

3187J

T R A N S A C T I O N S
OF THE
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
FOR THE
PROMOTION OF SOCIAL SCIENCE.

BELFAST MEETING, 1867.

EDITED BY
GEORGE WOODYATT HASTINGS, LL.B.,
GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE ASSOCIATION.

LONDON :
LONGMANS, GREEN, READER, AND DYER.
1868.

On Compulsory Education. By the Rev. JAMES M'COSE, LL.D.

WHEN I set out a few years ago, on a tour in Germany, I was as strongly prepossessed as ever a Briton was, against compulsory education. But in visiting the great cities of Prussia, Saxony, and Austria I did not see in the streets the idle children so constantly falling under our eyes in such towns in our country, as London, Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow, Dublin, and Belfast. I was led to inquire into the cause, and found it to lie in the circumstance that the children in those countries were all required by law to be at school. I had occasion to be in the streets at all hours from early morning till midnight: I inquired into the operation of the law; I inspected the schools with considerable care; and, however reluctant to confess, even to myself, that I had been wrong, I felt that my previous inclinations ought to give way, and I have ever since avowed the change of conviction from a narrow insular prejudice to a judgment founded on a wider knowledge. There was much in Germany, much even in German education, which I regarded as surpassed by the corresponding state of things in our country. But here is a point in which our neighbours are superior to us, and I felt that it would be no disgrace to us to look beyond our own things to those of others.

In nearly every civilized country, except Great Britain, there is a law of some kind requiring parents to educate their children. In Prussia there has been a compulsory law for ages, and the consequence is a high standard of education among all classes. In the Prussian army only three per cent. of the recruits were found uneducated, whereas in the British army more than one-fifth cannot read. In every state of Germany, except, I believe, Hamburgh and Frankfort-on-the-Maine, there is a compulsory law. In Holland, which I visited last month, I did not find a positive law enjoining education; but that practical people accomplish the same end by withdrawing relief from paupers when they do not send their children to school. All the cantons of Switzerland, except Geneva, Schwarz, Uri, and Unterwalden have a compulsory system. Italy, since she became free, has enjoined education through all her provinces. In Denmark, Sweden, and Norway parents are exposed to penalties if they leave their children uneducated. Even in Spain, Portugal, Turkey, and the Danubian Principalities the law is proclaimed, though in these countries there is no adequate authority to enforce it.* Crossing the Atlantic I find that in Connecticut a person is disfranchised who cannot read. In Rhode Island a power is given to the several townships to make byelaws for suppressing truancy—that is, systematic absence from school. In Massachusetts, the model state in respect of education, persons neglecting to send their children to school are liable to a fine of twenty dollars. I found as the result of my inquiries in the United States last year, that the desire for education

* There is valuable information on this subject in *Questions for a Reformed Parliament.*

was so strong and universal that there was little need for putting a compulsory law in execution. But the law exists in a number of States, and I ascertained, that, as in Massachusetts and elsewhere cases were occurring of young people, especially from Europe, springing up in ignorance, the authorities were taking active steps to have the law executed. In New York there is a department of police force, called truant officers, especially appointed to look after children who absent themselves from school.

So far as I know there are only three grounds on which compulsory education can be objected to ; *one* is the right of the parent to do as he pleases with his children ; a *second* is that the end can be accomplished by a sense of duty on the part of parents and liberality on the part of the rich ; and, *third*, that public opinion is against it.

(1.) I acknowledge that the parents have certain indefeasible rights of which they cannot be deprived. To them primarily has been committed by God the upbringing of their children. Parents have rights of conscience which ought to be attended to by legislators and others. No state, no priest, no presbyter, has a right to compel a father to send his boy to a school where tenets are taught of which he disapproves, to force a Roman Catholic father to send his boy to a school where he must learn Protestantism, or a Protestant father to send his boy to a Roman Catholic school. But respecting every religious conviction—which I will show can easily be done—I hold that for the public good, and particularly in order to the prevention of evils which would otherwise be inflicted on the community, the State has a right to lay restraint on parents and their children. We impose sanitary restrictions on families, on their dwellings, and on their sewerage, and on open indecencies ; and are we not to be allowed to lay down rules to prevent the formation of a polluted moral atmosphere which produces far worse evils than fever or cholera, an ignorance which genders vice and crime ? We ordain that all children shall be vaccinated in order to prevent the spread of a contagious disease, which used to decimate the population of our land, and are we not entitled, by instilling a good education, to stop so far as we can the propagation of a far more infectious and deleterious malady ? In Great Britain children are required to be registered at birth, that we may know what people we have, and what to do with them and for them ; and I would, by a like State enactment, have every child's name registered on the books of some school, or taught by a private teacher, that he may know what is the duty he owes to the State and to his fellow men. For years past we have been imposing restraints on the employment of boys and girls in factories, and from the seen benefits we are extending the Act to nearly all employments ; and if we thus look after young people to prevent their health from being injured by the cupidity of those placed over them, are we not required to guard against influences which inflict on the mind far greater mischief than premature labour does on the body ? We have already a compulsory Act bearing on the education of children working in factories ; we wish the Act to throw its protection over others who equally stand in need of it.

And there is no difficulty in securing that there be no interference with the religious convictions of parents, under a compulsory system. While the State enjoins that every child shall be educated, it should not enact that it be sent to any particular school; the child may get its instruction where the parent may think fit, in public or in private. Contemporaneous with its compulsory enactments, the State must secure that a good school be established in every district; and in that school there should be "the conscience clause," providing that the child shall not be constrained to receive religious instruction of which the parent disapproves, or, better still, have the special religious instruction at a separate time, as in the excellent Irish system, where the religious instruction is given more solemnly and effectively, just because it is given at a separate and quiet hour. And if there be persons or denominations not satisfied with us, they have full liberty in this land of freedom to combine and provide funds to set up schools according to their own model.

(2.) But then it is said that the evils can be met under the voluntary system. In answering this objection, I am to show that the evils have not been met, and that they are not likely to be met.

I admit that in certain districts of our country the education returns show a very satisfactory state of things. In the parts of our towns where the wealthy, or the better portion of our artizan class, reside; in the rural regions where the squires and the ministers of religion are promoting education separately or in combination; in the parts of Scotland, Ireland, and Wales where religious convictions are strong, the attendance of children at school is very large. In England, 1 in 7·7 of the population, and, in Scotland, 1 in 6·5, are reported as being on the roll of some school. But when we come down from these general statements to examine particular districts and classes, we find a melancholy, an alarming state of things. It has been said that if you take a mile square in the district of St. James's, London, you will find in the *season* a greater amount of intellect than in any other like portion of the world. But, not far from it, I could find you a mile square in London, in which there is a greater amount of ignorance and vice than in any other similar space on our globe. That is the pride of our land—more wealth, perhaps more intelligence, than in any other kingdom; that is the disgrace of our land—more poverty, and vice, perhaps, than in any other country. I do not wish to lessen the wealth of the rich, or the knowledge of the educated; but it is a burning shame that our wealth and our intelligence have allowed our ignorant and vicious masses to sink to so low a level.

In 1865, the means of education were wanting in the diocese of London for between 150,000 and 200,000 children. Every one has heard of the active society which aims at providing education for the poor in Manchester and Salford. The Committee of Council on Education thus sums up its doings:—"Certain defined districts of Manchester and Salford are being visited one after another from house to house. The result for several districts was published November, 1865, and it showed that in every fifteen children between the ages of three and twelve, one was at work, six were at school, and the

other eight neglected. It is probable that a majority of the neglected eight-fifteenths above named do pick up some little schooling between three and twelve years of age, at irregular intervals ; but there is no doubt that the general result is, that there are many thousands of children in large towns like Manchester, growing up and going to work without any school education, and many thousands whose schooling is utterly worthless." Coming to Glasgow, we find that in the rich district of Blythswood there are 7·1 at school ; but then, in the poorer districts, we have in Hutchensontown, 1 in 12·3 ; in Tradeston, 1 in 13·2 ; in Bridgeton, 1 in 14·5 ; and in the whole of Glasgow 1 in 11·1. Messrs. Harvey and Greig report : "The voluntary system has hitherto proved utterly inadequate to effect the education of the masses of the population congregated in our large towns." Referring to the Clyde district, two-thirds of the children of school age are attending no school. "And what are these neglected children doing if they are not at school ? They are idling in the streets and wynds ; tumbling about in the gutters ; selling matches ; running errands ; working in tobacco shops ; cared for by no man ; with parents or guardians over them who would resent as an impertinent interference any care or sympathy that expresses itself in any other way than a gift of money, of clothes, or of bread." I am able, from house to house visitation in more than one district in this town, to say that there is the same state of things in Belfast. I asked the Town Mission to procure me some statistics through their agents. One of them, a graduate of the Queen's University, reports, that he set about inquiring of the parents whether their children were at school, and commonly got the reply that they were ; by which they meant that they had some time or other been at school, or were to be at school some future time. Not satisfied with this he set about examining the children, and he found in a district of 102 families, and these by no means the most degraded in Belfast, that out of 258 children between five and fifteen, only 145 could read, leaving 113 who had received and were receiving little or no education. He visited last week 66 families (not the same as those in the above list), and found 133 children between twelve and fifteen, and of these only 44 were at school on the day he called.

But then it is said that what cannot be done by a sense of duty on the part of parents, may be accomplished by public opinion brought to bear on it, and the exertions of the benevolent. But here again it can be shown that the voluntary system utterly fails. Even in rural districts all over the three kingdoms there are careless parents who keep away their children from school on the most trifling pretences, or who never send them to school at all ; and who have fallen so beneath public opinion that they resist all the appeals made to them by ministers of religion or the benevolent, and are bringing up their children in ignorance and under a hardening process which is sure to make them pests of their neighbourhood all their lives. But it is in towns that the evil appears in the most alarming form. Everyone who has visited from house to house in our cities, knows that in certain districts of all of them there is a sunken population which

cannot be swayed or reached by the motives which influence the better portions of humanity. It consists, first of the worst portions of our town population herding together, and then of the worst portions of our country population driven into towns by their crimes and the force of public opinion. Certain streets, lanes, or districts come to be possessed by this class, and they countenance each other in their degradation; and in the end no others will live with them, except indeed at times certain deserving poor persons driven there by absolute indigence—to find their children allured in a brief space into the crime which rages around them. Into these sinks the population that becomes degraded pours itself; and there filth, beggary, drunkenness, and crime seeth and ferment and emit a malaria worse than fever or plague or pestilence. Out of these dens come the greater number of our paupers, beggars, and criminals. Here are reared the great body of our young thieves and robbers and low prostitutes. Talk of influencing such places and persons by public opinion! In truth there is a public opinion even here, but it is certainly not in favour of education; it is a sentiment against all restraint, against the law, against the police, and in favour of clever deeds of cunning and daring, in favour of the expert young thief and robber. It is a proof that Christianity has not died out among us, that it is yet a living power in our land, the fact that benevolent people in large numbers go down into these dens:—ministers and missionaries, visitors male and female, agents of our destitute, sick and clothing societies, tract distributors, Sabbath school teachers, including ladies and gentlemen who go out from houses and homes where they have every luxury and every refinement, into places breathing infection and presenting moral corruption in its most offensive forms. And all such, provided they go in a kindly and humble spirit, are received—yea, welcomed—not only by the destitute, but by the most criminal. But then, how often have they to return with a sad and sorrowful, at times almost with a broken heart, feeling as if they had only been, as it were, sowing seed on the rock—trying to sweeten the Atlantic by casting buckets of fresh water into it. They easily get the parents to promise to send their children to the school or Sabbath class; next week, or next month, when they go back, they find the children strolling the streets or begging, as they did before. They ask the cause; and are told it is because the parents cannot pay the school fees; well, they promise to pay the pence required, but on inquiring of the teacher they find that the children have attended two or three days and then disappeared—the fact being that the parents required the money earned by the begging or petty errand-work of the children. They are now assured that the children cannot be sent to school for want of clothing; well, the clothing is provided, but when the visitor returns he finds it is pawned. Driven from every other pretext, the mother assures you that she is most anxious to send her young people to school, but that they will not obey her; for through bad training the children have become utterly wild, and will submit to no restraint. Of all

people our charitable people are those who feel most the need of a law of compulsory education, and this to make their charity do any good. There are persons who have convinced themselves that such a law would do away with, or at least lessen, benevolence; but the truth is it would hold out a new motive to philanthropy,—the great hindrance to benevolent exertion in the bad districts of our great cities being found in the helplessness of the work. Give our charitable people a young generation taught to read, and I venture to say that they will labour more than ever, and give more than ever, and feel encouraged in their work; and Sabbath schools, and churches for the poor, and house to house visitation, and tract societies, and young men's societies, and lending-libraries, and lecturing institutes, and penny readings, and musical associations, and savings-bank agencies would be provided, and provided because found to be valued and useful.

I am quite aware that poor schools and ragged schools do so far lessen the evils of the present state of things. But are there not inconveniences arising from poor schools, arising from the circumstance that the children are being trained as paupers, with a sense of dependence on others? In particular, do not ragged schools, where children are fed and clothed, breed a dependent feeling both among parents and their children? I am not speaking against such schools. All honour to those who have set them up. As things now are they are absolutely necessary to keep the rising generation in certain districts from sinking into utter degradation and crime. But, while they lessen the evil, they are not fitted to conquer it. In London there are 30,000 children at ragged schools; but then there are other 30,000 reported as equally fit objects for these charities. Under a properly constituted national system there would be no need of poor schools and ragged schools, for every child would be receiving the elements of a good education, and be in a position to take advantage of any higher education which the State or benevolent persons might offer.

(3.) But then it is said that the public feeling of this country is against it, and that therefore a compulsory measure can never be carried. Now, upon this I have to remark, first, that I am not sure that the public sentiment is against it. I know that many thinking people are in favour of it, and the number of such is increasing every year. Mr. Sellar says that "the great majority of the schoolmasters of Scotland consider that direct compulsory education is almost a necessity," and that "a good many ministers, and some laymen, hold the same views." Thus I further believe, that the lower classes, as a whole, are not unfriendly to it. Mr. Foster, speaking of the Durham collieries, says, "So long as there is nothing to render it equally binding on all, none will venture to make it his own. Parents would be glad of legal enactments to strengthen their own hands and uphold them practically in what they believe to be right, but have not firmness to maintain, as regards keeping their children at school. They say it would be well for themselves if their parents had been obliged to give them education." This I know, in countries where compulsory education is the law, the people are for it. In Prussia I

had to listen to many complaints on the part of the people against their government, but I never heard one of them utter a word against the law which required them to educate their children. I have only further to say on this subject, that so far as public opinion is not right on this subject, it is to be enlightened by information; and this is to be furnished by such discussions as we have at the meetings of the Social Science Association.

But how is the scheme to be executed? To this I answer that it is to be done in this country as in other countries. Let us first agree that a wise law is desirable and a machinery for executing it will soon be found. In towns there are functionaries quite competent to do the work. In rural districts the task may be committed to the parish authorities. In Ireland we have stipendiary magistrates and a police force who could aid. The idea of some people is that with such a law the prosecutions would be very numerous; I believe they would be very few—far fewer than in the collecting of taxes. The people knowing that the law is binding would soon learn to submit to it. Clergymen and others would first deal with the consciences of the parents, and, upon this failing, the law would be called in only when all other efforts had failed; and I venture to say that in behalf of no other law would you have such a concurrence of private conscience and public sentiment.

There is an additional force imparted to all these considerations by the circumstance that the political franchise has now been so extended. This is not the place to inquire whether it was wise or not, all at once so to enlarge the political power of the masses. But this I may be allowed to say as an individual, that I am not afraid of the result, provided that you educate the people. When I was in the United States last year, I found a strong and unanimous conviction among thinking people, that the safety and perpetuity of that country, with its universal suffrage, depended solely, under God, on the people being educated. Hitherto the lowest population in London and our great cities have not been much addicted to politics; the truth is they were so ignorant as not to understand politics, and they had little motive to engage in them. But it will be different now when they, or those with whom they associate, have political power, and are addressed by scheming demagogues, or by wealthy but unprincipled men, ready to flatter or to bribe them for the promotion of selfish or vile ends. I should tremble for the nation under a democracy—provided it is left in ignorance. There would be times when the masses might be tempted to combine for revolutionary and tyrannical purposes. But I have no fear of my country under the Reform Act, provided we have an enlarged education, and the churches of Christ do their duty. My hope is, that the new state of things in which we find ourselves will compel our aristocracy and our churches to combine with the thinking portion of the common people, in demanding the universal and thorough education of the people.