Geo. B. Emerson

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GEORGE B. EMERSON.

GEORGE B. EMERSON, the first principal of the first English High School established in this country, and for more than thirty years the head of the best school for girls in Boston, Massachusetts, was born on the 12th of September, 1797, in what is now Kennebunk, York County, Maine, then a part of the town of Wells. His father was Samuel Emerson, M. D., a gentleman who, in the midst of his professional occupations, always took great interest in the schools of the town, and used his influence in sustaining them at a high point of excellence. Dr. Emerson was a good scholar, and retained through life his early fondness for the Latin and English classics, and his familiarity with them. His son, George B. Emerson, attended the schools of the town during the winter half of the year, but in the summer occupied himself busily, but not severely, with the health-giving labors of the farm and the garden. The advantages of such an early life, both mentally and physically, can hardly be overestimated. They were fully enjoyed by young Emerson, who then formed a habit of steady, vigorous labor, and a love of employment, which have never deserted him, and which, added to abilities of a high order, have enabled him to accomplish so much for the good of society. These early habits also inspired him with a love for botany and other branches of natural history, which has been of immense benefit to him as a teacher, a source of perpetual interest and exalting pleasure, and of healthy recreation. In 1812, he enjoyed, for six months, the instruction of Benjamin Allen, L. L. D., the able master of Dummer Academy, at Byfield, where he learned the elements of the Latin and Greek grammars very thoroughly. His remaining preparation for college was made at home, under the care of his father, and he entered Harvard University in 1813. In 1817, he took the degree of Bachelor of Arts.

The winter vacation at Cambridge, in those days, was seven weeks long. It is now six, and it was the usage then, as now, for young men, who desired to add something to their means of meeting college charges, to teach winter schools in the country, taking four or five weeks out of the term, and so lengthening the period of their absence to ten or twelve weeks. Mr. Emerson began the great task of his life by teaching, in the winter of 1813–14, a school in one of the districts

which he subsequently rejected and but very seldom resorted to. Many teachers, still, would hesitate to adopt the system to which Mr. Emerson's moral judgment finally gave an unhesitating preference and approval. The question is not yet fully decided; but it may safely be asserted, that if all teachers had the intellectual accomplishments, and the weight of personal influence, which distinguish him pre-eminently, there would be no doubt left that the system which employs only lofty and disinterested motives in the training of the young, would infinitely exalt the style and spirit of education, both public and private.

In 1819, Mr. Emerson was invited to accept the office of tutor in the mathematical department of Harvard University, under the late Professor John Farrar, and he afterward performed, for a short time, the duties of Greek tutor. The leisure of a college tutorship, contrasted with the unintermitted labors of the preceding two years of teaching, seemed to Mr. Emerson like a long and pleasant vacation. He was associated with the ablest men in the literary class of that time. It was in the glorious academic days, when the good Dr. Kirkland had surrounded himself with a brilliant circle of professors. The genial and gracious Farrar lectured with the most attractive eloquence on physics and astronomy; Everett, in the early flush of his manly genius, and his vast learning, expounded the beauties and splendors of Greek literature, and gave rich promise of what he was destined to become; the elegant, accomplished, conscientious Frisbie, who had taught the Latin language and literature, with the enthusiasm of genuine scholarship, now devoted himself with equal ardor to the department of moral philosophy and natural theology; these eminent men, and others scarcely less distinguished, made the academic society, to which Mr. Emerson was now admitted, brilliant, exciting, and instructive in the highest degree. No wonder that his mind received a strong impulse, and that his tastes for elegant letters and a life of devotion to intellectual pursuits were confirmed.

Mr. Emerson now had the opportunity he desired of reviewing the experience of the previous years, and re-examining the principles upon which influence and discipline, in the working of a high system of education, should be grounded; and our young tutor, now only two and twenty years of age, came to the conclusion, that the use of the ferule or the rod in school, except in extreme cases of obstinate resistence to authority, should never be resorted to; that only ignorance, or stupidity, or insensibility, proved the use of such a coarse and degrading method of government habitually necessary; and that the excitement of emulation, though sanctioned by the authority of

Cicero and Quintillian, is contrary to some of the clearest principles of the Gospel, and he resolved should an opportunity occur, in his future career as a teacher, to appeal, in the discipline of a school, to a different and higher set of motives than those which were universally resorted to.

In 1821, the desired opportunity presented itself. The English High School for boys, then called the English Classical School, was established that year by the town of Boston, for the purpose of furnishing a better intellectual preparation for the duties of life to the youth of the town who were not intended for a college course. Of this school, Mr. Emerson was chosen principal, with authority to determine the course and methods of instruction and discipline; and he soon satisfied himself that the sentiment of honor, to which he appealed, was not only in itself a higher motive of conduct, but that it was, just in that proportion, a more effective means of influence with the boys than the fear of punishment. He endeavored to check, so far as he could, the feeling of emulation; believing that it is always strong enough without artificial excitement; and he addressed himself to the conscience and the principle of duty, the desire of making a good preparation for the duties of life, and the pleasure of acquiring knowledge and of exercising the intellectual faculties.

While Mr. Emerson was connected with the High or Classical School, he had the good fortune to assist in bringing to perfection, and producing before the world, the most valuable school-book which has appeared in our age—the Mental Arithmetic of his friend, the late Warren Colburn. Mr. Colburn, as he prepared the book, submitted it daily, lesson by lesson, to the test of practice in a private school for boys, which he was then teaching. He proposed to Mr. Emerson to send him the manuscript as it was written, and that the lessons should be given to the classes in Mr. Emerson's school, the pupils of which were more numerous and advanced than his own. The "*First Lessons*" were thus submitted, lesson by lesson, by another teacher, to the same test which he was himself applying. Very few changes were suggested, beyond a little amplification in some of the sections. The whole admirable work existed complete in the mind of the author. It had grown out of his thoughts, and was perfected by his experiments. But it was a great advantage to Mr. Colburn to have the hearty cooperation and the practical judgment of so able a teacher as Mr. Emerson, and one so earnestly engaged in making improvements in the methods of education; and the first public exhibition of its effect upon the powers of the learner was indeed a grateful triumph to the modest and ingenious author.

In 1823, Mr. Emerson gave up the Classical School, with great reluctance, and opened a strictly private school for girls. The result showed, however, the wisdom of the change. A most interesting and important field of labor was opened, and the excellent influence of this admirable school, in enlarging and elevating the system of female education, has long been felt, and its effects will never cease, in the character of the society of Boston, and the wide extent of the social relations of the capital. Mr. Emerson, while deliberating upon the questions that had been pressed upon him, consulted a dignified and excellent lady, Mrs. Eliot, who had always taken a warm interest in his career. Without hesitation, she advised him to become a teacher of girls, and "to do all in his power to show them how to go there"—pointing up toward Heaven; and this advice, thus strikingly enforced, had great influence in determining Mr. Emerson's course. In the spirit of this christian counsel, Mr. Emerson always addressed his pupils as immortal beings, preparing for life in this world, and a higher life to come, and grounded his authority as a teacher upon the authority of Jesus Christ. His constant aim was, first of all, to fill the heart of the pupils with reverence for the laws of God, whether revealed in the Scriptures or discovered by reason; next, to form habits of *self-control*, punctuality, and order, and to establish a profound sense of accountability to God for the proper use of all the talents with which He had been pleased to endow them. Again, he led them to cultivate the kindly feelings, and those courteous manners, which belong to the character of the high-bred gentlewoman. He aimed to make them good scholars, not so much for the sake of scholarship, strictly so called, as for the effects of literary culture upon the taste, the refinement, and the elevation of the mind and character of woman. As to the subjects taught, it was the earnest purpose of Mr. Emerson to fill the minds of his pupils with that kind of knowledge which should enable them to perform, nobly, all the duties to which a woman may be called—the duties of her social position, the duties that devolve upon her as wife and mother, and which relate to the physical, mental, and spiritual nature of those intrusted to her forming care—not neglecting such studies as should supply her with resources for pure and elevated enjoyment in solitude. Such were the lofty aims and motives with which Mr. Emerson entered upon the great and sacred task which lay before him in his new career. The community is now reaping the rich fruits of his long, conscientious, and most successful devotion to this exalted duty—the great labor of his life. He continued in the work until 1855—a period of more than a quarter of a century, during every year of which

more pupils were offered him, on his own terms, than he could receive.

Besides his direct labors as a teacher, Mr. Emerson's talents have been devoted to other, but kindred objects, with remarkable efficiency. In 1827 the Mechanic's Institution was formed for the purpose of exciting a taste for science, as connected with the mechanic arts, and of elevating the tone of thought and inquiry among the young men in that city. Dr. Nathaniel Bowditch was first president of the society, and Mr. Emerson was first corresponding secretary, and was chosen to give the opening address. No lectures were given during the first year. In the second, Daniel Webster gave the introductory discourse, and Mr. Emerson gave the first course of lectures; six lectures upon elementary mechanics. So great was the favor with which this first attempt to give popular and scientific instruction by means of lectures was received, that no hall could be found large enough to contain the persons who applied for tickets, and the introductory discourse and all the lectures of this winter were repeated to crowded audiences. Mr. Emerson was afterward often invited to deliver these lectures, or others, before the lyceums of the neighboring towns. But he felt that all his time was no more than sufficient to prepare for the instruction to be given in his own school, and he uniformly declined the invitations.

In 1830, the American Institute of Instruction was formed by teachers and friends of education. Mr. Emerson took an active part in its formation and in all its operations, was its first secretary, and afterward, for many years, its president. The meetings of the Institute were held wherever it was thought they would have the best effect, or where the most urgent invitations were given by the inhabitants. At these meetings, the condition of the common schools, as well as of all others, was a constant subject of consideration; and, in 1836, a memorial was presented to the Legislature of Massachusetts, drawn up by Mr. Emerson, as chairman of a committee appointed for that purpose. The object of the memorial was to urge the importance of doing something by legislation for the improvement of the common schools, especially by raising the qualifications of the teachers; but apparently no effect was produced at the moment. It was referred to a committee, but no action was taken upon it. In 1837, another memorial, also written by Mr. Emerson, was presented to the legislature, in which the important measure of creating a superintendent of the common schools was strongly urged, and modes by which such an officer might exercise a beneficial influence were pointed out.

These repeated memorials to the legislature, and other causes then

at work in the commonwealth, fixed the public attention upon the subject, and led to the establishment of the Board of Education, of which the Hon. Horace Mann, then president of the senate, was the first secretary. The influence of the Board, and the efficient labors of Mr. Mann, and of his successors, are fully appreciated by an enlightened public sentiment. Of the other causes above alluded to, one of the most powerful was, undoubtedly, the appearance of a series of letters upon the schools of Massachusetts, by the late Hon. James G. Carter. These letters were extensively circulated and read; they were republished in the British Provinces, where, as well as at home, they made a profound impression. Other causes, co-operating toward the same result, were the publications of Rev. T. H. Gallaudet and W. C. Woodbridge, the labors of Rev. S. R. Hall, the lectures of the Rev. Charles Brooks, and the discussions which had taken place, from year to year, in the Institute of Instruction.

In 1831, Mr. Emerson delivered before the Institute a lecture on Female Education; and, in 1842, one on Moral Education. In 1843, he wrote the Second Part of the "School and the Schoolmaster"—the Rev. Dr. Potter writing the First. This work was written on the invitation of the late James Wadsworth, of Geneseo, N. Y., one of the most enlightened friends of universal education, who paid the expense of printing and distributing an edition of fifteen thousand copies. An act of kindred munificence in the late Hon. Martin Brimmer, of Boston, who married a daughter of Mr. Wadsworth, placed a copy of this work in each of the district schools in Massachusetts.

From the first establishment of the Normal Schools in Massachusetts, Mr. Emerson took the greatest interest in their success, and was a frequent visitor. In 1848, he was appointed a member of the Board of Education, and continued to be a most active and useful officer in that position, until he closed his own school, and left the United States for a tour in Europe, in 1855. For two years, 1847 and 1848, Mr. Emerson allowed himself to be chosen upon the Boston School Committee. During these years he gave much time to the examination of the schools, and made strenuous efforts to have the medals for girls, abolished. After deliberate consideration, and full discussion, the committee voted to discontinue these medals. This success was, however, only for a time. The measure was defeated, and the medals restored through the management of an individual who took pains to go round to the members of the committee, previous to the meeting at which the vote was to be taken, and persuade them to promise either to stay away or to vote for the restoration of the

medals. On his way to the meeting Mr. Emerson met one of the committee coming away. On being questioned, the gentleman confessed that his remaining would be of no use, as he had promised, if he voted at all, to vote for the medals. On entering the meeting, Mr. Emerson was surprised to find most of his friends absent. A vote was immediately passed which precluded all discussion upon the question, and Mr. Emerson was defeated, without being allowed to say one word in defense of his measure. This was a serious disappointment to Mr. Emerson, as he had long thought that there was little propriety in urging preparation for the sacred duties of a mother, and the formation of the quiet, disinterested, and self-sacrificing character, which is to gladden, enlighten, and bless a Christian home, by the spirit of rivalry and the love of distinction, which are fostered by medals.

In 1830, the Boston Society of Natural History was formed. Mr. Emerson was one of a few gentlemen who were accustomed to meet at the study of Dr. Walter Channing, and who at length obtained from the legislature an act of incorporation, and thus were the founders of the society. Of this society, which has grown up to be one of the most important scientific institutions of Boston, Mr. Emerson was, for many years, the president. During this period, the Botanical and Zoölogical Survey of Massachusetts was recommended by the society as a proper complement to the Geological Survey, which had been made by Prof. Hitchcock. Mr. Emerson was made chairman of the commission, appointed by Governor Everett, to conduct the survey; and, in fulfillment of the duty with which he was charged, he carried the reports of those associated with him through the press, and, in 1837, made his report upon the trees and shrubs of Massachusetts. This was the first of the state surveys. Mr. Emerson's volume is not only of great practical utility to the material interests of Massachusetts, but is written with such abundant and minute knowledge of the subject, and such beauty of style, that it has become a classic in scientific literature.

While a member of the Board of Education, Mr. Emerson suggested and drew up the act of the legislature, which originated the State Scholarships, and recommended the useful measure of granting the aid of the state to the pupils attending the normal schools. In 1819, he was the secretary of the Cambridge branch of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. He was early elected a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and for several years was its corresponding secretary.

To a mind of such liberal culture and large experience, a visit to

Europe could not fail to be the source of lasting interest and the greatest delight. But, though Mr. Emerson had fairly entitled himself, by the unremitting and various labors of so many years, to whatever of respite and amusement such a visit affords to the traveler, he neglected no opportunity of gaining information upon the subjects connected with education in the Old World, and of persuing his favorite sciences, and the branches of elegant literature, to which his leisure time—if his time could ever be characterized by that term—had always been consecrated. In Germany, he visited and carefully examined the normal schools and the gymnasia; and scrutinized the processes of teaching, and the branches taught, from the very beginning to the end of the course. In Rome, which he reached in January, 1856, he immediately began to study the plants which were in bloom among the ruins of the Colosseum, and of the palaces of the Cæsars, and over the Campagna, in every direction from the Eternal City. He continued this fascinating occupation until the latter part of April, when he left Rome for Naples. Here he renewed his pursuits in the Botanic Garden, on Vesuvius, and the old volcanic mountains, which give such a striking character to these classic regions. He kept up with the vegetation, as he returned to Rome, and until he left that city, verifying every plant which came into flower in Cicero's villa, and Horace's farm, and ancient Veii, and wherever else he went. He was assisted in these beautiful investigations by an excellent English botanist at Rome, and by Prof. Rolfe, attached to the Pope's Botanic Garden. At Naples he was kindly assisted by the venerable Prof. Tenore; and, as he traveled back from Naples to Rome, he kept his carriage filled with plants freshly gathered all along the road, and his herbarium contains specimens from every famous spot along that route, so peopled with the most interesting historical, and classical associations. On his return to Rome, in May, he resumed his investigations; but Nature had been so rapid that it was impossible to examine all the plants. On a leisurely journey from Rome to Florence, he visited the Botanical Gardens in several of the old Etruscan towns, and greatly astonished the gardeners, to whom he was introduced as an American, by speaking Italian, and discoursing upon the natural orders and their characteristic genera.

Mr. Emerson did not neglect the classical and historical objects of interest, in every part of Italy, and the wonderful treasures of art. He explored the Roman Catacombs, and visited the sites of many of the old Latin cities, and studied their ruins with the appreciating eye of the well-trained scholar.

Mr. Emerson has returned from his foreign travels, in full intellectual and physical vigor. True to the instincts of his nature, he still takes an active interest in all that concerns science and letters, and the cause of education in the old commonwealth. On the death of the lamented Judge Kinnicutt, of Worcester—who, to numerous other public services, gave, for many years, his time, and judgment, and faithful attention to the affairs of the Board, as their treasurer—Mr. Emerson was chosen to succeed him.

We have thus inadequately sketched the labors of this great master of education. Such labors are not so prominently brought before the public eye as those of the great advocate, or the statesman; but they are of at least equal consequence to the well-being of the community, for they lie at the very foundation of the social edifice.