

**ÉCOLE NORMALE
SUPÉRIEURE. AN
HISTORICAL SKETCH**

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Ecole normale supérieure. An historical sketch by A. J. Ladd

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A. J. LADD

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ÉCOLE NORMALE SUPÉRIEURE

AN HISTORICAL SKETCH

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE DE-
PARTMENT OF LITERATURE, SCIENCE AND THE
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BY

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TO

DOCTOR WILLIAM HAROLD PAYNE,

*That Keen Critic, Impartial Judge and Sane
Writer of Educational Literature, this
little Sketch is gratefully inscribed.*

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INTRODUCTION

M. Guizot, in his *History of Civilization*,¹ has put forth the proud claim that France has ever been a sort of clearing-house for European ideas. He has claimed, for example, that before a new idea or principle of civilization could be accepted or made operative in the other European countries it must first have received the endorsement of France. Napoleon's assertion that a revolution in France is sure to be followed by revolutions in other European countries is to the point. Whether or not the boast could be sustained as a whole it is certainly true that many instances could be cited which would seem, at least, to give it color.

It is not my purpose either to defend or challenge the statement beyond calling attention to the fact that for as much of truth as may be found within it there are many good and sufficient causes. The simple matters of soil, climate and mere geographical location, those most formative factors in the development of any people, have here exerted all their wonted influence; so that thus located and thus supplied, throwing out, for the moment, all other considerations, this people must needs have occupied a very commanding position in the onward march of the centuries. And it has. In peace and in war, in political experiments and in social theories, in theological controversies and in educational practices, she has ever played so strong a hand that the eyes of the world have followed her, always with interest, many times with wonder, and often with profit.

In this introduction it is my purpose merely to prepare the way for an intelligent comprehension of the subject under discussion. From the general mention already made I now pass to very hasty survey of some of the most striking features connected with her educational leadership.

In this field the activities of her people may not seem so stirring, they may not have made so much noise, as in some of the others, but yet they have been far reaching and telling. Before the beginning of the Christian era the present soil of France harbored and largely supported the most celebrated seats of learning west of Rome. I find Henry Bernard saying that in these early days Marseilles, at the mouth of the Rhone, was known far and wide as "the dispenser of Greek culture, not only to its citizens, but to disciples from all parts of Gaul and Germany."² He also calls attention to the value of the educational work of the Druids. He says, likewise, that during the early centuries of the Christian era and up to the very downfall of the Roman power, public educational institutions were found in nearly all of the larger towns of the present France. And after the decline of the pagan schools their places were taken by those of Christian origin and conducted in the monasteries and cathedrals.

¹Guizot: *History of Civilization*, 1: 16.

²Barnard: *National Education*, (1872) p. 197.

Later, when, under the repressing influences of asceticism, bigotry and church domination, the dark night-clouds of ignorance had settled down and so nearly succeeded in putting an end to intellectual progress, it was from the home of the Franks that the first rays of light and promise shone forth. Thru the painstaking and intelligent efforts of the great Alcuin, well worthy of being the co-worker of the great Charles, these clouds were lifted. And a few centuries later, with her people thus more nearly ready, we see the Mediæval Universities arise. They develop, play their large part in the upbuilding of this interesting people, and then either pass away or form the basis of more modern institutions. France likewise furnished a most favorable environment for another celebrated institution of these Middle Age centuries—the Teaching Congregation. From their founding up to the early days of the Revolution, when, with a wave of the hand, as it were, they were apparently swept away, nearly every one of the forty or more orders was successfully active in the educational work of France.

The normal school movement, which is now recognized the world over as one of the most fundamental agencies in the development of any nation or people, had its origin in the French mind and first sunk its roots into the French soil. Educational France may well take pride in D emia and LaSalle. True, this work did not attract very wide attention, nor did it continue save among the Congregations, but the institution has scarcely once lapsed either in theory or practice.

The pages of history cannot show a parallel to the educational activity put forth during the great Revolution. With what a grasp of fundamental principles, with what a breadth of view as to the importance of the question, with what a clearness of vision as to the far reaching consequences of the legislation in hand, and with what a clear recognition of the absolute necessity of wise legislation, did the statesmen of the Revolution try to handle the educational problem! How keenly they felt that it meant life or death to their State! Well and truly could Lakanal say: "Hopes the most brilliant, expectations the most universal were those of a new plan of education which should place the nation in a position to exercise worthily that sovereignty which had been rendered to her."³ And as to results achieved thru that agitation and that multitudinous and contradictory legislation: they certainly cannot be summed up in M. Thery's word, "negation", nor in M. Duruy's, equally fruitless, "chimera". Rather does Compayr  more intelligently sum up the situation when he says: "For every impartial observer it is certain that the Revolution opened a new era in education."⁴

It is true, again, that the advanced positions were not maintained tho "a new era in education" was opened. This was due, however, not to the falsity of the conclusions reached but to the repressive hand of monarchical power which never wants an educated people. Note how eagerly and how quickly and how intelligently educational reform has arisen every time the power of that hand has been stayed for a moment. This is strikingly seen after the governmental changes of 1830 and of 1871, and it can be discerned, even, following those of 1815 and of 1848. And the gains they have made have not once been wholly lost, so that, on the whole, progress has continued, now slowly, now rapidly, but always continued, until today France is second to no country in the comprehensiveness of her educational system or in the desire that her every son shall receive its benefits.

The institution which it has been my profit to study and which it is now my pleasure to attempt to describe is an example of the pioneer

³Hippeau: *L'Instruction en France, pendant la Revolution*, p. 411.

⁴Compayr : *History of Pedagogy*, p. 363.

work done by this interesting people. The "École Normale", since 1845 called the "École Normale Supérieure", is one of the most interesting educational experiments ever tried, one which no other nation has ever tried, or probably ever will try, but one which France has somehow found, in spite of manifest contradictions, to be the very corner-stone of her educational progress. Note the salient features of this school and its great dissimilarity to all others will be at once appreciated.

It was not at first, nor has it once been since, an ordinary normal school whose function it is to prepare young men and women for teaching children how to read and write. Not this, difficult as it always is, has been the problem of the "École Normale". Something very different. Indeed, its function is caught sight of in the very name it has borne, "L'École Normale," "The Normal School," "The Superior Normal School". In its first conception it was to form and produce not merely teachers, but teachers of teachers, men themselves capable of directing the work of normal schools. Later, and during the greater portion of its history, there has been added to that first work another, thought by some to be greater yet, even the preparation of the teachers for the colleges of France—college professors.

For students the "École Normale" has taken the choicest and keenest young men of the entire land, already well equipped, academically, for honorable positions in life. It has provided for these the most learned masters and best teachers to be found. It has placed at their disposal the best equipment in library and laboratory facilities that money could obtain. It has made them *interns*, and thus has effectually kept away from them all distractions of the outside world and given them an opportunity for uninterrupted application and unrestricted search for the truth. As students it has made them free spirits roaming at will under wise and efficient guidance. It has therefore been able to turn out men of mark, men who have distinguished themselves and rendered invaluable service to their country not only in the one profession of teaching for which they have been especially fitted, but in every department and activity of the nation's higher, freer life.