

## LITERARY DEPARTMENT.

## Prize Essay.

## LITERATURE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY.

"THERE is nothing more remarkable in the history of humanity, or less capable of reduction to rules than are the waves of literary impulse that sweep over a country." They neither resemble each other nor do they move at regular intervals. One has no natural connection in the way of cause and effect or resemblance to another. The mind, the form and the meaning change from one generation to another so entirely that it seems a new thing—a separate creation.

Beginning at the close of the eighteenth century we will endeavor, in a brief way, to show the force of one of these waves which has brought with it not only new-created laws and a new code, but has changed the very atmosphere of literature and introduced purer morals and a higher soul.

The chief movement of the English speaking people at the close of the last century was one of re-action against the ideas which had predominated for many years. People were becoming weary of the Classic Age and were rising in rebellion against the arbitrary rules with which Pope and his followers had fettered literature. All agreed that literature, and especially poetry, was becoming altogether cold and lifeless, and, conforming to rules and proprieties, was being divorced from Nature. Turning from the artificial, forced sentiments and foreign imitations as unsatisfying to the heart, they resorted to the early native poetry, and the effect of this is soon made apparent in the imitations and forgeries of romances of chivalry and simple narrative ballads. Ballad poetry, it is said, has always had a strong hold on the imagination of the people, but in this period it did more than please them—it influenced poetic taste, and we can trace it in most poets of the age. Particularly we find it caused the birth of the historic poem

brought to such perfection by Scott. This style of poetry took the heart of the people by storm, recounting, as it did, in language possessing a simple majesty, the legends and tales dear to all, mingled with which are word pictures of surpassing beauty. It is doubtful if the works of Byron would have been welcomed with the enthusiasm they received had the way not been prepared by the historical poem, and even after Scott ceased writing poetry (in recognition of Byron's superior genius) his lustre remained undimmed, and his verses, though inferior to Byron's in true poetical genius, have always been cherished by the people for whom he showed so much sympathy.

The literature of this age was influenced to a remarkable degree by Germany, whose productions in literature, "bold, speculative and profound," have gained ground both in England and America, and have everywhere left their impress on the thoughts of the people, and its influence shows itself in their works. While Germany was creating "freedom of thought" by its philosophy, France was also influencing in a like manner by the revolution which had swept over it, and which made itself felt even in England. These two great means of liberty of thought to the people, combined to produce the characteristics of those called by Taine, "The Romantic Poets."

Never in English poetry has such passionate unrestraint been found as is predominant in this school. It is as if the soul of man, so long held in check by the shackles of conventionalism, had at last burst its chains and poured forth its feelings with a fervor almost over-powering in its intensity.

With this spontaneity we perceive the love of nature increasing till in some of the schools, especially Wordsworth, it becomes a vital principle. Subjects that concern mankind in general, which were considered in the prior age too mean and lowly to be used for the best poems, again form the theme of poetry. The language too became less refined, and less stress was laid on the perfection of execution—a contrast to last century. Simplicity of style and sentiment,