

THE ACADIA ATHENAEUM.

VOL. XII

WOLFVILLE, N. S., JANUARY, 1886.

No. 3.

THE Acadia Athenaeum.

Published Monthly during the College Year by
the Students of Acadia University.

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One copy per Year, \$1.00. Postage prepaid.

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→* The Sanctum. *←

THE Earl of Iddeleigh, better known as Sir Stafford Northcote, Lord Rector of the University of Edinburgh, lately delivered an address to the students concerning desultory reading. His consideration of the subject shows careful thought, deep insight, and a true regard for the practical value of labor expended among books. We wish briefly to note some of his leading thoughts, and shall not hesitate often to introduce his own words. He modestly approaches his subject as follows:—

“I shall not attempt to tread the high paths of science, or to enter far into the domain of philosophy. Neither shall I adventure upon the more elevated regions of literature or seek to explore the temples of the muses. My theme will be the pleasures, the dangers, the uses of what is commonly called desultory reading, and I hope to be allowed to decline for my address the more pretentious title of a lecture

and to describe it rather as a desultory discourse. Not that I regard desultory reading as unworthy philosophical examination, nor desultory study as a contradiction in terms.”

He believes the continuous reader will make the better progress in drawing deductions from given premises. The desultory reader may succeed more effectually in collecting the materials which must form the foundation of the inductive science. The comparative pleasures and advantages of close and desultory reading are compared the one to a journey by railway, the other to a journey on horseback. The railway will take you most quickly to your journey's end; but the horseman has the greater variety and enjoyment.

We are warned against confounding desultory work with idleness. The original application of the word to horsemen jumping actively from one steed to another certainly implied no loitering. But our book heritage is so great that it is impossible for any one to make himself acquainted with any considerable part of it. Hence our choice lies in ignorance of much, or in such knowledge as may be gained by desultory reading.

A change is necessary for mental relaxation. He never read so many novels in succession as during the months he was working for his degree at the rate of ten or twelve hours a day. “The student who is also something of a man of the world will often go further than the man who shuts out the light of day, that he may give himself wholly to his folio and his lamp.”

Misdirected energy is also deplored, the energy of the student whom Mr. Lowell makes the butt of his clever satire—“a reading machine ever wound up and going, he mastered whatever was not worth the knowing.”

He wisely advises always to read with an object. One may read for facts which can only be obtained by collating a great number of authorities. He may read to discover the true meaning of an author who has attained great celebrity, or for the sake of study-