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Elementary Education

Martha Maclear
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CHAPTER III.

ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

THE ELEMENTARY EDUCATION of girls during the first half of the nineteenth century was largely determined by class distinctions. For the daughters of the rich, private schools were provided, while philanthropic societies furnished whatever education the children of the poor received. Later in the century, the free, state supported school replaced this private benevolence.

The Dame School was one of the chief instruments used in the education of young children. It had its rise in England where it flourished from the period subsequent to the Reformation until the nineteenth century. It was usually kept in a kitchen or living room by some woman who had in her youth obtained the rudiments of an education. For a few pennies a week the dame took the children into her home and explained to them the mysteries connected with learning the beginnings of reading and spelling.¹ In his poem, *The School Mistress*, Shenstone celebrates the dame school and, incidently, gives an idea of its universality and its method.

“In every village mark’d with little spire,
Embowered in trees and hardly known to fame,
There dwells in lowly shed, and mean attire,
A matron old, whom we schoolmistress name,
Who boasts unruly brats with brick to tame.”²

There was often a board at the door to prevent the infants from straying, and while the discipline was severe, it was tempered with mercy in the shape of ginger-bread and sugar cakes

“Lo, now with state she utters her commands!
Eftsoons the urchins to their tasks repair,
Their books of stature small they take in hand
Which with pellucid horn secured are,
To save from fingers wet the letters fair.”³

In New England, the dame school was the only primary school and served as the prerequisite to the town reading and writing school, until the public primary schools were opened.⁴ But, unlike its English proto-

¹ Cubberley, E. P., “The History of Education,” p. 447.

² Monroe, Paul, “A Cyclopedia of Education.” Vol. 2, p. 246.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, p. 248.

type, a dame school might be a select school exclusively for the rich and well-connected or a quasi-nursery in which working mothers could leave their children.

In the early part of the nineteenth century, there was kept in Salem, Massachusetts, a small, select school, called a dame school, for the benefit of well-born children. So exclusively was it that an introduction was necessary before permission could be granted to enter. The school was co-educational in theory although few boys attended. The furniture consisted of two rows of single desks with hard, slippery little chairs for the girls and one row for the boys.

The curriculum comprised lessons in good breeding, reading, spelling, writing on slates and chanting the multiplication table to a tune adapted from Yankee Doodle. Arithmetic was learned from an abacus "which had the effect of at once destroying any possibility of original effort on the part of the pupil."

"When we were marked for any misdemeanor, we had to go to Miss Emily and ask what we should do to 'make up our marks.' Before doing this, it was the fashion to cry—or pretend to cry—for a few minutes, with one's head resting upon the desk. I do not think any of us ever really shed a tear but it was a perfunctory way we had of showing our sense of the disgrace of having a mark. The 'making up a mark' was by no means a heavy penance. It usually consisted of writing one's name ten times or making some figures or 'doing sums' on a slate." As "we had all sorts of odd books, each child was in a class by herself."⁵

In addition to the studies mentioned above, such accomplishments were taught as "courtesying prettily and the like and every Wednesday, Miss Lucy instructed us in needle work."

"Our lessons were few and simple and the methods were undoubtedly old-fashioned. However, what we learned, we learned thoroughly and there were lessons not to be found in books, to be gained from the daily example of the two fine old gentlewomen with their rigid ideas of right and wrong and the quaintly elegant manners of an age gone by."⁶

Such was one pattern of a dame school—a select school for the aristocrats. Lucy Larcom, who gained some distinction as a poet while working as a mill hand at Lowell, Massachusetts, has left a record of the nursery type. This school she attended at Beverly, Massachusetts. It was kept by Aunt Hannah in her kitchen or sitting room as best suited her convenience. The culinary operations and other employments were a

⁵ Putman, Eleanor, "A Salem Dame School." *Atlantic Monthly*. Vol. 55, 1885, p. 53.

⁶ *Ibid.*

source of constant delight to the children. If a baby's head nodded, a little bed was made for it on a soft comfort in the corner where it had its nap out undisturbed. But such an untoward incident did not happen very frequently. Aunt Hannah kept so many interesting things going on that the children seldom had any inclination toward sleep. To enforce discipline, she used a ferule or a thimble to rap the children on the head. The age of entrance was two years and reading was begun at two and a half. All of which was necessary to relieve the mothers of the prevailing large families who had no time to spare from their multitudinous labours to devote to the care of the younger children. In addition to reading, the curriculum consisted of sewing, patching and knitting stockings.⁷ It was these two types of the dame school which provided education for young children until public opinion had been awakened to the point where it was willing to vote money for schools in which the rudiments of learning might be taught.

In New York state, there were, also, dame schools scattered here and there, under irresponsible teachers, and usually short-lived. In them were taught reading and writing to the children of both sexes. Sewing and needle work were sometimes added to the curriculum for the benefit of the girls.⁸

The lack of appropriateness in the conduct of such schools may be inferred from the following items: "1831, a room in the tavern at Tracey's Corner was used for the school." "Miss Betsey Whitcomb taught school for a dollar a week." "1842, Melissa Dickey taught a school in a dry kiln."⁹

However all dame schools could not have been of this unstable character. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the noted suffrage leader, recalls with appreciation, a good spinster, Maria Yost, who patiently taught three generations of children. This, in spite of a curriculum even more meagre than was customary. "The rudiments of the English language and an introduction to the pictures in Murray's *Spelling Book*" could hardly be dignified by the name of "course of study."¹⁰

Paralleling the dame schools in that they provided education for children of the same age, were certain better organized schools. Anna Green Winslow, a Boston school girl of 1771, has left in her diary glimpses of one such school. "This morning I was at sewing school and writing

⁷ Larcom, Lucy, "A New England Girlhood."

⁸ Munsell & Co., "History of Queens Co.," p. 57.

⁹ Muraid, John S., "History of Allegheny County," p. 460.

¹⁰ Stanton, Elizabeth C., as revealed in her "Letters, Diary and Reminiscences." Edited by Theodore Stanton & Harriet Stanton Blatch, p. 7.

school; this afternoon, at sewing, for Master Holbrook does not in winter keep school of afternoons."¹¹ In addition to the work done at school, there was knitting to be done at home and spinning.¹² One item in the diary reads, "I have spun thirty knots of liming yarn and (partly) new footed a pair of stockings for Lucinda, read a part of the *Pilgrims Progress* and copied part of my text journal."¹³ From these entries it would seem that writing was taught at school and reading at home and that Master Holbrook shared the usual Boston prejudice that girls would not go to school in the winter of afternoons.

Later in the century, the curriculum was broadened to include reading, writing, English grammar, punctuation and orthography, drawing, painting and needle work while assurance was given that every attention would be paid to the morals and good behavior of the pupils.¹⁴ In the early school for girls, arithmetic was not offered but when boys were in attendance it formed part of the curriculum¹⁵ and, also, in schools for young ladies and children.¹⁶

The teachers in the private schools were far from competent since there was no standard which they were compelled to maintain.¹⁷ It was even asserted by one engaged in public school work that "the majority of these schools are taught by young girls who have either failed to get a license or whose education is so limited that they dare not ask for an examination."¹⁸ It is stated in Barnard's *American Journal of Education* that it was not uncommon to find a teacher giving instruction in reading, spelling, geography, arithmetic, chemistry, natural philosophy, logic, mental philosophy, history, rhetoric, moral philosophy, chronology, algebra, geometry, Latin, some work of a theological nature, drawing, French and music.¹⁹ Superficiality could only be the result of expecting any teacher, especially an untrained one, to cope adequately with such an overloaded programme.

The prejudice in favor of private schools was such, in spite of their obvious shortcomings, that it played havoc with public education. This was especially true of the education of girls. In the Thirteenth Annual

¹¹ Winslow, Anna Green, "Diary of a Boston School for Girls of 1771." Edited by Alice Morse Earle, p. 35.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁴ Albany Argus, November 28, 1815.

¹⁵ Rochester Republican, September 30, 1839.

¹⁶ Boston Daily Times, April 17, 1836.

¹⁷ Willard, Emma, *Plan*, op. cit.

¹⁸ Fourteenth Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1863.

¹⁹ Barnard *American Journal of Education*, Vol. 2, p. 221.

Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of New York, the district superintendent of Green County complains that "it is astonishing what an influence the wards 'select school' have on the minds of some persons. If a teacher is employed in a public school, they esteem him a common school teacher; when teaching in a private school, he is at once Professor So and So. . . . These schools are mostly encouraged by persons of aristocratic proclivities minus the ability to merit more than their neighbors. By their activities they contrive to damage the public school and their own children."

In 1843, the same complaint was made by the superintendent of schools for Monroe County. Here, he said, little select schools were springing up in the cities of the county which segregated a few children of wealthy parents from the rest of the community. In thus fostering family and aristocratic feelings, there was danger of working permanent evil to society. "The children of the poor and indifferent by being thus left to themselves were growing up in ignorance, idleness and vice, the dire effects of which you can better imagine than I."

In the same year, 1843, the superintendent of Oswego County complained of the "widespread evils of select schools." "Miniature aristocracies," he called them and insisted that they robbed the common schools of respectability while not being so good as they, the government was of the loosest kind and moral training was much neglected. Even the elementary branches were imperfectly taught or wholly neglected.²⁰ In Queens County, the education of girls was slighted not only on account of co-education in the common schools but also because of the high price of tuition in the select schools.²¹ In some localities, the common schools were held in such ill-repute that, it was said, parents taught their children to feel contempt for them. School houses were assailed with bricks and stones and windows were broken since only common people attended them.²²

It was this attitude of mind, colored by class distinctions, which the advocates of the public schools had to fight. While Henry Barnard was Commissioner of Education in Rhode Island, he found that the wealthy were going to private schools while only the poor and uninfluential patronized the common schools. Therefore the community was the more inflexibly divided into classes and the much-needed improvements in the common schools were unduly delayed.²³ Practically the same situation

²⁰ Report of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1843.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Common School Assistant, Vol. 2, p. 61.

²³ Barnard, Henry, Report on the Public Schools of Rhode Island, 1848, p. 38.

obtained in Boston. In 1826, the school committee reported that there were one hundred forty-one private schools in the city, twenty-two of which were conducted by men, one hundred nineteen by "ladies," while the girls registered in them numbered twice as many as the boys. One thousand sixty-nine boys as compared with two thousand four girls were found enrolled which was about the proportion found in other New England cities and in New York.²⁴ As the private schools were tuition schools working men were deprived of their benefit and their children were restricted to the common schools, which were felt to be inferior, or else forced, by dire poverty, to have no education at all.²⁵

A decade later when Horace Mann became secretary of the Massachusetts School Board, the majority of towns and cities in that state were paying more for private than for public education.²⁶

There was much difference of opinion as to the worth of the private school. Its patrons claimed that it was necessary to maintain tuition schools to protect children from better homes from evil influences. The children in the public schools were said to be so addicted to profanity and mischievousness as to make it imperative that well brought up children, especially girls, should not be associated with them.²⁷

While this discussion was agitating the minds of the well-to-do, the children of the poor were left to the care of philanthropic agencies. This method of meeting a situation had been prevalent during the Colonial period, when the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts had been active in educational work. A society which was founded in England in 1701 to extend the work of the Anglican Church abroad. Its method of procedure was to supply schoolmasters and ministers, to establish schools and to train children to read, write, know and understand the catechism and to fit into the teachings and worship of the church. The principal objects of the society were to develop piety and help the poor to lead industrious, upright, self-respecting lives, "to make them loyal church members and to fit them for work in that station of life in which it had pleased their Heavenly Father to place them."²⁸

New York City was one of the main fields for the activities of the

²⁴ Report of the School Committee of the City of Boston on the state of the Schools.

²⁵ Workingman's Advocate, October 1, 1829. Quoted by McMaster, op. cit. Vol. 5, p. 100.

²⁶ Report of Board of Education, 1837. Quoted by Mayo, A.D., "Educational History in the United States," p. 718.

²⁷ Mann, Horace, Lectures and Annual Report on Education, Vol. 2, p. 416. Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board of Education, 1838.

²⁸ Cubberley, E. P., "History of Education," p. 449-450.

Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. Here it labored with zeal for the education of the poor until the separation of the colonies from England made an end of its work. In its schools, no discrimination seems to have been made between the sexes except in the teaching of arithmetic and writing. The former was not taught to girls since it was felt to be such a rare accomplishment that only the very talented among the male sex could learn it. While writing, a subject not essential to the education of girls, was given only a modicum of time. The teaching of religion, reading and a trade was the same for both boys and girls although the trade varied with the sex of the pupil. Needle work was usually the only trade taught to girls since, up to the middle of the nineteenth century, it was the chief means by which they earned their living.²⁹

After the Revolution, when the British Society had discontinued its work, the only facilities for elementary education in New York City were provided by church, private and charity schools. In these schools, there were one hundred forty-one teachers, of whom one hundred six were men and thirty-five women. A school for colored children had been opened in 1787 by the Manumission Society and a school for girls, in 1801, by the Association of Women Friends for the Relief of the Poor. This society was generally known as the Female Association. In the course of time, the Public School Society took over the schools of both societies, those of the Manumission Society in 1834 and those of the Female Association in 1845.³⁰

Of the church schools, the one incorporated in 1806 by Trinity Church may be taken as an example of such philanthropies. It was opened "to receive and admit into said school to be boarded, lodged, clothed and educated only at the expense of the corporation hereby erected such and so many poor children of either sex as they shall judge fit to admit."³¹

The schools conducted by the Female Association were primarily designed for girls but later boys were admitted. The Lancasterian method of instruction was adopted, that is the school was divided into groups of ten under teaching monitors.³² These monitors were taught by the teach-

²⁹ Kemp, William W., "Support of Schools in Colonial New York by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts," p. 107ff.

³⁰ Reigart, John F., "The Lancasterian System of Instruction in the Schools of New York City," p. 1.

³¹ Hobson, Elsie G., "Educational Legislation and Administration in the State of New York, 1777-1850," p. 86.

³² Bourne, W. O., "History of the Public School Society of the City of New York," p. 27.

er and, in turn, taught what they had learned to the pupils. In addition to the teaching monitors, there were monitors for attendance, for discipline for looking after absences, etc. In this way, it was possible to teach large numbers of children and to systematize school-room procedure at slight expense.

As the primary object of the schools of the Female Association was to train girls to earn their living, the chief subjects of instruction were needle work and "other useful employment."³³

Perhaps the most important of all the early philanthropic societies which maintained schools for the poor was the New York Free School Society. This name was later changed to the Public School Society of New York. Founded in 1805, under the leadership of DeWitt Clinton, it remained in existence until 1853 when it relinquished its schools to the Board of Education.³⁴

The Free School Society provided in almost all of its schools accommodations for girls. Free School No. 1 provided a room for such a purpose and six years later additional room. In December, 1811, apartments in No. 2 were opened and accepted as a school for girls. But in 1828, the Association ceased to offer educational facilities for girls owing to its losing a share of the school fund.³⁵ However this condition did not long persist. In the 29th Annual Report, 1834, eleven schools for girls are reported with an attendance of 2795. In addition to the institutions exclusively for girls, there were three for boys and girls which were attended by 450 boys and 227 girls; and seven primary schools with 1412 girls enrolled.³⁶ From this date on, there was no question of limiting the attendance to boys.

From the foundation of the Public School Society, the Lancasterian was the official method used in their schools.³⁷ As this system was in use in the many Lancasterian schools throughout the state, it was possible to awaken a certain amount of *esprit de corps* among the girls in such schools by means of communications of various sorts. The following letter from the girls in Syracuse, dated August 20, 1845, to the girls in New York, in reply to a letter from them, dated July 24, 1845, sheds light upon the course of study and the spirit in which it was undertaken:

³³ Bourne, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

³⁴ Reigart, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

³⁵ Fitzpatrick, Edward A., "The Educational Views and Influence of DeWitt Clinton," p. 121.

³⁶ Published in *The Knickerbocker*, 1834, p. 80.

³⁷ Reigart, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

“Dear Sisters:

“We hail you as sisters. We are glad a correspondence is now open between us and we haste to acknowledge the reception of the box of minerals presented by you. In return, we send you eighteen specimens of plants gathered in the vicinity of our village. Our class in Botany numbers sixteen. We have analyzed fifty species of plants this term and find ourselves increasingly interested in the pursuit of so pleasing and profitable study. We are exceedingly pleased with the minerals and will gratefully receive any specimens of mapping, penciling, painting or geometrical diagrams with which you may favor us. While we thank you, we will endeavor in our response to return an ample equivalent. We love the study of natural science and are taught by our Teacher to regard the field of nature as our Heavenly Father’s own library, from which He would not only have us gather lessons of wisdom and instruction but in which every object should seem to us to mirror forth His perfection and enforce His claims upon the affections of our young hearts.

“Hoping to hear from you again, we remain

“Yours affectionately,

“Eliza Fritcher,

“On behalf of Girls’ Public School No. 7, Syracuse.”³⁸

The above letter gives a much better appreciation of the course of study than a mere enumeration of the subjects offered. These were geography, grammar, bookkeeping, history, astronomy, algebra in the upper classes. In the primary grades were studied, reading and arithmetic.³⁹ Later geometry and trigonometry were added but possibly only for the boys.⁴⁰

Annual exhibitions of the work in the schools were held in which girls as well as boys took part. The programme of one such exhibition has been preserved in which alternate numbers were assigned to the different sexes.

In concert, they recited the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah which was followed by a reading lesson. Then a class, composed entirely of girls, showed its ability to work problems in addition, in compound multiplication and in arithmetic tables. After which demonstration, the work in sewing was displayed “with becoming pride.”⁴¹

Although the Public School Society was the best established of the

³⁸ Quoted from 40th Annual Report Public School Society, 1846.

³⁹ Twenty-ninth Annual Report, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ Report of P.S.S. to Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1843.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 35th Annual Report.

societies for the education of the poor, it, too, outgrew its usefulness. In 1853, after it had educated over 6,000,000 children and trained over 1200 teachers, the society surrendered its charter and turned over its buildings to the public school department of the city, which had been created by the legislature in 1842.⁴²

In the state of New York, public elementary education dates from 1795 when a law, valid for five years, distributed \$1,000,000 a year to the counties for schools. In 1798, there were 1352 schools in sixteen of the twenty-three counties and 59,660 children enrolled but on the expiration of the law in 1800, it could not be re-enacted. The first permanent school law was passed in 1812 and the first state superintendent of schools provided for. In 1814, teachers were ordered examined and by 1820, New York had probably the best schools of any state in the Union.⁴³ As there were no sex differences in the public elementary schools, these advantages meant as much to girls as they did to boys.

New England, settled originally by Calvinists, had made, by the end of the eighteenth century, good provision for public education. Vermont passed its first state school law in 1782 and established a state school fund in 1825. New Hampshire followed in 1789 and 1821 and Massachusetts passed its first general state school law in the same year, a law which applied to Maine, also, until 1820. Connecticut secured its permanent fund in 1750 by the sale of some land which the sale of the Western Reserve in Ohio raised to \$1,200,000.

But the first mention made of a school for girls supported by the town was in Portsmouth, New Hampshire in 1773. Here a school for girls was opened in which reading, writing, arithmetic and geography were taught. Its popularity was so great that seventy to eighty girls were in attendance, which necessitated an afternoon as well as a morning school. So proud was the town of its venture that it boasted of having the only "female" school supported by a municipality in New England.⁴⁵ However it did not long maintain such a distinction. In 1790 Gloucester, Massachusetts, passed an eight hour day for its schoolmaster in order that he might give two hours a day "to the instruction of females as they are a tender and interesting branch of the community and have been much neglected in the public schools of this town."⁴⁶

In New England towns and small cities, girls and young children

⁴² Cubberley, E. P., "Public Education in the United States," p. 88.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 67.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 65.

⁴⁵ Slosson, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 234.

went to school in summer only from five to thirteen weeks. Their teachers were young women quite untrained for their task who earned a little money and filled in idle time by teaching before an early marriage. In such summer schools the children studied reading, writing and spelling. Later when the privilege of attending winter school was granted them and boys also were in attendance arithmetic, grammar, geography, the constitution of the United States, the constitution of Massachusetts and the dictionary were added.⁴⁷

The city of Boston, unlike the rest of the state, had decided that girls would not go to school in winter owing to the inclement weather. Therefore it was decided by the city fathers, in 1790, that the one sex should attend school from April to October while the other went from October to April. The validity of this position was doubted by some of the residents of the city who were interested in education. To put it to the test, one, Caleb Bingham, opened a private school of a superior grade for girls. His venture met with such success by so many girls flocking to his school that the fallacy of the city's position was made only too plain. As a result of his effort the city schools were re-organized to allow girls to alternate with boys in sessions in a "double-headed grammar school course."⁴⁸ But even this concession proved inadequate and further provision had to be made. In 1818 primary schools were opened to which girls as well as boys were admitted. There were women teachers, who together with this type of school, became very popular. Children crowded in to the number of seventy or eighty to a room despite the fact that by far the largest number of children was in private schools.⁴⁹ As the years advanced and democratic forces grew stronger, this ratio was changed in favor of public education and the common school free to both sexes became the popular type of elementary education.

The other cities of Massachusetts were not so reluctant as Boston to open their schools to girls. Worcester, Plymouth, Salem, Medford and other cities all make mention in their town records of primary and elementary schools open to "females."⁵⁰

The other states of New England, following the example of Massachusetts, report the same liberal spirit. In this respect, New England followed New York in providing elementary education for girls either in separate schools or in the same building.⁵¹

⁴⁷ McMaster, *op. cit.*, Vol. 5, p. 345.

⁴⁸ Mayo, *op. cit.*, p. 1557.

⁴⁹ Wightman, Joseph M., "Annals of the Boston Primary School Committee from its First Establishment in 1818 to its Dissolution in 1855.

⁵⁰ Grizzell, *op. cit.*, Chapter 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Although public elementary education was open to girls, there seemed to be a feeling that some concession should be made to feminine intellect. In 1837, there were published two books for little girls; the first by Jane Taylor, the second by C. M. Sedgwick. The preface to the *Girls School Book No. 1*, states that this book "has been written expressly for little girls, to be used as a reading class book in primary or common schools. The writer knew no book written purposely for this class of learners. . . . As it has become the practice in common for girls to read in a class by themselves and not, as formerly, with boys, a small book teaching the peculiar virtues, properties and duties of little misses, seemed to be generally wanted."⁵²

The next year, the well-known author, Mrs. L. H. Signourney, brought out a *Girls' Reading Book*. The table of contents includes the following: "The Value of a Good Education. What is a Good Education for an American Female? Domestic Economy and Housewifery, Dress, Manners, Accomplishments, Intellectual and Moral Culture, Poetry, Biographies of Four Females."⁵³

These two books, designed especially for girls, take their place in the long succession of books of a similar nature which appeared during the first half of the century. Beginning in 1799 with Caleb Bingham's "The Young Lady's Accidence," a short and easy introduction to English Grammar. Designed principally for the use of the Fair Sex, though proper for either⁵⁴ to the middle of the century with *Gift Books and Garlands*, there was an annual output of books testifying to the general notion that "females" needed special intellectual fare.

In the main, elementary education for girls shows less prejudice against it than any other branch of education. The chief obstacle to be overcome was not the undesirability of such education but the class prejudice which insisted upon isolating girls into select schools. This practice did much to undermine the prestige of the public schools. It was not until the unifying force of a great conflict and the filtration of new ideas into society from many sources, that girls attended the public school as a matter of course.

⁵² Common School Assistant, Vol. 2, 1837, p. 32.

⁵³ Ibid, Vol. 3, 1838, p. 24.

⁵⁴ Cubberley, op. cit., p. 219.