

**THE EDUCATION OF THE WAGE-
EARNERS; A CONTRIBUTION
TOWARD THE SOLUTION OF THE
EDUCATIONAL PROBLEM OF
DEMOCRACY**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649568963

The Education of the Wage-Earners; A Contribution Toward the Solution of the Educational Problem of Democracy by Thomas Davidson & Charles M. Blakewell

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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OF DEMOCRACY

BY

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Educational Ideals," "The Education of the Greek People and
its Influence on Civilization," "Rousseau and Education
according to Nature," "A History of Education," etc.*

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER

BY

CHARLES M. BAKEWELL



GINN & COMPANY

BOSTON · NEW YORK · CHICAGO · LONDON

PREFACE

THIS volume tells how a few lectures that the late Thomas Davidson delivered before the wage-earners on the East Side of New York upon the problems which the Nineteenth Century hands on to the Twentieth led to the formation of a class in History and Social Science, and how this rapidly developed into an incipient "Breadwinners' College," and at the same time became the center of a general social movement for the betterment of mankind. It is the story of an experiment in the education of the wage-earners which is very far from finished, the record of a movement still in process of formation. It introduces nothing sensational or dramatic, offers no easy cure for social ills; it simply tells how the efforts of one man to find among the wage-earners themselves the forces that are tending toward righteousness and truth, and to unite and direct these to a common educational and moral end, were crowned with a measure of success that promises well for the future, and is rich in suggestions for the social reformer, as well as for all who are interested in educational problems.

Mr. Davidson, through a combination of happy circumstances, opened up a mine of enthusiasm and of power for righteousness and self-improvement latent in

the hearts and minds of those whom weary souls and patronizing reformers are wont to call "life's disinherited ones." And the work that he accomplished is unique among modern social movements in that it is a growth almost wholly nourished by the inner vitality of the developing group. In most of our efforts to improve the condition of the struggling and less favored masses, the wealthy contribute, but with their gloves on, the wise aid, but *ex cathedra*, and with a tinge of condescension. At best, noble and devoted men and women, renouncing comfort and ease, cast in their lot with the poor, and with a fine sympathy and loyal devotion become their true friends and inspiring companions. In so doing they discover many practical ways of introducing social reforms, and by carrying these out, as well as by their example, undoubtedly accomplish much good. Yet few, if any, even of these, are aware of the latent power in the hearts and minds of those whom they are helping; and none, so far as I am aware, have made it their main concern to find a way to seize upon this power and to develop and direct it so that it may do its appointed work, and that every individual as he makes progress in his own development may become forthwith, according to his lights, an enthusiastic and efficient helper of others still less favored. Few, if any, have a strong enough belief in the intellectual capacity of those whom they are helping, to employ with them the only sound educational method, which never attempts to make a present of the truth, but ever seeks to elicit it from the self-active minds of the taught.

The agitator and the demagogue, and to some extent even the social reformer, carry their audiences by means of flattery, by appealing to prejudice, and by dealing in vague and ambiguous, if high-sounding, phrases. These are the means by which the unenlightened mind is most easily swayed. We cannot hope to stem the tide of error, which these modern sophists cause, by persuading sober-minded scholars to give occasional lectures to the workingmen. The scholar scorns the sophist's methods, and so he cannot strike home until much preliminary work has been done to lead the workingmen to that habit of mind that puts calm, clear-sighted, and unprejudiced reason at the helm. Even with those who have had the advantage of a good common-school education, with trained students in the colleges, nothing worth while can be accomplished by lectures unless the student follow them up with hard and persistent intellectual effort of his own. Is it not absurd to suppose that those who lack such training can gain truth more easily, can dispense with the hard and slow and painful intellectual discipline that is the condition of all clear thinking? Must we not either frankly confess that the great body of workingmen must remain simply "the masses," shut out from the light of truth, doomed to walk in the darkness of confusion and prejudice, swayed by caprice and blind feeling; or else face the stern fact that there is no royal road to learning for them any more than for others, — and then do our duty by supplying a sound education that shall be within the reach of all who are capable and willing to put forth the effort necessary to win it?

Thomas Davidson appreciated these things, and it is this that makes the record that these pages contain, fragmentary as it is, worthy of the consideration of all who are interested in social questions, and of all who are seriously concerned for the welfare of our country.

Mr. Davidson believed in the workingmen and workingwomen whom he taught. Many of the things that he said to his class, and to its individual members, — and illustrations may be found in the letters printed in this volume, — a superficial and cynical observer would pronounce sheer flattery. But they were not that. Mr. Davidson had a way of seizing what was best in his friends, the ideals which in their best moments they longed to be, and of naming them after these and dealing with them accordingly. This is doubtless one secret of his success: he made the young men and young women feel that the ideal which they were to live up to was their own ideal, their own truer selves; and they were thus put on their mettle to live up to his judgment of them. In this way they acquired a confidence in themselves born of self-respect, and at the same time became more cautious in their judgments. Much of his success was no doubt due to his exceptionally strong and magnetic personality, to his generous enthusiasms, and to his tireless and unbounded loyalty and devotion to his band of wage-earners, — for he gave himself unsparingly for them; much, too, to the fact that he was working mainly with Jews, who, beyond any other race, seem to have a way of keeping the inner fires burning in spite of most untoward outer circumstances. But the main thing, after all, was that he had

discovered a way to bring out and utilize, as the force and life-blood of his undertaking, the energy that was in the wage-earners themselves as organized and directed by their own highest ideals. This is the most encouraging thing about his work. If we can only succeed in this we need not despair of popular education, for we shall at last have found a power adequate to the great task.

I have thought it best to add an introductory chapter, giving a brief account of the author and of his democratic philosophy. This, and the following chapter on "The Task of the Twentieth Century," are reprinted, with the kind consent of its editor, from *The International Journal of Ethics*. In the third chapter, which discusses "The Educational Problems which the Nineteenth Century hands over to the Twentieth," the idea of a Breadwinners' College is developed. This is the lecture that precipitated the movement which the next chapter, "The History of the Experiment," describes. This was the last thing that Mr. Davidson wrote, and it was left unfinished. It is published as he left it. In the fifth chapter are printed in full most of the weekly letters that Mr. Davidson wrote to the central Saturday Evening Class during the summers of 1899 and 1900. These show more clearly than anything else could the relation that existed between him and his pupils, and the spirit that underlay his work with them. I have added a final chapter, continuing Mr. Davidson's narrative from the point where it breaks off, and giving some account of the movement as it has been carried on by these workingmen and workingwomen themselves in

the four years that have elapsed since his death. I have to thank the members of the class for their kind coöperation in supplying material for this portion of the book, and, especially, Mr. Louis Dublin, Mr. S. E. Frank, and Mr. Morris R. Cohen. The bulk of the sixth chapter is taken bodily from the account sent me by Mr. Cohen. I wish also to acknowledge my indebtedness to my friend Professor W. A. Neilson, who has kindly read most of the book either in manuscript or in proof, for his valued advice and encouragement.

In conclusion I would suggest that a reader who is desirous of coming without delay to the story of Mr. Davidson's actual experiment in the education of the wage-earners turn at once to Chapter IV.

THE EDITOR.

Laurel Run, August 5, 1904.