

Books And Their Authors

Read Four Books of "Iliad" in Vancouver

Considerable Humor in "Letters of Principal Denney to His Family and Friends"—Some of These Epistles Were Written from Vancouver and Other Places in Canada—A Funny Story, and Nothing Else, Recorded While the Scotch Professor Was in Winnipeg.

By Prof. W. T. Allison.

Some very famous literature was first thrown into the form of letters. Students of classics always have a sigh of relief when they switch over from the orations to the letters of that industrious writer and politician, Marcus Tullius Cicero; Pliny is another ancient whose letters to his friends are still read with enjoyment. In English literature Cowper, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Lamb, Fitzgerald, Browning and his wife, Matthew Arnold, and Stevenson are only a few of those who revealed their personalities with singular frankness, charm and power in the epistles they despatched to their intimates, not knowing that they would be spread before the curious eyes of posterity. In this country few letters exchanged between friends would be worthy of publication, but the English and the Scotch are assiduous letter-writers. The leisureed Englishman spends about a third of his life writing missives to his friends. It is one of his favorite forms of recreation or should we say that it is one way in which he follows the good old precept, "England expects every man to do his duty?" James Denney, the noted theological professor of Glasgow, who died in 1917, gave a good deal of his spare time to this exercise. By rising early he was able to write as many as fifteen letters in a long forenoon. The letters that he wrote to Sir W. Robertson Nicoll between 1893 and 1917 filled a stout volume, and now his friend, Professor James Moffatt, has found no difficulty in making up another good-sized book with "Letters of Principal Denney to His Family and Friends" (Hodder and Stoughton, Toronto).

There Was an Edge on Denney's Style.

He who opens up a book like this must not expect to find anything exciting or diverting. The life of a theological professor in Scotland in modern times can scarcely be called an action story and those who demand reading of the Zane Grey or James Oliver Curwood sort would probably rather go to jail than be compelled to assimilate this volume. But for those who take their pleasures sadly, who wish to relieve high blood pressure, who like to breathe "the still air of delightful studies," these letters will afford much satisfaction. They were written by a great scholar who was able to express himself in simple language but who managed even in ordinary, every-day epistles to convey the impression that his thoughts were long thoughts and his brain a subtle machine. He could, when occasion required, say sarcastic things and in his letters there is often an edge to his style. One day, after listening to a paper on the mystical imaginations of Maeterlinck, he exclaimed, "It's bad enough to be at sea, but to be at sea in a fog!" He summed up Bishop Westcott's quality of mind in this phrase, "He is not philosophical, he is oracular." He was an adept at handing out good advice to theological students. "Don't become the pet lamb of your flock; be their shepherd" was

much talk about travels across Scotland and up into the Highlands in these letters. Denney had to visit many churches and, especially after he was made Principal, preach a great many sermons on Anniversary Sundays in various kirks all over the country. That he had a good sense of humor and was aware of the fact that even the proverbial Presbyterian reverence for scholarship would not excuse a professor for preaching a dull sermon. "I was at Dunfermline," he writes, "at the communion a fortnight ago. Fairweather, our minister there, told me that he had some very severe critics of sermons. — had taken his prayer meeting one night and had apparently not shone. Some one made a disparaging remark, but was answered, 'O, it wasna that ill for a market-day.' Another time — preacher on 'I will be as the dew unto Israel.' 'Dew!' quoth a deacon; 'there wasna a drop o' dew in't frae beginning to end; it was as dry as a meal-sack.' At a Monday evening service an old woman was overheard as she went out: 'I just put on my auld shawlie the night, and deed it was gude enough for a' we were to get.' Luckily he told me these things after the preaching was over, or it might have been embarrassing."

A Frank Criticism of Balaam's Ass.

A large number of these letters were addressed to brother ministers and the tone of many of them is therefore theological. Often Dr. Denney is polemical and heavily serious, but in the following paragraph he handles a higher critic with a light pen. "Lately," he says, "I have been reading a book by a man Greutliat, a professor in Neuchatel, who enlivens his solid theology with smart remarks about his enemies—sometimes rather personal, but—sometimes very witty. German critics, he says, are so habituated to tell everything they know, and sometimes more, that they naturally assume the Evangelists know nothing they do not tell. In one place he mentions, with evident sympathy, an old professor of apologetics, who used to say to his students, 'And if they say they don't agree with you, tell them they are wrong.' He makes the best remark I remember to have seen on Balaam's ass. 'Considering how the attention of Christendom has been diverted by this incident from the sublime oracles of Balaam, I have been tempted to think in my bad moments that this learned creature lost an excellent opportunity of holding its tongue.' Isn't that good, though not for a prayer meeting?"

Mr. Denney's Impressions of Canada.

In 1909 Principal Denney visited Canada on the invitation of Principal Mackay, to deliver a course of lectures to Presbyterian students in Vancouver. At Halifax he lectured and preached for ten days, and then made his way across Canada stopping at Montreal, Toronto and Winnipeg. There is nothing in his letters about Montreal or Toronto and Winnipeg, but the only thing he thought worth recording when he was in the gateway city was a funny story which he had heard in Nova Scotia. "I must tell you," he writes, "one story I heard about Fraser, the Governor of Nova Scotia, who was very polite to me. He told it himself as belonging to the only occasion on which he was completely baffled at a public meeting. He was a candidate for the provincial legislature, which has charge of the schools, when for some reason the question of corporal punishment came up. Like other candi-

dates he was heckled on this, and pronounced against it. 'Gentlemen,' he said, 'I can remember when I myself suffered under this brutal and barbarous custom. I can remember when every finger of my hand was scarred and bleeding from the lash. And what was the offence for which I was so barbarously treated? Gentlemen, it was telling the truth.' The impressive pause with which he followed this impressive utterance, that it might have time to sink into the minds of his hearers, was broken by a rasping voice from the front bench: 'And I guess it cured you.' It was the end of the meeting!"

He Read the "Iliad" and "Don Quixote" in Vancouver.

Perhaps it was the newness of everything about him in the Canadian west drove him to old books, but it seems to me rather amusing that in his letters from the coast he takes up most of his space by talking about Homer and other worthies. He read "Don Quixote" in Vancouver and fairly romped through four books of the "Iliad" which he found in a lovely edition in his friend John Mackay's library. Think of a man reading the "Iliad" in the original in Vancouver when he could have gone fishing in any one of a hundred places along the coast! He has this interesting little note in one of his letters dated at Vancouver, May 23rd, 1909. "People here have the flag of British Columbia even in their prayers—and evidently think the powers above would think twice before falling out with people who have such a future as they. I must say, however, they are very hospitable and very much addicted to their business, whatever it may be. There is no approbation or toleration of loafers, and not very much consideration for the inefficient or ungifted. The very prosperous are not usually very sympathetic."

Two Drawbacks at Lake Louise.

Dr. Denney complains bitterly that there were no old books at the hotel at Lake Louise. For once, however, he lets himself go in praise of the scenery. "The lake," he writes, "is a mile and a half long, and three-quarters of a mile in width, of a changing emerald color, and the mountain, with its vast and dazzling fields of snow, is not unworthy of being compared with the Jungfrau. You will have some idea of how imposing it is. I do think it almost the most wonderful place I have ever seen." There was a second drawback, however, in that famous beauty spot—mosquitoes. "It does seem queer," he continues, "that man should subdue the Rocky Mountains and be victimized by a little hack fly. Coming up here in the bus from the station, there were two elderly gentlemen opposite me who discussed them. One was American and took them gaily; I slapped one on my knee; 'No go,' he said; 'kill one, and two come to the funeral.' The other, who, I am sorry to say, was Scotch and had some connection with Glasgow, took them most complacently, instructively. He had been everywhere, and gave us his experiences of mosquitoes in Japan, Australia, New Guinea, Singapore, the Valley of the Ganges, the Zambesi, and Uganda—besides most places in Europe! You never met such a bore. The mosquitoes were a positive relief to him: what doctors call a counter-irritant." He winds up his letter by a paragraph on Goethe's "Wilhelm Meister." That was another old book which he read while in Vancouver.

I find that I have managed, after all, to find some entertaining material in this rather formidable-looking volume. Even a Scotch theological professor is not so dry as the public might imagine him to be. In his learned commentaries and such a doctrinal work as his class; on the stonement, Dr. James Denney is so firm enough, but in these letters

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—W. T. ALLISON.

Literary Notes.

Librarians all over the country today are doing a great work in encouraging boys and girls to read good books. Every normal child loves a story and in our big city libraries now-a-days they have hours when someone with a genius for narrative entertains and instructs the little folks by practicing what is one of the most ancient of arts. In other ways, also, the modern librarian strives to obtain the suffrages of his young constituents. He leaves no stone unturned to awaken their interest in the "treasures" that he has on his shelves. When I was a boy, librarians viewed me with suspicion when I entered their keep, and when I signed for a book they handed it to me with seeming reluctance. Today, however, all is changed. The books are out in the open for boys and girls to handle and the librarian is happiest when he sees the largest crowd of young readers that his building can accommodate. He is as keen to persuade young folk to take story books home with them as a merchant to sell perishable goods.

An interesting example of this missionary zeal of public librarians is afforded just now by a book competition that has been put on by J. H. McCarthy of the Winnipeg Public Library. He has induced the boys of the manual training departments of the Winnipeg public schools to make samples of attractive little bookshelves to be placed on exhibition in the juvenile departments of the city libraries. His idea is to encourage boys and girls to make or have their parents buy just such shelves, so that they can begin building up a little library at home. Moreover, he has invited them to send in a list of the best twenty-five books for a juvenile library. There are three competitions in all for the best suggestion for (1) a library for a girl or boy of eleven years or younger, (2) a library for girls of twelve to fifteen years of age, and, (3) a library for boys of twelve to fifteen years of age. This is an excellent plan to foster a love for good literature and I should like to see it adopted in every public library in Canada.

Some very amusing literary anecdotes are to be found in the "Private Diaries of the Rt.-Hon. Algernon West," who was Gladstone's private secretary and intimate friend for many years. Sir Algernon died in 1921 in his 89th year. In his diary he has reported that one day at a dinner party the question was raised whether Oscar Wilde was really witty. "Augustine Birrell contended he was, and gave this instance. He had met Lewis Morris, who said, 'I have written a book, and not a paper nor a review has alluded to it. There is a conspiracy of silence.' Directly afterwards I met Oscar Wilde, and asked him what I ought to have said. 'You should have said,' answered Oscar Wilde, 'My dear Morris join it yourself.'"

Sir Algernon recounts another story that was told by Lowell about Methuselah. It is based on the fact that old men seem to diminish in height. Methuselah's friends paid him a visit of homage on his 900th birthday. The old man had been shortening for hundreds of years, and when they asked him how he felt he replied, resignedly, "Oh, pretty well for my age, but these damned

shoe-strings will go flapping in my face!

Should Canadian writers refuse to follow the fashions set by English and American novelists and seek to be absolutely original? This is the question raised regarding American makers of fiction by Miss Frances Newman in the semi-annual official bulletin of the Carnegie Library of Atlanta, Georgia. She quotes Professor Emil Reich, as saying, "The Hungarians produced great writers because they preserved their native Magyar so effectively, and were more tenacious of their native culture than any other people." He also believes that no great works of art are produced in either South or North America, because both in the Latin and English-speaking continents the writers have tried to employ the culture of the parent countries which was entirely unsuited to new conditions. Miss Newman thinks that since 1877, American writers have been producing some great fiction because they have been entirely American in their simplicity and clarity. "Babbitt" might be regarded as entirely American.

—W. T. A.

OPENWAY.

By Archie McKishnie, 233 pages. Price \$1.25. Hodder & Stoughton, Toronto, publishers. Open way, all you will take up this book—open way for the refreshment you'd take from the wind over the hill or the mist by the streams. Open way—open way in your hearts for a tenderness you will never lose again.

Open way—open way in your purse that you may lay it in the hands of some boy who is dear to you and tell him to keep it by him always—but read it first yourself.

It is the story of a boy who loved wild creatures, but whose only friend and companion, old Trapper Bob considered most animals just "varmits." To him an animal was a pet; to Benny, an animal was a pulsing life as warm and as dear as his own. He couldn't seem to make Bob understand. Still, he was able to protect the few who sought protection, and to that end he dedicated the length of a certain rail fence where any wild dweller of Shagland might find a home unmolested. Benny trapped for skins in the winter with Trapper Bob too; there was nothing foolish about him; but he believed in giving the creatures a fair chance and fair battle, and found much that was wonderful and heroic in their lives. To kill an animal on sight for the mere sake of killing it, seemed murder in his eyes. To Benny, the happiest part of the day was when he could nestle down in some hidden covert and watch the life about him unnoticed. Watching and listening with Benny, you will find a new world, a new summer, a new winter, forever at your hand at the turning of a page. You will learn to know the myriad low cries of the wood, the wimpers of the soft paddings, the sorrow of little tragedies, the everlasting sweet rustling hum of the underbrush that is its life. And as the creatures lie warm in the soft home nest, or run or swim or fly from season to season; as they return after the

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