

TEACHERS' RESPONSIBILITIES.

ADDRESS BY PROFESSOR JETHRO BROWN.

In his address at the opening session of the annual conference of the South Australian Public School Teachers' Union on Monday morning, Professor Jethro Brown, of the Adelaide University, delivered an important utterance concerning the growing responsibilities of the teacher. The school teacher he said, received into his hands the youth of a nation. He had a great opportunity and upon the use which he made of it depended to a large extent the character of the people and the destiny of the nation. (Cheers.) Other powers were at work, acting in alliance with the teacher—the discipline of the church and the family, the spirit of authority, the laws and institutions of the State. But to-day some of these powers, though at work, were not so potent as they had been, and the increase in the activity of the State threw upon the teacher a responsibility of which the extent was not fully appreciated by the community—perhaps not even by the teacher himself. (Cheers.)

The Church as Ally.

It was his opinion and he gave it for what it is worth, that the value of the church as an ally to the teacher was less than it used to be. The most conspicuous causes at work had been the progress of scepticism in thought, the increase in man's material possessions, and the multiplication of forms of pleasure or entertainment which were unassociated with the churches, and often in unavowed rivalry with them. Let them reflect for a moment upon the results of the combined influences of these causes as revealed in the waning efficacy of religious belief. The old religion gave men a theory of human life. It affirmed the exactitude of Genesis, the sovereignty of God, the Divinity of Christ, the hope of heaven, and the stern reality of hell. All these were bound together in one great system. What had become of them? To talk of hell to-day was hardly polite, and he had the assurance of one pastor that he dared not speak of it. "My people," he said, "wouldn't stand it for a moment." (Laughter.) The cosmogony of the older theologians had become a jest; the educated man no longer discussed the exactitude of Genesis. Most men either thought of Christ as philosopher or saint—or thought of Him not at all. (Hear, hear.) Finally, while without the churches men professed a tolerant agnosticism, which admitted that anything might be true of God, but said nothing could be known to be true, the world within the churches, after surviving the attack of science, was still undergoing the more severe ordeal of historical criticism. A boy who believed in hell, as he believed in it, had a strong, though not an exalted motive to good conduct. (Laughter.) A parent who believed in hell, as his parents believed in hell, had a motive to watch with exceeding anxiety over the child's moral development. Take away this belief altogether, or weaken its intensity and they would depreciate the value of the church as an ally to the teacher, unless the human material with which the church had to deal admitted of appeal to more exalted motives of equal power. (Cheers.) So far as he was able to judge, the great mass of individuals had relaxed their hold upon an ancient creed without replacing that creed by any conviction or faith of comparable power.

Corporate Responsibility.

They might think that he had taken a gloomy view of recent progress, and had ignored those aspects of modern life which revealed progress in a real sense—for example, the triumphs of democracy, and the growth of a sense of corporate responsibility, of social solidarity, and of human brotherhood. As a matter of fact, however, when they turned to those aspects they would find that they involved a direct increase of the teacher's responsibility. In the first place, as teachers in a democratic community, they were not merely training citizens. They were training the arbiters of the national destiny. (Cheers.) It was of the utmost importance that their pupils, when they left school, should already know a little, and want to know a great deal more, of the principles of wise legislative action. (Cheers.) The growth in the sense of corporate responsibility, of social solidarity, and human brotherhood, implied, above all things, a deeper recognition of the claims of human weakness. This in itself was a good thing, a real achievement, and something to be proud about. Yet, when viewed in relation to the teacher, it

implied an addition to his responsibilities which exceeded in significance any fact or condition to which he had previously referred. The great instrument in the maintenance of the racial type had been natural selection. The average offspring of parents was likely to be below, rather than above, the parental average. Hence, if in the past all the offspring had survived, the result would have been a steady degeneration of the race. Natural selection, however, had eliminated the relatively weak, and thus secured the breeding of the race from the relatively strong. The result had been only clumsily attained; there had been much cruelty in the process. Undesirable forms of inferiority had survived, and desirable forms of superiority had been sacrificed. The "fit" had indeed survived; but the fitness had meant a fitness to survive in a particular environment. Still, making all due allowance for such qualifications, the operation of natural selection had worked, steadily and persistently, in the direction of maintaining the racial standard.

Race Environment.

In the popular mind there persisted the belief that independently of selection they could improve a race by improving the environment of that race. Of course environment was extremely important; but its operation affected the individual rather than the racial type. He used environment in the broadest sense. He meant by it much more than physical and climatic conditions. He included the complex of beliefs, opinions, knowledge, social, economic, and political conditions. Environment so defined was of the utmost importance. But there were certain things which it could effectively do; and certain things which it could not effectively do. Consider for a moment the things which it could effectively do. In the first place, social and economic institutions might be of such a nature as to affect the form of fitness upon which natural selection operated. The fitness, for example, instead of being dependent upon a capacity to survive in a free fight might be in part dependent upon the possession of mental or moral qualities which belonged to a higher plane. In the second place, an environment might bring out the potentialities for good, and repress the potentialities for evil in the children which were born into it. But it was just at this point that the popular belief to which he had referred became dangerous. It was commonly believed that if they provided an ideal environment for a child, say of criminal tendencies, or defective physique, they would not only improve him as an individual, but would also improve him as a breeding stock. Now the weight of scientific opinion did not countenance this belief. As an individual they might have made a man of him; as a breeding stock he remained what he was. Of course, this cut both ways. If an individual who might have grown up good grew up bad, while he deteriorated as an individual as a breeding stock he remained what he was. All this was expressed in scientific terms as the doctrine of the non-transmission of acquired characters. The individual transmitted inborn—not acquired—characters. On the face of it this seemed ridiculous, if not impossible. But the very fact that it did seem ridiculous and impossible only tended to make its endorsement by the weight of scientific opinion more significant. Speaking for himself, he accepted that opinion, knowing that it was the result of prolonged and elaborate investigation by many of the ablest minds of the age. (Cheers.)

Heredity.

If that were so it had an immense significance for the social reformer, who had been prone to imagine that he could save the race by providing an adequate nurture for the children and that by this means the next generation would be born with a clean heritage. But they could not shed the past in that way. They could only secure a clean heritage by the process of breeding from superior stocks. The child of the slum might be taken out of the slum; he would breed the stock from which he came, despite his changed environment. Natural selection must always operate, and in an ever decreasing degree. Preventive and remedial medicine was partly responsible. But a potent factor was the resurgent will of man rising in revolt against the cruelties of a nature of which it had been said—

So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life.

Remedial Legislation.

Much of the legislation of their time illustrated this resurgent will at work. Public Health Acts, Social Insurance Acts, Industrial legislation, as well as the multiplication of public and private philanthropic institutions, qualified in many and diverse ways the operation of natural selection. Nature, as they generally understood the term, would eliminate the weak; but man rose in revolt against this law. As a result the relatively weak survived. But they not only survived, they inter-married and

left a posterity which perpetuated their weakness, despite any improvement in the parental environment. This fact, taken in conjunction with the fact that breeding was on the whole more prolific in inferior stocks, involved a grave consequence. Unless other agencies were at work, they should have saved the single life at the expense of a persistent degradation of the average life.

The Teacher's Place.

Man had declared for a progressive qualification of the operation of natural selection. He had resolved to secure the nurture of every child, strong or weak. The resolution should be accompanied by a recognition of the price to be paid. (Cheers.) That price included the strengthening of all the influences grouped under environment—conspicuously a recognition of the importance of the teacher to the community. (Cheers.) There were some people to-day who wanted to be virtuous without paying the price of virtue. But the thing could not be done. (Cheers.) Logically and morally having decided in favor of the nurture of the unfit as well as of the fit, the decision became a curse, not a blessing, unless they were prepared to make all the sacrifices that might be necessary in order to ensure for the whole youth of the nation the best possible material, mental and moral environment—conspicuously the best and completest system of education that their ingenuity can devise. (Cheers.) They had undertaken, perhaps without realising their full responsibilities, a decision to weaken one factor in the maintenance and development of the national life. Good; but they must shoulder the responsibilities. The task was stupendous. It demanded the best brains and the highest character that the nation could devote to the work. (Cheers.) If, as he believed, the religious discipline of time past had lost much of its old power, if the discipline of the family had relaxed and the spirit of authority had weakened; and if the progressive qualification of natural selection threw an ever-increasing importance upon environment, then the teacher of to-day found his responsibilities multiplied indefinitely. He did not ask how the teacher was going to discharge these increased responsibilities. He was content to indicate their existence. They demanded a serious thought, both on the teachers' part and on the part of a community which they served so ably. (Cheers.)

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Hibbert 11/11/3 ✓

WANING RELIGIOUS BELIEF.

Referring to changed conditions as material which bore upon the question of the position and responsibilities of the teachers, Professor Jethro Brown, in the course of an address to the Teachers' Congress on Monday, alluded to an article which he had written for The Hibbert Journal on "The Passing of Conviction." He had begun with an expression of opinion which might provoke their dissent. Nevertheless, it was his opinion, and he gave it to them for what it was worth. It was that the value of the church as an ally to the teacher was less than it had ever been. The most conspicuous causes at work had been the progress of scepticism in thought, the increase in man's material possessions, and the multiplication of forms of pleasure or entertainment which were unassociated with the churches, and often in unavowed rivalry with them. Let them reflect for a moment upon the results of the combined influences of those causes as revealed in the waning efficacy of religious belief. The old religion gave men a theory of human life. It affirmed the exactitude of Genesis, the sovereignty of God, the Divinity of Christ, the hope of Heaven, and the stern reality of Hell. All these were bound together in one great system. What had become of them? To talk of Hell to-day was hardly polite. (Laughter.) A Voice—Was it ever? (Laughter.) He had the assurance of one pastor that he dared not speak of it. (Laughter.) He said:—"My people wouldn't stand it for a moment." The cosmogony of the older theologians had become a jest; the educated man no longer discussed the exactitude of Genesis. Most men either thought of Christ as philosopher or saint, or thought of Him not at all. Finally, while without the churches men professed a tolerant agnosticism which admitted that anything might be true of God, but that nothing could be known to be true, the world within the churches, after surviving the attack of science, was still undergoing the more severe ordeal of historical criticism. He did not think that the years that had passed since Emerson had spoken had done aught but add force to his censure:—"There is faith in chemistry, in meat and wine, in wealth, in machinery, in the steam engine, galvanic battery, turbine wheels, sewing machines, and in public opinion, but not in divine causes."