

## PUBLIC INSTRUCTION IN ANTE-REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE NATION:

SIR: In your review of Mr. Stanley Weyman's novel, 'The Red Cockade,' you state that the author is in error in showing us the French peasant of 1789 as absolutely without education. Your reviewer says that recent French writers tell us that he was better educated under the *ancien régime* than during the half-century which followed the Revolution. No authority is given for this assertion, which was a surprising one to me, as, I am sure, it must have been to many of your readers. I wish to quote in opposition to his view a most competent authority. Miss M. Betham Edwards, the author of a number of statistical books upon France and the editor of the last edition of Arthur Young's 'Travels.' In her introduction to the Travels she says (p. 13):

"One curious omission must have struck most readers of the French travels. This quick and accurate observer, who took note of every object that meets his eye, who travels the three historic high-roads, diverging to the right and to the left in quest of information, never by any chance whatever mentions a village school. Had such schools existed, we may be sure that he would have visited them, bequeathing us in a few graphic sentences an outline of their plan and working. The education of the people was a dead letter in France at the time he wrote. Here and there a curé or *frères ignorants* would get the children together and teach them to recite the catechism or spell a credo and pater noster. Writing, arithmetic, much less the teaching of French, were deemed unnecessary."

The Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars—during which the French peasant was to be found in arms all the way from Lisbon to Moscow—must have accomplished something in broadening the minds of even the most unlettered hinds. Veterans were constantly returning to the village and the plough, and others, recruited from the same class, were taking their places in the ranks. Can it be that, during all these years of upheaval and restlessness, the French peasant actually retrograded mentally? The wonderful advance of rural France in wealth and the comforts of living during the past century makes the broad statements of your reviewer seem reckless, especially in the absence of a specific reference to the authorities to which he vaguely alludes.

Yours truly,

THOMAS ROBINS.

PHILADELPHIA, December 16, 1895.

[Arthur Young was mainly an observer of agricultural and economic conditions, and Miss Betham-Edwards was so singularly ignorant of modern works upon the French Revolution as to be quite unfit to supplement Arthur Young's deficiencies. A large number of writers have lately investigated the condition of primary education in France during the eighteenth century, and their conclusions fully justify the remarks of the reviewer. The first of these writers was the Abbé Allain, whose volume on 'L'Instruction Primaire en France avant la Révolution,' published in 1881, was followed by special studies on the same subject by Albert Duruy, Victor Pierre, Albert Babeau, the Abbé Maggiolo, and by many local historians, who entirely confirmed his conclusions on the universality and efficiency of village schools in France under the *ancien régime*. Some of these writers have gone

further, and, not satisfied with demonstrating the excellence of primary education in France under the fostering care of the curés in the rural districts, have shown by statistics how the persecution of the clergy during the Revolution almost extinguished rural education, and left to the statesmen of the Convention and to Napoleon the task of building up a new system of national primary education.

Perhaps one citation of facts will be more effective than assertions or references to recognized authorities. In 1789 there were, in the districts which now form the department of the Meurthe-et-Moselle, 599 communes; in 596 of these there were one or more schools; in 1801, after the Consulate had been established and the Revolution was at an end, there were schools in only about 200. This statement is taken from an article by the Abbé Maggiolo in the *Revue de la Révolution*, vol. 4, p. 117, and similar figures can be quoted for other départements, such as those of the Lot, the Nord, the Haute-Garonne, and the Seine-Inférieure—départements sufficiently scattered to warrant the statement objected to in the review of Weyman's book. Upon the whole question of the overthrow of the former system of village education—owing to the persecution and emigration of the French priests—and the measures taken by the National Convention to meet the difficulty, our correspondent may consult an article by Prof. Morse Stephens of Cornell University upon "The Work of the Committees of Legislation and Public Instruction in the Convention," which appeared in the *Yale Review* for November, 1895. (ED. NATION.)

## ACETYLENE AND ALCOHOL.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE NATION:

SIR: The violent protest uttered by "Chemist" against certain statements about the possible commercial future of acetylene should not be allowed to pass without comment. The question of advantageous production of alcohol from acetylene is not to be settled in any such summary and off-hand fashion. The possibility or impossibility of making wood alcohol from marsh gas at a fabulously cheap price has no bearing on the matter. It is a problem by itself, and chemistry does not indicate that the solution must be unfavorable. It is simply a question of the cost of production starting with calcium carbide, as against the cost when grain is used, and must be worked out empirically. If the chemical reactions which are involved can be effected on the large scale with something like theoretical results, carbide of calcium at \$10 a ton may very well enter the lists against grain as a profitable source of alcohol.

As to the use of acetylene for illuminating purposes, "Chemist" says "that the original electricity directly converted into light must inevitably be far more economical than this very roundabout method, implying large losses in lime, coal, and in electrical energy." If electricity could be converted into light directly, and without loss, as this statement seems to imply, acetylene and indeed all other sources of artificial illumination would be out

of all economical consideration. But electricity cannot be converted into light without loss. There is loss from the instant that the current leaves the dynamo—loss in the conducting wires, loss in the transformer; and when the electricity which finally reaches the lamp is transformed into radiant energy, only about five per cent. of this is light. The making of acetylene does not necessarily imply large losses in even such cheap materials as coal and lime, and it is by no means "inevitable" that the light given by acetylene gas must be far more costly than the electric light. The matter is not to be disposed of by dogmatic assertion; it will be determined by experience, and experience thus far indicates that "Chemist" is wrong.

It is to be expected that one who dismisses the commercial claims of acetylene so abruptly may have rather hazy ideas in regard to the character of chemical reactions and the transformations of energy. That this is the case is certainly suggested by the language which "Chemist" employs. According to him, acetylene is "decomposed" into benzole (benzine) or into alcohol; and marsh gas is "decomposed" by chlorine into methyl chloride. None of these reactions are decompositions; the first two are building-up reactions or syntheses, and the third a substitution. Energy in the form of water power may be transformed into electrical energy, and this in turn is transformed in the electrical furnace into the heat necessary to bring about the reaction between lime and carbon which results in the formation of calcium carbide; but "Chemist" has it that water power is "decomposed" into electricity, and electricity into "chemical energy" which "decomposes" the mixture of carbon and lime. S.

## Notes.

MACMILLAN & Co. will be the American publishers of the 'London Garland,' extracts from Chaucer, Lydgate, Spenser, etc., edited by W. E. Henley, with 100 illustrations by the Society of Illustrators, of which we gave a preliminary account some weeks ago.

Gann & Co. announce for February 1 'Inductive Logic,' by William G. Ballantine, President of Oberlin College.

William J. Bok of Flatbush, Brooklyn, expects to publish next June 'The Quiet City, or, The Mighty Tenants of World-Famed Greenwood,' containing a great number of views of the monuments and portraits of the distinguished dead of that cemetery.

The advance sheets of the introduction to the 'Selections from the Corners' (Robt. Henry III. to Henry V.), edited for the Selden Society by Dr. Charles Gross, assistant professor of history at Harvard, are now at hand, and it is hoped that the volume will be ready for distribution before the close of the year. It is noteworthy that Dr. Gross is the first American editor of the Society's publications, and his choice and the fact of his qualification for the task show pleasantly that the interest in the preparation of material for the treatment of Anglo-Saxon legal history is not confined to our English brothers in the law.

G. P. Putnam's Sons have in press 'Renaissance Fancies and Studies,' a sequel to 'Euphorion,' by Vernon Lee; and 'Joan of Arc,' by Mrs. Oliphant.

Simultaneously with the exhibition of Thomas Peina's collection in London, Mr. M. D. Conway