

(Essay)

Our Public Schools.

Their Foes and Future.



OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

Their Foes and Future.

No decade has its peculiar problem. A question of the day is the bequest of centuries. Two thousand years have passed since Aristotle tilled the fertile mind of Greece; four centuries nearer us, Quintilian trains the crooked shoots of Roman boyish intellect; in the dawn of the Renaissance Erasmus sows afresh the wasted soil of medieval thought; and but yesterday Pestalozzi brought almost to perfection the culture of the brain. Educators, these? Yes, and civilisers! Yet the '90's usher in no harder problem than the old one tried by them: What is Education and How shall we Educate? Misunderstanding is mother of both the faults and foes of education.

Never in the world's history was the need of education more keenly felt—never, perhaps, were its aims and essence more widely misunderstood. Educational pathways are everywhere broken, and defects omnipresent. England treads, with Briton stoicism, her curious mozaic of "Board" Schools, "Trade" Schools, "Public" Schools, "Free" Schools.

English salaries, in many cases, are yet based on the number of *successful* scholars; multitudes of English children yet learn by rote; and certain religious sects, as the Jews, are remorselessly debarred from public educational privileges. France walks with swifter feet a safer road, yet her public instruction extends only to the thirteenth year and *private* schools are apparently a part of the French *public* system. However both in the French schools and in those of Germany newer methods rule and progress is certain, if, indeed, gradual. ^{but} The United States, with the best of all educational paths, is a nation of critics. Every division of her system must needs be bomb-proof; every step in the line of educational progress discovers new foes behind new bulwarks.

The American public schools, with all other educational systems, have their faults—faults few but serious.

Incompetence in individual workmen is ^a cause for general inefficiency in any trade. The educational trade is no exception. Mobs, semi-ignorant alike of subjects taught and of modes of teaching, have rushed yearly into educational ranks. An occupation demanding keenest brain, most acknowledged ability, has been made ^a dumping ground for mediocrity. Children-in-years have been taught by children-in-brain. Until the true meaning of education becomes clear to teachers—until they appreciate the fact that mere class-learning and discipline are not teaching—incompetence will continue as one of the vital faults of the public school.

Lack of continuity in education has contributed largely to the school's imperfections. Abrupt changes from kindergarten to higher methods, and lack of touch between

high schools and college could not but exert an evil influence on the progress of the schools.

National indifference, bad buildings, worthless texts—evils fast disappearing—have played their various parts. And if apathy as to educational matters yet exists in Congress, it should be remembered that like apathy characterises that august body in all its deliberations—save, perhaps, those of a personal or party nature.

That a definite education is not wholly compulsory has been a serious fault. If the State has a right to educate at all, she has the right to truly educate. There can be no true education with optional, indefinite, irregular, attendance. Schools show real results only when they have real pupils.

Such are the genuine mistakes in our present public education; yet such faults furnish neither the foes of the public schools nor the grounds for their criticism.

True hostility to the public system has its origin in misunderstanding of the true objects of education, and the public schools find their real foes in the Utilitarian, Parochial, Private, and Political, clans.

Our age has many bad names; it is "materialistic," "skeptical," "practical," "iconoclastic." In centuries previous the stamp of antiquity was the warrant of safety; in the present it is held to be just ground for suspicion, investigation, correction. In such an epoch it were strange had not some true beliefs, some noble theories, been covered with the mud of materialism. In education especially, it seems, our reformers would err in reforming: they would work the utilitarian vein to its full extent, and in education there is little that is earthy.

Our new educationists tell us that education means training for trade; that schools should fit men for active life, and that they do not so; that money-making usefulness is, after all, the true end of life, and that the schools train only Professional money-makers. And they proceed to philosophize at great length on a "Life of Usefulness," and the "Unfitness of Graduates" for honest labor.

Much of this is honest and much more of it is honestly meant, but, as in many other harmful theories, misunderstanding leads to falsity. That the public schools should fit a man for public usefulness is true; that their sole or even primary object is to fit men for public usefulness, is false. Education means training a man to think: between this process and that of cultivating mere money-making ability in man is a Tartar gulf of difference. Education is thus a thing intrinsic, not relative; general, not special; not confined to the schools, yet there most easily and rapidly acquired. And if the schools send forth a boy clearer brained and more thoughtful than when he entered their portals, their object is accomplished. The clearer brain in nine cases of ten will be the basis of better business success, but such success is a secondary object. The aim of education is to make a man think; not to think how to succeed but to think and succeed.

Whether manual training might advantageously enter our system is another matter. The training of the eye to keen discrimination and of the hand to delicate skill can not but be of service in brain-culture. Workshops may be made educational aids of no mean power. Yet any demand for technical trade-learning as a substitute for general culture is mistaken, harmful, and a debaser of educational ideals.

The parochial foes of the public school are perhaps, of all, the bitterest. Religious prejudice unites with all the rancor of a rival institution in hatred of the national schools. While it will be well to remember in discussion the rarely noted fact that Rome is not the only parochial church—that quite a number of other sects are equally pronounced in parochial opposition—yet the Catholic church may fitly be taken as a typical parochial opponent of the public schools.

To say that the same Pope, under a new name, holds the Vatican to-day who held it in the days of Henry 5th; that the same Cardinals, who, in the middle ages, schemed for personal and ecclesiastical aggrandizement, are scheming for the same objects to-day—is, perhaps, to speak truth, but truth of no moment to educators. Whether Rome is as powerful, as ambitious, as despotic as ever; whether American Catholics are a democracy or not; these are no educational problems. The schools question the educational attitude of the Roman Church, and that attitude only. But as England's blazing hilltops gave warning of the stranger foe—so may the burning protests of our American schools lead us sternly to scrutinise the course of this foreign church.

The Catholic church may or may not be opposed to education in general; to the public school she is the sworn foe. Her reasons are many, her prettexts two.

First—she declares, plausibly enough, that she can not send her children to schools in which doctrines contrary to her own tenets are taught. Were it true this would be strong enough for objection. An hour spent in any public school, however, will prove the groundlessness of her fears. Teachers rarely if ever remark on the Scripture read. Al-

leged antagonisms between the English and Romish Bibles are almost entirely mythical. The English Bible teaches Christianity—the Romish Bible, Christianity with a grain of Roman Catholicism. It would be as fitting, as rational, as sensible, for the Methodist to object because his "Discipline" is not distinctly taught—for the Presbyterian to complain because school children are not forced to subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith—as for the Roman Catholic to curse the public schools because of Bible reading.

The second pretext, strangely enough, is that the public schools are "Godless." If Godless means creedless the objection is well taken—the schools are free from creeds. One need only remark in passing that a church's doctrines must be peculiarly flimsy if she has to teach and rub in religion to the exclusion of liberal education. If "Godless" means Christless the assertion is false. If the Bible is the plain, clear, divine book that all Christians claim it to be, its reading must save the public schools from the charge of Godlessness. Consistent Catholics themselves appreciate their false position, and priests, both many and learned, condemn their church's course. Yet despite the opposition of some patriotic priests—and all patriotic Americans—the parochial foes of the public school are apparently gaining ground. But a little while ago a Wisconsin Supreme Court decided in their favor and a Detroit Mayor was recently elected solely on the Catholic side of this issue. The teaching of patriotism, freedom of and honesty in belief, allegiance to no foreign potentate ecclesiastical or otherwise—is the cause of Rome's especial opposition. Parochial opposition in general finds its origin in desire to teach children religious rather than general facts. This may be religion, it is not education.

That parochial victory would be prejudicial to the interests of the public school, is a truism—it would be deadly. To say that the parochial course is unpatriotic, disloyal, un-American, would be weak—it is traitorous.

The Mormon church was false and disloyal—we corrected her. The Roman church may be false and disloyal. In that case to those who wish to see our national institutions survive the centuries, who appreciate the dangers of religious recognition by the State, one course alone remains. Yet there are signs, and many which indicate that the silent mass of Catholics dislike the parochial and respect the national schools; that religion and education should walk together—yet at arm's length, is becoming more apparent. In a word, the object of education is getting clearer: to make a man neither religious nor irreligious, but thoughtful. The Church, and, above all, the Home, must give religion, the Schools are for education.

Side by side with parochialism is another essentially foreign foe. English private schoolism has in a measure detracted from the publicity of the public schools. The schools are deemed too common, too vulgar, for many scions of our aristocracy. Yet the spirit that thus apes English blunders is so un-American in character that as yet it has been a very small factor in the educational problem.

A new wedge has just entered our school system. That wedge is city politics. It is a matter for surprise that public school positions have so long escaped the rapacity of city politicians. Positions mean votes and the opportunities of the situation are no longer hidden. Men of long experience and tested ability are ousted; men of no experience and doubtful talent oftentimes take their places. Needful appropriations are denied; needless one are granted.

Salaries already notoriously insufficient are either kept at the same disgraceful point or lowered—in accordance with the belief that an official economy depends official popularity. And much, if not all, of this is directly traceable to the educational ignorance of machine elected Boards. If the evil spreads teachers will soon have to court not only Boards but Bosses. Pulpits will perhaps follow as prizes of political victory. The inimical influence of this new enemy can hardly be overestimated.

Such are the foes of the public schools. Each has its origin in a peculiar error. The utilitarian mistakes business training for education, and the vast numbers of children yearly withdrawn from school to learn trades in shop or store are the practical result. The sectarian schoolmen mistake religious training for education, and the large membership of the parochial schools is the outcome. The private educationalist thinks to find education in books alone and narrow social clanism follows. The politician deems education a new field for his industry and ruined city schools mark his track.

Yet all of these enemies, while lessening the usefulness of the public schools, have far from crippled them. Despite their efforts education proceeds in its work of leveling distinctions, increasing brotherhood, elevating humanity—patriotism and Americanism continue to grow under its beneficent care. Malevolent influences are at least recognised, and to recognise an enemy counts for much. With our present teachers there are strong grounds for hope in the educating of the nation.

Yet the nation needs educating fully commensurate with the power of the present public schools.

The condition of the South needs no reference; Whites

and Blacks alike ignorant present a problem much discussed and little dealt with. The much sinned against and sinful Indian calls for a large share of public education. Mines and factories need investigation, and Alaska has room for considerable enlightenment. That these various problems will be rapidly solved may be confidently expected. The glorious past of the public schools, their product, their staunch support are potent encouragements to anyone who has at heart the safety and perpetuity of our national institutions, and are glowing warrants for the future.

A great river system stretches over our land. Through broad branches it gathers the waters which its mission is to pour into the sea; and back of those branches are streams and brooks and springs. And labor cleanses those myriad springs, clears from babbling shallows the brooks, deepens the channels. Slowly the great river swells into yet more majestic volume—sweeps on with yet clearer depths. It is the river of our national thought, and the schools, quietly, steadily, are purifying its beginnings, freeing it from babbling uselessness, deepening and straightening its channels, and training it to pour its ever grander burden into the sea of human knowledge.