AN INQUIRY

INTO THE

PROGRESS AND PRESENT CONDITION

OF

MECHANICS' INSTITUTIONS.

Part I.

A PAPER READ BEFORE

THE DUBLIN STATISTICAL SOCIETY,

ON MONDAY, 16TH OF FEBRUARY, 1852.

BY T. E. CLIFFE LESLIE, LL.B.

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An Inquiry into the Progress and Present Condition of Mechanics' Institutions. Part I. By T. E. Cliffe Leslie, LL.B.

The formation and development of Mechanics' Institutions may be regarded as characteristic social features of the present century, the first association of this description having been established at Birmingham in 1796, under the title of the "Birmingham Brotherly Society."

During the first ten years after the formation of Mechanics' Institutions in the principal towns in England, it seems to have been generally thought that no species of knowledge was necessary or adapted to the operative, but such as respected the science or practice of his art, and tended to make him a better workman. It was, indeed, naturally expected from the first, that general science would be advanced by the communication of its principles to a great number of individuals, who had in their daily occupations peculiar opportunities of making observations upon their practical application. As Adam Smith says, "There is scarce a common trade which does not afford some opportunities of applying to it the principles of geometry and mechanics; and which would not, therefore, gradually exercise and improve the common people in those principles—the necessary introduction to the most sublime as well as the most useful sciences." But, with the development and diffusion of these useful associations, larger views were taken of their destination. In the addresses delivered at various Institutions, the speakers began to dwell more upon the general, moral, and social advantages of sound popular education, and of diffusing a taste for rational and refined recreation These considerations, along with the necessity of accommodating the supply to the general demand, led to an extension of the objects and arrangements of Mechanics' Institutions, and the admission of a variety of literature and amusement, which the original founders not only had not contemplated but discountenanced. It becomes now an interesting inquiry, how far either their primary or secondary objects have been accomplished. It might justly have been expected, that the great efforts made in this century on behalf of juvenile education, would have laid a foundation for the success of such admirable schemes for the improvement of the adult members of the working classes; and, among the symptoms relied on some years ago, as indicative of a popular disposition towards intellectual pleasures, was the decline of the taste for coarse and violent games and diversions. But whether these institutions commenced under favourable auspices, is a question of small moment compared with the investigation of their present condition; and when we refer to statistical facts, the wide diffusion and great number of these and similar societies, might seem at first sight a conclusive test of their

prosperity, and of their adaptation to the wants of the age In 1851, the number of Mechanics' Institutions and similar literary associations stood thus:—In England, 610; in Wales, 12; in Scotland, 55; and in Ireland, 25. Nor is this all; in the eloquent language of Dr. Hudson, whose "History of Adult Education" comprises a statistical survey of Mechanics' Institutions, "the history of the formation and development of Mechanics' and Literary Institutions in every quarter of the globe, has now its annals. The humble temple of knowledge rears its head adjacent to the abode of the New Zealander and the Sandwich Islander. In the spot where the great circumnavigator of the globe was destroyed by a cannibal race, an athenæum is established. In the golden, yet uncongenial regions of California, the Mechanics' Institute is located, amidst iron houses and coarse tents. In the home of the African at the Cape, and at Port Natal, near the haunts of the Kaffir, the literary association has found a resting place. Under India's burning sun, the Mechanics' Institute finds friends and members In Van Dieman's Land the athenæum has its well-built local habitation; and in Australia the Mechanics' Institute receives ample funds from the government, and possesses a well-filled roll of members" But when we look at the number of members belonging to these institutions in the United Kingdom, we find that the 602 institutions in England contain only 102,050 members; and the entire number of English, Welsh, Irish, and Scotch institutes only 120,081 members. This is, of itself, numerical proof that the operative classes partake, to a very small extent, of the advantages offered in these establishments. But even this is an inadequate test; for the result is still less satisfactory, when we inquire what is the proportion of the members who may be fairly called mechanics or operatives, to the number belonging to a higher class of society. The returns are not sufficiently precise to enable me to state this proportion in figures; but it is a universal complaint, that Mechanics' Institutions are attended by persons of a higher grade than that for which they were designed; and the same observation applies to the athenæums and literary societies From this fact, perhaps, one gratifying inference may be drawn, that it evinces, on the part of the higher classes, a willingness to associate themselves both in name and fact with their humbler brethren. It has also been remarked on this point, that "the union of different classes in pursuit of one common object is attended with many social advantages, and the want every where felt of funds for the support of Mechanics' Institutions renders such a union imperative."* But whatever moment may attach to these considerations, they still weigh little in the scale against the fact, stated in evidence before the select committee of the House of Commons on public libraries, in 1849, by Mr. Smiles, in reply to the following questions:—

* Manual for Mechanics' Institutions, 1839.

"The persons upon whom it is now desirable to act are persons in the lower classes of society, to whom Mechanics' Institutions do not practically extend?"

Answer—"Yes; there is a large proportion of the working classes who are neither connected with any literary nor any religious body, whom society does not look after in the slightest degree, who have no mental provision, and for whom libraries and literary food of some kind is most desirable."

Nor is this the only discouraging circumstance elicited by a review of the condition of Mechanics' Institutions; for the statistics and facts contained in Dr. Hudson's "History of Adult Education," and other sources of information which I have consulted, prove that even considered as associations for the use of those classes to which their members actually belong, they are at present in an unsatisfactory position, being in a declining state, with respect to the number of members, their finances, lectures, classes, museums, and workshops. It appears, from the returns in 1851, that the number of members has decreased in almost every Institute; that "the fluctuations in the roll of members, not only as to numbers, but as to the individuals composing those members, is a very serious evil;" that "between five and six hundred members retire annually from the Manchester, Leeds, and Liverpool Institutes; their places being filled by others, who in their turn leave the society with perfect indifference;" and that every year has its list of suspended as well as of new institutions. The *Morning Chronicle* of December 1st, 1851, says:—"We would especially commend to the attention of those who contend for the voluntary principle in the education of the people, the fact that almost every Mechanics' Institution, even in the large manufacturing towns, within ten years after its formation became either utterly bankrupt, or so embarrassed, that it could only maintain a precarious existence by bazaars, concerts, and exhibitions." "Lectures," says Dr. Hudson, "have met with a premature decay." . . . "The number of persons attending the evening classes of Mechanics' and Literary Institutions has considerably declined in the last two years." It would appear, from the returns of 1850 and 1851, that 73 institutions have been obliged to suspend all but their discussion and language classes . . . . "The workshops of the London, the Manchester, and the Newcastle Institutes had a short career. Indeed, wherever industrial education has been attempted, it has proved a signal failure." . . . "The Liverpool Institution has only afforded an additional proof that local museums are not valued by the community." In most of these particulars, I learn that the Dublin Mechanics' Institute is an honourable exception to the general rule; but it does not appear that members of the working classes avail themselves to any great extent of the advantages which it offers.

This is, on the whole, a gloomy picture; but we must not shrink from looking at it in its true colors; nor can we otherwise ascer-

tain why, and in what points, institutions designed with so much apparent wisdom fail to satisfy the wants and coincide with the tastes of the public. It is useless to build social structures upon a plan drawn from an abstract idea of the useful and beautiful, without attention to the imperious conditions of time and place. A handsome edifice, well furnished with books, and equipped with models and specimens, is still not a Mechanics' Institution without the mechanics themselves. While, therefore, respect and admiration are due to the liberal minded men who presided over the births and infancy of these societies, it is not the less important to inquire whether they have attained a healthy and vigorous maturity; and if not, what are the impediments to their growth.

It is plain that institutions for the use and benefit of the working classes must derive support from one or more of the following sources, viz.:—The *benevolence of the rich;* the *contributions of the operatives* themselves; *private enterprise* and speculation; or, lastly, from *public funds* drawn either from the general revenue or from local rates. Now it does not require much experience or reflection to convince any mind, that the hand of benevolence, however open, is not ample nor strong enough to sustain the weight of many hundreds of such expensive establishments, even if there were not other more peculiar claims upon its support. Charitable aid is at all times a precarious foundation to build upon; the means and dispositions of individuals are liable to change; the individuals themselves are subject to the common law of mortality; and we cannot reckon upon successive generations of generous rich men at each given place, acting uniformly in a given direction. Secondly, if these institutions were, or could be rendered self-supporting, by means of the co-operation and voluntary contributions of the working classes, their success would be a most interesting spectacle, and should be hailed by the augurs of society as a most auspicious omen. But since the fact is otherwise; since they are not supported, nor taken advantage of to any extent, by those classes; it is clear that a great moral, social, and economic improvement must precede the possibility of their success without the aid of the other classes of society; and either we must wait until they grow spontaneously out of the advance of civilization, or we must take means to promote that advance. I therefore propose to inquire whether, under certain conditions, Mechanics' Institutions may not themselves be made valuable auxiliaries towards the development of such result.

Private enterprize cannot be successful here; since it cannot create a demand for a commodity in a market where it has been found unsaleable, viz.—among the poor. And this is one of the cases in which union and centralization are in point of economy superior to competition. Competition would, if it could be applied at all, lead to the establishment of a number of rival institutions where one would suffice; and it is only where competition is

legitimately applicable, that private enterprise is in its proper sphere of usefulness.

From these considerations the conclusion suggested is, that unless the backwardness of the operatives arises merely from injudicious regulations and arrangements in the existing institutions, the attempt to impart to them the advantages of such establishments must be abandoned, or the question of supporting them in some form and degree by public funds must be seriously discussed. The indisposition of the working classes to enrol themselves as members of these associations, has been accounted for in several ways. Dr. Hudson attributes it to three causes, 1st, the diffidence and restraint felt by the operatives in the society of members who are their superiors in wealth and position; 2nd, "the time and trouble of suitably attiring themselves to appear in the company of the middle classes;" and 3rd, "the quarterly and annual terms of payment" Upon the last two he observes, "the former may be obviated by an influx of fustian jackets, provided the latter is corrected by an introduction of a system of weekly payments, and the entertainments prepared are of a character suited to the taste of working men." On these correctives I shall only observe, that both weekly payments and payments upon entrance have been tried without success; and that a class so poor or so improvident as to be unequal to pay the small sum required for a quarterly subscription is not likely to furnish "an influx of fustian jackets," in consequence of a change in the mode of making the charge. The first impediment to which Dr. Hudson has referred, viz. the diffidence occasioned by the presence of members of the middle classes, "only demonstrates," as he says, "the necessity of creating another class of societies, to which the working operative shall be alone admissable." That Dr. Hudson, however, could not have thought the mere creation of exclusive institutions for working men would suffice to secure their support by that class, is evident from his next sentence. "With the increase of population," he continues, "society has developed itself in new circles, and the requirements of the age demand for the laboring classes not only *free* public libraries, *free* public news-rooms, *free* public lectures, but *free* evening classes, free to the half-educated shop-boy and the unlettered apprentice."

I have now arrived at a portion of my subject to which I request particular attention, viz, the propriety of the application of public funds to the establishment of bona fide Mechanics' Institutions. Any project which contemplates an appropriation of public money must be well recommended to the public to obtain their support, and I shall therefore make use of the authority and arguments of persons entitled to more consideration than my own reasoning could merit.

In the year 1849, a select committee of the House of Commons on public libraries agreed to a report, from which, and from the

minutes of evidence subjoined to it, I shall take leave to quote at some length. Mr. Edwards, one of the witnesses, was asked,

"How do you account for the small interest taken in Mechanics' Institutions by the working classes?"

Answer.—"There is a fee charged. The fee varies from 1d. to 2d., 3d., or 4d. A penny more or less makes a great difference to a working man."

"Are you aware that on the continent there are public libraries which are accessible to every one?"

A.—"I understand so."

"Do you think that Mechanics' Institutions offer to the operative classes an opportunity of intellectual cultivation of which they have not availed themselves?"

A.—"Yes; at the same time, there are obstacles. There is a payment required, and a large proportion of those people are poor, and *are often out of work, when they have most time to read.*"

A letter from the secretary of the "Yorkshire Union of Mechanics' Institutions" was then read to the Committee, from which I take the following extract:—

"It appears to me that the second best gift which the government could confer on the working classes—next to a good system of national education—would be a library in every town and village in the empire. The only libraries to which the poor have access are those of the Mechanics' Institutions, and the fee, though small, limits the circulation. Besides, the selection of the books is imperfect and frequently injudicious, and the expenditure of the institutions thereon cripples their exertions in other directions. I believe public libraries, so far from injuring the Mechanics' Institutions, and other voluntary efforts of the working classes to provide themselves with intellectual food, would stimulate to still greater exertions in other channels, in which the Government could not so well assist."

M Guizot, formerly Minister of Public Instruction, and Prime Minister of France, was examined, and stated to the Committee his opinion, that the formation of libraries for the use of the laboring population would be much easier than in France, there being in England a great abundance of cheap books excellently adapted for the purpose, but very few such in France. Yet in France there are 107 public libraries, and but one in England, which can be strictly called so. And M. Guizot observed, that the "access to public libraries in France produced the best results, and diffused through the public mind a general regard for learning and literature." He also remarked that he "had observed in the country, that the English labourers were inferior in point of execution to the French, but the French farmers inferior to the English;" a circumstance which may be accounted for by the greater ability of the English farmer than the French to purchase books, while the laboring classes in England have not the advantage of access to

public libraries, independently of the insufficiency of juvenile education.

Mr. G. A. Hamilton, M. P., stated in evidence:—

"In Ireland a very large proportion of the population can read; yet the supply of libraries, which can afford to such persons the means of reading, is very limited indeed. It does appear to me," he said, "that it would be a most desirable thing in every point of view, that libraries should be established to which the working classes should have access."

A great body of evidence to the same effect was collected on this subject, and not one dissentient opinion was expressed as to the propriety of establishing free libraries for the working classes. And it may be remarked that Mr Hamilton's statement, that a great proportion of the population do not read because they have no access to books, and not because they *cannot* read, was corroborated by a great many witnesses, and applies with yearly increasing force in proportion to the increase of national education.

The following extracts from the report of the Committee appear to me so very important, that I am induced to hope I shall be pardoned for their length:—

"Several years have now elapsed since the inquiries of parliament and the observations of the public were directed to the formation of free galleries and museums of art, as a means of enlightening the people of this country. In spite of some opposition, the experiment was made, and the British Museum, the Gallery at Hampton Court, and the National Gallery were thrown open to the public. It is now generally admitted that no abuse has marked the change, but that much rational enjoyment and popular enlightenment have distinguished it. One improvement, however, yet remains to be accomplished, hitherto almost untried in this country—the establishment of libraries freely accessible to all the people. Such libraries have long existed on the continent. The principal advantages of the foreign libraries consist in their number, their entire accessibility, and the fact that the books they contain are allowed to circulate on liberal conditions beyond the walls of the library. · · · · It appears that

France	contains	107	public libraries.
Belgium	„	14	„
The Prussian States	„	44	„
Austria	„	48	„
Bavaria	„	17	„

"Of all these, it may be generally stated that admission is granted unrestrictedly to the poor as well as the rich, to the foreigner as well as the native. · · · · Yet it is stated that we have only one library in Great Britain equally accessible with these numerous libraries abroad. Nor is this contrast displayed by the European continent alone. Our younger brethren, the people of the United States, have already anticipated us in the formation of public libra-

ries. It appears that there are in the United States above a hundred such institutions. · · · · If from countries we descend to particular towns, the contrast between our own and foreign lands is equally discouraging. But, whatever may be our disappointment at the rarity of public libraries, we feel satisfaction in stating, that the uniform current of the evidence tends to prove the increased qualification of the people to appreciate and enjoy such institutions Testimony showing a great improvement in national habits and manners is abundantly borne in the evidence taken before the committee. That a still further improvement would follow from the establishment of public libraries, it needs not even the high authority and ample evidence of the witnesses to demonstrate. · · · · The great practical education of an Englishman is derived from the incessant intercourse between man and man in trade, and from the interchange of opinion elicited by our system of local self-government, both teaching that most valuable lesson, self-control. It has been remarked by an American witness, that nothing strikes an American more forcibly than to see how little reading there is in England. This contrast (which we at once acknowledge and lament) arises partly from the wide application in America of the system of local self government and local rating to the diffusion of universal education, and partly from the greater cheapness of books in that country; the great demand for which, arising from that very diffusion of education, comes from a class of persons who cannot afford to pay for *dear* books. But these disadvantages on our part are only an additional reason for giving, from other sources, greater facilities of reading to our fellow-countrymen. Scarcely any class is so benighted as to be insensible to such influences." After some observations upon the demand for public libraries in Scotland, the report proceeds—"The extension which has recently taken place in the system of education in Ireland, leads to the same conclusion as to the importance of public libraries there. Nor are libraries only needed in consequence of the increasing intelligence of the Irish people. The social habits which such institutions would beget, and the approximation of persons of different opinions and creeds which they would promote, are of great importance to the manners and repose of the nation. As a proof of the penury of books in Ireland, amidst a population becoming daily more capable of using them, it has been stated that there are in Ireland 73 towns, containing an average population of 2,300 persons, in which a bookseller's shop is not to be found. · · · Every witness examined has given an opinion favourable to the grant of assistance by the Government to the formation of public libraries. This is one of those cases in which a small aid may accomplish a large portion of public good. In almost every State of the American Union, the state legislature sustains a public library. It also contributes an amount equal to the amount raised by individual contributions, to the support of the libraries of the academies This principle is recognised in our own

annual votes for school-houses. It might be extended to public libraries.

"Your committee recommend that a power be given, enabling Town Councils to levy a small rate for the creation and support of libraries An Act was passed in 1845, enabling Town Councils to levy a rate (to the extent of $\frac{1}{2}d$ in the pound), for 'encouraging the establishment of museums in large towns,' commonly known as the Museums Act. A call has been made on the legislature, from more than one quarter, and especially from Limerick, to extend this power of rating to the case of libraries. . . . . .

"It is the opinion of this Committee, that much of the future character of our agricultural population may depend on the due formation and extension of village libraries; the people may be taught many lessons, which conduce to their material as well as their moral welfare; the cleanliness and ventilation of their dwellings, habits of providence and temperance, a taste for something better than mere animal enjoyment, may be instilled into them by means of well-chosen books. There is also one subject on which village or parochial libraries may be made the means of conveying most valuable information—we mean the subject of emigration. Inasmuch as a large portion of our people annually withdraw from the mother country, to seek, under another hemisphere, the support which their parent land denies them, it is necessary that they should be previously supplied with the most exact and ample information, in town as well as in country libraries, on a subject so closely connected with their future fortune."* The Report concludes with a strong recommendation of the *abolition of the duties on the importation of books, on paper, and on advertisements, as ancillary to the formation of public libraries*

In 1850, a select committee of the House of Commons received additional evidence, and reported that they "saw no reason to vary the general conclusion arrived at by the Committee in the last session of Parliament—that this country is greatly in want of libraries accessible to the public, and would derive great benefit from their establishment"

On the 14th of August, 1850, an "Act for enabling Town Councils to establish Public Libraries and Museums," provided that

* On this passage of the Report the writer of this paper cannot forbear to express his belief, that the diffusion of adult education and literary habits would effect a more important benefit than the supply of accurate information on the subject of emigration Increased intelligence and facilities for its exercise would enable our laboring classes not only to become acquainted with the comparative resources and advantages of other countries, but to develope more efficiently these of our own. And as it is a known fact that great local inequalities in the rate of wages often exist in Ireland, which do not find their economic level in consequence of the not ill-founded fear and mistrust which an Irish peasant entertains as to the treatment he may meet with on a change of residence, few things would tend more to allay the political animosities, agrarian jealousies, and ignorant prejudices which lead to this, than a measure which would expand the intellect, and promote the economic welfare and mental happiness of the Irish people.

in any town (the population of which exceeds 10,000 persons), the Town Council may, with the assent of two-thirds of the burgesses, levy a rate, not exceeding ½d. in the £1 on the annual value of the property rateable to borough rate, and apply the proceeds to taking lands or houses, or erecting buildings, for the purpose of providing a repository for a public library, and supplying "fuel, lighting, fixtures, furniture, attendance, and other similar matters for convenience and useful occupation, and the enjoyment of such libraries or museums," to which admission is to be free of all charge. But no provision is made by the act for the purchase of books; and in the case of towns in which the population does not exceed 10,000 persons, the Act is unavailable. As, however, further evidence was taken before a Select Committee on Public Libraries in 1851, who reported their intention to consider the subject further in the present session, there is no reason to apprehend any indisposition on the part of the Legislature to extend the principle of the Act, which, indeed, seems to be very little known, although its provisions have been taken advantage of in Manchester.

In the application of public money to such purposes, there is nothing contrary to the principles of political economy As Adam Smith says (at the conclusion of his chapter on the "Education of People of all Ages"):—"The expense of the institutions for education is beneficial to the whole society, and may therefore be defrayed by the contributions of the whole society. When the institutions or public works, which are beneficial to the whole society, either cannot be maintained altogether, or *are* not maintained altogether by the contributions of such particular members as are most immediately benefited by them, the deficiency must, in most cases, be made up by the several contributions of the whole society."

But the establishment of public libraries, in the ordinary sense of the word, would not be sufficient; what is wanted is not only an intellectual provision, but also rational enjoyment for the adult members of classes, who have such scanty means of obtaining it at their own disposal; and for this purpose the public reading rooms in towns and villages, which the Parliamentary Committee propose to establish, should be furnished with the kind of literature which is naturally the most attractive and interesting, and perhaps not the least instructive—the newspapers and periodicals of the day. "There is," (says Mr. Burton, in the chapter on education in his "Political and Social Economy,") "something pathetic in a temperance procession with its banners and music; it is the effort of ignorant men, who cannot enjoy the rich and delightful excitement of intellectual pursuits. These men are trying to find some factitious excitement, to fill up the void felt in flying from the fascinations of the tavern." So, in an address to a Mechanics' Institution, Sir John Herschel observed:—"There is a want, too much lost sight of in our estimate of the privations of the humbler classes, though it is one of the most incessant cravings of all our wants,

and is actually the impulsive power which, in the majority of cases, urges men into vice and crime. It is the want of amusement Gratified to a certain extent it must be, in the case of every man, if we wish him to be either a useful, active, or contented member of society. Now, I would ask what provision do we find for the cheap, innocent, and daily amusement of the mass of the laboring population? I should hardly like to appear to rip up grievances by saying how little. The pleasant field walk and the village green are becoming rarer and rarer every year. Music and dancing have become so associated with ideas of riot and debauchery among the less cultivated classes, that a taste for them for their own sakes can hardly be said to exist The demands of agriculture have become stern and imperious, and while hardly a foot of ground is left uncultivated or unappropriated, there is positively not space left for the amusement of rural life. Now, since this seems unavoidable, and since it is physically impossible that the habits of a condensed population should continue to be those of a scattered one, it behoves us to consider some substitutes." For the reasons thus stated by this eminent man, and in consequence of our living in a climate which would render a "field walk" by no means the most "pleasant" evening recreation for the tired workman, through a great portion of the year; and also, in consideration of the intellectual wants which the increase of civilization, and the subdivision of labor necessarily engender, it appears to me that the most practicable and the most useful "substitute," would be the establishment of *bona fide* Mechanics' Institutions, the main characteristic features of which should be a public lending library, and a public reading room, supplied with magazines and newspapers. I have been struck by two circumstances mentioned by Dr. Hudson, in the work I have several times referred to, which are remarkable symptoms that the disposition of operatives in large towns is favorable to the success of such institutions, and that it developes itself under the most unfavorable circumstances. Describing the progress of adult education in Nottingham, he says:—"The desire for intellectual amusement seems to have entered into all the ramifications of society in this town, for there are several working men's libraries held in public houses; at two of these, political discussions are held under judicious regulations." And in his account of the Mutual Improvement Societies of London, he says:—"The public houses have made some advance, for the number of newspapers has greatly increased; and, in some instances, nights have been set apart for political discussions, which have been well sustained in bar parlours. At an inn in Kensington Road, lectures on astronomy have been delivered to attentive smokers, before whom were the ale-pots and alcoholic mixtures." Such facts will be read with satisfaction by one who has perused the gloomy chapter on "The amusements of the English poor," in Mr. Kay's "Social and Educational Condition of the People," which, according to him, consist exclusively in drinking and profligacy; and, at the same time, they are strong evidence of

the feasibility of providing "substitutes," both for the class of amusements which the "condensation of population" has rendered impossible, and that which is generally provided for our condensed population in gin palaces and public houses.

But, from the foregoing reasoning and evidence, it seems to me proved that such substitutes cannot be provided and maintained without the assistance of public funds. It has been shown that neither *benevolence*, nor *private enterprise*, nor the voluntary efforts of the *operatives themselves*, can be looked to as the chief support of such institutions; that the example of almost the whole civilized world is in favor of the establishment of public libraries; that ample and unanimous testimony to their want and usefulness has been laid before the House of Commons; that an act has been passed, embodying to a considerable extent the recommendations of the select committee of 1849; that the attention of the legislature is still directed to the subject; and that the diffusion of education has already largely prepared the public mind, to appreciate the advantages which free literary institutions would afford—an argument which applies every year with increasing force.

Of course, the application of local rates to the purpose advocated in this paper, would be left to the discretion and public spirit of the local authorities and inhabitants of each town or locality; and there seems no doubt that if the power were generally given and generally known, the experiment would be made in different places; and that the success of a tentative process, in a few places, would bring the scheme into general operation.

It appeared to me necessary to add some observations as to the class of literature which should be admitted; because it has been overlooked in many institutions, and by many writers, that what is called "solid intellectual food" may be too solid to be generally palatable or digestive, and that we owe it to the working classes to make some provision for their recreation, as well as for their intellectual improvement; nor indeed can the latter be generally introduced without the admission of the former, but

"Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci."

I feel bound to add, that it seems to me of great importance, that the public reading rooms should be open at certain hours to the working classes, on the only day which they have much at their disposal. There might be many advantages, too, in attaching these public reading rooms to the Mechanics' Institutions already established; economy as to building and other expenses would be effected, and the periodicals, which the subscribing members of the institutions would have the first use of, might be subsequently transferred to the public room.

But whether such public institutions as I have endeavored to advocate will ever become general and successful or not, there is a portion of the inquiry I proposed to myself which is independent of that question. We find that the associations actually existing

under the name of Mechanics' Institutions, are supported almost entirely by the members of a very important class of society above the rank of operatives. It becomes, therefore, material to consider the progress and results of these associations; and whether, in their present constitution, there are any impediments to their success. I trust to have an opportunity of bringing this subject under the notice of the society in a future paper.