

MISUSE OF THE WORD AVERAGE.

The word "average" is now frequently used in connection with statistics in a manner which is misleading, and without any practical meaning. This has arisen from the idea which the word "average" really expresses having been lost sight of, and its being substituted for one which more correctly conveys the idea which those desire to express who misuse this word. Even if we allow the word to be used in the sense it has acquired, which is an amount estimated as a mean proportion of a number of different amounts, the methods by which that mean proportion is arrived at are very commonly quite erroneous. It sounds strange, but it is true that "average" in its true and original meaning has more reference to the employment of horses and carts than to the relation between sets of figures. One of the earliest English dictionaries, published in 1626, gives the meaning of *average*, as, "a charge for carriage, or portion of work done by working beasts yoked in carriages, or otherwise." A later one issued in 1691 states *average* to signify "the service which the tenant owes to his lord by horse or ox, or by carriage with either." That is, the amount of rental, as we now say, payable by a tenant for the use of land, which was paid by services in carrying the landlord's wheat, turf, or other materials, was termed "average," meaning that proportion of his obligation which was estimated according to the work done by "avers," or cart-horses. The word "aver" is old French for a horse, and our Scotch friends will recall its use by Burns in this sense, when he wrote, "a ragged cowl's been known to mak a noble aiver," which, being anglicized, reads, "a rough colt's been known to make a noble horse." It is interesting in this connection to note that one of the causes of the great French revolution was this custom of tenants placing teams at the landlord's service which was so grossly abused as to have aroused intense indignation prior to that outbreak centuries after the service of "average" had been abolished in England. According to the earliest law dictionary, the common use of the term average to express a certain proportionate payment of rent by the services of the tenant's teams led to its being adopted over two centuries ago to "a contribution that merchants and others do proportionately make towards their losses, who have had their goods cast into the sea for the safeguard of the ship in time of tempest." We thus get a history of the development of the application of this word, it was first: a contribution of services in carrying the landlord's wheat, etc.; then it indicated a charge for carriage; and, later, a proportionate contribution towards the loss of things carried; and, in more modern days, it became used to express the proportion which exists between any two or more sets of figures or statistics. It is, when used in the latter sense, that the word "average" is commonly so misused as to convey highly misleading, and wholly erroneous ideas. Take, for example, the use made of this phrase in connection with the public debt of this

Dominion. The amount of the debt, say, \$264,803,000 is divided by the total number of the population, say, 5,200,000, the quotient being \$50.92, which sum is constantly spoken of as the "average" amount of the public debt for which every one of the inhabitants of Canada is responsible, men, women and children of all ages and conditions included. Besides the manifest absurdity of stating that the babies in arms, and the children, and youths, and the decrepit and all our women are each individually responsible for a share of the national debt, it is also equally absurd to apportion the burden of the debt by an arbitrary mechanical division regardless of the financial condition of those in various classes of society. Even supposing that the people of Canada were called upon to discharge the public debt, is it not utterly inconceivable that each inhabitant would be required to pay what is called the "average per head," Lord Strathcona as much as and no more than each dock laborer or cart-er? Yet speakers in the House of Commons have scores of times depicted the poorer classes as being oppressed by the burden of the public debt which is allotted to them under the "average per head" system of calculating. The money to pay either the principal, or interest, of any form of public debt, never was, never is, and can never be raised by a poll tax or tax based on an average per head. The word "average," then, in this connection, has no practical bearing upon any existing or any possible condition, and its use, therefore, by those who desire by this system of calculation to impress the people with the extent of the obligations they are individually under for their share of the public debt is irrational and very misleading. Another misuse of the word we saw recently in a paper on Canada, which stated that the average area of land held by the people of Canada was so many acres, which was arrived at by dividing the entire area of this country by the number of its population. The idea this would convey to foreigners would be, that each Canadian is the owner of a large area of land, some more, some less, but the "average" holding being the size of a large farm. Manifestly, no such average exists. We hear also constantly of the "average" amount of taxes paid by the people, the sum being arrived at by dividing the gross receipts for taxes by the number of population. This is quite generally used "on the stump" by speakers who wish to alarm their bearers at the excessive burden of taxes imposed on them. If statistics were published showing the respective percentages to income paid in taxes by persons in receipt of an income of \$300 per year, \$500, \$1,000, and so on up to the largest of our millionaires or business men whose trade is most lucrative, then we could judge of the extent of our tax burden, but, when the amount is only given by an average crudely drawn by dividing the total by the population, the information has no practical value. Between the amount of a public debt and of its taxation revenue, and the extent of its population, there is no such relation as to give the average per head of