

In September last, the members and friends of the Edinburgh Mechanics' Subscription Library, held an entertainment in the Waterloo Rooms, in order that the principles and objects of this excellent institution might be fully laid before the public. As Mr. Macaulay, M. P. for the city, had in the most handsome manner, delayed his departure to enable him to be present, and, as it was generally understood that party politics would be excluded, the attendance was most numerous, (about 700, we believe,) including persons of all shades of political opinion. The chair was filled by Mr. Alexander Murray, printer of the *Edinburgh Observer*, senior member of committee, and one of the earliest members of the library.

The Chairman commenced the business of the evening by stating, that as this meeting was called for the sole purpose of advancing the interests of the Mechanics' Library, it could not be wrong to crave the Divine blessing on their efforts, and called on Dr. John Brown to perform that sacred duty, which the Doctor accordingly did. The Chairman then said, that the purpose of the meeting was to lay before the public the nature, objects, and principles of an Institution which, it was believed, was well calculated to benefit a large portion of the community of Edinburgh. The Institution was formed by thirty individuals, about fourteen years ago, paying 5s. each, and now consisted of between 700 to 800 members, and 6000 to 7000 volumes, with an annual income of upwards of £300. The Chairman concluded by asking the company to unite in dedicating the first bumper to her Majesty,—"The Queen" (cheers.)

The Right Hon. Mr. MACAULAY then rose, amid loud cheers. He said—Ladies and Gentlemen, I have now often had occasion—considering the shortness of my connexion with this city, I may say often—had occasion to address audiences in Edinburgh, but I think I never rose to address any meeting with so much pleasure; for on former occasions I addressed persons who were assembled to discuss topics which it was scarcely possible to discuss without some unavoidable mixture of bitterness of feeling—topics on which honest men necessarily differ—topics on which the most amiable men, when they do differ, will sometimes show signs of irritation and acrimony. Happily, in addressing this large and respectable audience, I have no such feeling. We are now, I feel, standing on neutral ground. It is with the most sincere pleasure that I have heard that persons of all shades of political opinion belong to this most useful and valuable association, in whose prosperity all who are assembled here take an interest; and from my own knowledge I can say that many excellent and honourable men who are strongly opposed to me politically, look with pleasure on this institution, as one which tends to promote useful instruction and innocent enjoyment in an eminent degree (cheers.) There are certainly—and I do not know that they are confined to any one political party—there are certainly men whose intentions may be upright, but whose minds I cannot but consider as narrow, who look with jealousy and aversion on any scheme of this description; and their argument—if it deserves the name—is generally this:—They profess to admit the value of knowledge, for no person pretending to rationality would dispute a point so clear; but they say that knowledge—if a man possess the time and opportunity for acquiring profound knowledge—is certainly a most valuable thing; but if men are placed in such a situation of life that in all probability they will only be able to obtain a smattering of knowledge—if the information they acquire be almost necessarily superficial—if most of their hours are necessarily employed in labour—if what they can spare for the acquisition of information is but a small pittance of time—the probability is that they will acquire knowledge of that sort which is worse than ignorance; and those who indulge in this sort of language generally sum up their reasoning, if it deserves the name, with a line of Pope's, written certainly with a very different view—

"A little learning is a dangerous thing."

Now, I must undoubtedly admit that it is in a high degree improbable that the majority of those who belong to this useful institution will be able to spare sufficient time from their necessary avocations, to become deeply informed with respect to many matters of literature and science. Yet, at the same time, I can no more admit that this is a reason for excluding them from the many enjoyments and advantages of literature and science, than I can admit that because a man is short-sighted he should put out his eyes, or because a man has not a ready utterance he should wish himself deaf and dumb (laughter and cheers.) If, indeed, we consider the weight and the force of this argument against "a smattering of science" and "a little knowledge," we shall find that it not only tends to the most pernicious consequences, but is most absurd in itself. For what do we understand when we speak of "a little knowledge," and of "a smattering of science," and what standard shall we apply? If we look at all possible, known truth—at the whole vast mass of physical and of moral science, then, I say, that we all know little, and that all of us are mere smatterers (loud cheers.) Suppose a man educated in the best schools of learning that exist; suppose his life lengthened to more than the ordinary term of longevity; suppose that to the last day of his life he retains his faculties unimpaired; suppose him placed in so happy a situation that he is able to devote the whole of his waking hours to literature, science, and art; suppose he spends his life in study, in libraries, amidst experiments, in galleries of art, in foreign travel, and in conversation with the most learned and accomplished men; still what is all that such a man can know when compared

with the mass of all that may be known in the world—when compared with the knowledge of all the great laws with which it has pleased God to regulate the creation—when compared with the complete knowledge of all those laws which regulate the constitution of society and the moral nature of man? (great cheering.) In this sense, indeed, all that any of us can know is a mere smattering—a mere pittance of knowledge; and that any man should attempt to shut out from the fountain of knowledge all who cannot quaff deeply of the spring, while his own knowledge is but as one drop of water in the bucket, and one grain of sand on the shore—that any man should pretend to say to his fellow creatures, "I know much; I am deeply read; but you, you can only be smatterers; and therefore I shall withhold from you the advantages of knowledge"—that has always seemed to me to be absurd and ignorant presumption (cheers.) But if, on the other hand, we appeal to the standard—not of what can be known, nor what men might possibly have known—but of what men, and great men, and eminent men, actually have known, then we shall see still more clearly how absurd these arguments are; for most happily, such is the progress of mankind, of society, of experimental science, and such the accumulation of information, that a man with but small expense of time, and few opportunities, may in our age learn far more than any man with the best appliances and amplest leisure could in a different age. Would it not be thought the height of absurdity if it were maintained that it would have been well had Euclid known nothing of mathematics, because he was but a smatterer; and yet is it not certain that a man with but small leisure, and with a moderate degree of application, may in our age know more in a few years than Euclid ever knew? Would it not be thought the height of absurdity for any man to say that it would have been a good thing if Alfred the Great had not been able to read, because, after all, he had only a smattering of knowledge; he knew very little of geography—very little of history—very little of any science—he was but a mere smatterer, poor King Alfred the Great! (great laughter and cheers.) And yet he knew quite enough to accomplish a great revolution in the state of this island, a revolution, the beneficial effects of which we feel to the present day. And is it not notorious, that by the help of this library, accumulated by the independent and honourable exertions of the labouring men of Edinburgh, any man may, by the application of a few hours in the week, gain more knowledge of history, more knowledge of the state of other countries, more acquaintance with science, than it was possible for Alfred the Great to acquire in the whole course of his life (loud cheers.) I therefore say with confidence, that it seems to me the height of absurdity to withhold from any class of men the advantages of that which can be shown to be good and useful knowledge, because from unfortunate circumstances they are not able to devote any very large portion of leisure to its cultivation. There are many other topics on which I should feel great pleasure in addressing you; but already so many men of eminence, of great eloquence and enlargement of mind, have so fully explained to the people of this country the immense advantages arising from intellectual cultivation, and the spread of education among all ranks of the people, that it is scarcely necessary for me to repeat what must be so familiar to you all. I do most firmly believe—and I am only going to say what every intelligent Conservative and Reformer in this country may say with equal sincerity—that the spread of intellectual cultivation among the people does tend to useful Conservation as well as to useful Reform. I do believe that it tends to the removal of abuses and by the mildest remedies, and at the same time to preserve all that is truly valuable in Government (cheers.) I do believe that the spread of intellectual education tends to diffuse in indissoluble conjunction the love of liberty and the love of order. And even if I did not think thus highly of the advantages to be derived from the intellectual cultivation of the people, I must say that I should look with no common interest and delight on institutions like this; for let me put its advantages at the very lowest point. How much innocent delight have these 7000 volumes afforded, how many hours rescued from listlessness and idleness, some perhaps from intemperance and vice, have been happily employed over them? And is the quantity of enjoyment in this world, and, above all, the quantity of enjoyment among the labouring classes, such that we ought to grudge them this? How many painful anxieties, how many distressing circumstances have been forgotten by them in poring over the pages of these works? (loud cheers.) I feel this more strongly perhaps than others may, arising from some peculiarities in my own mind; for I can say that, as far back as I can remember, books have been to me dear friends—they have been my comforters in grief, and my companions in solitude—in poverty they have more than supplied to me the place of riches—in exile they have consoled me for the want of my country—in the midst of much that was vexatious and distressing in political life, in the midst sometimes of calumny and invective, they have contributed, I hope, to keep my mind serene and unclouded (cheers.) There is, I may truly say, no wealth—there is no power—there is no rank which I would accept in exchange for the pleasure I have derived from my books, for the privilege of conversing with the greatest minds of all past ages, for the privilege of searching after the true, of contemplating the beautiful, for the privilege of living with the distant, in the unreal, in the future, in the past. There are many that hear me who know what it is to enjoy such pleasures. They, I am sure, will not grudge this enjoyment to those who are now labouring by honourable, independent, and gallant efforts to obtain those pleasures for themselves. For myself, having owed so much as I

do to the soothing influences of literature, I should be inexcusable were I to grudge to others that enjoyment which I have so highly relished myself. He concluded by proposing "Prosperity to the Mechanics' Library" (great cheers.)

Mr. SKENE, the Secretary, returned thanks. He said—I have been deputed by the office-bearers to follow out the remarks which the chairman has already made on the history and progress of this Library; and especially to state the principles on which our predecessors in office as well as ourselves have been guided in conducting our Institution, and in selecting our books. It cannot be said that we have joined with either of the two great parties who have recently agitated the community on the subject of educating the common people. We owe them all gratitude for their professions of kindness towards us; but as it could not be expected that we should wait till they had fought out their quarrel, we have done what we could to put an end to the strife, and to induce the disputants to "sheath their swords for lack of argument," by proceeding in our own way and of our own means to educate ourselves (cheers.) In doing so we have shown no partiality for one system over another. All classes of politics, and all shades of political opinions, have found favour in our eyes. Our aim has been, to cultivate amongst ourselves, and to diffuse amongst others, a catholic taste for works of genius, wherever they may be found, and on whatever subject they might be written. We have been anxious to concentrate as in one focus those scattered rays of genius, of wisdom, and of virtue, which have made the language of the British people majestic as their story, undying as their renown (loud cheers.) We have felt a pride in the reflection, that by means of this institution we, the working men of Edinburgh, were placed on an intellectual level with the great and the wealthy; and that on whatever subject a man might wish to employ his leisure hours, he might here find "ample room and verge enough" to indulge his most extended researches. It is gratifying to think that these objects of ours have nearly ceased to be regarded with suspicion by any section of the community. All parties are now agreed—though it may be on different grounds, and with varying degrees of confidence, in the application to our case of the inspired maxim, "That the soul be without knowledge it is not good" (hear.) But we did not ask for this universal consent as the sanction to our proceedings, nor did we wait till it had been obtained. We were secured by the very lowliness of our position—we were secured from discerning those dangers which other minds, perhaps because placed in more elevated stations, appeared to desecrate in the universal diffusion of knowledge—the tree was within our reach—its fruits looked fair and tempting—and we knew of no statute which barred our approach (cheers.) The highway of life was to us so stony and rugged, that we needed little temptation to make occasional incursions into the flowery and enchanting fields of poetry and fiction; our daily avocations supplied us with continual incitements to inquire into those principles of science, with the stupendous results of which, in their application to the arts of life, habit had already made us familiar; and the very inconveniences of our lot filled us with an anxious desire to know in what position we stood as compared with the inhabitants of other lands. Besides all this, we felt, in the words of the noble lyric which has just been repeated by my friend, so full at once of poetry and of masculine common sense (cheers), that all mankind are but a world of brothers; and we owed it to our brethren more favoured of fortune to show, that in the lowliness of our lot we had not forgotten the dignity of our common family; nor had we, in the condition of the labourer, sunk the man (loud cheers.) We felt, too, that this state of existence was not intended for the full development of our aspirations; that here

"Our arm was hampered,
And had not room enough to do its work;"

and therefore we gladly availed ourselves of those works which spoke of another scene, where all the conventional distinctions of this life shrivel up and disappear—where virtue is the sole nobility—and where the perfecting of their intellectual and moral nature is the sole and delightful employment of the blessed inhabitants. These were the principles which have guided us in the selection of our books, and by these principles we trust still to abide. We believe that the universal diffusion of knowledge is identified with the best interests, not of ourselves only, but of the whole race. We have no fears for any accidental mischief of which it may be productive. Some people, indeed, affect an alarm lest the spread of education should by possibility prove injurious to our venerable, and venerated, and time-honoured institutions. I know not how that may be—I am not here to argue the question; but I count on the consent of every person present to this principle, that whatever cannot keep its feet before the advance of knowledge, does not deserve to have much care taken for its stability (loud and repeated cheering.) Knowledge is truth; and whatever can be overthrown by truth must be allied with error; for the nature of truth possesses this quality, that its weapons cannot be wielded against itself. In proportion, therefore, to our confidence in the excellence of our institutions, ought we to aid in the advancement of truth, that the progress of light and knowledge may the more test and demonstrate their stability. Even to those who anticipate revolution and change as the consequence of extended education, I would submit that the subject is not so full of evil as at first view they may be disposed to apprehend. It may be true that knowledge will produce change; it is certain that ignorance will not prevent it. If changes are necessary,

they will come, whatever may be the state of the people; but it depends altogether upon the previous spread of education—religious and secular, among them, whether that change shall be accomplished by peaceful or by violent means; whether in the process of transition, all existing institutions shall be attacked with blind and indiscriminate rage, or whether the zeal of the reformer shall be tempered with the caution of the philosopher and the charity of the Christian. An ignorant people, infuriated by madness, will make no distinction between things substantially and those only accidentally evil; the same people, educated and enlightened, will understand too well the nicety and intricacy of political mechanism, rashly to pull it in pieces; they will bear with many things which they consider evils, rather than risk a remedy which may prove worse than the disease; and if ever an institution should be condemned by the unanimous voice of an indignant people, the sentence will be carried into execution in the spirit, and with the feelings of the noble language of Brutus to the conspirators—

"Gentle friends,
Let's kill him boldly but not wrathfully,
Let's carve him as a dish meet for the gods,
Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds." (cheers.)

But, however these things may be with others, we are not careful to answer in the matter. We at least are guiltless of any far-reaching scheme to bring about change or revolution; we are engaged in the construction of no mine which we may hereafter spring against existing orders. Our warfare is only with ignorance and vice; our aim is, by occasional draughts at the well-springs of immortal truth, to arm ourselves with fresh nerve to encounter the toils and inconveniences of life, and so to become wiser, better and happier men. It is upon these principles that we have acted ourselves; it is upon these principles that we wish others to act. We regard the multiplication of institutions like ours as powerful auxiliaries to the spread of pure and undefiled religion—we hail them as omens for good—as streaks of light in the moral horizon, ushering in the dawn of that day, whose glories have been sung in the strains of more than mortal music, when "wisdom and knowledge shall be the stability of the times." (loud cheers.)

Mr. JAMES BALLANTINE then repeated the following "Ode to Knowledge," composed for the Mechanics' Library Festival:—

When Art and Science both were young,
And man's great teacher was the tongue—
When books, tho' wrote, were seldom read,
And Thought, though born, lay mouldering dead—
When Error, nursed by Ignorance,
Usurp'd the place of common sense—
Dark was the night in which man lay,
Till knowledge lit his mental day.

Of yore the hard-brow'd artisan
Had nought but might to mark him man—
And Labour sobbed and sighed in vain
A short respite from toil to gain—
For lordly power and feudal might
Were shrouded close in darkest night,
And shrunk affrighted from the ray—
The morning star of mental day.

But now mind's glorious mid-day sun
Hath cleared the air from clouds so dun—
And high and deep the blue sky
An angel's sun-bright form we spy,
Who scatters wreaths of blooming flowers,
All reared in heaven's ethereal bowers—
All taking root amid earth's clay,
Nursed by the light of mental day.

And, pregnant now with light and truth,
Youth teaches age, age leans on youth—
And many a humble group is seen
By cottage hearth, or village green,
With sparkling eyes, and joyous looks,
All pouring eager o'er their books—
While curly locks and haffets grey
Glist in the light of mental day.

And labour hath his hour of rest,
While useful knowledge fills his breast—
He walks the earth with manly tread,
With feeling heart and thinking head,
Invents great works for public weal,
And wealth and power reward his zeal;
He stands apart from noisy fray,
For knowledge lights his mental day.

And Beauty, with her sparkling eyes,
Brighter than stars that gem the skies,
Radiant with love and truth combined,
Pays homage to superior mind,
And now the gladdened soul may see
Labour repose on Beauty's knee,
His brow begirt with laurelled bay,
Green with the bloom of mental day.

Thus Knowledge equalizes all,
Humbles the great, exalts the small—
One good heart opens a thousand others,
And men become a world of brothers—
Reason grows strong, and feeling fond
Binding us in one common bond—
And Pride and Folly fly away
Far from the light of mental day.

O Knowledge! thou whose magic wand
Hath raised to power my native land,
Extend thy blessings all around
Where'er the human race is found,
Till misery from the world departs,
And loving-kindness rules all hearts;
So shall all nations bless thy sway,
And Heaven light up thy mental day!

A surgeon at Lincoln having lately been much annoyed by mischievous boys ringing his door bell and thundering at the knocker, hit upon a capital expedient for detecting the runaway plagues: getting his electrical apparatus into order, he charged the Leyden jar rather powerfully, and communicated it with the bell-wire. Scarcely had he done so when the bell rang, and on opening the door a juvenile delinquent was found prostrated all his length by the shock, and calling out lustily. The young rogue was nearly frightened out of his senses; and, after a sound lecturing, he was permitted to depart without further punishment.