

**A COURSE OF ENGLISH
READING: ADAPTED TO EVERY
TASTE AND CAPACITY: WITH
ANECDOTES OF MEN OF GENIUS**

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A Course of English Reading: Adapted to Every Taste and Capacity: with Anecdotes of Men of Genius by James Pycroft

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JAMES PYCROFT

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A
COURSE
OF
ENGLISH READING,

ADAPTED TO
EVERY TASTE AND CAPACITY:

WITH
Anecdotes of Men of Genius.

BY
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TRINITY COLLEGE, OXFORD;
WITH ADDITIONS,
BY J. G. COGGSWELL.

NEW-YORK:
WILEY AND PUTNAM.
1845.

P R E F A C E .

MISS JANE C. divided her indoor hours into three parts : the house-keeping and dinner-ordering cares of life claimed one part ; hearing two younger sisters say their lessons a second part ; and during the third and most delightful remainder she would lock herself up in her bedroom, and move on the marker of Russell's " Modern Europe " at the rate of never less than fifteen pages an hour, and sometimes more.

Being so vexatious as to ask wherein her satisfaction consisted, I was told—in the thought that she did her duty ; that she kept her resolution, and exercised self-denial ; that she read as much as the best-educated of her friends ; that continually fewer histories remained to read ; that labour sweetened leisure, and that she hoped one day to excel in literature.

A few torturing questions elicited that all the labour, all the self-denial, and all the resolution aforesaid, had not produced any sensible increase, or more than a vague but anxious expectation, of available information, love of study, confidence in society, or mental improvement. In short, my very deserving friend was all but convinced that there was some truth in the everlasting annoying remark of

a certain jealous and idle companion, that she was "stupefying her brains for no good."

A few days after I received a letter, from which I extract the following :—

" I'll tell you what:—I will never forgive your vexatious
" sifting of my ways and means of reading, if you do not
" sit down and write me a list of books which *will* do me
" good ; and such plans and contrivances of study as
" may enable me to improve as fast as you say that my in-
" cessant toil and trouble deserve. Now, mind—I'll fol-
" low your plan to the letter, and if it does not succeed,
" the fault must be yours."

In reply, I gave half an hour's instructions, which led to such an increase in the knowledge, the entertainment, the habits of reflection, and sense of improvement of my pupil, that after modifying the same instructions to suit the taste and capacity of other literary young ladies and literary young gentlemen, and after putting their value repeatedly to the test, I venture to publish them in the following pages.

J. P.

Bath, May 15, 1844.

P R E F A C E
TO THE
AMERICAN EDITION.

HAD the author of this little volume given it the title of a PLAN, instead of a COURSE OF READING, he would have designated its purpose more definitely ; such in fact it is, and a better one could not easily be devised. Having originally prepared it for the private use of a friend, he was led to publish it, as he says in his preface, after he had had a practical test of its value. For the same reason its republication here was advised and urged by one who had had many years experience of the advantages of a like system, and the concurrent testimony of all to whom it was recommended, that it greatly increased both the pleasure and the profit of reading. It is founded on the plain common sense principle, that in the pursuit of knowledge, as of other things, the inquirer must mark out and keep to his path, if he would spare himself the waste of time and toil in reaching it. Hence it requires that the subject of inquiry should first be settled, and then those books be selected for prosecuting it in which it is most ably treated : thus combining discipline with culture

of mind, and guarding against the evil of reading without an aim, and consequently with little interest. It does not suppose that a book in itself valuable can be read, even in the most desultory way, without some benefit, but that, when so read, it makes a less lasting and less distinct impression, and imparts less instruction, than if read in connexion with its proper subject. In support of this view of the question, the author cites a maxim common among lawyers, "that private reading makes little impression till legal practice shows its use, and fixes attention to important points;" the truth of which is fully verified by the readiness with which a practised jurist refers to the cases reported in the numerous and ponderous tomes of his legal library. On the plan of reading here proposed, every subject of investigation becomes a case, upon which the authorities are to be looked up and studied out on the same principle as the lawyer searches out the references in his brief. A further argument in favor of this mode of study might be drawn from the same profession; there is none in which there are so many examples of self-formed great men—men who became great by the mere force of the mental discipline to which they are subjected, without any uncommon gifts from nature; and why should not equally favorable results be had in every other intellectual occupation, were they pursued upon the same system? These are some of the leading ideas in Mr. Pycroft's plan of reading, which his work fully develops and explains: what has here been said of it will suffice to show how valuable it must be as a guide to the young, and indeed

to all who read with a view to mental and moral improvement. It may be thought, perhaps, that the books and parts of books referred to are not pointed out with sufficient exactness ; but this was, doubtless, intentional on the part of the author, to accustom the reader to search for himself. This book would have been republished from the English edition without alteration or addition, had it not been found necessary to supply some omissions. In the course of reading recommended in it, the subject of our own history does not receive its due share of attention—a defect which it was clearly the duty of an American edition to remedy ; but as it was desirable to preserve the English work in its integrity, no change has been made in the body of it, the additional matter being introduced in the form of an Appendix. In this way the American reprint remains an exact copy of the original, with some few additions appended, which, it is hoped, will make it more acceptable and useful here.

J. G. C.

New-York, Jan. 1, 1845.

A COURSE
OF
ENGLISH READING.

ALL the world would allow that a traveller would pass more easily from any one point to any other point by having a distinct picture of the road before he started. All the world would approve of a traveller's stopping once or twice in his journey, and asking himself, "To what place am I going?" and "Is this the best way to reach it?" But how many myriads in this world aforesaid do set out on the long and intricate road of life without a map, and, while they can only keep moving, never stop to ask whether they are in their latitude or out of it. So blindly do men run after all the imaginary prizes of life, and just as blindly do they pursue any one of them. Consider intellectual pursuits. Many young persons have said to me, "I should so like to possess general information, and to be well read, like our very amusing friend. Is it not strange that, amidst all the toils of a most engrossing profession, he can find time to acquire so much knowledge on every subject?"

"Not at all; a few minutes a day, well employed, will be quite enough."

"Really I do not find it so. What I read very rarely interests me; so I forget nearly as fast as I read, and grow more and more confused."