

THE INDIAN CHARACTER. BY E. M. CHADWICK, ESQ.

(Read April 10, 1897)

This paper was read, as views on the same subject had been presented by a reader before the Institute some time previously. Such former paper had not, in the opinion of the present reader, exhausted the subject, nor treated it quite justly or in due proportion, but had rather enlarged upon the faults of the Indians without giving due weight to their better qualities, the reader being impressed with the importance of understanding and recognizing what good there is in those under our care and tutelage, and how many unfortunate mistakes may have been in the past, and possibly may be in the future, avoided by a better knowledge of what the Indian has been, is, and may be.

The Indian, as a subject of which so many have written, has been in this respect at a great disadvantage, and has been treated with much injustice, because, firstly, his history has, for the most part, been written by his enemies; secondly, most writers have formed their impressions from tribes which have been deteriorated from contact with unscrupulous whites, diminished by intemperance and the diseases which have ever marked the advance of civilization, impoverished by the destruction of their accustomed means of subsistence, and disheartened and dispirited by the change in their circumstances; and lastly, because it has been a common practice to gauge the Indian by a European standard. This last, however, may be regarded as an unintentional but very marked tribute to the innate merits of the Indian, for other uncivilized people have been described either without reference to other conditions than those in which the writers happened to find them, or by comparison with people of similar circumstances.

The reader reviewed the various traits of the Indian character at length, and concluded as follows:

While the policy of our Government has ever been wise and commendable, and has been generally honestly carried out by the executive agents and officers, I cannot but think that in one respect a grave mistake has been commonly made by those charged with duties bringing them into immediate contact with the Indians, both officials and others, and perhaps especially missionaries, whose methods are apt to be unduly patronizing. The Indian is in many respects child-like, knowing that the white man's knowledge is superior to his, and, therefore, when his tutelage begins he enters into a relation as regards the whites similar to that of pupil and teacher. This condition is one of much difficulty, requiring management with a tact and skill such as few people are able to exercise. If the Indian were treated as a friend and equal rather than as a pupil or dependent, I believe his advancement would be more certain and speedy. Individual cases of Indians revolting, and perhaps with little or no apparent reason, from the guidance or control of agents or missionaries will no doubt occur in the experience of such people, without their perceiving that a certain amount of fault may lie with themselves. I do not wish to be understood as unduly criticising either agent or missionary, for in Canada I am convinced that our Indian agents as a class are men competent and well worthy of the great trust and responsibility imposed upon them, as I certainly know some of them to be; and for the missionaries I have the highest respect, believing that upon the faithful performance of their duties, more than anything else, depends the future welfare of the Indian as a civilized citizen.