

## THE PRESS AS A MENTAL POWER.

I shall not be accused of flattering any one when I say that I consider our press tolerably free from the license, which too often degrades and enfeebles the authority of the free press of the United States. Ours is chiefly to blame for the provincial narrowness of its views; for its localism and egotism; for the absence of a large and generous catholicity of spirit, both in the selection of its subjects and their treatment; for a rather servile dependence for its opinions of foreign affairs, on the leading newspapers of New York and London. Moreover there is sometimes an exaggerated pretentiousness of shop superiority, with which the public are troubled more than enough; for it is a truth, however able editors may overlook it, that the much-enduring reader does not, in nine cases out of ten, care one jack straw for what this editor thinks about that one, or whether our contemporary round the corner has or has not resorted to this, or other sharp practice in order to obtain a paragraph of exclusive intelligence. The reading public cordially wish all able editors better subjects than each others faults or foibles; and the fewer professional personalities one finds in his paper, the better he likes it, in the long run.

This newspaper literature forms by much the largest part of our general reading. There are in the four United Provinces about one hundred and thirty journals, of which thirty at least are published daily. Of the total number of habitual readers it is not possible to form a close estimate, but they are probably represented by one-half of the male adults of the population—say 400,000 souls. However ephemeral the form of this literature, the effect must be lasting; and men of one newspaper especially, are pretty much what their favourite editors make them. The responsibility of the editor is, therefore, in the precise proportion to the number and confidence of his readers. If they are 500, or 5000, or 50,000, so is the moral responsibility multiplied upon him. He stands to hundreds of thousands, in a relation as intimate as that of the physician to his patient, or the lawyer to his client; and only in a degree less sacred, than that of the pastor to his people. He is their harbinger of light, their counsellor, their director; it is not for him to build up the gaps in their educational training; to cut away the prejudices; to enlarge the sympathies; to make of his readers, men honest and brave, holders of truth and lovers of justice. Modern society does not afford educated men any position, short of the pulpit and the altar, more honorable, more powerful for good or evil, and more heavily responsible to society. The editorial character as we now know it, is not above a century old; that length of time ago, correspondents addressed the publisher or printer, but not the editor. Original views on events and affairs were in those days usually given to the press in pamphlet form—of which subdivision in literature England alone has produced enough to fill many libraries. This pamphlet literature is now for the most part a dead letter; as ephemeral as our newspapers now are; unless when falling into the hands of men like Swift, Addison, Johnson and Burke, the publication of a day in dealing with principles and great characters, rose to the dignity and authority of a classic. There is no insuperable obstacle in the case to prevent our newspaper writing undergoing a similar improvement. The best English and American journals are now written in a style not inferior in finish to the best books, and though ours is the limited patronage of a province, it is not unreasonable that in our principal cities we should look for a high-toned, thoughtful, and scholarly newspaper style of writing. In the Australian colonies, where, by sheer force of distance, much smaller communities than ours are thrown more on their own mental resources, they produce newspapers, in all respects, superior; and when they do borrow from their antipodean exchanges, they borrow only the best extracts. With us the scissors does much, and does well; but I should say with profound deference to the editorial scissors, to spare us, on all occasions, what passes for Irish anecdote across the border; and especially to avoid naturalizing among us, those discourses or narrations which are disfigured by blasphemous perversions, and parodies of the Sacred Scriptures.

## BOOKS AND PUBLIC READING LIBRARIES.

As to the other branch of supply, I believe our booksellers have nothing to complain of. The sale of books is on the increase, though not at all so largely as the sale of newspapers. Our books are mainly English, or American reprints of English originals. In point of price the editions are not so far apart as they were on the other side during the civil war. As to the classes of books most in request, I have been informed by one of our members well-informed on the matter, that the sales may be divided somewhat in these proportions: religious books 18 per cent., poetical works 10 per cent., books on historical, scientific and literary subjects 28 per cent., and works of fiction 44 per cent. My obliging informant (Mr. Samuel Dawson), adds in relation to the comparative money value of the several classes of books most in demand, the historical,

literary, and scientific works would represent about 45 per cent., the works of fiction 22, the poetical 15, and the religious 18 per cent. of the value. We thus have this striking result, that whereas the works of fiction are in volume, nearly one-half of all the reading done among us, in cost they come to less than one-fourth, what is expended for other and better books. An accurate analysis of these books would be a valuable index to what it much concerns us to know, whether "Thomas A. Kempis" is still the book most read next to the Bible. How many of Shakespeare, and how many of Tupper go to the hundred; whether the "Pilgrim's Progress" is bought chiefly as a child's book, or whether Keble's "Christian Year" sells as well or better than "Don Juan?" "The demand for novels," says my informant, "is not nearly so great as it was," and this he traces to the growing preference for newspapers and periodicals, containing serial stories and romances in chapters. On the general subject of reading fictitious works, I hold a *juste milieu* opinion. I hold that a bad novel is a bad thing, and a good one a good thing. That we have many bad novels, issued from the press every day, is a lamentable fact; books just as vile and flagitious in spirit as any of Mrs. Behm's abominations of a former century. The very facility with which these books are got together by their authors, might itself be taken as evidence of their worthlessness, for what mortal genius ever threw off works of thought or of art worthy of the name with such steam engine rapidity? It is true, Lopez de Vega could compose a comedy at a sitting, and Lafontaine, after writing one hundred and fifty sentimental stories, was obliged to restrain himself to two days writing in the week, otherwise he would have drowned out his publishers. But you know what has been said of "easy writing" generally. For my own part, though no enemy to a good novel, I feel that I would fail in my duty if I did not raise a warning voice against the promiscuous and exclusive reading of sensational and sensual books, many of them written by women, who are the disgrace of their sex, and read with avidity by those who want only the opportunity equally to disgrace it. We must battle bad books with good books. As our young people in this material age will hunger and thirst for romantic relations, there is no better corrective for an excess of imaginative reading than the actual lives and books of travel of such men as Hudson, Burton, Speke, Kane, Du Chailu, Huc and Livingston. These books lead us through strange scenes, among strange people, are full of genuine romance, proving the aphorism "truth is strange—stranger than fiction." But these are books which enlarge our sympathies, and do not pervert them; which excite our curiosity and satisfy it, but not at the expense of morals: which give certainty and precision to the geographical and historical dreams of our youthful days; which build up the gaps and spaces in our knowledge with new truths, certain to harmonize with all old truths—instead of filling our memories with vain or perplexing, or atrocious images, as the common run of novelists are every day doing.

## THE BOOK OF BOOKS ITSELF.

In regard to the Bible, Mr. McGee said, there is always, as a corrective to diseased imaginations, the Book of Books itself—the Bible. I do not speak of its perusal as a religious duty incumbent on all Christians; it is not my place to inculcate religious duties; but I speak of it here as a family book mainly; and I say that it is well for our new Dominion that within the reach of every one, who has learned to read, lies this one book, the rarest and most unequalled as to matter, the cheapest of books as to cost, the most readable as to arrangement. If we wish our younger generation to catch the inspiration of the highest eloquence, where else will they find it? If we wish to teach them lessons of patriotism, can we show it to them under nobler forms than in the maiden deliverer who smote the tyrant in the valley of Bethulia? or in the grief of Esdras as he poured the foreign king his wine at Susa? or in the sadness beyond the solace of song, which bowed down the exiles by the waters of Babylon? Every species of composition, and the highest kind in each species, is found in the wondrous two Testaments. We have the epic of Job; the idyl of Ruth; the elegies of Jeremiah; the didactics of Solomon; the sacred song of David; the sermons of the greater and lesser Prophets; the legislation of Moses; the parables of the Gospel; the travels of St. Paul; the first chapters of the history of the Church. Not only as the spiritual corrective of all vicious reading, but as the highest of histories, the truest of philosophies, and the most eloquent utterance of human organs, the Bible should be read for the young, and by the young, at all convenient seasons.

In other respects, I do not advocate a domestic spy system on our young people; but if one knew that a young friend or relative was acquiring a diseased appetite for opium-eating, would we not interfere in some way? And this danger to the mind is not less poisonous than that other drug is poisonous to the body. "The woman that hesitates," says the proverb, "is lost;" as truly may be it said, "the woman who hides her book is lost." And in this