

The Passing Librarian

SOME of our best known citizens leave us and would be much mortified if they knew how quickly and silently the gap, which their absence makes, will close up behind them. Their place may not be unimportant in the scheme of society, but a hundred other persons as competent are ready and willing to step into the vacant shoes and fulfil the duties. We shall not fill Mr. Douglas's room as easily as that. At the Carnegie Library he has presided for more years than I have known Vancouver, and all that time it has delighted him to give freely of his time and energy to keep the lamp of literature trimmed and burning in the West.

It has been no mercenary task, for the majority would probably have valued his services as librarian more, if he had loved books less, and given a mere dry, technical knowledge to his work. Sometimes he has had understanding and appreciative associates on the Library Board; as often these have been pushed aside in the election by more aggressive vote-hunters, who know as much of books as the later Pharaohs knew of Joseph. And over the library has brooded the usual doom of literature, a light appraisal, neglect, and the financial starvation, which in former days was supposed to be the most efficient nurse of genius.

If we think of all that a public library might be for a great city, and look on the actual accomplishments, we see much undone, many hopes unfulfilled; and when we consider the miserly appropriations of money made by the City Council for the Carnegie Library, it is plain that in faithless times their faith is not strong enough to move mountains, and that the miracle of the Loaves and Fishes is less easy to perform on Burrard Inlet than it was by the Lake of Galilee. Yet with all the beggarly means at his disposal, Mr. Douglas has had a wonderful measure of success. The Reference Library, inadequate as it is, covers a surprisingly large field of knowledge, and the lending library, although patched and threadbare, presents a decent appearance to the public gaze, if not too closely scrutinized. Now that Mr. Douglas has resigned, the City Council has tardily allowed the library an increase in its resources, and his successor will find their inadequacy less stringent than it has been in recent years. They say too that a ruthless cutting down of the library staff and the dismissal of servants, who have grown grey in the public service, will add to these funds; but too often we find that we have hardened our hearts without our pockets being better filled, and the reduction of today is only a step to the increase of tomorrow.

Friendships at least are not to be made in a day, and we shall miss the ready welcome, which we were sure to meet at the Librarian's room in days past. There we could find at any time an intelligent interest in whatever subject held our attention for the moment, a comprehensive knowledge of his bookshelves, and an eagerness to assist, which stretched the powers of the Reference Library to their furthest limit. Al-Mr. Douglas is a devoted worshipper of the spirit of letters, he has perhaps as keen an admiration for the vessels of the altar. The format of the book, its paper, its printing, the fair white margins, the engravings, the bindings, calf, cloth or morocco, these all speak to him more keenly than to the most of us. My feelings towards a first edition are almost as stunted as those of Peter Bell when he looked on the primrose; but to Mr. Douglas a first edition is a delight, an inspiration, wakening interests to which I am for ever a stranger. His favorite potentates of poetry, Shelley or Fitzgerald, excite in him an enthusiasm and reverence, which we seldom meet in these days, when any whippersnapper in criticism has the audacity to pass infallible judgments on the greatest names.

It was therefore not with any intention of picking out the faults or weaknesses in authors, and examining them under a magnifying glass that the Librarian took up the work of

giving literary lectures in the Reference Room. He had enjoyed reading their books himself, and he wished to share his pleasure with others. To readers, who had not met those writers before he wished to point the way towards where they lived in their books. Books make up a great part of his world, and he feels that when he is making us acquainted with his books he is introducing us to his best friends. Just as we seldom talk about the faults of our friends or wish to think about these, he draws a kindly veil over the failures and delinquencies of his authors, and tells of them only what is best. A very just and reasonable course to take in these introductions, for it is not a man's faults that win our friendship, although their humanity may sometimes endear their owner to us when once friendship has been established.

Love of literature is wider and deeper in Vancouver than it was a dozen years ago, and in commencing his lectures Mr. Douglas was more adventurous than we can now easily imagine. When the talk of the street corner was chiefly "cash down, so many dollars a month," Shakespeare stayed his full three centuries away from us, and poetry whispered too low to be heard of the people. I did not know Mr. Douglas in his pioneer attempts to arouse the spirit of letters in such surroundings, but I can well believe that there were many vacant chairs at the first lectures in the Library. As time passed, he achieved the success at which he aimed, for his audience grew in numbers until the seats were latterly too few to accommodate his hearers. Outside his own circle he established a literary fashion, which has made literature of better repute in Vancouver and lectures a popular means of breaking for an evening the tyranny of the picture show.

Mr. Douglas has always been a man avoiding publicity, and probably did not realize how many friends he had made in Vancouver, until the hour came when he was to leave it—at least for a time. Many who knew him did not suspect that he was an author, with several publications to his credit. That he never obtrudes upon his acquaintances, but it happens that this year he is the Vice-Chairman of the British Columbia section of the Canadian Authors Society. He is a Canadian, never so happy as in supporting the literature of Canada and its writers; he is an Imperialist, never losing touch with the greatness of the whole in his love for a part; and he draws one of his great interests in life from his Scottish descent, which is shown by the fact that this year he also holds the office of Vice-President in the Scottish Society of Vancouver. It was therefore a natural course for the Authors Society and the Scottish Society to be active in promoting the banquet, which was recently given to Mr. Douglas by his friends in the Hotel Vancouver. Mr. Robert Allison Hood, the President of the Authors Society was the Chairman and the toast drunk to the guest of the evening gave many of those present the opportunity of telling Mr. Douglas how much they had valued his friendship and the notable public work, which he had done as Librarian of the Carnegie Library. Mr. Douglas in his visit to California will have leisure for special work which his duties in Vancouver have prevented him from completing, but we are not without hope that the lure of the North ere long will be strong enough to draw him back to British Columbia. —D. G.

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