

**THOUGHTS ON THE ORIGIN,  
NATURE, PRINCIPLES AND  
PROSPECTS OF THE  
TEMPERANCE REFORM**

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Thoughts on the Origin, Nature, Principles and Prospects of the Temperance Reform by Walter Channing

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TEMPERANCE REFORM.

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By WALTER CHANNING, M. D.

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FROM THE AMERICAN QUARTERLY OBSERVER.



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1834.

### TEMPERANCE REFORM.

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THE temperance reform began with a few individuals. They were among the thoughtful, well principled and well educated men of the State of Massachusetts. Intemperance was making progress in our country with a rapidity which exceeded even the increase in our population, and men almost despaired of arresting it. The reformers saw that this vast moral evil could only be cured by a moral remedy. Various other means they knew had been thought of and tried. Legal enactments, excise laws, with penalties for their infringement, were among these. Every thing showed how deplorably they had failed. But for every moral evil God has provided one only and sure remedy, a moral one. This most grateful truth was at length seen in all its relations to the great evil of intemperance, and men looked to it with the full confidence which a great natural principle always excites. The foundations of the undertaking were thus made to rest on an original moral truth. Regard was constantly had, in its earliest movements, to the circumstances of the times in which it was begun, but with this always came the deep conviction of its ultimate success. It was foreseen that it must be vast in its extent, and it was further believed that it was to be permanent in its results. If men could be awakened to the great truth that their religious, their moral, and their intellectual nature, was a

possession of incalculable value, and that in the highest cultivation of that nature was their truest felicity, it was foreseen that the reform which promised and secured such cultivation, had in it the sure promise of being alike extensive and permanent. The earliest movers in the temperance reform saw that their undertaking was a *new* one in an important sense. It was *new* in that men of great consideration in the community, solemnly impressed with the ruinous tendency of intemperance, and with its alarming and hitherto unchecked progress, came out as one man to make open declaration of their convictions, and, in a special manner, to separate and to pledge themselves to the greatest of all causes, the cause of reform. There was nothing fanatical or rash in any of their proceedings. They did not set themselves as judges of other men's affairs. It was for themselves, and for the whole human family that they came forward to show how for each and for all, ruin to soul and body, to mind and estate, was by a paramount necessity the consequence of intemperance.

The attempt then to eradicate this vice, was with these individuals a *new* one. This fact is an important one. It is not stated with so much distinctness in order to direct public attention to the first movers in this great cause. They do not ask it, they do not require it. The fact is important because it teaches, what indeed has been again and again taught before, that the distinct apprehension of a great evil, connected, as in these individuals, with as distinct a notion of the means of eradicating it, contains within itself the essential elements of all great and successful enterprises. This fact, in the present instance, also teaches how long the most important truths may remain unknown, or if apprehended at all, in such a way only as to be productive of no small or permanent practical results.

In the fullest sense of its novelty was the undertaking begun. Its first efforts were directed against the *intemperate* use of ardent spirits. The history of the times furnished

instances of their *temperate* use. Perhaps some of the reformers themselves were instances. This use of them was accounted hospitality, and a man might have been thought deficient in this great virtue who did not commonly so use them. The same use extended to the domestic circle, and the dinner and supper table would have been thought wanting in a daily article of drink which did not furnish some form of alcohol. We may now think of this as hardly possible, but it is matter of sober history. It was in view of these facts that the reformers began. And the novelty of their attempt is thus further proved by the history of the times. The wisdom of their plan is easily shown. It is proved by the circumstance that temperate drinking was recognized as no departure from the strictest morality, and in the instances of all those who confined themselves to the strictest temperance it was no such departure. They understood the rule exactly, and dreamed as little of its violation in their own cases, as do those who now totally abstain, of violating the pledge under the sanction of which they daily and hourly practise this total abstinence.

Was it not wise that no more was attempted in the times we speak of? Has the reform been checked for a day in its onward progress by this distinct reference by the reformers to the circumstances of their times? I answer that it has not. The earliest movements were necessarily slow. Men looked with doubts about the results of the enterprise, and some men with suspicion about the motives of the reformers. There was occasion found in this extraordinary movement for deliberate argument against the wisdom of the undertaking, and the more powerful weapon, sarcasm, was not forgotten among the means employed to defeat it. But neither the opposing circumstances of the times, nor the direct, nor indirect agencies to obstruct its progress, which the reform gave rise to, have produced this effect. It has gone steadily onward, gaining and diffusing light in its whole career.

At first the undertaking moved slowly, and to some it did



not move at all. Its earliest friends were the habitually temperate. They were deeply convinced of the virtue they practised, for the practice was based on principle. But they were most anxious that what was to them so great a blessing might be equally so to all. They knew the power of example, but they also knew that intemperance removed its victim from the influence of this ordinarily powerful motive. He was to be sought then, and to be addressed directly, touching the danger and ruin that attended him. There was no other way of reaching him. The reformers were thus obliged, by the very circumstances of the case, to come out, and to make the public a friend or a foe to their noble enterprise.

But it was not the circumstances of the intemperate only, or chiefly, that retarded the progress of the reform. The public, though fully aware of the extent of the evil, could hardly be supposed acquainted with the remedy. There was no experience to guide them, and the novelty of the reform had none to furnish. There was very much the same feeling evinced towards it, that has been manifested in every period of human history, on the first promulgation of any great plan which has proposed important changes in the customs of society. It has been the same when some mighty mind has appeared, in advance of its age, and promulgated as most important truths, what, it may be, have never till then been brought distinctly before a community or the world. This has been alike the case with both literature and science; and for ages truths of unspeakable value have been looked upon as the dreams of the visionary, and as entitling their authors rather to reprehension than to fame.

Now there is reason for this, and in many cases it is of great use. It is hardly to be supposed that the discovery which is to unsettle a science will be at once admitted; and the doubt which demands further evidence, is not only a pardonable but wholesome skepticism. So with discoveries in morals. The new principle which is to subvert old and

established practice is never unworthily treated when submitted to unprejudiced investigation. The same is true of literature. We may now be surprised at what seems the insensibility of a former age to some of the mightiest achievements of the human intellect. But it was the misfortune of their authors, if it were one, to have lived in advance of their time. There was light, but the darkness comprehended it not. The mere naked fact, however, that the mind had done so much, had in its very self a promise that there would arise those who would apprehend what had been written, nay more, who would find in the immortal record, inspiration for themselves, and even add new light to what they had received ; give to it new directions, and modify it as the changing circumstances of men and times might require.

What has been traced in a few words, is just what has happened in regard to the temperance cause. Men have waited that the experiment might be fairly made, the reform severely tried, before they have felt willing to send in their adhesion. But this very course has made the reform a matter of frequent and serious thought ; and as its principles are too true not to be fully admitted when patiently investigated, those who doubted most when they were first presented to them, have become the firmest friends of the reform. The conviction it may be has been slowly produced, but it has derived a fullness and strength from this very fact, which a more sudden conversion might not have secured. This slowness of the early progress of the reform, has been most favorable to the cause. Many and most important changes have been brought about in its progress. There has been a constant reference to what has been already done, in every new step that has been taken, and the cause has been saved in this way from much that might have appeared reasonable prejudice, had any other course been pursued ; and it has daily and almost hourly made new friends.

To the careless observer this progress may seem to have been different ; and some recent alteration in the measures

of reform, are claimed to have been original, at least independent of what preceded them. For one especially has this character been claimed. The total abstinence principle which has within a few years been introduced, and is now almost universally adopted as fundamental. The pledge is a part of the same measure. These, both of them, have been of vast importance. No true friend of the cause can for a moment question the powerful and successful agency of these principles. They have saved multitudes who were in the sure way to ruin, and thus have kept thousands from entering that fatal path.

Since the universal promulgation of these principles, the cause has gone forward after a manner most extraordinary for its rapidity. A noble foundation had been already laid, and on it the superstructure and crown of the labor rose with a beauty and a grandeur which could not fail to engage the interest and admiration of all the good in every community. These principles were aided in their operation by another very interesting fact, furnished by an anterior period of the reformation. Men were at length so truly satisfied that it was founded in true philanthropy, that they were no longer ashamed to be numbered among its friends. This was a vast step. Nothing is more fatal to any cause, however important it may be, than the ridicule which may incidentally or more directly attach to it. The temperance cause was peculiar for the obstacles it met in this direction. There were embarrassments often, even where open ridicule could hardly be encountered. One does not always like to be at issue with those about him concerning any matter, and especially on a question of doing, or abstaining from doing, that which in one's own individual case may be indifferent, and becomes important only as it may contingently operate as example. Still the case was met with sufficient firmness, but with no ostentation; with no forth-putting of acting upon other or better principles than one's friends. It was an easy and conciliating exercise of