

To the Young Men of Western Canada

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Prejudices

It is a very easy thing to let our life become a prey to prejudice. This undesirable condition is bound to be the outcome of indulging one's petty dislikes. Brooding over real or fancied grievances and harboring animosities are positively bad for a man. This sort of thing operates as a poison on the moral system. By and by these attitudes usurp the whole horizon of the life, just as clouds spoil the brightness of a promising day.

We almost all have prejudices of some kind. Charles Lamb says, half in fun and probably half in earnest, that he hated Scotchmen, Hebrews, Negroes. That represented, so to say, his choice of dislikes. Nearly everyone has a little bevy of them. Almost everybody draws the line somewhere. Such a one is strong in his advocacy of social equality among people of his own race, who yet cannot abide the Oriental—Japanese, Chinese, Hindoo. A distant day will undoubtedly come when national prejudice, of the sort just alluded to, will be a thing of the past. At any rate, for our own peace of mind if for nothing else, it behooves us to check the reign of prejudice in our lives.

To-day's Happiness

It is very hard to realize in a practical and effective way that all we are immediately responsible for is the present day, the present hour, the present moment. If we could keep these "presents" right all would be well. There has been much debate about the bearing of a belief in Immortality on everyday morality. John Ruskin refers to the question in "The Crown of Wild Olive." He says that in his addresses to the working men of England he long took it for granted that they believed in the mortality of the soul. Suddenly he found that many of them did not so believe. As a result he had been shooting beside the mark. Ethical arguments presupposing a belief in Immortality had been leaving them untouched. He changed his tactics. He continued to believe in the persistence of the soul, so far as he himself was concerned; but his appeals for right conduct he thenceforth based solely on considerations affecting this present life. Even if there is no to-morrow, he said, it is wise in your interests to live in such and such a way to-day. John Morley refers to the same subject in his noble essay on Compromise. (Every young Western Canadian, by the way, should read such noble compositions as Mill's Essay on Liberty and Morley's Essay on Compromise. If they do not appeal to you the first time, read them again. They demand a certain mental fitness, and you should not rest satisfied until you realize their insight and elevation.) He shows that failure to believe in a future state is certainly no warrant for license. In other words, he attacks the soundness of the argument involved in the words: "Let us eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow we die." If we die to-morrow, he says, that is precisely why we should decline to live irresponsibly in the time that now is. "Work for the night is coming," should rather be the motto of such a man. In particular, so far as our relations to others are concerned, Morley points out that inability or refusal to believe in a future state should be no apology or ground for ruthlessness, cruelty or lack of consideration. Such a one, he puts it, should remember: the happiness I refuse or fail to give to those around me to-day, they will never have. As long as time runs, what they miss to-day, they miss forever.

That is powerful, is it not? One could hardly have a better rule. To-day's joys to-day or never. A scowl, a frown, a bitter word, often destroys the happiness of a whole group for a whole day. That day is irretrievably gone. Immortality or no immortality, no to-morrow can supply the quantum of happiness that was meant for to-day. Remember that time passes irretrievably. Clutch at that rule: Give to others to-day the happiness that, forfeited to-day, can never be recovered.

Local Journalism

The city lords it too much over the country. This is on the whole more the fault of the country than of the city. In other words, in many respects the country lets things go by default. Nowhere is this more true than in the matter of journalism. Everybody reads the big city daily, and nearly everybody neglects the local paper. Part of this will always continue. People will always have to read the big daily for world news. But the local paper should be given a chance. The editorial column of most country papers is a joke. It is not strange that this is the case. In the first place, the editor is overdriven. He owns the paper besides editing it. He solicits subscriptions and advertisements, he sets up the type, he does what editing is done. Occasionally he writes what he thinks a specially good article. The probability is, he gets not a word of appreciation. More attention is paid to some paragraph giving the measurements of a new potato, or describing a dance, than is accorded to a serious political article. The editor is hardly to be blamed if he stresses the details that seem to command

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editor would throw his columns open to certain carefully selected people. Why shouldn't the local preacher, teacher and lawyer, to mention no others, use the local paper as an organ for the expression of their views? Doubtless this is sometimes done, but too rarely. Let the local paper be a "trying-out" field for literary talent. The countryside abounds in interesting details of natural history. I remember some years ago seeing an interesting extract in a Winnipeg paper taken, if I am not mistaken, from a Souris contemporary. The article described an interesting fact in the habits of the squirrels along the Souris River. Instead of nesting in fallen or hollow trees, they had developed the practice of making their nests in standing trees, in effect like birds. I inferred that this was due to the absence of big, fallen trees. The detail may be unimportant, or it may even be untrue, though I have no reason to think it was, but it illustrates my point. Local papers might be made very rich in the reporting of peculiar and characteristic happenings.

Incidentally, but most importantly, talent would be developed. Every district has its quota of unusually clever people. Agnes Laut, was, for many years, after I came to Winnipeg, on the staff of the city schools. I think I am not incorrect in this. Later she was on the staff of the Free Press. The editor of those days used to tell me about articles that he frequently refused to accept from her. But she was not to be beaten. She persisted. She had faith in herself. To-day she is the author of many books, is a prolific contributor to big magazines, and, I think, has a residence on the Hudson. We all remember when Mrs. Nellie McClung was living in Manitou. It was the life that she knew that she took and utilised. She has made quite a stir in the world, and I have little doubt that she would make quite a stir on almost any stage she chose to move on. I remember a few years ago—perhaps ten—being in Crystal City. At a meeting where I delivered an address a young man, Robert Stead, read a poem of his own composing, "The Settler." I think Stead has since done quite notable work. Such and such a boy who sends an article to the local paper, who gets it printed, who repeats the experiment again and again, may ultimately gravitate to Winnipeg, to Regina, to Calgary, to Edmonton. Thence, urged on by laudable ambition, he may go to New York or to London; and the local paper will have the satisfaction of having nurtured a man of real talent. I was in Nova Scotia this summer. What was the paper that I was specially interested in? The Morning Chronicle of Halifax. Why? Because it was the paper that had been the vehicle for Joseph Howe, perhaps the greatest of Canadian orators; for Fielding, for fifteen years Finance Minister of Canada; for Longley, now Justice of the provincial supreme court; for Haliburton, author of "Sam Slick." I have been a number of times in Camden East, the little village near Napanee, Ontario, where Gilbert Parker spent some years. It would be interesting to look up the files of the local paper to see whether there are not some articles by the man who was destined to become famous and wealthy as a novelist, to become a member of the British House of Commons, and to be knighted.

Let the local newspapers of Western Canada conceive themselves as nursing grounds for all the talent that is locally available. The paper itself will take on a local flavor that will enhance its value and its standing; and the country will be enriched by the only thing that makes a nation worth while—namely, the evocation of talent.

Public Examination Days

When I was a boy, in what were supposed to be the very poor schools of the province of Quebec, the school year always closed with a public examination. The children appeared dressed in their best. The people of the village attended in considerable numbers. The teacher was on his mettle. Recitations bulked largely in the programme. I wonder if this practice has not largely disappeared. And if it has, is it not regrettable? I had an interesting conversation this summer with the post master of New Glasgow, Nova Scotia. He gave me this queer proof that the people of that province are well satisfied with their school system. He said that in his boyhood the practice of holding public examinations at the end of the year had obtained. To-day, he said, there is practically no such thing.

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His inference was that the people are perfectly satisfied to-day that all is well with the schools. I think it will be agreed that the inference is at least doubtful.

As I say, recitations used to figure largely in those programmes. Most of the great snatches of literature that I remember automatically occur in passages that I learned for such occasions. Just to illustrate. From one of Chatham's great speeches on the American Trouble I recall only these words: "If I were an American, as I am an Englishman, while a foreign enemy was embarked on my soil, I never would lay down my arms, never, never, never!" It was for such days I first learned the prologue of "The Lay of the Last Minstrel"; beginning, "The way was long, the wind was cold." For them I learned the old minstrel's passionate apostrophe to Scotland, commencing, "O Caledonia, stern and cold, meet nurse for a poetic child; Land of brown heath and shaggy wood, Land of the mountain and the flood." This summer I met A. H. Powell, a member of the International Waterways Commission, at St. John. We chatted for some hours in his great library of 5000 volumes. What did he talk of most? The great literature that he had learned as a boy out of the school readers.

Looking at the map of New Brunswick this summer I suddenly saw the name Tracadie. Echoes began to waken in my brain. What was stirring there? Vague memories, growing every moment more substantial, of a sombre description, read in boyhood in a school reader, of a lazzaretto for lepers situated at Tracadie. The thing had made an impression on my mind that I had never shaken myself clear of, and here I was within a half day's journey from that very Tracadie. I could hardly resist the temptation to take the time necessary to go; and I am sorry now that I did not yield to the temptation. How do I know what that impression of sombre solemnity has meant for my mind and life? There are two things we ought to stand for in connection with the local schools: a full revival of the good old-fashioned practice of holding public examinations, and for great readers that will fill the minds of the children with great and noble images, ideas and ideals.

Get Outside Yourself

One of the grand objects of self-discipline should be the development of the ability to get outside ourselves. We are too much disposed to "impute" ourselves to other people and to other things. In other words, we are too self-centred and subjective. I remember a bit of description that occurs in one of the dramas of Goethe. A traveller gazes at the spectacle of the setting sun. Thereafter, traversing with his eye the horizon, he sees images of the sun everywhere. He sees suns where there are none. Similarly we see our own judgments and opinions, likes and dislikes, everywhere. Each one who hears a certain sermon gets out of it what suits himself.

Let me give a couple of illustrations of my point. I have just finished reading a celebrated French novel called "Madame Bovary," by Flaubert. It is one of the classics of French Realism—one of the most famous novels of the nineteenth century. It is the record of the unhappy career of a woman who is unfaithful again and again to her husband, and who finally, involved in debt, commits suicide by poisoning herself. The critics discuss at great length the question: Is it moral or immoral, is it a virtuous book or a vicious one? I have just read a criticism of it by Fagnat. He says the book is in itself neither moral nor immoral; which it proves to be in any individual case depends on the reader. "To the pure all things are pure."

My other illustration comes nearer home. I have just this morning been chatting with a man who has been travelling through Saskatchewan and Alberta. "What about the West and conscription?" I asked him. One doesn't know what to think on this subject. If the Liberal Convention was a genuine reflection of Western opinion, apparently Saskatchewan and Alberta are against conscription. A bank manager in a small Saskatchewan town tells me he has yet to meet the farmer who favors enforced military service. A young Winnipegger spent his holidays at the home of a well-to-do farmer north of Regina. All the settlers are Ontario people, and most of them extremely comfortable. According to him they are, almost to a man, against conscription. My friend of to-day is a Conservative. He is a great admirer of Borden. "What about the West?" I asked him. "Well," he said, "I was in a machine shop at Govan the other day. In came a strapping young farmer about 35 years of age. I'm a Liberal but I'm done with Laurier. That's one sign," said my friend. "In Brandon the other day I met a man who said he had never polled anything but Liberal votes, but Sir Robert Borden is the greatest Canadian since Confederation. That's another straw showing which way the wind blows." And so this man goes about hearing, for the most part, what he wants to hear, and reaching conclusions that coincide with his own wishes or judgment. And, by the same token, that is what most of us do. I repeat, one of the hall-marks of the soundly disciplined man is the ability to observe facts impartially and objectively.