

## Dr. Edwin Abbott

by John R. Seeley†

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A great school may look forward to a life-time of centuries. It will, therefore, have a history, which will fall into periods, and of these periods some, perhaps, will be named after eminent persons. If it would keep its consciousness lucid, if it would have a trustworthy corporate memory, it must take note of the transitions as they occur, and promptly write down its fresh impression of such eminent personalities.

Our school has now lived long enough to feel that it has a history, and it is just now under the sense that an age of that history has come to an end. It feels also that this age will always be named after a person — it is the age of Abbott.

I have one or two friends who were at Rugby in the time of Arnold. I scarcely ever meet them but this fact about them flashes across my mind. It distinguishes them, and, of course, it is a distinction which is always growing greater, because rarer. Half a century hence there will be some Old Citizens who will pride themselves upon belonging to Abbott's time. Lately, no doubt, many of his pupils have been trying to express all they owe to him, and perhaps the time will come when one of them will draw such a portrait of this eminent headmaster as will be felt to be satisfactory. I, of course, am not of Abbott's time, I am senior to him. I am one of Dr. Mortimer's boys; and though I afterwards went back to the school in the character of a master yet this was also in Dr. Mortimer's time. I have, in fact, scarcely been near the school since Abbott became headmaster of it. My connection with it came to an end at the very moment when he succeeded Dr. Mortimer. I acted as Examiner when that event took place, and I well remember the dinner with the toasts of farewell and welcome, the proclamation, *Le roi est mort! Vive le roi!*

And so my only title to speak of his personal character and qualities must be derived from our friendship, which has been uninterrupted since he came up as a freshman to St. John's; and our intimacy, which at times has been close, and has even extended to literary collaboration. But I can imagine no character, no temperament, better suited for a headmaster. How shall I describe it? A sort of manliness accompanied with an unusually vivid remembrance of boyhood, and for that reason likely to produce a greater impression upon

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boyhood. A great mental activity and freshness, which, however, moves by preference along the line of academic study, so as never to bewilder pupils or pass altogether out of their sight. The vividness of genius without that which mars a teacher — eccentricity. And then a great power of despatching work without meanness or loss of spirits. Yes! I never saw him teach, but if you who have seen him, or have been taught by him, tell me he is an ideal teacher, my answer will be, I have no doubt of it; he could not but be such.

But without seeing him teach, without even visiting the school during his reign, I have been able to recognise — the whole academic world has recognised — what an eminent headmaster he was. For at that time, and in that particular school, it was open to a headmaster to do more than simply to teach well or to superintend efficiently. In the first place, there were important experiments to be tried in education. Those questions were coming up which we must positively before long answer in one way or another. Half a century ago Arnold gave a new lease of life to the public school system by showing how it might be ennobled morally and deepened intellectually. The question which Abbott took up a quarter of a century ago was different, but it had become not less urgent. It was the question of day-schools. It was the question of an educational apparatus much less cumbrous and expensive than the public school. How much moral training is it possible to impart where boys do not live together in a carefully-guarded city of their own, but only meet and sit side by side for certain hours of the day in the heart of a crowded metropolis? This was one question. The other was — how much intellectual training can be given to boys who look forward, for the most part, neither to a life of leisure nor to a professional life, but to commerce? Here were questions which could not be dealt with but by trying that experiment which seems so revolutionary — I mean modifying the old classical *curriculum*. Shall we ever pluck up courage to invent a scheme of education frankly, not classical? I mean a scheme in which literary culture shall be imparted by means of English, French, and German, and in which Latin and Greek shall have their place as advanced subjects, to be approached gradually by way of the modern languages. It seems to me that we must come to this sooner or later. But the way of this goal must be explored by cautious pioneers — men who thoroughly know and appreciate the old system, and feel all the responsibility of superseding it. It seems to me that Dr. Abbott has been such a pioneer partly by his position as headmaster of the very school which, as the School of the City of London, is more bound than any other to seek the highest ideal of the commercial day school, and partly by the eminent qualities which he brought to his position, he has been the greatest of all the pioneers who have explored that road.

And secondly, all that he has done, he has done with distinction. He has not been absorbed in his work, but rather his work has been absorbed in him. In England we value the practical man almost too much; but who denies that the first duty of a headmaster is to

manage his school efficiently? Pity that so few of us have vitality enough to achieve anything beyond the routine of our daily task. Pity that no one has time to be in the least degree interesting or remarkable. Dr. Abbott, however, finds time for everything. He lets his light shine before men, or rather his light cannot help shining. It has been his habit when his day's work was done, and, thoroughly well done, to sit down in the evening and write a book. Or sometimes in a vacation of six weeks he has found that he enjoyed the Lake Country so much that ideas occurred to him, so that he could not help writing a book, which accordingly was ready for the publisher when term began again. And these books were not merely well-meant effusions interesting only to his personal friends. They were books which went home, books which left an ineffaceable mark on some important subject. Thus he made his mark on the criticism of Shakespeare and on the history of the English language by his Shakespearian grammar. He discussed the life and character of Bacon with a vigour which greatly disturbed the mind of James Spedding. He made his mark on theology by investigations of the same thorough kind. And so he was able to give an account of his evenings and his holidays. There remained the Sunday, upon which he was positively forbidden to work. But he evaded the prohibition by appearing on this day as one of the most eloquent preachers of the time.

The style of these writings is in a high taste. They are real literature, wholly free from academic pedantry; but also they are wholly free from literary excess, from the tricks and ambitious affectations of the literary aspirant.

It does not often happen that a great headmaster is also an eminent writer. When Dr. Arnold combined the two parts, his friends, e. g., Bunsen, were alarmed for his health and life. At times we too have been alarmed for Abbott. Henceforth we may dismiss these fears. He has reached the port. This chapter of his life at least is closed and unalterable. One thing at least is certain for him in this uncertain world; he has been a great headmaster. I sometimes wish, when I note how rapidly the educational revolution seems to approach, that he were still at hand to guide it. But he is not far off, and his advice at least will not be wanting.

Meanwhile it is his own opinion that he can do something else for us. For let us be sure he has retired for work and not for rest.

What is he preparing?