

"Some Questions of Good English"

By Ralph Olmsted Williams. Henry Holt & Co.

THIS IS the reprint of certain discussions in literary journals with Mr. Fitzedward Hall. Their publication in book-form has been approved by such men as Profs. A. S. Hill of Harvard, A. S. Cook of Yale, Brander Matthews of Columbia, T. W. Hunt of Princeton, and others. They will particularly interest teachers and critical students of English, and, in a less degree, a considerable fraction of the larger public of "general readers."

The first controversy was initiated by Mr. Hall's objections to "known to" as used in this sentence quoted from Marsh's "Lectures":—"The word *respect*, in this combination, has none of the meanings known to it, as an independent noun, in the English vocabulary." Coleridge had criticised Lord Grenville for writing of warfare "unknown to the practice of civilized nations," the word "to" being "absurdly used for the word 'in'"; and Mr. Hall said that Mr. Marsh's "known to" was "not unlike" the nobleman's "unknown to." Mr. Williams, in our opinion, is clearly right in assuming that the metonymical extension of "known to everybody" (used by Mr. Hall himself) to Shakespeare's "known to the camp" ("Coriolanus" i. 9) and Cardinal Newman's "unknown to the classical age," etc., is natural and justifiable. But Mr. Hall insists that Mr. Marsh's expression involves something more than such a metonymy. It seems to him "a highly nebulous and intolerable sort of personification," since to say that a meaning is known to a word is "just like saying that a word 'knows' a meaning for 'has' it." This kind of criticism would rule out many well-established idioms which cannot be changed from passive to active or active to passive. Mr. Hall, as might be expected, finds "to" "misused" by Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes, Stedman, Prof. A. S. Hill, and other American writers in many other expressions; like "protection to property," "a few hundred pounds to the year," "a hard metallic glitter to his talk," "he set out at once to Boston," etc.; and yet he says, in the next paragraph, that "good contemporary usage, not analogy, determines what is idiomatic." Is not the usage of writers like those just mentioned "good contemporary usage"?

Mr. Williams well says:—"That metonymical phrases should give rise to other phrases similar in form but not metonymical in sense is not especially remarkable. It would seem to be one of the numerous changes in language produced by imitation of mere form." We should say that this is so common that it might almost be called a law of language; and if any of these imitative phrases are adopted by a considerable number of reputable writers, they become good idiomatic English.

Other chapters in the book discuss "none but they" for "none but them," "is being built," "born in Boston," "to part from" and "to part with"; also the distinction between "every" and "each," the misplacing of the adverb "only," "Americanisms," etc. Two indexes, one of names of writers, the other of words and phrases, together filling twenty pages, add to the value of the book for purposes of reference.