

The Morning Herald 7th June 1906

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**PROFESSOR HENDERSON'S LECTURES**

**ROBERT BROWNING.**

The committee of the Swan River Mechanics' Institute was not mistaken in supposing that its own hall would be too small to accommodate all who wished to hear Professor Henderson's lecture on Robert Browning, for every seat in the Town-hall was filled last night some time before it commenced. Amongst those on the platform was His Excellency the Governor (Sir Frederick Bedford), while Lady Bedford and suite occupied a seat on the floor of the hall.

Professor Henderson said he had now come to the final lecture of his course, and he would ask his audience to consider with him, with as much attention as a gold-mining community could give, the man whom many would call an extremist in his ideal representation of life. The British character was not generally credited with a tendency towards theories or ideas; they were essentially a practical people. Mark Twain had said that the English were mentioned in the Bible, for was it not there written that the meek should inherit the earth? But it must be borne in mind that the practical man was not necessarily one who had lost all sympathy with ideals. Robert Browning was a Briton, and he had said the last word on many ideal questions. He would in that lecture treat mainly of the poet's philosophy of life, touching only on the poems here and there, where they illustrated his contention. If the poet's philosophy of life were more generally understood, he would be more widely read. First of all, then, he was a man with a strong, grasping intellect; not so sweet, certainly, as Tennyson's, but more powerful, as Tennyson himself had admitted. A lecturer on a dramatic poet laid himself open to criticism from the very outset. He was quite aware that such a poet should not necessarily be credited or discredited with what he put in the mouths of his characters, but there was a moral system underlying Browning's philosophy in drama, as there was in Shakespeare's. Besides, he wrote, as well as his dramas, a considerable number of didactic poems, principally at the instigation of Elizabeth Barrett, a little while before she became his wife, for she deplored the fact that with all the music in him he had not impressed his own personality directly on his readers. That division of his works alone would enable a just notion to be formed of his views. Thoroughly to understand him it was necessary to appreciate two fundamental beliefs he entertained—that human beings have souls, and that there is a God. There was to him nothing so important in this world as the development of a soul, and they must concentrate their attention on what he considered paramount. "When," continued the lecturer—"when he says that evil is nought, you suppose he must be a dreamer, and you are inclined, I suppose, to close your book." Browning was a psychologist, and it would be well to inquire into three points concerning his view of the development of the soul. First and foremost, there was the heroic quality in him. His thought was heroic, because he believed profoundly in a presence in the inward life which gave to the individual power to say in the presence and conflict of danger, "Thou shalt, or thou shalt not," as Kant had put it. His view was diametrically opposed to that originated by Locke, and developed by Hume to its natural conclusion, that man must be the slave of the strongest sensation he knows. He was of the opinion expressed in Plato that the soul should overcome those sensations and master them. There was, he believed, something which was the spirit of the soul—the thing that made for grit and stamina—and that principle was heroic. In many of Browning's dramas they found his heroes defying circumstances, and he loved a man who asserted the heroic quality of his soul. Socrates maintained that the man who was ignorant, and knew he was ignorant, was on a far higher level than the man who was ignorant and knew it not, for the former had a principle in his mind which would impel him on till he was no longer ignorant. Browning did not sympathise with those who looked forward to Heaven as a resting place, for Heaven to him was in the nature of an aspiration, and a striving onward. He thought the man who lived in stagnation was left "in God's contempt, apart," and even went so far as to say that the principle which distinguished a human being from a brute was the principle of progress in a man's own soul. When the light began within himself a man became worth something.

Then in his dramas the poet showed a fondness for delineating a man passing through a spiritual crisis. Like Cromwell, he loved to catch a man in a crisis, when, if he showed himself master of his passions—why, then they had a personality before them. When a man had to make a great choice for himself or for his nation, then he was seen at his noblest and best, if he were a true man. Then, with regard to inspiration, Browning asked one to struggle, because he believed that a man's better part was conditioned by that struggle. Material wealth might sometimes be

obtained with little pains, but not so with the mind. What a man acquired of mental resource, of culture, of taste, depended on the nature of his ability, and on the effort put forward, for there was no royal road. What Browning measured and valued in a man was not the concrete external appearance, but the inward struggle, deeming that even a losing battle, nobly fought, was often really a triumph. The soul was the register of every thought and act and feeling. In the poet's theory of what might be called the law of indirectness he asked people to consider what came to them indirectly from any given phenomenon, for indirect results were often the most important results of all. Putting the ball through the goal in a game of football was as nothing compared with the struggle, the strengthening of fibre, the training to work with others for a common end—and these results were all indirect. The poet took humble and obscure persons generally for his dramatic personae, neglecting the great and the rich; and he had said of the plodding grammarian of one of them that that humble man was loftier than the world suspected, because he had put the whole force of his being into a definite object, and obtained as well all the indirect advantages inseparable from such a struggle. Ends accomplished were always the means for a higher end. There was no such thing as failure to the man who struggled, and struggled ardently. The important thing ever and always was the development of the inward life, not of the material; and even though a man might seem to fail there would come to him a genuine fulfillment. Browning did not doubt the existence of evil in the world—the "Ring and the Book" would show that—but he thought a sunset all the more beautiful because of the clouds that mingled with it, saying that evil existed merely to be transmuted into good—that what was good shall be good, and what was evil so much good more. There was evil in the world, but evil was a relative thing. Temptation overcome was added strength. The highest good could not be attained until evil was not only overcome, but had become transmuted into good. (Loud cheers.)

At the conclusion of his lecture Professor Henderson was accorded an enthusiastic vote of thanks, on the motion of His Excellency the Governor, seconded by Mr. Longmore, the president of the Mechanics' Institute.

**PROFESSOR HENDERSON ENTER-TAINED.**

**VALUE OF EDUCATION.**

On Tuesday evening all the Sydney University men of the Education Department gathered at the Hotel Continental, Claremont, to do honor to Professor Henderson, prior to his return to Adelaide. The Professor is not only a Sydney University graduate, but was for some time a member of the teaching profession under the Department of Public Instruction in New South Wales. There were present at dinner, in addition to the guest—Messrs. W. J. Rooney, B.A., Wallace Clubb, B.A., Hugh Hunt, B.A., J. A. Miles, B.A., A. W. Maloney, B.A., A. E. McGregor, H. J. Hughes, B.A., J. Parsons, M.A., A. J. Coombs, B.A., T. C. Chandler, T. N. Lee, B.A., W. C. S. McClinton, B.A., C. W. Hadley, B.A., and S. C. Smith, B.A., and an apology was read from Mr. J. A. Klein, B.A., who was unavoidably absent.

After the toast of "His Majesty the King," the Chairman (Mr. W. J. Rooney) proposed the toast of "Professor Henderson," tracing the steps of his distinguished career from the time that he commenced his work as a teacher in the service of the Department of Public Instruction (N.S.W.) to that night, when he was present among them as a man occupying a very important position in the educational world of the Commonwealth. That he had been a teacher, and was still a teacher, had been shown most forcibly in the excellent and telling lectures which the Professor had delivered in Perth to such appreciative and crowded audiences. The toast was supported by Mr. J. A. Miles, B.A., and by Mr. J. Parsons, M.A., and was honored with great enthusiasm.

Professor Henderson, in reply, said he wished to express the feeling of gratitude and joy that he felt to be thus met and honored by so many men that had been associated with so much of his earlier life. The faces around him brought back many an almost forgotten incident, and reminded him of those strenuous days when they were all starting on the great work that they had taken up. He considered that the work that he then did as a teacher in New South Wales would always stand to him as a lasting possession, and he would ever consider himself in the light of a teacher. It was for that very reason that he had, some months ago, felt bound to refuse the offer of an administrative post in the Education Department of his own State, for he felt that he could not well give up his work as a teacher in the position he now held to the routine of such an office. No nation, the Professor continued, could not be great unless the people in the nation were resourceful, and they could not be resourceful without the development of a rich and full inward life. True great-

ness in individuals and in nations was based upon inward resource. The minds of the boys and girls in a nation constituted its most valuable asset. The future of any community depended on the value of their training, and it was their privilege as teachers to direct their thoughts and cultivate their better feelings. Material wealth was a means to an end; the development of mind was an end in itself, material wealth being a blessing or a curse as it was used or abused. It was, therefore, necessary in the interests of the nation that those who were engaged in educational work should strive to give every boy and girl the opportunity to develop the best that was in them. There must be no exclusiveness, nor in our Australian democracy was there likely to be any. Educational institutions were essentially democratic in character, for in all of them, from the primary school to the university, distinctions were open to all who had the ability to attain them. (Applause.)

The toast of Sydney University ("Alma Mater") was proposed by Mr. Wallace Clubb, B.A., and was honored with the hearty singing of "Gaudemus." Mr. Hugh Hunt, B.A., responded on behalf of the University.

The toasts of "New South Wales," "Western Australia," and "The Chairman" were also honored.

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**PROFESSOR HENDERSON'S LECTURES**

**REVIEW OF THE SERIES.**

By Chastan.

As Professor Henderson's course of literary and historical lectures, delivered under the auspices of the University Extension League, attracted uniformly large audiences, and was the subject of considerable discussion in Perth, it will, perhaps, not be altogether out of place to examine the validity of the reasons for its popular success. At the conclusion of his final deliverance, which was much the best of the series, the professor was complimented with sufficient warmth on the result of his undertaking, and the recognition was, from the promoters' point of view, not undeserved. Valedictory encomium is seldom taken very seriously, perhaps, for it is recognised that anything in the shape of criticism would be out of place in such circumstances. We may now, however, consider what were Professor Henderson's merits and blemishes as a lecturer; and if more emphasis be laid on the defects than on the merits, it should be remembered that the merits have already been sufficiently recognised, and that it really only remains to state the critical side of the case, and sum up as impartially as may be.

In speaking incidentally of laud in his lecture on Strafford, the first one of the series, Professor Henderson said the Archbishop lacked a sense of proportion. Whether such a charge can be justly applied to Land or not, there can be no doubt that it applies to the lecturer. Strafford was presumably chosen as a prominent man on the side of Charles I. to represent the position and views of the party which was opposed to the demands that were being every day more insistently urged by the popular leaders in the great movement that was inevitably leading to an epoch-making crisis. If this were not the reason for his selection, then he was a singular subject to choose for the purpose of interesting a mixed popular audience. If it were the reason, that aspect of the question was scarcely touched upon in the lecture. Strafford's upbringing, his career in the North of England and in Ireland, his trial and death, were all dwelt on at considerable length, while his conduct in England, which was the really important matter, was glanced over in the lightest manner. Everyone is well aware that Strafford is now a subject of merely academic interest, and that it matters not a jot how he is treated in a popular lecture; but the case illustrates the position. Cromwell, as Professor Henderson said, was a subject more suitable for eight lectures than for one, and in dealing with him the same want of proportion was exemplified; but this time in a manner almost grotesque. Much was said about the art of war in those days, about the battle of Marston Moor, and about the Irish campaign, but practically nothing was said about Cromwell as Lord Protector of England, except that he had a vigorous and successful foreign policy. What, from an historical and constitutional point of view, was by far the most interesting and important period of that great man's astonishing career was neglected, while the details of a battle, whose relative importance was as nothing, were elaborated to a disproportionate extent. With an unnecessary assumption of impartiality, Professor Henderson affected not to trust himself to speak about Strafford's comparatively unimportant character in the ordinary way, and insisted on reading what he had to say from his notes; but when he came to Cromwell there was no such timidity

about him. Cromwell, with the good sense which distinguished him, told the artist who was to paint his portrait to put in all the warts and seams of his rugged countenance. But on no such principle did Professor Henderson use his brush. There was a superabundance of light, and practically no shade. In that iron age no man could have done what Cromwell achieved without often using more than dubious means; and Cromwell's scrupulousness was not too nice. The lecturer in a general way admitted all this, but the total impression conveyed was that his hero had done nothing that was very wrong, considering the age in which he lived, but was a great, glorious man, practically without stain and without reproach. Milton, in the strict sense of the term, was not a Puritan, but few characters in history shine with so pure a light as that champion of liberty. Compared with Strafford and Cromwell, he was relatively perfect. Professor Henderson admitted the moral worth and great services of the man, but he dealt at disproportionate length and laid undue emphasis on the poet's unhappy domestic relations and on the hard words he used in his controversial and polemical writings. It was much more the custom to speak plainly and sharply in those days, when people cared intensely for the principles they were contending for, than it was for a victorious general to refuse quarter to a vanquished enemy as Cromwell did at Drogheda; but Professor Henderson laid more stress on the excessive zeal of the poet than on the far greater desert of the soldier. All Milton's faults of temperament and conduct, though concerning himself and his family alone, were brought up for inspection and reprobation. Cromwell's great qualities and achievements so filled the stage that there was no room for his very considerable failings to do more than peep bashfully from behind the side scenes occasionally; and the same may be said in a lesser degree of Strafford, as presented by Professor Henderson. So much for the historical lectures.

Turning to the lectures on Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Robert Browning, it cannot be denied that the audience received full value for its money when it heard what was said about Browning. That was an admirable discourse in its way, though it not unnaturally reminded His Excellency the Governor of a sermon. The lecturer confined himself to Browning's philosophy of life, and described with great force and clearness just what it was that gave Browning the wide influence he still exercises. Browning as a philosopher and a moralist had great weight, but as an artist, as a poet, he was comparatively insignificant. Tennyson was a great artist and a poet, but only incidentally a philosopher, and nothing could be more unsatisfactory than what was said about him. Professor Henderson's theory of aesthetics appears to be radically erroneous; and if his view of what the essence of poetry is were correct, then Mr. Swinburne would be one of the greatest poets of the world, instead of being no poet at all, in the highest meaning of that much-abused word. The, according to the professor, essential element of poetry, it seems, is "the swing and the rhythm of the line." If the audience went to the Mechanics' Institute hall that night in the spirit of the Athenians, "to hear some new thing," they assuredly were not disappointed. That one remark would be quite sufficient to discount Professor Henderson as an authority on poetry; but there is no need to dilate on so patent a fallacy. The professor seemed to think that splendid failure "In Memoriam" the best and most characteristic of Tennyson's works, but he is probably as much alone in that opinion as he is in his theory of the essence of poetry. Indeed, most that was said about Tennyson was superficial; this applies more or less to most of the other lectures. It is possible, however, that this superficiality may have been intentional,

dictated by consideration for "a gold-mining community" whose best attention the professor thought it necessary to beseech before commencing his lecture on Browning—although, incidentally, he credited it with an intimate acquaintance with the early Anglo-Saxon poets and the dialogues of Plato.