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THE LATE PROFESSOR JOHN FERGUSON

TRIBUTE BY SIR WILLIAM OSLER

At a recent meeting of the Bibliographical Society, London, the President, Sir William Osler, M.D. F.R.S. paid the following tribute to the memory of Professor John Ferguson:
Since our last meeting we have lost an original and highly valued member of our society, the veteran Professor John Ferguson, of Glasgow. By training a chemist and a teacher of chemistry he had long outlived any activity in his vocation, and for many years has combined the pleasant avocation of the book-collector with the serious and absorbing work of a bibliographer. The man and his method are revealed in that most instructive address which he gave as President of our sister society of Edinburgh. "On Some Aspects of Bibliography," the best introductory manual I know upon the subject. Beginning with the collection of books, old and new, upon chemistry, he soon ranged over the border-lands of science, and became our greatest authority on the literature of alchemy, witchcraft, astrology, and the various pseudo-sciences of the Middle Ages. The members will recall with pleasure his lectures to our society on Reisch's "Margarita Philosophica" in June, 1900, and on "Books of Secrets" in 1915.

Though an absorbing and profitable study, the end-results of Bibliography are too often big tomes of intolerable dullness. There are at anyrate two works on the subject full of the marrow and fatness of books, one is James Atkinson's "Two letter Bibliography," and the other is John Ferguson's "Bibliotheca Chemica," a catalogue of the library of the late Dr. James Young, now in the Glasgow Technical College. While not large, the collection is extraordinarily rich in works on alchemy and 16th and 17th century books on chemistry, and just the sort of library for a man of Professor Ferguson's training to catalogue. It is the most useful special bibliography in my library, and scarcely a day passes that I do not refer to its pages. The merit that appeals to one is a combination of biography with bibliography beside the book is a picture of the man sketched by a sympathetic hand. Would that in other subjects students as accurate and as learned could be induced to follow this example! There is an interesting paragraph in the preface which illustrates the spirit in which Professor Ferguson undertook this work. "The history of chemistry, as indeed of all sciences, is but a succession of epitaphs upon forgotten men and forgotten discovery. What then, do these men owe to him who gathers up their works, and in so doing, recalls their achievements, and thus labours to lift that icy pall of oblivion which descends on everything human, just because it is human, imperfect, temporary, and has to be

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2 Tribute by Sir William Osler.

forgotten to make way for something else? It was to mitigate that fate as far as human effort can, when it has to strive with the eternal law and necessity of change, that this gathering of the writings of bygone thinkers and workers was made. That they were struggling with error obscured vision towards the light of reality should cause not neglect of them and contempt for their shortcomings and failure, but should arouse the fellow feeling and interest of those who at the present moment are engaged in the same struggle, and whose turn for neglect and contempt is coming. Dr. Young realised this, and the library is his effort to awaken and foster such sympathy and remembrance."

Upon the author of a really good bibliography the iniquity of oblivion vainly scatters her poppy—to use an expression of Sir Thom. Browne, and the "Bibliotheca Chemica" will prevail as potently for John Ferguson as has the "Bibliotheca Britannica" for his great townsman, Robert Watt.

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J. S. J.