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GEORGE COMBE (1788-1858) AND EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY EDUCATION

E W JENKINS
University of Leeds

Despite his commitment to bogus phrenological doctrines, George Combe has some claim to being considered as one of the most liberal and enlightened nineteenth century educational thinkers As a 'secular educationist,' he contributed to the debate on the extension and control of education in the first half of the nineteenth century His ideas on curriculum content and methodology and on the training of teachers were progressive Apart from his successful attempt to ensure the teaching of physiology in schools, Combe's lifelong struggle to formulate the basis of a true science of education, founded on a 'science' of mind, achieved a synthesis which is noticeably lacking in contemporary education

George Combe is perhaps best known as the leading British phrenologist of his generation and as the author of *The constitution of man*, an unique attempt to reconcile natural science and theology through the medium of phrenology His influence on the educational practices and opinion of the first half of the nineteenth century should not be underestimated, however, for his educational ideas were progressive in character, logically based and most clearly and lucidly expressed Unlike his fellow phrenologist, Spurzheim (12), Combe never wrote a formal treatise on education but his writings are full of educational ideas and, like other educational innovators, he founded his own school in which he hoped to vitalize his views on the curriculum, on teaching and on discipline

The fact that many of his views on education stemmed from the much disputed discipline of phrenology or were couched in the specialist vocabulary of the phrenologist rarely affected their validity and, in retrospect, Combe's endeavours in the field of education are to be regarded as a major and significant attempt to develop a science of education logically and coherently founded on an analytical study of the human mind Moreover, his use of phrenological jargon in discussing education is more limited than might have been expected from such an enthusiastic advocate of a new field of study and, at no point in his numerous and varied discussions, does his meaning become obscure

Born in 1788 near the castle in Edinburgh, he was brought up in a

house which, by 1800, included thirteen children, his parents and the servants, all crowded into a few small rooms 'a more unhealthy residence can scarcely be conceived' (9, p 2) Not surprisingly, his own health deteriorated and it remained poor throughout his life He entered Edinburgh High School in 1797 as a pupil of a Mr Fraser whose principal recommendation seems to have been that he 'plied the tawse for certainly he 'taught nothing' (9, p 17) Combe has left a vivid description of the state of education at that time and of the 'torture which was a substitute for teaching (9, p 20) in his case In later years he was to particularly recall the lack of any map or illustrative object whatsoever in the school His religious upbringing was strict even by the severe standards of the day and the famine of 1800 did nothing to ameliorate the conditions of his own life at home

Nonetheless, Combe's education after 1802 included the study of geography, mathematics and elocution as well as Latin under Professor Hill at Edinburgh When, in 1804, the 'feeble, delicate boy of shabby appearance' (9, p 62) came to choose a career it was almost by accident that he entered an apprenticeship which eventually led to his becoming a Notary Public in 1815 He practised his profession until 1836 when he decided to devote the remainder of his life to the study and propagation of phrenology His interest in this subject had been aroused because it seemed to him to be capable of satisfactorily explaining the *functions* of the various parts of the human brain, revealed by the anatomists' dissections At first, Combe followed the fashion of his contemporaries in attacking the phrenological doctrines of Gall and Spurzheim when these were presented in the *Edinburgh Review* of June 1815 But, by 1817, he had come to be regarded as the principal proponent of phrenology in the Scottish capital, despite the fact that he, himself, was undoubtedly still at the stage of testing phrenology against his everyday experiences The rest of his life is the story of his devotion to developing the doctrines of phrenology and to propagating their worth Inevitably, any explanation of the functioning of the human mind has direct consequences for education which, significantly for Combe, was at that time becoming a major political issue in Parliament He thus became unavoidably involved with the basic questions of 'Who shall be educated? What shall they be taught? and by whom?" and above all, 'What body, if any, should be responsible for the large-scale government and administration of education?' In answering each of these questions, Combe was able to refer to the doctrines of phrenology which provided him with a coherence and totality of view often lacking in contemporary educational thinkers

THE EXTENSION OF EDUCATION

Combe was a true reformer in the sense that he sought the solution to contemporary political and social problems in the elevation of the labouring classes by means of education In a great number and variety of speeches and publications he argued the natural right of the lower classes to be educated (4) and emphasized the personal as well as the national, social, political and economic advantages of educating the 'labouring classes ' A neglect of education leaves the individual not only ignorant but incapable' (4, p 24) He saw clearly the need for an extension of the power of the people in every country in Europe but 'especially in our own' and warned that 'not a day should be lost in qualifying the people by instruction and training (4, p 1)

Combe was also clear that his scheme for national education should be administered by the government and not be carried on by the Churches or by voluntary means The narrowness and severity of his own religious upbringing may have influenced his views on the control of education but he was also sufficiently realistic to appreciate the near impossibility of a compromise between religious and secular interests at that time His national schools were to give a general instruction acceptable to all religious sects but instruction in a given faith was to remain the task of the home and of the Church

He outlined his plans for the administration of his scheme for national education in 1841, following his return from a visit to America He quickly became an important protagonist of secular education in the parliamentary struggle over the control of education but, in Scotland, he was excluded as 'too dangerous' from membership of the so-called 'Manifesto party,' an association of dissenters favouring a scheme of national education under the government A Bill, prepared by this association, which would have given non-sectarian education to Scotland was defeated in 1851 but by a sufficiently narrow margin to encourage 'secular educationists' throughout Britain to greater efforts Combe lent much support to the secular cause in both England and Scotland although he firmly opposed the plan put forward by the Manifesto party for education north of the border His opposition stemmed from a number of sources but principally from his argument that the Manifesto scheme, if implemented, would give the majority of rate payers power to introduce their own religion into the schools and to tax the minority for teaching it (11) However, he strongly supported the proposals of the Manchester-based National Public School Association (8), perhaps because these bore a close resemblance to his own views expressed over a decade earlier in the *Edinburgh*

Review of July 1841 Cameron Grant, in a recent note on 'secular' education in the nineteenth century has claimed that Combe's purpose went further than the setting up of an educational system outside the control of the religious authorities since, for Combe, 'a national system was to be the vehicle for a new kind of education ' (10)

Certainly Combe expounded and elaborated his views on both the control and the content of education on every possible occasion, notably to Cobden with whom he was on intimate terms The essence of his idea was that the inhabitants of a given social district should form themselves into a corporation with the power to tax themselves, erect a school and provide instruction therein in 'the conditions of social well-being' (9, vol 2, p 317) It is typical of the man that he raised no objection to the power of raising a rate for sectarian teaching, providing that 'no man would be bound to pay it who did not approve of the religion taught by means of it ' Nor is it surprising, in view of the period in which he lived, that Combe was recognized as a considerable influence in the debate over the control of education But it has been argued that his ideas on the curriculum for 'social well-being' were, in the long term, more significant than his undeniably important contribution to that debate (10), and some consideration will now be given to Combe's interpretation of his own phrase 'instruction in social well-being '

INSTRUCTION IN SOCIAL WELL-BEEING

Combe did not ally himself with those (3, 11) who argued that sound religious instruction, the three R's and the knowledge of a trade were adequate for the education of the majority of the people in the country He claimed that *society* had a right to *insist* on its members acquiring a certain kind and degree of knowledge and believed that an individual must have complete freedom of thought and action in all matters which do not directly or indirectly injure the welfare of his fellow men Thus, no citizen had the right to remain filthy in his habits since this rendered him a danger to other members of society Gross ignorance is similarly anti-social since it prevents men from acting rationally with due regard for their own and for the public welfare Therefore, for society's sake as well as his own, in short for social well-being, Combe required the citizen to study those subjects, e g physiology and the three R's, which would help to overcome unhygienic conditions and gross ignorance Rather less logically, subjects like poetry, painting and sculpture men were to be free to ignore since ignorance of these carried no direct harm to their fellow members of society

Children in schools were to be taught 'things that exist, their modes of action' and the 'nature of man' and how he is able to alter his environment to give him pleasure or pain (7) For Combe, secular education embraced reading, writing, arithmetic, algebra and geometry, geography, natural history, chemistry, anatomy and physiology, natural philosophy, the philosophy of mind, literature, poetry, painting and sculpture together with natural religion In modern terms this would be described as a liberal and scientific education Yet it is everywhere clear in Combe's writings that his prescription for secular education is essentially religious in all but the narrowest sectarian sense and that all knowledge is for use to the greater glory of the Creator In distinguishing natural from revealed religion, Combe differed from almost all of his contemporaries in the secular education movement He appreciated the conservative views of the churchmen but his ideas could not have avoided stirring up religious opposition or have prevented his secular education being labelled 'godless' or 'unchristian ' He provided further ammunition for his enemies by his refusal to accept that such 'delicate' or otherwise objectionable subjects as human anatomy and physiology should not be taught to girls as well as to boys

The subjects of Combe's timetable were to be taught 'by lessons, not lectures' and diagrams, objects and other 'preparations' were to be employed With the exception of the arithmetical tables, no lessons were set to the children to learn by rote (11) His views on teaching methods were influenced by a visit he paid to Lovett's National Hall School in 1848 and he recognized the importance of basing lessons on the everyday experience of the pupils His account of physiology teaching (6) shows that modern educational opinion could improve little upon his excellent questioning technique and use of visual aids It is, however, true that he made some concession to contemporary opinion by omitting from his physiology courses in the schools any mention of the reproductive organs

Combe succeeded in opening the Edinburgh Secular School in December 1848 with sixty boys attending by the end of the session in the following July The school became co-educational and moved to new premises in September 1849 but, despite its evident success, it was denounced as 'godless' and labelled the 'infidel school ' The Edinburgh Secular School lasted for six years, publishing its annual reports and examination results in *The Scotsman* Its closure was finally due to Combe's ill-health and the departure of the head teacher rather than to any fundamental educational weakness or mismanagement Combe's ambition to re-open the school was never realized but similar schools were set up elsewhere, e g at Leith,

and his ideas were reflected in such organizations as the Glasgow secular school movement which opened schools in the city in 1850 and 1853

Moreover, the initiative shown by Combe's school and others like it was to reap dividends as the nineteenth century progressed In particular, Combe must be regarded as the pioneer of physiology teaching in the schools and as the person, more than any other, responsible for the existence and the content of the physiology courses which became recognized for grant purposes under the Department of Science and Art in 1861 and were eventually embodied in the Elementary Codes of England and Scotland following 1870 Nowhere is Combe's liberal but utilitarian outlook more clearly revealed than in the many pleas he made for the teaching of physiology in the schools and it was mainly as the result of his own personal tact, persistence and enthusiasm that the 1853 petition to the Privy Council on education was received by a government largely sympathetic to the cause of teaching physiology in the science classes which it financed (2)

THE TRAINING OF TEACHERS

Despite the fact that Combe's description of the personal qualities of a good teacher were often couched in phrenological terms, his programme for the training of teachers was liberal in outlook and demanded a much wider field of study than was available in many training colleges a century or more after his death Moreover, his views are expressed with a clarity and logic which is often quite independent of the validity of any phrenological concept

> Every man, whose business is to deal with the human mind, has a system of Mental Philosophy of his own, according to which he decides and acts It may be a very imperfect system he may not recognize it as a system but still it serves him as one (1, p 365)

> To conduct education properly, it is necessary to know the physical and mental constitution of the being to be educated and the world in which he is to be an actor (5, p 37)

Thus, intending teachers should study anatomy and physiology as the keys to the physical constitution of man, phrenology as revealing his mental make-up, chemistry, natural history and philosophy as expositions of the external world and political economy and moral philosophy as the sciences of human action Combe's perception of the character of the training required by teachers was thus unusually lucid and advanced for his time It was not, moreover, a static view of the educative process In

writing to Baron Stockmar about the education of the future Prince of Wales, the following passage is of interest

> The better (the instructor of the Prince of Wales) be acquainted with *new* scientific views and opinion, the more suited will he be for his important vocation In the ages that are to follow the present, Science will influence society far more generally and powerfully than it has ever done, and both Literature and Religion will act subordinate parts in the drama of life compared with it (9, vol 2, pp 189-200)

Combe was convinced that the training of teachers was a *necessity* as far as the individual pupil and the country were concerned although it must be admitted that he saw the training schools as also providing an opportunity to instruct future generations of teachers in the doctrines of phrenology Only when teachers were adequately trained could education hope to become an applied discipline based upon the science of mind and not upon a common sense 'philosophy' which differed from one person to another and did not allow any united and well-directed efforts to improve the quality and extent of education in the country It is hard not to draw a parallel with the confusion casused by the need for eclecticism when considering contemporary psychological ideas on the learning processes and the development of the personality

Combe was one of the founders and promoters of the Edinburgh Model Infant School in 1829 and this remarkable institution trained infant teachers for work throughout the country Combe, along with Stow, Professor Pillans and the Mayos was vocal in his support for schemes of teacher training but, despite Brougham's agitation in Parliament, the first grant aid for the building of Normal Colleges was not given until 1836 Pillan's hope that teachers would be trained, like other professional men, in the universities had to wait longer for its realization in the founding of the Bell chairs of Education at Edinburgh and St Andrews Combe's broad view of the course to be pursued by intending teachers was, alas, not realized in the years that followed As phrenology became discredited, the support for many of his arguments appeared to give way When the new science of psychology eventually entered the training courses for teachers, this new science of the mind conspicuously lacked the unity of conception and outlook which was characteristic of George Combe s approach to education

CONCLUSION

In 1879, William Jolley, H M I , described Combe as 'one of the most enlightened and enthusiastic educationists this country has ever produced' (11, p v) Yet even Jolley was forced to admit that, by 1879, Combe's views were far from common knowledge and that his was an almost forgotten name This situation was undoubtedly due, in part, to the fact that Combe's ideas were conveyed through the medium of a new and despised philosophy of mind Perhaps more important was the fact that Combe's international reputation was that of a phrenologist and not that of an educational thinker Inevitably, his studies of the human mind led him to formulate the basis of a science of education and, in so doing, he achieved a synthesis which is noticeably lacking in education at the present time Combe's philosophy of life allowed him ready and logical answers to the questions of content and methodology in teaching pupils or training teachers, and his overall compactness of view perhaps provides a model for present day workers striving to establish a science of education

Within his overall view of the nature of man and of the role of education, George Combe's attention was minutely focused on each of the major educational, and therefore political, issues of the day His singleness of purpose and calm but sincere enthusiasm enabled him to ride the opposition and misrepresentation that is the lot of the reformer living much before his age, and the discrediting of phrenology has done little to alter the quality of his conception of the teaching process and all that follows from this conception for teacher training and the control of education

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