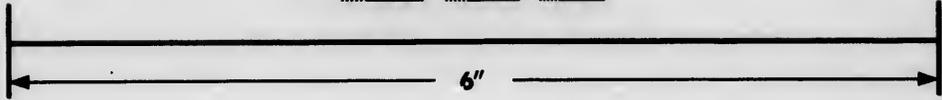
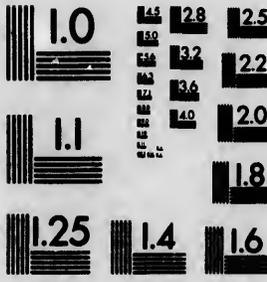


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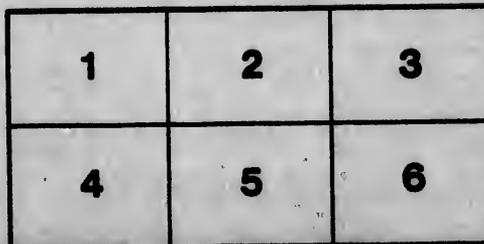
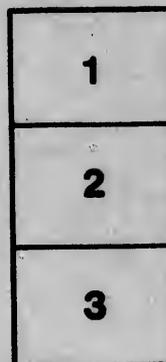
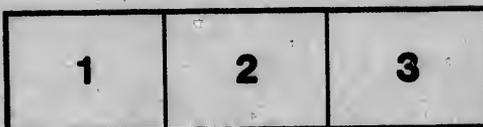
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On the Establishment of Free Public Libraries in Canada.

By DR. ALPHEUS TODD, Librarian of Parliament, Canada.

(Read May 25, 1882.)

[Abstract.]

In the machinery of modern progress now in operation, whether in Europe or America, free libraries, accessible to all classes, occupy a conspicuous place. But it is only within the last half century that the attempt has been made in England to introduce these useful institutions to public notice. In 1849 a select committee of the House of Commons was appointed to inquire into existing public libraries in the kingdom, and into the best means of extending their number, especially in large towns. Upon the close of this inquiry an Act was passed authorizing municipalities in towns and cities to levy a small rate for this object. The Act was afterwards applied to Scotland and Ireland. It has since been amended so as to give it a wider operation; and a measure is now before the Imperial Parliament to consolidate the existing law, and to increase its utility. It is proposed to extend the Act to the rural districts, so that thinly settled neighbourhoods may combine with places adjacent in order to secure the benefits of a free library.

From recent information we gather that most of these infant depositaries of knowledge, though they have usually commenced their operations in a very humble way, have gradually become flourishing and well frequented. There has been a steady increase in the demand for free libraries, especially in English towns. In some populous places, such as Birmingham and Manchester, the libraries have proved a marked success. Under admirable management they have attracted crowds of readers, which is a substantial proof of their educational value. The books have been selected with special reference to the wants of the particular district, or to the pursuits of the students. The mechanic or inventor, the lover of art, the social reformer, the budding politician, have each been provided with the necessary works for instruction in their respective branches of knowledge. And for the general reader, to whom books are a mere recreation, agreeable and wholesome literary food has been supplied, which has helped to preserve them from grosser temptations, and to enlarge, if not to elevate, their mental vision.

With such decided benefits attending the introduction of free public libraries into the United Kingdom, it is obvious that it would be a great desideratum if we could establish similar institutions amongst ourselves. The time has undoubtedly arrived when efforts in this direction, if judiciously made, might be expected to succeed.

Already the Province of Ontario has taken the initiative in this good work. At the last session of the Local Legislature, an Act was passed (Ont. Stat. 1882, ch. 22), to which his Honour the Lieutenant-Governor, in his prorogation speech, referred in the following appropriate terms:—"I congratulate you upon the passage of an Act which is intended to enable the municipalities to found free libraries, and maintain them in an efficient condition by levying a rate, so small as to be almost inappreciable in its incidence. The

advantages capable of being derived from this measure are so manifold that I shall be glad to learn that extensive application is made of the provisions of the law."

But it is not enough that legislative authority has been granted for this purpose; neither will the response of the municipalities, by sanctioning the levy of a rate, be sufficient. Something more is needed, and that is the active co-operation of intelligent citizens in each locality. This is indispensable in order to give life and energy to this movement; and this, it may be hoped, will not be wanting in Upper Canada. The result of the experiment in Ontario will be of no small interest to the other provinces of the Dominion.

I am not unmindful of the fact that the experiment in Ontario is not altogether new. More than thirty years ago the lamented Dr. Egerton Ryerson, included in his great and comprehensive plan of public instruction, the foundation of township libraries throughout the province. But this attempt was attended with very partial success. The township libraries still exist; but, in most places, it is reported that they do not thrive or give general satisfaction. Two causes, I think, have contributed to their failure. Firstly, the township libraries were established on the principle that Government aid, to an extent equal at least to that of local contributions, might always be expected. This forced the libraries prematurely; whilst their growth, to be healthy, should have been the result of spontaneous action, put forth in places where the necessity for a free public library had been felt, and acknowledged by the preponderating voice of the community. Secondly, these township libraries were supplied with books from a central depository, where they had been purchased wholesale, and copies of the same work were distributed everywhere. Such a cast-iron method of forming libraries throughout the land is obviously objectionable. It destroys the individuality which should characterize every separate library as well as every individual man. There are undoubtedly certain standard works of reference which are indispensable in all public libraries, but upon this foundation a superstructure should be built in accordance with the predominant tastes, mental pursuits, or class of studies to which the mass of the frequenters of the library may specially incline. If at the outset this cannot be ascertained, it should be the aim of those who are deputed to select the books to give at least a distinctive character to each collection by making a speciality of some particular subject. This would render every library an object of interest to the country at large, as well as a vehicle of instruction and entertainment to its owners. The lack of specialities in any library not merely brings the collection down to a monotonous and uninteresting level, but to an equal extent lessens its attraction and impairs its usefulness.

In these days of mental activity every public library should, as far as possible, keep pace with the times. The peculiarities of each collection will naturally depend upon local considerations, and upon the disposition and requirements of its supporters. But besides this there is apparent in self-governing communities an increasing interest in the great questions of the day. New topics are continually arising upon which it is the natural desire of all intelligent persons to obtain accurate information. "The Literature of Public Questions" must, therefore, find a prominent place in all popular libraries; and in proportion as this want is well supplied we may estimate their practical value to the people. If complete in this department, members of town or county councils, of a provincial Legislature, or of a Federal Parliament, will alike possess equal facilities for studying the history and present aspect of questions, in the settlement or application

whereof—in their respective positions—they must necessarily be occupied. The worth of such knowledge can scarcely be overrated; and this consideration alone should suffice to induce all well-wishers of Canada's advancement to favour the setting up of free public libraries in every possible direction.

But it is not merely on account of their practical utility that these institutions are desirable. Amusement and recreation are essential to humanity. A public library is not only helpful to the student and the brainworker in their graver pursuits, it should likewise supply the means of entertainment for all. My long experience as a literary caterer enables me to assert that no men enjoy a well written novel with keener relish and none derive more refreshment from its perusal than the hard-worked lawyer or politician, to whom such recreation is often as much a necessity as it is a gratification.

Moreover, by the judicious supply of a due proportion of fiction in every free library, you interest a larger section of the public in its support. You will thus enlist the ladies on your side, and will delight the young whilst you satisfy the old. Readers for mere pastime will probably constitute the majority everywhere; yet even amongst this class many may be weaned, by the attraction of entertaining books, from the gross but seductive pleasures of sensual indulgence.

There are very few public libraries in Europe or America that do not contain a considerable number of novels. From an estimate carefully prepared some years ago, I assume that our library of Parliament has a much smaller proportion of light reading than any corresponding collection on either continent, with two or three exceptions. But on referring to the statistics of the Manchester free library—which is perhaps the best selected, if not altogether the largest of the kind in Great Britain—the proportion of fiction to other works read in the library is about one-third, so that for every book of mere amusement perused in that institution two works of solid instruction are consulted. But, in addition, books are loaned to outside readers. To such the proportion of fiction distributed is greater. It includes five-eighths of the entire circulation of the year.

The average circulation of books in and out of the library of Parliament, for three years in succession, affords us very similar results. Of books read in the library, or consulted during session, fully two-thirds are of a solid useful description, whilst of those loaned to the general public, out of session, probably five-eighths are works of imagination.

The annual additions to the library of Parliament in the shape of fiction are few and not costly. We possess a large though not a complete collection of the standard British novelists. These books could scarcely be omitted from any free library, for the reasons already stated. But, on the other hand, the guardians of such institutions, in the selection of books, should be careful to exclude from their shelves all works which have a tendency either to subvert the public morals or to encourage the spread of infidelity. They should be alive to the great responsibility of placing within indiscriminate reach books which are calculated to undermine morality or religion. If individuals insist on perusing such works, let it not be at the public expense, or in depositories accessible to the public generally.

Upon the opening of the Manchester free library in September, 1852, many persons of distinction in literature assembled to do honour to the occasion. Amongst the number was Charles Dickens. Called upon for a speech, he said, with his customary felicity,

much that was both witty and wise. In particular, he gave a humorous description of his fruitless endeavours, during several years, to comprehend the meaning of the current phrase, "the Manchester school." He had gone hither and thither vainly imploring explanation. Some people told him it was "all cant," others confidently asserted that it was "all cotton." But, he said, in that room his doubts were suddenly dispelled. Looking around, he now saw that "the Manchester school" was a library of books, open for the instruction of all classes, whether rich or poor. May the time soon come, he added, when all our towns and cities shall possess as good a seminary.

Following up this train of thought, another great author, who was present, Edward Bulwer, Lord Lytton, quaintly remarked, that "a library is not only a school, it is an arsenal and an armoury. Books are weapons, either for war or self-defence. And the principles of chivalry are as applicable to the student now, as they ever were to the knight of old. To defend the weak, to resist the oppressor, to add to courage humility, to give to man the service and to God the glory, is the student's duty now as it was once the duty of the knight."

I owe these apposite quotations to a writer of special authority upon the subject matter of this essay, namely Mr. Edwards, the first librarian of the Manchester Free Library, whose work on "Free Town Libraries, their formation, management, and history," would be very serviceable to the advocates and promoters of similar institutions in Canada. The book was published simultaneously in London and in New York in 1869.*

I cannot close my paper more suitably than by citing Mr. Edwards' words in summing up the advantages which, even at that early period in their annals, had already accrued from the establishment of free public libraries in the United Kingdom.

"By the imposition of a rate so small that it can never become burdensome to any class of ratepayers, nearly half a million volumes have been already provided for free public use, in thirty-four British towns. Without exception, the working of all the free libraries so established and brought into active operation has proved eminently satisfactory to all classes of the ratepayers. It has largely promoted that industrial education which fits men for their specific callings in life, as well as that wider education which reaches farther and higher; and in not a few towns the introduction of the rating principle has already proved itself to be not a discouragement, but a strong stimulant to the exercise of private liberality. For it is seen to give the best possible assurance that liberal efforts to promote the intellectual self-culture of the present generation will continue to be productive of good to generations yet to come."

* See also a pamphlet by W. S. Green, Librarian of the Worcester (Massachusetts) Free Public Library, entitled "Library aids, and guides for readers," published in Boston, in 1882.

Since the publication of Mr. Edwards' volume, we learn that the steady growth of the Free Library system in Great Britain since 1871 is shown by the fact that there are now over 80 distinct communities that possess Free Libraries. These institutions have in the aggregate nearly 2,500,000 (two million five hundred thousand) volumes, and their annual issues run up to over nine million books. In twelve years the books contained in about two-thirds of the Libraries have been quadrupled. In twelve representative towns the following percentage shows the rate of the issue of novels in comparison with all other books: The lowest gives 56 and the highest 77 per cent. (Library Association Conference, 1883.)

