

# THE EDITORIAL PAGE

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THE editorial page has been likened to the productions of the prophets of old. It has been said that it performs for the present generation a duty somewhat similar to that attributed to those ancient writings. This places it upon a high plane, and ranks the editors with Isaiah, Jeremiah and Jonah. If this comparison transgresses it does so on the side of generosity to ourselves. Yet we ought to bear in mind that the page where it gives a fair relation of facts, where it warns and advises, where it stands for what is right and just and true, is in line with the literature of all ages that has helped to form the character of mankind, and has made for the happiness of the human race.

It has been said further that the page is the successor of the old pamphlets and essays which influenced the course of events in more recent times. This also gives it a worthy ancestry. If we cannot rise to the standard of excellence found in the classics we can at least remember that the page is rendering to this era, and in a way that is suitable to it, a service similar to that which the now historic productions of other centuries performed for the people of that time. The question is, however, not what the origin of the page is, but whether it is living up to its opportunities and its responsibilities.

This leads us to a consideration of the conditions under which newspaper discussion is now conducted in our own country as compared with the situation in years gone by. I think that those of us who look back to the old days will admit that the writings of that period were more polished, more scholarly, and at the same time more violent and more personal than those of this period. In former times it was not irregular to speak of the bald-headed Ananias of the other side, and to condemn that Scriptural character in ferocious yet well chosen terms, but to-day we merely deplore the terminological inexactitudes of the enemy, and piously hope for better things. In the old days it was the custom to press views upon the people through the resort to the black letter and through the use of Capitals, but to-day the editorial page marshalls its facts and tries to prove its case in the court of reason. Again, instead of assailing the individual, the page deals rather with the principle at issue and leaves the individual to take care of himself.

These are changes for the better in the editorial page. They can be attributed in a great measure to the attitude of the public towards questions of high importance. The average man to-day is not so much interested in knowing what an editor says or thinks as in being able to examine the facts for himself and to form his own conclusions. They are also traceable to the altered relations of the press towards public men. The time was when the politician ruled the editorial page with absolute authority. Every public man felt the necessity for an "organ"; every journal was the mouthpiece of some aspirant to fame. This was an era of great ambition, and of much bitterness in the press. To-day the press, even that which is pronouncedly favourable to a particular side of politics, is detached to a very large extent. It has no personal ambitions to promote; it knows that the good will of the public is more substantial than the gratitude of politicians. For this reason it strives, while upholding its own cause, to appeal to the intellect rather than to the passions of its readers. Thus political bitterness is assuaged, and a larger view is taken of the public questions as they arise.

## ITS DUTY.

While the editorial page has experienced an evolution of a satisfactory nature, we must not allow ourselves to forget its duties to the people and to the country. In the first place it ought to contribute to the stability of the constitutional system under which we live. Were we the victims of some intolerable grievance, some unwarrantable oppression, this view would not hold good. It would then be the duty of the press to seek the correction of the wrong by processes that are peaceful and at the same time effective. Public opinion should, under such circumstances, be stirred up to force a change. But, where we have absolute liberty under our system, liberty to make and unmake governments, liberty to accept or reject policies, liberty to rule ourselves in every particular, we should preach stability, not on the basis of an illogical loyalty, but

as a matter of good judgment. Our neighbours set us an example of devotion to their constitution. They differ in politics; but they are at one on the subject of the United States. The editorial page can keep the public mind right on this question. Its policy should be directed to this end. A continual rubbing in of the theory of dissatisfaction could create a state of opinion that would go far towards impairing our constitutional stability.

Nor is the responsibility of the editorial page in the matter of our foreign relations at all insignificant. Nearly half a century ago when a great crisis arose in the neighbouring states public opinion in Canada was not well directed. That it was wrongly directed I do not wish to say. It was rather left without guidance. The result was a diversity of opinion the effect of which upon the international relations was not salutary. A more recent difficulty, that of our neighbours with Spain, was viewed differently owing to the more extensive and more sympathetic discussion which it received from our press; and that situation alone contributed very materially to a better understanding with the United States, which understanding brought good feeling to Britain during the South African war from quarters which otherwise might not have been any too friendly. These matters are mentioned to enforce the view that the editorial page exercises an influence in international affairs, little though we may think it. Bismarck is said to have remarked that the diplomats were chiefly engaged in mending the windows which the press has broken. And, as we are all aware, it is by way of the editorial pages of to-day that the great war between Britain and Germany is being conducted.

## EDITORS AND PARTY LINES.

Passing from external to internal affairs the page finds itself faced with duties of a highly important although of a domestic character. Here we are confronted with divisions on party lines. That these divisions are to be deplored is to be doubted. One would almost think that out of the strife of opinions, out of the conflict of views, good may come. It is sometimes said that these divisions are unworthy, and that the journal which advocates principles of a type entertained by any large group of thinkers is partisan or prejudiced. But it is not possible to have an editorial page which does not now and then express an opinion. And, if the opinion that is expressed conforms with that held by a very considerable body of our fellow citizens it surely does not necessarily follow that the opinion is partisan or improper.

Partisanship comes in where the editorial page follows blindly and approves or disapproves without reason in the interests of faction. The editorial page ought to be sure that the policy is right, or as nearly right as the human intellect can make it, before accepting it. It ought to be sure that the thing is wrong before denouncing it.

Modern conditions contribute towards an attitude of this kind. The newspaper press is not now closely associated with party leaders. It has nothing to gain by assisting public men in the satisfying of their ambitions. Those who are connected with it are more distantly removed than ever from the party machine. It has everything to lose by advocating or by defending that which is contrary to the public interest. A high degree of independence, therefore, appertains to it, and it should be the aim of those who are connected with it to increase that independence and to direct the public mind towards the betterment of the conditions of the people rather than towards the exaltation of a party or an individual. Admittedly, there are circumstances or conditions which embarrass it in the performance of its duties in a thoroughly impartial manner. One of these is the fact that any objection to a proposition emanating from within the party which the editorial page usually supports, or any commendation of an act of the other side, is bound to be cited by contemporaries as evidences of disaffection or as proofs of the soundness on all questions of the opposing party. I have a solemn remembrance of the fact that a kindly word used in one journal was repeated with great effect in two or three general elections, and assisted to wipe out, or to negative, the adverse opinion on other issues subsequently expressed.

## NOT WHOLLY POLITICAL.

Rising above the party the editorial page ought to be the guardian of the public rights, the conservator

of the national interests. There are, however, subjects other than those of an absolutely political character with which the page can and should deal. Social questions, questions which relate to the every day life of the people; moral questions upon which the rough and ready judgment of the masses is not correct, demand attention, and should be discussed with a real desire to contribute to the general welfare. It may sound boastful, but there is truth in the proposition that the newspaper exercises an influence upon the tone of the community almost as important as that exercised by the pulpit. It is not by any particular view that is expressed at any particular moment that the influence is exerted; it is rather by the continual presentation of either good or bad principles that the people are led. It has been said that if an article be written formulating a certain opinion the average reader will look it over and allow the idea to pass from his mind. On the second occasion that the same view is promulgated, the reader will think the idea fairly reasonable. When next the matter is broached the average man will say, not only that the thing is right; but that it had been his opinion from the first. Thus it is a fact that the editorial page is insidiously powerful for good or evil. It touches the public mind. It helps to form the public morals. It aids the people in the determination of the course they shall take on the great majority of questions.

These views are not applicable merely to what are known as city journals. They apply also to that vast army, that influential body of journals, published elsewhere than in the larger centres of population. No one who reads these papers, as many of us do, as a matter of duty and of pleasure, can fail to appreciate the ability with which their editorial departments are, as a rule, conducted. It would be possible, but it would be invidious to do so, to name unpretentious journals whose discussions of the vast range of topics with which editors are required to deal are admirable for the ability with which their arguments are presented and for the fairness with which they are animated. The outside press, if a city man may be excused for so calling it, comes into the city office, bringing with it views that are drawn from sources closer to the people than any that the city press can really reach. It thus reflects in an especial degree the public mind. The power of that portion of the press is almost unlimited. It touches people who otherwise are not addressed. To the state it would be a real loss were the labours of that department of effort lessened. It is not necessary that the papers should devote themselves to the bitter discussion of political questions which divide the community. It is desirable, however, that they should lead on the great issues in which the social and moral conditions of the people are concerned.

The responsibility of the page is therefore not to be overlooked. There are those who say that they do not give a fig for your editorials. There are those who say that a paper without any opinions is the paper that will be popular. But let us hope that the day will be very distant when the press relinquishes its power to guide and to suggest along lines that make for the public welfare. Let us hope also that the writer will always feel that his duties are not merely perfunctory, but that every word he addresses to his readers must be an honest word dealing justly with the question upon which he speaks and suggesting a course of action that makes for the well being of the individual and of the state.

## Directions for Amateurs

THE amateur always has a hard time of it, and the amateur appreciator of his friend's artistic attempts is no exception to this rule. Fortunately a writer in the Munich *Jugend* has discovered and published five signs which should be very helpful to all who have to criticise pictures. They are as follows:

1. If the artist paints the sky grey and the grass black, he belongs to the good old classical school.
2. If he paints the sky blue and the grass green, he is a realist.
3. If he paints the sky green and the grass blue, he is an impressionist.
4. If he paints the sky yellow and the grass purple, he is a colourist.
5. If he paints the sky black and the grass red, he shows possession of great decorative talent.

\* A Paper read before the Canadian Press Association at its Annual Meeting last week.