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ALFRED LORD TENNYSON.

LECTURE BY PROFESSOR HENDERSON.

Professor G. C. Henderson delivered his fifth lecture in the Swan River Mechanics' Institute last night, taking for his subject "Alfred Lord Tennyson." This formed part of the series dealing with the poets of the nineteenth century. Mr. J. Longmore presided over a large gathering.

Professor Henderson started off with the assumption that Tennyson was the artist of the nineteenth century—the artist in the poetic realm. He was, he said, born in 1809, at Somersly, on the Lincolnshire Wolds. His father was a clergyman. Those who had seen his portrait, as painted by Watts, must have noticed a dreamy look in his eyes. But there was also strength in his general bearing. He was possessed of a combination of gentleness and strength, and was an example of a simple-hearted man. He disliked ostentation, as was proved by his hesitancy to accept a peerage. That he did accept the honour was due to the advice of Mr. Gladstone, but in spite of his yielding, he always regretted the loss of his own simple name. He acknowledged that he was sensitive, and on one occasion remarked, "I am black-blooded, like all the Tennysons. I remember all the malignant things said against me, but little of the praise." He was human, withal. No man appreciated a friend better than Tennyson did. He eagerly sought the company of his friends, and delighted to chat with them while smoking his pipe. He loved a joke, and was fond of hard work. But his most striking characteristic was his idealism. That would be found expressed in all his poems. They all showed an evidence of a man who was trying always to lift himself above himself. In the "Holy Grail" they had the struggle for the ideal, but best of all instances was "Merlin and the Gleam."

Professor Henderson proved interesting on the subject of poetic etymology, taking Tennyson for his guide. The poet, he said, always avoided looseness on the one hand and pedantry on the other. He was always scrupulously careful in his choice of phrases, but his taste was so exquisite that there could hardly be found in his works the single misuse of a word. It was said that he was rather fond of alliteration, but the alliteration of Tennyson was something very different from that of the old English poets. They not only got the similar sounding words in Tennyson's poems, but they got the significance of sound, indicating the very meaning and music of his verse. They had an instance of it in "The Brook"—"I babble with my pebble." Could they not hear the gurgling of the stream in those words? Then in "Enoch Arden" there were the descriptive words, "The league long roller, thundering on the reef." How descriptive those words were! Tennyson very rarely degraded his lines to obtain rhyme. There was very little strain in his endeavour to attain rhythm. It seemed to come natural to him. He was possessed of the very soul of poetry—swing and movement. He knew his art, indeed. Besides being the poetic artist of the nineteenth century, he was also to be regarded as the poet of religion. "In Memoriam" proved this. His mind, like that of Wordsworth, was intensely spiritual. By dwelling upon his own name he could lay to sleep the emotions of the human body, and turn all that was material into the spiritual. He would become a transcendental wonder, associated with absolute clearness of mind. Looking at a church, Tennyson would say, "The reality is not the building; the reality is the spirit of God." He was intensely spiritual, and in the last resort he regarded this world as spiritual. They found it expressed in "In Memoriam." Tennyson had stated that everything in it concerning religion was sincerely believed in by him. The big questions that troubled Tennyson's mind were those that troubled Chaucer. Take the question of the future life. He inclined to belief in the existence of a future life. He believed that man was not born to be left in the dust, if only for the reason that he was created by God. He also discussed the subject of the freedom of the human will in the lines—

"Our wills are ours, we know not how,  
Our wills are ours to make them Thine."  
Another big problem in life exercised Tennyson's mind, and the lamp burnt very dimly. It was the reconciliation of omnipotence and divine love. "How was it," he said, "that there could be so much suffering and misery in the world?" "An omnipotent Creator who could make such a painful world," he observed, "as hard to believe in as it was to believe in blind matter behind everything." His views on creeds and ceremonies were interesting. He believed that important as they might be,

they were not so important as conduct. They were, in Tennyson's opinion, simply a means by which something could be attained. On one occasion he said to a young man, "It is impossible to imagine that the Almighty will ask you when you come before him in the next life what your particular form of creed was, but the question will rather be, 'have you been true to yourself, and given in My Name the cup of cold water to these little ones?'" "Your creed may not be perfect," Tennyson would say, "but you may be pure and serve your fellows." He was tolerant with doubters in the future life, as was exemplified when he wrote the words, "There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds." He did not express his views on religion with the same emphasis as Browning. Where he faltered, Browning was determined. Both were Christian idealists, but the one was far more strenuous than the other. Tennyson was possessed of a tendency towards melancholy; Browning was a triumphant optimist. Tennyson was a Christian idealist; Browning was a more strenuous idealist. Professor Henderson will lecture in the Town Hall upon Browning to-morrow night.

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Professor Henderson, who last night delivered the middle number of his second series of university extension lectures, can hardly go back to South Australia wholly disappointed. He must, at least, feel gratified, if by nothing else, by the mere numbers which, often despite strong counter-attractions and inclement weather, his discourses have attracted. It could scarcely have been expected that a young community, busying itself so strenuously in material affairs, as ours necessarily is, would display quite so much interest in the purely literary matters which have been largely the subjects of the lecturer's attention. To what extent this interest has been genuine, and to what extent feigned or fictitious, it is of course, not easy to determine. It is chastening, however, to remember that appearances in these matters are sometimes deceptive—that things are not always what they seem. Fashion, a mere vogue, with little or no intellectual appetite as its basis, is sometimes the factor that decides the success or fortune of a lecturing tour, just as it often ensures the fleeting popularity of a new book. Still, all the seed that has been sown cannot have fallen on stony ground. Much of it, it is fair to assume, has found fertile lodgment, and may be calculated to bring forth good fruit. Viscount Goschen, speaking some years ago, said there were three motives which might induce people to seek the higher education. First, to obtain greater knowledge for bread-winning purposes; secondly, the improvement of one's knowledge of political economy and history and facts bearing upon the actual political work and life of the day; and, thirdly, there was the desire of knowledge as a luxury to brighten life and kindle thought. The idea here expressed is admirable. These are precisely the motives which a university, such as many of us hope to see established in Western Australia, should be designed to quicken. We do not want a lop-sided seat of learning. To call such an institution a university would be a contradiction of terms. If special stress has been laid in these columns on the importance of scientific education, it has been because we live in an age very different from those in which the ancient seats of learning in the old world were founded—because science to-day touches the life of the people at every point, and governs all, or nearly all, their occupations. It has not been with any idea of belittling or, in the least, ignoring the important relationship which exists, and must always exist, between life and literature, properly so called. Mr. John Morley has finely said: "After all, the thing that matters most, both for happiness and for duty, is that we should strive habitually to live with wise thoughts and right feelings; and literature helps more than other studies to this blessed companionship."

Since, therefore, the best poetry is the highest form of literature, Professor Henderson could not possibly have done better than include in his syllabus "The Poets of the Nineteenth Century." Nor will anyone, who knows anything of the poetry of the period, cavil at his choice of Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning, as an illustrative trio. Rich as was the Victoria era in great literary personalities, these three, though their order of eminence may not be universally agreed upon, are by common consent its giants. The list from which their names are selected is a registry which contrasts finely with the poverty of several former periods. It is surpassed only by the golden age of Elizabeth, with which, indeed, it is sometimes, and not inappropriately, compared. But Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning, and the numerous company of master singers who were their contemporaries have gone, leaving, it is feared, no conspicuous successors. Swinburne, alone of the successful poets of the Victoria period, still lags on the stage. In the place of that galaxy of poetic geniuses which included, besides the chosen three, such names as Southey, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Campbell, Moore and Matthew Arnold, we have our Alfred Austins, our Henry Dobsons, and our Rudyard Kiplings, poets certainly, but who, by comparison with their predecessors, are as rushlights to the sun. It would be interesting to

inquire to what this degeneracy is due. Must it be attributed to the methods of the poets themselves, to the failure of vitality and freshness in that section of society to which they belong, or to a drying up of the sources of ideal life in the nation at large? Though to the last mentioned cause probably most inquirers would ascribe the too obvious falling off, since the life of a people is usually reflected in its poets, the apparent interest excited by Professor Henderson's lectures on Wordsworth and Tennyson, if it is typical of the nation at large, would hardly seem to justify such a conclusion.

Neither Wordsworth nor Browning, whatever may be said of Tennyson, is or has ever been what can be called a popular poet. Indeed all three appeal in the main to a highly select intellectual audience. To their appreciation there must come not only the hearing ear, but the understanding heart. All three are doubtless heirs to a classic reign. Their names are already canonized in the world's breviary as among the best and noblest of poets. Others of their period have been more widely read, but these three, in being destined to be longer read, will exercise a greater influence on the minds of men. If their real audience is small and circumscribed, it is composed of those through whom their teaching and philosophy of life percolates most surely to the multitude. But even Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning, though it may seem sacrilege to say it, greatly require pruning. Much that they wrote is fast losing its charm even for their disciples. Their fame, in every case, seems likely to rest in no small degree on their shorter poems. Wordsworth's "Lines Written near Tintern Abbey," and the Ode on Immortality bids fair to outlive his more pretentious works, "The Prelude" and "The Excursion." Tennyson's "In Memoriam" is no longer regarded in some quarters as his most enduring performance, and his "Idylls of the King," except the Mort d'Arthur, will, judging by the trend of modern criticism, scarcely achieve immortality. The same remark applies to Browning, whose fame already rests on his lyrics, though many, as Mr. Augustine Birrell has put it, "will prize the 'Ring and the Book' as the surgeon prizes the last great contribution to comparative anatomy or pathology." Though perhaps, it is yet premature for the knife to be used freely, it seems certain, paradoxically though it may sound, that the influence of the three great poets, with whom Professor Henderson is delighting Perth audiences, would be appreciably extended by a wise and judicious abridgment. Meanwhile we may be thankful to our visitor for his efforts to promote a more systematic study of English literature, and especially the literature of poetry, which, certainly, is among the most humanising influences of the world, the neglect of which is paid for by our exclusion from the—

"One great Society on Earth;  
The noble Living and the Noble Dead."

PROFESSOR HENDERSON'S LECTURES. BROWNING'S PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE.

The sixth and last of Professor Henderson's series of lectures, delivered in the Town Hall last night. The attendance was again gratifyingly large, there being no more than The Governor, Sir F. G. D. presided.

"We have now," said Professor Henderson in introducing his subject, "come to the last of our lectures, and I will ask you to consider with me the man who represents what many people would call an extremist in his interpretation of life. The British character is pre-eminently practical, and it is not generally speaking, regarded with a tendency to theorise or idealise. Yet I would have you believe that a practical man is not necessarily one who has no sympathy with high ideals. Though the British people are practical, and Robert Browning is practical, he has, in my opinion, as far as my process of thinking is concerned, said the last word on many questions of idealism." Continuing Professor Henderson said he would that night's lecture consider Robert Browning's philosophy of life, and would touch upon his poetry incidentally, and only so far as it affected his philosophy. Browning was too little read, he said, his philosophy understood, and he would have more readers. He was a man with a strong grasp of intellect. He was not so much a poet as Alfred, Lord Tennyson, but he paid tribute to the intellectual superiority of Browning. A dramatist, it might be said, was not to be credited with the opinions and convictions he put into the mouths of his creations. In the case of Shakespeare, however, they could discover by the trend of his thought, by the incidental references to contemporary events, what he himself believed regarding certain problems of life. There was a message in Browning's philosophy, and it was with that he wished to deal. Apart from his dramatic work, Browning had, at the request of his wife, composed certain didactic poems, and in these they had material for consideration of his views.

Browning believed that they did not understand life unless they understood that human beings had souls. Robert Browning believed that there was nothing so important in the world as the development of the soul. Late in his life as 1858—he was born in 1813—Browning wrote to T. K. of Dijon: "My stress lay on the soul in the development of a man. Little else is worth study." Let us inquire into those points concerning the development of the soul which Browning had always before him. There was the heroic quality. He thought was heroic. It was heroic because he believed profoundly in the presence in the inward life of man and women of a certain principle which gave the individual power to do the fact of conflict and danger. "Thou shalt" or "Thou shalt not." Browning had been called a modern Platonist. What, then, did Plato believe in? This heroic principle? They were the controversy between Socrates and some of his disciples. The disciples would prove that man's soul was something more than the product of sensation. "No," said Socrates, "it is he came back upon some principle in the mind which, instead of being merely the result of sensations could rise up in defence of the mind or soul was the product of sensation, how came it that there was something in the mind and in the soul which could rise up and defy the sensation, and say, 'No, I will not yield.' That something was the inner man, which was the spirit of the soul, which was what made for grit and stamina, and it was essentially heroic. It was and that principle that Browning dwelt on that principle, and it was because of his attention, and it was because of that they got so many of his characters representing men who would not yield to circumstances, who were ready to defy circumstances; and they were defied from the words he put into the mouths of these characters that he admired such men. Literary men in England had dwelt upon the presence of this principle which made men do things, and with what they had already done, and drove them on to make further conquests. Unless he could uplift himself, how poor a thing was man, because that divine spark within him had been smothered into a flame. I would have you believe that Browning was a Platonist in a place."