

ON READING

*Alumni Prize Essay, read by Elesban McPhee at the
Commencement Exercises, May 28, 1929*

The faculty which above all others distinguishes Man from the lesser creatures of this world is his intellect. And God, in His infinite understanding having endowed Man with a rational mind, foresaw that some means of communication would be necessary to intelligent beings, and straightway conferred upon them the power to speak. Providential foresight thus afforded contemporary beings a direct means of intercourse. But the passage of time necessitated one more link to make the chain of human understanding complete, and this was finally supplied through the medium of the written word.

No other single accomplishment of Man has contributed so substantially to the progress and cultivation of human society as has his ability to write. The literature of any country constitutes an inexhaustible source of wealth to its citizens; for in it they find recorded the wisdom and accomplishments of the great men of former ages. To the authors of the different centuries we owe indeed a meed of gratitude. To them we go to imbibe the knowledge and the truths which great thinkers of old have set down in their books for the benefit of posterity. Modern authors too, have contributed and do contribute much to the world of letters. Their readers, as is quite natural, far outnumber the readers of ancient authors, although it is generally conceded that the older writings, judged from a literary standpoint, are much superior. From these two sources, ancient and modern, the reader of today derives his mental stimulus.

The average reader turns to books for either of two main purposes; for information, or for recreation. To what authors we apply ourselves is determined by the nature of the information we seek, or by the taste for lighter literature which we possess. In either case we have a vast treasury from which to draw at any time we so desire. There is scarcely any field of human knowledge which our fore-fathers have not explored; and they have faithfully handed down their findings to us in their writings. In books we find the accumulated knowledge of centuries ready at our disposal. The writers of each generation

began where their predecessors left off, so that we have recounted fully the developments of the different branches of human knowledge up to the present day. Philosophy, science, religion, and practically any subject which the reader may wish to study, can be found in the proper books. And we are not confined to any one author's opinions on the matter, but may draw our own inferences after consulting the various ideas on that subject—set down by different authors. This applies, of course, more directly to our serious reading. However, we are not, nor should we be, always pursuing our deeper studies, particularly so since there is an abundance of lighter literature which is really excellent reading. The normal person must have some recreation, and, if he is a reader, he will find much to delight him in the realm of fiction.

There are many benefits to be derived from prudent, well directed reading, just as there are many disadvantages in the way of him who has not educated himself in the use of books. The reading of good books is an education in itself. The ordinary healthy individual is always—more or less desirous of extending the boundaries of his knowledge. This he may do by various means such as by travelling, or if he be yet of suitable age, by attending some institution of learning. But there are many who have not been privileged to partake of these opportunities and still have at hand the most liberal of all educators, a good library. Within its walls one may undertake daily expeditions into foreign lands, untrammelled by the awkward impediments of the traveller, and learn perhaps more from his reading than from an actual visit to those countries. Of course he will miss what perhaps most people travel for, the strange sights and actual contact with beings different to themselves. But many things incomprehensible to ourselves become wonderfully clear when they are interpreted for our benefit by others who have an understanding and sympathetic knowledge of those things. Thus the traveller may find much to be condemned in the habits and customs of the people of a foreign land; but the reader, seeing those people through the eyes of a writer who knew and understood them, will have a far deeper knowledge and appreciation of the strangers than will the hurried and bewildered traveller. The knowledge to be gained in books is, if not very exciting, at least very thorough.

In order to really enjoy literature a person should read according as his taste directs. Of course, this is not applicable to those who read on some specific subject for the sole purpose of gaining information. The person who is interested in some branch of science must confine himself to books which treat of that particular line of knowledge. But the man who reads for the pure enjoyment which books afford him should be guided by his inclinations. Only by so doing can he derive the full benefit of books; for if the subject is chosen only from a sense of duty, as it were, a reader cannot fully concentrate upon it. When a large part of the reader's energy is expended in overcoming his indifference to the book which he is reading it must necessarily follow that his concentration is greatly impaired. And reading without at least a fair amount of concentration is practically wasted time, for only a very hazy knowledge of the subject remains in the mind. The proverb "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing" may well be applied to those who read only half-heartedly. It is not the "little knowledge" in itself which is harmful. It is the unarranged ideas and indefinite notions of the subject which remain with the reader, and which can only result in even greater ignorance, that are harmful. It is better to read one book and understand it perfectly, than to read a dozen and have only an imperfect knowledge of their contents.

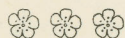
Reading is an excellent antidote for sorrow. In no other pursuit is one's conscious self so completely submerged as in the reading of a good book. The interested reader takes no note of his surroundings or of the passing of time. He is for the time being entirely divorced from his cares and living in a world apart. If one is merely tired he may soothe his nerves by indulging in light, airy literature; but if one is weighed down by a great sorrow he must seek his comfort from more serious books. The melancholy spirit derives no solace from an author whose books are overflowing with the joy of life. Such a person must betake himself to authors who have infused into their books the spirit of sympathy and understanding. The sympathy offered by acquaintances is only too often hypocritical; and the victim, rendered doubly sensitive by his affliction, invariably recognizes the quality of forced commiseration. But in a good book there is no pretense. Authors endeavour to set down in their pages just what

they believe, if for no other reason, simply because recourse to duplicity could serve no reasonable end. Moreover, the great author owes no small part of his greatness to his honesty in portraying life just as he sees it. This quality of integrity which all good books possess renders them particularly welcome to the seeker of comfort. Here will he find consolation and merciful forgetfulness of his troubles.

Apart from being a source of pleasure and of knowledge, reading is also an excellent means of training the will. We can accomplish very little, indeed, if we have not the will power to persevere. But to him who is happily possessed of this virtue, no task, however difficult, is impossible. The reader who sets himself the task of reading a certain book, and concentrates upon it, even though he would much prefer to throw it aside, is surely acquiring a lesson in self-control. No one, however much he is attached to books, will always find literature which appeals to him, but in order to receive the greatest benefit he must sometimes apply himself to subjects which are distasteful. Nor is this applicable only to our reading; it is true of any pursuit in life. And the self-control which is gained by reading will assist us greatly in overcoming the various obstacles which we encounter in our daily lives. This is perhaps one of the most important advantages of reading; for no matter how brilliant an intellect we may have, or how good our intentions may be, they will come to naught if we have not the propelling force of a powerful will behind them.

The pleasures and benefits of reading are many; but in order to derive the greatest pleasure or the greatest benefit from books we must form sensible habits of reading. In literature, as in everything else, we must be able to choose what is suitable and to reject what is undesirable. Particularly is this so today when writers through their very numbers and the extent of their output wield such tremendous influence over the whole civilized world. Some present day writers, in their efforts to produce realistic literature seem to have lost sight of the original moderate demands of realism. This type was instituted in protest to the exaggerated imaginings of romanticists; but, especially in modern novels dealing with social problems, we find too often the vulgar, the unprintable, parading under the caption of realism. But the great majority

of authors, ancient and modern, have put forth works which are a credit to themselves and an everlasting source of wisdom and pleasure to the reading public; and to such writers the world owes an immense debt of gratitude for their inestimably valuable contribution to the progress of civilization.



Why should we faint and fear to live alone,
Since all alone, so Heaven has willed, we die,
Nor even the tenderest heart and next our own
Knows half the reasons why we smile and sigh.
—*Keble*

Travel, in the younger sort, is a part of education; in the elder, a part of experience. He that travelleth into a country before he hath some entrance into the language, goeth to school, and not to travel.—*Bacon*.

