

THE HIGHER EDUCATION OF WOMAN:

AN ADDRESS

Delivered at the Opening of Queen's College, Kingston,
Canada,

SESSION 1871-72,

BY

REV. J. CLARK MURRAY,

Professor of Mental and Moral Philosophy.

KINGSTON,
1871.

F5012
1871

F5012 82

1871

M982



3 9004 01614030 0

The Higher Education of Woman.

At the opening proceeding of Queen's University on Wednesday, the Rev. J. Clark Murray, Professor of Logic and Metaphysics, delivered the following address on the Higher Education of Women.

To any one, who thinks of it for the first time, or who at any time thinks of it seriously, it cannot but be felt as surprising, that all the great public schools and colleges and universities of the civilised world,—that all the other institutes for an advanced intellectual culture, are, with a very few recent exceptions, constituted and managed on the obvious supposition, that their educational advantages shall be enjoyed by the male sex alone. Not that in all, or even in most cases, there is any statutory exclusion of the other sex; for within the last few years, in the face of much ungenerous opposition, some women have established their claim to sit in the class-rooms of several colleges. The fact, to which reference is made, in the constitution and management of nearly all our great academical establishments, is more forcibly shown in the circumstance, that women are rather ignored than explicitly excluded. It is impossible to account for this circumstance otherwise than by supposing, that the founders and legislators of these establishments never contemplated the possibility of women requiring or seeking more than a merely elementary education. Familiarised as we have become in recent years with the nobler ideas of woman's mission, which we owe to the modern vindicators of her rights, we find it difficult to realise that those, who were liberal enough to make arrangements for superior culture, should have implicitly resolved to keep the female mind beyond

the reach of its elevating power. But it must be remembered, that the importance of any education, for the male sex itself, has been but slowly discovered, even in civilised countries ; and those, who have watched the progress of legislation on the subject in England, must have been astonished to observe how long a national system of education has been rendered impossible by men, who choose rather to let children go uneducated, than to give up a pet theory on the kind of religious doctrines which should be instilled into children's minds. Moreover, there is an obvious reason, why woman has not been considered in past arrangements for higher education ; and that reason is to be found in the limited range of duties, to which she has hitherto been generally confined in the organisation of human society. It is quite evident that, if men had assigned to her a sphere of life which obviously required a higher education to fit her for it, the means of obtaining such an education would have been provided for her ; and it must therefore be inferred, that the sphere, actually assigned to her, is one for which a higher education has been deemed to be, if not absolutely disqualifying, at least altogether unnecessary.

Now, there are two points on which objection may be taken to this exclusion of women from our systems of higher education. (1) The limitation imposed on the range of female occupations conflicts with the natural rights of every human being ; and (2) a superior education is neither disqualifying nor indeed unnecessary even for that limited range of occupations.

I.—The restriction of women to the sphere of life, within which our social usages rigidly confine them at present, is without foundation in natural justice ; and consequently their exclusion from the means of superior education, on the ground that such education is not required for their sphere, is unjustifiable. I know that, in entering on this subject, I tread upon a path, in which it is extremely difficult to avoid running

against the foolish prejudices of the thoughtless, and even the cherished convictions of some who are by no means thoughtless, but who dread the effect of any great social change. It is possible, however, to show that the most important of the rights, at present claimed for women, are among those palpable demands of justice which cannot be refused except on the principle of opposing all progress; and it follows, therefore, that these rights are at present ignored rather from want of thought about them than from any denial of their justice. One thing at least is certain, that there is a very wide-spread discontent with the position to which woman has been hitherto restricted,—that this discontent has been of late spreading more widely every year. Any one, who has been observing the current of thought on this question, must have been at times surprised to hear,—often in quarters where he may least of all have expected it,—a voice which may have been timid at its first utterances, but which, on the slightest encouragement, became fearless, unequivocal, earnest, in its demand for some reform. There is probably no great social question, on which the opinions of men have advanced with the same astonishing rapidity, as on the question regarding the position which women should occupy in society. A few years ago the movement in favour of woman's rights was generally talked of in ridicule, or at least with no more respectful feeling than pity, as one of the unwholesome excrescences protruding on the surface of communities, which are stirred into an abnormal ferment by the diseases incident to a youthful state of society or to a period of revolution. Even yet, it is true, there are some, habituated to treat everything with levity, who affect to consider the claims of women sufficiently refuted by being simply pooh-poohed; while our comic papers endeavour to abuse our judgments by representing the profound revolution, which is elevating woman to social and legal equality with man,

as merely an exchange of the female for the male costume. Still no one can now dare, even if he felt inclined, on occasions when serious argument is required, to dismiss the question with the stale jests with which it was formerly set aside. For all thoughtful men it is becoming one of the most earnest problems of modern society, whether the demands of the highest Christian civilisation are satisfied by the social position which has been hitherto assigned to women.

There is still, however, a great amount of confusion in the minds of most persons with regard to the precise nature of the claims which are being advanced in favour of women. There is one special misapprehension, which rises perhaps naturally in any one's mind when the subject is first brought before his attention, and which is frequently fostered by the hasty effusions of periodical writers, who are often forced to write on a public question before they have obtained any deeper insight into its bearings than that which is derived from a first impression, but this misapprehension so ludicrously reverses the nature of the reform demanded, that it must be removed, before that reform can be seen to claim our support. Those, then, who wish to understand this question, must at once rid their minds of the supposition, that the advocates of woman's rights claim for her a right to neglect her family duties,—a right to leave the varied arrangements of her household to be attended to as best they may, in order that she may enter the public career of a politician or engage in the practice of some profession. If any movement tended to make a wife less faithful to the trust reposed in her by her husband, to make a mother less anxious to promote the true welfare of her children, to make the mistress of a house less scrupulous in her management of it with a view to the comfort of all its inmates, the most unmitigated opponents of such a movement would be the advocates of woman's rights. They demand a recognition not only of woman's rights, but per-

haps more truly of her duties ; they claim, for every woman, high and low, matron and maiden, a right to be something more than a mere ornament of human life,—a right to have, like every man, specific duties in the industrial arrangements of society. Nothing, therefore, could be so contradictory of such a claim, as a demand that women should be allowed to neglect their household duties ; or indeed any other duties which they may reasonably be called upon to perform : and no one has denounced, more strongly than the greatest living advocate of woman's rights, the idleness which ladies of wealth often purchase at the cost of enormous waste by surrendering their proper work into the hands of a hired housekeeper.

But if the movement spoken of does not seek to withdraw women from the work of their households, the question will naturally be asked, what is the object at which it aims ? It endeavours to accomplish a reform in the same direction in which every previous improvement in the relation of the sexes has proceeded,—towards the elevation of woman from a state of real or virtual slavery to man. What is now required is that this tendency of civilization shall be completed by at last according to women perfect equality with men in reference to social position and legal rights. The conscience of Christendom undoubtedly revolts against any explicit subjection of the one sex to the other ; and consequently it is only necessary to point out the inequality in the privileges accorded to the two sexes, in order to prove the rightfulness of the demand for some reform. Now, there are various ways in which this subject may be approached, as there are various aspects in which this inequality of rights is exhibited. The point of view from which the question will be examined at present, is one from which the necessity of some concession to women is peculiarly clear.

Let us start from the most fundamental rights of humanity, and we shall find at once a glaring discrepancy between these and the position which is assigned to women. The rights which are most fundamental are those which belong to every human being as a

morally accountable person, and which are therefore inalienable, except by his ceasing to be such. Among these rights a first place must be assigned to the right of physical existence, and therefore to the means by which that existence is maintained. This right is most fundamental, for without its recognition all the other rights of mankind are implicitly disregarded. Consider, then, what this right implies. It does not, indeed, imply that any one may waste his powers in idleness, or injure society by that evil-doing to which idleness too naturally leads, and yet claim from society that support which nature yields only to industry. But it does imply that no one shall be debarred by any usages or regulations of society from practising an industrial occupation, by which the means of subsistence may be obtained, as long as such occupation does not conflict with the rights of others. Now, what is the case with women in reference to this right? In general, every young man is brought up with the view of being able to support himself by his own exertions. There are also certain classes of young women, whose parents are not in circumstances to support them till they are married, if married they ever be: and fortunately these are brought up to support themselves in a style not disproportioned to that which they have been used to in their father's house; so that, even if they remain unmarried, their father's insolvency or disability or death does not take away their means of support. But how does modern society insist on bringing up the girl, whose father expects to be able to support her till she is married or perhaps even as long as she lives? It is not too strong a statement to say that there is scarcely any precaution more scrupulously observed in her training, than to prevent her from cherishing the idea, that she will ever be able, by the exercise of her "accomplishments," to provide for her own support. Her brother, gifted perhaps with greatly inferior abilities, is taught to look forward with confidence to an income of several hundred or even of several thousand pounds a year: she comes to years of reflection, only to be startled by the discovery, that, if thrown upon her own resources, she could with difficulty procure an income of as many shillings. For how many a woman does it

thus become a torturing alternative, that she shall surrender herself, under the symbol of a love which she does not feel, to one who will provide for her support, or that she shall struggle to support herself without the luxuries,—without even the comforts, of her earlier life, by some kind of sadly unremitting and sadly unremunerative toil? It would be too painful to sketch in detail the physical sufferings, the moral and social evils, which stream from this abundant source; but by those, who have inquired into these results, it must be felt that the enlightened conscience of the Christian community cannot long be satisfied with this state of affairs. The growth of a civilising Christian sentiment, spreading into every region of our social existence, must give up this unmanly advantage which is taken by the stronger in the race of life.

To disseminate more widely the nobler sentiment which must sweep away this wrong in our social system, it may be useful to trace the wrong to its origin; for the first step towards the removal of an evil must be to reach its cause. It is not always possible, indeed, to discover the influences by which every fact of social life is originated, for they are often so intricate as to baffle our analysis, and so subtle as to escape our observation. I do not, therefore, pretend to point out all the causes which may have been at work in assigning to woman the position she occupies in modern society. But there are two of these causes which it seems to me specially important to notice,—the one of them having its root in the generous gallantry of man,—the other in the unconscious tendencies of his selfishness.

1. It is not, then, wholly to unjust motives that the subordinate social position of women is due; it has been assigned to her partly from a misdirected sentiment which is essentially generous. To understand this we must observe the meaning of the distinction between poverty and wealth. When a man requires to labour for his *daily* bread, in the most literal sense of the expression, he is said to be poor; in other words, poverty consists in the necessity to work for subsistence, without being able, by each day's labour, to provide more means of subsistence than are sufficient for each day. A man becomes less poor when the labour of a day is able to support him more

than a day ; and he grows in wealth, precisely in proportion to the length of time during which he can subsist without actual labour. Wealth, therefore, consists in freedom from the necessity of perpetual toil ; the wealthiest are those who, throughout life, are never subjected to this necessity.

Now, what is the position in which the man of generous nature is ambitious of placing his wife and daughters ? His wish is undoubtedly to let them enjoy that immunity from toil, which is the lot of the wealthy ; he feels that, however laboriously he may require to work himself, he should endeavour to save them from the rough encounter with life's unpleasantnesses, which must be endured in the competitions of labour. This feeling is undoubtedly worthy of all respect ; but the best of feelings, when unguided by rational principles, find expression often in very exceptionable forms ; and it will not be difficult to show that this feeling, when it seeks to raise the women of the industrial classes into the position of an upper class, defeats its own end, and engenders far worse evils than any against which it is intended to guard. There are various ways in which, if it were desirable, it might be possible to secure the deliverance of women from the necessity of labour for their subsistence, as, for instance by a tax to a common fund from which all women might draw, when deprived of their natural male supporters. But it is useless to discuss impracticable schemes for an undesirable object. The fact is, therefore, that men take no real measures to attain the object of their chivalrous wishes ; and women are forced accordingly to find support for themselves. In general only three courses are open. The first,—that which they are taught by all the influences of prevalent opinions and usages to regard as the main object of life,—is to get married. Failing in this first alternative, they may fortunately find a home in the house of some relative. If both of those avenues are closed, the only resort left is self-support by one of the few comparatively unremunerative occupations to which women are admitted.

With regard to the first of these three courses, it is evidently unjust, as well as unchivalrous, to constrain women to look upon marriage as the only natural means of sup-

port. Almost every satirist of modern manners seeks to make us merry over the keenness with which women pursue what they have been taught to consider the prime end of their existence,—the pretty tricks by which the female tempter endeavours to lure the unwary male into the matrimonial trap. In their best moments men cannot join in that merriment; it is but a cruel jest at the wrongs which they have done to women. For the sake of all that is of worth in marriage,—for the sake of manliness in man, and of womanliness in woman,—for the sake of equal justice to both sexes,—both ought to be equally free to choose whether they shall marry or not.

With reference to the second alternative, even if a woman is welcomed in the house of a relative,—even if she is not made to feel herself an intruder,—yet the sense of dependence will be to many,—and these the finest spirits of their sex,—a keen torture throughout life. I shall say nothing of the third alternative at present, as I must return to it again.

2. But the social position of women is owing not solely to the chivalrous feelings, it arises partly from the selfishness, of men. Even the chivalrous desire to free women from the necessity of toil is often,—perhaps in all cases more or less,—alloyed with a selfish vanity. It is not always a manly tenderness for his wife and daughters, that leads a man to relieve them from the necessity of labour, it is too often the contemptible desire of making them a sort of stalking horse for the display of his own riches. We may try to hide it from our minds, but it is impossible, if we look at the facts of life, to deny, that the industrial classes reproduce many of the follies, separated from the virtues, of old aristocracy. The vicissitudes of trade, from the imperfect principles on which it is still carried on, are scarcely compatible with an hereditary aristocracy; and in consequence it has been generally attempted to secure for such an aristocracy a means of subsistence free from those vicissitudes. The result has been to engender, along with the more amiable pride in family antiquity, an utterly reprehensible self-gratulation in the possession of mere wealth,—of the mere ability to subsist without working for the means of subsistence. It is not sim-

ply a superstitious horror of losing caste, that makes the member of an old nobless shrink from contaminating herself with trade ; mixed with that there is a cowardly shame of honest poverty, or, to speak more correctly, at not possessing any riches but those which he acquires by his own industry. Who is there, even among the industrial classes, that does not, by the sheer tyranny of social manners, encourage this craven feeling by his conduct and conversation ? Is there any one who can plead not guilty to the folly of acting at times as if the man, whose hereditary property places him above the necessity of labour, should occupy a more respectable rank in society than the poorer man who, though superior in intelligence and moral worth, is obliged to work for his subsistence ? Can we wonder, therefore, that, even in communities like those of the United States and the British Colonies, which are founded almost entirely on industrial principles, there should be a strong ambition to let women take the rank of those who are independently wealthy ? However numerous a man's daughters may be, and however useless, therefore, for industrial purposes they may be in his own house, he feels that, if they adopt any occupation for their support, he can no longer flaunt one of the most easily recognizable symbols of wealth. A lady, thrown upon her own resources, feels that, if she goes out to any of the well-remunerated occupations of men, she gives unmistakable evidence of being obliged to work for her support ; and none of us dare say that the fear she entertains with regard to her rank in society is wholly without foundation. She knows that social opinion would degrade her rank if she went into a shop or a counting house, a bank or a public office, where she might make a reasonable income ; but she is not disgraced if she remains at home, and toils herself into an early grave at needlework or some similar employment, on the miserable remuneration of which it is scarcely possible to suppose that she could be dependent for her support.

I shall not, for want of time, attempt to illustrate other modes in which the selfishness of men operates, often unconsciously, in excluding women from the more remunerative employments of life. But this foolish pride in

idleness, this aping of aristocracy by merely copying its follies, must give way before truer ideas of real nobleness, in a wiser system of social economy. The industrial influences of the modern world will, it is to be hoped, ultimately teach us to look upon honest, earnest, thorough work as the only ground of esteem, and to place the woman, who squanders invaluable years in idle frivolities, in a less respectable rank of society than the factory girl, who wins at least her own bread. Hereditary property itself, if it exist in the more perfect society of the future, shall then no longer be regarded as absolving its owner from the duty of work, but as merely imposing on him an obligation to labour at some of those employments which, not being immediately remunerative, can be undertaken only by men whose means of subsistence are already secured. It is not of course to be supposed, that in such a state of society women ought to be selected for any employment in preference to men, who are equally qualified for it, or that women would be admitted to all the occupations which are at present monopolised by men. The principles of free trade, which are the principles of justice, ought to be rigorously carried out; and the same rule, which makes it impolitic and unjust to compel me to buy an article from my neighbour when I can get it cheaper or better from a foreigner, makes it equally wrong to compel an employer to purchase the labour of a man when a woman would do the required work better or for smaller wages. At the same time it is clearly wrong to exclude a woman from any occupation, not because it is in itself dishonourable, or because she is not qualified for it, but simply because she is a woman; and no one can have the hardihood to deny that there are various employments of a remunerative character, at present confined to men, for which women are equally qualified.

I have thus endeavoured to point out the injustice of limiting women to a sphere of life, which prevents them from entering on those occupations that yield the means of comfortable or luxurious self-support. The barest justice to them requires that they shall be brought up, as men are, to support themselves by their own labour. Now, what would be the difference in the education of young wo-

men, if they were trained, like young men, with the view of taking part in the industrial arrangements of human life? One of the most obvious defects in the present education of women, whenever it rises above elementary branches, is its comparative aimlessness or the comparative triviality of its aim, contrasted with the comparative definiteness of purpose, which is given to the education of young men, from the fact that it is directed to their preparation for the particular industry which they have chosen. It is impossible to deny that a girl's studies would show much more of earnest and thorough work, if from the outset she were inspired by the consciousness that she was preparing herself for an occupation on which she might depend for her subsistence. Not only, therefore, would the existing institutes of higher education be thrown open to women, or at least new institutes of a similar kind be provided for them, if the usages of society induced them generally to qualify themselves for industrial employments; but their study would be rendered quite as effective as that of men.

II.—It is not, however, necessary to show that the social usages, which exclude women from remunerative occupations in general, are unjust, in order to prove the justice of their claim to the means of higher education. I have dwelt at greater length on this cause of their being ignored in our academical establishments, because it is clearly the chief reason of the omission, and such a social wrong must be rectified before the right of women to the advantages of a higher education will be generally admitted. But it may be worth while to inquire whether that right ought not to be recognized, even if there is no change in the social position of women.

Let us take, then, the narrowest estimate of woman's mission, which can be adopted by the most unmitigated antagonist of her present claims. Let us admit that the sole natural sphere of woman's labour is the family—that every woman ought to be brought up solely on the expectation of becoming a wife, a mother, a mistress of a household: is that any reason why her education should be restricted to the elementary branches,—why the class-rooms of Universities should be closed against her? To deny women on this ground,

the right of a University education, would imply that such an education is not only unnecessary, but would even incapacitate them for the domestic duties which are their peculiar function in society. For if a superior culture would not actually render women less fit for those duties, there could be no reasonable ground for absolutely excluding them from the enjoyment of such culture. It would not be considered just to prevent a young man from proceeding to a University, because he intended to adopt some industrial occupation which could be practised successfully without an academical training. It is always admitted that his University career need not hinder the success of his subsequent occupation, and that, even if it do not add to the success of that occupation, it will probably contribute to his usefulness as a member of general society. In like manner, I believe, no one, except when driven to rash assertion by the perplexities of a controversy, would maintain that the functions of wifehood, of motherhood, and of household economy would be in general less efficiently performed in consequence of the high intellectual culture of the woman by whom they are undertaken. There is no reason, therefore, for excluding women from Universities, which should not, with equal justice, exclude also those young men who cannot directly apply a University training to their industrial occupation, who seek a liberal culture as an object which is worthy of being attained for its own sake.

But if it cannot be maintained that an academical curriculum would unfit a woman for her household sphere of labour, can it even be said that a superior education is wholly unnecessary for that sphere? It may be said, indeed, that the duties of a household have often been, and therefore can be still at times, performed, and well performed, without the previous training of a University; but look at the nature of those duties as well as of the mental activity which is implied in their skilful performance, and you will have little hesitation in admitting that a partial or complete course in the literary and scientific departments of a University could have no natural tendency but to enhance the value of woman's peculiar work. It is common and natural for

men, who are accustomed to see home arrangements only in their tidy completeness, never to reflect on the amount of intellectual and moral activity which the completion of those arrangements has called forth. There is an amusing old Scottish ballad, the subject of which is attempted again in a more modern song, in which a husband is pictured coming home after a hard day's work at the plough and finding his wife seated comfortably at a tidy hearth. He cannot repress a grumble over the difference in the toil which falls to the lot of men and the ease which women seem to him to enjoy; whereupon the wife offers to take the plough in hand next day, if he will attend to the affairs of the house. I shall not attempt to reproduce the inimitable humour with which the results are detailed in the old ballad, the wife returning home after a good day's ploughing to find her husband distracted with the multiplicity of his labours, none of which, in his perplexity, he had succeeded in finishing. The fact is, that a man breaks down on undertaking the peculiar work of a woman, not simply from being unaccustomed to it, but as frequently from the fact that the routine of his own occupation has not cultivated that rapidity and originality of mental action which are developed by the efficient management of a family. The fitness for a life-companionship, which must be of infinite moment to all concerned, the care of children through those years which influence, perhaps more powerfully than any others, their permanent physical, mental, and moral character, the ingenuity of providing for the ever-varying emergencies in the daily life of a family—these things give scope for the display of an intellectual vigour and quickness, as well as of a moral culture, for which no training can be considered too high. But if the ordinary curriculum of a University does not provide the most appropriate training for the domestic duties of woman, what, in the name of common sense, is the peculiar virtue of the studies which are carried on in ladies' schools? If time had allowed, it would have been worth while to remind you in detail of the work which is done in such schools, and contrast it with a University curriculum. Few, however, who reflect, will see in the studies of these schools a more efficient culture for the

proper duties of womanhood than could be derived from the literary and scientific training of a University.

This subject might be enlarged on at much greater length. The few points which I have taken up have been but briefly indicated rather than fully discussed; and to those who have been thinking or reading on the subject, few if any ideas can have been suggested with which they are not already familiar. There may, however, be a number in this audience to whom these suggestions are new, and who may be led by them to reflect more seriously on the injustice of systematically excluding women from all the established means of the highest intellectual culture, while these are freely opened to men, and numberless inducements are offered to them to accept the enjoyment of their advantages.

