

**ON THE RIGHT USE  
OF BOOKS:  
A LECTURE**

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On the Right Use of Books: A Lecture by William P. Atkinson

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**WILLIAM P. ATKINSON**

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*A LECTURE.*

By WILLIAM P. ATKINSON,

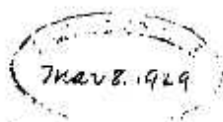
PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH AND HISTORY IN THE MASSACHUSETTS  
INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY.



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*70. Summer Lecture*

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BY W. P. ATKINSON.

*NOTE.*

*The following Lecture was written for, and first read to, a class of young business men, at that admirable institution, the Boston Young Men's Christian Union. Many additions have since been made to it, and some parts have been altered. For the opinions it contains no one is responsible but the author.*

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## THE RIGHT USE OF BOOKS.

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THAT excellent writer, the Rector of Lincoln College, Oxford, discoursing the other day on Books and Critics,\* quotes Mrs. Browning as saying: "The *ne plus ultra* of intellectual indolence is the reading of books. It comes next to what the Americans call *whittling*." Nothing can be more diametrically opposed to popular belief; for that belief is that there is something meritorious in the very act of reading. It does not matter much what we read — barring immoral reading — provided we only read. Parents love to see their children reading, — it keeps them out of mischief, they say, — and take little heed of the quality or direction of their reading; as if, the main point once gained, these were of quite inferior importance. Is it not all contained in books? There is a sort of sacredness attached, in their minds, to the printed page; as if, the *imprimatur* once received,

\* *Fortnightly Review*, Nov., 1877.

thought took on quite a different character from what it had before.

Nevertheless, I am much of the mind of Mrs. Browning. I do not believe that the world is much, if any, the wiser for a good deal of the reading that goes on in it; and perhaps I cannot better begin what I have to say on the subject than by trying to ascertain why this is true.

Perhaps I may say that the answer is an obvious one. We do not profit by our reading because we do not know how to read, and we do not know how because we have never been taught. To be sure, it is a very difficult art; and in one sense, and that the deepest, we may say that it cannot be taught. Goethe is reported to have said: "I have been fifty years trying to learn how to read, and I have not learned yet." The art which Goethe had not learned in fifty years, we need not feel ashamed not to be perfect in; and yet the question may well arise, Why, with all the reading that goes on, is so much well-meant effort absolutely thrown away? I am a teacher in a school of science, but my own teaching lies not among scientific, but among non-scientific subjects,—though I cannot use the current phraseology without a protest,—and I am *in the habit of* prefacing my instruction in history



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and literature to the successive classes of young men who come to me by a request that they would give me an account of their previous English studies and English reading; and I remember the contrast which, not long ago, two of their answers afforded. One wrote me a list of English authors, beginning with Chaucer and ending with Hawthorne whom he had "gone through," as the phrase is, at school, and wound up with the naïve remark that there was only one study that he hated more than he hated English Literature, and that was the other study with which I was about to engage his attention; namely, Rhetoric and Composition. And herein I suppose he was only honestly and frankly expressing the state of mind of the average school-boy, which is the result of the ordinary school teaching of these subjects. A state of chronic disgust at good literature which drives him to "dime novels" for recreation, combined with a chronic incapacity to pen an ordinary letter correctly, is, I fear, too often the upshot of the literary training of our schools. The other told me that he was the son of a country physician; that he had not had much schooling, but that his father had a small general library, and that he had done much reading in his father's books up in the retirement

of his father's hay-mow ; and the hay-mow had so far proved the better school that no disgust was indicated for Rhetoric or Literature. What the school, with its elaborately misdirected effort, had failed to do for the one, the other had done for himself : he had learned in part the Art of Reading.

I do not wish to draw any argument from these examples in favor of what is called self-education, or to underrate the value of school training, even with all its present imperfections and absurdities. At school, the child's mind is drilled, however badly ; trained, in company with others, to take the first steps on that broad highway which all generations must follow ; put in possession, however imperfectly, not so much of knowledge, as of those tools of knowledge which are indispensable, if higher real knowledge is to be acquired afterwards. I would be the last to overlook the importance, in early school training, of those semi-mechanical elements of drill, discipline, and mental gymnastic, on which the value of the mind as an instrument for future acquisition so much depends. But why — the question comes — does this school training, so elaborately applied, so often prove fruitless ? Why does this school knowledge, so painfully acquired, *lie like dead lumber* in the mind, even if it enter

the mind at all? Why does it not take root, and quicken into life, and grow? The answer can only be that pedants have exalted the means into an end; in perfecting the machinery, have lost sight of the object the machinery should accomplish; and thus, while our children are overtaught and overdrilled, they are not educated; and the defects of our educational system are nowhere so patent as in its failure to impart a real taste for books, to communicate the true Art of Reading.

You have invited me, whose calling keeps me among books, to say a word to you about the right use of them. And because my calling has kept me among books, and I can thus bring personal experience to bear upon the subject, I hope I may be able to say a helpful word or two. But, though I speak of an Art of Reading, do not suppose I mean to lay down any body of rules for your guidance. I have no such rules. In study as in life, each of us must find his own way, though there are none of us so wise that we cannot be helped by the experience of our neighbors. It is some of the results of that experience that I purpose giving you; and if some of my remarks seem trite, and quite wanting in the charm of novelty, I can only plead that the most important subjects are the most hackneyed.