

schools, who is left no alternative but to memorize the awkward and manifold devices and combinations by which the sounds of our spoken language are committed to paper. Nor is the task imposed upon the English pupil ever completed. Years of study in school, supplemented by years of patient care and attention in business or professional life, rarely ensures perfect results in this practically important department of personal education. The aggregate loss from this cause, in the results of human effort and enterprise, cannot be over-estimated or sufficiently deplored.

The difficulties which invest this question, relate almost exclusively to the vowels of the alphabet, and to the use of silent and supernumerary letters. In our written words, the vowel *a* has at least six sounds, *e* three, *i* two, *o* four, and *u* four—making nineteen distinct sounds for six letters. If we add the number of sounds expressed by combinations of vowels, we shall find that we have not less than twenty-four sounds in all, for which our alphabet provides but six signs.

In a paper once presented to the British parliament by Edmund Burke, it was claimed that not less than nine different meanings, or sounds, could be found in English words for the one letter *a*, while the abuses of the five remaining vowels were declared to be equally various and unnatural.

Sounds not represented by any letter of the alphabet are expressed by as many different methods as the ingenuity of man can invent, and by combinations which no rule will explain, and which no degree of patience and perseverance in study can thoroughly and satisfactorily interpret.

In his dictionary, Noah Webster attempted to indicate the pronunciation of English words by a system of diacritical marks applied to vowels, thereby virtually multiplying the

number of vowels belonging to the alphabet, and to that extent recognizing the principle sought to be practicalized by the advocates of orthographical reform.

In some or all of the readers adopted for use in our public schools, a similar expedient is resorted to, by way of relieving pupils from some part of the burden of learning to read and spell by means of signs otherwise almost wholly illogical and arbitrary. In a limited way, these devices seem to modify, but not to remove the obscurity and confusion. The first lesson the child learns from his spelling book, under ordinary circumstances, is, that to reason is crime. He finds, for example, that the letter *a* has one meaning in the word *fate*, but another in *fast*, another in *fall* and another in *far*; that the letter *o* is not sufficiently signified by the use of the letter itself, but by a multitudinous and disheartening combination of signs, as illustrated in the words *owe*, *blow*, *door*, *foe*, *sew*, *dough*, *beau*, *coal*, *yeoman*, *court* and *sword*; that the letter *o* in the words *done*, *come*, *son*, etc., is not *o* at all; that the sound of *i* is spelled without the use of that letter in such words as *by*, *buy*, *bye*, *my*, and *rye*; and that when that letter is actually employed to express a sound, it often means something wholly different from itself, as in the words *is*, *tin*, and *if*.

In his efforts to construe combinations of letters, the pupil fares no better. The letters *ai* in *jail* are not the same in *said*; the letters *eo* in *people* are something else in *yeoman*, and something else in *pigeon*, while *ough* means *o* in *dough*, *oo* in *through*, *uf* in *tough*, *auf* in *trough*, and *ou* in *plough*. The methods of expressing the sound of *e* and of pronouncing that letter, in the words *believe*, *receive*, *receipt*, *conceal*, *increase*, *concede*, *proceed*, *people*, and *sleeve*, are necessarily an inexplicable puzzle to any child or man.