Daily Appeal.

MR. PRESCOTT'S METHOD OF LITERARY LABOR.

From the Boston Transcript.

Every line that relates to the historical labors of the late William H. Prescott, is of great interest. We have, therefore, prepared a somewhat minute sketch of the method of preparation and composition adopted by the deceased, by which he was enabled to overcome his impaired vision, and to place his name among historians of the very first rank. Mr. Prescott, it is well known, though not blind, was affected with a dimness of the nerve of the eye, so that he was wholly incapacitated for reading and writing in the ordinary ways. He was accordingly systematic in his mode of life, and devoted few hours out of the twenty-four to his historical labors. After breakfast he listened for an hour to some light reading, a novel, poem, or other entertaining book. He then walked for an hour. At half-past ten o'clock his secretary came to his study and remained till twelve o'clock. Another walk of an hour was then taken, after which he went to his study and remained another hour and a half with his secretary. After dinner light reading was again resorted to, and at six o'clock the secretary returned and remained until eight. This routine of work and rest was very rigidly observed by another hand twenty years devoted to the preparation of his elaborate volumes.

Mr. Prescott's mode of writing history was this: he would take, for example, his last work, "Philip the Second." He arranged in his study all the books and manuscripts relating to that period, which had been years in collecting, at an expense of many thousand dollars. The manuscript three or four hundred printed volumes of state papers. There were also some twenty folio volumes of manuscripts, rightly be old, which probably cost more than all the rest of the collection, though some of the printed works were scarce and very valuable—for libraries and bookstores of all Western Europe, from Cadiz to Amsterdam, having been ransacked by agents in search of everything that could throw light on the history of Philip the Second. Except dictionaries and other works of reference, books not relating to the subject in hand were excluded from the study.

With his materials thus gathered about him, the historian commenced his work. The Secretary first read the only English history of the King in his reign. Notes and observations were dictated as they were suggested by the book. Having freshened his recollections by having the volume read, Mr. Prescott proceeded to examine the treasure he had collected. Each book was taken from the shelf in turn by the Secretary, who read aloud its title, its table of contents, and a few pages by way of specimen of its style and character. Notes were taken while this examination was going on, which were preserved for future reference. Of one of four hundred volumes, a great majority of course proved worthless, being either merely repetitious, or compilations, or written in preceding authors, or else, if critical, without authority. The number of books of real value would be thus reduced down perhaps to a hundred.

The large bulk of MSS. were next attacked. These had been examined by a competent person, who prepared a careful digest and table of contents. The Secretary read this, and notes were dictated to the amanuensis. Having thus as it were taken an account of stock, and ascertained the general character of his materials, they were best inspected in detail in the following manner: Mr. Prescott would take the Second contains an account of the abdication and last days of his father and predecessor, Charles the Fifth. The Secretary gathered from him every volume, and every MSS. which contained anything about the last ruined monarch. The books are in the English, French, Spanish, Italian, Latin languages. One by one they were read aloud, and copious notes were dictated. When everything that related to Charles the Fifth had thus been perused and noted, the historian, or, if he chose, poem his work, or, more properly speaking, to write it—for the process of composition had of course been going on in his mind during these preparatory labors.

The apparatus used by Mr. Prescott consisted of a frame the size of a common sheet of letter paper, with brass wires inserted to correspond with the number of lines required. This enchanted paper was used, and instead of a pen the writer employed a stylus with an agate point. The great difficulty in the way of a person's writing in the ordinary manner, whose vision is impaired, arises from not knowing when the ink is exhausted, and moreover the line will be run into one another. Both difficulties are obviated by the simple arrangement just described. The pages thus written by Mr. Prescott were copied by the Secretary, and underwent but slight alterations, if any, and some inserts might be made as were needed. The material for the second chapter, on the early life of Philip, were now taken up, and the same process went through with, ready for the printer. About six years were devoted to the first two volumes of Philip the Second, including the preliminary studies. These volumes appeared in 1855, the third of the series was issued within a few weeks, and it is understood that the fourth is considerably advanced.

The Hon. George Bancroft, in an eloquent tribute to his friend, before the New York Historical Society, thus referred to the studious and earnest habits of Mr. Prescott: "He habitually lived in the retirement of his library, retiring early and rising with the same hour, he rose early alike to winter and to summer, at the appointed hour, he would throw himself instantly, though in the sound sleep, at the first note of his alarm bell, never giving indulgence to inactive or delay. In the hours set apart for literary pursuits, he was as regular as clockwork, never lightly suffering them to be interfered with, and never giving to his reader, now dictating what seemed to be the mere impulse of the moment, but rather using the pen sparingly for rendering new writing by the aid of simple machinery devised for those who are in the dark, now passing time in thoughtfully pondering the subject matter. The excellence of his productions is, in part, transparent to every reader. Compare what he has written with the most of what others have written on the same subject, and Prescott's superiority beams upon you from the contrast. The easy flow of his language, and the facility of his style, may lead the reader forget the laborious toil by which the narrative has gained, but the critical eye sees everywhere marks of diligence and research, and the judgment, which give authority to every statement and weight to every conclusion.

Mr. Prescott's library was adorned with exquisite prints of Ferdinand and Isabella, of Columbus, of Don Sebastian, King of Portugal, and of most of the characters that figure in his histories. He possessed autograph letters of Ferdinand, Isabella, Charles V., and a piece of lace from the armor of Cortez. The library is not only written in his library, but in a well-worn one, made very light to meet the wants of an almost sightless superfect. When fully prepared to write, Mr. Prescott's daily task would average about seven pages of one of his printed volumes. Most persons with perfect vision would complain if they were daily compelled to copy seven pages from those chic ning books.

The thirteen volumes which comprise Mr. Prescott's works are noble monuments to his life of labor and study. With a knowledge of the facts we bring his reputation, as above given, we will not say all honor to the memory of one who so well used his talents, a scholar-like, and he-like devotion, point to the History of Ferdinand and Isabella, the Conquests of Mexico and Peru, and the reign of Philip the Second.

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