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## THE ORIGIN OF THE ELECTIVE SYSTEM OF STUDY.

BY PROF. A. T. ROBERTSON, D.D.

LOUISVILLE, KY.

I do not happen to be an alumnus of the University of Virginia, but I am familiar with its great history and I feel sure that a serious wrong has been done this noble institution of learning.

In Lippincott's Educational Series the new volume on the History of Education is written by Principal E. L. Kemp, of the State Normal School, East Stroudsburg, Penn. The book possesses a great deal of value and gives in succinct form a survey of educational development all over the world in all ages. Curiously enough, he has no discussion of theological training after the scholastic method of the Middle Ages (p. 127 f.). He knows nothing of the modern change in theological method since the application of the elective system of schools to theological study by James P. Boyce in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1859 (Broadus, *Memoir of James P. Boyce*, p. 156f.), an application of the University of Virginia method to theological education. But it is the author's ignorance of the University that is really inexcusable. On page 353 of the History of Education Principal Kemp speaks of the "elective system begun at Harvard 1824" as one of the great epochs in modern education (cf. also p. 329.) Not once is the University of Virginia mentioned.

Now, what are the facts? They are easily accessible. In the present writer's *Life and Letters of John A. Broadus* (pp. 55-61) a brief summary is given of the way that Harvard College came to get the elective system from the University of Virginia. But Principal Kemp can hardly be forgiven for not being acquainted with "Contributions to American Educational History edited

by Herbert B. Adams". No. 2 in this important series is entitled *Thomas Jefferson and the University of Virginia*, by Herbert B. Adams, Ph.D., Associate Professor of History in Johns Hopkins University. This volume appeared in 1888 from the Government Printing Press with an Introductory Letter to Secretary Lamar by the Commissioner of Education, N. H. R. Dawson. In this letter Mr. Dawson says: "It is surprising to observe how Jefferson anticipated many of the modern educational ideas which have come into conspicuous favor since his day." It would be interesting, if one had space, to copy the whole passage (p. 12), but in the list Mr. Dawson mentions "non-sectarianism in university education", "the academic study of history, politics, and economics; the teaching of history in common schools by means of reading books", "physical education", "military training of students", "manual and industrial training". But Principal Kemp has never heard of Jefferson in the educational arena! Mr. Dawson proceeds (p. 12): "To the University of Virginia, Jefferson's creation, the whole country is indebted for the following distinguished services to the higher education: (1) The recognition of real university standards of instruction and scholarship. (2) The absolute repression of the class-system and the substitution of merit for seniority in the award of degrees. (3) The first complete introduction of the elective system. (4) The establishment of distinct 'schools' in which great subjects were grouped, etc." We can quote no further, but this is enough.

Prof. Adams sets forth with perfect clearness the proof of this high claim made by Mr. Dawson. Since 1815 Jefferson corresponded with a young Bostonian, Mr. Ticknor, and in 1820 Ticknor was called "to a professorship in the University of Virginia, with more than double his salary at Cambridge" (*Thomas Jefferson and the University of Virginia*, p. 127), but he declined and remained at Harvard. In the *North American Review* for January, 1820, "the proceedings and report of the commissioners for the University of Virginia, printed in

1818, were elaborately noticed by Edward Everett" (Thomas Jefferson and the University of Virginia, p. 131). Hear Prof. Adams again (p. 124): "In December, 1824, Ticknor visited Jefferson and the University of Virginia, and wrote a most charming description of both the man and the institution to William H. Prescott, the historian." In this letter Ticknor says: "Of the details of the system I shall discourse much when I see you. It is more practical than I feared, but not so practical that I feel assured of its success. It is, however, an experiment worth trying, to which I earnestly desire the happiest results." To what does Prof. Ticknor refer? On June 16, 1823, Jefferson had written to Prof. Ticknor: "I am not fully informed of the practices at Harvard, but there is one from which we shall certainly vary, although it has been copied, I believe, by nearly every college and academy in the United States. That is, the holding the students all to one prescribed course of reading, and disallowing exclusive application to those branches only which are to qualify them for the particular vocations to which they are destined. We shall, on the contrary, allow them uncontrolled choice in the lectures they shall choose to attend, and require elementary qualification only and sufficient age." Ticknor returned from the University of Virginia to Harvard and his "views found absolutely no support from the faculty; on the contrary, the professors voted repeatedly against the innovations. It was chiefly through Hon. William Prescott and Judge Story that Ticknor's ideas found favor with the corporation and the Board of overseers, who adopted them in June, 1825" (p. 125), not 1824, as Principal Kemp has it. When Ticknor resigned in 1835 he claimed to have "introduced a system of voluntary study" into Harvard (p. 126), which claim is just, but he got his ideas directly from the University of Virginia which opened its doors for students in 1825, but whose novel plan of instruction had been published in 1818. Pres. Francis Wayland, of Brown, likewise, twenty-one years after Prof. Ticknor's visit, came to in-

spect the new educational system at the University of Virginia. "The publication of Dr. Wayland's report in 1850 is said to have marked an era in the history of collegiate education in America" (Thomas Jefferson and the University of Virginia, p. 131), but "every one of these ideas had been published by Jefferson in educational reports more than thirty years before the date of Dr. Wayland's recommendations to the corporation of Brown University" (p. 131).

It is needless to say more, though much more of the same sort can be told. This proof is absolute and beyond controversy. One cannot think that Principal Kemp would wilfully crown Harvard with the laurel wreath that belongs to Jefferson and the University of Virginia. In 1820 and 1825 it did not damn an idea in New England that it came from the South. The most original contribution to the American educational system came from the South. It was men of Virginia also (led by the Baptists) who finally secured by petition the first amendment to the American Constitution which, by gaining religious liberty for all, took religious instruction out of the hands of the State and gave the world its first great experiment in secular education, an experiment in education that is now at last copied by France, and which England must come to before her people pass out of the throes of the present educational strife.