

II.—*The Literary Faculty of the Native Races of America.*

By JOHN READE.

(Read May 21, 1884.)

What have the research and learning that have been brought to bear on pre-Columbian America disclosed as to the literary faculty in any of its populations? Before attempting to answer this question it will be well to seek a reply to another. Were any of the American languages suitable for employment in literary composition? The common notion regarding them would, perhaps, imply a negative answer, and this notion is supported by some great names. M. Ernest Renan, in his work on the Semitic languages pronounced a judgment which was, by implication, so indiscriminately adverse to the native tongues of America that Abbé Cuoq felt himself called upon to stand up in their defence. In an able pamphlet he claimed for the Algonquin and Iroquois languages all the excellences that his antagonist attributed to the Aryan tongues, while he put them far above the Chinese and even those of the Semitic group. M. Cuoq does not lack followers; neither does M. Renan. The elaborateness, which the former so highly recommends as a prominent feature in the American languages, Dr. Farrar looks upon as childish excess. On that point Professor Whitney says: "Of course, there are infinite possibilities of expressiveness in such a structure, and it would only need that some native American should arise to fill it full of thought and fancy and put it to the use of a noble literature, and it would be rightly admired as rich and flexible, perhaps, beyond anything else that the world knew." But as it is, he considers it "cumbersome and time-wasting in its immense polysyllabism." Professor Whitney, in fact, seems to think of the languages of the West as Byron thought of the Land of the East, that "all save the spirit of man is divine," and that, if only those who speak them were as gifted as they are expressive, the harmony would be fruitfully complete.

Professor Max Müller on this as on some other points is at variance with Professor Whitney. As we know from his writings, the great German-English philologist loses no opportunity of profiting by intercourse with such foreign students as he may come in contact with at the university which benefits by his services. Among them there happened some time ago to be a Mohawk and to him, as we learn from a note in Mr. H. Hale's interesting work, "The Iroquois Book of Rites," Professor Müller said one day: "To my mind the structure of such a language as the Mohawk is quite sufficient evidence that those who worked out such a work of art were powerful reasoners and acute classifiers." (*Book of Rites*, p. 99, note). In a letter to Mr. Hale, Professor Müller has also given the following emphatic testimony to the value of the American tongues to the philological student: "It has long been a puzzle to me why this most tempting and promising field of philological research has been allowed to be almost fallow in America—