

THE METHODS OF HISTORICAL STUDY AND RESEARCH IN COLUMBIA COLLEGE.

IN order to a clear presentation of this subject, one which shall escape the possibilities of a misunderstanding, it will be necessary to describe briefly the general peculiarities of the educational system of that complex of institutions to which the name Columbia College is now attached. The most general principle of that system distinguishes the College into two parts ; viz. : the Gymnasium, the College according to the old signification of that name in the United States, — as we term it here, the School of Arts, and the graduate and professional courses, the University. This distinction, however, is, without further explanation, liable to a misconception ; for the last year of the School of Arts, what is generally known as the College senior year, is counted to the University in the non-professional courses of the University, — those courses which, in a German University, would be placed under the Faculty of Philosophy. It is at this point, viz., the beginning of the senior year in the School of Arts, that the courses of study become purely and wholly elective, and the methods of instruction purely and distinctively those of the University. This year, with two graduate years, forms the University period for the students who pass from the School of Arts into the University, or who come from other Colleges at the end of their junior year. If, however, they be *graduates* of other Colleges, in which the courses of the senior year correspond to, or are an equivalent for,

the courses in the School of Arts, they are admitted to the second year of the University.

If, now, the reader will keep this distinction and these explanations clearly in mind, a full comprehension of the methods of historic study and research at present followed in Columbia College will be easily and rapidly attained.

In the Gymnasium, — the first three years of the School of Arts, — the method is, of course, the gymnastic method, and the purpose sought the gymnastic purpose: that is, the daily drill upon text-books and hand-books of history by recitation, question and answer, as required studies, for the purpose of fixing and classifying in the mind of the student the elements of historical geography, the chronology and outward frame of historic events, the biographies of historic characters, and the definitions of historical terms and expressions. This is, of course, the indispensably necessary preparation for every student who would come with a properly disciplined historical memory, stored with a sufficient amount of elementary historical data, to the work of the University in this branch. If this be not properly accomplished, the foundation for everything further is wanting, and the instruction received in the University will be to a large degree unappreciated, to say the least. I would venture to assert that to all persons who have taken any part in the attempt to develop a University in the United States the want of a true gymnastic training in the elements of knowledge has appeared a most crying one. And if, while so many of our Colleges, both great and small, are affecting to despise their gymnastic calling, and seeking to become Universities through the fallacious process of simply making their gymnastic studies elective and optional, some Apostle of the Gymnasium would arise and found Academies which would stand true to the gymnastic method and pur-

pose, such an one would do for the development of the true University a far greater work than the College which ceases to be the one thing without becoming the other.

On the other hand, the methods pursued and the purposes aimed at in the *University* courses of history are more complex, as well as different, and therefore require a more minute presentation. In the first place, attendance upon these courses is purely optional with the student. There would be a great loss both in the quantity and quality of the instruction were the professor obliged to accommodate himself to the level of hearers whose tastes and talents were not in the line pursued; and, on the other hand, it would be an unnatural limitation upon, if not a total destruction of, individual genius, were the student of the University not permitted to construct the combination of his studies for himself. The discipline and general elementary instruction of the Gymnasium ought to have developed in his own consciousness a better knowledge of his own intellectual peculiarities than any other person or body of persons can have. If it has not, then it will not matter much, as a general rule, where he may fall. Consideration for him who has no genius at all must never lead us to abandon the method in the University for the cultivation of a true intellectual peculiarity; for without such a development there can be no advance in the discovery of new truth or in a fuller comprehension of old truth. It is this consideration which has led the authorities in Columbia College to permit the University students of history not only to select what courses they may choose in history, but also to combine therewith such courses in philology, literature, philosophy, natural science and law as they may desire. Our experience in the working of the method has hardly yet been long enough to pronounce with confidence upon results. So far as my own observation reaches,

however, I feel entirely satisfied that the comprehension of history has been greatly broadened and deepened by the variety of combinations into which it has thus been brought, and I cannot but believe that the other elements of the combinations have experienced a like advantage.

In the second place. The method of instruction in the University branches of history is chiefly by original lecture. And this for two reasons: the one relating to the professor, the other to the student. The University professor must be a worker among original material. He must present to his student *his own view* derived from the most original sources attainable. He must *construct* history out of the chaos of original historic atoms. If he does not do this, but contents himself with simply repeating the views of others, it is probably because he is not capable of it; in which case he is no University professor at all, but at best only a drill master for the Gymnasium. While the University student must learn among his first lessons that truth, as man knows it, is no ready-made article of certain and objective character, that it is a human interpretation, and subject therefore to the fallibility of human insight and reasoning, — one-sided, colored, incomplete. Unless this thought be continually impressed upon him by the method of the instruction which he receives, he will, to a greater or less degree, make dogma of his learning, and this is the negation of progress in the wider and more perfect comprehension of truth. Now instruction by means of the text-book in the University has always the tendency to the production of this result, — unless, perchance, the professor uses the text more for the purpose of confuting than teaching, in which case he is really lecturing and not hearing recitations. What is contained in a book which has been studied by classes gone before has, in the mind of a student not yet accustomed to sharp criticism, too

large a presumption in its favor. He is too ready to acquiesce in its propositions, and let memory act where the more difficult processes of criticism and judgment should be called into play. On the other hand, when he has the person of his author always before his eyes, observes his weaknesses as well as his strength, then the true scholastic skepticism and belligerency will be aroused, and criticism, judgment, reasoning, insight, be developed.

Third. But this is only what might be termed the outward form of method generally. As to the internal principles or purposes of our method of historical instruction in particular, we seek to teach the student, first, how to get hold of a historic fact, how to distinguish fact from fiction, how to divest it as far as possible of coloring or exaggeration. We send him, therefore, to the most original sources attainable for his primary information. If there be more than one original source upon the same fact, we teach him to set these in comparison or contrast, to observe their agreements and discrepancies, and to attain a point of view from which all, or if this is not possible, the most of the evidence may appear reconcilable. And we warn him not to accept a statement not well authenticated for a fact, upon the principle that it is far better for the historical investigator to think that he does not know what he may know than to think he knows what he may not know. We undertake, in the second place, to teach the student to set the facts which he has thus attained in their chronological order, to the further end of setting them in their order as cause and effect. And we seek to make him clearly comprehend and continually feel that the latter process is the one most delicate and critical which the historical student is called upon to undertake, in that he is continually tempted to account that which is mere antecedent and consequent as being cause and effect. It is just in this process,

of course, that the true historical *genius* most clearly reveals itself. It is just in this process that genius is most necessary to accomplish anything valuable. It is therefore most difficult to formulate rules upon the point for the direction of the historical student who may have no genius for his work. What we most insist upon, however, is a critical comparison of the sequence of facts in the history of different states or peoples at a like period in the development of their civilizations. If this be done with patience, care, and judgment, the student who possesses a moderate degree of true logic will soon learn to distinguish, to some extent at least, antecedent and consequent merely from cause and effect.

Fourth. After the facts have been determined and the causal *nexus* established we endeavor to teach the student to look for the *institutions and ideas* which have been developed through the sequence of events in the civilization of an age or people. This I might term the ultimate object of our entire method of historical instruction. With us history is the chief preparation for the study of the legal and political sciences. Through it we seek to find the origin, follow the growth and learn the meaning of our legal, political, and economic principles and institutions. We class it therefore no longer with fiction or rhetoric or belles-lettres, but with logic, philosophy, ethics. We value it, therefore, not by its brilliancy, but by its productiveness.

Lastly. We would not consider the circle of our method as complete, did it make no provision for the public practice of the students. To this end we have established an Academy of the historic, jural, and political sciences, composed of the graduates of the University in these branches. Before this body, in its regular weekly meetings, each member has the opportunity and assumes the duty of presenting one original work each year. The work is then the property of the Acad-

emy to publish or preserve in its archives as it will. The best production of the year in the Academy, as adjudged by the University Faculty in these departments, is rewarded by a prize lectureship in the University. In this manner we seek to make our students not simply pupils but co-workers, not simply recipients but givers with interest upon what they have received and to open the way for genius, talent, and industry in these branches to positions from which they may be employed in the further development and expansion of these departments.

As I indicated above, we have hardly yet had sufficient experience with our method and system to pronounce definitely and finally upon results. They have not yet made their cycle. But we are satisfied with the progress, and encouraged by the prospects.

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