

**REMARKS ON PUBLIC
LIBRARIES. FROM
"THE NORTH AMERICAN
REVIEW" FOR JULY 1850**

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Remarks on public libraries. From "The North American review" for July 1850 by George Livermore

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GEORGE LIVERMORE

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FROM "THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW" FOR JULY, 1850.

Bro George Livermore

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"But is there to be no end to this purchase of books? Oh yes; and let us see when it is. When there have been redeemed from time all the valuable intellectual bequests of former ages; when there has been garnered up all that preceding generations had amassed as a sacred and imperishable inheritance, there will then remain no duty but to collect what the age produces. And when literary ambition shall cease to be excited; when genius is no longer bestowed by the munificence of Heaven; when industry no longer collects new facts respecting man and nature; when the forming hand ceases to reproduce; when the streams of human intellect no longer flow; when the springs of intelligence and thought are all dried up; when the regions of science and of mind sleep in universal lethargy, — then will it be time to give over buying books."



PREFATORY NOTE.

It has been suggested, that the views presented in the following "Remarks" are liable to be misapprehended; that they may leave on the mind of the reader the impression, that the deficiencies of this country in respect to large Libraries are therein exaggerated; or, at any rate, that it was unnecessary thus to expose them.

Let any one, however, investigate the actual present state of our larger Libraries, and he will soon be satisfied that the deficiencies are even greater, much greater, than they are here represented to be. Undoubtedly the fuller returns which are in a short time to be published respecting the statistics of Libraries in the United States, will show a much larger aggregate number of volumes in the country than has heretofore been given. Still the numerous small Libraries whose united contents go to make up this aggregate, are, in most cases, composed of nearly the same books; so that all that has been said of the difficulty of thoroughly pursuing any scientific or literary research will remain true.

The second part of the objection may be removed

by considering that the article was written in full faith that, to have these deficiencies supplied, it was only necessary to point them out.

The allusion to the cost of the buildings of the Girard College, the Boston Athenæum, and the Library of Harvard College, is more likely to be misunderstood. Perhaps they ought not to have been placed in the same category. For the first named,—a college for poor orphans—no satisfactory explanation or apology can be offered. With respect to Gore Hall and to the Athenæum, the case is quite different. It was believed, and with much reason, that if splendid receptacles for literary treasures were provided, private munificence would ere long fill them with the needed books. It is earnestly hoped that this may yet be so. Here are caskets fit to contain the richest gems; shrines, in which should be deposited the choicest relics of ancient and modern literature and science. May the time soon come, when the costliness and beauty of these edifices will not exhibit so strong a contrast with the poverty of their contents.

G. L.

DANA HILL, CAMBRIDGE,
July, 1850.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES.

1. *Report from the select Committee on Public Libraries ; together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, and Appendix.* Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed, 23 July, 1849. London. Folio. pp. xx. and 317.
2. *Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Constitution and Government of the British Museum ; with Minutes of Evidence.* Presented to both Houses of Parliament, by Command of Her Majesty. London : Printed by William Clowes and Sons. 1850. Folio. pp. xlv. and 823.
3. *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Astor Library of the City of New York.* Made to the Legislature, January 29, 1850. Albany : Weed, Parsons, and Co., Public Printers. 1850. [Assembly Document, No. 43, pp. 30.]
4. *Reports, etc., of the Smithsonian Institution, exhibiting its Plans, Operations, and Financial Condition up to January 1, 1849.* From the third annual Report of the Board of Regents. Presented to Congress, February 19th, 1849. Washington : Thomas Ritchie, Printer. 1849. 8vo. pp. 72.

ALLUDING to our attainments in literature and science in comparison with those of other nations of our age, Mr. Justice Story, in an address before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge, a few years since, made the following remarks : — “ We have no reason to blush for what we have been or what we are. But we shall have much to blush for, if, when the highest attainments of the human intellect are within our reach, we surrender ourselves to an obstinate indifference or

shallow mediocrity ; if, in our literary career, we are content to rank behind the meanest principality of Europe. Let us not waste our time in seeking for apologies for our ignorance where it exists, or in framing excuses to conceal it. Let our short reply to all such suggestions be, like the answer of a noble youth on another occasion, that we know the fact, and are every day getting the better of it."

The orator then ventures to mention one of our greatest national deficiencies, and says,—“There is not, *perhaps*, a single library in America, sufficiently copious to have enabled Gibbon to have verified the authorities for his immortal History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.”*

Notwithstanding his prefatory remarks, and the qualifying terms in which he stated this fact, it was received with surprise, and some doubt, by a large portion of his audience. Nearly all his hearers thought it a bold statement to be made so near to the vast bibliographical treasures of Harvard College. It was even hinted that the orator had probably been seeking in vain for some ancient black-letter law book from the press of Richard Pynson, and had drawn his general conclusions from his particular disappointment. But had the distinguished jurist been as learned in bibliothecal as in legal lore, had he and his audience been as thoroughly familiar with the actual condition and wants of our public libraries, as they were, in general, impressed with the importance of strenuous efforts on the part of men of literature and science, to raise our relative rank with other nations in these respects, he could have presented a much stronger case without danger of exciting surprise or doubt. It would not have been necessary to have cited so distinguished an author as Gibbon, nor so elaborate and learned a work as his matchless history. Our own neighborhood would furnish many instances, where research has been abandoned in despair on account of the meagreness of materials for pursuing the necessary investigations. We do not hesitate to say, that not one, nor all the libraries in this country combined, would furnish sufficient materials

* Fisher Ames had, many years before, made a similar statement ; and we have it from a high source, that John Quincy Adams attempted to supply the deficiency, by importing at his own expense every work to which Gibbon refers in his History. In the collection of books left by Mr. Adams, and now at the family mansion in Quincy, there are probably more of these authorities than in any other library in the country.

for writing a complete history of that little book of three or four score diminutive pages, which has had such a mighty influence in moulding the character and creed of former generations, "The New England Primer."*

With respect to Gibbon, it might have been said with equal truth, that probably not all the libraries in Great Britain, and perhaps no single library in the world, was sufficiently copious to have supplied him with the authorities for his work. According to his own published statement, he was obliged to collect and purchase for his own use the extensive and valuable works which form the basis of his history. So, in our own country, such writers as Irving, Sparks, Prescott, and Bancroft have been obliged to visit Europe to collect materials for their histories, or at a great expense to import the works which ought to have been freely furnished to them from our public libraries. It was only by visiting Spain, and collecting, at his own cost, one of the best libraries of Spanish literature anywhere to be found, that Mr. Ticknor was enabled to avail himself of the materials necessary for writing his invaluable work. If either of the above-named distinguished authors had been less favored in their means, the world would not have enjoyed the results of their studies. Is it strange, then, that our country has not produced a larger number of eminent and thorough scholars? The pursuits of literature are, at present, too expensive for any but fortune's favorites to engage in them with success.

* This assertion must not be regarded by the reader as a random or reckless one, intended more for effect than for expressing an ascertained fact; for such is not the case. Not many months since, a series of articles on the *History of the New England Primer* appeared in the "Cambridge Chronicle." The writer gave some account of the authors of the various pieces in that little book, and of the persons named therein. In speaking of John Rogers, the story of whose martyrdom (with an affecting picture to match) occupies so prominent a place in the *Primer*, it was stated that he had exhibited, in the case of Joan Bocher, an equally persecuting spirit with that of his papistical executioners. The origin of this accusation was traced back to Fox, who was a contemporary of Rogers. The account in "The Cambridge Chronicle" was given from "Crosby's History of the Baptists." The writer of that work copies from Peirce, who, in his *History of the Dissenters*, says that he had it from the first Latin edition of "Fox's Book of Martyrs," and that it was suppressed in the following editions, out of regard to the memory of Rogers. Some of the numerous persons in this country bearing the name of Rogers, and claiming to be lineal descendants of him of *Primer* memory, were unwilling to receive at second-hand a statement which, if true, leaves a deep stain on the character of their ancestor. Diligent inquiry was made for the original work; but no copy of the first edition of Fox's *Book of Martyrs* could be found in any library in the country. Several cases of a similar kind occurred when investigating the history of the *Primer*; and other important matters connected with that little book and its authors were left in doubt, on account of the impossibility of obtaining the requisite works to verify or correct them.