

**DESIDERIUS ERASMUS
CONCERNING
THE AIM AND
METHOD OF EDUCATION**

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Desiderius Erasmus concerning the aim and method of education by William Harrison
Woodward

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concerning
the Aim and Method of Education

by

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at the University Press

1904

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PREFACE.

THE scope of the present study of Erasmus is defined by its title. I have directed attention to one aspect only of his work and personality. That aspect of Erasmus is of profound importance. Indeed it may be reasonably maintained that of all his activities none was more congenial to him, none more characteristic, none of more influence in his own age and subsequently than that which was concerned with Education.

Yet although the limitations of the subject have not been lost sight of, it has been, from the nature of it, necessary to take a wider view of the attitude of Erasmus to the problems of his time than a hasty reading of the title of this book might suggest. For it is obviously impossible to understand and to present aright the Erasmian ideal of the fit training of the young unless the presuppositions upon which it rests are duly examined. Thus a brief historical review of the literary life of Erasmus was called for, though it seemed well to make clear the limits of the purpose for which it was compiled. Much that fills so large

a space in the approved biographies of Erasmus has been in effect ignored, as but remotely affecting the subject of this enquiry. On the other hand I have endeavoured to realise with precision the appeal which Antiquity made to Erasmus and the message which he believed it to convey to the modern world. Compared with this his share in the Lutheran conflict seems to me to be, in a serious appraisal of Erasmus, as unimportant as it was to himself distasteful.

The deepening interest in educational enquiry which marks the present time will, we may confidently hope, extend to the study of the aims and achievements of the educators of the past. Next to the great Italian Masters of the Quattrocento Erasmus makes claim for serious recognition. The actual degree of his influence in Germany and England it is difficult to assess, and writers have differed in their judgments. But if it should be provable that Erasmus left less direct impress upon school organisation or methods than certain of his contemporaries, the reason will be found in the fact that he was on crucial points so far in advance of public opinion, that he took so wide, so truly humanist, a view of the scope of education that in the troubled times of sectarian partisanship his day was not yet. In certain regards we must feel as we study such a work as the *De Pueris statim ac liberaliter instituendis*, contained in English dress in the present volume, that he speaks with a note unexpectedly "modern." As we realise therefrom the depth of Erasmus' conviction of the respect due to the rights of the child we understand, what we may have already suspected, how far a prevalent

type of criticism of Humanist methods has been based upon ignorance of the facts.

It is indeed of the first importance that the student of the history of educational thought should be led to acquaintance at first hand with the men whose doctrines are under discussion. Only upon this condition can the study of the subject be regarded as worthy of serious recognition as an aspect of literary and historical enquiry.

In the study of Erasmus the text is the first, the second and the third authority: and I have built up my exposition upon repeated readings of the treatises, prefaces, and letters pertinent to the subject. The range of Erasmian literature is notoriously immense. To distinguish the works which have proved specially prolific of suggestion is scarcely possible. But two may be here singled out as of first rate importance to students of Erasmus. The *Letters of Erasmus* by Mr F. M. Nicholls carries down the correspondence to 1509: a second volume which is, I am glad to know, to appear very shortly, will include the year 1517. The correspondence of Erasmus so far as it is of biographical interest—in a very wide sense—is presented in an English version, with most careful apparatus of preface and note. Without necessarily accepting every disputed attribution or date, I can affirm that no more valuable aid to the understanding of Erasmus down to the Cambridge period has yet seen the light, whether in this country or in Germany. The second work to which allusion is made is the analysis of the psychological presuppositions of Erasmus' educational doctrine