

LITERATURE IN SCHOOLS.*

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"NO power is capable of doing more for the schools than literature, if we understand by it the works of the best writers. They have thought the noblest thoughts, they have reached the highest truths, and the more we learn of them the more they help us to think and to know by ourselves. To feel the influence of literature thoroughly we must begin at an early stage, with such prose and poetry as children can then comprehend, and from this go on gradually until the works of the great masters can be read not only in but out of school, and appreciated." These are the words of one of America's greatest educationists, and they serve as an admirable introduction to the few thoughts on Literature in Schools which I shall endeavour to place before you. They draw attention to what literature is, to the necessity of beginning the study of it early, and to the object which this study is to accomplish, viz., to read and appreciate the works of the great authors feeling their influence.

The greater number of our pupils leaves school without advancing further than the fourth class, and without entering a High School where the study of literature proper now begins. Our reading books, containing a mass of short extracts with little if any order in their arrangement, have been so far our only means of forming our pupils' tastes and of interesting them in any author; and the sixteen lessons chosen for special study have been a hindrance rather than a help in this work. "Just a chapter or two of one writer,

or a poem or two of another—often indeed but a mere fragment of a poem—with rapid transition from author to author, and from age to age," says Dr. Eliot, "will leave most pupils confused rather than inspired." Does not our own experience enable us to bear testimony to the literal truth of the Doctor's statement?

It is generally admitted that if we wish to form in children a taste for good reading, to create in them an appetite which craves only the healthiest literary food, we must make them as early as possible familiar with the best English classics, and to bring this about we ought to introduce into the Public School programme such a course of reading as will enable us to accomplish these desirable ends and to impart correct methods of study as well. I did hope, some time ago, that, when a change of reading books became necessary, it might be possible to substitute for the Fourth and Fifth Readers one complete and characteristic work of each of, say, six authors. By this means the pupils, instead of knowing as now almost nothing about many authors, would know considerable about a few and be inclined to extend this acquaintance. In Boston the authorities have gone further than I have suggested, and have introduced into the second and third classes a two-fold series of popular tales, believing that the lessons should lead the children to take to reading as a recreation and amusement first, and later on as a means of acquiring knowledge. The superintendent remarks: "I have seen children read these tales as I never before saw them read anything in a Primary School, with closer attention, with deeper interest, with

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