

History of the Art of Writing

IN THREE PARTS—PART I.

By Katherine Smith

THE art of writing, and its progress, superficially considered, may appear a trivial subject for investigation, but without the art of writing, the labors of our ancestors, in every branch of knowledge, would have been lost to us and our best thought contributions would fail to reach posterity. The word of mouth method gave us tradition, but not authentic history, as the latter can only be compiled from written material.

The art of writing is as old as civilization itself, indeed Morgan uses it to mark the introduction to civilization. It is thought probable that in North Babylonia the pictograph or hieroglyphic stage had long passed eight thousand years ago. We are told that seven thousand years ago in Egypt, Babylonia and Crete, both reading and writing were of hoary antiquity. The written word has always been of mysterious significance to the savage. Among such peoples, the person who could use symbols for communication was next to the gods; hence written languages ministered to forms of worship and remained in the church. In this way the currency of civilization and learning became written language, consequently the revered part of education has not been the sciences as first hand studies of reality, but language and books have been made the prominent constituents of the curriculum until very recent years.

Writing has evolved through the same general stages as the evolution of speech. First, there was the gesture language, corresponding to the signal system of the animal herds, to give alarm and a means of communication with fellows; next there was the onomatopoeic, or growl writing, ideographs in which forms of actual objects were united, as in the Egyptian hieroglyphics, the picture of a man was drawn to represent the idea of man, etc. This is a note or word formed in the evolution of language. Gradually intonation was added, accent for extra meaning or emphasis; this stage in its earliest development is well illustrated in the Chinese representation of complex ideas.

The really important factor in human progress has not been so much the discovery of a method by which words can be recorded as it has been the invention of some facile, graphic device, such as the alphabet, by means of which the art of writing can be so far simplified as to become attainable before the age of adolescence has passed. A people may possess the art of writing without the knowledge of an alphabet, but such a system of non-alphabetic writing will be so limited in its power of expression as to be of little value, or else be too difficult, complicated and unsuitable for general use. The methods of writing used by the early Egyptians, Assyrians and Chinese go to prove that without the alphabet any complete system for the graphic representation of speech is an acquirement so difficult as to demand the labor of a lifetime. Under such conditions, science and religion necessarily tend to remain the exclusive property of a priestly caste, extended culture becomes impossible, and such a system of writing, instead of being the most effective means of progress may become one of the most powerful means of enslaving the masses.

The hieroglyphics system of the Egyptians, although it is the source of all existing alphabets, is far from being the only graphic system invented, or the only one which attained the alphabetic stage of development. Various races have succeeded in inventing methods of writing independently of one another. The characteristic fact to be remembered is that the starting point and general direction have been the same, i.e., all systems of writing have been found to have had their beginning in rude pictures; these pictures being conventionalized, more or less gradually came to be used to represent words and later became the symbols of more or less complex and abstract thought.

Let us enquire briefly into the primitive forms of writing from which all alphabets are abbreviated descendants, to instance similar stages found among the nations of today, and to show how our own alphabet has reached so high a stage of perfection. After a survey of a long period covered by the development of writing we are able, for convenience and brevity, to arbitrarily divide the whole into three stages:

1.—The mnemonic, or memory aiding.

2.—Ideograms—

(a) Pictures of objects.

(b) Pictorial symbols, or words.

3.—Phonograms.

(a) Verbal signs.

(b) Syllabic signs.

(c) Alphabetic signs.

1.—**The Mnemonic Stage:** In this some tangible object is used, as a message or for record, between people living at a distance from each other, and also for purpose of accrediting the messenger. This stage borders on and anticipates the symbolic stage of expression. Good examples of the mnemonic are "quipers" or knotted cords still used by the Puma herdsman of the Peruvian plateaux to register their herds. The history of the "quipers" is long, the idea being still with us in both the rosary upon which the Roman Catholics count their prayers, in the knot tied in our handkerchief to help our weak memory and in the sailor's log-line. The device was of widespread use, reaching its most elaborate form amongst the ancient Peruvians, from whose language the term "quipper," meaning knot, is borrowed. The following is a description from the story of the alphabet, by Clodd:

To the main cord at given distances are fastened thinner cords of different colors, each cord being knotted in divers ways to represent special purposes and each color having a peculiar significance of its own, i.e. red for soldiers, yellow for gold, white for silver, green for corn, etc., while the meaning of a single knot was ten, double knot one hundred, two double knots two hundred. Besides being a convenience in reckoning they were used for keeping the annals of the Empire of the Incas, for sending orders, for preserving records of the dead in old Egypt, etc.

"At the present time small cords are used by the native tribes of Ardrah in West Africa; while other African tribes have devised message sticks similar to the well-known Australian types, more highly developed knot reckoning is found among the Mexican Juni and in more primitive form among some of the North American Indians. A generation ago the Hawaiian tax-gatherer kept account of the assessable property throughout the islands in cord from three to five fathoms in length. The Chinese used the knotted cord prior to the invention of writing, and its use is also found depicted in Egyptian hieroglyphics. In 1831 the Houses of Parliament were destroyed by overheating stoves in burning up an accumulation of tally-sticks that had been used to keep the accounts of money lent to the government. In Scotland fifty years ago the baker boy made a notch on his 'nick-stick' for every loaf of bread left on his rounds. Thus the use of objects was almost universal in the distant past, and still survives in some measure."

Because of our familiarity with the wampum of the North American Indian little need to said on the subject. The use of wampum belts is not widespread. The belts consist of handmade beads or perforated shells arranged in various patterns on bark, filament, hemp or deer-skin strips, the ends being selveidged by sinews, or fibres of hemp. The patterns are usually pictorial symbols recording events in the history of the tribe or treaties between tribes. The Iroquois developed the wampum belt to quite a high degree of art.

2.—**Ideograms:** These are pictures intended to represent either things or thoughts. They are of two kinds: (1) pictures or actual representations of objects; and (2) pictorial symbols suggesting abstract ideas. "The earliest actual record known of any actual event is the scene depicted on the fragment of an antler which was found in the rock shelter at an antler in Auvergne. It portrays a primitive hunter covered with hair creeping up to a gigantic urus, feeding in the grass, and the hunter is seen in the very act of casting a spear at his un-

suspecting enemy." It is evident that primitive man, in his attempt to record and transmit his thoughts in a graphic manner selected such objects within his environment as were most frequently encountered in his struggle for existence. Clodd writes: "The necessity of identifying personal as well as tribal property, especially in land and livestock led to the employment of various characters more or less pictographic which have their representatives in signaries used in ancient commerce and in manufacturers' trade marks." In the marks used for branding cattle can be recognized survivals of Indian writing. Prof. Ernst of Caracas says "that in tattooing, aside from its symbolic and religious significance marking the connection of the man with his clan-totem or individual totem and also its decorative purpose, there is also a utilitarian purpose. It is known that certain red tribes of Red Indians tattoo both sexes so that the captured individual may be identified and ransomed in case of war. The grave of a chief is indicated by his totem scratched upon a slab, tribal boundaries are marked by stones engraved with the totem of the tribe. The very curious records on Pictish stones of Scotland; the pictures on the magic drums of the Laplanders; the drawings found on rocks in Australia, Siberia, Peru and Arabia not only show how keenly men of different races have striven to record some lasting memorials of their deeds, but these drawings are also of value in proving the essential similarity of the means used by different people to give effect to their desires."

A further extension of the system of picture writing became possible when it was discovered that complex ideas could be conveyed by combinations of simple ideograms.

(To be continued.)

THE SOAP BOXER

Of the different forms of society which are open to the adherents of the Socialist movement, that of the street corner propagandist, or "soap boxer," possesses a remarkable attraction, and much value. Not only is it effective in familiarizing the workers with the truths of Scientific Socialism, but it also serves as a valuable aid in broadening and deepening that understanding of the working class mind, which is so necessary to the student of society and its affairs.

In Vancouver, aside the squalor of the downtown district, hard by the slave market, where the workers in mine, field and forest have the privilege of reading on the employment boards, the price and terms upon which they shall render up the use of their bodies in the process of production, the work of education along scientific lines has been carried on for many years. Old timers in the revolutionary movement often refer to the argument and discussion that used to rage around "Lester's Corner," in the days when the movement in Canada was very young, and many of them can point to it as the place where they first developed the habits of thought and viewpoint peculiar to revolutionary Socialism. And it is of the utmost importance that this street corner propaganda should be carried on. Here it is that the migratory worker can be met and appealed to under circumstances which make his mind more susceptible to new ideas, and his miserable precarious condition as a wage worker is revealed to him in a manner that cannot be disputed. With a keen recollection of hard and brutal tasks performed for a wage barely sufficient for his most simple needs, and doubtful as to his ability to secure even this in the future that seems to await him, he will eagerly join the crowd that gathers when the street corner meetings begin.

But the Socialist speakers are not alone in their claims for a hearing. Here also come the religionists of different, but not conflicting creeds, clamor-

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