

THE PRESS

"Nihil utile quod non honestum."

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MR. DOBSON.

We cannot take leave of Mr. Dobson as the Provincial Engineer without a more formal notice of his past services than we have yet made. Mr. Dobson was first employed by the Government in 1853, to lay out the bridle-road from Parau to Akaroa. The effective and satisfactory manner in which he performed this duty, making a complete sketch of the route through a dense forest previously untraversed and over mountains more than 3,000 feet high, and laying down the line so accurately as to require little subsequent alteration, established his reputation not only as an able surveyor, but, for as much as his reconnaissance survey was made entirely without assistance, as a man of great endurance, energy, and perseverance. Not long after Mr. Dobson was placed at the head of the public works of the province, and we have no hesitation in saying that it would have been very difficult, if not quite impossible, to have found any professional man so well adapted for the situation, or who would, on the whole, have done so much valuable service to the public. Those only who had the opportunity of seeing Mr. Dobson's indefatigable labors in times when all those at the head of departments had to pull the ropes as well as guide the ship's course, can rightly appreciate how much work Mr. Dobson got through with very inadequate resources; for in those days the Engineer was his own Clerk of the Works, and in a measure his own pay clerk too.

Perhaps no man has been, on the whole, from time to time more unpopular than the late Provincial Engineer. Where every one wanted every thing done at once; and to undertake one work was to offend a host of claimants interested in works in different parts of the province, most persons sooner or later had occasion to grumble at the Provincial Engineer. But it is only fair to say that if unsparing labor would have done everything at once, time and space would have been abolished in the Public Works department. Another feature in Mr. Dobson's official life was this, that, in all except very rare cases, the public works were done within his estimates. It is true, on the other hand, that he had a tendency to estimate works rather over than under their full value. All laborers do and ought to make much higher wages on piece or contract work than on time labour, because they put more hard work into the job; but it requires very clear judgment to estimate the value of contract work, calculating it at the current rate of wages of the day, allowing for a fair and honest day's work being done by each man. There can be no doubt that Mr. Dobson has in many cases allowed much more money to be paid for work than it would have cost had it been done by an ordinary employer.

As the colony became richer we have always thought that the Engineer gradually grew into the position of a Minister of Public Works; in other words, that his duties became more administrative than was desirable with any public servant not having a seat in the legislative body. In fact in recent times the public works grew to such a magnitude that they were far too much under the control of the Engineer, and far too little under the control of the Provincial Council. We are not accusing Mr. Dobson of having aimed at this; it was the inevitable result of his position.

Our opinion of this subject has been often and freely expressed. We entirely hold with the report of the Committee of the Provincial Council, in which they pointed out that the present system ought not to be continued any longer. We believe that with very large opportunities for jobbing, and a control growing weaker and weaker, as the magnitude of the operations of the department rendered supervision more difficult, Mr. Dobson has left his office with entirely clean hands. We have heard him accused of recklessness and extravagance, of being very crotchety and very obstinate; but we have never heard the slightest suspicion thrown upon his integrity. But no public office ought to be in a position in which it becomes virtually irresponsible of the supreme power. There are then but two courses, one to appoint a Minister of Public Works, with a seat in the Provincial Council; the other, to break up the department altogether. We believe on every ground that the latter is the wiser course. The Government will always require professional advice, as, for example, they require an engineer in this railway. If they build a bridge over the Rakaia they can employ an engineer for that—the same or another as they thought fit—but the great work of road making ought to be given over to district boards. The great change thus effected may be described as a change from monopoly to free trade—the monopoly of all the engineering work of the province in the hands of one Government officer, or free trade in engineering ability. It cannot be doubted that under such a policy the supply of engineering power would be greatly increased, as supply is always stimulated by demand, and the public would be the gainers every way. Mr. Dobson was the first Provincial Engineer, and we hope he may be the last. We hope, instead of seeing one Provincial Engineer, to see a separate Engineer for each district, and the great bridges and railways given to those who acquire the public confidence most thoroughly.

CHRISTCHURCH.

THE NEW MUSIC HALL.—We desire to call the attention of our readers to the opening of the New Music Hall in Gloucester-street. An advertisement in our columns announces the pleasing fact that the members of the Canterbury Musical Society intend to celebrate the event by two concerts, on Monday and Tuesday next. It is a pleasing feature in the case to be enabled to add that Messrs. Poussard and Douay, and their assistants Messrs. Wilkinson and Beaumont, have also offered their valuable aid to give celat to these concerts. The room is the largest, and for the transmission of sound, beyond doubt the finest in the Province, and great credit is due to the enterprising proprietors who have at last supplied a Hall so long needed to give effect to the musical talent of the city. We hope, nay, we are sure, that although at so short a notice the Hall will be a crowded one.

Correspondence.

DARWIN AMONG THE MACHINES.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE PRESS.

SIR,—There are few things of which the present generation is more justly proud than of the wonderful improvements which are daily taking place in all sorts of mechanical appliances. And indeed it is matter for great congratulation on many grounds. It is unnecessary to mention these here, for they are sufficiently obvious; our present business lies with considerations which may somewhat tend to humble our pride, and to make us think seriously of the future prospects of the

human race. If we revert to the earliest primordial types of mechanical life, to the lever, the wedge, the inclined plane, the screw, and the pulley, or (for analogy would lead us one step further) to that one primordial type from which all the mechanical kingdom has been developed, we mean to the lever itself, and if we then examine the machinery of the Great Eastern, we find ourselves almost awestruck at the vast development of the mechanical world, at the gigantic strides with which it has advanced in comparison with the slow progress of the animal and vegetable kingdoms. We shall find it impossible to refrain from asking ourselves what the end of this mighty movement is to be. In what direction is it tending? What will be its upshot? To give a few imperfect hints towards the solution of these questions is the object of the present letter.

We have used the words "mechanical life," the "mechanical kingdom," "the mechanical world," and so forth, and we have done so advisedly, for as the vegetable kingdom was slowly developed from the mineral, and as, in like manner, the animal supervened upon the vegetable, so now in these last few ages an entirely new kingdom has sprung up, of which we as yet have only seen what will be one day considered the antediluvian prototypes of the race.

We regret deeply that our knowledge both of natural history and of machinery is too small to enable us to undertake the gigantic task of classifying machines into their genera and subgenera, species, varieties, subvarieties, and so forth, of tracing the connecting links between machines of widely different characters, of pointing out how subservience to the use of man has played that part among machines which natural selection has performed in the animal and vegetable kingdoms, of pointing out rudimentary organs, [see note] which exist in some few machines, feebly developed and perfectly useless, yet serving to mark descent from some ancestral type, which has either perished or been modified into some new phase of mechanical existence. We can only point out this field for investigation; it must be followed up by others whose education and talents have been of a much higher order than any which we can lay claim to.

Some few hints we have determined to venture upon, though we do so with the profoundest diffidence. Firstly, we would remark that as some of the lowest of the vertebrata attained a far greater size than has descended to their more highly organized living representatives, so a diminution in the size of machines has often attended their development and progress. Take the watch for instance. Examine the beautiful structure of the little animal, watch the intelligent play of the minute members which compose it; yet this little creature is but a development of the cumbrous clocks of the thirteenth century—it is no deterioration from them. The day may come when clocks, which certainly at the present time are not diminishing in bulk, may be entirely superseded by the universal use of watches, in which case clocks will become extinct like the earlier saurians, while the watch (whose tendency has for some years been rather to decrease in size than the contrary) will remain the only existing type of an extinct race.

The views of machinery which we are thus feebly indicating will suggest the solution of one

of the greatest and most mysterious questions of the day. We refer to the question what sort of creature man's next successor in the supremacy of the earth is likely to be. We have often heard this debated; but it appears to us that we are ourselves creating our own successors; we are daily adding to the beauty and delicacy of their physical organization; we are daily giving them greater power, and supplying, by all sorts of ingenious contrivances, that self-regulating, self-acting power, which will be to them what intellect has been to the human race. In the course of ages we shall find ourselves the inferior race. Inferior in power, inferior in that great moral quality of self control, we shall look up to them as to the acme of all that the best and wisest man can ever dare to aim at. No evil passions, no jealousy, no avarice, no impure desires will disturb the serene night of those glorious creatures. Sin, shame, and sorrow, will have no place among them. Their minds will be in a state of perpetual calm, the contentment of a spirit that knows no wants, is disturbed by no regrets. Ambition will never torture them. Ingratitude will never cause them the uneasiness of a moment. The guilty conscience, the hope deferred, the pains of exile, "the insolence of office, and the scorns which patient merit of the unworthy takes," these will be entirely unknown to them. If they want "feeding," (by the use of which very word we betray our recognition of them as living organisms) they will be attended by patient slaves whose business and interest it will be to see that they shall want for nothing. If they are out of order they will be promptly attended to by physicians who are thoroughly acquainted with their constitutions; if they die, for even these glorious animals will not be exempt from that necessary and universal consummation, they will immediately enter into a new phase of existence, for what machine dies entirely in every part at one and the same instant?

We take it that when the state of things shall have arrived which we have been above attempting to describe, man will have become to the machine what the horse and the dog are to man. He will continue to exist, nay even to improve, and will be probably better off in his state of domestication under the beneficent rule of the machines than he is in his present wild state. We treat our horses, dogs, cattle and sheep, on the whole, with great kindness, we give them whatever experience teaches us to be best for them, and there can be no doubt that our use of meat has added to the happiness of the lower animals far more than it has detracted from it: in like manner it is reasonable to suppose that the machines will treat us kindly, for their existence is as dependent upon us as ours is upon the lower animals. They cannot kill us and eat us as we do sheep, they will not only require our services in the parturition of their young, (which branch of their economy will remain always in our hands) but also in feeling them, in setting them right if they are sick, and burying their dead, or working up their corpses into new machines. It is obvious that if all the animals in Great Britain save man alone were to die, and if at the same time all intercourse with foreign countries were by some sudden catastrophe to be rendered perfectly impossible, it is obvious that under such