

Our Contributors.

A COMPARISON ALWAYS SAFE BUT OFTEN UNFAIR.

BY KNOXONIAN.

One of the good things in the oration of Demosthenes on the Crown is his reply to the charge that he was "nothing like the ancients." To compare or contrast the living with the dead the great orator contended was unfair. The dead have no rivals and even their enemies no longer hate them. Towards the living there always exists more or less ill-will. The respect that human nature has for the dead always makes a fair comparison between a living man and a dead man impossible. The faults of the dead are ignored; while the faults and failings of the living are often exaggerated. Demosthenes contended that the living should be compared with the living and sent home his argument by asking his opponent if he himself resembled the ancients to any great extent.

There is a huge fallacy in all comparisons between the living and the dead but nobody cares to expose the fallacy in any individual case. If exposed at all it must be exposed on general principles. Though such comparisons are manifestly unfair they are as safe as the Bank of England. It is always safe to say that a departed politician was a much abler man than anybody now in political life because you cannot bring back the dead man to grapple with the Manitoba School question, or make a speech in Parliament, or contest a close constituency. If he came back and tried his hand at the tariff or the Manitoba problem he might not do any better work than the gentlemen at Ottawa are doing now. Ontario had some able statesmen in days gone by. It is doubtful if any of them, should they return and take office, would govern the Province one whit better than it is governed at present. Of course it is quite safe to say that the public men of by-gone days would do marvellous things if they were here. The man who makes that original and brilliant observation knows quite well that they cannot be brought here; and therefore his comparison, though unfair, is quite safe.

These unfair comparisons abound in the church. We are often solemnly and sadly assured that the preachers of many years ago were very much abler men in the pulpit than the preachers of this degenerate age; that the professors of some by-gone age were much more learned than any living professors are; that the young people of half or a whole century ago were vastly superior to the rising generation; in fact, that everything and everybody fifty or a hundred years ago were much better than everything and everybody at present existing. Don't be surprised if you should hear somebody say on one of these March days, when the wind is blowing from the North East, that the Missionary Societies of a century ago were much more efficiently conducted than those of the present. The trifling fact that there were no missionary societies a century ago should not be allowed to spoil the comparison.

Now the general question whether the church is gaining or losing in power for good is one that might be discussed by itself and one on both sides of which something might be said. The specific point now before us is the unfairness of contrasting living with dead men.

The preacher of seventy-five or fifty years ago cannot be heard now and therefore it is impossible to say whether he preached more effectively than any living preacher. If judged by the sermons that have come down to us, the fame of many preachers of by-gone days is a mystery. But then the press has in many cases given us nothing but a few notes; and even a verbatim report would not do the departed brother justice, because cold type never gives all the elements of power that are in a sermon. The fact is a fair comparison cannot be made, but still it is quite safe to make it for nobody can contradict you.

How could anybody make a fair comparison between the elders of fifty years ago and the elders of to-day? How many

of the elders of fifty or seventy-five years ago does anybody remember much about? And just because we know comparatively little about these excellent people it is perfectly safe, though grossly unfair, to say they were vastly superior to the elders who serve the church now.

A comparison between the theological professors of ancient and those of modern days is equally unfair. We know very little about how men taught theology fifty years ago. We have heard rather amusing accounts of how some professors didn't teach, even in Scotland; but nobody cares to put things of that kind in print. Nobody wants to say anything about the inefficiency of a professor that has gone; but even very young students do sometimes say most ungenerous and unjust things about some of those who are here and doing their duty faithfully and well. The publication of text books by a professor, even when the book is a good one, proves nothing as to his teaching power. A very weak teacher may write a good text book. Prof. Young was considered by many the best teacher of his day, and he wrote little. A fair comparison between the teaching power of professors who have laboured fifty years apart cannot be made and yet you are perfectly safe in making it. Nobody will rise up and say that a professor of fifty years ago knew nothing of his subject or could not teach it; even though the statement might be as true as Holy Writ. Anybody will criticize a living professor; and perhaps give him scant justice or no justice at all.

The boys of long ago were of course all good. They never played truant, or chalked the teacher's back, or put cayenne pepper on the stove at public meetings, or crossed a neighbor's orchard fence accidentally, or anything of that kind. They were all little saints and the girls were all little angels. The modern boy is placed at a tremendous disadvantage when statements of that kind are made. He was not in existence fifty years ago and cannot tell how the boys of that era behaved. Most of the men who were boys about that time take precious good care not to come down to particulars of a personal nature.

Perhaps Adam was the only man of the past who did not praise the ancients and disparage his contemporaries. Adam had no chance to do anything in that line. He had nothing to put into that part of a speech in which the orator brings down the house by an eloquent paragraph on the fathers. From the days of Adam down, each generation has praised the dead and belittled the living. Our time will soon come. We are a poor enough kind of people but when we are half a century under ground the coming generation will be sure to say we were all good and some of us even great. The youth of that coming time will be told to look to the "fathers," meaning us! Then when those people who will be considered poor enough while alive, die and have been buried for about half a century, they, too, will be considered good. The last generation will have a poor chance for nobody will follow them to forgive their follies.

One or two home questions might be put here. Is respect for the dead more binding on us than justice to the living? Is veneration for the names of men who have gone more important than justice to those who are with us? Is it good morals to say what is untrue in praise of a man simply because he is dead? Are not truth and justice the very foundations on which the throne of the Eternal rests? Is the veneration and respect of a man worth much if he is untruthful and unjust to his neighbours?

Moral:—Respect the dead but do justice to the living: venerate those who are gone, but deal fairly with those who are here. No amount of veneration for the dead can justify injustice to the living.

Youth is good, but old age is better to the man who forsakes not his youth when his youth forsakes him.—MacDonald.

There is no truth greater, more certain, or more precious than this: That God is merciful, that God is ready to forgive, and ready to forgive him who has been of all mankind His most inveterate enemy.

MODERN SCOTS WORTHIES.

BY REV. J. A. R. DICKSON, B.D., PH. D.

The Rev. W. H. Hewiston was one of the saintliest of men, and it is well for us to become acquainted with him. If we may not advance so far as that, we may at least have the pleasure of an introduction to him. His Memoir has been written by the Rev. John Baillie, of Caius College, Cambridge. Suffice it to say it is according to our standard of biographical writing well done. He has that fine sympathy with his subject that gives him a thorough understanding of him, and a perfect appreciation of his whole bearing and character. Besides this "Memoir" there are two volumes of Hewiston's Remains edited by the same writer then settled in Linlithgow. These contain letters and sermons and a journal, and a collection of fragments and aphorisms. A very precious treasure. As a nugget of gold is precious, so are all the bits broken off it, or the filings and scrapings of it—it is all precious. Hewiston was born in Maybole, in Ayrshire, on the 16th of September, 1812. He was very delicate and had to be brought up with the tenderest care. When he was thirteen years of age, his father was appointed parochial teacher of Dalmellington. Here he had about him the rich beauty of the classic banks and braes of "Bonnie Doon," and the picturesque mountains and glens, the enchanted ground of the suffering Covenanters—those valiant saints of God. In this environment his soul would find fitting nourishment. He was a bookish boy, a great reader and a diligent student. When the prospect of a university course opened up before him, he ordered his steps with great circumspection. Everything in his life was reduced to a system, and all his powers were concentrated in the accomplishment of his object. He was naturally very ambitious, hence the progress he made was remarkable. He not only kept on himself, but he spurred on his lagging fellow students. When the thought of the ministry arose within him, he took a decided stand on the necessity of the great change: he told a friend "that he would never be a minister unless he were first a Christian; and by a "Christian" he meant, not professing religion, but being a converted man, "a new creature in Christ Jesus." He scorned the mockery of setting up to preach what he did not thoroughly believe and feel, and live upon himself.

At the University he was highly successful in every department, and left it crowned with honours. He had been a zealous and conscientious student and he left college enriched with effective furnishing for his life work. It was at Leamington in England, in November, 1837 that he "came to himself," chiefly through the conversion of a sick youth who died shortly after the opening of his acquaintance with him. His early Christian experiences were those of groping for light. He kept looking within instead of without, at his own frames and feelings, instead of Christ Jesus dying the just for the unjust, and so he was held as many have been held, in misery. He said this clearly afterwards and writing to his father said:—"I am now convinced that after hearing it preached a thousand times over, we still remain ignorant of the gospel, unless we see clearly and feel joyfully that Christ is offered to us, wretched, lost sinners. In all his fulness, as the free gift of God." Then he speaks of how he deceived and distressed himself with good works, and concludes, "now I see that the gospel is quite different—that it is full and wholly of grace." When the great change comes we know it, and others see it. When Mr. Hewiston was made a new creature in Christ Jesus his friends and acquaintances recognized it. The very night he returned to the parental roof he spoke with every one in the family on the concerns of eternity. "That," said he one day about this time, laying his hand upon the open Bible, "that shall henceforth be my daily study, I desire to converse through it daily with God." And this purpose was not left unaccomplished. It freshened his soul and fitted him for effective service. We are not surprised to

learn that ere he left Edinburgh he had been the means of saving one soul, and shortly after his return home he was honoured in converting another from the error of her ways. He who stands close to the source of power will not be without it. All through his life he was jealous of his Christian liberty. He feared being entangled again with the yoke of legal bondage. So being justified by faith, he stood firmly in the grace into which he had come, by Christ Jesus. To retain this position he made much of the word of God. Among the notes that are constantly ringing out in his journal are these: "To abide in Christ is the only means of enforcing Christian liberty." "In the morning, while I was engaged in reading the word and in prayer, the Lord again showed me his glory. Much blessedness in his presence and fellowship." "Meekness is that which makes the soul plastic and fit for the spirit's sanctifying operations." "Holiness has its source in love, and love its source in my knowledge of being saved." "The moment I depart from the world, the spirit of God ceases to uphold me in my goings, and I become utterly helpless; I have no longer any power to resist indwelling sin, and the wicked one prevails against me." "Find that nothing gives liberty but simple faith in the word of God and hearty cleaving to Christ as all my righteousness."

There was much in Hewiston closely akin to McCheyne. Once while a student he heard him and was much stirred and impressed so that he wrote out a solemn covenant engagement with God. This was before he came into the enjoyment of Christian liberty. Afterwards when McCheyne passed away he wrote to a ministerial friend: "Dear McCheyne! His departure was a great affliction to me, as well as to all who knew him. The beauty of the Lord was upon him."

His conversion was a turning away from so much! Writing to Wm. Dickson, Esq., Edinburgh, a dear friend of his, he says referring to his past: "Then I was burning to enter the arena of learned competition, and thought life without fame not worth having. For a while the demon of ambition was lord of the ascendant and baleful was the influence which it shed upon my character; it was working so effectively the ruin of my soul, that Satan ceased to harass me with fears, as he had done for years before."

He was set free from this snare, and this incident shows how completely this was the case. "The gold medal, once the idol of his heart, he forwarded to Mr. Dickson to be sold, and the proceeds to be put in the Lord's treasury." It was true what he said of his overcoming his great reluctance to part with it. "If the gaining of the prize was a trophy of nature, the parting with it will be, in some measure a trophy of grace." In the school of Christ he made notable progress. How few can say as he said: "I am better acquainted with Jesus than with any friend I have on earth." The delicacy of his childhood clung to him all his life, and showed itself again in a tendency to consumption, which determined his course to Madeira for the sake of the climate, where he again became ill of the same complaint. Persecution arose in Madeira which resulted in his removal, and after a time his going to Trinidad to minister to the exiled Portuguese of Madeira. In 1848 he was settled in Dirleton, Haddingtonshire, Scotland. Wherever Hewiston laboured, souls were brought to Christ. That was his case even on shipboard. He never left his work behind him. He found it right around him. He taught what he himself enjoyed. That "no awakened soul should rest short of a realization and experimental union with the Lord. No converted soul should rest satisfied, till it think every thought and speak every word in communion with Jesus." He tells us that he never preached without asking in the opening prayer that God would save souls at that time. I remember on one occasion in Madeira, when praying before service, I was tempted with the unbelieving thought: "God will not convert souls to-day." I asked forgiveness and for more faith. That day there was a more abundant outpouring of the spirit among the Portuguese than I