

articles to be found in the satchel of the schoolboy, and the tool-basket of the mechanic? Need I name "Robinson Crusoe," or "Pilgrim's Progress," or "Uncle Tom's Cabin," or "Petrarch's Lives," or "Macaulay's Essays," or "Captain Cook's Voyages," or "Benjamin Franklin's Auto-biography," with the scores of similar works whose very names are "household words," and which to be unacquainted with one must be transcendently learned, or deplorably ignorant. Now is there anything in common among these favourites of the multitude that will in any degree account for their great popularity? It can scarcely be attributed to their style; for some are learned, and others are commonplace and idiomatic. Nor can it be the particular order of literature; for we find here a fiction, there an allegory, and here again a dry matter of fact. What, then, is the secret charm that works in such dissimilar compositions? I think the solution will be found in the fact, that all contain, more or less complete, the story of a life; they are biographical—hence their attractiveness. And this view will be strengthened, if we turn from readers to authors, and infer the prevailing taste of the people from the prevailing practice of writers. Read the Reviews, estimate the comparative successes of authors and their works, and examine the balance-sheets of publishers, and it is highly probable that you would be found to affirm, that, in any book intended for the general reader, biography—either real or imaginary—is a *sine qua non* to be popular, profitable, and to a certain extent immortal, a book must photograph one of the many phases of human life.

Now a glance at our individual experience. What is our verdict as educators? Do we find that the children discover any preference for these life-stories? For myself, yes. I have seen large classes of tiny infants sit fascinated, or clap their little hands for very pleasure, under the influence of some touching life-story feelingly narrated. I have seen crowds of weary children, in an ill-ventilated Sunday-school roused to eager attention by some life-like biographical sketch. And most vividly do I remember the impression repeatedly produced upon a gang of barge-boys and costermongers that attended, or rather patronized, a primitive kind of Ragged-School in an exceedingly low neighbourhood by this very biographical teaching. Over and over again has order been restored, and an hour's wrapt attention secured, by the skilful narration of the life of some Scripture worthy; and I have considered it no bad compliment both, to teacher and subject, when the noisiest and most vulgar of the whole troop have peaceably retired with a "Good-night Teacher," and confidentially remarking to each other, as they lighted their short pipes at the door—"Well, if that 'ere tale didn't beat Phelps, blow me!" I think therefore that if one had the time and talent properly to enlarge upon the points to which I have just hurriedly referred, we should agree that history, our current literature, and our individual experience, all go to prove that the teaching of biography is universally attractive.

As teachers anxious to discover the causes of the various mental phenomena that come under our notice, we may very properly inquire why biography should thus enlist the sympathies and arrest the attention of man? One or two thoughts have suggested themselves to my own mind which I will venture to mention for your consideration.

In the first place, I think some of this relish for life-stories may be traced to the social nature of mankind. It would almost appear to be an essential element of human happiness to know everybody, and a good share of everybody's affairs. No wretched Bosjeman is sufficiently sunk in barbarism to be below his notice, and no Imperial Majesty can rise to such heights of grandeur as to be beyond his observation: he will devour with equal avidity the discoveries of Dr. Livingstone or the gossip of the Court Circular. Nor do I think that this curiosity springs altogether from a spirit of impertinent meddling, but would rather refer it to that deep-rooted conviction which obtains in every breast, that, somehow or the other, the condition and conduct of each is affected by the condition and conduct of all. The every-day greetings of "How do you do," and "God be with you," are not the mere meaningless conventionalities of an artificial society, but, rather, the natural outgoings of humanity grown up into a habit; hence it seems natural that the story of one man's career should possess attractions for all.

Again, some of this interest in biography may result from that mysterious quality in man which, for want of a term, I will call the "consciousness of immortality." I mean, that intense and undefinable longing to penetrate the obscurity of the past, or the future, that feeling of veneration that lends such peculiar charms to every thing dead, or very old, rendering Longfellow's advice to "let the dead past bury its dead," a practical impossibility, reversing, too, the old proverb, and estimating "a dead dog as better

than a living lion," so that the virtuous and the brave who have passed to the spirit world, revisit the imagination like another Samuel before another Saul, invested with parts and graces embellished and exaggerated by the doubtful light of the tomb.

To man's social nature, then, and to the sanctity which he attaches to the memory of the dead, I think may be referred some of the preference which is so universally discovered for biographical teaching.

If what has been advanced be true in fact, and fair in inference, it will be admitted that the teaching by life-stories offers a strong means by which to get at, and to influence, the minds of children and so merits the attention of every teacher.

But admitting that biography possesses all these charms, and can exert all this influence, I do not think it by any means follows that the results of such teaching will invariably be good. Indeed, it is quite competent for us to ask, whether some men's memories may not be left to perish? being neither fit to "point a moral," nor "to adorn a tale:" lives "so rank and pestilent," as 'twere wise and merciful to treat as carrion, and leave to the waters of oblivion. With this doubt uppermost in one's mind, a further question forces itself upon our consideration, namely: What use do we wish to make of this biographical teaching? To which I would answer: 1st. We wish to introduce the people to good company; and 2ndly. We wish to set before them the most unexceptionable models.

Now, accepting these two objects as proper ones, and worthy to be pursued, suppose we look about us in society, and ascertain whether the various agencies which profess to be means of public instruction, and to draw their lessons from life-stories, are taking the best course to attain to so laudable an object.

To begin with those universal exponents of life, whose great business it is "to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature,"—I mean the Opera and the Drama—what sort of companions and what description of models do they supply? Not quite what would satisfy a good taste, I fear. The great majority of their heroes and heroines are scarcely adapted to strengthen the decent, modest, workaday notions, which we desire to fasten upon our children; and although these places are visited more for amusement than instruction, that cannot be consistently urged as a reason why such prominence should be given to vice, instead of making the purest types of character the basis of all dramatic representations.

Turn now for a moment to some of our Literary teaching. Here is a first-class Monthly, invested with all the dignity of learning, and stamped with the authority of acknowledged genius, talking glibly of ethics and metaphysics, and assuming to be critical upon themes philological, classical, and poetical—one of the elect among the *litterati*—and yet, in this most respectable and proper periodical, we find writers selecting their life-stories from the lowest grade of criminals. Does it not strike one as something lamentably shocking, for a gentleman of brilliant parts and finished education to sit down, month after month, and grope among the rotteness beneath the gallows, paying more regard to the reputation of thieves and cut-throats than to his own, and striving to immortalize the names of Turpin and Jack Sheppard, by a process which must inevitably tarnish and tread into oblivion his own.

Visit, too, our Classical Academies, and I suspect we should find some of the gods and heroes which scholars delight to honour anything but the incarnations of persevering virtue and patient plodding righteousness; examples which simple-minded people would be apt to suppose better adapted to make boys caricature the pleasurable vices of bad gods than to imitate the sturdy virtues of good men.

But, to look a little nearer home, what are we doing in this direction in our Elementary Schools? Take History, for instance. Do we not sometimes detect ourselves in giving a very unwise prominence to plots, assassinations, and wars, thus engendering and cultivating a feeling of romantic interest on behalf of the Guy Fawkes, the Feltons, and the Napoleons of the world, both dangerous and undesirable?—while the really noble and sublime careers of a Newton, a Watt, a Hunter, a Wilberforce, or a Stephenson are passed by with an indifference as unwise as it is ungraceful?

To turn, lastly, to the very important subject of Scriptural Instruction, is there not too much of what goes by the name of "faithful teaching," both in our day and Sunday-Schools? and which, if interpreted, I think would in many instances mean an extremely injudicious selection of biographical illustrations. Why, to listen to some of our teachers, aye, and very good and earnest ones too, one would almost be led to conclude that the Bible was some antiquated Newgate Calendar, with such frequency and unction do they enlarge upon the wickedness of its heroes. Baalim