

### ON ENQUIRY.

A LECTURE DELIVERED BEFORE THE HALIFAX LITERARY AND SCIENTIFIC SOCIETY, ON FEBRUARY 24, 1840.

By Rev. Richard B. O'Brien.

I fear that I shall have to claim a considerable share of your indulgence, from the very uninviting way in which I am obliged to furnish the intellectual repast of the evening. The subject which I have chosen is so comprehensive, and the relations, in which I had intended to place it, are so interesting, that I could well desire a state of preparedness more commensurate with its importance; but as my professional duties make such a thing exceedingly difficult, if not entirely impossible,—I thought it more wise to contribute a little, towards the impetus which public spirit has already given to research, than to refuse all co-operation, because I could not be as efficient as I would desire. In deciding thus, Gentlemen, I have calculated considerably upon your kindness; and, in acting upon the decision, I assure you, that I anticipate much more from the direction, which my observations may, haply, give to your own strong intellects, than from any information which I may add to the knowledge you have already acquired. In presenting you with a few precious stones, whose value you can well appreciate, I shall leave the setting to yourselves; and am certain, moreover, that the same light which teaches you to estimate their worth, will lead you to those bright chambers whence ENQUIRY has derived them for us. This is a consummation worth wishing for, and for which, I would willingly submit to some sacrifice. Yours is a society possessing many of the resources for such a task, and replete with the power of applying them. Could you be induced to enter into the edifice of investigation, I am certain that you would not confine yourselves, as I have been obliged to do,

"To the mind's first chamber,  
Round which its young fancies wander,  
Like weak insects in a cave,"

but you would search the unexplored dwelling places of loftier thought—investigate those relations of ours, with the world moral and physical, whose multiplicity, mystery, and variety, fill up the mind with one vast idea of the Power that established them; and, in the words of the unhappy, though gifted, being whom I have just quoted, you would from mines of magic stone draw words that are weapons."

It is a goodly sight to see the rapid advances that enquiry is making in our days. It speaks volumes for the diffusion of a profound spirit of examination, that, though few governments have contributed *much*, and the greater number *nothing*, to remove the obstacles with which the sciences had to contend; still, have we advanced more, in the last half century, than the most visionary hope of progressive excellence could have anticipated. During this time we have endeavoured to decipher the sacred records of the Hindoo, and to unravel the mysticism of the Mandarin;—we have pored over the ancient philosophy of Persia, and followed, for information, the wanderings of the Arab; we have sat down with the Tartar chief in his tent, and communed with the Egyptian at the base of his pyramid; we have put a tongue into the womb of the earth, and compelled her to make known her history, and we have summoned from her bosom the dead of ages, to bear testimony to the truth of those conclusions, which enquiry had before established. This is a glorious view of things. It makes us a connecting link between antiquity and futurity—a bridge across the chasm of ages, by the agency of which we claim communion, once more, with the generations which have gone before us.

Various as have been the pursuits of the learned, both before and since the Revolution of France, they have not been more various than the motives which influenced their research. The maxim of the Roman poet, "Money *honestly* if you can, but money at any rate," seems to have acted upon some; much a greater number seem to have been impelled by an unaccountable yearning for some species of celebrity, and the desire of depreciating every thing, however sacred, because now become familiar; a large majority, however, to the honour of the age be it spoken, seems to have toiled in the ways of obscure investigation, for the purpose of raising an edifice sacred to true philosophy, of extending the resources of the human mind, and consequently increasing the aggregate of human happiness. It is a consoling reflection, that, while a Volney and a Voltaire endeavoured to uproot the foundation of Christian hope, a Young, a Burton, and a Wilkinson, were found ready to go forth and conquer the daring aggressors; and that, while a Bailly was arraying the powers of a majestic mind against the God that gave them, there were found a La Place, a Jones, and a Wilfert, to disprove his assumptions, unravel his sophisms, and fling a new halo around revelation, which glowed with a brighter loveliness, from the ordeal to which she had been subjected.

Among the means adopted by infidelity to accomplish the end of

its vocation, was an appeal to those sources, ancient and modern, to which it was well known the ordinary vulgar could not have access. There is, in the human mind, something that makes it reverence a tome that locks up the knowledge of past ages. The imagination can spread its wing in the region of possibility to which such a volume seems to point; and the mind is generally of a character sufficiently visionary, to admit a half proved claim to antiquity, rather than deny itself the pleasure of speculating upon the consequences of the admission. It was a sublime and boundless sphere for contemplation, should the Hindostanic terms of its thousands and millions of years be established—what room for conjecture, on the revolutions to which men and things had been subjected, during that awful period? It was grand to view the philosophy of the Celestial Empire completed ages before the world was thought of, and to pore over the tables of a practical and finished Astronomy, long before the days of such modern personages as Moses and the Prophets. It was even sentimental and philosophic to view the mystic scroll by which the dead of the olden time told us the tale of their splendour, or their ambition, or their power. As no Daniel existed to interpret the symbolic phrase,—with so much the more security could we sit in the shade of the obelisk, or the pyramid, or gaze upon the Porch of the Temple; and, while with something like a pity for the spirit of the past, that in mystic hand essayed to speak unto us things, which we could not understand, we gazed upon the ruin, it was easy to imagine more than that that spirit had ever intended to convey. It was by appeals to the romantic sympathies of the young, and by supposing what was false, to mislead the ignorance of the old, that the illuminee of the last century endeavoured to overthrow the religion of Christians. The unfortunate Rousseau was one of the former class—Voltaire and Bailly of the latter. To a man reading over some of the works of Voltaire, nothing at all appears so strange as the repeated use he makes of, "it is admitted by all," in cases where no man ever dreamt of admitting; and, in some thousands of instances, through ignorance or through malice, he quotes from authors whom he misrepresents and mistranslates, to such an extent, that neither sentiments nor words can be said to belong to them. How he acquired the name of a learned man, or the influence of a good one, is now a problem. A French author, whose name I cannot remember, but whose work I recollect to have read, has written a commentary upon Voltaire. One half the page is given to the works of that infidel, and the other to a running commentary upon their contents; and, in my existence, I never dreamt that man could betray such an excess of ignorance, such a malice of disposition, and such an arrogance of mind, as Voltaire does, without exciting the reprobation of the world. Bailly was quite as superficial as Voltaire, whose parasite he was, and whose dominion he brooked, with as much slavish homage, as if he were a demi-god. This man abused scientific enquiry to the most extravagant extent. It is hard to believe him sincere in his professions, in fact, no man can be indulgent enough to do so. De Lambert was the first to expose his nonsensical treatise upon Hindostanic Astronomy, and his master, Voltaire, went well nigh impeaching his pupil of loss of reason. However the variety of our species—the number and difference of our languages—the phenomenon just then discovering in the earth—the history and chronology—monuments—archæology and philosophy of the eastern and early nations, were successively put in requisition to furnish matter for arraigning the Christian belief. It is easy to cover with the dust of learned folios, an absurdity which is itself pretty much concealed. A spice of philosophic parlance, and a little magisterial dictation, has a wonderful influence upon the uninstructed and superficially learned of mankind; and such was the mode of lecture adopted by these men. It was his knowledge of human nature, rather than confidence in the cause which he espoused, that produced the impious boast of the arch infidel—"that the world was converted by twelve —, and that he would reconvert it himself alone."

While threats were being held forth, against the reign of true religion upon the earth, by those who knew not God—while the millions of Indian years were paraded before the world, and Christianity deduced from the Lamaism of the Ganges—while the hieroglyphic symbols were pointed out as the hand writing upon the wall, that declared Christianity weighed in the balance and found wanting—while the dynasties of Egypt were multiplied, and its early civilization exaggerated, until nothing was heard but the boasts of the revilers and the complaints of the timid—while languages, species, monuments, philosophy and all, were brought to bear upon the truth of "THE WORD,"—two classes of persons, I might say three, were giving more assistance to infidelity, than it could ever have acquired by the influence of its reasonings, or the patronage of its abettors. These were the extremely timid, who

refused to enter at all into scientific examination,—the greatly presumptuous, who anathematized the sciences, as the forbidden field of merely human wisdom,—and the partially ignorant who essayed to refute things of which they knew little. Nothing can be conceived of a tendency more injurious, than the refusal of legitimate discussion, or the pronouncing of a thing absurd and dangerous, merely because its first appearance may not be favourable to settled conviction. The latter, when coming from a source to which we are accustomed to look with respect may, for a while, interpose (to some partial extent) between the conclusions of science and their reception by the world; but it has been well compared to a dam, just high enough to stop the progress of a stream:—it serves for no other purpose than to produce an accumulation, and, by and by, will give double energy to the waters, that, bursting over their barrier, will sweep along their course resistless and majestic, rendered a thousand times more mighty, by the very power that opposed them. It is ridiculous to rise up and extinguish the light of established proof by a sweeping declaration that it cannot be. If Religion, or Philosophy, or Political Economy, be supposed fixed, unalterable, and inevitably true, yet deemed opposed to that which discovery has demonstrated,—the conclusions, that the plan is for reconciling them is not yet discovered, rather than that one or the other is false. But to clip the pinions of the mind—to fling a funeral pall of dogmatism over the light of the intellect, because *your* eye is not strong enough to view it—to sunder the communion of the soul with that bright world "where deathless minds do leave, where'er they pass, a path of light,"—is injurious to philanthropy, opposed to sound philosophy, and supposes God's truth to require an interdiction of the faculties, with which he himself has been pleased to dignify his creatures. It should never be heard of. The advancement in knowledge is one of the duties of our state; for if He has given faculties, he looks for their development. From every ordeal he will bring forth his Religion triumphant, "for truth is great and must prevail."

"The fault's not in our fate, but in ourselves," says Cassius, and the same may be said of the discrepancies, which sometimes appear between new discoveries and revelations; we are not able to grasp at once the various bearings of the objects of research. Examining one now, and another by and by, we behold only the distinct colours, from whose combination a beautiful whole is to proceed; and in the infancy of science, to crush its further progress, because we cannot comprehend how its first results do harmonize with our own conviction, would be just as wise as it would be for him who knows nought of the painter's skill, to refuse credence to the possibility of the portrait, when he beholds the half-finished design of the artist. Every experience we have had of the sciences, is a further proof of this position; and I am certain that the future progress of the arts and themselves will give it additional strength. At a period comparatively recent, the growing interest in eastern studies was looked upon with terror, by many well intentioned and pure minded persons, in every sect and persuasion. They imagined that evil minds would abuse such studies, and weak minds be turned by surmise. They feared and exclaimed. Thank God, they were unheeded. Enquiry has "rolled back the flood of never-ebbing time," stood alongside the Ptolomies and the Pharaohs; gone down into the catacombs and interrogated the departed; snatched a lamp from the table of industry to fling a wizard beam upon language that had been darkened for ages; evoked the spirit of intelligence from every century, and sea, and shore; and woven a garland, rare and beautiful, for the brow of revelation, from the flowers of every field of information.

I regret that, after every effort at reasonable condensation, I am obliged to abandon the most interesting portion of my examples. I had intended to take a view of the physiology, history, and language of the human race, and to shew how the discoveries in these, as well as in Geology, and Phrenology itself, tended to shew forth the proportions of revealed religion. But I find that I must abandon that task to some mind more able and more ample than my own; and select the best I can from the philosophy of the ancients—their historical monuments, and other remains. Whether these tend to explain an obscurity—reconcile an apparent contradiction, or answer a formally proposed objection, different in its nature from either, I shall account each and every one as converging to the great purpose for which they are intended.

Many of you, doubtless, are aware of the efforts which the learned world have been making to produce a hieroglyphic alphabet. The whole world waited with an intense interest upon the time when these written monuments of a once mighty people would explain to the earth the mystery of their origin. As I remarked before, it was a favourite resort for the appeals of Infidelity, and I may mention, as an instance of the exaggerated notion to which I