

THE CANADA  
EDUCATIONAL MONTHLY  
AND SCHOOL MAGAZINE.

APRIL, 1883.

A FEW WORDS ABOUT THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

BY FREDERIC HARRISON.

THE stormy antipathies of Thomas Carlyle have to answer for many a miscarriage of historical justice ; but for none more unfounded than that superior air with which he teaches the nineteenth century to sit in judgment on the eighteenth. "The age of prose, of lying, of sham," said he, "the fraudulent-bankrupt century, the reign of Beelzebub, the peculiar era of cant." And so grows on our Teufelsdröckh through thirty octavo volumes, from the first philosophy of clothes to the last hour of Friedrich.

Invectives against a century are even more unprofitable than indictments against a nation. We are prepared for them in theology, but they have quite gone out of serious history. Whatever else it may be, we may take it that the nineteenth century is the product of the eighteenth, as that was in turn the product of the seventeenth ; and if the prince of darkness had so lately a hundred years of rule in Europe, to what fortunate event do

we owe our own deliverance, and indeed the nativity of Thomas Carlyle ? But surely invectives were never more out of place, than when hurled at a century which was simply the turning epoch of the modern world, the age which gave birth to the movements wherein we live, and to all the tasks that we yet labour to solve. Look at the eighteenth century on all sides of its manifold life, free the mind from that lofty pity with which prosperous folk are apt to remember their grandfathers, and we shall find it in achievement the equal of any century since the Middle Ages; in promise and suggestion and preparation, the century which most deeply concerns ourselves.

Though Mr. Carlyle seems to count it the sole merit of the eighteenth century to have provided us the French Revolution (the most glorious bonfire record in profane history), it is not a little curious that almost all his heroes in modern times, apart from Oliver Cromwell, are chil-