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978-1-108-06634-1 - Improvements in Education, as it Respects the Industrious Classes of the Community: With a Brief Sketch of the Life of Joseph Lancaster by William Corston

Joseph Lancaster

Excerpt

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A SHORT HISTORY  
OF THE  
FREE - SCHOOL,

*Borough-Road, George's Fields,*

*AND SOME ACCOUNT OF ITS FUNDS.*

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**I**N the year 1798, I opened a school for the instruction of poor children, in reading, writing, arithmetic, and the knowledge of the Holy Scriptures; the children were taught at the low price of fourpence per week. I knew of no modes of tuition but those usually in practice, and I had a practical knowledge of them. The number of children who attended the school at that time, varied from ninety to a hundred and twenty. Being thus engaged in the study of education, with full liberty to make what experiments I pleased, whenever I found a poor child whose parents were unable to pay for his instruction, I gave him education gratis. This class of children increased so much, that above thirty names were on the book *as free scholars*, in a short

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time; and it is very probable no two children knew that there were other free scholars in the school besides themselves. I attended the school personally, retaining an assistant. It was not unattended with expence of wages, rent, taxes, rewards, &c. As the income arising from the pay-scholars was much diminished by the education I gave to so many, gratis, and there were still many more objects of benevolence in the school and neighbourhood, I was anxious to find an expedient which would enable me to extend the usefulness of the institution, without additional expence to myself; and soon found two liberal-minded persons, who readily seconded my views\*, Thomas Sturge, of Newington Butts; and Anthony Sterry, of the High-street, Borough. They had been in the practice of paying the usual price to other schoolmasters, for the education of some children, whom they met with in their endeavours to relieve distress. I prevailed on them to enter into a subscription for the education of poor children, in lieu of pay. Nothing but example was wanting; and, as soon as that was obtained, I easily raised the sum specified in the first year's account annexed. The subscription was quite of the nature of a contract: of every guinea subscribed, fifteen shillings *per annum* was considered as the price of each child's education; and the remaining six shillings was to be expended in books, rewards, and school expences.

\* At Midsummer, 1801.

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The *only* person who assisted me in raising subscriptions, was Elizabeth Fry, wife of Joseph Fry, of the Poultry, London. She solicited her immediate friends and connexions, and was successful in obtaining about twenty-six guineas; with this kind assistance I was encouraged to go cheerfully through the toilsome drudgery of raising subscriptions for the second year, in which I was so successful as to double the amount as well as the number of free scholars. Improvements in the modes of tuition had been made to good purpose, in those two first years, and a regular system of order established. Though a system of order was easily established, a new system of tuition was another thing; and to this I found myself most unexpectedly and gradually advancing.

The institution is greatly indebted to two gentlemen of the parish in which I live; but, as I fear, I am not at liberty to mention their names, I can only say, they have, by their generosity, exempted the *school-house* from all rent, for several years. Gratitude requires that this should be known, as, in consequence, I have been enabled to expend the money I should have employed in rent, &c. in making experiments relative to the education of the poor. It is to be understood, this relates only to part of the premises connected with the institution. The other part is on lease for fifty-nine years; and I have constantly paid the ground-rent, thirty guineas

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neas *per annum*, without making any charge to the public for it. Most experiments, whether on the improvement of education, or on any other subject, are attended with expence, which increases with the number of trials. Many such experiments have been made, which proved quite useless, and such as I should never attempt again. In other cases I have often gone the wrong way to work, and accidentally stumbled on the very object I was in quest of. The result has been a new and efficient system of education; the principle of which is not only adapted to large manufacturing districts, but, with little variation in the mode of applying it, to all the poor of the country and to village schools.

Hitherto, none of the active friends of the institution regarded it in any other light than a well-conducted school, with some few improvements in the modes of instruction. In fact, those who befriended it most, either never came to visit it, or never entered into its detail when they did. The *Duke of Bedford* and *Lord Somerville* were the first who visited it, and entered closely into its detail. Lord Somerville told me, he saw its importance from the first. I have a letter from the Duke on the subject, wherein he expresses himself thus: after describing his first visit, he says, “The advantages of the institution struck me so forcibly, they were so obvious and apparent, that I could not hesitate to give every encouragement in my power  
to

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to so laudable and beneficial *a plan of education*; which cannot but tend to better the condition, and improve the morals, of the lower classes, in a very eminent degree. Fully and earnestly convinced of this important truth, I cheerfully authorize you to call on me for further assistance, whenever you think fit." The Duke, and his friend Lord Somerville, have since shown every kindness to the institution that could be wished. May their names ever be dear to every Englishman, who is a real lover of his country. It is no wonder that I feel myself bound to express my honest gratitude in this public manner. But for their repeated, timely, and liberal assistance, the design would not so rapidly have extended in its various branches. When they first visited the school, they began the subscription for buildings needful to enlarge the school-room; more scholars were daily applying for admittance, and the premises were so contracted, that many more could not have been admitted. It would have been a painful circumstance to me, to have refused admission to such; and I could not have received them without an extension of the premises. I had mentioned my wishes to several friends on this subject. They were persons not wanting in benevolence, but as they never came near the institution, which they had all previously befriended, they did not enter into my views readily. Nor were they aware, that if the work was not begun in the proper time, it must be suspended twelve months longer. One

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friend did not like to take the responsibility, of standing first in a subscription, upon himself. Another, very properly, did not like to stand before his father, who was out of town; and a third was indisposed. Thus deprived of the energy of my most active friends, the design remained dormant for want of a leader; but that office was amply supplied by the generosity of those two noblemen, after whose example the subscription, dated Third Month, 1803, was raised. I had no person to aid me in soliciting subscriptions; and calculated, that I might travel about three hundred miles, backwards and forwards, at many different times, to obtain them. If I could, with propriety, have done entirely without public aid, as, in the outset, I intended doing, it would have been more agreeable to my wishes. It was my intention to erect the first building at my own expence, but I found, the sum which I could properly dedicate to that object, was inadequate.

The reader will be sensible, on perusing this, of the reason for inscribing this book to the Duke of Bedford and Lord Somerville; and, though dedications are often founded in flattery, this has for its basis, gratitude and truth. But it was not alone in the subscription just alluded to, that they have shown their cheerful benevolence; for in the spring, 1804, I proposed to them extending the school from three hundred and fifty to seven hundred boys. For this purpose, it was calculated the sum of at least  
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one hundred and eighty pounds was needful; and that, if it should appear proper, when the experiment had been tried, the subscription should remain open, to enable me to extend it to a thousand. The extension to seven hundred boys was made at a very trifling expence above the estimate.

It seems likely, the sum wanted to erect the buildings, needful to make the *proposed* extension to one thousand boys, will be about three hundred pounds. The reason of the difference in the estimates for extending the school to seven hundred, and that for one thousand, is, that in a former case, a contiguous building, already erected, was made use of to aid the design; and thus saved part of a greater expence, which otherwise must have been incurred. The extension of the school from three hundred and fifty to above seven hundred children, was a most extraordinary thing; and proved, after a thorough trial, the utility of the system and order established in the institution. Above four hundred children were admitted as scholars in about six weeks; and yet this surprising increase of numbers had no unpleasant effect on the order of the school. This great increase appeared, to some of my friends, who were not fully acquainted with what the system would bear, as likely to overwhelm every thing with confusion; but I had the pleasure of establish-

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ing the school for this large number, and giving a proof of the practicability of my plan, in six weeks.

When boys of common ability enter a new school, there is generally a degree of reserve and shyness about them, that does not wear off for the first week or ten days. All youth are influenced by example, and, like sheep, follow their leaders. The example prevalent in my school, was favourable to good order. When strange boys were admitted as scholars, their attention was divided between the influence of shyness and example; and, before that shyness had worn off, the power of example had in some measure habituated them to their duty. Thus situated, they daily improved in learning; and, stimulated by the hope of reward, shortly became as orderly as any boys in the school.

In the outset of the institution, it was thought economical if one child could be educated for one guinea *per annum*. The extension of the school from three hundred and fifty to nearly eight hundred children, in the short space of six weeks; the establishment of a school for nearly two hundred girls, all educated on the same plan, prove, that the system of order and tuition is adequate to the instruction of a thousand children, or more, in one institution; and *without any adult assistant teachers*. This sub-  
scription



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scription now remains open for public aid, with a view to extend the experiment to a thousand boys.

In the third year's account of subscriptions and expenditure, it will be observed, I adhered to the original plan of the institution, as arranged with the first subscribers *to the school*; the expence of each child being estimated at one guinea *per annum*, and the surplus numbers on the list varying from three to five hundred free scholars, were solely educated at my own expence; and, under the blessing of Divine Providence, in consequence of my own inventions and discoveries. For the fourth, or present year of the institution, which will end at midsummer, 1805, I engage that all the annual subscriptions necessary to be raised for the expences of the boys' school, shall not exceed two hundred and sixty pounds; and, that when the plan is extended to a thousand boys, the annual subscriptions need not exceed three hundred pounds, for defraying every expence. This economical plan of usefully educating a thousand scholars, is done at a much less expence than any of my friends ever expected me to reduce to practice; and which, if I had been told three years since were possible, I should have had great doubt of the fact, if I had not also thought it incredible. But facts are stubborn things.

It will be considered, that, in all new experiments, there is a difficulty in knowing how to proceed  
rightly.

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rightly. I stood alone in the early stage of the institution, having to grope my own way, as in the dark, under many difficulties and discouragements, in exploring a new and untried, but practicable path to usefulness; no wonder if I sometimes took the wrong road, to attain my object, instead of the right one; if I sometimes made experiments that ended in expence and disappointment, and that repeatedly. But this only stimulated me to more diligence; and, instead of being depressed by these circumstances, I eagerly and resolutely pursued the important object in view; till, I may say, under the Divine blessing, *without which all my labours would have been of no avail*, hitherto I have been helped to accomplish far more than I expected: having established a system of education, adapted to the poor, in a remarkable manner; and in which there is nothing but what is simple and 'easy, to persons disposed to engage in similar plans. Experiments are seldom made without expence: few of mine were, as to labour, time, and money. I do not regret that I have never charged them to public account; nor do I ever intend to do so. When I had made any experiment, and found it beneficial, I have introduced the practice of it generally into the institution; and am willing to use my best endeavours to lay it before the public, in as plain and simple a manner as I can, for the benefit of the rising generation. When an experiment has proved unsuccessful, it has been buried in oblivion. But all this has enabled