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A Pied Piper's Pipe Dreams

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A pied piper's pipe dreams

by Steven A. Samson

In history, as in music, silence covers a multitude of sins. A timely pause is often as telling as an imaginative flourish that is performed with assurance and ease. A good musician must be able to improvise. Many historians display a similar talent when lacing a narrative with interpretive embellishments. Indeed, a successful historian is generally cast in the same mold as a court musician. Both are paid to perform. But whoever pays the piper calls the tune.

As a result, the principal themes of history — especially the motives of guest soloists — are often missing from the performing version and left to the devices of the players. Just as it takes the practiced ear of another musician, however, to detect any variance with the score, so it takes a good historian to detect any tampering with the record. Recently a good piece of detective work on the origins of American public education was published by the Devin-Adair Company, 143 Sound Beach Avenue, Old Greenwich, Connecticut 06870. The book by Samuel L. Blumenfeld, a fellow of the Institute for Humane Studies, is entitled "Is Public Education Necessary?"

While a one word answer to the title question may seem sufficient, the title itself is misleading. The book is not a consideration of the pros and cons of public education. Rather, it is a very readable historical essay on the men, the motives, and the theories behind the adoption of state-supported humanistic education in Massachusetts in the 1830s. The author cites a considerable amount of primary source material, particularly letters written by the principal characters. And characters they were indeed! Public education, at least for a time, became the rallying point for all the social reformers, idealists, liberal clergymen, cranks, and philanthropists of the day. Come to think of it, there is not need to use the past tense. Public schools are the laboratories of social reform. That has always been their purpose, as

Blumenfeld makes abundantly clear.

The roots of public education go back to the Lutheran German states during the Reformation. The first compulsory attendance system was established in Wuertemberg in 1559. The Puritans who founded Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630 brought many of these ideas and innovations with them. The first education law was enacted in 1642, and public schools were mandated by the School Code of 1647 with the express purpose of preventing corruption of the Christian faith by the wiles of "that old deluder, Satan." The Puritan concept of self-government required a literate body of citizens to maintain a public form of religion: citizens who could consult the Scripture for themselves, who could read it in their own tongue. A government of laws, not men, requires universal literacy, and a common source of authority.

But time seldom stands still. Institutions founded for Godly purposes tend to fall away from them as men lose their common faith. What is dedicated to God by one generation may be subverted by another. "And, also, all that generation were gathered unto their fathers: and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the LORD, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel." (Judg. 2:10) The growth of Unitarianism in Massachusetts in the early years of our nation resulted in the gradual undermining and redefining of the political and educational institutions established by the state's Puritan founders.

The great harbinger of a new liberalizing trend was the takeover of Harvard University in 1805 by the Unitarians. "From then on Harvard became the Unitarian Vatican, so to speak, dispensing a religious and secular liberalism that was to have profound and enduring effects on the evolution of American cultural, moral, and social values." (p. 30) A new doctrine of man's perfectibility and natural benevolence was substituted for the Calvinist doctrine of man's innate depravity. Like Rous-

seau, these Unitarians believed that civilization corrupts human nature. And paradoxically, like Rousseau, they believed that education — that eminent transmitter of civilization — would counteract its corrupting influences. "To the Unitarian, therefore, education became the road to salvation." (p. 31) Schools and schoolteachers have been trying to save man from himself ever since. Indeed, this is one of the themes of an earlier critique of educational philosophy published by Craig Press, P.O. Box 13, Nutley, N.J. 07110. The book is "The Messianic Character of American Education" (1963) by Rousas John Rushdoony, who is the president of Chalcedon, a Christian educational foundation.

Among the dramatis personae of Blumenfeld's work are Robert Owen, the Utopian socialist and founder of New Harmony, a commune in Indiana; James G. Carter, an advocate of public education and a member of the Harvard-Unitarian elite, which was dominated by William Ellery Channing; Edward Everett, the first American to be awarded a Doctor of Philosophy and, later, a governor of Massachusetts; and Horace Mann, the state legislator who stood at the vortex of the public education movement into which the hopes and aspirations of diverse social reformers converged. Important supporting roles are played by Victor Cousin, the Hegelian philosopher who later blew the whistle on the radicals and converted to Roman Catholicism; Josiah Holbrook, geologist and advocate of Pestalozzian schools; Thomas H. Gallaudet, the developer of the whole-word, sight-vocabulary method of teaching the deaf to read; Frances Wright, an early feminist; and George Combe, the phrenologist, a confidant of Horace Mann. It should be obvious even from this brief catalog of co-conspirators that the fruits of their labor — centralized, state-supported secular schools — were as eclectic and

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humanistic at birth as they are today. It is fitting that Cousin, the French Hegelian, called his philosophy "eclecticism." In religion, eclecticism is polytheism or pantheism. The public education movement began as a direct attack on orthodoxy, subsidized by wealthy members of the Boston establishment.

Horace Mann reflects the motivations of early public school advocates as well as any man. He was raised in a strict religious atmosphere but, during his youth, rejected the Calvinist faith of his parents. According to a recent biographer, Jonathan Messerli, Mann was tormented for some time with guilt over the deaths of his father and brother, which he associated with his repudiation of the faith. He became a believer in "natural religion." As a politician and crusader for reform, he betrayed delusions of messianic grandeur. He spoke of his mission with the religious fervor of a true believer. "If we can but turn the wonderful energy of this people into the right channel, what a new heaven and earth must be realized among us" (p. 188). He envisioned the public school as "a beautiful temple, planned according to the noble purpose of improving the rising generation, and bearing evidence, in all

its outward aspects and circumstances, of fulfilling the sacred object of its erection. . ." (p. 192) He was convinced — or so he wrote — that public schools would save the human race. "This institution is the greatest discovery ever made by man: we repeat it, **the common school is the greatest discovery ever made by man.** . . . Let the common school be expanded to its capabilities, let it be worked with the efficiency of which it is susceptible, and nine-tenths of the crimes in the penal code would become obsolete. . ." (p. 211) Obsolete is not the word for it.

Anyone that challenged Mann's vision risked being subjected to Mann's withering scorn. Opponents were "bigots." Liberal historians have tended to reflect Mann's evaluations rather uncritically. For example, Merle Curti, a contemporary of Charles Beard, characterized two of Mann's critics in these terms: "Without justification, bigots like Frederick Packard and Matthew Hale Smith misconstrued his efforts to execute a state law which forbade the teaching of sectarianism in the common schools and, in spite of all he did to promote the reading of the Bible and the teaching of non-sectarian religion, denounced him as an atheist who crowded religious instruction out of the schools." What is not simply misleading about this statement is simply not true. Packard rightly called attention to Mann's school library policy as a means of favoring liberal religion over "sectari-

anism." In other words, Mann used his position to play the role of a public censor.

Blumenfeld's book culminates in a lengthy account of the controversy over Mann's Seventh Annual Report, in which he promoted the Prussian model of compulsory attendance and attacked traditional teaching methods. The Report provoked a response from the Association of Boston Masters and led to a very revealing series of polemical battles.

Blumenfeld gets high marks for the thoroughness of his documentation and the clarity and flow of his writing style, which tends to be moderate and even-toned. While it did not excite this reader with flashes of rhetorical brilliance, the book is overwhelming in the impact of the evidence it summons, catching the defense attorneys flat-footed by filling in evidence neglected by the professional historians. The maestro rests.

Steven A. Samson is the Editor of the SaltShaker, a monthly publication out of Portland, Oregon. Mr. Samson is an excellent writer and I welcome his contributions to the newsletter. If you liked the above article and want to know more or subscribe to his newsletter send your name, address, and a contributions for his costs to SaltShakers, Inc., P.O. Box 30114, Portland, Oregon 97230

Footprints in the sand

One night I had a dream. I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord and across the sky flashed scenes from my life. For each scene I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand. One belonged to me and the other to the Lord. When the last scene of my life flashed before us, I looked back at the footprints in the sand. I noticed that many times along the path of life, there was only one set of footprints. I also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in my life. This really bothered me and I questioned the Lord about it.

"Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you would walk with me all the way, but I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why, in times when I needed you most, you would leave me."

The Lord replied, "My precious, precious child, I love you and I would never leave you during your times of trials and suffering. When you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

Anonymous

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