

**A TALK ABOUT BOOKS:
ADDRESSED ORIGINALLY TO
THE STUDENTS OF THE CENTRAL
HIGH SCHOOL, BUFFALO**

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A Talk about Books: Addressed Originally to the Students of the Central High School, Buffalo by
J. N. Larned

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Addressed originally to the students of the Central High School, Buffalo . . . By J. N. Larned, Editor of "History for Ready Reference and Topical Reading"



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A Talk About Books.

I WAS asked to say something to you about Books; but when I began to collect my thoughts it seemed to me that the subject on which I really wished to speak is not well defined by the word Books.

If you had been invited to listen to a discourse on Baskets, you would naturally ask, "Baskets of what?" The Basket, in itself, would seem to be a topic so insignificant that you might reasonably object to the wasting of time on it. It is a thing which has no worth of its own, but borrows all its useful value from the things which are put into it. It belongs to a large class of what may be called the conjunctive utensils of mankind—the vessels and vehicles which are good for nothing but to hold together and to carry whatever it may be that men need to convey from place to place or from one to another.

Now, Books are utensils of that class quite as distinctly as Baskets are. In themselves, as mere fabrications of paper and ink, they are as worthless as empty wickerware. They differ from one another in value and in interest precisely as a basket of fruit differs from a basket of coals, or a basket of garbage from a basket of flowers, which is the difference of their contents, and that only.

So it is not, in reality, of Books that I wish to speak, but of the contents of Books. It may be well for us to think of Books in that way, as vessels—vehicles—carriers—because it leads us, I am sure, to more clearly classified ideas of them. It puts them all into one category, to begin with, as carriers in the commerce of mind with mind; which instantly suggests that there are divisions of kind in that commerce, very much as there are divisions of kind in the mercantile traffic of the world, and we proceed naturally to some proper assorting of the mind-matter which Books are carriers for. The division we are likely to recognize first is one that separates all which we commonly describe to ourselves



as Knowledge, from everything which mind can exchange with mind that is not Knowledge, in the usual sense, but rather some state of feeling. Then we see very quickly that, while Knowledge is of many kinds, it is divisible as a whole into two great, widely different species, the line between which is an interesting one to notice.

One of these species we may call the *Knowledge of what has been*, and the other we will describe as the *Knowledge of what is*. The first is Knowledge of the Past; the second is Knowledge of the Present. The first is History; the second is (using the word in a large sense) Science. We are not straining the term Science if we make it cover everything, in philosophy, politics, economics, arts, that is not historical; and we shall not be straining the term Poetry if we use that to represent everything which we have left out of the category of positive Knowledge, being everything that belongs to imagination and emotion.

In History, Science, Poetry, then, we name the most obvious assorting of the matter known as Literature, of which Books

are the necessary carriers. But there is another classification of it, not often considered, which is a more important one, in my view, and which exhibits the function of Books much more impressively. Draw one broad line through everything that mind can receive from mind,—everything, —(memory, thought, imagination, suggestion)—and put on one side of it all that has come from the Past, against everything, on the other side, that comes from the Present, and then meditate a little on what it signifies! In our first classification we considered the Past only with reference to History, or Knowledge of the Past. Now, I wish to put with that all of our Knowledge, of every kind, that has come to us *out of* the Past; and when you have reflected a moment you will see that that means almost everything that we know. For all the Knowledge now in the possession of mankind has been a *slow accumulation*, going on through not less than *forty* centuries. Each succeeding generation has learned just a little that was new to add to what it received from the generations before, and has passed the inheritance on