

John Pierce Brace, Schoolmaster

By HARRIET WEBSTER MARR

ON Monday I kept school and whipped A. On Tuesday I kept school and whipped B. And so on through the week and the alphabet." Poor John Pierce Brace, recently out of college (Williams 1812), a young fellow with literary aspirations, scientific interests, and a flirtatious disposition! No wonder teaching the winter term in a common school lacked inspiration!

He was born in 1795, and in an autobiographical sketch which he called "A History of my Poetry" he wrote: "At five, I read Rollin's Ancient History, and was delineating with acorn cups for soldiers the battles of Cyrus upon the floor. . . . At eight I was immersed in a delightful round of day dreams—how little did those who passed as I was driving my cows to pasture, or weeding in my father's garden imagine the train of vivid dreams that were passing through my waking mind. I was with the Grecian heroes at the siege of Troy; standing on the heights of Thermopylae; defending with Camillus the Rome of my worship; or combatting the Indians by the side of Putnam." Before that, "at seven—I became susceptible of the tender passion, and from that time, through the whole period of childhood, cannot remember the time when I had not a preference for some little girl." Verse naturally followed. One "poem" to Louisa, written when he was about ten years old, combines love and moral advice:

Louisa, I address my song to you;
Only hear me now, oh do!
Understand me now I pray;
I will advise you now to say,
Sweet virtue let your model be,
And you will act perfectly.

When your bloom decays and your
beauty's gone
Act then as you would once have done.
If you will remember virtue
Then virtue will remember you.

All his early literary efforts were not love verse. Politics loomed large, and at the age of eleven he wrote what he called "Osborne's Soliloquy," supposed to be spoken by the editor of a violently Democratic paper in Litchfield, Connecticut, where the young poet lived.

Today I rose and told some lies,
And then beheld bright Phoebus rise;
He looked on me in bright array
To see what lies I'd tell today.

* * * * *

Osborne the great one I; by me the
Federal dies.
Far famed am I for telling mighty lies.

Jefferson's famous gunboats were much in the headlines, and when one went ashore in a corn field the boy wrote,

Why Jefferson, what is the matter?
Why make such a confused spatter?
Oh ho! I see it now; now it is done
And you are launching number one.

* * * * *

When lo, from the East arose a storm
And laid it in a corn field snug and
warm.

Which showed Miss Gunboat's proper
station,

For she knew how to guard a corn-
field better than a nation.

Two aunts, one of them Miss Sarah Pierce, mistress of the famous academy for girls in Litchfield, put the ambitious boy through college. Following that he began to teach, at first in a common school at Northampton, Massachusetts, during the winter terms and at his aunt's school

in Litchfield during the summer terms when the number of pupils was larger than in the winter. Eventually he taught full time at Litchfield. Fortunately his diary has been preserved, and from that and from his "History of my Poetry," as published in *Chronicles and More Chronicles of a Pioneer School*, the most of the quotations in this article have been taken.

Like many a young teacher Brace had difficulties about discipline, difficulties complicated by his desire to be a ladies' man. "However, I do not care. I came here to get their money and thrash their children. . . . Keeping school is in some respects a pleasant employment. . . . Situated as I am now among a set of such ungovernable boys that nothing but the rod can influence, and noisy girls that are affected by no power that I can bring . . . it is impossible for me to receive that satisfaction in keeping school as I did last summer. Instruction is pleasant—it is generally a delightful task, but when one is obliged to beat it in by dint of great exertion it ceases to be delightful."

How different life was for him during the summer terms when he taught in his aunt's school! "A word or a look is all the authority I used this summer. . . . My boys behave well [this was during one of the years when Miss Pierce admitted a few boys into the school], and the girls all fear me, and I have not that difficult task I had last winter which destroyed all my happiness and poisoned every enjoyment and made me wish myself at home again where I am now enjoying the sweets of reputation and employment."

Occasionally, even at Litchfield, there were problems of discipline. Once some of the girls went in wading, got their skirts wet, and took them off to dry on the bushes. But they were seen and reported to Miss Pierce. Mr. Brace was delegated to speak to them. He made a

long speech about "this most flagrant breach of propriety and delicacy. . . . Young ladies must remember that reputation can be destroyed even by carelessness. . . . Let them like Caesar's wife beware of being even suspected." The pupil in whose diary this account is found ends by saying that "at tea Nancy's verse quite amused me. It was, 'Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth.'"

During the first six years that John Brace taught at Litchfield he states that he worked hard reviewing old subjects and preparing lectures on philosophy (probably natural philosophy or physics), rhetoric, logic, the philosophical principles of grammar, etc., "there being no good educational text books then." One entry in his diary reads, "Have nearly finished quadratic equations; they are very hard. I have never studied them before, for they are not studied in our college. Hope I have obtained sufficient knowledge of them."

Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was one of his pupils, wrote in later years high praise of his ability, calling him one of the most stimulating and inspired teachers in the Academy. She spoke of his enthusiasm for the natural sciences, and told how her brothers and the other boys tramped the hills with him seeking minerals and started collections of their own.

Each year John Brace chose some one field of science for special study. Mineralogy always interested him. His diary contains many references to walking trips for the study of minerals. In 1814 he went to Sheffield, Albany, Troy and Lansingburg. The list of specimens he brought home filled three pages in his notes. Later that year he went to New Haven where he saw a collection that caused him to write enviously, "I could be almost tempted to fling my cabinet away, it shrank to such insignificance when I saw the bril-

liant specimens congregated from all parts of the world."

It was, however, his teaching of English that Mrs. Stowe praised most highly, and praise from one with her reputation as a writer is worth noting. His conversations on the English classics, she said, created a real love for literature. His teaching of composition was superior to any she ever knew elsewhere. He made the pupils think; he got them so excited over the subject under discussion that they were eager to write. Her own first composition in his class, written at the age of nine, was on a subject chosen by the class—"The Difference between the Natural and the Moral Sublime." One wonders how any class today could be induced to choose such a subject, and how any child of nine could possibly have written on it! But Mrs. Stowe in later years said that the discussion Mr. Brace led in the class made her sure she had something to say. Furthermore, in retrospect she believed that at the age of nine under Mr. Brace's teaching she understood the subject as well as she did later!

Evidently Mrs. Stowe was not the only pupil interested in Mr. Brace's work in composition, for in 1821 "to please a quite literary loving school a school paper was established to be read every holiday afternoon. Very many of the scholars wrote for it as I did myself," he noted, "and it was very interesting." He was convinced that this was the first school magazine, forerunner of the school and college papers of a later day. Again, he tells us, in 1825, "to please the school I wrote a monthly magazine which I composed and copied myself and gave to them to read that wished it."

Even in the midst of his hard work in preparing lectures Mr. Brace found time for social life. In Northampton he had been contemptuous of the ladies' conversa-

tion. "What a person wants in such company is a pocket full of small talk and gingerbread conversation. . . . All their notions are as antequated and all their manners as starched as the grograin gowns of their progenitors." But in Litchfield he found himself attracted to one girl after another. Sometimes he decided not to flirt. She is "a young lady who I think would probably be my flame provided I felt the disposition to coquette this summer—but I do not." In 1814 he wrote, "No—those pleasures that in youthful love I once enjoyed can never be retasted and they were 'a light that ne'er can shine again on life's dull stream.' To be sure, I shall choose a wife but it must be a matter of calculation and regularly composed like an Apothecary's bill—ten grains of neatness, do of industry, and do of amiability, a teacup full of brains, acquired knowledge, talents to be immersed in a silver cup—with a handful of the flowers of beauty flung in."

He wrote verses in the Common Place Books of several of the girls:

There is not in all Litchfield a damsel so fair
As that girl with the bright eyes and bright
auburn hair.

The last lingering pulsations of life shall depart
E're that maiden's image shall fade from my
heart.

* * * * *

Sweet blossom of Litchfield how calmly my life
Could glide down its channel with thee for a
wife;

Then the storms that once lowered forever shall
cease,
And our hearts, like thy virtues, be mingled in
peace.

And "To a Stone from the Island of the
Lady of the Lake," the first four lines
reading,

Thou little brown stone, Ah, what hast thou
seen,
Since the floods rolled thee up on thy island so
green.

How many vast ages have travelled thee o'er
Like wave upon wave on thy lake girdled shore.

In spite of this tendency to "coquette" he felt seriously his responsibility as a teacher. Once he records a "long amicable dispute" with another teacher on the "principle of exciting ambition in the minds of scholars." Of two different girls he wrote, "She was a great friend of mine, but it was hard to accomplish anything of a reformation in her character. . . . I am determined . . . [she] shall be industrious if I can make her so."

By 1816 his hard work in preparation of lectures was completed, and "imagination and sensibility began to resume their sway," in others words his love of writing. Sometimes his literary ambitions led him into a stilted, affected style, but apparently very early he had recognized this danger, and occasionally burlesqued that style of writing: "In such a journal as this I should begin with a rounder sentence and a better turned period in order to give an eclat to what follows—*ecce signum*—the sonorous bell had struck five strokes when I aroused from my curtailed sleep (bye the bye a good way of telling that I had curtains to my bed) and having broken my fast I commenced my journey. (That is always the way. I never can begin a round sentence but what I come out the little end of the horn (what an elegant comparison—) I must write and, I think, even if I write pure nonsense."

The diary, at least the published part of it, merely mentions his marriage which occurred in 1819. Following that he continued his yearly study of some one of the sciences: 1822, entomology; 1823, four weeks in Boston copying works and plates from the Cambridge Library on entomology; 1823-1824, mineralogy. In 1824 he spoke before the Agricultural Society of Litchfield County, summing

up in his address the relation between the various sciences and the work of the farmer. In 1825 he studied chemistry, which he had taught, perhaps for the first time, in 1814. His diary at that date records, "I am attending to chemistry at present."



JOHN PIERCE BRACE OF LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT, SCHOOLMASTER.

Courtesy of the Litchfield Historical Society.

He had a class of three, including Catherine Beecher. "I try experiments often as far as my home made apparatus of vials and tea pots will answer."

In 1826 he delivered an unusual address at the Fourth of July celebration in Litchfield. All bombastic style is gone. So are the usual references to English tyranny and American freedom. In straightforward phrases he spoke of the problems of the day, international and domestic: "The object of these celebrations is not as many of the timid imagine to keep up in the heart the hatred of one nation. . . . In

the great work of enlightening the world, disseminating the principles of liberty, of education and of religion we need the assistance of a nation possessing as England does so many of the principles of freedom. . . . Enlighten the world and it will become free." He spoke of slavery and the division of North and South. "The South should . . . sometimes be willing to allow that character and talent exist in the North; the North should cease the constant reproach, as unavailing as it is, irritating, that slavery exists at the South. I do not stand here to advocate the principle of slavery; My ardent desire is that the time may come when not a slave shall breath the air of our republic; but that time is far, very far distant. . . . Its necessary continuance among us ought to be deemed by us at the North as a misfortune and not a fault of our Southern brethren."

In 1828 and 1829 he studied anatomy and in 1832 theology, at which time he set himself a stint: "I compelled my mind every evening to grasp fifty pages an hour in metaphysics."

In 1832 he retired from the school at Litchfield to become headmaster of the Female Seminary at Hartford which had been founded by his pupils, Catherine and Harriet Beecher. He remained there until 1853 when he became editor of the *Hartford Courant*, but that, as Kipling used to say, is another story.

In his conclusion to his "History of my Poetry," Mr. Brace stated regretfully,

"There is one thing quite evident from these volumes, and that is that I might have made a respectable poet had I written for a livelihood, and directed my whole life to that one subject." Poetry may have been his ambition but we remember him as a schoolmaster, who believed in the education of girls, apparently even taught them quadratics. His farewell speech at Litchfield sums up his theories about the education of women: "Our object has not been to make learned ladies, or skillful metaphysical reasoners, or deep read scholars in physical sciences. There is a more useful, tho' less exalted and less brilliant station that women must occupy; there are duties of incalculable importance that she must perform: that station is home. . . . Our design has been to give our pupils enough of science to conduct the early education of their children and to relish the education of the scientific around them. Our greater aim has been, however, to cultivate the judgment and improve the taste, to produce a relish for reading, & especially to create a correct & elegant style in conversation and letters, where alone, with few exceptions, women can manifest the extent of their information."

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