

# CHARLES W. ELIOT, OF HARVARD

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DR. ELIOT was certainly the only university president whose name has been known to almost every man and woman in the street. Such fame, which educators rarely achieve except through a scandal, was owing partly of course to mere longevity, partly, one fears, to the seductive promises of increased income which, in the advertising pages of the *Ladies' Home Journal* and other organs of opinion, were guaranteed with the use of the "Five-Foot Shelf." But even those thousands to whom he was only a name knew in a vague way that he was one of the masterful forces of his age. Educators knew, less vaguely, the same thing. The imperial sway which he held, the magnitude of the changes he worked, one sees most clearly when one tries to talk about him, for the slightest sketch becomes inevitably a survey of the immense system of American education and the immense kaleidoscope of American life. It is seventeen years since Dr. Eliot retired from the presidency of Harvard—though not from the rostrum—and his achievements can now be viewed in some reasonable perspective. A special penalty attends men whose work, like his, has been built into institutions; as time goes on, their fame becomes less and less personal; generations arise who accept changed conditions as a matter of course, and forget the individuals whose efforts brought them about. Yet, while Dr. Eliot's reputation may shrink, he will surely remain one of the most notable symbols of a great period of expansion. He became a popular as well as an academic oracle because he embodied, though with dignity and honesty of purpose, so many of the ambitions and ideas which, in the years 1869-1909, were held, with a difference, by the great noisy multitude of a democracy determined to grow.

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The range of his interests was wide, from education to politics, from social hygiene to trade unionism, from chemistry to conduct, and he touched little upon which he did not set his vigorous mark. I may begin with what is inseparably connected with his name, the elective system. In his inaugural address (delivered two years after the Confederation of Canada)! the young president declared

that "the college purposes to persevere in its efforts to establish, improve, and extend the elective system." But this was not, as its enemies have sometimes apparently thought, an invention of the speaker's own brain. Something of the sort was in operation at the College of William and Mary in the days of the Revolution, and later in other colleges. In 1885 Dr. Eliot said: "The elective system at Harvard has been sixty years in developing, and during fourteen of those years—from 1846 to 1860—the presidents and the majority of the faculty were not in favour of it." But his radical program at Harvard, copied as it was by the rapidly multiplying colleges of the country, justifies the popular view of the elective system as his own creation. It was the least permanently valuable of Dr. Eliot's reforms, but, because of the drastic effect it had upon the whole scheme of higher education in the United States, one ought to try to understand the motives and principles which guided him.

Those principles were derived partly from study of European universities, partly from the conviction that the traditional curriculum was inadequate for the growing needs of a great industrial and commercial middle class. His own account of the matter is clear enough:

After a separation from the university of six years, two of which were spent in Europe as a student and four at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as a professor, I went back as president in 1869 to find a tolerably broad elective system already under way. The wishes of the governing boards and external circumstances all favouring it, the system was rapidly developed. Required studies were gradually abolished or pushed back . . . No required studies now remain, except the writing of English, the elements of either French or German (one of these two languages being required for admission), and a few lectures on chemistry and physics. None of the former exclusive staples, Greek, Latin, mathematics, logic, and metaphysics, are required, and no particular combinations or selections of courses are recommended by the faculty. I have therefore had ample opportunity to observe at Harvard the working of almost complete prescription, of almost complete freedom, and of all intermediate methods.

The briefest form in which I can express the general result of my observation is this: I have never known a student of any capacity to select for himself a set of studies covering four years which did not apparently possess more theoretical and practical merit for his case than the required curriculum of my college days. Every prescribed curriculum is necessarily elementary from beginning to end, and very heterogeneous. Such is the press of subjects that no one subject can possibly be carried beyond its elements; no teacher, however learned and enthusiastic, can

have any advanced pupils; and no scholar, however competent and eager, can make serious attainments in any single subject. Under an elective system the great majority of students use their liberty to pursue some subject or subjects with a reasonable degree of thoroughness. This concentration upon single lines develops advanced teaching, and results in a general raising of the level of instruction.

Before speaking of the incorrigible optimism of Dr. Eliot's view of students and the defective logic of his argument, I may quote some significant words uttered in 1884: "For the twenty years past, signs have not been wanting that the American college was not keeping pace with the growth of the country in population and wealth. I believe that a chief cause of this relative decline is the narrowness of the course of study in both school and college." In other words, Dr. Eliot found a traditional curriculum which, whether it worked effectively or not, was aristocratic and exclusive, while outside college walls were the millions of workers in factories and fields, shops and offices, who needed another kind of education. The president demanded and made a place for English, French, German, history, political economy, natural science, "not one of which can be said to have existed in mature form when the definition of liberal education which is still in force was laid down." Courses multiplied, and students elected what they pleased. But the actual working of free election was not in accord with Dr. Eliot's idea of it. "The elective system", he said, "has been described by its opponents as a wide-open, miscellaneous bazaar, at which a bewildering variety of goods is offered to the purchaser, who is left without guidance, and acts without any constant or sensible motive. Nothing could be farther from the facts than this description. An elective system presupposes a well-ordered series of consecutive courses in each large subject of instruction, such as Latin, German, history or physics." Dr. Eliot presupposed a Utopia of young intellectual aristocrats; and though his own intentions were aristocratic, directed to the deepening as well as the diffusion of sound education, the practical consequence of his system, especially in the State universities, has been a flood of courses on salesmanship, business English, scenario-writing, animal husbandry and motherhood.

His illusions were partly those of optimism, partly those of a scientist. The European boy has free choice of subjects, and, said he, "the American boy is decidedly more mature and more capable of taking care of himself than the European boy of like age." Further, "a well-instructed youth of eighteen can select

for himself—not for any other boy, or for the fictitious universal boy, but for himself alone—a better course of study than any college faculty, or any wise man who does not know him and his ancestors and his previous life, can possibly select for him.” Unfortunately there proved to be, as there still is, a lack of well-instructed youths; in short, the free elective system brought chaos and confusion. Intended by its champion to get more work out of the student, to enable him to follow his bent, to develop thoroughness, it accomplished the precise opposite; it encouraged laziness, it worked havoc with serious intellectual discipline, and provided as a training for life a smattering of odds and ends. At Harvard and other colleges partial prescription, under the group system, had to be restored.

Another mistake of Dr. Eliot's, which is still with us, was his basic assumption that “there are no studies which are recognized as of supreme merit.” It is a view not uncommon among scientists and others trained in the practical subjects, and an American college president has said that “the most important fact connected with the development of the elective system in America is that Charles William Eliot was a chemist . . . the modes of thought of his powerful leadership were predominantly the mechanical forms of chemical analysis.” Unhappily a brilliant scientist may be, outside his laboratory, as illiberal and blind as a Fundamentalist divine, and Dr. Eliot, though not of course of that stripe had a very insufficient appreciation of those studies which make for sweetness and light, for the sensitive and disciplined imagination. It was in these qualities that he himself was defective, and he revealed the fact both in what he said and what he did not say. One is not, for instance, altogether happy in reading such words as these, uttered by the president of the oldest college of liberal arts in America: “I hardly think that I had during my life as an educational administrator any greater satisfaction than I have taken in the creation and growth of this School of Business Administration. It has had so very prompt and striking a success.” Or take this way of defining education: “The worthy fruit of academic culture is an open mind trained to careful thinking, instructed in the methods of philosophic investigation, acquainted in a general way with the accumulated thought of past generations, and penetrated with humility. It is thus that the university in our day serves Christ and the Church.”

The truth is that, at a time when all America was Hebraising, and needed, as it still needs, Hellenists, Dr. Eliot was the most confident and energetic of Hebraists. With his earnest and child-

like faith in the virtues of democracy, in the gospel of service, he did encourage in the less high-minded the glorification of precisely those elements in the great American middle class which an educational leader should have been the first to repress. "Children should learn", he said, "that the desire to be of great public service is the highest of all ambitions." The humanist believes that the greatest public service an individual can perform is to develop to their fullest capacity his own critical intelligence and imagination, both of which are sometimes destructive of the existing order; the devotee of service, whose comfort and security depend upon that order, prefers to keep things as they are, applying a little patch here and there. Dr. Eliot, though he spoke much and sincerely of the need of intelligence, and was tolerant of others' opinions, was really a liberal of the old-fashioned, cautious, one might say Tennysonian, sort. His mind moved within a set of ideas which he did not question, and most of these ideas were the equipment of the average man of the time. It was partly for this reason that the great public so heartily welcomed him as an official embodiment and spokesman of its cherished virtues. Dr. Eliot enjoyed an authority over the public such as no other university president ever had; for he was one of the people, and had thoughts akin to theirs. He might make havoc of college curricula, but on large general questions he was safe, and his ideas were readily translated into popular language:—if service was good, he should profit most who serves the best; fifteen minutes a day with the world's best books will transform a clerk into an executive; American civilization is nearly perfect, but things must be made bigger and better. His utterances were joyously reiterated, and debased, by the armies of Philistines, Babbitts, and charlatans, who felt that they had divine confirmation for their

acclamations of self-thanking, self-admiring,  
With, at every mile run faster, Oh the wondrous, wondrous age.

Even though Dr. Eliot cannot be held responsible for hundred-percent Americanism, his general attitude would have been impossible if he had ever penetrated to the inner shrine of the human spirit in literature and the other arts. His great concern in education was with morals. "If", he said, "the humanity or liberality of a study depends upon its power to enlarge the intellectual and moral interests of the student, quicken his sympathies, impel him to the side of truth and virtue, and make him loathe falsehood and vice, no study can be more humane or liberal than history." It is the voice of the Puritan humanitarian, not the enlightened

humanist, and in all his occasional discourses and incidental comments on books Dr. Eliot revealed the aesthetic insensitiveness, the intellectual and imaginative limitations, of a Puritan and a chemist. He protested that he did not wish to oust Greek and Latin, only to keep them in their place, but his imperfect sympathy and understanding are evident in such a remark as: "Greek literature compares with English as Homer compares with Shakespeare, that is, as infantile with adult civilization." Not that Dr. Eliot was satisfied with material progress, but his clear, strong Puritan intellect was not receptive to the spirit of beauty, of poetry, which is essential even in morals.

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It would not be fair, of course, to blame Dr. Eliot for all the unhappy results of his social and educational message, for the professional and utilitarian conception of education, the complacent barbarism, the intellectual delinquency and laziness, that are the chief enemies of humane culture in America—which includes Canada. These things are inevitable when a huge industrial and commercial democracy has to be educated, when its enormous energy and inertia combine to drag down the high standards of the liberal college. Such a process, one likes to think, must mean a steady if slow rise in the general level of intelligence—but only if high standards hold their own as the ideal to be reached. On this point it is not just to invoke the customary comparisons with Europe, for in Europe the masses are still largely shut out from higher education, which, nourished in the strongholds of an ancient and stable aristocratic tradition, is free from the American menace. And that the great system of American education is working upward and leavening a huge population is owing largely to the personal force of Dr. Eliot. He found the colleges anaemic and he left them vigorous.

From Maine to California educators were glad to follow, if they could, where the fearless Eliot led, but it is enough to glance at the transformation which he effected in the graduate schools of Harvard. In 1869 the Divinity School required only a high-school certificate; the Medical School required hardly any entrance qualifications; the Law School was in nearly the same condition; slackness prevailed in the Engineering and other scientific schools. The only advanced degree in arts was the M. A., which was awarded to any B. A. who had lived three unblemished years in Cambridge. Step by step President Eliot raised the standards in all these faculties, in spite of opposition, until admission to the professional

schools of law, medicine, and divinity was restricted to graduate students. It is needless to say a word about the character of the instruction and research carried on for many years in these professional schools and in the graduate school of arts and sciences; it has set the standard for the country. Further, professors in any department of Harvard University enjoy a perfect freedom of thought and speech which exists perhaps nowhere else; even Mr. Upton Sinclair, with "interlocking directorates" in his wildly roving eye, admitted that the Harvard Law School was free and incorruptible. That intellectual liberty, no less precious than rare, is one of Dr. Eliot's achievements, and one may add that it was gallantly upheld by President Lowell against the clamour of war-time hysteria.

Dr. Eliot apparently was afraid of no man. As Mr. Lowell said to him on his ninetieth birthday, from first to last he was "an educational warrior." It is not easy for an American university president to be fearless when, in the less civilized regions, his success depends upon his ability as a "gold-digger", and alumni growl if the team is not winning as it used to win. Though Dr. Eliot as President of Harvard was not exposed to that kind of humiliation, his drastic reforms and independent ways stirred up continual opposition. Yet if he had been head of the poorest and neediest backwoods college, he would have walked his own straight road. His famous rebuke to the President of the United States (who was and still is in popular opinion the embodiment of downright honesty) has often been quoted, but cannot stale. Just before the Yale-Harvard boat-race, two Harvard students were removed from the crew for taking a reserved book from the library, and President Roosevelt asked if some punishment could not be imposed which would not spoil the race. Dr. Eliot replied:

To President Roosevelt,  
White House, Washington:

Each man did a dishonorable thing. One violated in his private interest and in a crooked way a rule made in the common interest, while the other gave a false name and did not take subsequent opportunity to give his own. The least possible punishment was putting them on probation, but that drops them from the crews. A keen and sure sense of honour being the finest result of college life, I think the college and graduates should condemn effectively dishonorable conduct. The college should also teach that one must never do scurvy things in the supposed interest or for the pleasure of others.

CHARLES W. ELIOT.

He carried the same courage and independence into everything he did. There was an amazed and indignant outcry when, with his genius for discovering men, he appointed the boyish and ungainly Briggs as Dean of the College. Many years afterwards Professor Palmer said: "I believed then, as I still believe, that President Eliot possessed more of the elements of greatness than any man I had ever known: and I had the utmost confidence in his judgment of men. But when he appointed Briggs to the deanship, it seemed to me nothing short of an absolute joke." Dean Briggs became, as many generations are still testifying, the best-loved teacher and counsellor that an American college has ever had.

Though Dr. Eliot was given to celebrating the glories of democracy, his administrative methods were not perhaps completely democratic; he had, as he said himself, "a somewhat eager nature." Yet he loved fairness and tolerance. In an address presented on his ninetieth birthday Dean Briggs justly praised his breadth of mind: "Of your administrative generosity it is enough to say that you gave free use of the university printing press to a faculty minority who wished publicly to combat one of your cherished plans; that the printed argument of this minority was signed by many young instructors whose academic future was in your power, and that at the end of the year certain of the signers whose appointments had expired were appointed to full professorships. In personal matters the strongest man of the faculty was the most self-effacing."

Dr. Eliot's genius for discovering men was mentioned, and it is worth emphasizing. The mere size of modern universities and their complicated machinery tend to obscure what is, after all, the most important function of a president. Dr. Eliot was almost uncanny in finding great teachers and great scholars—before anybody else guessed the value of his finds. The unearthing and advancement of Dean Briggs would alone be enough to establish a president's reputation for prophetic intuition, but Dean Briggs was only one of many. When he was reorganizing the Law School, the president sought out a New York lawyer named Langdell, in the face of the usual criticism; the result was the inauguration of the study of law by the case-system, and the rapid development of a sort of easy-going law-office into a great school of advanced jurisprudence. Again and again Dr. Eliot, overcoming hostility by persuasion or the mere force of his personality, appointed the men he wanted, and again and again his choice was triumphantly vindicated. If he had any prejudice on the score of age, it was



in favour of youth; he was always insisting on the necessity of young men in academic councils—a feeling not invariably shared by university administrators, but not unnatural in one who had become president of Harvard at thirty-five. Dean Briggs has already been quoted in proof of his readiness to accept criticism of his policies from his subordinates. When this uncommon virtue was referred to during the exercises on his ninetieth birthday, Dr. Eliot acknowledged that the speaker was not mistaken “when he said that in listening to the debates in the faculty and in inviting my opponents to speak, I was probably pursuing with a good deal of perspicacity a study of those men—that I was making up my mind whether these zealous opponents were of the right stuff to be made professors in Harvard University. That is just what I was doing.” There is a story, true in spirit and perhaps in fact, that he brought Professor Irving Babbitt to Harvard because he was attracted by Professor Babbitt’s denunciations of his educational theories.

The problems of American education to-day are different from those which confronted President Eliot. Vast accumulation of diverse knowledge, the shifting scientific philosophies of a time of confusion, have created an insistent demand for some rational synthesis, some simplification, which may be an adequate guide for the adolescent and the mature mind through the maze of dancing moralities and universes and electrons. Dr. Eliot broke up one simplification because, at least as then taught, it was too simple and too rigid. Now complexity overwhelms us, and the pendulum may swing back again. But whether curricula shrink or expand, whether “Outlines” and orientation courses illuminate or darken our path, to know a great man is to be delivered from a multitude of opinions. Whatever Dr. Eliot’s solid achievements, which were many, and whatever his shortcomings, which, in retrospect, are easy to see, no one can estimate the personal influence which he exerted, manfully and honestly, during his long life. The tributes of great contemporaries, and the depth and extent of his work, testify to a driving force which is given to few, and which in fewer still is controlled and inspired by such absolute integrity. He was not a clubbable man, and perhaps not many knew him intimately, but colleagues and students always felt his powerful presence. Mr. Lovett wrote a while ago of the emotion stirred in him as a student at the sight of Dr. Eliot’s fine austere face in chapel and his sturdy figure marching across the Yard to his office in University Hall. He was a great man.