

N. Carolina General Assembly.

REMARKS OF MR. POTTER.

On Thursday, the 1st inst. on introducing the Report of the Committee on Education, on the "Bill to establish a *Political College* for the State of North-Carolina:"

Mr. Speaker—From the turn which the discussion in reference to this measure has taken, it would seem that the further agitation of the subject must be attended with some degree of embarrassment. Before, therefore, I proceed to the remarks I am now about to submit, I must pause, to assure the House, that so far as I am concerned, they need entertain no apprehensions of excitement about this matter. In a moment of animation, I may overstep the line, which prudence would prescribe for the regulation of my conduct; and, on a late occasion, I did, when much excited, indulge in expressions, incompatible, I believe, with the rules of the House, and the decorum of debate. For this I am sorry. I say this to the House—not to any individual. Let it be distinctly understood, that to the House alone I make this acknowledgment; and I tender it to them, not from any low desire to avert their wrath from my head, but because I feel it to be due to them, and, therefore, just and becoming in me. I have seen rather too much of the mode, in which the praise and censure of this world are bestowed, ever to "regard men's smile or frown, as loss or guerdon of a glorious lot." I could view with indifference the congregated wrath of all mankind, where it should be unjust; but I confess it gives me pain to believe, that I have incurred the displeasure of those with whom I am associated, and to know, too, that I have given them just cause for censure. It is not the idea of being unpopular, that distresses me, but the conviction resting upon my mind, that *I have done wrong*. It is not in my nature to be rude, even to the lowest of God's creatures, and the respect I bear myself alone, independently of my regard for the dignity of this body, would ever restrain me from a deliberate assault upon its feelings and character. Sir, the assault was not deliberate. The House will do me the justice to reflect, that, on the occasion alluded to, I acted under a strong and gross provocation. On account of the absence of the member from Salisbury, I shall abstain from any remarks upon the motives which induced him to use the harsh and offensive language alluded to; and, for my justification, shall simply state the language itself, and the light in which I and other gentlemen viewed it. This is now the more necessary, since a bungling reporter, whether from ignorance or design I know not, has published a most imperfect account of it. In reply to the gentleman from Buncombe, who had alluded to the degraded situation of North-Carolina, I understood the member from Salisbury to say, that on previous occasions, remarks of a similar character had been used, and that "it was a dirty bird that befoul'd its own

nest." He has since declared he had no allusion to me; but I had a few days before, in describing the condition of the State, used even stronger language, than that which fell from the gentleman from Buncombe. I was the only member of this House, who, during the session, had used such language; and I could not, therefore, but regard myself as the individual against whom those dirty words were directed. If the member from Salisbury had stated, that he deemed the course I had pursued improper, that he thought it wrong, or even unbecoming, I should have considered that, as a member of this House, he had a right to express such an opinion, and I should have borne it decently; but his language was so gross, imputing to me, as I conceived, nothing less than personal filth and foulness, that, at the moment, I lost the balance of my temper, and violated the feelings and dignity of the House. Still it was wrong, since no degree of outrage which I *could* receive from an individual here, would justify me in insulting the House. But where is the man, whose feelings have not sometimes triumphed over his reason? I think you will allow, I had some right to feel indignant at the charge, when you learn, that, instead of loitering in the nest which brooded me, I left it before I was fairly fledged, to stand forth in its defence. During the late war with Britain, when our country was sending down her gallant sons to the sea-shore to repel the enemy, I sought an opportunity to meet them on the ocean itself. While yet a boy, at the age of fifteen years, I left the humble home of my youth, and went forth, to do whatever my feeble arm could, in behalf of my country; and while other young men of my age were engaged in acquiring education and fortune, it was my lot to wander o'er the world, without the advantages of either. I forfeited forever the opportunity, which youth alone can give, of disciplining my mind, and now feel, and ever shall deplorably feel, the want of that education, I am so anxious to extend to the rising generations of my countrymen. During six years, in the very spring-time of life, from the age of fifteen to twenty-one, I bore the arms of my country in the Navy of the United States. Was this the flight of a bird that would "befoul its nest?" Was this the conduct of one indifferent to the honor and welfare of his country? That honor, and that welfare, are as dear to me as ever. I cherish towards North-Carolina all the affection and devotion that a child could feel for an aged and a helpless parent. To me she is but the dearer, for her very helplessness and decrepitude. I sprung from her soil—the bones of my fathers, for several generations, are sleeping in her bosom—to me she is now my only parent. But I came not here to flatter and cajole her—my object is to serve, not to court her. I will not compliment even my country, at the expense of truth. I will not say that North Carolina is a *great* State, and I am proud of her, because *she is not*; but I have endeavored to tell

her how she may become so. The stern and naked truths I told her, were spoken in the kindest spirit. They were the offerings of a heart, full of devotion for its country. My object was the honor and welfare of my country, and my arguments were those of truth and justice; and are you unwilling to listen to these? Woe to the interests and liberties of the people, when one of their representatives shall be regarded with an evil eye for standing up here and proclaiming the truth—for exposing here in the face of his country, the baseness of those, who have been entrusted by that country with the guardianship of her rights, and prostituted that trust to private purposes. What! are we to be required to tread lightly, and talk as softly in this Hall, here where the rights of freemen are discussed and disposed of, as if we were within the walls of a Spanish Inquisition? Are we to shrink with a sickly feeling of delicacy, from the exposure of men who have trodden upon the rights of the people? Are we, whose especial duty it is to look "with an eye that never winks" to the interests of the people—are *we* to permit those interests to be betrayed, and not beard and brand the offender with his crime? I hope the time is not yet come, when it can be said of us, "plate sin in gold, and the strong lance of justice falls harmless at its feet; clothe it in rags, and a pigmy straw doth pierce it." When I at least shall act on such principles, "be ready, gods! with all your thunderbolts, *dash* me in pieces." Sir, my remarks the other day were strong—they were bold; but they were *true*, and spoken in a spirit of as great tenderness towards my fellow-citizens, as if they had been a band of brothers. The House, I am sure, did not understand the facts to which I alluded, or they would at once have perceived the justness of my observations. I will not now harass them by an attempt at explanation. If I were, I should unfold a scene of baseness and corruption, that would astonish and shock the members of this House. Yet the people do not see it—the people do not understand it; and I, it seems, have been considered very impolite—very rude indeed, because I wished to inform them of it. Some, who admit the truth of what I said, yet deem this an improper place to have told it. I do not think so—upon the most deliberate reflection I do not think so. I do not see what arguments could have been used, more fairly or more forcibly, to show the necessity of educating the people. My object was to show, that, to the preservation of the rights of the people, it was essential *they* should know them; that, to protect them against the errors of weak men, and the artifices of bad ones, they should *all* have the capacity, to understand and superintend the management of their affairs. I made the statement I did, to show you how insensible our people are to their political character and political rights. I told you then—I tell you now—that a vast portion of them have not the capacity to understand their rights & interests.

The measure I proposed to you, is a great and a responsible one; and I thought it necessary to unveil to you, the full extent of the disease, in order to induce you to apply so costly a remedy. I mention the ignorance of the people, not as a reproach to them, but a misfortune; it would less become me than any other member of this House, to speak with levity of those misfortunes of my fellow citizens which arise from poverty. 'Tis we who are to blame, for withholding from them, against all sound policy, and in defiance of the Constitution itself, the means of education. At every turn we are met with mortifying evidences of the lamentable dearth of education among us. A single fact, which we acted upon the other day, speaks volumes on this subject. To enable an individual to write a book, the object of which is to tell us how we came here, and where we came from—which, in short, is to give us an account of our ancestors and our institutions, we were called upon to lend him the aid of legislation. The reading portion of the community is so small, that it does not furnish patronage, even for the most interesting of all literary works. Sir, I voted for that measure; but I confess I did it with extreme reluctance. I wish to strike the evil at its root. I wish to create *readers* rather than *books*. Educate the people, and every thing else will follow as a matter of course. Make education general, and we shall no longer be called upon to furnish premiums for literary and scientific works. Qualify the people to manage their affairs with ability, and be assured *they* will give a just and enlightened direction to them. The people are always disposed to do right, and always will, if they understand how; but, while this is admitted as a general principle—while no one denies the importance of general education—we stand hesitating and doubting, and refuse to act—insuperable difficulties seem to rise up, to prevent us from fixing upon a definite system. The measure before you is objected to by some, on the ground of the smallness of the number which it proposes to educate. Sir, my object is to begin, by creating for ourselves a body of preceptors, whose duty it shall be to instruct the mass of our people. Suppose we were now to establish District Schools throughout the State, where could we find men qualified to take charge of them? We should have to import them; for we have not at home men who are qualified to educate our children, except those whose situations would prevent them from undertaking the task. Look to your University, and look to almost every respectable School in the State. Our most distinguished seminary of learning is managed and governed by foreigners. Among the officers of the University, there is but one native of North-Carolina, and he, I believe, was educated at the North. Nearly every Academy in the State is under the superintendence of a Northern man; and if we were now to establish a system of District Schools, we should have to import a cargo of Yankees to take charge of them.

Adopt the bill before you, and it will furnish you, at the end of three years, with a hundred and seven men, of native growth and origin, eminently and efficiently qualified to train and instruct our youth; and it will be their duty, under the provisions of this bill, to perform the duty of instructors for three years, at such stations as may be assigned them, in consideration of the education they shall have received from their country. But this would be but the commencement of its benefits. The funds proposed would support the institution forever; and at the expiration of every three years, it would send forth more than a hundred virtuous and intelligent citizens, to inform and educate our indigent and helpless children. It is my opinion, that, if we ever do attempt to educate the mass of our people, so long as the population is as diffuse as it is, it must be done by the establishment of schools in the several counties, upon plans similar to the one now offered to you; and, in that event, it would be a matter of the first importance, that a general system of discipline should pervade them all, producing, as it certainly would, a most desirable result—a unity of character among all our citizens. If I were to stand here and speak to you until the setting of the sun, I could not exhaust all the arguments in favor of this measure; but I am led to believe that the country is not yet ripe for it. If so, it will gratify me at least to know that the subject is now open, and the attention of the people will be drawn to it.