

ENGLISH AS SHE IS TAUGHT

In the appendix to Croker's Boswell's Johnson one finds this anecdote:

CATO'S SOLILOQUY.--One day Mrs. Gastrel set a little girl to repeat to him (Dr. Samuel Johnson) Cato's Soliloquy, which she went through very correctly. The Doctor, after a pause, asked the child:

"What was to bring Cato to an end?"

She said it was a knife.

"No, my dear, it was not so."

"My aunt Polly said it was a knife."

"Why, Aunt Polly's knife MAY DO, but it was a DAGGER, my dear."

He then asked her the meaning of "bane and antidote," which she was unable to give. Mrs. Gastrel said:

"You cannot expect so young a child to know the meaning of such words."

He then said:

"My dear, how many pence are there in SIXPENCE?"

"I cannot tell, sir," was the half-terrified reply.

On this, addressing himself to Mrs. Gastrel, he said:

"Now, my dear lady, can anything be more ridiculous than to teach a child Cato's Soliloquy, who does not know how many pence there are in a sixpence?"

In a lecture before the Royal Geographical Society Professor Ravenstein quoted the following list of frantic questions, and said that they had been asked in an examination:

Mention all names of places in the world derived from Julius Caesar or Augustus Caesar.

Where are the following rivers: Pisuerga, Sakaria, Guadalete, Jalon, Mulde?

All you know of the following: Machacha, Pilmo, Schebulos, Crivoscia, Bascas, Mancikert, Taxhem, Citeaux, Meloria, Zutphen.

The highest peaks of the Karakorum range.

The number of universities in Prussia.

Why are the tops of mountains continually covered with snow (sic)?

Name the length and breadth of the streams of lava which issued from the Skaptar Jokul in the eruption of 1783.

That list would oversize nearly anybody's geographical knowledge. Isn't it reasonably possible that in our schools many of the questions in all studies are several miles ahead of where the pupil is?--that he is set to struggle with things that are ludicrously beyond his present reach, hopelessly beyond his present strength? This remark in passing, and by way of text; now I come to what I was going to say.

I have just now fallen upon a darling literary curiosity. It is a little book, a manuscript compilation, and the compiler sent it to me with the request that I say whether I think it ought to be published or not. I said, Yes; but as I slowly grow wise I briskly grow cautious; and so, now that the publication is imminent, it has seemed to me that I should feel more comfortable if I could divide up this responsibility with the public by adding them to the court. Therefore I will print some extracts from the book, in the hope that they may make converts to my judgment that the volume has merit which entitles it to publication.

As to its character. Every one has sampled "English as She is Spoke" and "English as She is Wrote"; this little volume furnishes us an instructive array of examples of "English as She is Taught"--in the public schools of--well, this country. The collection is made by a

teacher in those schools, and all the examples in it are genuine; none of them have been tampered with, or doctored in any way. From time to time, during several years, whenever a pupil has delivered himself of anything peculiarly quaint or toothsome in the course of his recitations, this teacher and her associates have privately set that thing down in a memorandum-book; strictly following the original, as to grammar, construction, spelling, and all; and the result is this literary curiosity.

The contents of the book consist mainly of answers given by the boys and girls to questions, said answers being given sometimes verbally, sometimes in writing. The subjects touched upon are fifteen in number: I. Etymology; II. Grammar; III. Mathematics; IV. Geography; V. "Original"; VI. Analysis; VII. History; VIII. "Intellectual"; IX. Philosophy; X. Physiology; XI. Astronomy; XII. Politics; XIII. Music; XIV. Oratory; XV. Metaphysics.

You perceive that the poor little young idea has taken a shot at a good many kinds of game in the course of the book. Now as to results. Here are some quaint definitions of words. It will be noticed that in all of these instances the sound of the word, or the look of it on paper, has misled the child:

ABORIGINES, a system of mountains.

ALIAS, a good man in the Bible.

AMENABLE, anything that is mean.

AMMONIA, the food of the gods.

ASSIDUITY, state of being an acid.

AURIFEROUS, pertaining to an orifice.

CAPILLARY, a little caterpillar.

CORNIFEROUS, rocks in which fossil corn is found.

EMOLUMENT, a headstone to a grave.

EQUESTRIAN, one who asks questions.

EUCHARIST, one who plays euchre.

FRANCHISE, anything belonging to the French.

IDOLATER, a very idle person.

IPECAC, a man who likes a good dinner.

IRRIGATE, to make fun of.

MENDACIOUS, what can be mended.

MERCENARY, one who feels for another.

PARASITE, a kind of umbrella.

PARASITE, the murder of an infant.

PUBLICAN, a man who does his prayers in public.

TENACIOUS, ten acres of land.

Here is one where the phrase "publicans and sinners" has got mixed up in the child's mind with politics, and the result is a definition which takes one in a sudden and unexpected way:

REPUBLICAN, a sinner mentioned in the Bible.

Also in Democratic newspapers now and then. Here are two where the mistake has resulted from sound assisted by remote fact:

PLAGIARIST, a writer of plays.

DEMAGOGUE, a vessel containing beer and other liquids.

I cannot quite make out what it was that misled the pupil in the following instances; it would not seem to have been the sound of the word, nor the look of it in print:

ASPHYXIA, a grumbling, fussy temper.

QUARTERNIONS, a bird with a flat beak and no bill, living in New Zealand.

QUARTERNIONS, the name given to a style of art practiced by the Phoenicians.

QUARTERNIONS, a religious convention held every hundred years.

SIBILANT, the state of being idiotic.

CROSIER, a staff carried by the Deity.

In the following sentences the pupil's ear has been deceiving him again:

The marriage was illegible.

He was totally dismayed with the whole performance.

He enjoys riding on a philosopher.

She was very quick at repertoire.

He prayed for the waters to subsidize.

The leopard is watching his sheep.

They had a strawberry vestibule.

Here is one which--well, now, how often we do slam right into the truth without ever suspecting it:

The men employed by the Gas Company go around and speculate the meter.

Indeed they do, dear; and when you grow up, many and many's the time you will notice it in the gas bill. In the following sentences the little people have some information to convey, every time; but in my case they fail to connect: the light always went out on the keystone word:

The coercion of some things is remarkable; as bread and molasses.

Her hat is contiguous because she wears it on one side.

He preached to an egregious congregation.

The captain eliminated a bullet through the man's heart.

You should take caution and be precarious.

The supercilious girl acted with vicissitude when the perennial time came.

The last is a curiously plausible sentence; one seems to know what it means, and yet he knows all the time that he doesn't. Here is an odd (but entirely proper) use of a word, and a most sudden descent from a lofty philosophical altitude to a very practical and homely illustration:

We should endeavor to avoid extremes--like those of wasps and bees.

And here--with "zoological" and "geological" in his mind, but not ready to his tongue--the small scholar has innocently gone and let out a couple of secrets which ought never to have been divulged in any circumstances:

There are a good many donkeys in theological gardens.

Some of the best fossils are found in theological gardens.

Under the head of "Grammar" the little scholars furnish the following information:

Gender is the distinguishing nouns without regard to sex.

A verb is something to eat.

Adverbs should always be used as adjectives and adjectives as adverbs.

Every sentence and name of God must begin with a caterpillar.

"Caterpillar" is well enough, but capital letter would have been stricter. The following is a brave attempt at a solution, but it failed to liquify:

When they are going to say some prose or poetry before they say the poetry or prose they must put a semicolon just after the introduction of the prose or poetry.

The chapter on "Mathematics" is full of fruit. From it I take a few samples--mainly in an unripe state:

A straight line is any distance between two places.

Parallel lines are lines that can never meet until they run together.

A circle is a round straight line with a hole in the middle.

Things which are equal to each other are equal to anything else.

To find the number of square feet in a room you multiply the room by the number of the feet. The product is the result.

Right you are. In the matter of geography this little book is unspeakably rich. The questions do not appear to have applied the microscope to the subject, as did those quoted by Professor Ravenstein; still, they proved plenty difficult enough without that. These pupils did not hunt with a microscope, they hunted with a shot-gun; this is shown by the crippled condition of the game they brought in:

America is divided into the Passiffic slope and the Mississippi valey.

North America is separated by Spain.

America consists from north to south about five hundred miles.

The United States is quite a small country compared with some other countrys, but it about as industrious.

The capital of the United States is Long Island.

The five seaports of the U.S. are Newfunlan and Sanfrancisco.

The principal products of the U.S. is earthquakes and volcanoes.

The Alaginnies are mountains in Philadelphia.

The Rocky Mountains are on the western side of Philadelphia.

Cape Hateras is a vast body of water surrounded by land and flowing into the Gulf of Mexico.

Mason and Dixon's line is the Equator.

One of the leading industries of the United States is mollasses, book-covers, numbers, gas, teaching, lumber, manufacturers, paper-making, publishers, coal.

In Austria the principal occupation is gathering Austrich feathers.

Gibraltar is an island built on a rock.

Russia is very cold and tyrannical.

Sicily is one of the Sandwich Islands.

Hindoostan flows through the Ganges and empties into the Mediterranean Sea.

Ireland is called the Emigrant Isle because it is so beautiful and green.

The width of the different zones Europe lies in depend upon the surrounding country.

The imports of a country are the things that are paid for, the exports are the things that are not.

Climate lasts all the time and weather only a few days.

The two most famous volcanoes of Europe are Sodom and Gomorrah.

The chapter headed "Analysis" shows us that the pupils in our public schools are not merely loaded up with those showy facts about geography, mathematics, and so on, and left in that incomplete state; no, there's machinery for clarifying and expanding their minds. They are required to take poems and analyze them, dig out their common sense, reduce them to statistics, and reproduce them in a luminous prose translation which shall tell you at a glance what the poet was trying to get at. One sample will do. Here is a stanza from "The Lady of the Lake," followed by the pupil's impressive explanation of it:

Alone, but with unbated zeal, The horseman plied with scourge and steel;
For jaded now and spent with toil, Embossed with foam and dark with
soil, While every gasp with sobs he drew, The laboring stag strained
full in view.

The man who rode on the horse performed the whip and an instrument made of steel alone with strong ardor not diminishing, for, being tired from the time passed with hard labor overworked with anger and ignorant with weariness, while every breath for labor he drew with cries full of sorrow, the young deer made imperfect who worked hard filtered in sight.

I see, now, that I never understood that poem before. I have had glimpses of its meaning, in moments when I was not as ignorant with weariness as usual, but this is the first time the whole spacious idea of it ever filtered in sight. If I were a public-school pupil I would put those other studies aside and stick to analysis; for, after all, it is the thing to spread your mind.

We come now to historical matters, historical remains, one might say. As one turns the pages he is impressed with the depth to which one date has been driven into the American child's head--1492. The date is there, and it is there to stay. And it is always at hand, always deliverable at a moment's notice. But the Fact that belongs with it? That is quite another matter. Only the date itself is familiar and sure: its vast Fact has failed of lodgment. It would appear that whenever you ask a public-school pupil when a thing--anything, no matter what--happened, and he is in doubt, he always rips out his 1492. He applies it to everything, from the landing of the ark to the introduction of the horse-car. Well, after all, it is our first date, and so it is right enough to honor it, and pay the public schools to teach our children to

honor it:

George Washington was born in 1492.

Washington wrote the Declaration of Independence in 1492.

St. Bartholemew was massacred in 1492.

The Britains were the Saxons who entered England in 1492 under Julius Caesar.

The earth is 1492 miles in circumference.

To proceed with "History"

Christopher Columbus was called the Father of his Country.

Queen Isabella of Spain sold her watch and chain and other millinery so that Columbus could discover America.

The Indian wars were very desecrating to the country.

The Indians pursued their warfare by hiding in the bushes and then scalping them.

Captain John Smith has been styled the father of his country. His life was saved by his daughter Pochahantas.

The Puritans found an insane asylum in the wilds of America.

The Stamp Act was to make everybody stamp all materials so they should be null and void.

Washington died in Spain almost broken-hearted. His remains were taken to the cathedral in Havana.

Gorilla warfare was where men rode on gorillas.

John Brown was a very good insane man who tried to get fugitive slaves into Virginia. He captured all the inhabitants, but was finally conquered and condemned to his death. The confederacy was formed by the fugitive slaves.

Alfred the Great reigned 872 years. He was distinguished for letting some buckwheat cakes burn, and the lady scolded him.

Henry Eight was famous for being a great widower having lost several wives.

Lady Jane Grey studied Greek and Latin and was beheaded after a few

days.

John Bright is noted for an incurable disease.

Lord James Gordon Bennet instigated the Gordon Riots.

The Middle Ages come in between antiquity and posterity.

Luther introduced Christianity into England a good many thousand years ago. His birthday was November 1883. He was once a Pope. He lived at the time of the Rebellion of Worms.

Julius Caesar is noted for his famous telegram dispatch I came I saw I conquered.

Julius Caesar was really a very great man. He was a very great soldier and wrote a book for beginners in the Latin.

Cleopatra was caused by the death of an asp which she dissolved in a wine cup.

The only form of government in Greece was a limited monarchy.

The Persian war lasted about 500 years.

Greece had only 7 wise men.

Socrates... destroyed some statues and had to drink Shamrock.

Here is a fact correctly stated; and yet it is phrased with such ingenious infelicity that it can be depended upon to convey misinformation every time it is uncarefully unread:

By the Salic law no woman or descendant of a woman could occupy the throne.

To show how far a child can travel in history with judicious and diligent boosting in the public school, we select the following mosaic:

Abraham Lincoln was born in Wales in 1599.

In the chapter headed "Intellectual" I find a great number of most interesting statements. A sample or two may be found not amiss:

Bracebridge Hall was written by Henry Irving.

Show Bound was written by Peter Cooper.

The House of the Seven Gables was written by Lord Bryant.

Edgar A. Poe was a very curdling writer.

Cotton Mather was a writer who invented the cotten gin and wrote histories.

Beowulf wrote the Scriptures.

Ben Johnson survived Shakspeare in some respects.

In the Canterbury Tale it gives account of King Alfred on his way to the shrine of Thomas Bucket.

Chaucer was the father of English pottery.

Chaucer was a bland verse writer of the third century.

Chaucer was succeeded by H. Wads. Longfellow an American Writer. His writings were chiefly prose and nearly one hundred years elapsed.

Shakspere translated the Scriptures and it was called St. James because he did it.

In the middle of the chapter I find many pages of information concerning Shakespeare's plays, Milton's works, and those of Bacon, Addison, Samuel Johnson, Fielding, Richardson, Sterne, Smollett, De Foe, Locke, Pope, Swift, Goldsmith, Burns, Cowper, Wordsworth, Gibbon, Byron, Coleridge, Hood, Scott, Macaulay, George Eliot, Dickens, Bulwer, Thackeray, Browning, Mrs. Browning, Tennyson, and Disraeli--a fact which shows that

into the restricted stomach of the public-school pupil is shoveled every year the blood, bone, and viscera of a gigantic literature, and the same is there digested and disposed of in a most successful and characteristic and gratifying public-school way. I have space for but a trifling few of the results:

Lord Byron was the son of an heiress and a drunken man.

Wm. Wordsworth wrote the Barefoot Boy and Imitations on Immortality.

Gibbon wrote a history of his travels in Italy. This was original.

George Eliot left a wife and children who mourned greatly for his genius.

George Eliot Miss Mary Evans Mrs. Cross Mrs. Lewis was the greatest female poet unless George Sands is made an exception of.

Bulwell is considered a good writer.

Sir Walter Scott Charles Bronte Alfred the Great and Johnson were the first great novelists.

Thomas Babington Makorlay graduated at Harvard and then studied law, he was raised to the peerage as baron in 1557 and died in 1776.

Here are two or three miscellaneous facts that may be of value, if taken in moderation:

Homer's writings are Homer's Essays Virgil the Aenid and Paradise lost some people say that these poems were not written by Homer but by another man of the same name.

A sort of sadness kind of shone in Bryant's poems.

Holmes is a very profligate and amusing writer.

When the public-school pupil wrestles with the political features of the Great Republic, they throw him sometimes:

A bill becomes a law when the President vetoes it.

The three departments of the government is the President rules the world, the governor rules the State, the mayor rules the city.

The first conscientious Congress met in Philadelphia.

The Constitution of the United States was established to ensure domestic hostility.

Truth crushed to earth will rise again. As follows:

The Constitution of the United States is that part of the book at the end which nobody reads.

And here she rises once more and untimely. There should be a limit to public-school instruction; it cannot be wise or well to let the young find out everything:

Congress is divided into civilized half civilized and savage.

Here are some results of study in music and oratory:

An interval in music is the distance on the keyboard from one piano to the next.

A rest means you are not to sing it.

Emphasis is putting more distress on one word than another.

The chapter on "Physiology" contains much that ought not to be lost to science:

Physillogigy is to study about your bones stummick and vertebry.

Occupations which are injurious to health are cabolic acid gas which is impure blood.

We have an upper and lower skin. The lower skin moves all the time and the upper skin moves when we do.

The body is mostly composed of water and about one half is avaricious tissue.

The stomach is a small pear-shaped bone situated in the body.

The gastric juice keeps the bones from creaking.

The Chyle flows up the middle of the backbone and reaches the heart where it meets the oxygen and is purified.

The salivary glands are used to salivate the body.

In the stomach starch is changed to cane sugar and cane sugar to sugar cane.

The olfactory nerve enters the cavity of the orbit and is developed into the special sense of hearing.

The growth of a tooth begins in the back of the mouth and extends to the stomach.

If we were on a railroad track and a train was coming the train would deafen our ears so that we couldn't see to get off the track.

If, up to this point, none of my quotations have added flavor to the Johnsonian anecdote at the head of this article, let us make another attempt:

The theory that intuitive truths are discovered by the light of nature originated from St. John's interpretation of a passage in the Gospel of Plato.

The weight of the earth is found by comparing a mass of known lead with that of a mass of unknown lead.

To find the weight of the earth take the length of a degree on a meridian and multiply by 6 1/2 pounds.

The spheres are to each other as the squares of their homologous sides.

A body will go just as far in the first second as the body will go plus the force of gravity and that's equal to twice what the body will go.

Specific gravity is the weight to be compared weight of an equal volume of or that is the weight of a body compared with the weight of an equal volume.

The law of fluid pressure divide the different forms of organized bodies by the form of attraction and the number increased will be the form.

Inertia is that property of bodies by virtue of which it cannot change its own condition of rest or motion. In other words it is the negative quality of passiveness either in recoverable latency or insipient latescence.

If a laugh is fair here, not the struggling child, nor the unintelligent teacher--or rather the unintelligent Boards, Committees, and Trustees--are the proper target for it. All through this little book one detects the signs of a certain probable fact--that a large part of the pupil's "instruction" consists in cramming him with obscure and wordy "rules" which he does not understand and has no time to understand. It would be as useful to cram him with brickbats; they would at least stay. In a town in the interior of New York, a few years ago, a gentleman set forth a mathematical problem and proposed to give a prize to every public-school pupil who should furnish the correct solution of it. Twenty-two of the brightest boys in the public schools entered the contest. The problem was not a very difficult one for pupils of their mathematical rank and standing, yet they all failed--by a hair--through one trifling mistake or another. Some searching questions were asked, when it turned out that these lads were as glib as parrots with the "rules," but could not reason out a single rule or explain the principle underlying it. Their memories had been stocked, but not their understandings. It was a case of brickbat culture, pure and simple.

There are several curious "compositions" in the little book, and we

must make room for one. It is full of naivete, brutal truth, and unembarrassed directness, and is the funniest (genuine) boy's composition I think I have ever seen:

ON GIRLS

Girls are very stuck up and dignified in their manner and behave your. They think more of dress than anything and like to play with dolls and rags. They cry if they see a cow in a far distance and are afraid of guns. They stay at home all the time and go to church on Sunday. They are always sick. They are always funny and making fun of boy's hands and they say how dirty. They can't play marbles. I pity them poor things. They make fun of boys and then turn round and love them. I don't believe they ever killed a cat or anything. They look out every night and say oh how lovely the moon is. This is one thing I have not told and that is they always now their lessons better than boys.

From Mr. Edward Channing's recent article in SCIENCE:

The marked difference between the books now being produced by French, English, and American travelers, on the one hand, and German explorers, on the other, is too great to escape attention. That difference is due entirely to the fact that in school and university the German is taught, in the first place to see, and in the second place to understand what he does see.