

AIMS AND METHODS IN CLASSICAL STUDY

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Aims and methods in classical study by William Gardner Hale

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WILLIAM GARDNER HALE

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Cover

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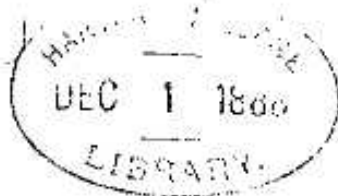
BY

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Rev. Edw. Abbott.

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I DEDICATE THIS ADDRESS
TO MY FRIEND

PROFESSOR E. P. MORRIS

WHOM I WOULD FAIR
PERSUADE.

AIMS AND METHODS IN CLASSICAL STUDY.

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED AT THE MEETING OF THE MASSACHUSETTS CLASSICAL AND HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION, BOSTON, 1887.

I HAD planned to speak to you to-day of the various phases of the classical education, — the study of the Greek and Latin literatures as bodies of thought, the study of the forms and constructions of the languages, the study of the history of the peoples, the study of public and private life, the study of art. I had planned to discuss the relation of these studies to one another, and to speak with some detail of the methods by which certain of them might best be pursued. But at the very outset I find a difficulty in my path. Six months ago one would have thought oneself safe in assuming a common opinion in regard to the aim of all this. One would then have said that, while either the classics or the natural and physical sciences, properly dealt with, would teach young students that indispensable and rare accomplishment, the art of thinking, yet they greatly differed as regards the things brought before the mind; and that in the power of the great literary men of Greece and Rome to stimulate thought, to teach a severe taste, to form those qualities of mind and char-

acter which come with a larger outlook on human life and a broader sympathy, lay their special value in a system of liberal education. But since that time a pamphlet has appeared, in an important series of monographs on education, in which the view has been upheld that this common agreement of the past was an error. It is there maintained that the humanistic conception of classical study has passed away, and that, under the mighty impulse of modern science, the scientific conception has taken its place, so that the great aim of classical study (as regards the schools, at least, this is clearly said) should be, and is inevitably coming to be, to teach scientific procedure, — namely, observation, generalization, and proof. And in this paper, after an admirable sketch of the currents that have prevailed from time to time in classical study, the view just stated is urged with such vigor and weightiness that one must certainly set oneself to debating very carefully in his own mind whether it is or is not just, and must have his whole manner of looking at classical education largely determined by the decision to which he is brought. Such a debate I have held with myself, and have not come to share the opinion of the writer. I do not know your convictions. But at any rate, until there shall again be a clear consensus of opinion on this fundamental point, no one can properly speak of the study of Greek and Latin without raising the question, What is the aim of it all? That is, then, of necessity, our first inquiry to-day. By a singular irony of fortune, the writer of that pamphlet is the gentleman in whose company I have the honor — a twofold honor, therefore — to address you, — Professor Morris, of Williams College. The irony has, however,

a kindly side; for, as we appear together before you, with opportunities assured us for discussion after our papers have been read, we may hope to reach, in amicable controversy, a common ground, and possibly even a common settlement of the important point at issue.

At once we are involved in perplexity. The general tone of Professor Morris's preface is not in harmony with the tone of the address which forms the body of his pamphlet. Both preface and address must therefore be considered.

I quote from the former:—

The classical work of the college, at least in the first two years, should undoubtedly deal mainly with the literature and history, with the contents of the writings, not with the form of the language. The arguments, therefore, which would naturally be used in support of the study of Latin in these years are those which are drawn from the excellence of the literature, from the political and social history of the Roman race, and especially from the fact that the most important elements of modern civilization have come from or through Rome. Taking the whole curriculum together, from preparatory school to university, these are beyond a doubt the chief aspects of the question, and it would be a matter of regret to the writer should their omission here be understood to indicate any doubt on his part of their weight as arguments, or of their supreme importance in contributing to culture. The reason for passing them over is a twofold one: first, because they have been often and fully presented; and, second, because any discussion of the college work brings in at once the question of elective studies,—a question upon which the writer had no warrant for entering.

To this statement I heartily assent. It is true, it is admirable. Than the phrase "their supreme importance in contributing to culture" nothing could be more satisfactory. And even if, noting the words, "the

classical work of the college, at least in the first two years," and the title of the monograph, "The Study of Latin in the Preparatory Course," one suspected a certain exclusion which augured ill for the schools, yet one would hope that Professor Morris's perception of the supreme value of the aspects he has spoken of would keep him, when he comes to speak of the philological side of classical study, from claiming for that side more than its just — its great but not supreme — importance.

At the beginning of the address, the writer says, "If any of the views which follow shall seem partisan in spirit, I can only remind you of the extreme difficulty of looking with entire impartiality at one's favorite study, and beg you to make such allowance for professional prejudice as you may think best." Let me, similarly, say that my own special field of investigation is precisely what I judge Professor Morris's to be, namely, comparative syntax. In any case, we start together, in that our special personal interest is on the scientific side, rather than the humanistic. If, then, the discussion of the question which Professor Morris has raised should lead me to the opposite conclusion, it will not be in consequence of natural bias.

The keynote of the address is struck in the preliminary statement on page 1.

Those who desire to see the classics retaining their place must face the fact that the literary spirit of fifty years ago has passed out of sight, and that the scientific spirit has taken its place. I disclaim, therefore, at the outset, any share in an attempt to reconstitute the college curriculum upon the basis of a mainly literary training, — an attempt which would result, in my opinion, simply in a prolonged struggle, disastrous to our higher scholarship, and certain to end in defeat.