

**MACAULAY'S ESSAY ON HISTORY.**

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE DIALECTIC CLUB.

GENTLEMEN :—The plan adopted in preparing this paper may not commend itself to all, but if so we shall doubtless hear of it. The liberty of an introduction with a few general comments has been taken.

First then, let me say we ought to study History. As men, the doings and sayings, the successes, but especially the failures of our predecessors, will be to us not only interesting but very profitable. So that if we were to act only for our own interests we must study history. But if we are true statesmen *in em bryo*, if it may be our ambition to force the lines of circumstances so as that they shall converge to that which we may consider desirable, then are we doubly bound to study the past. Johnson says "Ignorance when voluntary is criminal and a man may be properly charged with that evil which he neglected or refused to learn how to prevent." The past is the cradle of the present; from the circumstances of the past have grown the evil which we suffer and the good which we enjoy, and from the circumstances which we create will spring results which will influence for weal or woe all posterity. It should then be ours to see that we transmit no evil which by a study of the past we could have eliminated.

As students we are bound to study history. We will recognize that all men are kin; and as our sympathies grow our capacities will increase proportionately. Broad views and liberal sympathy are necessary for success. From the study of history we will learn that there are other great countries besides England; other colonies than Canada; other pillars of freedom than Magna Charta; other battles than Waterloo; and other Universities than Queen's.

But now as to the *manner* in which history should be studied: It should be studied in the light of truth and studied so as to watch the progress of mankind. History may be defined as an attempt to connect the present with the past. Guizot points out two ways in which the past may be regarded. 1. We may approach the past with feelings of mixed pity and disdain. Such a feeling is wrong. We have inherited much from the past. Is it too much then to hallow its memory for what is good and true in its history. Advances in the past were small—small we call them but they were great in consideration of the surrounding difficulties and darkness. 2. There are others again who give an undue reverence to the past and who chant with solemn earnestness the dirge of the good old days that are gone. To do this is as false as the first. To say that a critical spirit in the study of the past is wrong would be to give to time the unhallowed function of sanctifying error, and this we can never admit. Some of you may say now that all this has little to do with Macaulay's essay. In deference to such I take it up more particularly with a prayer to Clio that as I cannot to Macaulay justice, I may be prevented from doing him an injustice.

It is hard to fix on any plan which would even pretend to give Macaulay's method of treating this subject. We have read of minds capable of focusing the scattered rays of knowledge so as to bring all to bear on a single issue. Our minds must be incapable of thus focusing the somewhat desultory paragraphs of our author, because we confess to seeing no plan which would require such wordy profusion as we find in the essay. It is filled with striking

similies, terse expressions and beautiful language: but in working out the essay he seems to have confused the real object, viz. a dissertation on history as it should be philosophically with a synopsis of history, as it is practically. Of course, one illustrates the other, but Macaulay has given the illustration equal importance with the subject. He begins by showing the extremes of evil to which history is liable. The effort to write nice history leads to fiction. The imagination craves for the fanciful, the changing, the exciting; and so one class of historians write their narrative without laboring to discard error,—without pausing to draw conclusions or look beneath the surface,—without asking themselves any questions as to the cause and effects of this endless flow of circumstances. On the other hand to write philosophically correct history there is danger of falling into a severe uninteresting style. The historian of this class in his search for theory is apt to cast his facts in the mould of his hypothesis. Taking a general view of history we say it resembles the results of every other activity of the mind. First we have a period rich in production and then a period severe in criticism. In the first period anything pleasing or fanciful is given with a supreme indifference to truth; and this conglomeration goes on accumulating till in the second place men are forced to call a halt and examine what in their belief is worthy of preservation and what must be branded as false and useless. These alternate productive and critical periods of activity we find in religion, in literature, and in philosophy, and therefore in history, which is a combination of the last two.

*We will to finish notice some of the results of medieval activity in England and France respectively:*

England's political education has been gradual, and our growth is distinctly English. We respect Magna Charta more than the laws of Solon, and to our ears 'Parliament' is more venerable than 'Senate.' But while we respect our institutions and are proud of the advanced position which we occupy, we are not forgetful of the way by which we have been led. We remember our early sufferings and preparations. We know from our own history how essential gradual development is to stability; we know too well that no enactment on paper or decree from Legislative halls can change a nation's habits. Legislation can never get ahead of public opinion. England had a political education so that the active life of the Crusades when it reached that country found channels deep and well defined in which to spend itself. But in France there had been no such preparation or political education. The flood of activity swept the land like a deluge, submerging and destroying every institution—good, bad and indifferent. France was led away by the extravagancies of those historians of liberty falsely so called whom we were considering. What wonder then if the blind led by the blind should fall into errors, the evils of which have not yet been recovered from.

**WHAT I SAW.**

II.

ABOUT a stone's throw from the College there lies a little building strange in appearance and mysterious in its isolation. Several mornings lately we have seen bearing from its ports ominous looking instruments indicating that it was some fort of knowledge or battery of science. To be so near and yet so far from a whole mine of curiosities was too tantalizing even for an editor's coolness. Seeing is believing, and we determined at all hazards to gain an entrance to the sacred precincts. As usual the difficulty vanished when we faced it.

The Professor of Astronomy—for it was the observatory we have been talking about—very kindly and cordially