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ESSAYS

THINGS

WILLIAM
LYON
PHELPS

ESSAYS ON THINGS

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BY WILLIAM LYON PHELPS
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A PRIVATE LIBRARY ALL YOUR OWN

A borrowed book is like a guest in the house; it must be treated with punctiliousness, with a certain considerate formality. You must see that it sustains no damage; it must not suffer while under your roof. You cannot leave it carelessly, you cannot mark it, you cannot turn down the pages, you cannot use it familiarly. And then, some day, although this is seldom done, you really ought to return it.

But your own books belong to you; you treat them with that affectionate intimacy that annihilates formality. Books are for use, not for show; you should own no book that you are afraid to mark up, or afraid to place on the table, wide open and face down. A good reason for marking favourite passages in books is that this practice enables you to remember more easily the significant sayings, to refer to them quickly, and then in later years, it is like visiting a forest where you once blazed a trail. You have the pleasure of going over the old ground, and re-

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calling both the intellectual scenery and your own earlier self.

Everyone should begin collecting a private library in youth; the instinct of private property, which is fundamental in human beings, can here be cultivated with every advantage and no evils. One should have one's own bookshelves, which should not have doors, glass windows, or keys; they should be free and accessible to the hand as well as to the eye. The best of mural decorations is books; they are more varied in colour and appearance than any wall-paper, they are more attractive in design, and they have the prime advantage of being separate personalities, so that if you sit alone in the room in the firelight, you are surrounded with intimate friends. The knowledge that they are there in plain view is both stimulating and refreshing. You do not have to read them all. Most of my indoor life is spent in a room containing six thousand books; and I have a stock answer to the invariable question that comes from strangers. "Have you read all of these books?" "Some of them twice." This reply is both true and unexpected.

There are of course no friends like living, breathing, corporeal men and women; my devotion to reading has never made me a recluse. How could it? Books are of the people, by the

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people, for the people. Literature is the immortal part of history; it is the best and most enduring part of personality. But book-friends have this advantage over living friends; you can enjoy the most truly aristocratic society in the world whenever you want it. The great dead are beyond our physical reach, and the great living are usually almost as inaccessible; as for our personal friends and acquaintances, you cannot always see them. Perchance they are asleep, or away on a journey. But in a private library, you can at any moment converse with Socrates or Shakespeare or Carlyle or Dumas or Dickens or Shaw or Barrie or Galsworthy. And there is no doubt that in these books you see these men at their best. They wrote for YOU. They "laid themselves out," they did their ultimate best to entertain you, to make a favourable impression. You are necessary to them as an audience is to an actor; only instead of seeing them masked, you look into their inmost heart of heart. The "real Charles Dickens" is in his novels, not in his dressing-room.

Everyone should have a few reference books, carefully selected, and within reach. I have a few that I can lay my hands on without leaving my chair; this is not because I am lazy, but because I am busy.

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One should own an Authorised Version of the Bible in big type, a good one-volume dictionary, the one-volume *Index and Epitome* to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, a one-volume History of England and another of the United States, Ryland's *Chronological Outlines of English Literature*, Whitcomb's *Chronological Outlines of American Literature*, and other works of reference according to one's special tastes and pursuits. These reference books should be, so far as possible, up to date.

The works of poets, dramatists, novelists, essayists, historians, should be selected with care, and should grow in number in one's private library from the dawn of youth to the day of death.

First editions are an expensive luxury, but are more interesting to the average mind than luxurious bindings. When you hold in your hand a first edition of the seventeenth century, you are reading that book in its proper time-setting; you are reading it as the author's contemporaries read it; maybe your copy was handled by the author himself. Furthermore, unless you have paid too much for it, it is usually a good investment; it increases in value more rapidly than stocks and shares, and you have the advantage of using it. It is great fun to search book-cata-

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logues with an eye to bargains; it is exciting to attend an auction sale.

But of course most of us must be content to buy standard authors, living and dead, in modern editions. Three qualities are well to bear in mind. In getting any book, get the complete edition of that book; not a clipped, or condensed, or improved or paraphrased version. Second, **always** get books in black, clear, readable type. When you are young, you don't mind; youth has the eyes of eagles. But later, you refuse to submit to the effort—often amounting to pain—involved in reading small type, and lines set too close together. Third, get volumes that are light in weight. It is almost always possible to secure this inestimable blessing in standard authors. Some books are so heavy that to read them is primarily a gymnastic, rather than mental exercise; and if you travel, and wish to carry them in your bag or trunk, they are an intolerable burden. Refuse to submit to this. There was a time when I could tell, merely by "hefting" it, whether a book had been printed in England or in America; but American publishers have grown in grace, and today many American books are easy to hold.

Some books must be bought in double column; but avoid this wherever possible, and buy

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such books only when economy makes it necessary to have the complete works of the author in one volume. A one-volume Shakespeare is almost a necessity; but it should be used for reference, as we use a dictionary, never for reading. Get Shakespeare in separate volumes, one play at a time. It is better to have some of an author's works in attractive form, than to have them complete in a cumbrous or ugly shape.

Remember that for the price of one ticket to an ephemeral entertainment, you can secure a book that will give strength and pleasure to your mind all your life. Thus I close by saying two words to boys and girls, men and women: **BUY BOOKS.**