

* Special Papers. *

EVOLUTION OF THE TREATMENT OF ENGLISH.*

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IN the brief address which I purpose making to-night before this Association, my object is not to discuss any phase of the historical development of the English language, nor to trace the growth of English literature through any of its successive stages; but merely to draw attention to ungenerous treatment long accorded to that language and literature by people of English speech, and to note some of the indications that the value and claims of English, as a subject of study, are at last beginning to receive proper recognition. The formation of this Association is at once a protest against the treatment which English has received, and a proof of increasing interest in the study of this, the chief of the modern languages. This interest has lately become so great, and the new methods of study, not universally adopted, unfortunately, differ so widely from those which have been too long in vogue, that the name, "New English," has not inappropriately been applied to the latest stage in the evolution of the treatment of the language.

To a foreigner it no doubt seems strange that, until a very recent date, the proper study of English has had no place among the subjects prescribed for the liberal education of English-speaking people. If he were acquainted with English history he might regard it as an instance of poetic justice that the English language has been obliged to suffer long years of outlawry as a punishment for the ingratitude of the English people, who first came to England as allies, and then subdued those whom they came to aid. It had hardly begun to shape itself into literary form when it became the bond-servant of the French, and ever since the Norman conquest it has been the victim of prejudice, as if it could never free itself from the stigma of serfdom. More than three centuries elapsed before it became the language of instruction in the schools, and good John Cornewaile, "Master of Grammar," who set the fashion of construing in English instead of French, would surely have been surprised had he been told that five centuries more would pass before English would be universally regarded as a suitable teaching subject.

Scarcely had English shaken off the French yoke when it fell under the dominion of the all-victorious Latin, and, like a captive bound to the victor's chariot in a Roman triumph, it has followed in the train of that language even to the present time. The vocabulary of the English language was enriched and the field of English scholarship broadened, as a result of that intellectual activity which began in England in the closing years of the fifteenth century, but it was more fortunate for the permanence of the English language "pure and undefiled," that it was in the same age magnified and made honorable by the genius of Shakespeare. The other master-mind of that age, thoroughly imbued with the classical spirit of the new learning and the new philosophy, thought it necessary to put in a Latin form the works which were to make his name immortal, evidently fearing that English would never become the language of the courtly and cultured. But Shakespeare, little acquainted with the classical learning of the schools, used the language of the common people; and reaching out his hand in search of attractions for his theatre he touched the crude, lifeless forms in which the classical as well as the other stories of the time were cast, and they became infused with life and beauty. But even the power of Shakespeare's genius could not resist successfully the classical aggression, which attacked him in the centres of learning, forced from English scholars sighs of regret that he knew "little Latin and less Greek," and made them value his dramas in proportion as they furnished classical words for studies in etymology. The different readings of the folios and quartos afforded a never-failing mine for the scholastic pickaxe, and the number of syllables in his verses were clipped or stretched in true procrustean style, until the climax of absurdity in this respect was reached in Abbott's *Shakespearean Grammar*.

Lilly's Latin Grammar, from which Shakespeare

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learned his little Latin, was not only the progenitor of the Latin Grammars of successive periods, but was, also the foster-father of a succession of English Grammars. Because of the simplicity of the rules of construction in English, the scantiness of English inflections, and the consequent expression of relations by particles, English was regarded as a grammarless tongue, and it was bound to the framework of the Latin Grammars, so that students could have some grammatical notion of it by comparing it with a synthetic language. With great regularity English Grammars were modelled on the Latin, and I am sure that some of us still have lively recollections of the series of grammars—Greek, Latin and English—compiled by the Rev. Peter Bullions, all according to the same general plan, and I have no doubt, too, that some of us could now repeat the lists of adverbs, prepositions and conjunctions, carefully tabulated in these grammars, as though the parts of speech in English were labelled like those in Latin. The grammar-makers forced the English language within the Latin skeleton; they joined the living with the dead, and for generations English might have cried out in the language of Paul, "Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" The English language was considered too ignoble to be made the medium of instruction in Latin and Greek; consequently the grammars of these languages were written in Latin.

We know to how great a degree the classical spirit pervaded the writings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but this will not cause surprise when we learn what were the requirements of the schools at which the English writers of those days received their education. The study of English was neglected if not despised in the Universities; classical learning was considered the only basis of an education which would admit of a sound and perfect superstructure; and, indeed, it was fashionable to disparage the scholarship of any one who had not an acquaintance with the ancient classics. A boy on his arrival at school was ranked according to his classical attainments. Young lads of twelve and fourteen were set to making Alcaic and Elegiac verses after the manner of Horace. Their tutors would have considered it absurd to prescribe the composition of English verse to these boys, but when it was a question of composing in an unfamiliar tongue, they never asked whether the muse was willing or not. If the poet was not born he must be made, and it is no wonder that so many of the "double firsts" who spent years in the "base mechanic art" of making verses to order should prove complete failures in after life. No wonder that they were conceived all the forenoon and stupid all the afternoon of their lives. The method of teaching classics was bad, because the aim of the teacher was wrong. The true object of studying a dead language should be to make the student acquainted with its literature, to teach him to read it, rather than to make him proficient in writing it, but the teachers of those days seemed bent on making Latin orators and poets out of boys who could not write their Mother tongue. They did not teach Latin to enable these boys to read Cicero, but had them read Cicero as a means of teaching them Latin. I regret that this false aim in teaching classics is still pursued in many quarters, and still encouraged by our curricula.

Pupils came to the schools then, as they do now, with considerable mastery of their Mother tongue as a speaking medium, but no attempt was made to awaken in them any sense of its powers, to open up to their gaze the treasure house of literature of which their Mother tongue was the key. For the imparting of any further knowledge of English it was thought sufficient that it was the language of instruction in other branches of learning, and for any appreciation of literature which the students of these days might possess, they were indebted to the intellectual atmosphere of their homes, or, perhaps, to some teacher who had a soul above the ordinary routine of gerund-grinding. It was possible for a student to run a most brilliant career, and complete his education without any knowledge of English literature, or, indeed, of many other things that are now considered necessary for the education of a High School boy. As Gibbon remarks, "A finished scholar may emerge from the head of Westminster or Eton in total ignorance of the business and conversation of English gentlemen." He was like an heir who was not allowed to enjoy his inheritance, or like a captive prince to whom was forbidden any knowledge of his royal prerogatives.

Even to the last quarter of our own century we find the same condition of things existing, and the same ideas prevailing in regard to the necessity of instructing boys in Latin as an indispensable means of enabling them to understand their own language. In fact, until very lately English was an unknown tongue in the schools and colleges of England, and when it was introduced it was chiefly for the purpose of word study. There might have been some excuse for giving chief attention to the verbal part of language in a earlier age, when the stock of well-formed English literature was meagre, and when the language itself was still rude, but it was cruelty only less than that of forcing a boy to compose Latin verses, to starve his mind with the husks of verbal analysis, when one of the richest and noblest tongues, and that, too, his Mother tongue, with all its beauty and strength, and a literature, his own literature, with its unsurpassed wealth of intellectual treasure, lay spread before him for his feasting.

Coming to our own country we find the daughter following, naturally enough, in the footsteps of the mother in regard to the treatment of classics and English as subjects of study. An examination of the curricula of our universities and of the papers set at Matriculation, shows that matriculants were required to translate English into Latin prose, to have an acquaintance with the structure of Homeric verse, and with the dialects of Homer and the perennial Homeric theory; and if they were candidates for honors they were obliged to try their prentice hand at composing Elegiacs. In marked contrast to the tender regard shown to classics, English composition was not necessary for pass candidates, and reading of English texts was not prescribed for any part of the pass course. Even in the honor course, where textual reading was required in the final year, the examination consisted chiefly, if not entirely, of questions on different readings, derivations of words, proper names and figures of speech, and of book questions based on criticisms of the works of the authors prescribed. Any extract containing proper names in abundance was always a favorite with examiners. In the curriculum of 1876 and a few earlier years, English composition was required at Matriculation for students in Medicine, Civil Engineering and Agriculture, but, strange to say, it was not regarded as a necessary qualification for matriculants in arts. I trust you will pardon me for quoting the following questions from an examination paper in Matriculation English of that period:

"Define the several parts of speech."

"Give rules for the formation of the possessive."

"Distinguish between gender and sex."

"Distinguish between the uses of *shall* and *will*."

"Punctuate and correct the grammar of,—

"Has Henry Smith been down here last month? I saw a young man laid down under a tree in the Queen's Park, and I took it for him. I guess Toronto looks different to which it done ten years ago."

The paper in honor English of the same year was made up of ungrammatical sentences to be corrected, and questions on grammatical definitions. Four years' work was required in Latin and Greek, and only two years in English, but a year's work did not mean the same in each case. So much time was given to the dead languages, that a boy could manage to catch only an occasional glimpse of his living Mother tongue in the fag-ends of time that could be spared from his other studies. Even when English was placed on the curriculum it was done in an apologetic way as if it were said, "We yield so much to the modern spirit as to require an examination in English, we beg pardon, we mean English with History and Geography," and so it was attached to History and Geography as a sort of distant poor relation.

In 1871, Latin was removed from the list of compulsory subjects for High Schools, and about the same time an option was allowed in Honor Latin between verse and grammar. In 1877 Latin Verse no longer formed a subject of the Honor Latin examination, and in the same year English Composition and the study of English poetical texts were first prescribed for pass Matriculation. A further advance was made in 1886, when English prose texts were required to be read by candidates for Matriculation. Lately, too, there has been great improvement in the character of the examination papers in English. If the examination papers set in any subject are a fair criterion of the methods and thoroughness of the teaching in that subject