

A NOTE ON THE PROBABLE SOURCE OF PROVOST
SMITH'S FAMOUS CURRICULUM FOR THE
COLLEGE OF PHILADELPHIABy THEODORE HORNBERGER, Ph.D.
University of Michigan

In a recent article in these pages Mr. Eugene D. Owen suggested a possible English origin for Benjamin Franklin's conviction that the English language should be the principal medium of instruction in schools and colleges.¹ Mr. Owen's suggestion is interesting to all who realize that many of the theories which made the University of Pennsylvania a pioneer among American institutions of higher learning were importations, from sources as yet insufficiently studied. It is the purpose of the present paper to make the further suggestion that one of the most important of these sources was Robert Dodsley's compendium of knowledge, *The Preceptor* (2 vols., London, 1748), to which Dr. Samuel Johnson, the subject of Boswell's great biography, contributed a preface and an allegorical description of the place of education in human life.² The argument, in brief, is that *The Preceptor* in general, and Johnson's preface in particular, provided Provost William Smith with both method and material for his famous curriculum, or system of education, first published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of August 12,

¹ See "Where Did Benjamin Franklin Get the Idea for His Academy?" *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, LVIII. (1934), 86-94.

² See James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (Everyman's Library edition, 2 vols., London, 1916), I. 111. The preface and the allegory are reprinted in *The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (9 vols., Oxford, 1825), V. 231-246, and IX. 162-175. This edition is cited hereafter as *Works*. For Dodsley see Ralph Straus, *Robert Dodsley, Poet, Publisher and Playwright* (London, 1910), p. 94 and *passim*.

Smith, after including in his curriculum an "Introduction to Laws and Government" which suggests the title of Part XI. of *The Preceptor*, recommends for additional reading:²⁵

Locke on Government, Hooker's Polity, . . . Fortescue on Laws, N. Bacon's Discourses.

In history, Johnson's suggestion is:²⁶

The student may join with this treatise Le Clerc's Compendium of History; and afterwards may, for the historical part of chronology, procure Helvicus's and Isaacson's Tables; and if he is desirous of attaining the technical part, may first peruse Holder's Account of Time, Hearne's Ductor Historicus, Strauchius, the first part of Petavius's Rationarium Temporum; and, at length, Scaliger de Emendatione Temporum.

Smith's curriculum includes an "Introduction to Civil History" which *The Preceptor* may have provided, and "Patavii Rationar Temporum." It also suggests:²⁷

Scaliger de Emendatione Temporum, Compendis in Preceptor, Le Clerc's Compend of History.

Other correspondences might be demonstrated, but these are enough to justify the conviction that Provost Smith owed something to Dr. Samuel Johnson, and to suggest that the famous curriculum of 1756 was not entirely an expression of Smith's knowledge of curriculum changes at Aberdeen University. It is very likely, to be sure, that the changes at Aberdeen influenced Smith, but his curriculum did not follow the Aberdeen one in its most important innovation,—the postponement of the study of logic that the student might first be made acquainted with the modern branches of natural philosophy.²⁸

The interest of Dr. Johnson's preface to *The Preceptor* goes beyond these significant correspondences

²⁵ Montgomery, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

²⁶ *Works*, V. 240.

²⁷ Montgomery, *op. cit.*, pp. 237-239.

²⁸ See Robert S. Rait, *The Universities of Aberdeen, A History* (Aberdeen, 1895), pp. 300-301.

1756.³ The source of Smith's system has been thought heretofore to have been certain revisions of the curriculum of Aberdeen University made by the authorities there in 1753.⁴

The importance of Smith's course of study has long been recognized. As late as 1869, it was stated that: "Its best eulogy is that it has formed the basis of our present American college system."⁵ Historians of the University have said of it that "it evidently formed the basis of the college course down to 1828, and its influence can be distinctly felt as late as 1847";⁶ and that "whence ever its origin or conception, it is the first complete curriculum for a college training which the American colonies had yet witnessed or recognized, and will stand for all time as the forerunner in all advanced education on these shores."⁷ The general historian of American higher education regards it as the embodiment of Franklin's progressive ideas, and as marked by "the note of the modern spirit."⁸ A student of early college curricula in the United States gives Smith's course of study the foremost place in what he calls the "new tendency" in colonial education, interpreting it

³ Often reprinted. See *The Works of William Smith, D.D.* (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1803), I. 230-248; Horace M. Smith, *Life and Correspondence of the Rev. William Smith, D.D.* (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1880), I. 58-59; Thomas H. Montgomery, *A History of the University of Pennsylvania from its Foundation to A.D. 1770* (Philadelphia, 1900), pp. 234-242, 519-529; and Louis F. Snow, *The College Curriculum in the United States* (New York, 1907), pp. 69-72. Montgomery, *op. cit.*, p. 242, lists three other reprintings.

⁴ See *ibid.*, pp. 234-235, and Snow, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

⁵ Charles J. Stillé, *A Memoir of Rev. William Smith*, quoted by Frederick D. Stone, in his supplement to George B. Wood, *Early History of the University of Pennsylvania from Its Origin to the Year 1827* (Third edition, Philadelphia, 1896), p. 248.

⁶ William A. Lamberton, in *Benjamin Franklin and the University of Pennsylvania*, Bureau of Education Circular of Information No. 2, 1893, edited by Francis N. Thorpe (Washington, 1893), p. 259.

⁷ Montgomery, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

⁸ Charles F. Thwing, *A History of Higher Education in America* (New York, 1906), pp. 113-114.

as the most important departure from the New England perpetuation of the scholastic tradition of Oxford and Cambridge.⁹ The most recent historian of the University says that Smith's "advanced ideas were in harmony with those of Franklin and his associates, so that the modern theory of education had its beginnings at Philadelphia nearly a hundred years before it was established in any other community in the country."¹⁰

Smith's indebtedness to Johnson's preface to *The Preceptor* for portions of this curriculum is indicated by two types of evidence. It is clear, first, that Smith knew and had a high regard for Dodsley's book. It is clear, second, that Smith's curriculum was to some degree based directly upon Johnson's preface.

Smith's knowledge of *The Preceptor* is indicated by his use of that work as a textbook in rhetoric during the first term of the second, or junior, year, and by his recommendation of it for collateral reading in political philosophy.¹¹ It is probable, too, that he intended to have the book used in other studies, particularly in moral philosophy. He recommends, for example, David Fordyce's "compend. System" of moral philosophy and William Duncan's *Logic*, meaning in all likelihood the articles on these subjects which Fordyce and Duncan contributed to *The Preceptor* and which were later reprinted separately.¹² In the light of this knowledge it is hard to regard as mere coincidence the fact that when Smith came to write his famous essays for *The American Magazine* in 1757 he entitled them "The Hermit" and signed them "Theodore."¹³ Johnson's

⁹ See Snow, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-77.

¹⁰ Horace M. Lippincott, *The University of Pennsylvania, Franklin's College* (Philadelphia, 1919), pp. 25-26.

¹¹ See Montgomery, *op. cit.*, pp. 238-239.

¹² See the article by Gordon Goodwin on Fordyce and the article on Duncan by J. Westby-Gibson in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

¹³ Reprinted in Smith's *Works*, I. 83-152. "The Hermit" holds a high place among American periodical series of its period. See Elizabeth C. Cook, in *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, I. (New York, 1923), 122.

allegory in the last section of *The Preceptor* was "The Vision of Theodore, The Hermit of Teneriffe."¹⁴

Such a popular work as *The Preceptor* might have found a place in any "modern" curriculum at the time Smith wrote.¹⁵ His particular debt to it is revealed by the list of books which he recommends for those who desire to continue study after the broad foundation of a college training. Johnson, too, is at pains to direct the independent reading of those who wish to go beyond the scope of *The Preceptor*. Smith gives a list of sixty-two books, thirty-five of which are also recommended by Johnson. That the relation is not mere coincidence is shown, moreover, by numerous instances where the order of the recommendations is identical.

Regarding rhetoric and poetry, for instance, Johnson has this to say:¹⁶

For a farther progress in these studies, they may consult Quintilian, and Vossius's Rhetorick; the art of poetry will be best learned from Bossu and Bohours in French, together with Dryden's Essays and Prefaces, the critical Papers of Addison, Spence on Pope's Odyssey, and Trapp's Praelectiones Poeticae.

Smith, after placing "Rhetoric from Preceptor" and "Quintilian, Select Parts," in his regular curriculum, adds the following:¹⁷

Vossius, Bossu, Père Bohours, Dryden's Essays and Prefaces, Spence on Pope's Odyssey, Trapp's Praelect. Poet.

For natural history Johnson suggests:¹⁸

¹⁴ See Johnson's *Works*, IX. 162-175, or *The Preceptor* (Fourth edition, London, 1763), II. 520-530.

¹⁵ Its popularity may be gauged from its rarity in America. Harvard possesses a copy of the second edition (1754); The Library Company of Philadelphia and the Detroit Public Library have copies of the fourth edition (1763); the Boston Public Library has the first volume of the seventh edition (1783), and the second volume of the eighth edition (1793); Princeton owns only Volume II. of the eighth edition. See, for this information, the printed catalogues of the libraries named.

¹⁶ *Works*, V. 240.

¹⁷ Montgomery, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

¹⁸ *Works*, V. 243.

the Religious Philosopher, Ray, Derham's Physico-Theology, together with the Spectacle de la Nature; and in time recommend to their perusal Rondoletius, Aldrovandus, and Linnaeus.

Smith, who in this field is somewhat fuller than *The Preceptor* itself, recommends:¹⁹

Ray, Derham, Spectacle de la Nature, Rondoletius, Religious Philosopher.

In ethics Johnson thinks²⁰

must be recommended Tully's Offices, Grotius, Puffendorff, Cumberland's Laws of Nature, and the excellent Mr. Addison's Moral and Religious Essays.

Smith has in his regular scheme "Cicero de officiis" and "Grotius de Jure B. & P.," while "Puffendorf by Barbeyrac," and "Cumberland de Leg.," as well as others not named by Johnson are added suggestions.²¹

In trade and commerce Johnson lists:²²

Mun upon Foreign Trade, Sir Josiah Child, Locke upon Coin, Davenant's Treatises, the British Merchant, Dictionnaire de Commerce, and, for an abstract or compendium, Gee.

Smith lists, as an introduction to the subject, a summary or synopsis which may be merely Part X of *The Preceptor*, and adds:²³

Locke on Coin, Davenant, Gee's Compend.

In the field of law and government Johnson recommends:²⁴

Fortescue's Treatises, N. Bacon's Historical Discourse on the Laws and Government of England, Blackstone's Commentaries, Temple's Introduction, Locke on Government, Zouch's Elementa Juris Civilis, Plato Redivivus, Gurdon's History of Parliaments, and Hooker's Ecclesiastical Polity.

¹⁹ Montgomery, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

²⁰ *Works*, V. 244.

²¹ Montgomery, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

²² *Works*, V. 244-245.

²³ See Snow, *op. cit.*, p. 71. Montgomery, through a printer's error, reads: "Locke on Civic-Davenant, Gee's Compend."

²⁴ *Works*, V. 245.

with Provost Smith's curriculum. He who reads that preface at the same time with Benjamin Franklin's *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1749),²⁹ cannot but be impressed with the extraordinary agreement in spirit of these two works. There is no question of derivation, for Franklin acknowledges his sources,—Milton, Locke, Rollin, and others,—but there is every indication that Dr. Johnson anticipated Franklin in those opinions which are now often thought of as most typically Franklin's: an insistence upon practicality in education, a belief that English should be the medium of instruction, and a conviction that the arousal of interest is the first duty of the educator.³⁰ It will be enough here to quote Franklin's most vigorous paragraph:³¹

As to their Studies, it would be well if they could be taught *every Thing* that is useful, and *every Thing* that is ornamental: But Art is long, and their Time is short. It is therefore propos'd that they learn those Things that are likely to be *most useful* and *most ornamental*. Regard being had to the several Professions for which they are intended.

Johnson, not quite so tactful, puts it as follows:³²

It was intended by means of these precepts, not to deck the mind with ornaments, but to protect it from nakedness; not to enrich it with affluence, but to supply it with necessities. The inquiry, therefore, was not what degrees of knowledge are desirable, but what are in most stations of life indispensably required; and the choice was determined, not by the splendour of any part of literature, but by the extent of its use, and the inconvenience which its neglect was likely to produce.

²⁹ I have used the facsimile reprint, with an introduction by William Pepper (Philadelphia, 1931).

³⁰ See, on this point, Thomas Woody, *Educational Views of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1931), pp. 109-148; David E. Cloyd, *Benjamin Franklin and Education* (Boston, 1902), pp. 29-39; and Edwin E. Slosson, *The American Spirit in Education* (New Haven, 1921), pp. 65-77. The list of opinions I have given is by no means exhaustive, but it is, I believe, representative.

³¹ *Proposals*, p. 11.

³² *Works*, V. 235-236.

For many of the details of the first curriculum of the University of Pennsylvania (and hence of many another colonial college) Dr. Samuel Johnson would seem to be responsible. That Johnson, or Provost William Smith, or even Benjamin Franklin, was individually responsible for the spirit which animated the early history of the institution is not, however, reasonable. All three men belong in the prevailing educational tradition of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Franklin linked himself closely to that tradition by his acknowledgments to the "famous Milton," the "great Mr. Lock," and others, but neither Johnson nor Smith was without similar connections. To understand the sources of those ideas for which the University has long stood,—the belief that a University should offer full opportunity for self-improvement, and the belief that social welfare rather than political expediency should determine the aims and activities of higher learning,—one must go not to Franklin alone, nor to Smith, but to a long tradition of educational thought in England and Europe, not yet sufficiently studied in its relations to American institutions.