

The Prestige of Learning in Early America

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THROUGH MOST of American history, belief in education as a panacea for most of our social ills has been an article of faith. Indeed, we have believed in education with religious fervor, and we have often made education almost the equivalent of godliness. Educators have pointed out that an increase in educational facilities would be certain to raise the moral tone of a community. To express doubt of the value of education was to run the risk of being classed with agnostics and atheists. This is not to say that everybody in every community was ready to increase his taxes or to labor in the educational vineyard. A few skeptics could always be found to oppose spending money to provide for schools, and always there were a few Neanderthals who simply did not want to have any traffic with learning. It was one of these who avowed that he was 'agin' education, the railroads, and the gov'mint.' Although there might be suspicion in some minds about the practical utility of learning, in most communities the 'better element' fostered schools and related agencies designed to raise the cultural level.

It is not my purpose to present a summary history of education in America, for that has been done many times, but to discuss the variety of agencies of learning that existed, the quality of this learning, and the cultural goals of our ancestors.

The notion of free education for everybody is a relatively modern concept, primarily a twentieth-century development. Even in Puritan Boston, which has often been cited as an ex-

ample of enlightenment in all educational matters, free schools for everybody came late in its history. Although Boston and other New England towns in the seventeenth century made an effort to see that all children got the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic, all who could afford to pay for schooling were assessed according to their means. Only children of the very poor got by without paying in the so-called 'free schools.' For higher education at Harvard College every student had to pay, though a few scholarships, usually for divinity students, were available.

By the late nineteenth century, however, the doctrine of free education had become widespread, and by the mid-twentieth, it had become an inalienable natural right. Furthermore, it became an accepted belief that everybody had a right to the same sort of education, and little or no effort was made to provide training designed to fit the aptitudes, interests, or cultural backgrounds of the pupils. Such an effort is of fairly recent origin, though our seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ancestors, perhaps wiser than we have been, sought to supply vocational training for those patently ill-adapted to a white-collar education.

The inalienable right to free education has not raised its prestige or improved its quality. What is given away often is not esteemed, and countless students now go through twelve grades without learning much of value. I was recently involved in an educational project designed to improve the teaching of history in high school. At a conference of educational specialists, one teacher announced that we had not done anything for the 'non-readers.' When I asked who they were, she replied, 'Students in high school who can't read.' It turned out that many pupils now proceed through twelve years of schooling without a clue as to how to interpret the written or printed—word. They literally cannot decipher a headline in a newspaper. When I asked what use history would be to these, I was told that some nice pictures might interest them.

A situation like this would have dumbfounded our ancestors in an earlier period. Learning was something to be prized—and paid for if necessary.

Colonial Americans brought with them an ideal of learning inherited from the Renaissance. In addition to the aristocratic tradition of emphasis on the civilizing influence of Greek and Latin literature, the religious doctrines of the Reformation made it imperative for every man to learn to read the Bible. No longer was the interpretation of Scripture left to priests; now everybody was enjoined to read the Word of God and seek salvation in this exercise. Consequently, learning to read became a Christian duty. In Scotland, the teachings of John Knox revolutionized popular culture, and the Scots, from being a barbarous folk, soon developed into a Bible-reading populace who demanded a learned ministry. The more literate seventeenth-century settlers in America combined the Renaissance respect for the classics with the Protestant belief in the necessity of knowing how to read and interpret not only the Scriptures but a deal of pious literature. The requirements of a new land also gave them a regard for training in vocational skills.

The tradition of Renaissance learning and respect for the classics, brought to America by our ancestors and adapted to their uses, is worth our consideration for a moment because these ideals of learning were responsible for the intellectual qualities of the most influential of the Founding Fathers. From the classics colonial Americans got their ideal of education for leadership, and in Greek and Roman history and philosophy they found principles of government, ethics, and social relationships which still influence our thinking, though we have forgotten the sources.¹

The Renaissance ideal of education, translated to colonial America, deserves our thoughtful attention, for that ideal ac-

¹A few paragraphs are adapted from Louis B. Wright, 'Humanistic Learning and the Democratic State,' *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, XLII (1942), 142-151.

counts for the quality of a remarkable leadership. This concept of education, in comparison with ours of today, may raise some questions that we need to face honestly.

From Aristotle the Renaissance derived four principles that education must seek to induce in men who would be leaders: Fortitude, Temperance, Prudence, and Justice. From Christian ethics, the Renaissance got two other principles: Liberality and Courtesy. These six virtues made up an ideal of conduct desirable for everyone, but particularly for men who would provide guidance for society. And, contrary to general belief, leadership was not the exclusive monopoly of the well-born. Beginning in the grammar schools and continuing through the universities and the rest of life, these principles received constant iteration. Literature and history were studied for the examples they offered of these six virtues: Fortitude, Temperance, Prudence, Justice, Liberality, and Courtesy.

The definition of these virtues was not narrow. For example, Prudence meant something far more important than the present connotation of caution. Prudence required wide knowledge so that a man could act with wisdom in any emergency. Young men studied the career of Alexander the Great, for instance, not only to learn how he had achieved his successes, but to discover the faults that led to his disasters. Constantly, teachers pointed out the lessons to be applied to conditions of their own time. Justice required learning in the principles of law as set forth by Solon and Justinian, and a study of the manifestations of justice and injustice to be found by diligent reading in the histories of all countries. Our own recent neglect of history is reflected in the ignorance manifested in the utterances of some of our lawmakers. No member of Parliament in 1600 would have been guilty of the kind of historical ignorance that has too often echoed in the halls of Congress—an ignorance which has had unfortunate results in governmental policies.

Liberality did not mean merely the virtue of being generous

on occasion. The Renaissance ideal of liberality required the cultivation of a liberal and tolerant spirit through the contemplation of human actions, past and present. Courtesy meant something more than saying 'Thank You' and replying to invitations on the right kind of stationery. Courtesy required a knowledge of human relations in each stratum of society and taught men how to adapt themselves to the demands of any sort of human contact. Fortitude and Temperance were positive as well as negative virtues. To demonstrate courage and to control one's self became the mark of the man capable of leadership.

Renaissance education had a single purpose: to induce the qualities that exemplified the six virtues that I have mentioned. The goal was not to produce a race of pious prigs, but to train a body of men ready and eager to serve the state in the most intelligent fashion. The state itself, unlike the Nazi state, was conceived in Grecian terms. It was a state that had for its dream the highest cultivation of the individual. But the individualism of the Renaissance was not a detached individualism of anarchy; on the contrary, it made possible the cultivation of man's full powers under the restraints of law.

Whether the colonial gentleman was a Puritan merchant of Boston, an Anglican tobacco planter on the James River, or a planter-trader of Charleston, South Carolina, he retained the old faith in classical learning as a way to wisdom, and he subscribed to the virtues of Aristotle, modified by Christian ethics, as a code of conduct.

To what extent Renaissance gentlemen—or colonial gentlemen—actually lived up to the code is a question hard to answer. But in any age the acceptance and persistence of a high ideal is significant, even if few or none approach perfection in its practice. And we do know that both in sixteenth-century England and in colonial America there were many examples of men noted for their adherence to this ideal of behavior.

Sir Philip Sidney of Elizabethan England would have found

Richard Lee of Virginia an understanding and compatible friend. Both were learned men, with their education out of the same books; both were zealous in their service to the state and placed their duty to the commonwealth ahead of personal gain or glory; both were bookish men but were also men of action. More than a century in time and an ocean in space separated these two men, but they were of the same outlook. If it be objected that there were few Philip Sidneys or Richard Lees, we must answer that there were many only a little less distinguished for the practice of the same virtues.

Richard Lee's life illustrates two significant characteristics of the colonial gentleman: he felt an obligation to be learned and an equal obligation to serve the state. When he died, his tombstone recorded in impeccable Latin that 'while he exercised the office of magistrate he was a zealous promoter of the public good. He was very skilful in the Greek and Latin languages and other parts of polite learning. He quietly resigned his soul to God, whom he always devoutly worshiped, on the 12th day of March, in the year 1714, in the 68th year of his age.' Here was a man, living in the wilderness of Westmoreland County, Virginia, who was careful to keep up his learning, to set an example in religion, and to fulfill his civic duties. Governor Spotswood testified that Lee was 'a gentleman of as fair character as any in the country for his exact justice, honesty, and unexceptionable loyalty in all the stations wherein he has served in this government.' And a grandson observed somewhat regretfully that his ancestor had been learned but had not made the most of his opportunities to improve his patrimony: 'Richard spent almost his whole life in study, and usually wrote his notes in Greek, Hebrew, or Latin . . . so that he neither diminished nor improved his paternal estate. . . . He was of the Council in Virginia and also other offices of honor and profit, though they yielded little to him.' He might also have added that this scholar was no cloistered soul but instead was colonel of the militia, among

many other offices, and was a diligent overseer of his plantation and business affairs. This combination of the active and contemplative life would have pleased Vittorino da Feltre, or any other Renaissance educator.

Robert 'King' Carter of Corotoman, whose prolific heirs have multiplied until they are legion, was less unselfish in his devotion to the commonwealth, but he shared many of Lee's attitudes. For example, he regarded the Renaissance tradition of education as essential to the proper education of youth. He was so conservative that he regretted that his sons' schoolmaster no longer taught from Lily's Latin grammar—the textbook that Shakespeare studied—and he prescribed that his son Landon should 'be made a perfect master' of John Comenius' *Linguarum Trilinguis* in Latin, English, and Greek.

Even so worldly and so ambitious a social climber as William Byrd II of Westover exemplified in many respects the Renaissance tradition. He set himself a hard goal of learning. His diary records for long periods in his life the systematic and daily study of Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and various modern languages. It reveals his zeal to serve the state, and to maintain the decorum in religion expected of a gentleman. If it also discloses that the weaknesses of the flesh too often betrayed him, it makes perfectly clear his own remorse and regret over a failure to live up to a great ideal.

Specific illustrations from Virginia and from other colonies might be multiplied indefinitely. The aspirations of a colonial aristocracy to duplicate the culture of an earlier time and place were responsible for a race of leaders in America who were particularly influential in the eighteenth century. They earnestly believed that privilege carried with it responsibility to society, a concept frequently forgotten in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These ideals, traceable to the Renaissance and to classical sources, help to explain the qualities of the more intellectual and more unselfish leaders in the American Revolution and the generation thereafter.

One can make a good case for the assertion that Thomas Jefferson was the culmination of the Renaissance tradition in America. We know from his well-documented life what a tremendous part classical learning played in the development of his own social and political ideas. The earliest extant piece of writing from Jefferson's hand, a letter to John Harvie dated January 14, 1760, announced his intention of going to the College of William and Mary 'to get a more universal acquaintance' and to 'Pursue my studies in the Greek and Latin.' At Williamsburg he came under the influence of George Wythe, the greatest lawyer of the day and equally renowned for his learning in the classics. There Jefferson received a grounding in law, supported by classical reading, which he utilized for the rest of his life. A reading of the correspondence between Jefferson and John Adams is a revelation of the enormous impact that Greek and Latin authors had upon both these men.

Most of our education comes, not from formal instruction in school, but from many diverse influences. One of the most significant sources of learning, of course, is found in the books we read. We might pause for a moment to wonder about the effect on the minds of this generation of the out-pouring of the printing press today: 'What We Always Wanted to Know' about this and that 'and Were Afraid to Ask,' etc. Books in early America supplied much of the learning that our ancestors acquired, and books as a vehicle of education were highly prized and esteemed.

Some of the books that were widely read influenced our mores profoundly. For example, the sermons and devotional works of the Reverend William Perkins, an English divine with Puritan leanings, who died in 1602, enjoyed an immense popularity on both sides of the Atlantic for more than a century. They were read by Puritans in New England and Anglicans in the South. Perkins was concerned with Christian ethics and the practical application of Christian doctrine rather than with theology. For instance, his influential *Treatise of Vocations*

discussed the nature of man's calling, both spiritual and temporal. In it one finds the basic doctrines of American middle-class society, the insistence upon having a calling and laboring in it, and the virtues of thrift, diligence, and sobriety. Cotton Mather read Perkins and adapted many of his ideas in his own writings. Benjamin Franklin read Mather and utilized Perkins at second hand in his own essays. Franklin's epitomized wisdom in *Poor Richard's Almanac*, and especially in 'Father Abraham's Speech' in the *Almanac* for 1758, later published in innumerable editions as *The Way to Wealth*, has influenced American social philosophy more than any other single work.

Perkins of course was not the only pious author who taught early Americans the principles of bourgeois ethics. Almost as popular and influential was Richard Baxter, whose *Saints' Everlasting Rest* (1650), *The Right Method for a Settled Peace of Conscience* (1653), and *A Christian Directory* (1673) gave instructions for living in a competitive world where men sought prosperity on earth and peace hereafter.

Pious reading was not confined to New England but was general throughout the colonies. Colonial households too poor to own many books usually had a Bible and Lewis Bayly's *Practice of Piety* (3rd and earliest extant edition, 1613). The so-called 'cavaliers' of Virginia were almost as avid readers of 'good books' as their Puritan counterparts in the North, for religious works had a prestige which we find hard to comprehend. Robert 'King' Carter of Corotoman in Virginia, not generally remembered for his religious concerns, wrote angrily to his London factor, William Dawkins, in 1721 admonishing him about some failure to carry out instructions: 'I shall recommend to your perusal the fifth part of Dr. Scott's *Christian Life* where he is treating of the excellency of the soul,' Carter advised him. When our brokers today forget to carry through an order, nobody would think of quoting Billy Graham in reprimand.

William Byrd of Westover, remembered for many things

but not for piety, relished sermons almost as much as John Cotton of Massachusetts Bay, who boasted that he sweetened his mouth with a little Calvin before going to bed. Byrd makes frequent entries in his diary about his reading of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew—and strangely of his addiction to sermons. For example, on December 25, 1709, he improved Christmas evening by the perusal of a sermon. He noted in his *Diary*: 'In the evening I read a sermon in Mr. Norris but a quarrel which I had with my wife hindered my taking much notice of it. . . . I neglected to say my prayers but . . . I had good health, good thoughts, and indifferent good humor, thank God Almighty.'

Related to religious reading was an interest in secular books on conduct, beginning with the famous Renaissance work, Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*, available in Thomas Hoby's translation as *The Courtier* (1561). This book provided a rationale of upper-class behavior which had a persistent influence on ideals of conduct, as did native English works like Henry Peacham's *Compleat Gentleman* (1622) and Richard Brathwaite's *English Gentleman* (1630). From such works colonials got the basic outlines of a philosophy of life.

Next to godly reading came history as the most popular form of intellectual instruction and entertainment. Innumerable historical works, from Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the World* (1614) to the latest import from England supplied our ancestors with useful information. When Jefferson sat down to confute the British assertion that the colonies had been settled at government expense, he went back to Richard Hakluyt's *Voyages* and worked forward through contemporary accounts of colonization.

Much practical instruction came from books, for colonial libraries were chiefly utilitarian. Books were expensive, and few could afford works for either ostentation or mere entertainment. So household collections contained instructive works on medicine, law, agriculture, and architecture. During the eighteenth century carpenters' and builders' manuals were

common and invaluable. James Gibbs' *A Book of Architecture* (1728) and Batty Langley's *City and Country Builder's and Workman's Treasury of Designs* (1740) were among the most popular. From such books we can date the vogue of classical design.

A comprehensive discussion of the instruction that colonial Americans received from their reading would strain your patience, but I have suggested the impact of books upon all classes.² One cannot leave the subject, however, without stressing the influence of the King James version of the Bible. No other single book was so important in the education of Americans. In many households this was the only book; in actuality it was a library in itself. Children learned to read from it and many adults had their vocabularies and their diction shaped by its rhythms. It is a commonplace to cite the instance in a later period of young Abraham Lincoln reading the Bible by the light of a pine-knot fire. Perhaps the 'Gettysburg Address' would not have had its simplicity, clarity, and eloquence without this reading.

Learning of all kinds, whether obtained from tutors, in elementary schools, in colleges, or from the individual's reading of books, was held in high esteem in the colonial period. Learning was costly in both money and effort, and consequently was prized.

In the colonial period, in both North and South, learning was expected to help a man improve his social status, to be a gentleman, for in this period men still believed that it was a Christian duty to rise in the social scale if possible. The hippie who denies all the values of conservative society had not yet become fashionable, though the late eighteenth century witnessed the popularity of Jean Jacques Rousseau, the original alienated youth, drop-out, and ne'er-do-well. His trumpeted

²For further treatment of the subject, see Louis B. Wright, 'The Purposeful Reading of Our Colonial Ancestors,' *ELH, A Journal of English Literary History*, IV (1937), 85-111.

beliefs concerning the nobility of the savage and permissiveness in behavior and in education gained currency in Europe, but they did not afflict us until a later time.

Recently, however, thanks to the recrudescence of decadent Rousseauism grafted upon ill-understood Freudianism, we have come to believe that wisdom resides in the innocence of youth. Indeed, to observe some academic administrators scrambling to placate student rebels and to prove that they are 'with it,' one would believe that the best equipment for life is a *tabula rasa*, and the blander the better. No longer are the elders of the tribe respected, nor is their experience prized. Instead, we have enthroned youth, put them on boards of trustees, and let them tell us what is 'relevant' in learning, even if what is 'relevant' at noon becomes obsolete by three p.m. Along with the deification of juvenility has come a disparagement of tradition and the values formerly believed to be implicit in a knowledge of history. Sociologists have invented a language to glorify the 'innovative' (a word they love) and to preach a new religion of 'fresh concepts and perceptions' (again, words out of their armory of jargon). This revolution has demolished the concept of the gentleman and the cultural heritage that made him what he was.

Although few people in a technological society such as ours would contend that the classical education that sufficed in the eighteenth century would be adequate today, earlier educational theories still have something to teach us. Thomas Jefferson himself believed that education should include both a knowledge of modern science and an acquaintance with the wisdom of the ancients. He and other thinkers in his period, like their predecessors in the Renaissance, regarded classical learning as a utilitarian guide to intelligent living. Jefferson maintained that a democratic state such as he envisioned required an *aristoi*, but an aristocracy of intelligence, to be developed by the program of learning that he advocated.

As every student of the period knows, Jefferson was deeply

concerned with education and planned a system that would insure training in accordance with the ability of the student. The most competent would be selected for the best education that the state could provide. We have never been willing to adopt Jefferson's program. To many, the ideas of the father of democracy seem 'undemocratic.' Hence we penalize the competent for the benefit of the incompetent—who frequently show their contempt for what is offered them.

Although we talk much about education and spend more upon it than ever before in our history, the prestige of learning has declined. Only in our time has the nation witnessed the growth of a widespread cult of anti-intellectualism. Tradition and history are useless if not wicked, we have been told. The choice of literature taught in the schools is based, not on quality but on what a student can be induced to read. Although we have thousands of new books published each year, and millions of paperback volumes are available for a modest price, no proof exists that books have the same value in the educative process that they had in an earlier age. A few good books well read had a greater impact upon the intellectual development of our ancestors than the superficial skimming of scores of bare-bosom paperbacks has upon this generation.

It is too much to expect that we shall ever return to the disciplined study of the literature of Greece and Rome, but perhaps a swing of the pendulum will induce a renewed respect for history and literature of excellence. Already there are signs of disenchantment with the notion that we can find in youth a fountain of sagacity. The zeal to return to primitivism, to exalt the noble and not so noble savage, to abandon polite society and resort to communes of barefoot worshipers of the ecology is beginning to decline. We can hope that some day we again will seek the wisdom of the ancients, at the least the ancients of our own culture. We would do well to remember Thomas Jefferson's ideals of learning and his dream of a leadership based on an aristocracy of 'talents and virtue.'

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