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ART. 3.—A FEW OBSERVATIONS, ON THE IMPORTANCE OF AIMING AT THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SOME GENERAL SYSTEM OF EDUCATION, IN CANADA, AT THIS TIME, 1841. *By* DANIEL WILKIE, LL.D.

[Read, 20th February, 1841.]

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To address a Literary Society, on the importance of education would be exceedingly out of place, and, indeed, altogether superfluous. The very fact of our existing Association, proves, that we are penetrated with a conviction of the momentous consequence of intellectual improvement. Yet, it is possible, we have not considered, in all its extent and magnitude, the importance of using our utmost efforts to extend the benefits of education among all who inhabit the same country and live under the same laws with ourselves. And, even, if we have fairly appreciated the vast importance of this subject, there may still be circumstances which render necessary a deeper and more intense consideration of it.

1. Among the circumstances that might render this necessary, may be reckoned, the very considerable length of time that must elapse, before institutions for education, even when in full operation, can produce their *natural* and appropriate effects. Education is commonly considered to commence about the age of five or six, and, in some shape or other, cannot well be longer delayed. It may be supposed to be concluded about the age of sixteen or eighteen. And, when it is recollected, that six, eight, or even ten years more, may gene-

rally pass before a young man studies his profession and establishes himself in the world; it may be fairly allowed, that a quarter of a century is not too large an allowance of time for the best and maturest systems of education fully to develop their effects.

This may, possibly, be one reason, why no progress has hitherto been made, in this country, on this all-important subject. Those who brought forward the question to public attention, about fifty years ago, probably expected, that they had, by their exertions, given a footing to the subject. They possibly believed they had given it an introduction, and, that it would, henceforward, work its way. But, their hopes, if they were such, have turned out fallacious. Half a century has passed away, and no progress has been made. Dear-bought experience has taught us, that, unless some effective, and general co-operative system is adopted, and when adopted, persevered in; no real, no visible, no effectual improvement can be communicated to the public mind. The expectations of the benevolent will still continue to be disappointed. The only progress made, will continue to be brought about by private individuals, and the great sacrifices which intelligent parents are willing to make for obtaining such instruction for their children as a country so situated can afford.

2. Another circumstance, which renders our attention to this subject not a little necessary, is the mixed form of government under which it is our happiness to live. Those who live under despotic governments, seem to have little need of education at all. Indeed, the most prevalent opinion in this case, has been that the less education they have, the better. This, however, is a most fallacious opinion as far as individual happiness is concerned. But, as far as their co-operation with the govern-

ment is concerned, it is perfectly correct ; their only duty to such a government, is to obey ; and, their observance of it is not likely to be improved by any education they can receive. Under a republican government, on the other hand, some instruction is unquestionably requisite, to prepare the mind for the performance of the numerous civil offices, which in such circumstances, it falls to every one's turn to perform. Yet, the essential, pervading principle of such governments, that all men are equal, is easily learned ; scarcely any instruction is necessary to impart it ; in such situations, it springs up spontaneously, is learnt and understood without an effort. And, it may be observed, that, the overpowering reason which, under such forms of government, urges men who love their country, to labour for the dissemination of knowledge, is to prevent the evils and confusion that so readily spring from the ebullitions of the uninstructed popular will. They regard education as a sanative principle : as a preventive of evils, which are inseparable from uninformed minds when endowed with power.

Under a mixed form of government, a higher degree of intellect is required than under a republican. The variety of civil offices which an individual has to perform, is equally great. To be fitted for the performance of these, requires an equal degree of knowledge. But, to appreciate its excellencies, to see the innumerable advantages which attend it ; to learn its superiority as evinced by the experience of nations in the records of history, no inconsiderable expansion of mind is required. To study the complicated checks which one part of such a constitution has over another, demands no small enlargement of the reasoning powers. The convictions ensuing, do not, like that of the original equality of men, spring from

intuition. They require thought, inquiry, comparison. They require attention at the same time, to the experience of past ages, and to the present workings of the constitution itself. It is vain to expect, that men will feel persuaded of the superior advantages of such a government, unless the means of information are put within their power, and their minds furnished with some facilities in the use of them. Peculiar causes may, at times, operate such a conviction, but, without the necessary instruction it is not natural to expect its prevalence, or to hope that it will be permanent. To provide instruction is an act of indispensable justice to that large class of persons whose views are usually of limited extent, whose pursuits in life are unfavourable to extended reflection. We can never be said to withhold from them the means of instruction, unless we forbid their inquiries; but to omit to afford them these means, is an indication of an egregious want of that spirit of benevolence which it is becoming in every man to entertain towards another.

The principle of self-preservation, essential to every government, not less than immediate duty to its subjects, requires it to provide for their instruction. Every government, founded on the public good, must possess, and put in practice, this self-preserving principle: for, otherwise, it must leave the happiness of its subjects a prey to every disturbing commotion. One of the most effectual means that a mixed government can employ for securing its own permanence, is, to provide institutions for general instruction. Thus, only, can a knowledge of its numerous advantages be obtained, and the consequent preference be felt by the public mind. Thus, alone, can that sympathy with its measures be secured, which will render its support cordial, universal, and undisputed. Till that sympathy is obtained, no government is secure.

3. An additional and rather pressing circumstance, on account of which it seems proper to bring the subject before this Society, is, the infinite importance of establishing a good system of education. Even, if we were all equally, and all well convinced of the importance of this subject, yet, the consideration of the best means of effectuating the object still remains to be taken into account. What are the most likely means of accomplishing the object, and, what is the course of instruction which it would be best to adopt? These are questions which naturally present themselves to the enquiries of an Institution such as we form. These are questions that might naturally be put to us by an administration busied with the subject, and, to which, for that, as well as for other reasons, we ought to endeavour to be prepared to return an answer. They are, also, questions to which it is natural to suppose, that we have all, individually, given some attention. If we can, by combining our views, bring forward something practicable and useful, we should only be fulfilling the just and reasonable expectations entertained of the Members of such an Institution.

It would far exceed the limits of these few brief remarks, to discuss the nature of the course of instruction which would be requisite in the present circumstances of the country. To do any justice to this inquiry, would require a lengthened investigation, on which it is impossible, at present, to enter. When such a discussion, however, may be undertaken, it will be necessary to take into account the whole extent of the subject. The inquiry must embrace elementary schools, for the benefit of all the inhabitants; academies, or schools of a higher order, for imparting the elements of a liberal or business education, and, one or more institutions, of the highest order, for imparting professional instruction, and training teachers for the inferior semi-

naries. The proper organization of such a system of schools, on a graduated scale, would be a work of very extensive detail. The observations, now made, serve but very faintly to sketch the subject. It is hoped they may have the effect to induce Members of the Society, to direct their attention, more steadily than they have done, to a subject, which ought never to be forgotten, till it is once placed on a substantial and arduous basis.

4. There is only one other circumstance, which I would wish, at present, to press upon your attention ; and, I do it, under the deepest impression of reverence for the gravity of the subject, and of deference for the different and interfering opinions entertained respecting it. If it is enquired, what is the cause which has so long delayed the establishment of a proper system of education, we can hardly fail to perceive, that the principal cause is the great diversity of opinions entertained on religious subjects. When, along with this great diversity, is conjoined, the great anxiety of each denomination to have the system of education so modelled, as to promote its own theological doctrines ; then, the difficulty really becomes almost insurmountable. Had not this difficulty stood in the way, it can hardly be doubted, that a general and efficient system of instruction, would have been, long ago, introduced. But, the contradictory demands of so many claimants, has, hitherto, defeated every scheme that has been proposed.

In making these observations, I hope, I shall not be supposed to speak with the slightest disrespect of any of the religious bodies existing among us. The error to which I allude is common to them all, not excepting that to which I have the happiness to belong. In order to overcome the difficulty, if it is ever to be overcome, we must view it in all its magnitude.

## 22 *Importance of some General System*

The objections, brought by the majority of clergymen, of all denominations, may be easily reduced to one general principle, which they all express in one general axiom. That axiom is this, "Every system of education must be based upon religion ;" or, "Without religion there can be no education." Now, this axiom, as it stands, I, for one, am disposed to consider as incontrovertible. Religion, in one shape or other, must enter into the basis of every scheme of education. It would, indeed, be impossible, without some religious principle, to teach the most common mechanic art. If such an attempt is ever made, some imperfect substitute, as that of honor, or some other, still more indefinable principle, must be adopted. Without dwelling, at present, on the inadequacy of such a substitute, let us grant, at once, the indubitable truth of the axiom, that "Religion must lie at the basis of all education."

Granting, then, the certainty of the axiom, let us see whether it decidedly leads to the conclusion, which the majority of the clergymen, of all religious denominations, have drawn from it. We cannot doubt the truth of the principle : but, it may be possible to question the use that is made of it, the conclusion which it is made to subserve. But, because, we grant the admission of general religious principles to be essential to every school ; does it, therefore, follow, that every teacher of science or of languages, must mix up with his instructions the whole set of tenets held by the religious body to which he belongs ? If this were really necessary, we might very fairly assert, that there never was such a school. Or, is instruction in the whole range of such tenets necessary or essential even in common schools ? There is nothing in the general principle to establish the supposition, that such a concomitant is essential to the existence of these schools : nothing to prove, that it is essential to their useful and effective operation. That it would have been con-

venient, had it been possible, may be admitted. But, that it is inseparable from their existence, and, even of their utility, cannot, in any way, be established. The various denominations of Christians in this country, with a few exceptions, take an oath in the same form. It has never been surmised, that the varying and numerous tenets held by them have any tendency to diminish the solemnity of that obligation. The reason, indeed, is obvious. The solemn obligation of an oath is immediately founded on the Omiscience of the Diety, a principle essentially contained in the faith of all Christians. The same is the case with all the religious principles required for the regulation of a school. The Almighty Power, the ubiquity and other perfections of God, the obligation of truth, of justice, of kindness, of order, are the leading principles, that require continual enforcement in these juvenile institutions; and, they are maintained, without variation, by all Christians. The illustration of the peculiar doctrines of each several church, may be, very fairly, reserved to the institutions belonging to that church.

When M. Guizot was Minister of Education, in France, a very few years ago, I believe, only two or three, one of his directions to the teachers throughout the kingdom was to this effect: "Faith in Providence; holiness of life; submission to parental authority; respect for the laws of the Sovereign, and, for the rights of all men: these are the sentiments which it is your duty to develope." Such was the system, on this subject, found necessary in France. Yet, the inhabitants of that country are not so much divided as we are. The same forbearance is, therefore, still more indispensable in our case.

These very few ideas, thrown out in this very brief manner, cannot be considered as doing any justice to the great importance of the subject. They may, perhaps, serve to introduce it