon the point. Now ninety-eight persons out of every hundred think that poetry means the arrangement of certain words into lines, in metrical form, the lines rhyming in couplets or otherwise. A poet living near one of our lakes brought out a "book of poetry" some time ago, and he describes our common country in these lines:

"This is a land of inland seas
Whose waters seldom, if ever, freeze,
They are filled with incognito fish
Which you may pull out if you wish."

We now and again get a "poem" of much the same kidney as this; and likewise a request to criticise it. The best way of course would be to publish such sublimity that people could take a look at it. The same poet we believe of whom the above quatrain was born, also turned his gifted pen to an eulogy upon Percy Bysshe Shelley. Shelley, as our readers know, was drowned while sailing in a small boat in the Gulf of Spezia; and his body was burnt upon the sands where it had been cast by the sea. Therefore the Canadian bard to whom we refer, thus summed up the fate of the English poet:

"Glided, young and ill-fated
So early drowned and cremated."

We frequently are called upon to express our opinion of "poetry" resembling these two lines; but we never do it. Then at far distant places we hear them whisper, "What is the odds. In newspaper offices they have no taste for poetry. Best to try the magazines." A very prominent marsh poet down in New Brunswick has given a couple of volumes of verse to the public; and his writings are always spoken of as poetry. The following passage from his gifted pen lingers upon the writer's memory. It describes a hero clearing off with his true love. The waters are those of the Bay of Fundy:

"He saw the moon away up in the skies,
And the wind being calm, it made no noise,
—Says he of a sudden, 'we're sinking!'"

Mr. John Reado, of Montreal, a few days ago, had a paper on hereditary genius in America; and he quoted the author of the above lines as an example of transmitted genius.

There is another form of poetic expression, the lofty, the amazing kind, which young writers deliver from the fulness of their burning souls. When a certain prince was about visiting Ireland, a shoemaker bard dropped his half-finished slipper, and composed a couplet. It was this:

"O princely offspring of Braganza,
Eris greets thee with a stanza."

Another poet, about the same time, was de-

lirous of apostrophizing the ocean in a way "that the thing" had never been done before. This was his starting line

"O thou reservoir of immortal dampness."

Poetry of this sort, we beg to say again, we do not criticise, or write opinions upon. It is not in our line; and we must ask our correspondents, from parts rural or otherwise, to excuse us.

Then there is a class of poets who utter mighty poems while beseeching the muses to come and touch their lips with her lyre-springs. One person everpowered with poetic anguish, with the yearning to sing, cried out in these glorious and tremendous lines:

"O for a lay loud as the surge
That lashes Lapland's scounding shores."

But we cannot pause to give any more examples; neither shall we attempt a definition of poetry here; because to say what poetry is would be about as difficult as to say with strict scientific accuracy what light is. But light we can recognise when we see it; poetry is just as unmistakable.

Once more, it is just as presumptuous for a person who has the barest knowledge of English grammar, and who knows nothing about the laws of prosody or the methods of the masters of song, to sit down to write verse, as it would be for one who never studied navigation to undertake to steer a ship across the ocean. To TRUTH office, and to the office of every journal, come scores of "poems," out of metre and out of tune, showing that the writers know nothing about the art of verse-making. As a rule where such illiteracy exists there is almost invariably a poverty of thought; for a man with a message to deliver, and with proper understanding, approaches a high art like verse-making in his stockinged feet. It is only

"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

It would perhaps take away the breath from those who without any preparation rush into the making of verse to hear that it must take from five to ten years actual writing, before you can reach a mastery of your style; that is become master of the boat, the most direct, the clearest and most forcible way of presenting your thought. We hear a lot of stuff about Scott writing resonant, rolling verses when ten years old; but the verses he could write at twenty would not be worth putting upon paper. This is all that we have to say in this issue upon the poetry question.

EDUCATION IN ONTARIO.

The condition of education in Ontario has been so often referred to in these columns that to make it the subject of a lengthy article again would almost need an apology. But we are constrained to take the matter up because we find that the leading party newspapers have given much of their space of late to a discussion of educational topics; and they have looked upon the question from a party point of view, rather than from the grounds of patriotism. Let us suppose that in the administration of affairs the Hon. George W. Ross does sometimes commit a blunder;—but does that justify a wholesale

condemnation of his policy when his acts are nearly always right, and his intentions always proper?

The immediate occasion of the recent attacks upon the Hon. Minister of Education was the publication by the department of certain books bearing upon the general work of the schools. The work upon school architecture and Hygiene, by the well-known and capable educationist Dr. Hodgins, was singled out as a special object of attack. We feel ashamed to think that a newspaper so able as the MAIL is, should allow itself to sink so low as to make an attack upon a work which it well knew to be admirable, and of exceeding value, for the sake of having a blow at its political opponents. The MAIL we repeat, must, if the writer of the articles referred to had any understanding at all, have seen how wise, and timely, and practicable were the suggestions and plans in that book; and supposing that he could not see these plain facts for himself, if he had looked into his exchanges, those from abroad as well as from distant points in Canada, he would have seen that the book was welcomed and approved everywhere; that in many parts of the United States it was recommended as a chart to the directors of schools by thoughtful and prominent men; and that copious extracts from its pages were reproduced in the leading press. One does not mind what party papers of the minor stripe say; but a great newspaper like the MAIL ought not to impair its reputation for the remote chance of a small gain.

The entire "text-book" question has been raised, and nearly all the works chosen or prepared under the minister's directions have been sneered at; the gentlemen who compiled or adapted them have been compared with certain eminent authors in England whose works have been superseded, and a loud guffaw has gone up as the result of such comparison. This is extremely unfair; and we cannot believe that it is the result of ignorance.

When the Hon. George W. Ross came to the Educational Department, things were topsy turvy owing to the ill health of the minister responsible for educational management. The newspapers, trustees, inspectors, teachers, pupils and parents everywhere over the country were complaining about the lack of uniformity and the frequent changing of text books; in Toronto the publishers were brawling; and everywhere the demoralizing spectacle known as the "battle of the books" prevailed. Ring after ring was formed, one in the interests of this publisher, and another in that; and under a half promise from the Minister of Education, three sets of school readers were made at great expense to the publishers. Then arose the question as to which set should find favor with the Educational Department. It is not necessary to recount all the writtings in newspapers and in pamphlets that was done to prove that such a set was the acme of perfection, and that its rivals were worthless. In this way the matter stood when the present gentleman as-

sumed charge of the Department of Education. He rolled up his sleeves promptly and set at work, and it became plain soon that both his heart and his will were in the undertaking. As our readers must know affairs were in a state of the densest confusion;—and his first act was to clear the ground and see exactly how matters stood; to ascertain what claims the publishers had upon the Government, and how far the Department could go towards giving justice to all concerned. Calm, careful, patient consideration soon showed him a way out of the difficulty; then rising, with that energy of character for which his career has been conspicuous, he seized the text book difficulty by the throat, and promptly made an end of it. And in this way he did it: instead of trafficking with rival publishers, he announced that under the supervision of his department one set of readers would be prepared for the schools; that henceforth the project of producing a book for the schools must emanate from the Education Department. In this way was the difficulty ended; and instead of the rude and shallow criticisms to which the Minister has been subjected he has merited the thanks of every member of the community.

With respect to the many new text books prepared under the direction of Mr. Ross, this much is to be said: that if he has not attracted to him geniuses in the preparation of some of these books, that he has done the best that he could with the tools at his hands; and all his exertions have been in the direction of making our system of education harmonious. We regard that book either published or about being published, containing a history of Canada and of Great Britain, as inadequate from the Canadian standpoint. What is needed is a history of Canada, containing about 250 pages, written in the lucid, narrative style of the books of Charlotte Young which are so popular in the English schools. Unimportant events and dates, and all that dry, valueless matter which always repels, and is never worth knowing, should be dropped; and the history of the past should be presented in a series of epochs connected by light, running, deft links. We trust that the Minister may some day see his way clear to procure such a work for our schools. But for heaven's sake let none of the D.-as-Dusts touch it.

Before concluding we cannot refrain from saying a word respecting a low-bred and impertinent article which appeared some time ago in the MAIL respecting Mr. Ross. He declared that he at one time failed to obtain a second-class certificate. Well, what did he do? He did not fail however to obtain a first-class certificate, and he is a capable, industrious and prudent administrator of education. There are many university graduates who might fail on examination for a second-class certificate, and among that number honor might be found. We do not know whether it is a fact or not, but we are sure that love is blind.