

**THE EDUCATION OF THE
PEOPLE, OUR WEAK POINTS
AND OUR STRENGTH,
OCCASIONAL ESSAYS**

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The education of the people, our weak points and our strength, occasional essays by J. P. Norris

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EDUCATION OF THE PEOPLE,

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OCCASIONAL ESSAYS,

BY

J. P. NORRIS, M.A.,

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"Modò saltem homines et vires suas atque defectus etiam viciam suarum probè et prudenter nôsse velint : atque aliî ab aliis inversionis lampada, non contradictionis torres, accipiant."—BACON, *De Augm. Scient.*

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CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTORY,	1
II. HOW FAR NATIONAL EDUCATION SHOULD BE COMPUL- SORY,	17
III. NEED OF ONE SIMPLE LAW FOR THE REGULATION OF CHILDREN'S LABOUR,	39
IV. THE REVISED CODE OF EDUCATION MINUTES (1862),	47
V. EDUCATIONAL CONDITION OF STAFFORDSHIRE IN 1858,	57
VI. ADULT EDUCATION AND EVENING SCHOOLS, ?	74
VII. PRIZE SCHEMES,	90
VIII. TECHNICAL INSTRUCTION,	103
IX. GIRLS' INDUSTRIAL TRAINING,	114
X. THE NATIONAL SCHOOL SYSTEM IN IRELAND,	135
XI. MIDDLE CLASS EDUCATION,	145
XII. THE EDUCATION OF GIRLS OF THE PROFESSIONAL AND MIDDLE CLASSES,	159

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CHAP.	PAGE
XIII. THE TEACHERS' DIFFICULTIES,	172
XIV. ON THE MOST EFFECTIVE MODE OF PROMOTING PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY THROUGH OUR PARISH SCHOOLS,	184
APPENDIX I. THE CONSCIENCE CLAUSE,	197
" II. AMSTERDAM PAPER ON OUR FACTORY LEGISLATION,	202
" III. THE WORKSHOP ACT OF 1867,	211
" IV. REPORT ON THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT OF THE PARIS EXHIBITION OF 1867,	215

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

THE following chapters contain the substance of papers written from time to time for special purposes on subjects connected with Education. They pretend to no completeness. Their only merit, if any, is, that they convey the fresh impressions of one who was daily occupied in the examination of school-children.

I was appointed to an inspectorship of schools in 1849, and resigned it in 1864. Five years of comparative leisure have since given me the opportunity, not only of "taking stock," as it were, of my fifteen years' experience as an inspector, but also of testing some of my conclusions in the care of a country parish. A brief summary of these conclusions will form, perhaps, the best preface to this volume.

Let me first speak of the education of the children of "the independent poor"—to adopt the phrase of the Royal Commissioners of 1861—as distinguished from the "pauper and vagrant" children on the one side, and from the children of the "middle class" on the other side—both of these latter classes requiring separate treatment. As regards these children, then, living in fixed homes, my conclusions are mainly the following:—

1. If our purpose be, not merely to teach certain arts of reading, writing, and ciphering, but also to civilise children by wholesome training, the success of our school system, whatever that system be, will depend on the character of the teachers.

If kindly, God-fearing teachers be chosen, the schools will win the confidence of the parents and prosper. If teachers of another sort come to be appointed, the schools will fail, however perfect in other respects be their organisation.

2. Religious men and women will not, in our country, and in that class from which our teachers must be drawn, seek the office of teaching, unless direct religious instruction be included in their work. If direct religious instruction cease to enter into the daily routine, the character of our teachers will be altered for the worse. Therefore, without going into the question whether the *children* might not get a sufficient amount of religious instruction from their parents and Sunday-schools, I am persuaded that the day-school *teachers* would be deteriorated by being relieved from responsibility for this portion of the instruction.

3. For this, and for other reasons, it is very certain that schools which had not a distinctly religious character would not command the confidence of the parents. In the words of the French Minister of Instruction of 1833, "By substituting in schools what is called civil morality for morality based on religion, we should not only be guilty of a great fault towards the youthful population, but should excite most formidable resistance; we should render primary education an object of suspicion, perhaps of antipathy, to a multitude of parents."*

In America, Mr Fraser reports "a growing feeling that more distinctly religious teaching is required; and that even the interests of morality are imperfectly attended to."† In 1857, I spent some months in the south of France. I found the Christian Brothers very generally supplanting the Government teachers in the charge of the schools; and I was everywhere

* *Projet de Loi sur l'Instruction primaire.* 1833.

† Report to the "Schools' Inquiry Commission" on the Common School System of the United States. 1867.

told that the change was due to the strong feeling of the *parents*, unwilling to trust their young children to secular teachers. M. Guizot's prophecy was being fulfilled. Much more would this be the case in England and Scotland.

4. The distinctly religious character of our schools can only be preserved by what is called the "Denominational System;" *i.e.*, by connecting our schools with the *congregation*. Before the creation of the Education Department in 1839, it had come to be a "cardinal idea that the school was an inseparable element of the organisation of a Christian congregation."* The government of that day most wisely adopted this constitution of the day-school which had thus taken root and grown up amongst us. But by its action in subsidising the school of the congregation, the government developed a new idea, which has come to be equally cardinal, *viz.*, that the Nation also has an interest in the school.

5. For twenty-five years these two ideas have been jostling each other; the school managers struggling to preserve the *congregational* character of their schools, the State trying more and more to *nationalise* them. The denominations stipulate that the distinctive religious character of their schools shall be retained; the State requires that the whole population be provided for, and contends that strictly denominational schools can no more cover the area of a population than sixpenny pieces can cover the area of a table,—in other words, that minorities too small to have a school of their own are left unprovided for. The result ought to be, and must be, a compromise. And this compromise is to be found in what is called a *conscience clause*. The true principle of a conscience clause was admirably phrased by Mr Gladstone a few months ago: "Perfect liberty of religious instruction to the teacher; perfect liberty of withdrawing his child from that instruction to the

* Sir James K. Shuttleworth, "Four Periods of Public Education," p. 440.

parent." It was because the Education Department pressed for more than this, and seemed inclined to guarantee the child's liberty by infringing the teacher's liberty, that the conscience clause was so strongly opposed, not only by extreme men, but by many also of the more moderate clergy.*

6. But if the "religious difficulty" involved in a continuance of the denominational system be thus obviated by a conscience clause, there remains another difficulty—its *precariousness*. The denominational system is necessarily a voluntary system; and schools that depend in any large measure on voluntary support, must ever be of precarious efficiency; and can never, therefore, (it is contended,) form the basis of a truly national system of education. Let us see, then, how far we may hope so to recruit and reinvigorate *the voluntary system* as to make it a proper basis for a national education. My belief is that this may be done by giving the parents a more direct personal interest in the affairs of the school of their parish. Why have they hitherto taken so little interest in it, careless about their children's attendance, murmuring at its discipline, grudging the school fee, and often preferring to pay a much higher fee to some inferior private adventurer? Chiefly, I am persuaded, because they have been hitherto excluded altogether from a share in the school management.

The parish school is the successor of the old "Charity School;" the associations of the old "Charity School" still hang around it; and these associations the better sort of parents do not like. The school is not an institution belonging to their own class. It is provided for them by the gentlefolk; they have no voice in its management. The teacher and

* The letters printed in the Appendix to this volume will make my meaning more clear. The modification of the conscience clause therein advocated was adopted in the Duke of Marlborough's Education Bill of the last session, and has, I believe, won the approval of most of the bishops and clergy.