



HOME MAGAZINE



Life, Literature and Education.

Our Debate.

Just one more week in which to work on our debate, "Resolved that a High-school Education Qualifying for Teacher's Certificate is of More Advantage to a Farmer than an Education Qualifying Him for a Diploma from a Business College."

There is much to be said on this question, and if you have not already given voice to your ideas on it, speak quickly—and tersely—limiting your essay to 500 words. If you don't feel like writing yourself, get the teachers in your vicinity interested, also the business-college graduates whom you know, and let them help to fight it out. We have decided to give four prizes in books, two to each side, also an extra award of a Society Pin to the writer of the first-prize essay on the winning side. We shall publish the four best essays (two on each side), then leave it to a post-card majority vote of members to decide which side has had the best of it.

Now, get down to work, and make this debate a profitable as well as an interesting one. The subject is one which deeply concerns the welfare of many, and many may be led to see things in a clearer light because of your reasoning. As long as the post-mark on your envelope is not later than March 1st, your essay will be considered.

We wish to thank several of our members for sending us suitable subjects for debate. These have all been entered on our list for future use.

Reply to Mr. Taylor's Letter.

While agreeing with Mr. Taylor that there is too much fiction read, I do not think the list of books which he recommends would tend very much to the development of the mind. One who reads books on science and theology might be spoken of as well educated—certainly not as well-read and cultured.

First, Mr. Taylor put too low an estimation on the value of good prose fiction. Certainly, there are books, such as "David Harum," which are very popular for a while, and which soon go out of print, in spite of their former popularity. But Scott's works have withstood the severe test of time for nearly a century, and they are still read and enjoyed by the critical public; surely these must be worth the time spent on them. Books such as those by Dickens and George Eliot are read and approved of by some of the best educated men of two continents; they are quoted by ministers in their sermons, and by professors in their lectures; and it is absurd to say that fiction such as this has no literary value whatever, and that one has to wade through page after page of "nonsense" to read some moral lesson. Several of our novels are classed among the classics and given a place next to the poetry. In the description Dickens gives us of the death of little Paul there is nearly as much poetical thought and

expression as there is in Tennyson's "May Queen," and more pathos, because it is more realistic.

Secondly, Mr. Taylor speaks only of contemporaneous literature, and, with the exception of Shakespeare and Milton, makes no mention whatever of the old writers. Time, however, is the only true test, and works such as Bacon's must have been composed by superior minds, to have lasted so many centuries. As to Greek literature, everyone should at least have a copy of Homer, either Pope's or Chapman's translation, for his two great epic poems are generally regarded as the greatest in all tongues and all ages. In Roman and Italian literature, there is Virgil's *Aeneid* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Cary's translation), which is one of the greatest imaginative works ever written. Following Milton in English poetry, are Dryden, Pope, Byron, Shelley and Keats. Along with these should be read Johnson's "Lives of the Poets," which, besides giving an account of their lives, criticises their works.

Mr. Taylor makes no mention of that strong element in English literature—the essay. Perhaps the best English essayist is Lord Macaulay. His essays are chiefly literary and historical, and are a great help in the study of the poets, on account of their valuable criticisms. As a writer of pure and faultless English, Addison is excelled by no one. Together with Steele, he wrote the essays for the *Spectator*, which was then published as a periodical. Someone has said that a person who makes any pretension whatever to having a library, has a volume of the *Spectator*. Emerson's essays are the best in American literature. They were first given as speeches, but were afterwards published in book form. Besides these three we have Carlyle's "Heroes, and Hero Worship," Lamb's "Essays of Elia," and Ruskin's "Modern Painters."

There is one more branch of literature which Mr. Taylor did not mention—that of history. Three of our best histories are Gibbon's "Rome," Alison's "Europe," and Macaulay's "England," but if these are too long, shorter ones may be read. Herodotus and Livy are the two best historians among the ancients; and in their works they interweave a great deal of fiction. This, perhaps, is why they are so popular. Among some of our best works of fiction are the following: Irving's "Sketch Book," and "History of New York"; "John Halifax," by Mrs. Craik; Goldsmith's "Vicar of Wakefield"; Kingsley's "Westward Ho!" and "Hypatia"; Lytton's "Last Days of Pompeii," and "The Last of the Barons."

Some, when choosing books, are discouraged because there are so many; but there are only a few really great works, and, as some writer has said, "Read not the Times, read the Eternities." Emerson, in speaking of this, says: "I occasionally visit the Cambridge Library, and I can seldom go there without renewing the conviction that the best of it is already within the four walls of my study at home. The inspection of the catalogue brings me continually back to the few standard writers who are on every

private shelf; and to these it can afford only the most slight and casual additions. The crowds and centuries of books are only commentary and elucidation echoes, and weakeners of these few great voices of time."

Thus, it is possible for everyone to have a collection of the best minds of all ages; and even the meanest shelf may hold the writings of men who have struggled all their lives, and who have sacrificed everything, even health and happiness, that they may inscribe one more immortal volume upon the scroll of fame.

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Another Opinion.

I have read with much interest the articles of Mr. McGregor and Mr. Taylor on the value of reading for young people, and would say that, in my opinion, they are both full of valuable suggestions, but they appear to me to have been written from altogether different points of view. The main question in dispute between them seems to be the place that should be assigned to fiction. They seem to agree as to the value of poetry, and, of course, we must all admit that it is probably entitled to first place in all languages, as it was the first mode of literary expression. It is said that it is the poetry of a nation that keeps its language alive, for the simple reason that a great poem cannot be translated into another language in such a way as to preserve its beauties; and, therefore, any one wishing to read the poetry of the ancients, so as to appreciate its excellence, must do so in the original.

While, however, this is no doubt true, I do not believe that in the case of young people, especially in our rural districts, a taste for poetry is very highly developed, except, of course, in rare instances; and I think that to recommend a list of the poets for general reading to those about to start on such a course, would be somewhat discouraging, and in that regard I think that Mr. McGregor is quite right in recommending fiction as a starting point.

No one, of course, pretends that fiction is of the same value as the more serious forms of literature, as Mr. Taylor points out, but I do not think it would be of much use to start young people on the heavier classes of literature, such as biography, history, and the essay. To my mind, the value of fiction—or, in other words, the novel—is not the recreation derived therefrom, nor the solid advantages to be gained from its perusal, but rather does its value consist in creating in the minds of our young people a desire for reading. When that desire is once established it will surely be found that it will not stop very long at fiction, but will rapidly lead the reader on to these more serious departments. Indeed, Mr. Taylor, who, I have no doubt, as he says himself, is quite able to settle down and enjoy deep scientific and theological books, confesses that he had first started by reading fiction; and so I believe it will turn out with others.

But I do not think it would be

wise to recommend, especially for young people, such as I understand Mr. McGregor had in view when he wrote his letter, such heavy books as Morley's three volumes of the "Life of Gladstone," which will probably take its place as the greatest biography ever written, and perhaps some of the other works mentioned by Mr. Taylor. On the whole, I am inclined to think that Mr. McGregor is right in trying, in the first place, to get our young people to read, and I do not know of any subject that would be more likely to encourage them to do so than to recommend on the start works of fiction. As they advance, of course, it is expected that they will take up the more serious studies, and it might be well, then, to recommend such lists as Sir John Lubbock's 100 best books, that has been the cause of so much discussion, or other similar lists.

To my mind, however, the main thing is to get a start made, and I think, in all cases, this should be followed up by some systematic plan, or course of reading. Let it not be too extensive, but let it be rigidly adhered to, and it will be found that many of our leisure moments, that are now perhaps wasted, will be devoted to carrying out our plan.

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[We publish the two foregoing letters with very much pleasure. In fact, throughout we have been very much pleased with this friendly discussion on books. In the first place, we feel that it cannot but stimulate to new interest in literature. In the second, we are glad to see so hearty an interest evinced in the pages of our L. F. A. E., which is fast becoming a very favorite corner to the Editors of "The Farmer's Advocate," as well as to its readers. In the third, the letters called forth by this discussion are rapidly giving us an index to the mental capacities of our readers, and affording us a clue by means of which we may know the quality of work which we may expect from them in future tournaments in the Literary Society. We say, with all sincerity, that, so far, not a letter has been published in regard to this book question from which some good may not be taken. In to-day's contributions, for instance, Mr. Harris has brought to the fore the essay, in many respects the very cream of literature; and history, an essential to general knowledge. Mr. Paterson, on the other hand, has made a very strong point in saying that it is not wise to start young people on too heavy literature. There must be a gradual growth in reading, as in other things, and literary indigestion is a thing to be avoided. The child, or the youth, must be led to love reading—of the wholesome species, of course—and one can scarcely hope to develop this love in him by presenting to him a mass of literary material which he can neither understand or appreciate, and from which he will turn with weariness or discouragement. As Mr. Paterson has well said, it is very important "to get a start made," then, the heavier literature may be introduced, according as the capability for assimilating it develops. . . . Nevertheless,