THOUGHTS

On a Reform in the English Alphabet.

BY A THOUGHTFUL

CHAPTER I.

[illegible]

[illegible] "It seems to me that the proper office of an alphabet is to represent the primary elements of words. These they must represent, and yet what? Not, I do, as he [illegible] alphabetical signs, our written or printed letters should (1) actually represent elements of speech—should not be, as we say, silent; (2) should each represent one element, distinct from that represented by any other; (3) should such a set unvarying for a single sound or *element of words*; and (4) should [illegible] all the simple sounds or elements of speech."

It could be not much to the understanding of any scholar to offer suggestions in support of these axioms, and I may fairly presume that they have occurred to every scholar who has thought on the subject. Nay, I doubt not it is a very general matter of regret that the alphabet of our language is so little in conformity with these characteristics of a proper alphabet. And perhaps only multitudes would rejoice to think that its defects could be remedied, and one of the greatest obstacles to mental development be removed out of the way of teachers and pupils. Let it be considered that the great stumbling block lies at the very threshold of learning, and that numbers never surmount it, or get so lamely over it that they never make a respectable approach to those attainments they might otherwise easily reach. Well did the self-taught Stone (of Scotland) say,—"When one has learned to spell and read correctly," i. e. when he has acquired a knowledge of the use of our alphabet,—"he may learn any thing else." Multitudes who tell you they can read, will be found, on examination, to do it with so much difficulty that they can obtain no accurate and ready information from books and never feel any interest in them, through their whole lives.

The experience of many years as an instructor has abundantly taught the writer the necessity and importance of the change under consideration. "The schoolmaster is abroad," as Brougham says, but how severe is the labor of teaching children to spell and read English! How long a time does it occupy! How dreary and tiresome the work! How distasteful to the little pupil who is forced mechanically to repeat what he cannot comprehend and what at every step seems so inconsistent and arbitrary! How many of the joyous months and years of childhood are lingered out in the confinement of the school room! How great an expense is entailed on parents and the state by the cost of books worn out in the long service as well as in the fees for tuition! How desirable then a reform which would make learning to read the easy task of a few days (or weeks at most,) thus sparing the health and spirits, abridging the toil and confinement, diminishing the expense, and bringing within the reach of all, what now is denied to a very large proportion of the population of our country! A consideration of great moment here, is that when the first steps have been unsuccessful, and a youth has been permitted to attempt other studies before he reads well, he will not only fail in those studies, but in nine cases out of ten he will never learn to read correctly. Now it is not denied that many learn to read well even under the present difficulties, but we insist that these difficulties are needless, and we further maintain that they prevent great numbers from ever acquiring a useful education.

1. We have in our written and printed words many silent letters. All the pains taken by a child to remember the name and power of L, serve only to render the spelling and reading of such words as palm, talk, &c. more difficult. Were any analogy observed, that is, were certain letters always silent in similar situations, it would be better, but we all know this is not the case.

2. Our letters do not represent each a distinct element of words. Thus a and e have the same sound in *bare* and *there*, and it is difficult to shew a young learner the difference between bare and bear, bear and bier. Fear, fair and fare: heir, air, ear, ere, are specimens of the same confusion.

3. The same letter is at one time gifted with one power, at another time with a very different sound. Thus c is confounded with s in *cent*, but in *cat* it has the power of *k*. *A* in *fam* differs from *a* in *father*, as much as in *far* it differs from *a* in *worth*.

4. There are elemental sounds of our language not represented by our symbols, thus, for want of its proper mark (the Greek *theta*) *th* is represented by combining two letters, neither of which has any thing to do in producing the sound denoted by their union; and after we have contrived this combination, it falls short of its object, inasmuch as its power in *thick* differs from its power in *this*, violating our 3rd axiom, as well as the principle in the note on page 52.

Beside these violations of the axioms laid down, we have other difficulties that seriously embarrass the learner. 1. When a child has learned the whole alphabet in capitals he has then to renew the task and study the smaller representatives of the same powers, many of them so different from their colleagues as to give him great trouble. Now there are advantages derived from the use of capitals, but none at all from making the capitals differ in form from similars *not capital*. What benefit results from having the different forms of R and r, and if a variation be necessary in that letter why do we make the same figure answer for s or for o whether *large* or *small*, *capital* or *terminal*?

2. The names of the letters not only give no aid in learning their powers, in many cases, but some of them positively mislead and obstruct the pupil. The name of h completely puzzles him, *g* suggests a wrong power in such words as *gate* and *leg*, and gives no idea at all of the closing sound of sing, &c. Even in the simple case of *b* or *f* the power denoted is apt to be lost sight of from the stress laid on the vowel sound combined with the name, (pronounced *bee*, *eff*—e being affixed to the one and prefixed to the other,)—a difficulty which, on full consideration, it may yet be found we cannot attempt to remove, though I am informed by an intelligent Hanoverian that in the schools of at least some parts of Germany, children are taught from the first the powers without what we call the *names* of the letters. In other words, they are taught to close the lips and utter the breathing forcibly for *b* and a little more so for *p*, and in like manner they are taught the other symbols.

3. The whole theory and construction of diphthongs and triphthongs is calculated to bewilder the pupil. The difficulties attending the use of variable vowels and of silent letters are here combined. The true theory of a genuine diphthong (i. e. a combination of two alphabetic vowel marks in a single syllable to represent one indivisible sound) is this, that having a sound to denote which we had in our alphabet no symbol provided, we make a mark for it composed of two marks already appropriated if taken separately to other sounds: and it is of no importance whether the sound thus denoted by their union be really made up of the sounds they individually represent. Thus in *out*, the sounds of *a* and *u* if combined or made to follow each other as closely as possible, will not produce the sound represented by *ou*. The common definition of diphthong and triphthong therefore is unpardonably vague and incorrect, not to say false. It does not state the facts in the case, but if the young learner reflect at all, it serves only to perplex and confound him. As for the improper † diphthongs, in which a silent letter in fact exists, and the whole sound is but the power of one of the letters, as *ea* in *beat*, *ai* in *fair*, but we need not waste words on them. They are nuisances, and nothing but nuisances.

4. One more difficulty and I have done with this part of the subject for the present. The strong resemblance for the unpractised eye, which some of our letters bear to others very much retards the progress of the learner; *n* and *u*, *p* and *q*, *b* and *d* bother the little scholar a good deal, but capital I and small *l* run him completely aground.

If these disadvantages are felt by native children, how severely do they embarrass the foreigner, who attempts to acquire a knowledge of the English language! True his own language written or printed may not be phonographic, but were ours so, we should at least meet him half way, and greatly facilitate his progress. I believe it is the general opinion of Europeans that ours is one of the most difficult languages to learn, and that too in spite of some peculiar advantages in its grammatical construction ‡. Why should a language so far inferior to ours, as the French, bear away the palm, and bid fair to become the universal tongue—the expression of refinement, politeness and science? Let those who speak English do their duty and remove the obstructions now under consideration, and we may fairly defy French policy, arts and arms to obtain for their language the supremacy which they covet for it.

But what is of far nearer and more momentous concern to us remains yet to be contemplated. I mean the effect of these imperfections on the stability and uniformity of our language.

1. The orthography is unsettled, and will ever remain unsettled till these evils are corrected. The wonderful improvement made since the age of Tyndal and Hollinshed, when the spelling of English was in a state of fluctuation, [illegible] Now that spirit of change, banished from the land and shackles of every kind, seems to have settled down to the opposite extreme of very slender to none, we complain of to the opposite degree. The variation in spelling of subjects nearly greater indeed and the formation of dictionaries for the express purpose of preventing such evils from this cause, and can not there off only by a combined and resolute determination to eliminate and dry up the very source itself.

2. Resulting in part from the numerous divergencies still existing in our orthography, but chiefly from the state of our alphabet we find great differences in pronunciation, and these again under the present system produce equal variations in orthography. Long have scholars lamented the want of an acknowledged standard, and each has been disposed to claim for his own favorite lexicographer or orthoepist a right to govern the spelling and pronunciation of all—but hitherto in vain. Nor can the matter ever be settled till a much more perfect alphabet be introduced and established by the common consent of scholars.

3. Lastly, the grammar itself, and all that lays a foundation for a strong, pure and characteristic style are in danger of frequent, irregular and ruinous mutation while our alphabet remains in its present imperfect state.—We have already noticed the wonderful advance made in former times by the masters of style who wrote in the Augustan age of England, and the increased stability that improvement gave to the orthography, and even the standard of our language. But the happy effect did not end here. There took place such an embodying of the character of English, not in the words themselves only, but in the forms of expression at large, as fixed a permanent standard of taste, and set forth perspicuously the beauties of which our language is capable. We readily admit that other causes cooperated with this; we readily admit that the progress of taste and literature on the continent had a decided effect, and that the co-existence of a large number of gifted men at one period exerted a powerful influence, but can any one doubt that the impulse of previous progress, and the encouragement derived from the consciousness of that advance gave force and direction to these causes? Could Addison and his contemporaries have exerted such an influence on literature and on style in particular, with the barbarous and ever varying tongue of the days of Tyndal and Hollinshed? And we are witnessing a great and degrading reversal of the progress of improvement. Many are beginning to yield to the melancholy belief that our tongue has passed the zenith, and must inevitably sink into utter barbarism and irregularity again: that its palmy days are over, and its "fine gold changed" to baser metal—changed irrecoverably to tinsel and to dross.

CHAPTER II.

THE REFORM PROPOSED—OBJECTIONS CONSIDERED—MEASURES SUGGESTED.

The axioms laid down, and the difficulties pointed out in the preceding chapter sufficiently indicate the object and the amount of the reform proposed. It is proposed to abolish in our spelling all silent letters—to have a distinct mark for every sound, and to make that particular mark stand invariably for a single sound or power—to give a single letter more than one power or sound, and no sound or power more than one representative. It is also proposed to make the capitals of the same shape with the other letters of the same power—to abolish the absurd names of at least some of the letters, to represent the diphthongs and triphthongs, as we call them, more rationally by individual marks, and to make letters now too nearly resembling each other more distinguishable. In order to the accomplishment of these objects, it may be necessary to remodel the symbols or marks called letters, at least to some extent, or even to frame new ones, or to make some additions to the present number. This, we are aware, will require concert—a union of action and influence on the part of scholars of all ranks, and of teachers especially. And we are aware that it will require new books for learners, and will introduce a very great change, ultimately, into the form and appearance of all books in our language.—This brings us to the objections naturally enough presented to the desired reform. These objections take their rise chiefly in the fastidiousness of literary men, their indifference to all improvement designed for those who are to come after them, the sloth which shrinks from the difficulties of the task, the apprehension of the impracticability of sufficient concert, and of the expence of the change in the printing of books. I do not pretend to answer every argument that may be suggested, or to anticipate every objection to which the proposed reform is liable. I shall only in the briefest manner consider those which present themselves as the most weighty and formidable.

1. "The etymology of words will be obscured, and the origin of some will be entirely lost. Many words now distinguished by the spelling, i. e. by the combinations of marks or symbols used to represent them will be to the eye utterly confounded." This, to my mind, is the strongest objection that can be brought against the proposed reform. I perceive that it will not be so easy to trace the etymologies of some words, and that in some cases, words derived from different roots may appear to be of the same origin. But I by no means allow to this objection all the weight it will have with a certain class of scholars, and I maintain that the preservation of etymologies is by no means of so much importance as to prevent an attempt to relieve teachers and the young of all future generations from the intolerable burdens they now endure, and to remove the most fatal obstruction to the diffusion of knowledge. How cheap must we hold the health and happiness of teachers and children—how little must we value the benefits of universal education if we cling, for the sake of curiosities preserved for our inspection in our dictionaries and spelling books, to all that grinds down the energies of instructors and pupils for months and years of precious time, and to all that makes learning impossible to vast multitudes in many places where our language is used!

And yet after all, the difficulty is vastly over-rated. The derivation or etymology of a word is simply a historical fact; and what is to hinder the preservation of that fact, after all the changes we propose to make?—May not the works on etymology or the dictionaries now existing be perpetuated even in their present form, and kept, at least by the curious in such matters for their own inspection and instruction? Or, may not the facts translated, if we may use the expression, into the new symbolical form proposed be appended to the words concerned, in dictionaries printed for the use of those who shall have learned the new alphabet? For a length of time, no doubt, it will be the fact, should the proposed reform take place, that scholars, even though they commence their early education with the improved alphabet, will proceed of choice in maturer years to acquaint themselves with the older forms so long in use. I entertain, therefore, no apprehension, after looking this formidable difficulty in the face, that any serious loss will result, even to this *comparatively* unimportant branch of knowledge.

2. "Words of similar sound will be confounded in sense also as well as in derivation by the proposed alteration." Thus, *creak* which denotes a certain noise may be taken for *creek*, a stream, or *cote* for *coat*. Here the objector evidently forgets the important fact, that the things however different are represented in English by the same sounds, and while we propose to represent the sounds by the same symbols, he assumes that the things will be confounded thereby. But how are they distinguished in conversation? and how those which are spelt alike yet differ in sense, as *foot*, part of the body, and *foot* a measure? By the connexion, to be sure; and why not as well in a book? How does the child learn that *coat* represents a garment, while *cote* with the same sound denotes a pen for sheep, or house for pigeons? He is *told* of the difference in *sense*; and cannot the same means be used to point out the like difference when the *symbols* are the same? Or, in making the proposed reform cannot a distinction be denoted without the absurd process now followed? As matters now stand much greater difficulties result. At this day how many spell alike the very numerous words that sound alike, as *creak* for *creek*, &c. How many rise to high office in our country, who never learned to spell correctly in our present system, and subject themselves and their country to the ridicule of the world by their barbarisms in this way? It is the merit,—the undisputed merit of the proposed reform that it removes the possibility of mis-spelling, and this will abundantly compensate for the disadvantage here alledged, even if we admit all the force imagination gives it.

3. "The change will shock the eye and appear even ludicrous in print." No doubt it will offend at first. Dr. Franklin wrote a specimen of our language, spelled as it is uttered, which would make any one laugh. But Dr. F. did not write it in a reformed alphabet; had he done so, much of the drollery would have been lost. It is for this reason, among others, that we should prefer extensive changes in the alphabetic symbols to slight variations from the present usage. By this course we should perhaps wholly shun the seeming ludicrousness of appearance in words, and in no very long time, completely turn the laugh upon the exigeing absurdities.—It a reform take place, that indeed will be the result, before many generations shall have passed. We now laugh at the orthography of our forefathers in Elizabeth's day, how will our descendents split their sides at sight of the follies of our present system!

4. "The expence entailed by the proposed reform" is another objection. "School books must be printed on the new plan." True, and school books must and will be printed on the old plan, if the old be retained; and they will cost just as much as if printed on the new, nay, we very believe, it will not be long before elementary books will, from their greater simplicity and novelty, cost much less if printed in the reformed letters, than if executed in the present method. Fewer books will be worn out in learning to spell and read; that will be a great saving. And yet the extension of education to multitudes now beyond its precincts will still supply the press with an object of business and profit.

"Other books must be translated into the new form, or the learner on [illegible]

[illegible] the effect of the Hayneites bill, [illegible] Oregon party have been [illegible] explanation of a [illegible] Upon this one was the effect of the speech [illegible] on the other of the Executive urged, the Union. Then it seemed (to use a [illegible] Western figure) absolutely to [illegible] "knock'd into a cocked hat." [illegible] on the President's declaration [illegible] all hazards *fifty four forty*, [illegible] of compromise, denouncing [illegible] remarks there who did not [illegible] of Oregon or money' then all of a sudden [illegible] swear it proclaimed to the [illegible] authoritatively and confidently, by a [illegible] and supporter, that the President had [illegible] to occupy the extreme ground of "all of Oregon or war," that he was actually willing to compromise, and on measures [illegible] down to forty nine—allowed to "Cass Eustis &c.," that the organ of the Executive, the keeper of his conscience not his [illegible]—that he should be in darkness as to the Presidential mind, that he should be left in the lurch! It was not to be believed; "Mr. Haywood must be mistaken;" "the man was so understood;" "nobody had a right to speak for the President;" "Did not Mr. Allen contradict Mr. Haywood?" "Did not Mr. Hannegan interrogate him?" "The President would defend the rights to the country;" "he would never yield an inch." ("He won't run, Sir Lucius.") All very true, but still that ugly silence of Mr. Haywood, and the still more ugly silence of Messrs. Hannegan and Allen since! Have they not yet ascertained whether Mr. Haywood spoke with authority? Do they still doubt? Alas, no. The editor of the organ would fain believe so, but his heart fails him; he hopes, but it is "hope mix'd with a killing fear." In short, the state of the organ, since that fatal Thursday, has been painful to witness. His "sufferings" do indeed seem "intolerable," and they betray him into the most amusing contradictions. One day he hangs out his banner on the outer wall of *fifty four forty*, the next, fearing that he may be there left in a minority, (dreadful of old to all his sensibilities,) he descends a hole, and seems willing to compact with *forty nine*; then, alarmed at the idea of concession, abuses the Whigs, bounds off to the north, and talks even of *sixty one*. Thus, in a painful incertitude as to the ultimate action of the President, he vibrates between the extremes, settling at no point, but a mere thermometer, indicating from day to day the varying temperature of the Oregon feeling and prospects. The annexed remarks from the New York Express, on the same subject, will strike every reader as pertinent and forcible:

From the New York Express.

The "Washington Union," in order to overwhelm the noise of mutineers in its own camp, turns to and rails at the Whigs for the course they pursue in the matter of Oregon! To hush the mutiny there, it makes all sorts of faces, and calls all sorts of names!

Now, the Whigs, in this business of Oregon, have no course at all as *Whigs*. Some go one way, others another, but all refuse to make a party question of it; all promise to stand by their country in case of war, and all are for holding the Administration responsible for every step it takes in the negotiation. Whig principles are naturally for peace, for order, and for bettering the condition of their fellowmen by the pursuits of peace; and, if war comes in spite of us, it is not to be of our creation; but of a *national* we do not chose to make a *party* question. Such a course puzzles the Union. It can make no political capital out of it. The Whig course does not allow Mr. Polk to keep up a prodigious outcry for his own personal benefit—to bring the country to the verge of a precipice, and to keep us quivering over it; but it compels him to show his colors, to be for peace, or to prepare for war. Hence we are ready to increase the navy, nay, if necessary, to strengthen the army, to keep up or add to the tariff, to lay extra taxes, to make loans; in short, to do any thing to rescue the country from the ruin and disgrace of being pillaged the first year of a war, because we were so mad as to run into it without preparation.

But millions of dollars would not pay for the mischief the Union has done, from the first outcry it made, prior to the opening of Congress, for "the whole or none of Oregon," down to the present hour. It has arrested business; it has checked importations and exportations; it has frightened capitalists; it has palsied the arm of the employer and the laborer; and even here, in New York, where the gambling politics of the Administration are seen through, and nobody believes there is any real danger of war, the timid capitalist is *frightened*, and hoards up his treasures instead of putting them into active service for the common good.

The course of Mr. Polk, as we understand it, is about as equivocal as it is possible for that of a high functionary to be. His friends in Congress represent him, one set, a man of 49, and another of 54 40; and he has the merit of playing fast and loose with both, and of denouncing all. He stands hesitating between the fires of his party, receiving the shot of both, and, privately, if not publicly, denounced by both. The Union gravely tells us no Senator has a right to speak for him; as if there was a merit in deceiving the friends that elected him, and allowing them to pick and hack each other in debate like cocks in a pit. Nay, more; we see Mr. Polk (nolens volens) offering the line of 49 to the British Government; but, when he sees a portion of his own party denouncing him for it, shrinking from the responsibility, and cringing before the rebukes of braggart partisans as if he had done a thing he was ashamed of, and would, now that it was done, gladly retract from it if he could.

For the Union to represent such a course as this preferable to the course of Whigs, only shows that a government organ is especially established and paid to blow the trumpet of his employer.

For the Highland Messenger.

Brookbrook County Agricultural Society.

The above Society will hold a regular meeting on the Tuesday of Court. A general attendance of the members is requested, as business of importance is to be transacted.—Addresses may be expected by different gentlemen on that occasion.

JAMES H. EDNEY, Sec.

March 20, 1846.

Awful Calamity.—We learn that on Sunday night the 22nd ult., the dwelling house of Sidney Perkins, near Cane Creek, in Charlotte county, was consumed by fire, and two of his sons, (one six, the other three years old) perished in the flames. Fire was accidentally communicated to some broom straw lying under the bed; and being unable to extinguish it, Mr. P. ran to a neighbor's for assistance. When he returned the house was in a light

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* Fifteen vowels and diphthongs are represented in our language in more than seventy ways! One of our elementary sounds has at least nine representatives! I mean e, represented in so many different ways in the words *me*, *beat*, *beet*, *mien*, *key*, *receive*, *marine*, *people* and *cœliac*; and these, be it remembered, all denote but one power of *e*. Another power of *e* is denoted in six ways—as in *met*, *dead*, *said*, *Œdipus*, *guest*, *friend*. On the other hand most of our vowel letters have several powers, thus *a* has three, *e* four, *i* three, and so on; in all over fifty; but these are not distinct, i. e. *a* has in some situations a power which is also denoted by *e*, *u* the same as *e*, *i* and *o*, and *e* even in one case the same as short *i* (*women*.) The *combinations* of vowel marks represent *simple* vowel sounds, and that in the most fantastic manner; thus *ey* in *they*, is equivalent to one power of *a*, but in *key* it denotes a power of *e*. In short no analogy or rule is followed. Amidst this irregularity and confusion, instead of wondering that so many cannot read, I am surprised that so many accomplish the task. A tabular view of this whole subject will be presented to the public in due time, with a view to exhibit the nature and extent of the evils here complained of. It is my purpose also to accompany it with a project of the improvements which such a view suggests.

‖ The truth is, that the improvements produced in *similar words* by putting the spelling beyond mistake will amply make up for the number of words apparently confounded in this way; that is to say, words now spelled alike and yet pronounced differently, will on the new plan be clear of any danger of being mistaken in sense or pronunciation. How many doubtful questions in spelling will be settled at once, and forever, by the proposed reform! How many false analogies, like that between *good* and *blood*, will be at once rendered harmless!

** I will present here a single instance of the difficulty of concert in such a committee, and the mode of obviating it. The first syllable of *national* is pronounced by some as the first syllable of *nation*, and others give the first *a* the sound it has in *action*. How, it may be asked, shall the sound of this *a* be represented? I answer, both ways, i. e. let the dictionary give us "*national or* national," using the proper symbols agreed on to represent those two sounds. If an author then prefer the one, let him have his book printed accordingly. But a better plan would be to let this committee, under correction of the convention at a future meeting settle such points, and even make some mutual concessions.

Never has the writer of these hints found it more difficult to restrain his pen; so vast are the interests directly and indirectly affected. To men in a religious point of view, it is admitted, there are questions of greater moment directly considered; but even these are deeply implicated in the fate of this question. To teachers and scholars, to parents and children the results directly following a reform would be incalculably beneficial.—To the population of a large portion of our country, and of course to the intelligence, peace and virtue of generations unborn throughout this land its importance cannot easily be overrated. In the diffusion of knowledge and religion what aid so powerful as this reform would afford! How happy a diversion of the energies of the press from the publication of trash, to the preparation of elementary books, and standard works in our new orthographical dress! What an opening to enterprizing publishers!—What an increase of readers! What an enlarged demand for books, newspapers &c., would ensue! How many new teachers would find employment! How many more scholars would teachers be enabled to instruct!—How soon would the spelling and pronunciation of our language find a standard! How soon should we see something like uniformity in the methods and results of instruction and thorough learning in the first steps smooth the way to greater and better attainments in all the branches of knowledge! Am I not then excusable for calling on every parent, teacher, publisher, patriot, philanthropist and christian in our country to aid in this reform!