

THE LOST ART OF READING

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The lost art of reading by W. Robertson Nicoll

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THE LOST ART OF READING.

I.

THE tendency of our time is to make reading difficult, and those who do not read are beginning to decry the habit as a mean and degrading vice. In a current magazine a brilliant novelist has an article entitled "The Vice of Reading." In another paper I find an argument controverting Bacon's saying that reading makes the full man. Even among men who live by writing, reading goes out of fashion. If you will permit me to relate a personal experience, I will say that while in London I am constantly impressed by the brilliance and versatility of many men of letters. Yet I find few among them who read much. A very moderately read man will be constantly humbled by the superior talents of his contemporaries, but if I may venture to say so, he will be seldom impressed by the extent of their reading.

I speak from the strictly orthodox point of view. I believe that the business of students

is to do the work of the day steadily, and to aim with all their strength at University distinction. Macaulay was undoubtedly right when he said a start gained at the University is often maintained in life. The fact that you win scholarships and prizes during your college career will help you in all your after years. To have passed through your curriculum without distinction will be more or less of a handicap. Besides, the habits of youth are apt to persist in manhood, and there is nothing that makes so much for success as the punctual and relentless discharge of the day's duty in the day. I am aware of the new claims made by athletic sports. Any reader of the newspapers will see that to be a great tennis player, or cricketer, or golfer helps a man to the highest offices in the State. It is not impossible to be eminent as a politician without any of these qualifications. There is one man, whom I need not name, of whom it is told not only that he never takes exercise, but that he has declared that he has never taken a walk without feeling distinctly the worse for it.

But I fully admit that distinction in athletics counts for much nowadays, directly or indirectly. I have even heard it said that it is an eminent and valued qualification in the teaching profession. It requires some boldness in these circumstances to make a plea for reading. If I

venture to maintain that the habit is not pernicious, and even that it may be fruitful of advantage, I hope for a patient hearing. Successful students have been known to read in their leisure time, and as all students cannot excel in intellectual or gymnastic competitions, it may not be the worst thing for them to cultivate a taste for books.

Life is full of surprises. It does not work out as you may fancy it will. You will discover, as the years go on, that one of the great and unsatisfied needs which trouble the great majority is the need for congenial society. There is no society like the society of fellow students. There is no fellowship in life like the fellowship between those who are young and buoyant and hopeful and engaged in common pursuits. No part of their life is unshareable. They can make common the experience of every hour. They are never in want of a subject and of something to say about it. They never bore each other. Those talks which you have in "midnights worth many a noon," you often long for as the days darken round you.

"Oh, years ayont, oh, years awa,
My lads, ye'll mind whate'er befa',
My lads, ye'll mind o' the bield o' the law
When the mune was shining clearly."

I do not forget that young men are often more capable of bearing solitude than they are when they grow old. Solitude may even be beloved. You will not forget the intense three years which Descartes spent in the heart of Paris without seeing a single friend, or even so much as going out for a walk. But in the University life you can have society when you wish it, and it is the accessibility of congenial fellowship which comes to be such a craving. This difficulty of fellowship is peculiarly painful in dreary and remote places, and even in cities and in the midst of crowded life it is oftentimes a trial. A man confesses to himself that there is no brother of his heart within reach, no one to whom he can reveal his inmost self, no one with whom he can take counsel on work and destiny.

Then again you will discover that the great danger before you is not that you will turn out criminals or blackguards, not that you will wreck your life and shame your kindred. Happily there are not many black sheep in the flock. The danger is that you become respectable, decent, commonplace, uninteresting mediocrities. The danger is that thirty years after this those who remember what you were will lament with justice that the promise of your life has not been fulfilled, that

your mind has stagnated, that it takes in no new ideas. Under many an exterior apparently satisfied and even pompous, there is an inward chill. A man knows well that he has not done as he might have done, and what he should have done. He has got through without great disaster, and that is much, but he has failed to keep mind and soul alive, and having failed thus, he has lost the best and highest form of happiness.

One thing is certain, whatever your career may be, distinguished or undistinguished, you will pass through it in the conviction that you are overburdened with work. Many of you will be overburdened. Those of you who are not really put to strain will need as much as the rest a city of the mind. You will get fellowship there, and if you are debarred from the satisfying fellowship of your kind, you may find it in books. Lord Rosebery once made a political allegory of the oyster. He spoke of him as "an eminently self-contained character. His shell is his castle, his house is attached to a rock, and within that shell and attached to that rock he is absolutely aloof from the storms and catastrophes of the world." The oyster is self-contained, but no human being can afford to be self-contained. For the rest, the signs are that life will be marred by over tension.