

The Melbourne Athenaeum.

The New Buildings Opened by the Governor.

Last evening the handsome new building in Collins-street east that has just been completed to the order of the managing committee of the Melbourne Athenaeum was formally opened by His Excellency the Governor, who was accompanied by Lady Loch and suite. The large hall of the institution, which has been tastefully decorated by Mr. Mouncey, was well filled on the occasion by the members and friends of this oldest of Melbourne literary and educational centres. The ancient and unprepossessing façade that the Athenaeum so long presented to Collins-street has now completely disappeared, and its place has been taken by a lofty substantial structure of three stories that harmonises well with the adjacent buildings. Four attractive shops, all tenanted, occupy the ground floor, there being two on each side of the vestibule leading to the main hall. A spacious stone staircase on the right of the entrance to the hall conducts to the library, a splendidly lighted and capacious apartment, in which Mr. W. Smith, the librarian, will for the first time be able to classify his books scientifically, and display them to the best advantage. Yet, although this handsome room is an immense improvement on the old, dark, dingy, and contracted quarters, it does not provide sufficient shelf accommodation around its walls for the 20,000 volumes that now comprise the literary collection of the Athenæum. Adjacent to the library is the reading room, also well lighted and handsomely furnished, fittings of the most modern and approved type having been provided by Mr. Thos. Dakin. On the next floor is a small lecture hall, with a platform at the eastern end, adapted for meeting purposes, rehearsals of musical societies and other kindred objects. Branching off from this hall there is a commodious and comfortable apartment, which has been secured by the Metropolitan Liedertafel, and nicely furnished by that musical organisation as a club room and library. The principal apartment on the top story is now occupied as an office by the Public Service Association, but the probability is that it will eventually be utilised as a smoking and billiard room, in connexion with the institution. Several cloakrooms, retiring rooms, &c., have been provided and furnished in excellent taste. The office of the secretary (Mr. J. H. B. Curtis) is in the same position that it occupied before the recent improvements were effected. Mr Alexander Kemp, of Carlton, was the contractor for the new building, and the work has been carried out to the thorough satisfaction of the committee. The total cost was £14 000, which added to the old liability of £4,000, makes the total indebtedness of the institution £18 000.

The large hall was well filled in the evening, when the opening ceremony was performed by His Excellency the Governor, who, in company with Lady Loch and suite, had been previously shown over the new building by the officers and members of the committee.

The president, Mr. Charles Rennie, commenced the proceedings of the evening with an address, the principal portions of which are as follow :—In the first place I have,

on behalf of the members, to welcome your Excellency and Lady Loch to the institution, and to express the thanks of the committee to your Excellency for favouring us with your presence on this important event in our history — the opening of our new library and reading room. I think that a slight reference to our past history would not be altogether out of place nor uninteresting under the circumstances which have brought us together this evening. To go back to the foundation of the institution (one of the very oldest in the colony) I have to refer to what are - as applied to myself - prehistoric times. By the early records I find that the meeting at which it was resolved to establish a mechanics institute (this institution) was held on the 12th November, 1839, the objects in view being the diffusion of scientific and useful knowledge among its members and the community generally. Captain Lonsdale was the first president, and on the original committee were leading citizens of the day, men who had no little share in moulding the future destinies of the country. I find on the list the names of Mr. Westgarth and Mr. D. C. McArthur, who I think are the only survivors, and whose names are household words with Victorians. The project was taken up zealously,

A house was rented in Bourke-street for use as a temporary library, the stock comprising some 600 volumes. The committee in 1840 purchased two allotments at a Government land sale, each 66ft to Collins-street, running through to Little Collins street, the price paid being £142.10s for each lot, or £285 for the acre. The present value of the land would be something like £60,000 to £70,000. A portion of the land was re-sold at a handsome profit, the balance being reserved for the use of the institution, and is the ground on which our buildings now stand. Our members now, at a distance of over 43 years from these transactions, are greatly indebted to the promoters for their prudence, foresight, and business tact in securing such a fine property, for a more eligible site for our purposes could not be found in the city at the present day. The cost of the first building was £1,920, and the structure was at the time referred to as the noblest edifice in the province. In the early days of the institute lectures formed a special feature, many of the prominent citizens of the day, including the late Sir Redmond Barry, acting in the capacity of lecturers. In later years, however, these were for various reasons discontinued. In 1853 the front offices, which were removed for our new buildings, were erected, and other improvements made. After varying fortunes, generally coupled with shortness of funds, the name of the institution was changed in 1872 from the Mechanics' Institute to the Melbourne Athenæum, and in the same year the hall in which we are now assembled was erected at a cost of some £7,000. The foundation stone was laid by the then president, Mr. H. Biers, whose name will always be associated with it.

The library and reading rooms erected in 1853 having served their day and generation, a movement was set on foot some three or four years ago for replacing them with new premises more in accord with the present requirements of the institution. Plans were prepared by Messrs. Smith and Johnson for a four-storied building, the cost of which would have left us with a debt of £23,000, but members in their wisdom did not see their way to sanction so large an expenditure. After some

little time the matter was again taken up, and the plans were referred back to the architects to bring the construction of the projected buildings to such a limit that, whilst securing the requisite accommodation, they should not exceed an outlay which would leave the institution with a debt of more than £18,000. The architects made a long story short by deleting the third story. The new scheme was approved. The contract was let to Mr. Kemp about 12 months ago. The buildings are up, and now our long-wished-for desires are realised. It may be said by some critics that the committee cannot be accused of extravagance in exterior ornamentation of the building, but the means at our disposal were limited, and, as a consequence, the internal economy became our chief concern. The comfort and convenience of our members—ladies, as well as gentlemen—have been carefully studied, and I venture to say that the arrangements will compare favourably with those of any other similar institution south of the line. The library contains 20,000 volumes, and in the reading room are the leading newspapers of the world, and with the extra conveniences and accommodation now afforded, the committee have every reason to hope for a large accession of new members, and that the prosperity of the institution will go on increasing. It must be very gratifying indeed to the members to know that they have a freehold property worth over £50,000, with an indebtedness of only £18,000, and that the rents received from the front shops alone will exceed the amount of interest payable under the mortgage. The thanks of the members are due to the architects and contractor for the way in which the work has been performed and I must not omit to mention the name of our secretary, Mr. Curtis for his watchfulness of everything tending to the comfort of the members in connexion with the construction of the new buildings. Many of you will no doubt have observed that a niche surmounts our building, and that it is still untenanted, however, has not been overlooked. One of our trustees and a very old friend of the institution—Mr Alderman Moubray—hearing that the committee would require all their ingenuity to keep within the prescribed limit of liability, in the most generous and unexpected manner forwarded to them a cheque for 100 guineas to provide a statue of Minerva wherewith to crown our building. (Applause) The members are under a deep debt of gratitude to Mr. Moubray for his handsome gift and arrangements are now being made to obtain a suitable work of art worthy of the donor and of the institution. (Applause.)

Professor Elkington followed with an address, in the course of which he said: — Permit me, sir, to join you in congratulating this large meeting of members of the Athenæum and their friends on the successful completion of our well-planned and excellent buildings. The reading room, the library, the lecture and concert hall, and the class rooms which adjoin, are now large enough and sufficiently well equipped to make them worthy of the place the institution fills in this city. I have been requested by the committee to say a few words tonight on the manner in which this institution, which has now assumed the form in which, as regards building, it will probably remain for some years to come, can be rendered of greater public utility than it has been in promoting that after school education which is admittedly one of its objects, and which most of the great industrial countries of the world are

beginning to regard of vast importance as a final preparation for that complete living—socially, morally intellectually, and physically—which is the true end of education in the wider sense of the term. Athenæums and mechanics' institutes generally assume education rather than impart it.

The lectures delivered and the papers read are usually enjoyed most of all by any specialists who attend and seem to do little towards training those who really need the knowledge. I wish to tell members and their friends tonight that it rests entirely with them to say whether a different, and a better, course in this respect shall be pursued in the future from that which has been followed in the past. It has long appeared to me, and to others of the Athenæum committee of management, that a great want in this city and in other Victorian centres of population would be met by organising courses of local lectures, or class lessons if you like, to be delivered in the evenings by capable men in such institutions as this of ours, travelling from one to the other, in different parts of the colony. The lectures or teaching should be tutorial in character, and the audience would be formed strictly of students whose diligence might be tested by examinations, and certified to by some certificate or memorial issued by the institution concerned. The fee to each student would be small, just enough to pay rent of rooms and the salary of the lecturer, and if a plan which finds much favour at home could be acclimatised here, the payment by the student would be little more than nominal. A fund for the purpose of providing courses of lectures is formed by subscriptions from wealthy firms and others, and the cost of a student's attendance ticket is based on the deficiency between the subscriptions so raised and the estimated cost of the lecturing to be done. The subjects undertaken would depend, of course upon the character of the demand. Doubtless mathematics and English literature would be highly popular. There is chemistry, the grammar of all the arts, which every year shows to be more and more necessary as a branch of knowledge. There is hygiene, or, in plain English, health, the ritual of that most sacred of temples, the human body, in which every man is divinely appointed his own high priest. There are the principles of decorative art, a subject that I am glad to find is beginning to be understood here. This is just the kind of study that ought to flourish with us, where moderate affluence is so widely spread, and where the sons and daughters even of the cottagers might create to themselves a joy for ever by learning how to make home and its surroundings a thing of beauty. And there is a commercial value too that will commend it; for as the pattern sells the cloth, so a knowledge of the higher qualities of design, and of artistic workmanship, is an accomplishment that develops trade and brings wealth to the possessor. The number and range of the subjects that might be selected are enormous, and I have not even referred to architectural history and political economy, a knowledge of which is indispensable to the well informed citizen. What an invaluable guide to readers might be had from a series of lectures on the collection of books in our capital library. Consider, too, the group of natural sciences. Botany, for instance, lends itself readily to delightful treatment at the hands of a skilful lecturer, and is perhaps the most generally popular of all branches of natural science. Keep ourselves unspotted from the world by considering the lilies of the field, how they grow. Is there a more

sorrowful sight than that of a man exclusively devoted to one pursuit, but slowly driven from it by decaying powers? How empty the world is apt to seem and how listless he grows to objects of contemplation or admiration now that his old love has played him false. Such education raises us to abiding solace and source of enjoyment. Still, for all this a price is to be paid. The penalty of Adam is upon us all. The only royal road in this quest of learning is hidden in that one password which the Roman emperor gave from his death bed at York to his British legion, "Laboremus." (Applause.)

His EXCELLENCY, who was received with prolonged applause said that it had afforded both Lady Loch and himself great pleasure to be present on that interesting occasion. He had listened as he was sure they all had, with much interest to Mr. Rennie's recital of the early history and subsequent progress of the institution, as well as to Professor Elkington's anticipations, which he hoped would be fully realised, as to the number and variety of the subjects that would be taught within the walls of the new building they were inaugurating that night. Both himself and Lady Loch had just visited the library and reading room, and had found them to be large, well-lit apartments in which he hoped many would assemble every night, both for recreation and study. (Applause.) The institution deserved wide and general support from the citizens of Melbourne, and he trusted a very large measure of support would be accorded to it now that it was about to take possession of its new buildings, and enter on a new career of usefulness. He hoped all present would make it their business to go over the new buildings, and make themselves personally acquainted with the many advantages it offered to those who desired to utilise their leisure hours in mental improvement. He now had much pleasure in declaring the new buildings of the Melbourne Athenæum open for the objects which they were intended to serve. (Applause.)

The musical entertainment was pleasing and interesting in high degree. The programme was well chosen, and the performance did not take too long. After the National Anthem had been sung, the choir of the Metropolitan Liedertafel, conducted by Mr. Julius Herz, sang the part song "Fair Rohtraut," composed by Veit, and the same well-trained singers sang afterwards at intervals "When the swallows homeward fly," by Abt; "The Dance," by Zollner; and the grand double chorus, "When Semele's high-born son," from the "Antigone" music, by Mendelssohn. These were all familiarly known and well-practised numbers, and the result to the hearers was most enjoyable. Particularly fine points were noticeable in the rendering of the popular part song by Abt, and the fulness and grandeur of the double chorus by Mendelssohn were shown with telling effect. In another aspect, namely that as accompaniment to a solo voice, the choir did tasteful and artistic service. This was in the performance of "On the Water," composed by Abt, wherein the choir for the most part carried on a humming accompaniment to the solo voice of Mr A. W. Jack, a member of the society, who sang his part of the work with most agreeable voice and in perfect good taste. Miss Alice Simmons sang the highly ornate polacca, "Io Son Titania," from the opera "Mignon," by Ambroise Thomas. This young lady possesses

a soprano avogato voice of pure and agreeable quality. Her execution of the work was most creditable, and pleased the audience greatly. Later on the same young lady sang the song "Dear Heart," by Mattel, with such effect that she had to reply to an unanimous demand for an encore, to which she replied by singing De Faye's song "O'er the hills of Normandie" in tasteful and finished style. Mr. A. J. Pallett, a member of the society, displayed good quality as a tenor singer in his rendering of Pinsuti's song, "The voice of my love," not the least amongst the good features in this performance being the fact that the singer had studied his song so as to be able to sing it without recourse to the printed copy. Messrs. Rouvray and Rofe made genial effect with their humorous duet "The Wooers." Miss Atchison was the solo pianiste. She was received with pronounced favour. Her performance of "Marche (Rhapsodie ?)—Hongroise" No. 4 by Liszt exhibited her facile touch and accurate manner in such a way that the audience insisted on an encore. To this the young player replied with a charming performance of Gottschalk's "Danse des Sylphes." Messrs. Otto Linden and Julius Herz were accompanists throughout the evening. The National Anthem brought the entertainment to a close.

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