

Almanacks.



ALMANACKS are at the present time a branch of popular literature, but to arrive at such a position they have passed through many gradations, from the time when the Arabs leading a pastoral life made a particular study of the starry heavens, and fostered the belief in astrology, and adopted those forms of religious fanaticism which prevented them undertaking any work of importance without first consulting the stars. Afterwards, those who had given attention to astronomical changes prepared a book giving it an Arabic name signifying "The Diary," from which the name almanack was derived. This book imparted information respecting the stars, and advice relative to the movements of the heavenly bodies, and was looked on as a text book by persons who had not the ability or inclination to make calculations or predictions for themselves. These early almanacks were succeeded by something of a similar character, copies of which are still to be found in the museums of several countries. The earliest printed almanack of which there is record was published by George Von Purbach at Vienna, about the year 1460. In 1474, Ragiomantanus, a German mathematician connected with the Hungarian court, commenced a famous series of almanacks in Latin and German. This series contained only the account of the eclipses and the places of the planets on the different dates, but was nevertheless highly valued.

Yearly almanacks appeared first in England in the sixteenth century. They soon became filled with prophecies against parties and individuals in the State, and were in consequence thereof soon suppressed. James I. granted a monopoly to the Universities and the Stationers' Co. for the publication of almanacks, under the censorship of the Archbishop of Canterbury and Bishop of London—and under such auspices astrology and popular superstition flourished almost unopposed. It was said of these almanacks that it would be difficult to find in so small a compass an equal quantity of ignorance, profligacy, and imposture as was contained in their pages. In 1775, Lord Erskine, who was then rising into fame, in pleading against the continuance of this monopoly at the Bar of the House of Commons, said: "I should really have been glad to have cited some sentences from the 113th Edition of Poor Robin's Almanack, but I am prevented from doing it by a just respect for the House." In 1828, the Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge published the British Almanack; this was like the death knell to the old style. The press took up the cause, and the public shewed its appreciation by the manner in which it was received. A rational and popular almanack was produced in England for the first time, and soon others of the same kind followed. The empire of astrology was invaded and the blasphemies of Francis Moore and the obscenities of Poor Robin were denounced and ridiculed, and in one year the one was discontinued and the other retreated into puerile stupidity.

The earliest almanack in America is supposed to have been published by William Bradford in Philadelphia,

in 1787, but the first of an intellectual character appeared in 1732, nearly a century before a similar one was produced in England. This was Poor Richard's almanack, published by Benjamin Franklin. It became very popular, not only in America but also in France and England, where the proverbial and wise utterances were translated and reprinted.

There has never appeared a general polyglot almanack of civilisation, but each nation capable of compiling one has produced that which has been found suitable for its requirements. A collection of the almanacks of all countries would form an instructive picture of the march of the mind upward from the lowest stages of superstition and ignorance to some of the most abstruse calculations of the highest scientific intellects; and what was at one time an expensive luxury cherished by royalty and courtly dames, with all its absurdities, would be seen to have become popular in the homes and in the offices of the men of business on account of the information they contain.

The Nautical Almanack, which is such a boon to the mariner, was commenced in the year 1767, in England, under the charge of Dr. Maskelyne, and the part which was useful at sea was for many years republished in New York.

The American Nautical Almanack owes its existence indirectly to the immense impulse given to the study of astronomy by the great comet of 1843, and directly to the national and scientific ardour of Admiral Charles A. Davis, U.S.N., who was appointed its first superintendent in 1849. The first volume, for 1855, was published in 1853, and at once took a stand against those of Britain, France, and Germany. This almanack is in some respects superior to its elder sisters, and its excellence is chiefly due to the energy and devotedness of Admiral Davis and the manner in which his views have been carried out.

This Offspring.

"My pigmy counterpart," the poet wrote
Of his dear child, the darling of his heart;
Then longed to clutch the stupid printer's throat
That set it up—"My pig my counterpart."

RARE BOOKS, NOT OLD ONES, ARE VALUABLE.—Age only gives value to comparatively few books. Hundreds of volumes printed in the seventeenth century are to be had at the second-hand shops at prices ranging from threepence to a shilling apiece, and the average vellum of three hundred and fifty years ago is worth eighty per cent. less in the market to-day than is one of the cunning little first editions of popular authors printed between 1838 and 1842. Going over a second-hand catalogue a few days ago, we made a note of the prices of items bearing dates from 1490 to 1510, and found that the sixteen volumes offered for sale could be had for 25/-, about 1/6 apiece. Not long ago a twenty-four volume edition of Melancthon, printed in Amsterdam in 1660, was sold for 21/-. By actual weight and by actual measurement (for they were monstrous folios in double thick vellum) they were cheaper than coal or wood.