

(From Toronto Globe, 30 Aug. '84.)

GOOD ENGLISH SPELLING

(To the Editor of the Globe.)

SIR, In the course of his recent address to the Provincial Teachers' Association on 'Some Educational Follies,' Rev. Principal Grant denounceth with his usual vigor the practice of 'cramming' in schools. A few minutes afterward, while outlining what in his opinion would be a good public school program, he insisted on the necessity of making the pupils 'good spellers.' Dr. Grant was right in his denunciation of 'cramming,' but, in order to free himself from a charge of inconsistency, he will have to give a somewhat unusual definition of 'good spelling.' Whatever he may have meant by the expression when he used it, it was certainly understood by all his hearers to mean that in our schools every pupil should be taught not merely to spell words correctly in the conventional way, but to regard the ability to do so as one of the most important of educational accomplishments. If this is his view, then I beg leave to say that in my opinion he is trying to perpetuate in our schools the most injurious and least defensible kind of cramming that has ever obtained a footing in our educational system; that he is not only hugging his own pet, but is seeking to rivet them on every English-speaking individual of his own and subsequent generations; that he is trying to render permanent on the shoulders of the children a burden which the fathers have been unable to bear, and that he is not merely proclaiming himself a fetch worshiper but is seeking to compel every one else to bow down in the same superstitious frame of mind before the contemptible idol he adores.

I shall be glad to learn that the learned Principal of Queen's University did not mean all this when he insists on making all pupils 'good spellers.' I shall be still more glad to hear that by 'good' spelling he means rational spelling, and he not—as every educated man now—that our conventional spelling is extremely irrational and capricious. He notes that much time and money are wasted in the effort to make school pupils expert spellers with very little to show for it in the practice of their after lives. He notes that so-called bad spelling, which is

really better than the so-called good spelling, is the more prevalent of the two in spite of the herculean and wasteful drudgery it entails on both teachers and pupils. He notes that many otherwise accomplished candidates for teachers' certificates are plucked because their orthography is a little eccentric. He notes that hundreds of candidates are rejected every year at the Departmental and University examinations on account of misspelled words in their written papers. He notes that there is not a single English filological scholar of any standing, in either England or America, who is not an earnest advocate of spelling reform. He notes that the process of reforming the spelling of the German language is now in full blast under both scholarly and official auspices. None of these and many other facts to which I might call his attention, is Dr. Grant prepared to make a decided stand in favor of retaining our present capricious system.

If he is not, then why in the name of common sense does he insist on so much stress being laid upon 'good spelling'—it is perfectly obvious that so long as superstitious reverence for our present orthography dominates the mind of the majority, any departure from it must be generally regarded as a mark of illiteracy. And yet nothing can be more unjust or absurd. I can spell as well as most people; but if I choose to spell 'though' without the 'ugh' as good English writers did half a century ago, and as good English writers do to-day, I would endanger my reputation as an educated man. The same is true of such words as 'program,' 'catalog,' 'rime,' 'traveler' and a host of others, many of which forms would be condemned by nomenclature and Departmental Examiners. I challenge Dr. Grant or any other person to give a single good reason for regarding a man's mode of spelling English words as a proper criterion of his literary or professional attainments. I have seen reasons given, but never one that would stand a moment's investigation.

I appeal to heads of colleges, like Dr. Grant and Dr. Wilson, such whose standing as scholars is unquestioned in the community, not merely to refrain from seeking to perpetuate the tyranny of ignorance, to which I refer, but to