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***INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION,***

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**MR. MITCHELL'S LECTURE.**

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# A LECTURE

ON THE SUBJECT OF

## COMMON SCHOOLS,

DELIVERED BEFORE

THE NORTH CAROLINA

*INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION,*

AT CHAPEL HILL,

JUNE 26, 1834.

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1834.

## LECTURE.

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*Mr. President and Gentlemen of the Institute:*

I WILL, with your leave, inform this audience, that our appointments, for this occasion, are two in number. An annual address with which we hoped to be favoured from a gentleman of such talent and ability, that had he not been called by other engagements to a distant part of the country, their taste and judgment would have been fully satisfied. Secondly, a lecture on common schools—a sort of after-piece, of less substantial materials—of lighter texture—and a brevity which but for its relation to the other, that has just been stated, would, I fear, appear unseemly and indecorous.

It is remarked by Sismondi that some of the great revolutions which have changed the condition and character of nations attracted no attention whilst they were in progress. The agents by which they were effected were despised as insignificant, and proceeding slowly and in silence, they were already far advanced towards their accomplishment before they were known to have commenced. When generations separated from each other by an interval of many years were compared, men discovered with surprise that the existing population of a State or Kingdom were in condition, sentiment and conduct a different race from their fathers.

Certain obscure inhabitants of the German cities along the Rhine, whose names have hardly escaped oblivion, seeking to multiply copies of books without the labour of repeated transcription, fell upon the invention of the art of printing. They aimed only at an enhancement of the profits of the occupation from which they derived their subsistence, and little suspected the amount of influence they were exerting upon the destinies of man through all succeeding time.

Some of the intelligent observers of the progress of events whom I have the honour of addressing, are probably not aware that in our own day provision has been made for extending the triumphs of this art, and producing, by means of it, important changes in the structure and condition of society. Especially is this true in relation to our own country. Perhaps it is not too much to say that we are in the midst of a revolution. Not only have the seeds of great improvements been cast into a prolific soil, but the fruit has already, in some instances, been gathered. The changes to which we refer have also a very intimate connexion with the objects for which we are associated as members of the Institute of Education.

From the date of its invention the art of printing advanced rapidly to a high degree of excellence. The early editions of the classics are still admired as specimens of typographical elegance as well as accuracy. It then remained stationary, or

nearly so, for about three centuries. Perfection was supposed to be, if not actually attained, at least so nearly approached in its different processes, that material improvement was neither attempted nor hoped for. Yet within the last twenty years the labour and expense of printing on an extensive scale and with a large amount of capital embarked, have been so far diminished as to have reduced to one-third of their former cost all the great standard works of English literature.

Whilst improvement in the methods and operations of printing have been tending to the result of rendering books cheap and accessible to persons in the humblest circumstances in whatever part of the world, a cause of a totally different character has been contributing, and is destined hereafter to contribute largely to the production of the same effect in the United States.

It is known to those who have turned their attention at all to the manufacture of books, that the wages of the compositor or person who arranges the letters in the order in which they stand on the printed page enters as an important item into the cost of their production. In this country it may amount to one half, or even more; and as it is a fixed quantity—remaining the same whether the edition of a book be large or small—it follows that the expense of printing a great number of copies does not increase with, or in proportion to the number. There is a great advantage in large editions. The price of each copy, including the expenses of paper and press-work and a small fraction only of the wages of the compositor, is reduced and brought within very moderate limits.

On this account, that people are to be regarded as unfortunate whose language is confined to a small number of persons. Their literature will almost necessarily be barren—their books few in number, and those expensive. The population of the North-eastern corner of Spain and of the Highlands of Scotland who use the Basque and Gælic tongues, are in this predicament. The Bible and a few small volumes of devotion, popular poetry, medicine and husbandry, will exhaust the catalogue of their best furnished libraries. Men of science have to struggle with the same kind of difficulty. Mathematicians, chemists, entomologists, botanists, and others that might be enumerated, constitute a number of distinct nations, employing a language with which the rest of mankind do not care to make themselves acquainted, and the books they can venture to publish are few in number compared with what the interests of those sciences demand, and those few exceedingly costly.

The population of this country has now reached a point where this kind of embarrassment—so far at least as the great body of our literature is concerned—has begun to disappear. At the close of the Revolutionary War, a high degree of enterprize was implied in the publication of a book which will now be committed to the press in perfect security that the investment will be profitable and reimbursement speedy. The increase of our population is going therefore to co-operate with the improvements in the art of printing in depressing the price of books very far below what it was even a very few years ago. With the funds which we have exhausted in the

purchase of a few volumes, a man of the next generation will provide himself with what may bear the name of a library—and before our numbers shall have reached fifty millions, (a day not far distant,) every work having any pretensions to merit will be brought into the market, in the certainty that somewhere in the long windings of the Atlantic coast—of the Mississippi, and its tributary streams—on the Eastern or Western declivity of the Alleghany, purchasers and readers will be found. Our literature will have a cheapness so far as the price, and a richness so far as the number and variety of the volumes in which it is contained are concerned, unequalled by that of any other people on the face of the globe.

I am apprehensive that these minute details respecting the art of printing and the price of books will be regarded by some persons as an awkward and impertinent introduction to an address before the Institute of Education. But it will perhaps be admitted as an apology for them, that those considerations of economy which may be scorned and neglected under other circumstances, become objects of paramount importance when the means of extending the benefits of education to the whole population of a country become the subject of discussion. What is in itself trifling and contemptible, acquires a character of magnificence if it be found to have a bearing on the well being of millions.

When the attention of our citizens is urgently drawn to the subject of popular education, their minds recur at once to the past. Neither the generation now upon the stage, say they, nor their fathers, enjoyed those advantages of learning which you represent as indispensable. A few weeks or months spent at an old-field school constituted the whole of their literary education. They are not without their deficiencies; but they do, with decent prudence and judgment, manage their own private affairs, and watch over and secure the public weal. It becomes needful, therefore, for us to show, not merely that the times and circumstances are changing, but that they are already changed. By reason of the greatly diminished expense of the manufacture of books they are about to exert a much greater influence than ever, heretofore, on the character and condition of mankind. They are the lever of Archimedes that is to move the world. Our own country, especially, is destined to be inundated with them under every variety of form, and on every variety of subject; and, unless we will consent to fall into the back ground and allow the people of other sections and States to outstrip us in the career of improvement, education must be attended to. The case does not involve a question of expediency, but has a character of strong and overwhelming necessity.

It may be doubted whether this multiplication of books be not an evil. If it be such, it is an evil that is beyond our control. We may stand upon the bank of the torrent, and utter loud lamentations, as we see it pour over its banks, but it will continue to swell and sweep on. If mischief is apprehended, it can be prevented in but one way—by giving greater extension and accuracy to that education which has hitherto been scanty and imperfect. With the mere ability to read; a rich and varied

literature before him, but without the information necessary to guide his selection and give accuracy to his judgment, a man's condition will be little better, than if, when labouring under disease, and ignorant of medicine, he be left in the shop of the apothecary to swallow a potent remedy or a fatal poison, as he may happen to lay his hand on the one or the other. Such a man is the very material on which the unprincipled and designing will delight to act. But strengthen his mind by culture, and store it with knowledge, and you place him beyond the reach of danger.

But it is easy to enlarge on the importance of education, and to establish its necessity, by convincing arguments. A more difficult task awaits us in the discussion of the methods by which it may be rendered general and its benefits shared by all ranks and orders of society. It may indeed be stated, very briefly, that if we will give greater extension and effect to the scheme of education at present in use amongst us, a larger amount of the time, labour and annual income of the population of the country must be devoted to this object; and that, if thus devoted with perseverance and skill, there can be no doubt that the result desired will be realized. But how, and from whom, shall the funds destined to the purposes of education be collected, and how distributed and applied. The case evidently, not only admits, but demands, the interposition of the Law-giver— and for two or three different reasons.

Where the consequences of neglect in the discharge of parental duties soon manifest themselves, it is not, in most cases, expedient for the State to interfere in behalf of the child. If the poor man intermit those labours by which his family is supported, hunger soon looks in at his door, and his heart is rent by the voices of his children clamouring for bread. He will be impelled to his task, however ungrateful, by a feeling more intense than a dread of the penalty which the laws of his country assign to a neglect of his duty. That the public authorities should enforce the cultivation of the earth, or a diligent application to the mechanic arts, is therefore unnecessary, and in this country at least impracticable. It is said that the Dutch, when a man will not labour, put him into a cistern, furnished with a pump— set the water to running upon him, and then leave him his election, between pumping himself clear and strangling. But if this method were introduced amongst us, it is to be apprehended that one half the community would be kept busy throughout the year in making cisterns and pumps for the other.

But in many cases a parent will provide his child with food and clothing, whilst he neglects the cultivation of his mind. Education is a plant of slow growth.— Though it may blossom and give fair promise, it does not produce much fruit till after the lapse of fifteen or twenty years. Men are not fond of labouring for so remote a return. As the boy, when he is grown to be a man, is to exert an influence, either good or evil, upon the society of which he is a member—that society has a right, in self-defence, to compel the father to allow his son time, and to such extent as his property will admit, the means, of obtaining an education.

But further: in the establishment and support of common schools, individual enter-

prize can effect but little—there must be co-operation. Nor can this be safely left to such arrangements as the parties concerned shall be led, under the influence of the common interest they have in the matter, to make with each other. When a settlement is small, it often happens that the amiable passions of anger, envy, hatred, with others of lesser name, kindly come in to swell the numbers of a scanty population, and a man will choose that his children shall never know a letter, rather than share the benefits of education with the children of the person from whom he may have received some trivial insult. The iron chain of the law is here required, with its wholesome girding, to bind these jarring elements into a single, if it be not a peaceful and harmonious mass—to communicate certain limited corporate powers, and prevent what is so important to the welfare of the child from being left to the result of a long and friendly negotiation.

In settling the amount which each individual shall contribute to the fund destined to the support of the school, it does not seem to be needful to enquire very solicitously, how many children he may have to share in its benefits, nor to exempt him, though he be childless. His ability is the principal point to be ascertained. The general diffusion of knowledge is of such advantage to all, though its beneficial effects reach some by direct and others by indirect channels, that, like the frame of government under which we live, it may claim a general support.

I am well aware that it is a maxim, perhaps an axiom in the books of law, that a man's house is his castle and his plantation his little kingdom, of which he alone is the sovereign Lord, and in the possession, management and disposal of which and of whatever it yields, he cannot be interrupted or interfered with, without manifest and great injustice. It is undoubtedly *best* for all ranks and orders of men, that we should be permitted to acquire property; to hold it by the tenure just described, and transfer it to others, to be thus held by them; and those are the enemies of the human race who advance and advocate a different doctrine. But let us distinguish between absolute rights and such as the public welfare requires that we possess. It has never yet been my good fortune to meet with the original title-deeds by which the God of Nature conveyed to one of his creatures an absolute and perfect property in a single acre of the soil of this land. If, then, the public good require that every man be protected and defended in the possession and enjoyment of his estate, and if it further require that some inconsiderable portion of his income be diverted from the purposes to which he would apply it, to meet the expenses of general education, let not such disposal of it receive the name of injustice. The State has a right to specify the terms and conditions on which protection shall be granted and possession allowed; nor is it more reasonable for a person to refuse to contribute to the fund destined to the support of common schools, because he has no children to send to them, than to object to the payment of those taxes by which the criminal law is upheld and executed, because its penalties are to be inflicted upon another man, and he is not to experience in his own person the joys of whipping, cropping, branding, strangulation, and imprisonment.

The Legislature may interfere with advantage, and without passing the bounds of justice, in the business of education, to the extent of clothing the counties, or other smaller municipal divisions established for this particular purpose, with the power of imposing taxes for the support of schools to a limited amount, and according to the plan of assessment already in use for other purposes. It may then enforce the maintenance of a certain number of schools by the imposition of penalties in case of neglect, and beyond this its action will be neither profitable nor expedient.

Some persons have a magnificent scheme for sustaining schools altogether by funds drawn from the State Treasury. It suits their convenience and habits much better to lie upon their backs and rail at the Legislature for not sending a schoolmaster to educate their children, than to get up and apply their own shoulders to the wheel. If a vote of the Legislature could call millions of gold and silver from non-existence into being, or if their voice had even half the potency of the lyre of Amphion, and could make tall pine trees descend from their elevation and arrange themselves into comely school-houses, we would ourselves be foremost in invoking their aid. It would appear from the tenour of certain orations on this subject, to which we have listened with wonder, as we have heard them uttered with warmth and apparent sincerity, that the Legislature have the ability, without increasing the burthens of the people, to extend the benefits of education to every remote village and settlement in the country. But there is no mystery in the case. A warrant upon the treasury for one hundred dollars, to pay the salary of a schoolmaster, will make just as great an inroad upon the amount of funds in hand as if devoted to some other object.—When the vaults of the treasury are exhausted, they must be replenished by the tooth-drawing process of taxation, or by some equivalent. If the State is to sustain common schools, funds for this purpose must be drawn from the pockets of the people—must be part of the annual product of their labours—drawn from them for the express purpose of being paid back again—but in part only; for a part must be retained to cover the expenses of management. And whether it be of any particular advantage to a village or settlement to pay one hundred dollars into the public treasury, that it may receive ninety-five in return, to aid in supporting the schoolmaster, we may leave to the arithmetician who has not gone beyond counting upon his fingers to decide.

The results of the attempts that have been made in other States to maintain free schools by monies drawn from the public treasury, either directly and avowedly, or indirectly, through the medium of a literary fund, are not of a nature to induce us to rush very eagerly into the system. Large sums have been expended in this way by our nearest neighbours—Virginia and South Carolina—and good has been done; but at an expense that is not in keeping with the advantage derived from it. Connecticut has a school-fund of very nearly two millions, and is able to pay to her citizens a larger sum for the support of common schools than she draws from them under the form of taxes. And yet it is doubted by many persons who have watched



with care and intelligence the effects of these ample contributions to the cause of learning, whether it were not better that the school fund were annihilated, and the system abandoned. Massachusetts, with a population of kindred habits and character, but without a school-fund, has better schools, and without feeling the burthen.

The only effect of the system is to convert the population of the State into a joint stock company for this particular object. The best writers on political economy represent, that such companies are always an expensive, and often an unsuccessful agency for the transaction of any business. And for this reason, that no one is thoroughly interested in watching over their concerns; preventing fraud and embezzlement, and following on with promptitude, where a prospect of profitable investment is opened. They have this character in a higher degree, in proportion as they are larger. The United States pay more liberally, in general, for services rendered, than a single State—the State has work executed at higher cost than a county—and a county will be less happy and successful in the transaction of business than an individual. The business of maintaining schools will, therefore, be conducted on the most economical plan, when the eagle eye of private interest is watching over it, and superintending both its collections and disbursements.

The only institutions that can with propriety claim the direct and efficient patronage of the government are such as private enterprize or even the co-operation of a few individuals is not competent to establish and support. Of these, an University may furnish one of the fairest and best examples. In regard to every thing else, it is best that the people should be thrown, and should regard themselves as thrown, upon their own resources—and for this simple and sufficient reason, that, after all the ambiguity we may employ, and the name of literary or other fund we may give to the machinery we use, the people have to bear the expense, and can accomplish the desired object in a cheaper and better way than any in which it can be executed for them.

But here the very worthy and excellent gentlemen by whom I was designated to the duty I have the honor of fulfilling, will perhaps exclaim with indignation, that the production of arguments, and the establishment of conclusions, such as these, were not the objects of the appointment. We wanted you to shew how decent schoolhouses can be made to rise spontaneously out of the earth; schoolmasters be taught to live upon air and clothe themselves, with a mist or vapour, so as to need no support from us; and how, instead of rain, we may get now and then, in the course of the summer, a shower of spelling-books. As I have wandered so far from the train of thought by them regarded as the only proper one, they will perhaps declare this discourse of mine to be a mere lecture as it were about nothing at all—and even compel me to lecture again—a misfortune in which I should hope my audience would grant me their pity and sympathy, as I can assure them they should have mine. To escape, if possible, so great an evil, I must propose some plan by which the existing facilities for acquiring an education may be increased without an enhancement of the expense.

Mawe informs us, in his travels in Brazil, that as the Portuguese proceeded in working the gold mines of that country, they fell in with certain pebbles of moderate size, which they were led to collect and preserve as curiosities merely, without attaching any value to them, and which they used as counters in their games of chance and skill. At length, some person observed that these pebbles resembled those brought from India to Europe; which, after being cut and polished, are attached as brilliant ornaments, under the name of diamonds, to the robes of Princes. These stones from Brazil proved on trial to be diamonds.

I have long been of the opinion, that we have amongst us a treasure, corresponding to these precious gems from the Brazilian mines, which may be made available for the purposes of education—which is before our eyes from day to day—and yet, hardly a person beside myself appears to be fully aware of its transcendent value and excellence. This treasure is the female sex—which I might, perhaps, claim as my own by the right of first discovery. And here I must beg those fair maidens who grace and animate our anniversary by their presence, not to take the alarm, under the idea that they are going to be requested to become instructresses in the common schools. Will they have the goodness to attend particularly to the exact nature of the illustrations we have employed. It is the diamonds that are yet unpolished, that we propose to devote to this occupation—not such as to native brilliancy have already added all the radiance and beauty which the most exquisite touches of art can communicate. Abandoning metaphor, we refer to those who are so elegantly described and characterized by one of our American poets, as “Brown-corn-fed nymphs”—young females, born in humble circumstances; without property, and whose honest industry is the only fund to which they can look for a maintenance.

The invention of certain articles of machinery used in the cotton factory has rendered those occupations of spinning and weaving, which in the most palmy days of Greece and Rome were the pleasure and the pride of their fairest and proudest matrons—the Andromaches, Penelopes and Cornelias of ancient story—a mere useless waste of time. The labour of females in these employments is under existing circumstances worth next to nothing.

Willing as far as possible to give a practical character to these remarks, I have accumulated a considerable mass of facts respecting hanks and cuts of yarn; how many can be spun, and how many woven up in a day, and the value of the whole when the task is completed; and by the application of the principles of the transcendental geometry to these facts, I hoped to ascertain what a young woman may regard as the probable remuneration of her labour for a year. But fearing that if I allowed myself to enter upon these sublime subjects, I might be so far overcome by them as to neglect Horace's precept—

*“Seruetur ad imum.*

*Qualis ab incepto processerit!”*

and fired with the theme, might break out into a sweet strain of lofty and impassioned poetry, I determined to avoid the dangerous topic. Of the general state of the

facts, however, there can be no doubt—that many a female, who is now homeless, friendless, helpless—ready to accept the hand of a man whom neither her understanding nor her heart approves, as a means of escape from still greater evils—might, with a little instruction, command a home; be independent of cold-hearted relatives, and looked up to with the affection due to a second mother by many a child, indebted to her for a plain but competent education. All this would be accomplished, and the benefits of learning diffused widely through the country, with hardly any expense—with a trifling addition only to the amount of wages these persons are now receiving.

In the Northern States, the young females find employment in the factories, and General Jackson, when he visits that part of the country, makes his triumphal entry into the towns where their operations are carried on, through files of factory girls a mile or more in length. Should he favor North Carolina with a visit, I would have him welcomed at the Virginia line by a mile of schoolmistresses, each with a dictionary and spelling-book under her arm, and the Governor of the State, or President of the University, (as one or the other could procure himself, by active electioneering, to be elected to that high office,) at their head.

I may be met here with the objection, that females would be unable to manage the raw, unpolished and refractory materials of which our common schools are likely sometimes to be composed. On this point, I may appeal to the more venerable part of my audience—those who bend their awful brows like Jove in the halls of justice and legislation, and whose nod decides the fate of men and States, and demand of them whether there is likely to be any incapacity to *rule* and *govern*. But as this may prove a delicate subject of inquiry, I will state a little the results of my own experience, and mention, that one of the severest, most soul-subduing and effectual castigations I ever received at school was applied by a very small and delicate female hand.

But should a want of vigour in the instructresses in controlling the population of their little empires, render necessary the occasional interference and co-operation of the parents of the children, this is the very result which, beyond almost every other, is to be desired and hoped for. The little interest they excite is a principal cause of the small advantage derived by the rising generation from the existing institutions established for their benefit. A man will know the name and countenance of the person he employs as an instructor for his children; be able to say that the school-house lies in a given direction, because that way runs the path along which the negroes went with the wagon to assist in building it, and that path his children take when they start for school in the morning, or he helped to raise it with his own hands, and knows well its situation and magnitude—but of the mode of instruction adopted, and the progress made there, he is content to live in ignorance. Why should the child trouble himself about that which occupies so few of the thoughts of the father? Whilst we would ascribe the very superior efficiency of Sunday Schools in no inconsiderable degree to the particular favour and blessing of Almighty God, rewarding a holy and excellent labour of christian charity; the circumstance that so many, young and old, are embarked in the enterprize, watching over its progress and

urging it on, contributes beyond doubt to stimulate the industry of the child, and aids in securing the actual result.

*C'est le premier pas qui coute.* The entrance on almost every new scheme of action is embarrassed with distressing difficulties. Those encumbering the scheme proposed would soon disappear, and other beneficial results, not less important than those immediately in view, might be expected to follow.

There are two kinds of education. One is derived from books, and requires only time, talent and industry for its acquisition. It is that which is in view when enquiries are made respecting popular education, and the best means of conducting and accomplishing it. The other is obtained by commerce with mankind, and is such as sharpened the intellect of the ancient Athenian, who without literature was nevertheless acute, able and ready to detect any fallacy presented to his understanding, and with a taste which in delicacy and correctness is not surpassed by that of the most accomplished scholars of modern times. In the towns, villages and populous settlements, as also in the persons of the wealthy who have opportunities of intercourse with the world, both are accomplished, more or less, perfectly together. But in the less fertile districts, where habitations occur only at distant intervals, the knowledge derived from books is wanting through the want of an instructor to communicate the first rudiments of learning, and the mind brought into collision with mind but seldom—stagnates. Could the population of our country be thoroughly aroused and interested on the subject of common schools, they would themselves furnish an opportunity and occasion of intercourse between families and neighbouring sections of country—such as neither the muster, the tax-gathering, nor any other assembly of the people does afford, for that interchange of thought and feeling which operates almost as powerfully as books themselves in the diffusion of a spirit of information and intelligence.

Who is the christian philanthropist by whom this great work is to be accomplished, I know not; whoever he may be, his name will merit a place on the roll of true fame and greatness but just beneath that of Howard. The exertions of the Institute in this good cause are meritorious; but it is not, after all, by the appointment of a person to rise up on the day before Commencement, execute the annual roaring on the subject of education, and sit down, that the work is to be done. Warmer hearts, and more faithful and laborious hands than have been yet engaged, are necessary, or all our past exertions will prove unavailing.