

**A GUIDE TO THE CHOICE
OF BOOKS FOR STUDENTS
& GENERAL READERS**

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A Guide to the Choice of Books for Students & General Readers by Arthur H. D. Acland

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ARTHUR H. D. ACLAND

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A GUIDE
TO THE
CHOICE OF BOOKS

O for a Booke and a shade to keepe
either in-dore or out ;
With the greene leaves whispering overheade,
or the Sweets cries all about,
Where I neede Heede all at my ease
both of the Newe and Olde ;
For a Jolles good Booke wherein to nooke
is better to me than Golde.

A GUIDE
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CHOICE OF BOOKS
FOR
STUDENTS & GENERAL READERS

EDITED BY
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Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potentia of life in them to be as active as that *soule* was whose potency they are; . . . I know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those filthy Dragons' teeth; and being sown up and down may chance to spring up armed men. (MILTON)

The point is not that men should have a great many books, but that they should have the right ones, and that they should use those that they have. — JOHN MORLEY.

LONDON: EDWARD STANFORD
26 & 27 COCKSPUR STREET, CHARING CROSS, S.W.

1891

Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider.

BACON.

Books are no more education than laws are virtue; and, just as profligacy is easy within the strict limits of law, a boundless knowledge of books may be found with a narrow education. A man may be, as the poet saith, "deep vers'd in books and shallow in himself."

F. HARRISON.

There are three classes of readers: some enjoy without judgment, others judge without enjoyment, and some there are who judge while they enjoy and enjoy while they judge.

GOETHE.

P R E F A C E

For those who have competent advisers at hand who can tell them "What to read" this little book is not intended. They are fortunate persons in an enviable position, more fortunate and more envied than they often know. The making of these lists arose from the frequent demands made upon myself and some of my friends by two different classes of persons. There were those with no advisers, who asked for the names of some of the best books on the subjects in which they were interested; and there were those who were responsible for providing libraries of books for popular or general use. It has been impossible to discharge the task satisfactorily, and I am not sure whether the result in any way justifies the great amount of labour that has been given to the work, or whether those whose needs we have tried to meet will not be disappointed. Possibly only those who make the attempt know what the difficulties of the task really are. But whether the result is bad or good, I owe the best parts of the book to my Oxford and Cambridge friends and others who have so kindly helped me, and they are not to blame if its general arrangement is unsatisfactory, or if there are bad omissions and mistakes.

I hope that the book will be useful to the Committees of the smaller Free Libraries, to the Educational Departments of Working Men's Co-operative and other Societies, to some of those who are attending University Extension Lectures, to Home Reading Circles and Mutual Improvement Societies, and also to a good many isolated students engaged in efforts to educate themselves. Few people who have had a good education realise how great are the difficulties of many whose opportunities have been narrowly limited, who desire guidance, but

who are unable, in an age when books pour forth from the printing presses in an unceasing torrent, to discriminate between the good, the bad, and the indifferent. There are still in many provincial towns and many out of the way homes those who cannot get at any good advisers, who want to use libraries or buy books intelligently, but know not how. Except in London and a very few large towns, readers cannot get sufficient help from booksellers, and too many circulating or public libraries are inadequately furnished with the books which are best adapted to the needs of students who desire to inform themselves upon literary, scientific, historical, and economical subjects. The experience of University Extension Lecturers and others has shown again and again that time is disastrously wasted by those who read antiquated and second rate books because they know no better. Some read antiquated books on scientific and similar subjects, when the newer books would be far more useful. Others who read general literature jump at "the latest book out," and know little of the stores of interest and wisdom to be found in the masterpieces of older writers.

I have some hope too that the book will be of special service in Public Libraries to those many librarians who so industriously try to lift by degrees the taste of their readers from the indifferent and second-rate books to the good. The grants for Free Library salaries given by many of the municipal bodies are often so small, and the amount of mechanical duty therefore so great, that there is little opportunity for librarians to help their readers in the choice of books as much as they would wish to do. But as a truer conception of municipal life and duty grows among us, the better recognition of such work may be confidently expected.

The number of subjects on which lists have been given is, when compared with the ordinary library catalogue, very limited, and the principle on which the selection has been made is arbitrary. This was inevitable if the book was to be moderate in size and cheap. The case of the ordinary reader or student of certain subjects of literature, history, art, science, economics, philosophy, has been kept in view, with some consideration for children and "the home." Large classes of books have inevitably been ruled out altogether. There are practically no technical books on trades, professions, amusements, sport. There are no theological books. The list of works of fiction is limited, and a great deal of what is called light literature of all sorts is omitted, because it is just on this point that information is very easy to obtain. There are no foreign books unless translated (except in the books for beginners in languages), and hardly any books which are out of print, this last being a rule which keeps out a grievously large number of important works.

The question of advice as to the merit of different books is a

difficult matter, and it may be said that there is very little guidance in a book of this sort after all. I can only say that I have studied many lists which profess to describe books or to classify them according to their merits, which exhaust and repeat all the epithets of praise, faint or unmeasured, and those which mark with asterisks certain selected books. I believe little that is of practical value can be gained by such means, unless comments are given at far greater length than would be possible here. A few words of suggestion or advice have been given here and there where it seemed advisable at the beginning of the lists. In certain cases the books are classified into Elementary, Advanced, and Reference books. The price of a book frequently gives some guidance as to its character. Beyond this it is difficult to go with any satisfactory results.

It is no doubt the case that, notwithstanding all efforts to keep out bad or indifferent books, in some of the lists—such, for instance, as Biography—it is not easy to exclude books of very moderate value. But, on the whole, a biography of even moderate merit is better than none. Ladders must be built for miscellaneous readers to lead them on to the higher and better books. Mr. Frederic Harrison, in his wise essay on the Choice of Books, has uttered many wholesome warnings against the “cataract of printed stuff which honest compositors set up.” But he could not withstand the temptation in his younger days, as he tells us himself. And however true and sane his advice may be, the lesser books must continue for many to be the starting-points from which a desire for the greater books will arise. Thus children’s books, domestic economy books, popular biography and history, elementary science books, popular or indifferent books on social economy, even blue books, may become stepping-stones to something better.

I fear that it is a very humble measure of assistance which this book will give to those who need advice and guidance. But I hope that those who may use it will remember that whatever devotion they may give to science, political economy, philosophy, or history, they will always need the help which comes from a study of the great books which will be found mainly under the head of Literature, with a few additions from the other lists. Unless they would be one-sided men and women, let them not fail to turn again and again to the great masterpieces of all time, to the books which are strong, dignified, inspiring, in which the wisdom and experience of many generations is enshrined.

It should be added that none of those who have kindly given their advice in the selection of books are to be regarded as solely responsible for the lists as finally printed. Several friends of acknowledged authority have helped me, whose names I do not feel at liberty to give, as for want of space and other reasons the lists have had to be