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—BY—

B. F. DOWELL,

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Jacksonville, Feb. 17 1872

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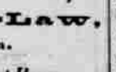

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OFFICE AND RESIDENCE,

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A Plea for Free Education.

The following address was delivered by Hon. Syl. C. Simpson, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, before the Teacher's Institute of the First Judicial District, last Saturday evening, at the Court House in Jacksonville. The address was delivered in excellent manner, and was listened to attentively throughout by a large audience. At the close of the lecture the assemblage voted that it be published in the Jackson county papers.

Mr. Simpson said:

Oregon is just beginning to build her school system. The materials for the structure are on the ground. The excavations have been made. Workmen are busy on the foundation walls. But the corner stone has not yet been fully laid, and until that is done "they labor in vain that build the house," for though it may grow up shapely and tall, under the cunning hands of the workmen, it will be weak and insecure, trembling at every breath of the tempest. That corner stone, as I view it, is the grand *American* idea, that the State has the supreme right and power to provide for, direct, control, and if need be, *enforce* the education of her children, and that it is her solemn duty to exercise that right and power, judiciously, and yet fearlessly and without faltering.

I say that the corner stone has not been *fully* laid, and yet I believe that it is even now partly in place. The idea of educating the youth of the commonwealth at the public expense, and of controlling that education by public law, is recognized in our school system—vaguely, indirectly, hesitatingly—yet unmistakably recognized. But it is not avowed and adopted boldly, heartily and completely as the fundamental idea of the whole system, as I believe it should be. We seem, judging from our legislation on this subject, to be trying to *sneak* into the establishment of free schools, as though it were something to be ashamed of, instead of being, as it is in truth, the proudest boast and glory of a State. Better so, than that we should not adopt a free school system at all. But Oh, that we had the manly courage to leap at once to the right position on this subject?

The truth is, there is a large number of our citizens who do not accept the free school idea. They believe that the State has no rightful authority to impose taxes for the purpose of providing free education for the children of the people. They affirm that it is the duty of the parent *alone* to educate his children, and that he has no right to call upon his fellow citizens to pay taxes to relieve him of that duty. This objection to the free school system is an old one, and has been again and again refuted, but it is none the less vehemently urged on that account; and there are still multitudes in our land who regard it as unanswerable.

The persistent opposition of this large and influential class has, I doubt not, been one of the chief causes of the slow and hesitating progress of our State in the great work of popular education. And so long as such a pernicious notion is entertained by any considerable number of our people, so long will our legislators be timid and irresolute in their enactments on this subject. In order, therefore, that we may bring about the adoption of a free school system in Oregon, efficient, thorough and complete in all its appointments, we must, first of all, secure an intelligent unanimity of public sentiment on the subject of the relation of the State to education. And the friends of the "free school system" must see to it that this grand idea of the supremacy of the State in educational matters is made prominent and emphatic in all agitations of this subject. It is for this purpose that I desire this evening to present to you a few thoughts in support, and for the illustration, of this idea.

Let us then devote a few minutes to a discussion of this theme—trite and common-place as it is. Thank God that it *is* thus trite and common-place! It only proves that the friends of popular education have done their duty loyally and well in presenting this subject to the world. I am glad that, wide and comprehensive as my theme is, I can wander into no nook or corner of it without finding the foot-prints of some Kane or Livingstone of the educational world, who has gone before me.

The first inquiry that naturally presents itself in the consideration of this subject is: Has the State a right to provide for the education of the children of its citizens at the public expense and to direct and regulate that education according to its own sovereign will? I affirm that it has.

In the first place it seems to me that education is, from its own nature, a matter for social regulation, and that if there is any question of precedence among the proper subjects of legislation, this should rank as the foremost of all.

Organized society is the mere out growth of the human intellect—the bloom upon the tree of mind. Man has been described as "the social animal;" but it is so only because he is the *intellectual* "animal." Take away the mind and its necessary adjunct, the power of communicating thought, and man would cease to be "social" and become merely *gregarious*. We might roam over the hills and valleys, as herds, like the cattle of the fields, following the leadership of any companion who might happen for the moment to have fought his way to the front by sheer brute strength and courage. But this would not be society. It would be merely a chance concourse of individuals and would perish with the members composing it. It is only because we can think and express our thoughts that we are able to build up Communities and States and Nations, and to perpetuate them from generation to generation. This is the bond of union, the ligament that ties the race together. This vast superstructure of human society, with its gigantic pillars and "cloud capped" towers, covered with the moss of ages, with its lordly halls, grand corridors and winding staircases, and its dark passages and secret chambers, is but the cunning handiwork of man's patient intellect. Mind was its architect "from cope to foundation stone." It was mind that wrought its marvelous triumphal arches, and its gloomy dungeons. It is mind that has tapestried its walls with six thousand years of glorious yet terrible history, punctuated with laughter, and song, and tears, and blood. It is mind that warms it with the fervent fire of thought and lights it with its electric radiant glow.

Thus we see that mind is the social element in man. It is from this that society derives its very life and being. Government—that is, the organization of the society—is but the reflection or rather the expression of the *average mind* of the individuals composing it. As that average mind advances or declines in strength, intelligence and breadth of, view so the Government advances or declines in exact ratio. But every mind in the community helps to make up that average mind, and by its intelligence or ignorance either raises or lowers the average. Hence the culture bestowed upon each individual intellect in the community must, of necessity, immediately and vitally affect the well being of the whole social organization.

The right of the State, therefore, to provide for, direct, and indeed *demand* the education of all its citizens is as unquestionable as the power of self preservation, because it is a branch of that power. To permit a child to grow up in ignorance is an offense against the State, because it does a direct injury to society by lowering the average of intelligence. To deny the right to prevent such offenses, by placing the means of instruction within the reach of all, and by demanding, if need be, that all shall avail themselves of it, would be equivalent to denying that it has a right to protect itself from any injury whatever. Ignorance is a public enemy, against which it has the same right to legislate that it has to provide armies to meet its foreign foes.

But while this is true in the case of all governments, it is pre eminently so in a republic. The distinguishing characteristic of this form of government is that it depends directly and immediately upon the "consent of the governed." It is a "government by and for the people." So far as it is truly republican, so far is it an exact reflection of the will, intelligence and conscience of the people who compose it. It can never be any better than its average citizenship, any more than a stream can rise higher than its source. Hence, in such a government, it is of the utmost importance that proper provision should be made for the education of the people. To such a State, the right to protect itself from an ignorant citizenship is even more essential than the right to punish crime.

The ballot box is a great crucible, into which the people cast the expressions of their individual intellects, to be fused into a common mass and coined into public laws. The man of culture and refinement must throw in his pure gold side by side with the base alloy of the ignorant and degraded wretch, picked from the slums of the gutter, who will sell his little stock of manhood for a glass of whiskey, and be well paid at that. And the more there is of this worthless alloy the baser will be the coin. In the long run, the lack of intelligence or virtue among the people is sure to be reflected in its laws and institutions. Surely, then, the State has the right to protect itself from this adulteration of its legislation by providing for the proper instruction of its citizens.

There is another view of this matter. Society *does* educate its members, whether it so wills or not. Education is not a mere spontaneous evolution of the inner consciousness of the individual, but a "drawing out" of the mind by external influences. Cut an individual off from the society of his fellows—sever, if possible, the myriad threads of circumstances, that are entwined about him like the meshes of a web—wrap him in the solitude of his own personality—and he could no more educate himself than a man could lift himself by his bootstraps. His mind would remain a silent, stagnant, waveless Dead Sea through all eternity. Not a ripple of thought would ever disturb its placid surface. No breath of memory would play over it. No bird of fancy would soar above it. No flower of poesy would bloom upon its barren shore.

The grand capabilities of the intellect are *within*, but the culture that brings them into play is from *without*. Imprisoned in its measureless depths there is a grand electric power that can gather the earth in its arms and weigh it as in a balance, and then can flash through the ether, and tread among the stars and play with them as a child plays with its toys; but to evoke that power the mind must be touched with the conductor of social contact and fellowship. Like the rock in the desert of Lin, it has locked within its bosom delicious, life giving fountains, but it will not yield them until smitten by the rod of social intercourse.

Yes; it is society that educates the indvidual—if not in the school room, then upon the street and in the highways and by-ways of life. If it is not training him for good, then inevitably it is giving him a dangerous, evil culture. Like Janus, society has two faces. One of them is pure and holy, shining with the heavenly radiance that streams through "the gates of pearl." The other is dark and fiend-like, glowing in the lurid glare of the fire light of Hell. With one of these faces it looks upon every individual. Either it turns to him its angel-face and, lifting him in its gentle, loving arms, places his feet in the secure pathway of good and virtuous living, or it shows him its demon side and folding him in its awful embrace drags him down the "broad way" to eternal death. Ah, there is many a poor fallen soul that never sees any but this worst side of society!

Since, then, society *does* and *must* inevitably train its members for good or for evil, surely it has the right to say that training shall be for good. As it educates every individual, whether it will or not, it *must* have the power to determine that that education shall be in the direction of "the true, the beautiful, and the good." Hence the State, representing society, must be conceded the right to *start* every member of the community in this direction, to begin with, by providing him with proper intellectual and moral training in childhood.

As I said awhile ago, it is claimed by those who object to the "free school system" that the education of the children of the commonwealth is the private and personal duty of the parents of those children, and that it is not just or fair to shift that duty upon the shoulders of the public. Or, putting the objection in the form in which it is usually urged, they say that the State has no right to tax the property of the rich to educate the children of the poor. The absurdity of this objection is apparent upon a moment's thought.

In adjusting the public burdens, it is a well settled rule, and a sound one too, that those who are benefited by any particular expenditure are the proper persons to bear that expenditure. For instance, our public roads are worked and kept up by those who live in the vicinity of them. In cities and incorporated towns, streets are improved and sidewalks are laid at the expense of the adjacent property-holders. And so in other cases.

Now let us apply this principle to the subject under discussion. Who is it that is most benefited by the education of the children in a community? Is it the parents of those children, or is it the public at large? Suppose, for instance, that through the training received at school a boy becomes an inventor. With his quickened, far-seeing intelligence he explores the deep and fathomless recesses of philosophy and "ransacks the arcana of Nature." He discovers some hitherto unknown principle or property of matter, or makes some new application of an old law of science. The result is an invention like the sewing-machine, or the steam-engine, or the magnetic telegraph, that multiplies the physical power of man a hundred-fold, or gives his thoughts "the wings of morning" and sends them speeding round the world and through "the uttermost parts of the sea." A nation is clothed in a day; or the earth is "gridironed" with railroads or belted with telegraphs. The world takes a long leap in advance and achieves a thousand years of progress in a single decade. Who is it that is benefited by such an invention, and by the educated, trained intelligence that produced it? Is it the father of the inventor who, perhaps, does not even live to rejoice at his son's triumph, or is it society—the world at large? And who, then, upon the plainest economical principles, ought to pay for the education that achieves such grand results?

Or, take another instance: Suppose that a boy trained at school grows up to be a great public leader. He becomes, like Washington, the "Father of his Country," who created a nation, or like Madison, the "Father of the Constitution," who breathed into the nostrils of that nation "the breath of life" and made it immortal. By his wisdom, the State is saved from a great public peril and enters upon a proud career of prosperity and glory. Who is it in this instance who receives the chief benefit of that trained intellect—the father of the boy, or the State? Who, then, ought to pay for that training?

Of course all school-boys do not become Howes, or Watts, or Marshes, or Washingtons, or Madisons. It would be a queer world if they did. But the principle that a man's education, whatever it may be, benefits society rather than his parent—if it benefits anybody—is of universal application. The only particular advantage ordinarily that a parent receives from his son's success in life is derived from the natural feeling of pride and gratification that it excites. This advantage is of a very intangible, purely sentimental character, and beyond this he gets no benefit from that success which he does not share equally with every other member of the community within the radius of that son's influence. Ordinarily, as soon as a boy's school days are over, he leaves home and begins to "do for himself." After that, for all practical purposes, he is no more to his parent than any other man. The son's successes and failures, his good deeds and his bad, affect his father only as a part of the society in which he moves.—If by reason of right education and training, he is developed into a worthy character, and if his life is a blessing to society, his father is affected by it practically to the same extent as his neighbors—no more, no less. If, on the contrary, through lack of education, or misdirected training, he turns out a villian, the calamity affects his father only as it affects the rest of the community—aside from the natural emotion of parental grief which it causes. When some uneducated, or wrongly educated ruffian, commits robbery or murder, or sets fire to a city, it is society and not the father of the criminal that suffers.

Then, applying to this subject the rule that is adopted and acted upon in other cases, is it not just that the State, rather than the parent of the child, being the party chiefly to be benefited by that child's education, or injured by the lack of it, should provide and pay for that education?

Looking at the matter as a mere question of political economy what right has society to say that in addition to providing for the physical wants of my child during his minority, I must educate him also, when as soon as it is done, I am required to emancipate him from parental control and send him forth to use that education not for *my* advantage but for the advantage of the public! What right has my rich neighbor to throw upon *me* the whole burden of educating my children when he is to be benefited by it as much as I and probably more? Is there any justice in such a system?

Understand me not to deny the natural and scriptural obligation of a parent to train his children. I admit it with all its force. There is a home culture which nobody can provide but the parent, and he cannot shirk it. But I do contend that it is the business of society, the State, to furnish the child with scholastic instruction and training. That *it* can do better than the parent.

To further indicate the utter unreasonableness of the notion that education is a private affair, with which the State has no right to meddle, we have only to compare it with some matters that are universally admitted to be legitimate subjects of legislation. When we are asked what right has the poor man to call upon his rich neighbor to help educate his children, we may well retort, what right has the rich man to call upon his poor neighbor to help protect his property and to recover it when stolen? His property is his own. He uses it for his own selfish enjoyment. Instead of a benefit, perhaps, it is a source of oppression to his humble neighbor. It may be employed, as wealth often is, "to grind the face of the poor," and vex "the widow and the fatherless." Why not, then, leave the possessor to take care of it the best he may? Why compel poor Lazarus to bind up his sores and trudge after the thief who has stolen a few shillings from the bursting coffers of Dives? And much more, when William B. Astor gets into a law-suit with some wealthy neighbor about a corner lot, what right has he to require poor John Hobbs, across the way, to leave his work and attend court day after day as a witness or juryman in the case? Isn't a law-suit private business? Why not, then, leave the parties to it to settle it the best way they can? Why impose upon the public the burden of settling it for them?

Surely, if it is proper and legitimate for the State to regulate these matters, there can be no question of its right to provide for the education of the children of its citizens at public expense. The interest of society in the private property and law-suits of its members is at best indirect and remote; while its interest in the education of the individuals composing it is, as we have already seen, direct and immediate.

The right to establish, maintain and control free schools by public authority is already practically conceded, not only in the legislation of our own State, but in that of all the States of the Union and of every civilized country on the globe. They all have had upon their statute books from "time immemorial" enactments of some sort upon the subject of education, and this fact commits them to the free school philosophy as thoroughly as its most ardent friends could wish. For if a State has the right to legislate upon the subject at all, it has the right to control it by legislation. If it can rightfully levy a one-mill or three-mill tax for the support of schools, it can levy a tax large enough to make the schools entirely free. There is no middle ground. Education is either private business, or it is public business. If it is private, the State has no right to meddle with it; if it is public, the State may take exclusive jurisdiction of it. Those who oppose free schools, to be consistent, must oppose all legislation upon the subject of education. When they concede anything to the State in this matter, they concede the whole question. Hence, when any State, like Oregon, makes any provision for popular education, it goes far enough to admit its right to go farther, and so is forever estopped from denying its authority to establish a thorough, free school system.

Having thus, as I think, shown conclusively the right of the State to provide for the free education of the children of its citizens, I purpose now to briefly consider its *duty* in the premises.

I claim first, that the State should provide a thorough system of popular education, because, as the friends of free schools have always contended, it tends to prevent crime. I know that has been denied by many good and thoughtful men. They maintain that merely intellectual education does not diminish crime among a people, and that to accomplish this purpose it must be coupled with moral instruction. If this were true, it would constitute no valid objection to the establishment of free popular education. It would only prove that education should include something more than mental training. If intellectual instruction alone does not tend to prevent crime, then the State should provide for systematic moral instruction also.

But I deny that the objection is true in point of fact. I maintain that the spread of mere intellectual knowledge among a people *does* diminish crime. If the intellectual and moral nature of man are two different entities, they are so linked together that the one cannot be improved without exerting an appreciable influence for good upon the other. Like the Siamese twins, they are bound together by an indissoluble bond, and every pulse of the one is felt by the other. It seems to me impossible that the understanding could be educated without in some degree elevating the moral nature. If a man's mental training could be confined to the study of pure mathematics, a kind of instruction in which there is no moral quality whatever, I believe that his faculties would be so quickened and strengthened that he would necessarily have a better and clearer apprehension and appreciation of moral truth than he had before. There may be no moral principle involved in the proposition that the angles of a triangle are together equal to two right angles, but the training necessary to enable a man to understand that truth and the demonstration upon which it is based will make it an easy matter for him to comprehend and accept that other proposition that "honesty is the best policy."

But aside from the theories of the case, the fact is incontestably established by statistics that education *does* diminish the tendency to crime. I need only refer to a few of the figures that have been collected in this subject:

"Out of 252,544 persons committed for crime in England and Wales, during a series of years, 229,300, or more than 90 per cent., were reported as uneducated."

"In the Ohio penitentiary, out of 276 inmates, nearly all were reported as ignorant, and 175 as grossly so."

"In the Auburn prison, New York, out of 244 inmates, only 39 could read and write."

To come nearer home: According