

things exerting only a secondary influence on the condition of our race, I know not any of equal importance to the one on which I propose now to offer a few observations. The adoption, by the most civilized nations of the world, for the purpose of communicating their ideas by the sense of sight, of characters, not the representatives of the ideas themselves, but only of the arbitrary sounds that happen to have been fixed on to denote them.

The subject is unquestionably both curious and interesting, and might give worthy employment to an erudition which I do not possess, and to leisure and materials far more extensive than I can command. I should not therefore venture on it, were it not in the idea that the object of our meeting\* here is rather for the purpose of rousing thought and inquiry, than of determining opinion, and under the hope that the view I am to give of the matter, may perhaps awaken the attention of some of the members of this society, to a train of investigation very singular in itself and full of interesting conclusions, and which discoveries that have been recently made, and which every day adds to, places more and more within our reach. I need not causlessly occupy time in attempting to prove that a language of visible signs is naturally a language of pictures and not of sounds. This is the immediate expedient which men employ to convey ideas in the rudest state of society, when distance of time or place prevent them from communicating through the medium of spoken language. Thus the Indian of our continent, who takes a party through the woods and over the waters of the interior, takes care to leave a token of

who he and his party are, and what are their movements, at every remarkable point in his route, and thus to hold necessary communication with the scattered families of his tribe, who but for some such expedient would be ignorant of the motives of each other, and unable to meet and arrange matters for their common welfare or safety. He paints, on a piece of bark, a rude picture delineating the number of the individuals with him, and their sexes and ages; marks the size of the moon, at the moment of their passage, and the probable period of their return, by the appearance which it, or the last of successive moons which he delineates, will exhibit; and indicates the success of the hunt, by rude figures, of the animals captured. Finally, he takes this piece of bark, and fixing it on a pole, makes it point in the exact direction in which the party are proceeding. From such rude beginnings as these, the systems of picture writing, which at one time or other have prevailed among all races, have had their origin. In Mexico, we know this system had attained considerable perfection. In China, it embodies the whole learning, laws and science of that very ingenious people. It attains its facility of expression by adopting general signs for its prime characters, and expressing all particulars by a due combination of these elementary marks. Thus, in the first beginnings of picture writing, a lion would be painted as a lion, a sheep as a sheep, in such hasty and rude essays as the imperfection of the art of painting could compass. But subsequently, in the progress of this sort of writing, all attempt at a perfect representation, or at any representation of the mere form, would be dropped. A general simple character would be adopted to denote an animal; another character combined with

\*This paper was read before the Literary Society of Hamilton, U. C. It has not been thought necessary to make any change upon its original form.