

ARE WE A LITERARY PEOPLE?

We often hear it charged upon Canadians that they are not a reading people; in other words, that in Canada there is a general absence of that mental culture which enables men to enjoy the companionship of a good book. Is the charge deserved? We regret to express our conviction that to a great extent we must plead guilty to the indictment. Undoubtedly this is true—that the great mass of *native* Canadians—those who have reaped all the advantages which our system of education—admirable in many respects—is able to impart—are not of those who delight to fill up their leisure time in literary pursuits, to improve their minds, to make themselves acquainted with the world's progress, to keep abreast of the world's thought and mental phases. Ask any retail bookseller in city or town, more particularly perhaps in the latter, his opinion on this point; and he will reply in doleful accents, with a shrug of the shoulders and a shake of the head, "I am expected and in a measure obliged to keep a large stock of general literature, but it is the most profitless stock in the store; it takes me years to turn it over." Question such a dealer further as to who constitute the majority of his customers for works of a literary nature, and he will tell you that 90 per cent of them are professional and other men, who acquired their education and their taste in the old country.

What is the cause of this state of things so lamentably to be deplored? We think it may reasonably be expected that that education which costs the country so much and of which we are so prone to boast should bear fruit of a better kind. That cannot by any liberality of meaning be called education which leaves a boy with just enough knowledge to drive a trade and make money,—which stops short of cultivating his tastes both literary and artistic; and that cannot be called a *liberal* education which has not for its object "to impart the highest culture, to lead youth to the most full, vigorous and harmonious exercise, according to the best ideal attainable, of their active, cognitive, and æsthetic faculties."† Education in other countries has achieved results of which our education as yet shows little or no signs. In Scotland, the means of education are not more general than in Canada; yet the Scotch are pre-eminently a reading people. The same can be said of the Germans and Swiss. Is it too early to expect results like these from our educational system? Our grammar schools date from 1807, and our common schools from 1816.

† Sidgwick's Essay on "Theory of Classical Education."

Surely by this time we may justly look for the first and simplest result of liberal culture—a desire for mental food in the shape of books. True, a desire to read as a rule naturally follows the ability to read, but what kind of literature satisfies 95 per cent of our youth and young men? Confessedly trash in the shape of dime and other novels, and at the best exciting books of travel and adventure. This is not as it should be; and if we cast about for the cause, we think it is to be found in the defective nature of the education our youth of both sexes receive in our grammar and ladies' schools. It is useless to expect an approach to liberal culture in our common schools, so long as the great majority of common school teachers do not even comprehend the term, and have no aspiration beyond earning their pittance, by performing therefor the required amount of "grind" in the A. B. C. of knowledge. But as a class our masters of grammar schools are of a different stamp. They may have understood,—they may have seen—the necessity of imparting to our youth such a training in English classics,—of imbuing them with such a relish for the beautiful and elevated in thought and taste, of creating in them such an interest in the progress and phases of mental activity in the world,—that there shall be little danger of their minds stagnating in a state of torpor when they leave school. But their hands have been tied, they have been compelled to waste the precious time in which this could be done in hammering into promising and unpromising heads alike a smattering of Latin and Greek. We regard the requirement of the late grammar school law, which made it compulsory on all grammar school pupils to learn Latin, *volens volens*, as having been most ruinous to the cultivation of English in our schools. Half the time of our masters has been employed in teaching little more than "qualifying Latin" to hundreds, yea, to thousands to whom it has been of no earthly use, but positively mischievous; in that it crowded out the liberal study of their own tongue; forbade an acquaintance with the classics of their own language, left them "in midnight ignorance of science, shaky in spelling, with a handwriting spoiled by impositions, and a taste gratified with dime novels. As a result of so much happy seed-time the pupil at most possesses a few scraps of vocabulary and patches of grammar wholly unphilosophical and half understood." * Dr. Evans, head master of Birmingham grammar school, affirmed before the Public Schools Commission that "large numbers of boys left Rugby every year in the lower forms with little

* See Farrar's Essay on Public School Education in "Fortnightly Review."