REPORT

FOR THE MEDICAL RELIEF COMMITTEE

OF THE

PAROCHIAL BOARD OF THE CITY OF EDINBURGH,

ON THE STATE OF THE

IDIOTIC AND IMBECILE

IN THE

EASTERN DIVISION OF THE POOR HOUSE.

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REPORT FOR THE MEDICAL RELIEF COMMITTEE OF THE PAROCHIAL BOARD OF THE CITY OF EDINBURGH, ON THE STATE OF THE IDIOTIC AND IMBECILE IN THE EASTERN DIVISION OF THE POOR HOUSE.

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THE COMMITTEE, I have no doubt, are aware that the condition of the Idiot and the Imbecile, has been exciting no small degree of interest, for some years past, on the Continent, in England, and also in America.

The idea has been gradually gaining ground, that much could be done to improve their mental, moral, and physical state; and the labours of those who have volunteered in so philanthropic a cause have been, in many instances, rewarded by astonishing results. Institutions have been provided for them, and Schools established, where, by a system of judicious teaching and training, their helpless and defective state of mind has been improved, and many have been rendered useful, and enabled to contribute, in some degree, to their own maintenance.

To France must be allowed the merit of having first moved in this benevolent undertaking; it being fully fifty years ago

since ITARD commenced his interesting labours. From that period, the object had never been lost sight of, although it was not till 1828 that a regular system of education and training was commenced by M. FERRUS, at the Bicetre; and, in 1831, by M. FALRET, at the Salpetriere, which, some years later was extended by M.M. VOISIN and LEURET, and more recently M. SEGUIN has introduced the mode he adopts with the Deaf and Dumb. The description given by Dr CONOLLY of his visit to the schools attached to these two large institutions, for the benefit of the Idiotic, is highly interesting and encouraging, as shewing the happiness of the pupils, the enthusiasm and self-denial of the Teachers in their arduous duties, and the success attending their humane and persevering efforts in cases the most unpromising. One case, in particular, at the Bicetre, that of Charles Emile, a lad of fifteen, described as "wholly an animal," with wild and ungovernable propensities, has become, under the indefatigable exertions of M. VOISIN, "docile in his manners; decent in his habits; capable of giving his attention to various subjects of elementary education; and affectionately conscious of the presence of his instructors and friends." *

In Switzerland, the philanthropic efforts of Dr GUGGENBÜHL for the mental and physical improvement of the Cretins, commenced in 1839. But it was not till 1846, that any attempt was made in England, in a systematic form, for the mental amelioration of this unfortunate portion of our fellow creatures, when some ladies at Bath, after reading an account of Dr GUGGENBÜHL'S Institution on the Abendberg for the Cure of Cretinism, became desirous of attempting something for Idiot Children at home; and, accordingly,

* British and Foreign Medical Review, vol. xix.

a school, on a very limited scale, was commenced. The effect of this was to excite the public interest, and it was soon apparent, from the number of applications for admission, that an Institution, on a more extended basis was requisite to meet the exigencies of the case. The visits of Dr GUGGENBÜHL to England, in 1847 and 1848, when he also came to Scotland, tended much to expedite this object. During these visits, he embraced the opportunity of explaining his views, and of making known the results of his labours on the Abendberg. A knowledge of his system, and of the success attending it, had by this time been pretty generally spread through the medium of the Press.* The sympathy of the public was now much awakened, and the idea of forming an Asylum for Idiots of different classes, occurred to several persons in London. Advantage was taken of this by the Reverend Dr REED of Hackney, who called a meeting, and the result was, the opening of Park House, Highgate, in 1847, as an Asylum for Idiots, under the directions of Dr CONOLLY, who had long advocated the cause. In the course of three years, a larger establishment was necessary, when, through the benevolence of S. M. PETO, Esq., Essex Hall, near Colchester, was placed at the disposal of the Managers. These two establishments are now under the patronage of Her Majesty and the Prince of Wales. The Report for the present year shews, that the number of pupils and patients is 198: That the Board are satisfied that for three-fourths of these much may be done. Such is also the conviction of the friends and

* Some Account of Cretinism, and the Institution for its Cure, on the Abendberg, by Dr William Twining. London, 1843.

The Alpine Retreat of the Abendberg. Dr Coldstream, Edinburgh, 1848.

On Dr Guggenbuhl's Institution for Cretins. *Chambers Journal*, April, 1848.

relations of the pupils. The Report further states, that the demand for admission has rendered it necessary to make additions to the House at Colchester for fifty or sixty more; and that the Board will not let the difficulty of accommodation come between them and their duty to the public. For while they have two hundred applicants knocking at the door for admission; and while they are sustained by a sympathy and a generosity which have certainly never been surpassed; they will not shrink from the great work which Providence has assigned to them. In pursuance of this noble resolution, the Board have purchased the estate of Earlswood, near Redhill, consisting of about 130 acres, where they have determined to build an Asylum for the suitable and permanent reception of the Idiot and Imbecile, with not less than 400 beds, and which may be a model institution for the nation and for Europe. And they have already proceeded so far as to have fixed on a plan, with all the arrangements and adaptations indispensable for such a family, in the execution of which they are prepared to commence immediately. His Royal Highness Prince Albert having condescended to appoint Thursday the 16th of June for the purpose of laying the first stone. This auspicious event, accordingly, did take place on the above day, when the ceremony was both solemn and imposing. The stone having been lowered, the Bishop of Winchester pronounced a benediction, and Prince Albert having received the cups of corn, wine, and oil, poured them over the stone. A most interesting scene then took place,—between 300 and 400 ladies brought purses, each containing £5, and placed them on the stone; then, of thirty gentlemen who had been appealed to, to contribute each £100, twenty-nine came forward, and Mrs WARNER, wife of the partner of the firm of PETO and WARNER, gave the thirtieth £100. A

more noble spectacle of the practical effects of pure Christian philanthropy could scarcely be witnessed!*

While such has been the happy result in England, of the awakened sympathy for this unfortunate portion of our fellow creatures, it is pleasing to reflect, that a similar spirit has of late years sprung up in America, as appears from the very able and comprehensive Report of Dr HOWE, in 1848, to the Legislature of Massachusetts, on the condition of the Idiots within the Commonwealth; and more recently in his Address to the Legislature of New York, in which he states, as the result of his experience, that much may be done to render them intelligent, happy, and useful. With such examples, and such experience before us, let us throw off the apathy which has so long bound us, and not hesitate to follow in the same course. But while we frankly confess to our former indifference, it is fair to mention, for the satisfaction of the Board, that, for a series of years, the Idiot and Imbecile in the City Poorhouse have had some attention paid to them in the way of improving both their mental and physical condition.

As long ago as 1827, Dr POOLE, formerly an active Manager of this House, in an Article on Education, in the Encyclopædia Edinensis, drew the attention of the Public to the improvability of the Idiotic and Imbecile; but, it is to be regretted, no combined public effort was made at the time to carry out his views. In 1828, at the suggestion of the Reverend Dr BRUNTON, public worship was introduced at the City Bedlam, when an opportunity of joining in the service was afforded to all the patients capable of appreciating, in some degree, its nature. But, for several years antecedent to the

* The Times newspaper for 17th June 1853.

first of these periods, the Idiotic and Imbecile children were in the habit of attending the general school, under the Reverend Mr Maclean, (now Minister of Liff and Benvie,) where they were taught the elementary parts of education and the simple truths of religion, and with such a degree of success, that the system has ever since been continued.

In the Eastern Division of the House, set apart for the Idiotic and Imbecile, there are in all about ninety cases, embracing every shade of mental deficiency, from complete congenital idiocy to simple senile dotage. Of the above number, twenty-six are congenital idiots, six of whom are attending school, whose ages range from seven to twenty years; they have all made some progress in reading, writing, and arithmetic. They are also acquainted with the leading truths of the Bible; and some of them have committed to memory portions of psalms and hymns. It is worthy of remark, that even some very defective Idiots shew a wonderful sense of Divine things; and when the name of God is mentioned, or they are asked to repeat the Lord's Prayer, a degree of awe is observed to come over them, which is very striking and affecting. Such are, therefore, generally well conducted and attentive during Divine service. Several of them have a turn for music, and join in the psalmody, keeping in time and in tune. Indeed the singing is conducted by a female, who was admitted about twenty-five years ago as a congenital Idiot, and who is a good example of what may be accomplished by education and proper training, as she has been for many years very useful, acting as a nurse, and assisting in various household duties. She shewed a wonderful degree of memory at one time, being able to repeat by

heart the 119th Psalm. Of those not attending school, a large proportion are usefully employed. The females, in domestic occupations, as—in the washing-house, kitchen, in knitting, sewing, &c. The males are also employed in various ways; at the sametime, the want of sufficient and regular employment for them is much felt, whilst it is evident a great deal of work could be done by them, both at different trades, as well as in field labour. In proof of which, I would mention, that one of them, who had been a weaver, draws patterns occasionally, and engraves very neatly. One poor man, a German, who has only one hand, cuts out figures in wood with much taste;—and, during the last two years, many of them have been employed in the removal of a large bed of clay, which was in the grounds, the digging and carting being done entirely by them, affording much amusement and enjoyment.

Whilst this brief statement shews how rapidly increasing has been the interest in, and how successful the efforts have been to improve the condition of the Idiot and the Imbecile elsewhere, and, likewise, that it has not been altogether unattended to in this City; it will further appear, that much more might be done to advance their improvement and comfort, at the sametime rendering them useful, and so far capable of supporting themselves. A more perfect system of teaching and training should be introduced; and, to promote the comfort and usefulness of the Males, accommodation for Workshops and the means of Field Labour are required. *

The whole subject, I conceive, is highly worthy of the

* There is a farm attached to the Asylum of the Bicetre, of about 150 acres, cultivated by the patients, which returns a profit.—*British and Foroign Medical Review*, vol. xix.

consideration of the Committee. And when they are apprised that, by the Report of the Board of Supervision for 1846, there are between 1600 and 1700 Idiots and Imbecile under the care of the different Parochial Boards, and living with private individuals, the greater number of whom, we may safely infer, have received no mental, moral or physical, training, (although it must be evident they were all more or less capable of it,) but have been left to grow up as mere animals, often a prey to disgusting habits, and to vicious and dangerous propensities, it must be allowed that there is both occasion and opportunity enough for bestirring ourselves in this good cause.

It is, therefore, encouraging to know, that the subject has, for the last two or three years, attracted the attention of not a few members of the community, and that, in July last, under the kind auspices of Sir JOHN and Lady JANE OGILVY, the foundation of an Asylum for Imbecile Children was laid, on their property of Baldovan, near Dundee. The building is intended to accommodate forty pupils; and may it lead to the same astonishing and happy results in Scotland as the small Institution at Bath has done in England.

Let us, therefore, although late, take example from our brethren in the South, and act in the same spirit, being assured, that "inasmuch as we do it to the least of these, we do it to Him, our Blessed Lord and Saviour, who both lived and died for us."

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