

A RADICAL EDUCATIONIST IN EARLY ILLINOIS

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Higher education has been chiefly the possession of a limited and favored class. Its character has been determined largely by the desires, the needs, and the traditions of such a class. Knowledge, perhaps for this reason, has been regarded as knowledge of things which do not interest the masses of men. It has been, one may say, characteristically aristocratic and remote from the daily life of the lower classes in society. Some educators believe that class distinctions and the traditions of social status have determined what type of education and knowledge is valid. Hence knowledge about the normal activities of the masses and education for such activities have been regarded as unworthy of the name. Such, we are told, was the Greek conception and it has persisted until this day.

The tendencies in modern democratic societies seem away from this view of knowledge and education. Knowledge about the activities of the common man is regarded by many today as equally valid with the knowledge of the nature of the universe and of man's destiny. Knowledge is instrumental, not contemplative. Education therefore is most successful when most intimately associated with the daily pursuits of the learners. It is an instrument of control, not a beatific vision. The classical tradition has lost its supremacy largely because it has seemed to have no sufficiently vital function in the normal activities of the masses of men. The various classes of society are winning the battle for the right of special types of education based upon special needs and occupations. Higher education is no longer limited to preparation for leisure or for the few professions.

The purpose of this paper is to call attention to an early advocate of this view of knowledge and education.

Jonathan Baldwin Turner began his career as a pioneer in building the civilization of the Middle West in the third decade of the last century as a professor in Illinois College. He gave his life to the cause of securing for the agricultural and the mechanical classes a prepara-

tion for their occupations comparable to that given in the colleges of that day for the "learned" professions. He was a man of vigorous and positive mind, of broad culture, and of splendid intelligence. He was a radical, not only in education but in religion and in politics also. Although himself a product of the classical tradition in education, he criticised it severely because he saw that it was in practice a class education. His criticism and his constructive work showed that he had a deep sympathy with all classes in society and that he saw the problems of the early west. Not the least of his services was the perfecting after years of experimentation of the Osage Orange hedge which made small farms possible and proved the practical effectiveness of his social vision.

Professor Turner thought that the system of colleges then existing was too restricted with respect to the classes which were benefited, that the preparation they gave was valuable mostly for the few professions only, and that there should be colleges which would do for the agricultural and the mechanical classes what the existing colleges did for the traditional professions. He saw the beginning of the realization of his program in the establishment of the University of Illinois.

Knowledge, he held, must function in the everyday pursuits of life if it is to be of value, and education must provide this knowledge not merely for one class but for all classes. The industrial classes *(Address at Griggsville, May 13, 1850) lacked the means of bringing the abstract truth in their occupations "into effectual contact with the daily business and pursuits" of life. Truth as taught in the colleges was concerned with a very different world than that of the industrial classes. He advocated therefore a development of the science of the various industrial pursuits. The industrial classes "want, and they ought to have the same facilities for understanding the true philosophy, the science, and the art of their several pursuits and of applying efficiently existing knowledge thereto and widening their domain which the professional classes have long enjoyed." They

* All quotations from "The Life of Jonathan Baldwin Turner" by Mary Turner Carriell.

could not get this in the existing colleges for it was not regarded as valid as knowledge or as education.

How were they to get such an education? First, there should be a National Institute of Sciences "to operate as the great central luminary of the national mind". He thought we possessed this in the Smithsonian Institute. In addition each class should have its own university, with subordinate institutions. Each department should conduct annually a series of experiments. This, he thought, would be a means of good to all classes, would "evolve and diffuse practical knowledge and skill, true taste, love of industry, and sound morality".

This view naturally involved criticisms of the assumptions of the classical tradition in higher education, in particular, the validity of the claims made for language study and the doctrine of mental discipline. Education, he thought, should be liberal. But he doubted the effectiveness of mental discipline even for the professional classes. His view of mental training is a good example of realistic thinking. He said, "No inconsiderable share of mental discipline that is attributed to this peculiar course of study arises from daily intercourse for years with minds of the first order in their teachers and comrades, and would be produced under any other course if the parties had remained harmoniously together". His definition of mental discipline would be difficult to improve. "The most natural and effectual mental discipline possible for any man", he said, "arises from setting him to earnest and constant thought about things he daily does, sees, and handles, and all their connected relations and interests". This is at once a defense of the value and the validity of knowledge concerned in the so-called practical concerns of life and a criticism of the looseness characteristic of much present-day education, for it involves earnest and constant thought as well as a vital relationship to daily pursuits or concrete problems.

Professor Turner thought it absurd "to educate the man of work in unknown tongues, abstract problems and theories, and metaphysical figments and quibbles". He knew the sensibilities of the orthodox, however, and

thought that some might regard "the theories of such a course of education as too sensuous and gross to be at the basis of a pure and elevated culture". He thought not, however. Such objects of study were as important as any, "unless, indeed", as he said, "the pedantic professional trifles of one man in a thousand are of more consequence than the daily vital interests of all the rest of mankind". Such men as Socrates, Franklin, and Kosuth derived their education from their connection with the practical pursuits of life. "What we want from schools," he said, "is to teach men . . . to derive their mental and moral strength from their own pursuits." The difficulty of providing schools and a literature suited to the wants of the industrial classes would be met by the methodical application of science.

This view that the knowledge possessed by the workman is real knowledge, that the source of all knowledge is the normal activity of human beings, and that education, even in the schools, is best derived from intimate connection of the individual with life activities and occupations, is familiar doctrine. I thought it might be of some interest that they were verified in the life and thinking of Professor Turner, who developed them in intimate contact with the conditions and problems of a new country and who came by them through earnest and constant thought about things which a pioneer daily does and sees and handles.