

Literature.

[The prompt mention in our list of "Books of the Week" will be considered by us an equivalent to their publishers for all volumes received. The interests of our readers will guide us in the selection of works for further notice.]

HART'S WESTERN CHINA.*

Few recent works of travel equal this one in interest and importance. China was for so many ages closed against the entrance of foreigners that we are slow in appreciating the fact that a European may now visit all parts of the country and that missionaries are settled in the interior of the vast empire where they enjoy reasonable security. Mr. Hart's narrative gives an account of some of these inland stations, but it is not essentially a missionary work; he gives us, rather, a description of features of the scenery, and takes for the objective point of his travels the great and little known Buddhist shrine of Mount Omei.

The author's style is exceedingly simple not to say bald. He might easily have added to the interest of the work by a little more warmth and fancy. As it is the facts carry the reader along more than the method of presenting them. These facts, however, are of great interest and value. We gain an idea of the Chinese character and a conception of life as it has proceeded for many ages in that singular country so independent of all other nations such as we find in few works on that country since the famous story of Marco Polo. It almost makes one tired to think how without change things have been moving in the same groove behind that Chinese wall, entirely regardless of anything outside just as the China and the planet were interchangeable terms.

We hear much in these days of artesian wells and oil wells; we are apt to conclude that such wells are recent inventions due to Western enterprise and entirely a result of modern science. But Dr. Hart in a most interesting account of the oil and brine wells of Western China shows us that for nearly twenty centuries the indefatigable Chinese have been boring such wells sometimes to the depth of five thousand feet, a depth never yet reached by our deepest wells. The business of boring these wells and owning them has descended from generation to generation in the same families. One venerable proprietor laughingly said that he had been in the business twenty generations, meaning that his family had been boring wells since the first emperor of the Min dynasty!

The apparatus used is rude, consisting of a wrought-iron borer, sixteen feet long, dropped by a rope through a bamboo tube. The rope turns on a pulley at the top of a frame over one hundred feet high, and the rope is drawn by oxen. Often they bore through thousands of feet of solid rock. Thirty to forty years is not an uncommon time for piercing one of these Chinese wells. One would imagine that the enormous labor and time required to bore these wells would tend to limit the number. But Chinese patience is inexhaustible, and in the province Sz-Chuan they amount to tens of thousands. It is impossible to consider these results without increased respect for the ingenuity and persistency of the Chinese character.

Following the winding waters of the "beautiful Min," our traveler at length came in sight of the objective point of his journey, Mount Omei. He says of it:

"Mount Omei is a center of natural and artificial wonders, the like of which may not be found elsewhere upon the globe. I speak advisedly. The world is large, and in regions like Switzerland and Alaska Nature has been taxed to the uttermost to produce a combination of natural objects of surpassing beauty and grandeur. Here, however, near the borders of Chinese civilization, we find a region of unequaled sublimity—a combination of lofty mountains, of swift rivers, of valleys of wondrous fertility. Then, also, of the works of man there are many—such as thousands of brine wells, a great silk culture (of which it is the center), a white-wax industry, moun-

tains chiseled into the forms of idols, colossal bronze statues, pagodas, and one temple wholly of rich bronze. Great Omei Mountain is hundreds of li in circumference, rising 11,100 feet, its highest point enveloped in the everlasting clouds. . . . All these wonders are within a radius of forty miles from our anchorage. . . . A mile or two below, upon the opposite bank, abrupt red sandstone bluffs were in full view from our boat. White pagodas and fine temples grace the tops, which are wreathed with beautiful evergreens. Upon the face of the highest cliff, which descends straight to the water is the famous carved Mileh-Buddha, in a sitting posture, and over three hundred feet in height. Small trees grow from the head of the colossus."

Mr. Hart states that the peak, which rises some six thousand feet above the main mountain, has on one side a perpendicular precipice over a mile high. Excepting, perhaps, in the unexplored recesses of the Himalayas there is probably no other such tremendous cliff in the world. When ascending the mountain Mr. Hart came across an object further illustrating the endless ingenuity of the Chinese. Iron suspension bridges are naturally supposed to be exclusively a Western invention. But he discovered a finely constructed bridge of one hundred and forty feet span made of iron rods and swung across a roaring chasm.

Mount Omei is to a Chinese the most sacred and exalted spot in the Empire, the center around which cluster his veneration and beliefs, the Mecca of the pious Buddhist. The road to the summit is thronged with altars and shrines, and the extreme top of the peak possesses the most remarkable temples in China, and has been for ages the goal of millions of pilgrims who, wending up those steep mountain pathways, have sought among the clouds a nearer way to the Nirvana or eternal calm.

Mr. Hart's description of this sacred retreat is by far the best part of the volume. One who is attracted by descriptions of foreign lands, who studies the various national types, who ponders on the questions of comparative religion cannot fail to gain much by a perusal of this account of Mount Omei. To all such, Mr. Hart's most original and attractive narrative will prove welcome and useful.

* WESTERN CHINA; A JOURNEY TO THE GREAT BUDDHIST CENTER OF MOUNT OMEI. By the REV. VIRGIL C. HART, B.D. Illustrated. Boston: Ticknor & Company. 1893.