

The Free Library Movement.

NEW ENGLAND has long had a habit of providing for the culture of her people by the free lending of books. A sort of obligation is put upon rich men in the old territory of Puritanism to do something for the public, and especially for the native city or village. The story of the Boston man whose will was contested because he had not left anything to Harvard University, is but a burlesque of a real New England feeling that one who has made a fortune is under obligations to do something for the land that made him a man by pinching his boyhood. When we see such foundations as that in St. Johnsbury, Vermont,—one example of many,—we count that country happy whose sons are grateful, filial, and enlightened. It is from Boston that this spirit has radiated through the hill-country, once considered so forbidding, now rendered so home-like and habitable by domestic virtue and public spirit.

But the *direct* influence of New England on the country at large is not very great, and is growing less. With all its culture, New England is rather provincial. Her early isolation and Puritan sense of divine election seem to have got into her blood. The country at large is only remotely known at Boston, which has never taken the nation fully into its sympathies, and this limitation of view on the part of home-staying New-Englanders makes their metropolis seem half-foreign to the rest of the country. It is only after a New England idea has undergone a transplanting to the metropolis that it becomes national in its influence. Slow as our great mart has been to receive or conceive new ideas beyond the sphere of commerce, it is the real and only center of diffusion. The art movement, the literary movement, the philanthropic movement of this generation have their capital where once the Dutch trade in wampum, beaver-skins, and match-coats had its center, to wit: on Manhattan Island. So that a liberal movement for popular education by free libraries, set afoot in New York and Brooklyn, will produce, perhaps, a wide-spread awakening on the same subject in the towns and villages of the country. The old reproach, that we teach our children how to read in free schools but do not teach them the love of reading, will be in fair way for removal whenever literature shall be as free to the poor in New York as it is in Boston.

As long ago as the colonial time, the complaint was current that literary institutions did not flourish in New York. No doubt the motley origin of the people of the old city had much to do with it. From the very beginning of New Amsterdam, the French Huguenots divided the town with the Dutch, and there were also people of other nations. "English carpenters from Stamford" built the first Dutch church, and when the little village at the lower end of Manhattan was a quarter of a century old, there were eighteen languages spoken within its narrow walls. When, in 1664, an English population and the tyranny of royal governors was overlaid on the Dutch and French background, one cannot wonder that the community was divided into cliques by national prejudices. Public spirit grows with difficulty among people who speak different tongues, go to different churches, and have different traditions. What does grow in such

a place, however, is the metropolitan spirit: national and sectarian prejudices in New York were early blunted by mutual attrition, and that wide and tolerant sympathy so characteristic of the metropolis of to-day came out of the multifarious origins of her early trading population.

We have not wanted for libraries, though they have had other purposes than those proposed in a free library. It is foolish to blame the Astor Library, as many do, for not doing a work for which it was not intended. The Astor is primarily for scholarly people. The student is the people's proxy, the nation's eyes. No library in America, perhaps, offers such conveniences to special students as the Astor. He whose researches are not very extensive can there consult any works he may ask for, without cost or ceremony of introduction. The scholar pursuing a given line of study, and bringing proper credentials, may gain admittance to classified alcoves, where he can have the invaluable privilege of seeing and examining all that the library affords on his theme; and some of our writers have come to have a sentimental home attachment to the quiet alcoves of the Astor. Even the British Museum Library, a sort of paradise for scholars, where everybody is incredibly obliging and polite, has no such arrangement as that by which the Astor permits the accredited scholar to range at will among its treasures. This privilege we possibly owe to Washington Irving, who had much to do with the early plans of the library, and who knew a scholar's wants; and though the privilege has no doubt been abused by impostors, it is to be hoped that it will never be taken away. To the gentlemen of the Astor family we owe this substantial gift, and it would be ungrateful to find fault that they have not made a popular library out of what was meant to serve another purpose. It is a pity that a building holding such treasures is not quite fire-proof, and that the light in the old halls is not better. The most valuable eyes in America are injured by its dusky twilight on dark days. And it is to be hoped that the liberality of some wealthy men may enable it to complete its collections, particularly in the important department of American history, since the Astor is the main source of information to scholars in New York City. It is to be regretted that the fine collection on American history made by the State Library at Albany could not be located where it would be more accessible to students. Neither Albany high-school pupils nor members of the State Legislature, who are its most numerous clients, seem quite capable of using to advantage its rare treasures, which are hardly known to many special students.

There are, besides the Astor Library, other public libraries, such as the Mercantile, with its vast membership, the Society Library,—a joint stock association,—with an ancient history, high prices, and an aristocratic patronage. The Lenox is not to be accounted among public libraries in any other sense than that it is exempt from taxation. It is open neither to the public nor to scholars engaged in special research, nor does there seem to be any warrant for believing that it ever will be opened as a working library. A library founded and managed in this exclusive spirit works injury to scholarship; it makes the rare and expensive books needed by scholars and authors more rare and expensive, by retiring a large

number of them from use. Private collectors, who buy books only as curiosities, render a similar disservice to letters. Nor can the libraries of learned associations, such as the Historical Society, be fairly accounted public, since their books are for the use of members and the acquaintances of members. For practical purposes, this great metropolis has but two or three public libraries: the Mercantile, which is a lending library, charging a rate that is not high, but out of the reach of the poor; the free reading-room of the Cooper Institute, whose books are to be used only in the rooms; and the Astor Library, which is accessible to all, but only in hours which practically confine its benefits to students, since its books are never loaned to be carried out of the building.

Brooklyn seems to be in a fair way to realize the project of a free lending library through Mr. Seney's liberality, and Baltimore has been tendered a munificent gift for the same purpose by Mr. Pratt. New York's free library is yet in the brain of projectors, not having up to this time touched the pockets of givers. But the great merchants—the burgher princes of the metropolis—have never failed in these later years to sustain any movement having reasonable prospect of serving the city and the world, and we do not doubt of the ultimate success of the Free Library, now that it is fairly propounded and advocated by influential men. It is to be hoped that the proposition to distribute books through the police-stations will not be accepted. A free library ought to guard itself carefully against all appearance of shabbiness; and to the poor the station-house seems a sort of porter's lodge to perdition. The distribution through the public schools would be less objectionable, but the tendency of this might be to lower the standard of books purchased and the public estimation of the library. We think that means can easily be devised for distributing over the wide territorial extent of New York without calling in the aid of other institutions. It is important that a strict censorship be kept upon the books of such a library, that it may not become a fountain of corruption instead of a source of enlightenment.

But why should the movement for free libraries be confined to great cities? A library is of more use in an educational way than a high-school. The taste for good reading is the true door to culture, and if the taste for good reading be once established in a young person, there is an absolute certainty of the attainment of a degree of culture which persevering years in school cannot give. It is not enough to have free schools. A wide-spread movement for libraries, which shall be either wholly free or exceeding cheap, would be a most wholesome one. The abolition of the low-priced pirated productions, which we hope to see brought about by copyright, would leave the field free for libraries, and libraries would render American as well as English literature of easy access to the humblest.

A Third Offer of Prizes for Wood-engraving.

By reference to page 230 of the present number, the reader will find the report of the Committee of Award setting forth the results of the second annual competition for the prizes for wood-engraving offered by this magazine in April, 1881. These results are of so successful and promising a nature that, in making a third offer, we are induced to add an additional prize to competitors of the first and second year. The demand for first-rate engravers continues to keep pace with the rapid growth in public favor of the best American work, and the reasons urged by us, a year ago, for the establishment of instruction in the art in technical and art schools have gained rather than lost in cogency. In Philadelphia, by the efforts of Miss Emily Sartain, a class in wood-engraving has been organized in connection with the Academy of Design, and, we are told, is fully justifying the faith of those who united in its establishment. The number of those from Boston who have already competed for these prizes is so large that we shall not be surprised to hear that a similar experiment is to be set on foot in that city.

In Cincinnati, a city of most liberal investments in art,—investments which have already produced a large return of good designers and artists,—the project has been favorably considered, but, we believe, has been dropped for want of funds. The past year has seen, as every succeeding year is likely to see, such improvement of individual engravers, that it is safe to regard as confirmed that the present high state of the art in America is not accidental, but is in the constitution of the national mind and hand. So long as there are good paintings, there will be a popular demand for their reproduction by the wood-cut, and with the spread of a taste for the former will come an increased demand that the latter shall always be as good as the best. With this desire in view, we announce herewith the

TERMS OF THE THIRD COMPETITION.

I. To the engravers of the first, second, and third best blocks to be made during the current year by persons who, before June 1st, 1882, have never engraved for pay or taken part in former competitions—the proofs to be submitted to us by Dec. 1st, 1882—we will pay respectively \$100, \$75, and \$50

II. For the best block engraved during the year by any one who has taken part in former competitions, except prize winners \$50

III. For the best block to be done during the year by any prize winner in former competitions \$50

IV. Competing blocks must be accompanied by two fine press-proofs and by the original.

V. No subject must be chosen by an engraver until he has secured permission from the owner of the original, or, if copyrighted in America or Europe, from the holder of the copyright, to publish the engraving in THE CENTURY MAGAZINE without cost to the magazine.