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978-1-107-62106-0 - Milton's Tractate on Education: A Facsimile Reprint
from the Edition of 1673

Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Oscar Browning

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TRACTATE ON EDUCATION.

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MILTON'S TRACTATE ON EDUCATION

A FACSIMILE REPRINT FROM THE EDITION
OF 1673.

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

BY

OSCAR BROWNING, M.A.

FELLOW AND LECTURER OF KING'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE, AND
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TO

JAMES WARD,

FELLOW OF TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE,

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED.

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PREFACE.

MILTON'S Tractate on Education has been a favourite study of mine for five and twenty years. When I first went as an assistant master to a large public school, about the time when the Public Schools Commission was beginning to sit, it occurred to me as an ardent educational reformer, that a cheap reprint of Milton's Tractate would have a good effect in clearing the thoughts and opinions of my colleagues and others on the pressing question of the day. I had opened negotiations with the school bookseller for executing a reprint which I intended to scatter broadcast in pamphlet form through the public schools of England. My theories received a rude

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shock. One of the senior masters at my school set Milton as a subject for a Latin theme to his division, and told his boys that they were to prove that Milton, like Burke, went mad in his old age. I had never heard of this idea before, and I asked the master on what grounds it rested. He replied, "Did he not write a crack-brained book about education in his old age?" Milton was by no means in his old age when he wrote the Tractate, but that did not matter. I concluded that my scheme would be useless, and gave it up.

I am now able to carry out the design formed so long ago, under more favourable auspices. Milton's Tractate is a subject set in the Teachers' Certificate Examination of the University of Cambridge for the present year. As far as I am aware, no separate reprint of the work exists, and it therefore became necessary to prepare one.

The present edition is an exact facsimile of the edition of 1673, published in Milton's

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lifetime. I have carried the accuracy of the facsimile so far as even to reproduce Milton's misprints. I have done this because it would have in some cases spoilt the appearance and the arrangement of the pages to have corrected them, while in no case are they likely to cause any difficulty to the reader. They are all, I believe, mentioned in the notes. The notes have been confined to what appeared to be necessary for the explanation of the text. I have edited the work as a schoolmaster, and not as a philological student of the English language. By the kindness of Messrs C. K. Paul, Trench and Co. I am able to reprint as an Introduction the account which I had given of Milton's Tractate in the sixth chapter of my *Introduction to the History of Educational Theories*¹.

¹ *An Introduction to the History of Educational Theories*, by Oscar Browning, M.A. London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Co.

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INTRODUCTION.

THE tractate of John Milton is written in the form of a letter to Mr Samuel Hartlib, the son of a Polish merchant who resided mainly in London. He was a friend of every new discovery which seemed likely to advance the happiness of the human race. He took great interest in science, in the union of the Protestant Churches, and above all in education. He published in 1651, 'Propositions for the Erecting of a College of Husbandry Learning,' or, in modern phraseology, an agricultural college, in which he proposed that apprentices, received at the age of fifteen, should after seven years' instruction receive money to set themselves up in a farm, and a yearly payment for four years. Also in 1647, Sir William Petty, the founder of the Lansdowne family, wrote to Mr Hartlib a letter containing a scheme for a trade or industrial school, a grand plan which we may possibly see realised in our own day by the establishment of a technological university in London. Sir William Petty says, 'All apprentices might learn the theory of

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their trades before they are bound to a master, and consequently be exempted from the tedium of a seven years' bondage, and having spent but about three years with a master, may spend the other four in travelling to learn breeding and the perfection of their trades.' To the same category belongs Cowley's scheme of a philosophical college, published in 1661, the school part of which bears so much resemblance to Milton's scheme as to make it certain that Cowley in writing it must have had the former in his mind. Although these plans were never carried out, being indeed impossible in the troubled times of the Commonwealth and ill suited to the frivolous temper of the Restoration, they shew us plainly enough the desire which was fermenting in men's minds for a better and more liberal education. Had they met with more success the English might have been by this time the best educated nation in Europe.

It was natural that Hartlib should have been specially attracted by the writings of Comenius, the great Moravian teacher, who announced to his age a discovery as important as that of Bacon, heralded with the same confidence, and promising as great results. We have seen that one of the most important points on which Comenius insists is the simultaneous teaching of words and things. Endless time had been spent on the mere routine of language—why not at least attempt to utilise this labour, and while the drudgery of words and sentences is proceeding, take care that what is

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learnt is worth remembering for itself. We shall find these same lines of thought running through Milton's tractate. Writing to Mr Hartlib, he proceeds to set down 'that voluntary idea, which hath long in silence presented itself to me, of a better education in time and comprehension far more large, and yet of time far shorter and of attainment far more certain than have yet been in practice.' He asks his friend 'to accept these few observations which have flowered off, and are as it were the burnishings of many studious and contemplative years altogether spent in the search of civil and religious knowledge, and since it pleased you so well in the relating, I here give you them to dispose of.'

Milton begins by the principle that the end of learning is to repair the sins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright; and, because God can only be known in His works, we must by the knowledge of sensible things arrive gradually at the contemplation of the insensible and invisible. Now we must begin with language; but language is only the instrument conveying to us things useful to be known. No man can be called learned who does not know the solid things in languages as well as the languages themselves. Here we see asserted the important principle that words and things must go together, and that things are more important than words. The next principle with which we are familiar in the writings of Comenius and others, is that we must proceed

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from the easier to the more difficult. We are warned against 'a preposterous exaction, forcing the empty wits of children to compose themes, verses, and orations, which are the acts of the ripest judgment.' Matters were indeed far worse in Milton's time than they are now in this respect. We have to a great extent thrown off the tyranny of the grammarians and the schoolmen. But we are still guilty of the 'error of misspending our prime youth at the schools and universities either in learning mere words or such things chiefly as were better unlearned.' We have still as much need as ever that someone should 'point us out the right path of a virtuous and noble education, so laborious indeed at first ascent, but else so smooth, so green, and so full of goodly prospects and melodious sounds on every side that the harp of Orpheus was not more charming.'

Milton defines what he means by education in the following words: 'I call a complete and generous education that which fits a man to perform justly, skilfully, and magnanimously all the offices, both public and private, of peace and war.' To attain this object, first a spacious house and grounds about it is to be found, fit for an academy to lodge about 130 students under the government of one head. This is to be both school and university, to give a complete education from twelve to twenty-one, not needing a removal to any other place of learning. There is something strange in the idea of welding together the school and uni-

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versity, but it was more consonant to the opinions and practice of Milton's own age. He himself spent at the university the years between fourteen and twenty-one; the ordinary length of the academical course being seven years from entrance to the degree of M.A. So that his proposal is not so much to suppress the university as the school. Doubtless he saw little hope of reforming a large body like the university, or weaning it from the useless brabblements of the Aristotelian philosophy, whereas by a private establishment such as he describes the reform might be begun at once. We must remember also that the age of entrance at public schools is now what the age of entrance at the university was in Milton's time; while many of our public school boys do not go to the university at all. The plan advocated by Milton is in this respect carried out in France, and pupils graduate directly from the *lycée*, only attending afterwards a special school of law or physic. Such institutions as Owens College at Manchester are doing precisely the work which Milton recommends.

Milton divides his scheme of education into three parts: (1) Studies; (2) Exercises; (3) Diet. In order to do justice to his method we must remember that he does not conceive of any education possible except through the Latin or Greek tongues. To make his precepts useful to us we must tear aside this veil, and go as deeply as we can into the principles which underlie his teaching, and infer what he would have recommended to us

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under a different state of things. In those days Latin was the language of the whole learned world. A man ignorant of Latin would have no access to the best books of the age, and no opportunity of communicating his thoughts to the world at large. It is natural, therefore, that he should recommend Latin grammar to be taught first, but with the Italian pronunciation of the vowels such as is rapidly making its way amongst us at the present day. But here at the outset the means are subordinate to the end. Language is to be the vehicle of moral teaching for the formation of a lofty character. The Pinax of Cebes, which as a school-book is coming now again into favour, and which advocates moral principles in simple language; the moral works of Plutarch, one of the purest and most high-minded of the ancients, and the best dialogues of Plato are to be read to the youthful scholars. For here Milton says, 'the main rule and ground-work will be to tempt them with such lectures and explanations upon every opportunity as may lead and draw them in willing obedience, enflamed with the study of learning and the admiration of virtue, cheered up with high hope of living to be brave men and worthy patriots, dear to God and famous to all ages.' Milton emphasises the cardinal truth of education, that it resides not in the mechanical perfection of study and routine, but in the spirit of the teacher working in the heart of the pupil. The first step in education is to make the pupils 'despise and scorn all their

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childish and ill-taught qualities, to delight in manly and liberal exercises, to infuse into their young hearts such an ingenuous and noble ardour as would not fail to make many of them renowned and matchless men.' Together with their Latin exercises, arithmetic, and geometry, are to be taught playing, 'as the old manner was,' and religion is to occupy them before going to bed. Thus ends the first stage of their education. It should be remarked that the Greek authors, Cebes, Plutarch, and Plato, are to be read, of course in Latin translations, and that they are to be 'read to' the boys probably in the manner recommended by Ratich and Ascham. As soon as they are masters of the rudiments of Latin Grammar they are to read those treatises, such as Cato, Varro, and Columella, which are concerned with agriculture. The object of this is not only to teach them Latin but to incite and enable them to improve the tillage of their country, to remove the bad soil and to remedy the waste that is made of good. Then after learning the use of globes and maps, and the outlines of geography, ancient and modern, they are to read some compendious method of natural philosophy. After this they are to begin Greek, but the authors read have reference to natural science, which is at this period the staple of their education. When in their mathematical studies they have reached trigonometry, that will introduce them to fortification, architecture, engineering, and navigation. They are to proceed in the study

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of nature as far as anatomy, and they are to acquire the principles of medicine that they may know the tempers, the humours, the seasons, and how to manage a crudity. No advocate of scientific education could have sketched out a more comprehensive plan of study in these departments.

Then follows a suggestion which has often been made by educational theorists, but not often tried. There are some minds which are inaccessible to purely abstract knowledge ; learning takes no hold on them unless it is connected with doing, and it has occurred to many that, if to the whole curriculum of science there could be added a curriculum of practice, few pupils would be found incapable of receiving intellectual education. We find this feature in the Pædagogic Province of Goethe's 'Wilhelm Meister,' and the few occasions on which it has been tried give encouragement for its further use. Milton accepts it without reserve. 'To set forward all these proceedings in nature and mathematics, what hinders but they may procure, as oft as shall be needful, the helpful experiences of hunters, fowlers, fishermen, shepherds, gardeners, apothecaries, and, in the other sciences, architects, engineers, anatomists, who, doubtless, would be ready, some for reward and some to favour such a hopeful seminary. And this will give them such a real tincture of natural knowledge as they will never forget, but daily augment with delight.'

These rudimentary studies, classical, mathe-

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matical, and practical, may be supposed to have occupied them to the age of sixteen, when they are for the first time to be introduced to graver and harder topics. 'As they begin to acquire character, and to reason on the difference between good and evil, there will be required a constant and sound indoctrinating to set them right and firm, instructing them more amply in the knowledge of virtue and the hatred of vice. For this purpose their young and pliant affections are to be led through the moral works of Plato, Xenophon, Cicero, and Plutarch, but in their nightward studies they are to submit to the more determinate sentence of Holy Writ.' Thus they will have traversed the circle of ethical teaching. During this and the preceding stage, poetry is to be read as an amusement, and as a golden fringe to the practice of serious labour. 'And either now,' Milton remarks, 'or before this, they may have easily learnt, at any odd hour, the Italian tongue.' This sentence has often been quoted to shew how visionary and baseless Milton's idea of education was. But experience is here in his favour, and those who have tried the experiment are well aware that Italian may easily be learnt by intelligent and studious boys with little expenditure of time or interruption of other studies. Ethics is to be succeeded by politics. After the foundation of their character and principles, then is to follow their education as citizens. They are to learn 'the beginning, end, and reason of political societies; that

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they may not in a dangerous fit of the Commonwealth be such poor, shaken, uncertain reeds, of such a tottering conscience as many of our good councillors have of late shewed themselves, but steadfast pillars of the State.' The study of law is to come next, including all the Roman edicts, and tables with Justinian, and also the Saxon law, and common law of England, and the statutes of the realm. 'Sundays also and every evening may be now understandingly spent in the highest matters of theology, and Church history, ancient and modern.' By the age of eighteen Hebrew will have been learnt, and possibly Syrian and Chaldaic. Tragedy will be read and learned in close connection with political oratory. 'These, if got by memory and solemnly pronounced with right accent and grace, as might be taught, would endue them even with the spirit and vigour of Demosthenes or Cicero, Euripides or Sophocles.' When their minds are truly stored with this wealth of learning, they are at length to acquire the art of expression, both in writing and in speech. 'From henceforth, and not till now, will be the right season for forming them to be able writers and composers in every excellent matter, when they shall be thus fraught with an universal insight into things.' Thus ends this magnificent and comprehensive scheme. 'These are the studies wherein our noble and our gentle youth' (observe that Milton is thinking of the education of a gentleman) 'ought to bestow their time in a disciplinary way

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from twelve to one-and-twenty, unless they rely more upon their ancestors dead than upon themselves living. In the which methodical course it is so supposed they must proceed by the steady pace of learning onward, as in convenient times to retire back into the middle ward, and sometimes into the rear of what they have been taught, until they have confirmed and solidly united the whole body of their perfected knowledge like the last embattelling of a Roman legion.'

One of the main hopes of the improvement of education lies in adopting the truth that manly and serious studies are capable of being handled and mastered by intelligent schoolboys. We might have hoped that the publication of John Stuart Mill's 'Autobiography' would have led to the imitation of the method by which he gained a start of twenty years over his contemporaries in the race of life. It seems to have produced the contrary effect. But no one can read Mill's letters to Sir S. Bentham without acknowledging that he had done at the age of thirteen nearly as much as Milton expected from his matured students. Mill was reading Thucydides, Euclid, and algebra at eight, Pindar and conic sections at nine, trigonometry at ten, Aristotle at eleven, optics and fluxions at twelve, logic and political economy at thirteen. He had also by this time written two histories and a tragedy. There is no reason to suppose that the studies thus early acquired did not form an integral part of his mind, or that when writing his

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standard works on logic and political economy, or sketching a complete scheme of education at St Andrew's, he was not using the knowledge which he had acquired in these very tender years.

The physical exercise proposed by Milton for his students is of an equally practical character, and differs widely from the laborious toiling at unproductive games, which is the practice of our own day. With him amusement, emulation, bodily skill, the cheerfulness of bright companionship, are all pressed into the service of practical life. Dinner is taken at noon, and about an hour or an hour and a half before that meal is to be allowed them for exercise, and rest afterwards. The first exercise recommended is 'the use of the sword, to guard and to strike safely with edge or point. This will keep them healthy, nimble, strong, and well in breath, is also the likeliest means to make them grow large and tall, and to inspire them with a gallant and fearless courage.' They are also to be practised in 'all the locks and gripes of wrestling.' After about an hour of such exercise, during the needful repose which precedes their mid-day meal, they may 'with profit and delight be taken up in recruiting and composing their travailed spirits with the solemn and divine harmonies of music, heard or learnt, either while the skilful organist plies his grave and fancied descant in lofty fugues, or the whole symphony with artful and unimaginable touches adorn and grace the well-studied chords of some choice composer. Some-

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times the lute or soft organ-stop, waiting on elegant voices either to religious, martial, or civil ditties, which, if wise men and prophets be not extremely out, have a great power over dispositions and manners, to smooth and make them gentle from rustic harshness and distempered passions.' The same rest, with the same accompaniment, is to follow after food. About two hours before supper, which I suppose would be at about seven or eight o'clock, 'they are by a sudden alarum or watchword to be called out to their military motions under sky or covert, according to the season, as was the Roman wont, first on foot, then, as their age permits, on horseback, to all the arts of cavalry; that having in sport, but with much exertion and daily muster, served out the rudiments of their soldier-ship in all the skill of encamping, marching, embattelling, fortifying, besieging and battering, with all the help of ancient and modern stratagems, tactics, and warlike maxims, they may, as it were, out of a long war come forth renowned and perfect commanders in the service of their country.' Milton had good reason to desire the formation of the nucleus of a citizen army, and much service might be rendered by a school rifle corps if they were organised on a more serious and laborious model.

In Milton's institution the vacations were intended to be short, but the time was not all to be spent in work without a break. 'In those vernal seasons of the year, when the air is calm and

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pleasant, it were an injury and sullenness against nature not to go out and see her riches, and partake in her rejoicing with heaven and earth. I should not therefore be a persuader to them of studying much then, after two or three years, that they have well laid their grounds, but to ride out in companies with prudent and staid guides into all quarters of the land, learning and observing all places of strength, all commodities of building and of soil for towns and villages, harbours and ports of trade; sometimes taking sea as far as our navy, to learn also what they can in the practical knowledge of sailing and sea fights. These journeys would try all their peculiarities of nature, and if there were any such excellence among them would fetch it out, and give it fair opportunities to advance itself by.' 'This,' he says, 'will be much better than asking Monsieur of Paris to take our hopeful youths into their slight and prodigal custody, and send them back transformed into mimics, apes and kickshoes.' Travelling abroad is to be deferred to the age of three-and-twenty, when they will be better able to profit by it. In Milton's time communication was far more difficult than it is now. Not only was a short trip on the Continent out of the question, but even travelling in England was laborious and slow. Yet even in these days our young statesmen are profoundly ignorant of the country to which they belong, and a knowledge of its character and resources should be the first foundation of sound political wisdom.

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In our own day we might go so far as to regard a knowledge of the whole world as the fitting conclusion to a liberal education, and Milton, if he were writing now, might recommend an educational cruise such as has been attempted in America and France. Of diet, his last division, Milton tells us nothing except that it should be in the same house, and that it should be plain, healthful, and moderate.

In conclusion Milton anticipates some of the objections which might be raised against his plan, on the score of its impracticability, or its aiming at too high a standard. He admits that a scheme of this kind cannot be carried out except under the most favourable conditions, with teachers and scholars above the average. 'I believe,' he says, 'that this is not a bow for every man to shoot in, that counts himself a teacher; but will require sinews almost equal to those which Homer gave Ulysses; yet I am withal persuaded that it may prove much more easy in the essay than it now seems at a distance, and much more illustrious, howbeit, not more difficult than I imagine, and that imagination presents me with nothing else, but very happy and very possible, according to best wishes, if God have so decreed, and this age have spirit and capacity enough to apprehend.'