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MECHANICS' INSTITUTE.

The following OPENING ADDRESS was delivered before the Mechanics' Institute, by JOSEPH HOWE, Esqr. at the commencement of the Winter Course, and is published in compliance with a vote passed by the body:

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

Nearly eight years have passed away, since, in the room at the other wing of this building, I read the first lecture delivered before the Institute after its formation. The scene is still fresh in my recollection. The room was badly lighted—the lecturer stood at a temporary desk, hastily arranged for the occasion; while around him was gathered an audience, which, whether their relative stations in society, or the feelings that actuated them, were considered, might be regarded as of a most miscellaneous description. A goodly number of those men whom I see before me now, who have steadily upheld the Institute ever since, through evil report and good report, were there: bent on a common object, believing in the possibility of spreading information without diminishing industry, but even they were sadly perplexed with doubts and fears, which often half overclouded their hopes and expectations. They had but little reliance on their own powers, for they had but seldom been called into exercise—the extent of their own information they hardly knew, for they had had but few opportunities of comparing their stores with those of the men they regarded as well informed. These persons were comparative strangers to each other: for they had only met on the bustling thoroughfares of life, where the worst points of character are those most prominently exhibited—and if they were associated with some others, known by reputation to all, there was perhaps fair ground to suspect the motives with which these had stepped forward to aid them in their enterprise. It was under these by no means favourable auspices, that the early friends of the Institute met for the first time in public. But there were others, who attended on that evening, in a very different spirit, and for very different objects:—who came to sneer at what they had determined not to assist—who regarded that band of knowledge-seeking Mechanics, as crackbrained or idle enthusiasts, who were aspiring to what was beyond their province, and who had much better be attending to their work, or spending their earnings at a tavern, according to the well established mode. As the restraints of order—the boundaries of debate—were unfamiliar to many, while many more had not acquired habits of self-confidence and of mutual reliance upon each other, these visitors, who came but “to spy out the nakedness of the land,” were not left without some materials for mirth; and, from what they saw and heard, confidently predicted the speedy downfall of the Institute. But the men who had begun this good work were not to be shaken by sneers, or discouraged by prophecies—they had put their hands to the plough, and were determined not to turn back. They met the difficulties which arose out of the jealousies or restlessness of a few, and the ignorance of the many; and, from the moment that the rules were fairly tested and understood, or rather from the time that all parties began to feel that a good Committee was better than a multitude of rules, the Institute may be said to have been fairly established, and, from that period down to the present time, it has met with no serious impediment, and has enjoyed a course of uninterrupted prosperity.

After an existence of eight years, in which nothing like internal dissension has lowered its character—in which attacks from without have been regarded with calm indifference—in which hundreds of regular attendants, and thousands of occasional visitors, have been instructed in the principles of science and encouraged in a love of letters and the arts,—am I not justified in the assertion, that this society has taken its place among the established institutions of the country, and has fairly answered every objection which its enemies urged against it?

May I not ask of many if not all who hear me, whether you are not more intelligent than you were? and yet are you less industrious? Are not the men who have steadily attended and sustained this Institute, among the most useful, laborious, attentive and punctual, in the several classes and occupations to which they belong? Are they not to be found as early and as late as their neighbours at their workshops, offices and stores? Are the families or others better provided for, or better behaved? The worst foe that the Institute ever had, will not venture to reply in the affirmative. And if this cannot with truth be said, may I not ask, if these men, without neglecting the stern and paramount obligations which they owe to their families and to society, have not enlarged their minds, cultivated their tastes, and multiplied the sources of rational pleasure, and exhilarating recreation, in those hours of leisure, which, thanks to Providence, in this country every occupation affords? If

this be the case, and if Halifax is more prosperous, more enterprising, wealthy and industrious in 1839 than it was in 1832, who will assert that, while undeniably you have reaped much advantage, the town has, as a whole, been injured by the operations of the Institute?

But the benefits derived from our exertions have not been confined to the town—the country has caught the spirit of enquiry and exertion, and similar societies have sprung into existence and are flourishing in many other parts of the province; while Institutes have been formed in New Brunswick and Prince Edward's Island, that, after a time, will become the prolific parents of a numerous progeny of similar societies, by which the population of these colonies cannot fail to be stimulated and informed.

Who can calculate the results of this increased intellectual activity? who can trace the varied streams of information which this Institute alone has circulated through a single community? how many absurd notions have been exploded by the lectures delivered from this platform, and the conversations and discussions which have occurred in this room? how many valuable facts have been made the common property of all—how many just views have been rendered familiar to our minds—how many thoughts and reflections have been roused within many that formerly lacked the means or the habit of useful and agreeable reflection? And if no one can gauge or estimate the good done, and the information diffused, by this society, how are the products to be estimated of all those institutions to which it has given birth? As from the loins of one human being a numerous progeny may descend, that, in the lapse of time, may expand into a nation—as from the product of a single grain, hundreds of acres may be covered with a ripening harvest, and many thousands may be fed—so, by the procreative power of the intellect, knowledge, and genius, and taste, go on expanding, until a whole people become educated, enterprising, prosperous and refined. One mind, directed to scientific pursuits, may lay the foundation of an extensive branch of natural industry—may cover a country with manufactures—crowd its seaports with the returns of foreign trade—or establish an institution by which for ages its society may be elevated and refined.

Looking back, then, upon the past history of the Institute, we see that much has been done; and with what appeared, at the outset, but very limited means. Who dreamed, when we commenced, that our worthy President was to step from behind his counter, to astonish and inform us with lectures on Chemistry, which, for clearness of style, and brilliant and successful illustrations, were not unworthy of a regular Professor of that branch? Who supposed that our old friend, Mr. O'Brien, whom I may call the Nestor of the Institute, laying aside his axe and his plane, was to instruct us in Geometry, and the figure and motions of the earth, and in fact to pour out upon every subject that he touches, a stream of information? Could we have dreamed that Mr. MacKenzie was more familiar with Meteorology, than with the manufacture of sugar plumbs—and that, while he was not inattentive to those occupations by which the wind was to be raised, he was familiar with every law of atmospheric pressure, every movement of the air which surrounds our globe? Who could have anticipated that Mr. Smithers, besides lecturing to us upon the rules of Perspective, a branch that, in the olden time, house painters did not very deeply study, would have lent us the aid of his pencil to decorate our walls with representations of the great monuments of the arts and sciences we hoped to diffuse?

These men, and a dozen more whose names I could mention, with equal commendation, if it were necessary, are still left to us—they are here beside the President, whoever he may be, almost every night, to lend the assistance of their talents, as willing to labour as ever, and with minds more closely trained and zeal not at all less ardent, than on the evening when we assembled for the first time. But, besides these ancient pillars of our edifice, every year supplies from among the intelligent and the industrious youth of the town, some props and aids to make it more secure. The Institute, in fact, in this respect, is not unlike the Eastern tree—the branches from which, striking into the soil, extend its grateful shade without diminishing its strength; and, in return for the sap by which they were nourished, give support to the parent stem. Our young friends Credd, Lynch, and others, were but boys when this Institute was projected—they are now men, able and willing to sustain it. While then we have lost but few of our old friends, we have reared many new ones, and every day is expanding some young mind, developing some new talent, and adding to the interest and variety of each succeeding course. Besides increasing the number of our lecturers, we have accumulated a goodly store of apparatus; while, under the fostering care of Mr. McDonald, our Museum is every month becoming not only more interesting to

ourselves, but a source of excitement and information to strangers

It is plain, therefore, that the Institute has not gone backwards, but that, in the expressive phraseology of our neighbours, it has “gone ahead”—not so fast as to be of a rickety and unstable constitution, but surely and steadily, with all the appearances of health and longevity about it, able to bear the rough fondling of its friends and, if it still has any, even the dextrous malice of its enemies. So far, then, we can look back with pleasure upon a path, every step of which exhibits progress. The question naturally arises now, what else is to be done? How are our time and resources to be made available, for the further diffusion of useful knowledge, and the cultivation of the intellect and taste of the community?

It is not my intention to recommend any wide departure from our accustomed course—in the main, I think we cannot do better than to pursue it. A list of lectures has been published, embracing a variety of interesting subjects, to be handled by men fully equal to the task; and it is probable that the remainder of the session will be amply provided for by the forethought and discretion of the committee in charge. But, while we should be in no haste to deviate from our old paths, or to startle each other with novelties—it is but right that, keeping our main objects steadily in view, and steering by those landmarks with which all are familiar, we should ask ourselves—Can any thing more be done to give to the Institute a higher character? Can we extend its scope and bearing and influence? Can we raise the Mechanics still further in the social scale, by fostering emulation—arousing honest pride in themselves, and in their occupations—and, without withdrawing their attention from the duties and utilities of life, give them a more abiding fondness for its purer and more intellectual pleasures.

One of the errors by which the world was for a long time misled, and one which it cost centuries to unlearn, was the notion that education could only be obtained in day schools or seminaries, to which the whole time of the learner must be devoted; and that those who had been denied in early life the blessings of instruction, must necessarily remain in a state of hopeless and effortless ignorance. A better philosophy, one more suitable to the genius of the age, and the circumstances in which the great mass of human beings find themselves placed, has of late prevailed; and it is now believed that the business of informing and training the mind may be steadily combined with the every day occupations of life, and that the assiduous cultivation of the intellect should only be abandoned when the faculties committed to our charge are overclouded by final disease, and the body itself is falling to decay. It has been proved that the judicious use of the leisure hours snatched from manhood may more than compensate for previous neglect, or the untoward circumstances of early youth. However sceptical some of us may have been on this point, our past experience has removed all doubts; and our appearance here this evening proves that we are prepared to carry on the good work of self-cultivation—encouraging and improving each other, by every means within our reach.

Another absurd notion was in former times religiously believed and is still cherished by many,—that Mechanics, and those who perform the manual labour in every society, wanted but little education, and that in fact it was dangerous to give them much. Against this absurd prejudice this numerous and valuable class have slowly but steadily fought their way, until it is now almost universally admitted, that each artizan should be master of the sciences which bear directly upon the occupation to which he has been bred. Few now undertake to deny us access to these, but many still hold to the opinion that to these alone, and perhaps to the simple laws of morals, our attention should be confined. I have ever contended for a more enlarged and liberal view of the character, capabilities and pursuits of the working classes; and I think that our aim should be, to give to those of Halifax, and of Nova Scotia generally, the largest amount of knowledge, and the highest degree of refinement that they are capable of receiving, without weakening the springs of industry.

I cannot believe that the all wise Creator of the Universe, who has spread the great book of universal nature open before the Mechanic, meant that his attention should be confined to any one science—I cannot believe that he who spreads the rainbow in the Heavens,—and on a Summer eve, decks the sky with beauty, to glad the eye of the Artizan returning from his toil, denied to him the privilege of copying these beauties, or investigating the laws of colours and the magic powers of light and shade,—I cannot believe that he who paints the rose, creates the cataract, piles the mountain, and awakes the storm, shuts out this large class of his creatures from the enjoyment, either in art or nature, of the beau-