

## \* Special Papers. \*

## ONTARIO SCHOOLS.

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A PAPER READ AT THE TEACHERS' CONVENTION AT STRATFORD.

IN many respects Canada, and more especially the Province of Ontario, is, or claims to be, an exceptionally favored land, in none more so than with regard to its educational advantages. For forty years past we have hugged to ourselves the belief that we have the best devised school system in the world, and for now nearly twenty years we have again and again been assured, both by official pronouncements and party editorials, that our school methods are modernized and enlightened, our text-books unequalled, our departmental administration perfect, and our teachers both qualified and devoted. Has our educational advancement been commensurate with our facilities? Has our progress in building up a moral and intellectual nation been fully keeping pace with the improvements, or so-called improvements, in our educational machinery and appliances? If we have not been simply deluding ourselves with pleasant fancies, our public liberality, our advanced school legislation, our model text-books and improved teachers should, by this time, have produced tangible and even startling results. At least half of our adult population have received their Public and High School and Collegiate training within the past twenty years. How do these compare, morally and intellectually, with the generation of Canadians now verging on old age? How with the citizens of the United States, whose educational methods and means we have been wont to insist are inferior to our own? Are the Public school children of Ontario to-day more intelligent, more symmetrically developed, better taught, of higher promise, more fully informed, or of cleaner behavior than their parents were in their time? Are the High school and University scholars who have graduated since, say, 1881, not merely better filled or more systematically crammed with ancient or modern languages, or with the various ics and als and ologies, but intrinsically more intellectual, of larger mental capacity, of sterner integrity, of firmer moral fibre? Are they better equipped for the business of life, better prepared to become enlightened, patriotic citizens; are they more earnest, more steadfast, more intense than those of the last and preceding decades? If so, where is the evidence that such is the case? Is political partyism, which may be taken as the very antithesis of intelligence, less rampant or less virulent than of old, except to the extent that it has been modified by independent journalism, or checked by the inexorable logic of recent political disclosures? Are our public men and officials, most of whom are the immediate outcrop of our educational system, more public-spirited or less self-seeking than their predecessors were? Are vice, and ignorance, and irreligion less prevalent in our cities and towns? Are the great body of the people in our rural sections any less grossly superstitious, less credulous, less

gullible, less easily victimized by every political or professional or other knave who may decide to live by preying on them? And, apart from all mere national prejudice, do our people as a whole, in public or private virtue, in enterprise, in push, pluck, prudence, and perseverance, or in all or any of the elements of national greatness, surpass those of our race in other countries? If candour compels us to answer all or any of these questions in the negative, where are we to seek for the cause? If all the vast educational outlay of the Province, all our complicated and perfected educational contrivances, our multiplied checks and counter-checks, our boasted school legislation, our matchless methods and means have neither greatly advanced us beyond ourselves in the past nor placed us distinctly in the vanguard of all nations educationally—then common prudence suggests that we should anxiously ask why? Where are we to look for the broken cog in the machinery; where shall we find the overheated axle or the defective gearing that clogs the wheels of our educational progress?

## POLITICS AND EDUCATION.

How such queries are to be answered is, of course, largely a matter of opinion. Some are disposed to insist that our comparative failure is largely, if not altogether, due to the bureaucracy of our system and the unhappy alliance between politics and education, which practically centralizes all patronage in Toronto, and makes professional preferment, at least in the higher grades, not a question of personal merit, but chiefly one of political complexion and support. Others are inclined to locate the fault in our High schools, with their procrustean tendencies and systems of over-stimulation and forced cram, which irreparably injures pupils by over-study at the most critical period of their lives, while it substitutes, in the masters, a safe mediocrity of effort and uniformity of aim for personal enthusiasm and the highest essays of teaching skill. Into these fields of discussion, tempting as they doubtless are, it is not my purpose now to enter. While freely expressing my opinion that evils—great and fatal evils—do flow from organic defects and anomalies in the higher and dominating parts of the system, I desire just now to address myself to you as Public school teachers, and to limit what I have to say to your personal characteristics and shortcomings in that capacity.

## THE POWER OF THE TEACHER.

That within certain limits you have it in your power to make or mar the success of the whole, is not, I think, open to question. For such causes of weakness as are inherent to our system, but which lie beyond your control, you are not, in any sense, responsible. There do exist, however, causes of miscarriage which lie at your door, which pertain to you individually and collectively. If these are ever to be remedied at all, relief must come not from without the profession, but from within it; not from Acts of Parliament or departmental regulations, but from your own autogenetic, conscientious, self-sustained efforts. Speaking more directly to those of you who are yet young and plastic—who are just entering, it may be, on a

teacher's life—I propose to point out what are to-day reputed to be the prevailing faults to be met with among the teachers of our Province. It were certainly a more grateful duty to dwell only on the many excellences to be met with in your schools. These, however, are less likely to escape your notice. Partial friends, interested flatterers, vanity, self-conceit, all conspire to give us a great opinion of ourselves and of our work; all unite to emblazon our merits in crimson and gold, while they strive to conceal our defects beneath a coat of sober grey. Thus you will find many ready to give you whatever credit or commendation you may deserve. Be mine the more useful, though less gracious, task of setting forth the shortcomings and mistakes which may possibly belong to some among you, not captiously or malevolently, but lovingly, honestly, hopefully, and with an earnest prayer that you may never rest or feel at peace with yourselves until, with God's blessing, you shall have emancipated yourselves from defects and tendencies and modes of thought and rules of conduct which very largely discount, if, indeed, they do not altogether destroy, your usefulness as teachers.

## A GRAVE MISAPPREHENSION.

Primarily, then, let me rectify a grave misapprehension on the part of many young teachers as to the general nature of the work to which you have devoted yourselves. There is a constant flow of hot young blood into your profession. Dissatisfaction with agricultural pursuits, the irksomeness of farm life, and the ever-increasing competition in all industrial employments annually drive our High school pupils by hundreds to become instructors of youth. Just as soon as they obtain the coveted third-class certificate they are eager to try their 'prentice hands at work of the nature of which they may be said to know little or nothing, and to care less. Hence, both in and out of the profession, there prevails a very general impression that anyone who can obtain a certificate can teach a school—that it is an easy thing to become a school teacher, and that school teaching is easy work. This is a serious mistake. It is unquestionably an easy thing to be a school-keeper—a thing so contemptibly easy that no one having status or aspirations above those of a human cabbage should be emulous of filling the role. It is but little, if any, more difficult to herd children in a school-room than to herd sheep or cattle or swine on the hillside, and is scarcely more dignified or reputable employment. Nor is either the trouble or the respectability of the work greatly enhanced by the effort, however successful it may prove, while herding children to merely instil into their receptive minds a modicum of useful knowledge. It may be admitted, then, that it is almost if not quite as easy to be a childherd as to be a shepherd, or a cowherd, or a swineherd, or, in other words, that to keep a school is easy work. But to teach a school—to be a real, living teacher, charged with the tensional electricity of high resolve—an exhaustless source of mental enlightenment and moral warmth to all around—developing his scholars while instructing them—more anxious that they shall become good