

Many teachers who will not fail to note and profit by some of the good things in Mr. Houston's paper in another column, will hesitate long before accepting his estimate of the value of "good spelling." No unusual courage would we fancy be needed to take up his challenge "to give a single reason for regarding ability to spell English words in the ordinary way as either a fair test of literary culture or a mark of a well-trained and well-informed mind." Whatever strange things may come to pass in the future, written or printed words are now much more than the symbols of certain sounds. Each word has a physiognomy of its own, which is associated in the mind of the scholar, not only with a certain idea but with the origin and history of the idea. In many cases several words of very diverse meanings, indicate the same sounds, but the reader readily distinguishes them by the individuality of their faces. It is hard to conceive how either literary culture, or a well-trained mind, could exist apart from the ability to spell ordinary words in the way in which they have been spelt by the writers and thinkers, whose works are the instruments of the culture and the training. Not to know the faces of the words, would argue a singular defect in the training of the perceptive faculties, of not utter ignorance of the thoughts and ideas those words are used to convey. Occasional instances of variation in the spelling of particular words by classical writers prove nothing, save as the exception proves the rule.

It is announced that the Education Department in Ontario is about to prescribe a course of professional training for First Class Teachers and assistants in High Schools. The scheme proposed is, we believe, to set apart four or five Collegiate Institutes, to be known as Training Institutes, and to require every candidate before he can rank as a first-class teacher or assistant master of a High School, to spend at least four months at one of these institutes, and to teach under the direction of the Principal; also to pass an examination on prescribed professional works. An examination on some standard educational works as a test of the attention the candidate has paid to the science of education is no doubt desirable. But many of the candidates for assistant masterships are either experienced teachers who have already had a professional training, or University graduates. What one of either of these classes may be expected to gain by a perfunctory attendance for four months at some school not necessary superior, and quite possibly inferior, to those with whose modes of working he is perfectly familiar, it is not easy to see. Every unpracticed teacher must experiment somewhere but we fail to see why, given the requisite educational qualification, he may not better experiment in a field where his salary and reputation are at stake, than in one where the consciousness that he is experimenting must be ever present to embarrass him and give to all his efforts a flavour of unreality.

No man, no woman lives, or has ever lived who can begin to give his or her own untried capacity. It is immeasurable as the universe. Trust it as you trust God, and launch yourself unflinchingly upon its vast possibilities.

Special Articles.

ENGLISH SPELLING.

In a recent number of THE CANADA SCHOOL JOURNAL, under the heading "An Essential Thing," I find the following:—

"Pupils must be trained to read and write their mother tongue correctly. Teach them to do this so that every scholar at fifteen years of age shall be able to read a newspaper readily; shall be able to spell common words correctly; shall be able to converse free from provincialism in pronunciation; shall be able to write a legible letter in correct English. In reading, teach them not merely to pronounce words, but to get at the meaning of what they read. There must be no sham scholarship here. Good spelling is a conventional test of education, and even a spelling lesson may be made the means of valuable mental training."

Some of this advice I can heartily endorse. If by "writing their mother tongue correctly" the author means making correct use of it in composition, he has given only due prominence to an accomplishment as important as it is rare, for there are few, even of our best speakers and writers, who do not at times perpetrate inexcusable blunders. For instance, I happened to be consulting May's "Constitutional History of England" a few minutes ago, and found in his chapter on "Party" the following sentence:—"The two first years after the Reform Act formed the most glorious period in the annals of the Whig party." Stubbs, in the preface to his great work, says constitutional history "reads the exploits and characters of men by a different light from that shed by the false glare of arms, and interprets positions and facts in words that are voiceless to those who have only listened to the trumpet of fame." Such errors are common in speech, but they should not be so frequent in writing. Froude is a flagrant sinner against the Queen's English, and Goldwin Smith is almost the only living writer I know of who is at once elegant in diction and perfect in syntax.

I agree with the author of the above advice also in attaching just importance to correct pronunciation, to facility in reading, and to the faculty of understanding what is read. Too little attention is paid to all these accomplishments in our schools, and especially to pronunciation. Where I differ from him is as to the importance to be attached to what he calls "good spelling," which in the same sentence he admits to be "a conventional test of education." Because it is "conventional," he seems to think it worthy of acceptance; just because it is conventional, I would have its importance as a test of educational attainments enormously diminished. If our spelling were strictly phonetic, to spell a word wrongly would argue on the part of the speller either an imperfect knowledge of the spoken language—the real language—or carelessness in making use of his knowledge. In that case bad spelling might fairly be regarded as a sign of inferior English scholarship. At present, if a man spell common words differently from his neighbors, the most reasonable inference is that he has paid more attention to pronunciation than they have, and has shaken himself clear of a superstition by which they are still enthralled. In short, if I may be permitted the use of a paradox, our worst spellers are really our best spellers.

Let me repeat here a challenge which I have made in the most public manner over and over again. I ask any of the advocates of "good spelling" to give a single reason for regarding ability to spell English words in the ordinary way as either a fair test of literary culture or a mark of a well-trained and well-informed mind. If any reason can be given, I would like to hear or see it; if none can be given, then those who choose in despite of phonetic laws, to apply this test are themselves not merely worshippers of a fetic, but would be persecutors of men whom they know to be, in many instances, better English scholars than themselves. The day is