

The Register  
May 2nd 1914

### PRACTISES WHAT HE PREACHES.

#### The Importance of Elocution.

[By our Special Reporter.]

The intellectual calibre of Adelaide's public men has just been strengthened by the introduction of a fine preacher. This is the Rev. Thomas Tait, M.A., B.D. who is now occupying the pulpit of Chalmers church. Ranking high in his equipment of gifts is his artistic command of the living voice. He is a celebrity in the world of elocution. In a little volume, which has been accepted as a popular classic, Mr. Tait, with simple and graceful manipulation, has overhauled for us the fundamental parts of vocal mechanism. His style has literary finish, and his statement of the case, excellent authority. It will be a pity if Mr. Tait's accomplishments are not eagerly utilized here. What a delight and an advantage it would be to have him filling a Chair of Rhetoric at the University! And there is no doubt that such a study must soon find a place in the greatest seat of learning. Scant courtesy has been given to the speaking voice, that delicate instrument so often abused, and Mr. Tait has never hesitated to condemn "the reprehensibly languid interest" taken by the colleges and churches in its proper fashioning. Stop and think over the matter for a moment. How many public speakers are speakers who ought to address the public? It is a fair question. Answer it! What is known about voicing the vowel or sounding the consonant, about accurate articulation or expressive gesture, about the virtues of well-managed delivery? There would, I fear, be rather a sad percentage of failures in an elocutionary test. The defect is big, and challenging, and nobody seems to care very much whether it should ever be remedied. This week I interviewed Mr. Tait to see whether he could point a way out. He did. It was the only way out—through an academic curriculum of study.

#### —A Masterly Exponent.—

No one who knows anything of Mr. Tait's career can possibly question his right to speak on this topic. His work at Ormond College, Melbourne University, where he filled a lectureship in elocution, won for him laurels of praise. There he was able to show what could be done in preparing students for the practical work of the ministry. In Victoria, Tasmania, and New Zealand, particularly, Mr. Tait has received marked recognition of the high merit of his pulpit and platform qualities. It is a common stone flung at clergymen that they do not practise what they preach. You can't hurl that missile at the new minister of Chalmers Church. You could, as a matter of fact, but it would not hit him! He not only knows elocution scientifically, but is acknowledged as a masterly exponent of it. Somebody has written of him that his own methods are perfect to a degree, and that he sways his audience with his mood. Mr. Tait had a brilliant educational course, and his five years' sojourn at the Glasgow University was crowded with achievement. He came to Australia from one of the large city churches there, and performed special work in Victoria. The sister State said good-bye to him reluctantly, and New Zealand gripped his hand in a most regretful farewell. And now South Australia has got Mr. Tait—it is the consensus of opinion among those who are in a position to pass judgment that we have been singularly fortunate. As a speaker, he has yet to be heard, in the popular acceptance of the term, but the other night he charmed the members of the University Shakespeare Society by the beauty of his delivery and the force of his knowledge. It was there I got the starting point for my interview.

#### —A Neglected Art.—

"In your lecture you referred to the fact that elocution has not yet found its place in an academic curriculum of study."

"Yes, and I am not alone in deploring the fact that, generally speaking, educational authorities have not given this art the dignity and place it eminently deserves. What would we think of a medical course of study which excluded clinical practice? And yet we profess to train men for the pulpit and the Bar, and give the cold shoulder to that very art of expression which goes so far to determine ultimate success or failure. If a man is professedly trained for a vocation which demands public speaking, can any one maintain that his training is adequate if it fails to give him the necessary discipline in voice and the expression of thought and sentiment?"

"I suppose your idea is that universities ought to have chairs of rhetoric?"

"Precisely. Professor Mahaffy, of Dublin, has advocated that in a most conclusive way. Many another cultured voice has been raised in the same direction. In spite of such advocacy and pleading, and in spite of the fact that many preachers and speakers break down more or less with voice troubles, very little has been done to remedy this defect in the ordinary academic curriculum. Long-suffering audiences continue to endure their manifold miseries while this art receives only the scantiest recognition."

"I suppose you have acted as a judge in elocutionary competitions?"

"Oh, yes. One of the largest of these was the competition held in connection with the Christchurch Exhibition, which I see attracted fully two million visitors."

"It must have been a kind of infliction, was it not, having to listen to crowds of amateurs?"

"You do feel sometimes as if you were in a condemned cell. It's interesting, though; and it provides an opportunity for saying some things that have to be said in the best interests of an art which is not always wisely taught or properly learned."

#### —The Wrong Way.—

"What would you say is a wrong method of teaching elocution?"

"Perhaps the most conspicuous fault in some teaching is to be found in this:—The teacher does the most of the work for the pupil, and presents his own peculiar style as a model for imitation. This is fatal to success; and the reason is obvious. Elocution is the art of vocal expression; and this pre-supposes first of all something in one's own mind and soul calling for utterance; and also a vocal mechanism wisely drilled into effective and instinctive obedience to the intimations of the soul. No reader or reciter can do justice to a piece of good literature without first intelligently studying the piece for himself, until his own being is stirred with the writer's thought and emotion—in a word, it is useless attempting to express what has not first of all entered into and possessed one's own mind and heart. If one is incapable of appreciating the power and beauty of good literature, it is worse than waste of pains trying to recite by any secondhand method of imitation. A good workman needs to have suitable tools in good working order, and then he wants ideas to bring these tools into effective operation. So with the reader, reciter, and public speaker."

#### —Only a Beginning.—

"Supposing chairs of rhetoric were to be set up in universities, would it not be rather difficult to find cultured men who had made themselves specialists in this art of expression?"

"The opportunity would bring men of the proper stamp into training for such positions. It only needs a beginning to raise this necessary academic discipline to the position of dignity demanded by the intrinsic value of the art itself and also by the obvious need for the wise and noble culture of it."

#### —The Ideal—and the Real.—

"Are not the Presbyterian clergy well trained for their work?"

"Happily, we have high ideals intellectually, and we endeavour to maintain our somewhat exacting standard. But it is really a saddening fact to admit that we leave our men pretty much to their own inclinations in learning how to use the voice, and how to express themselves in public. Here, for example, is a minister whose culture and erudition fit him for occupying a University Chair in Philosophy or Theology—where do you find him?"

With all his brilliant faculty and store of knowledge, he ought to be in a city pulpit. And yet you will find men of this type in some out-of-the-way village in Scotland. The only reason one can discover for this lamentable loss to larger communities is that scholars have never studied the voice and its wonderful powers of expression. It is a practical truism that many who have knowledge lack the skill to impart it. This is fully recognized by every wise education department; and the art of teaching finds its prominent place in the training of the professional teacher. Unfortunately, the preacher is taught everything necessary except how to preach. Of course, I gladly admit that there are now several colleges—particularly in America—where learned men specialize in the study and teaching of rhetoric, which includes the training of the voice; and I have found in correspondence with professors in various parts, that there is a growing conviction that this department of training must have its place in the curriculum. The only difficulty which these correspondents have mentioned is the difficulty of finding the money to endow chairs."

#### —The Tragedy of Listening.—

"Every public speaker comes in for a good deal of criticism, does he not?"

"No doubt, and some of the criticism is well justified. No public speaker has a right to claim the time and attention of an audience, if he cannot at least make himself heard, clearly and distinctly, in an ordinary auditorium; and the various afflictions visited upon long-suffering audiences are after all quite gratuitous. If a wise system of training were undertaken at the proper time, the most common faults of a painful delivery would not obtrude themselves so frequently in the pulpit and on the platform. Bishop Magee once said, 'there are preachers you can't listen to; preachers you can listen to; and preachers you can't help listening to.' No training can of itself make an orator; but there is a method of training which is capable of sparing the speaker much personal discomfort, and of giving audiences what they have a right to expect."

#### —Elbow Room.—

"Will you give me your ideas on extempore speaking?"

"The written word and the spoken word are quite different. In writing one seeks to condense his thought into fewer sentences and more pregnant phrasings, and readers have ample time to linger over the printed page. The speaker, on the other hand, must carry the intelligence of his audience along with him; and to do this successfully he requires more elbow room. Moreover, when listening to a public speaker we look for life and soul and individuality; and if these are to be available at the maximum the speaker must be able to clothe his ideas and feelings in the living language of the moment."

"And that is your method?"

"Yes, it is; and one suffers a good deal by it; but it's worth all the mortification a speaker feels at times. When one speaks at his best, he really brings his own soul into vital contact with the souls of those who are listening to him; and I don't think this can be effectively done if the contact is broken by the presence of notes or manuscript."

#### —Living Language.—

"You do not write your sermons or lectures then?"

"No, I don't. Every speaker to his own method, of course; but I think on the whole—at any rate, with comparatively few exceptions—this is the method that works best for the ends in view. It is a method which involves hard work; for a man must give himself to severe and prolonged thinking before he can risk appearing before the public in the hope of successfully clothing thought in the language of the moment."

May 2nd, 1914.  
House of Lords.

**DR. MAWSON.**

WELCOMED AT NAPLES.

ROME, April 30.

Dr. Mawson, the Australian Antarctic explorer, was welcomed to-day in Naples which he is visiting, in company with his wife, while on his way to London.

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