

**A MEMOIR OF MR.
JOHN
LOWELL, JUN.**

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A Memoir of Mr. John Lowell, Jun. by Edward Everett

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EDWARD EVERETT

**A MEMOIR OF MR.
JOHN
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MEMOIR
OF
MR. JOHN LOWELL, JUN.

DELIVERED AS THE
INTRODUCTION
TO THE
LECTURES ON HIS FOUNDATION,
IN THE
ODEON, 31st DECEMBER, 1839;
REPEATED IN THE
MARLBOROUGH CHAPEL, 2d JANUARY, 1840.

By EDWARD EVERETT.

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MEMOIR

OF

MR. JOHN LOWELL, JUN.

THE occasion of our meeting, at this time, is of a character not less unusual than interesting. By the munificence of the late Mr. John Lowell, jun., a testamentary provision was made for the establishment of regular courses of public lectures, upon the most important branches of natural and moral science, to be annually delivered in the city of Boston. The sum generously set apart by him for this purpose, and amounting nearly to two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, is, with the exception of the bequest of the late Mr. Girard of Philadelphia, the largest, if I mistake not, which has ever been appropriated in this country, by a private individual, for the endowment of any literary institution. The idea of a foundation of this kind, on which, unconnected with any place of education, provision is made, in the midst of a large commercial population, for annual courses of instruction by public lectures, to be delivered gratuitously to all who choose to attend them, as far as it is practicable

within our largest halls, is, I believe, original with Mr. Lowell. I am not aware that, among all the munificent establishments of Europe, there is any thing of this description upon a large scale; and I cannot but regard it as a conception eminently adapted to the character and wants of our community, and promising to be as beneficial as it is original and generous.

The form of instruction by public lectures has greatly prevailed of late years, and obtained a high degree of favor in this and other parts of the United States. It has been ascertained, that twenty-six courses of lectures were delivered in Boston during the last season, not including those which consisted of less than eight lectures;—many of them by lecturers amply qualified to afford instruction and rational entertainment to an intelligent audience. These lectures, it is calculated, were attended, in the aggregate, by about thirteen thousand five hundred persons, at an expense of less than twelve thousand dollars. This is, probably, a greater number of lectures than was ever delivered in any previous year; but the number of courses has been steadily increasing, from the time of their first commencement, on the present footing, about twenty years ago.* It is not easy to conceive of any plan, by which provision could be made for

* Courses of botanical lectures were delivered in Boston by Professors Peck and Bigelow in the year 1813, and of chemical lectures by Dr. Gorham, about the same time. The statement of the number of lectures in 1839, is derived from the last annual report of the Secretary of the Board of Education, p. 74.

the innocent and profitable employment of a part of the leisure time of so large a portion of the community, at so small an expense.

These facts sufficiently show the vast importance, as well as the popularity, of this form of public instruction, and they naturally lead to the question, whether it does not admit of improvement in respect to the character of the lectures, and the basis on which they are delivered. In answer to this inquiry, it readily suggests itself, that, notwithstanding the great and unquestioned benefit which must accrue to the community, from the delivery of so large a number of lectures on scientific and literary subjects to voluntary audiences of both sexes, there are two points, in which the system is evidently defective. In the first place, the means of the institutions, under whose auspices most of the public lectures are delivered, are inadequate to hold out a liberal and certain reward to men of talent and learning, for the preparation of well-digested and systematic courses. The compensation is necessarily limited to a moderate fee, paid from the proceeds of the subscriptions to the courses. A necessary consequence is, that the greater part of the lectures are miscellaneous essays, delivered by different persons, without reference to each other. These essays are often highly creditable to their authors as literary efforts; and in the aggregate, no doubt, they are the vehicle of a great amount of useful knowledge. But it cannot be denied that the tendency of lectures, prepared

under these circumstances, is to the discussion of popular generalities, for the production of immediate effect; and that a succession of such lectures during a season can never be expected to form a connected series, upon any branch of useful knowledge. A few instances of continuous courses, delivered in exception to the foregoing remarks, will not, I presume, be considered as inconsistent with their substantial accuracy.

In another respect the system obviously admits improvement. Although the length of time for which these lectures have been delivered among us, with increasing public favor, is matter of just surprise, in the absence of all established funds for their support; yet there is just ground for apprehension, that the system may not prove permanent without further provision to sustain it. Whatever relies for its support on retaining the public favor, without a liberal compensation for the performance of labor, and without the means of withstanding the caprices of fashion and the changes of popular taste, is, of course, in some danger of declining, when the attraction of novelty is over, and the zeal of a first enterprise is exhausted. Even if there were no just ground to fear an entire discontinuance of the public lectures, it is obvious that the present system contains no principle for such a steady improvement in the character of the instruction they furnish, as is necessary to make them a very efficient instrument of raising the literary and scientific character of the community.

For each of these evils an ample remedy is found in the provisions of Mr. Lowell's bequest. It holds out the assurance of a liberal reward for the regular delivery of systematic courses of lectures. By the positive regulations of the founder, these courses will extend to some of the most important branches of moral, intellectual, and physical science; while the trustee is enabled, in the exercise of the liberal discretion reposed in him, to make provision for any lectures, which, in his judgment, may be most conducive to the public improvement. The compensation, which is provided by the bequest, is sufficient to reward the lecturers for the elaborate and conscientious preparation of their courses, and consequently to command the highest talent and attainment engaged in the communication of knowledge in this country; and this, not for the present season or the present generation, but as long as it is possible for human wisdom and human laws to give permanence to any of the purposes of man, for all coming time.

We may therefore consider it as certain, that all who are disposed, in this community, (within the limitation, of course, of the capacity of our largest halls to accommodate an audience,) to employ a portion of their leisure time in the improvement of their minds in this way, will henceforward enjoy the fullest advantage of regular courses of public lectures, delivered without expense to those who hear them, by persons selected for their ability to impart instruction, and amply rewarded for the