NEGLECTED NATURE.

By R. A. PENNETHORNE.

Birds are more studied nowadays than plants, first, I suppose, because they come to us and visit our bird-tables and nesting-boxes and sing to us in return. Many people are bird lovers who are not bird 'recognizers.' Still, with 'sanctuaries' and 'watchers' they have their altars and their devotees. Moreover, the conscience of the community has been touched, and we do not suffer from the sight of a 'linnet in a cage' or a moulting, depressed bullfinch as of yore, overfed on hemp. Birds of the air do their best to teach us how to enjoy the sight of another style of living without 'possession.'

Forty years ago, when Charlotte Mason's work was first under consideration in the organised schools and education of England, she led the van of the fashion of the times in her insistence on 'Nature' work. She was herself a wonderful naturalist, and it was she who first drew my attention to the *smell* of 'mouse ear,' hawkweed, and of other familiar plants. She preached what she practised and deeply loved, and all her followers caught this deep personal interest in the endless cycles of plant, bird, insect and animal life teeming around them.

The 'Nature Note Books' still kept by the students of Ambleside are not, and never were, 'lesson books'—they were personal records of a life lived in close communion with the life of the countryside around them. These books have indeed

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gone out into all the world, and one monograph on the birds of Ceylon owes its origin to them. Indeed, one feels that at some future time those continued and carefully kept may rank as authorities for plant distribution or climate when all our generation have passed away. Readers who are growing old will remember Mrs. Ewing's delightful books, 'Six to Sixteen' and 'Mary's Meadow.' Both show that amongst cultured people of those days a knowledge of plant life and a zest for 'collections' was common. There was far more leisure to fill then and, without transport, far more individual ways of filling it. To-day, what with games clubs and always going 'somewhere else,' the younger folk have not formed the habit of concentrating about the knowledge of every aspect of life in a given countryside.

Can we in the Parents' Union recapture for the children of to-day that pure and passionate knowledge? I believe we can, if we implant the habit early and foster its growth. 'Hiking' has brought walking back into favour, and so youth may once more be found 'upon the upland wild.' The Guides and the Scouts have tried nobly with their 'Naturalist's Badge' to encourage these studies—but they also know the difficulty of being offered merely the necessary minimum and modicum of information, instead of being asked to reward a life-long devotion.

Many schools have also offered prizes for holiday work and 'collections' of wild flowers. Here we would offer, from long and sad experience, a heartfelt plea. If such work is suggested, let it be for *all ages* and not for the juniors only. It is sadly true that many people look upon any form of Nature study as 'something for the babies' which is outgrown, of course, by noble people in their teens. Perhaps all the admirable work done by Froebel and other teachers in the junior classes *has* something to answer for, and there has been too much baby-talk. 'Mr. and Mrs. Willow' instead of staminate and pistillate, and all that attitude to life that goes with the

avoidance of the proper technical term, has ‘put off’ some naturally scientific minds and alienated growing intelligences.

Another point generally noticed in holiday floral collections is that the plants are *pressed*! Now ‘pressing’ is sometimes the only way to accuracy and to identifying rareities. Never shall I

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forget a search for an Erica (still undetermined) through an overseas ‘pressed’ flora, or the poor custodian who complained that only three people in two years had ever wanted to see the collection! Pressed flowers look hideous and smell atrocious, as a rule. The roughest painting will give more of the gesture, colour and form, and little children can be, and should be, trained *little by little* to make *accurate* and *scientific* their gradually increasing store of direct paintings. With all our different local plant names no accuracy is possible without the Latin label. An excellent way of gradually learning these is to record in one of Mrs. Den’s ‘Field Botanist’s Diaries’ the place and date of every find. In this the Latin names of the eight hundred odd ‘accredited’ British wild plants are given alphabetically.

Thirty years ago Nature ‘exhibitions’ used to be held. I remember a delightful one in the Regent’s Park, where butterflies lived in muslin cages with their food-plants and were fed on honey! I remember, also, gatherings connected with the ‘Trefoil’ Club in Kent and the rows of ‘finds’ proudly exhibited there—one of which was a ‘coral-root.’

In these days we are so afraid of losing the flora and fauna which still remain to us that we are very chary of letting the world in general know too much about our happy finds. The museums, which generally have a local Natural History Society affiliated to them, do exhibit ‘floral specimens’ from the countryside, but they take good care to give no indication *where* the treasure exactly stood when in its own home. The ‘plucker’ has always been a terror to the real naturalist, and now we have the B.B.C. to support our denunciations of the bluebell ravisher.

But the rarer, shier plants are only seen and noticed by the expert. I know a whole salt marsh which only has sea heather down *one* of its dykes, and a great marsh in Norfolk which only has yellow villarsia in *one* stretch of water. ‘Flora’s League’ does grand work among the learned and the unlearned, teaching them to love all ‘treasure trove’ with *distant* respect. Perhaps the best deed of my life was to have *left* a rare S. African wild flower where I found it.

There are so many of us now, and transport is so easy, that it behoves us not to turn out hordes of naturalists who are

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merely acquisitive. Our good modern teaching of ‘science’ has made botany as much an indoor matter for the laboratory as an outdoor familiarity with things in their natural homes! We must learn to revisit our friends at their own homes and in their own seasons.

We, in our own Union, used to believe in years for the little child of *growth* in a natural setting. Because the nation did not see its way to give the nation’s children that time, but began their organized education at five, other children, who would eventually compete with them in public examinations, have begun earlier and earlier, and those true ‘wanderjahre’ have been lost to all. One great European statesman boasts, not of his achievements, but that he knows why a hare’s front legs are so short, and how you tame an owl, because he had those early years close to the real life of the countryside.

Our English men and women are forgetting their country heritage unless in contact with some teacher to whom these things are dear and familiar. The boys in pre-war England of the ‘great houses’ learnt a vast amount from gamekeepers and gardeners; with the changing scene and scale of expenditure that source of information, too, is failing.

Are we, as a society, capable of making a united effort, in conjunction with any and every other body, not merely for the ‘preservation of the countryside,’ but for a real revival of our knowledge of it?