

The Moral Stimulus of Great Literature

REV R. WALTER WRIGHT, B.D., DURHAM, ONT.

"BOOKS are merely, helps, instruments, tools," says John Stuart Blackie. True, a steam engine is merely an instrument, but it has revolutionized modern civilization. A great book is an instrument, but its influence upon humanity is incalculable.

Books stimulate and develop the mental and moral life. The greatest book is the Bible—great in its literature, mighty in its influence upon the intellectual life, its chief appeal is to the spiritual, to the highest and best in human nature. Out of and around the Bible have grown up many great books; books of exposition, of spiritual experiences. It has often been classed as Biblical and Theological Literature, including hymns, religious poetry and books of devotion.

Some have attempted lists of the great books of the world. Sir John Lubbock, an eminent scientist, some time ago published a list of the great books of all time, not including those of living writers. It commences with the Bible and includes some of those books whose inspiration has been the Bible. But the greater number are in their general appeal wholly intellectual. They train the perception, they store the memory, they kindle the imagination, they discipline the reason, they exercise the judgment. The great mass of the literature of today is of this character. Look at the catalogue of any public library and the list of purely religious books is comparatively small, and we are afraid in many cases these are little in demand.

BOOKS AND RELIGION.

Here the interesting question arises, How does general reading bear upon the religious life of the individual? Do books, great books, not specifically religious, not written directly to aid morality—affect, stimulate and promote moral and spiritual life? and if so, how? It is everywhere recognized that books and religion, education and Christianity, go hand in hand. The well-informed, educated man is prepared to be a better Christian, to do larger service for God than the ignorant, on the other hand, Christianity awakens the intellect and creates a thirst for literature. This is true not only in the individual, but in society, in the nation, and in the church. But the mutual relations of books and religion would form a subject for a large volume, and we are only going to say a few words about the moral stimulus of certain classes of books, and to point out one great reason why young people should acquaint themselves as far as possible with the best literature of the world.

WHAT TO READ.

1. *History and Biography.* Some of the world's greatest books are histories. We go back to the old classics to find Herodotus, Xenophon, Diodorus, and Tacitus, then such a book as Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," "the splendid bridge from the old world to the new"; and later such as Green's "History of England," and Carlyle's "French Revolution." It is true some of these great older books are seldom read now, they have been summarized in modern volumes. Every young Canadian should be familiar with a good history of Canada, and also of the United States.

Everywhere in history we see flashing out great moral truths. It has been said "History is philosophy teaching by examples." It is a great moving picture, men and women live and act before us on the printed page. We cannot read history long without being impressed

with the thought of Providence, of God, in history. The drift of events is not entirely aimless, all is not confusion and chaos. There is a power, which makes for righteousness moving through all.

"Behind the dim unknown
Standeth God within the shadow keeping
watch above His own."

Judgments often fall unerringly upon sin. Great nations lifting up their heads in the pride of conquest and blood, of prodigality and vice, are smitten by an unseen power and crumble into dust. The ancients believed in Nemesis, the Fury who punished crime, and in the Fates who guided all events, but the Christian sees the divine hand of an Almighty Father holding the reins of the world's history and visiting sin with its inevitable penalties.

"History," said Voltaire, "is little else than a picture of human crimes and misfortunes." So it may often seem to the faithless soul; but from the weltering depths of this great ocean of evil there is pushed up now and again, here and there, like a green tropical island, a great and noble character, great and noble because of moral qualities. These persons history has exalted, we cannot fail to be impressed with them. True, there are also the mean and ignoble, but these inspire us with loathing and disgust. History gives us a broad outlook upon men and affairs which teaches fundamental moral and spiritual truth, shows us that the foundations of righteousness are large and substantial, not confined to the present, the transitory, the local, but embedded in the very constitution of human nature, unchangeable, invariable and universal.

Biography is closely connected with history. "History is the essence of innumerable biographies," says Carlyle. The history of a country is made by the individual lives of the people of that country. The history of Canada is being made by you and me and some seven million more Canadians. "Every man's life is a fairy-tale written by God's finger," exclaims Hans Christian Andersen, and another great man adds, "There is no life of a man faithfully recorded but is a heroic poem of its sort, rhymed or unrhymed."

Some men whose lives have not been devoted specially to religious work have been, nevertheless, among the world's greatest moral teachers; such are Oliver Cromwell, William Ewart Gladstone, and Abraham Lincoln. Others have taught negatively by their outstanding lack of moral qualities, such are Napoleon Bonaparte, Lord Byron and Robert Burns. Thus great principles, eternal truths loom up in lives whose pursuits would appear to be wholly material or intellectual.

The writer, when a boy of about eight years, was given by his mother a reward of one dollar for reading through the Old Testament. With that money he purchased "Livingstone's Travels." The name of Livingstone has been a magic word to him ever since. Many a life has been powerfully influenced by the early reading of a great biography.

Among the great books of the world, not by any means overlooked in Sir John Lubbock's list, are those on *Philosophy*, "Depth in Philosophy," says Bacon, "bringeth men's minds about to religion." One of the great books bequeathed to us by the ancients is Aristotle's *Ethics*. Plato and Cicero, Butler and Locke, and a multitude of other great men in more recent times have grappled with the mighty themes of philosophy. These by many are considered

too deep, too dry, and are scornfully passed by. They will not spend their energies delving in the mines of philosophy, but if they do they will secure abundant reward in discovering such great nuggets of thought as God and Freedom and Immortality.

Poetry and Essays bulk quite largely in the world's literature, and in their bearing upon the moral aspects of life they present an almost unlimited field. Whole books have been written on the theology, the religious teaching of the great poets. The moral force of poetry is one of its grandest characteristics. Poetry is the literature of the imagination—it must soar—the moral and spiritual region is the atmosphere, the heavens above the intellect, therefore poetry finds its natural, its congenial home in moral and spiritual altitudes.

"Poetry is itself a thing of God;
He made His prophets poets; and the
more
We feel of poesy do we become
Like God in love and power."

Without dwelling on the old heathen poets, such as Homer and Virgil, whose verse glimmers and palpitates, like the midnight heavens with the fire of the spiritual; we may point out Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Cowper, Coleridge, Wordsworth; Browning, Tennyson and Longfellow as great moral teachers in immortal verse. Since Cowper, whose life was so deeply tinged with religion, the spiritual has entered more and more into English poetry, till we reach Tennyson and Browning, whose work it has been said "is overcrowded with theology." Poetry reflects the moral and spiritual history of its age, thus the Methodist revival in England introduced a new and enduring element into the poetry of our language—God and the personal soul stood out with a distinctness never realized before.

Great essayists also, as Addison, Emerson, Ruskin, and others, have exerted an incalculable moral influence.

But we pass on to mention in the last place, *Fiction*. All the world loves a story, and some of the world's greatest literature is in the form of fiction. We need mention only, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Arabian Nights, Gulliver's Travels, Robinson Crusoe, The Vicar of Wakefield, and Don Quixote, and the great tales of Thackeray, Dickens, George Eliot, Kingsley and Scott.

But are novels not often demoralizing and spiritually baneful? Unfortunately, that is true. A recent report on Irish prisons calls attention "to the fact that the morbid and immoral tone of a great proportion of modern English society novels renders them unsuitable for prisoners' libraries." The reviewer of a late American novel has pronounced an author "an illiberally forbidding ground and stays there." The moral props on which our social structure is reared are weak enough in all truth; but certainly our novelists are among those who are doing their best to weaken them, almost pride ourselves upon being a Christian nation—no one would suspect it from much of our fiction.

Sometimes in the midst of a story otherwise good and wholesome a writer will insert a paragraph so full of deadly virus that it may prove to be a drop of septic poison to inflame and destroy the entire soul. Even good novels should be read in moderation. To read only fiction is like a diet solely of liquid stimulants, it will lead to mental intoxication.

Nevertheless the novel is one of the mighty forces for good in modern literature. Some are written expressly to enforce a great moral truth or to combat a moral obliquity. There are novels that preach, but some which do not