



Education in Ednah Dow Cheney (1824–1904)

Therese Boos Dykeman

That “Life is a school, and it is not finished [...] a continual education, constantly strengthening and enlarging our powers and enabling us to do better work” was foundational for Ednah Dow Cheney’s philosophy and her life. Finishing formal school, she continued her education with the Conversations of Margaret Fuller and Bronson Alcott, eventually lecturing, herself, at the Concord School of Philosophy. She founded schools, and traveled e.g. to St. Louis to witness William Torrey Harris’ system in the West and the Freedman’s schools in the South where two schools were named after her, and formed clubs for continuing education in the East. Her philosophy of education was that as an institution it be continually refreshed. She argued for the reflexive benefits of widening education to the needs of industry and agriculture to mutually strengthen the “reasoning powers” and the practical disciplines. Education should be universal and equal for sexes and races, rich and poor—she chastised Harvard for excluding women and colleges in the South for excluding African-Americans. Universal Suffrage, in its “educational light,” teaches the powerful. Nature, a “stern teacher,” demands cooperation in solving philosophical problems. Art education elevates us by “what it makes us to be,” it’s “moral influence...gentle.” The “greatest of moral and religious lesson is to teach a child to do something for the good of others, and to do it well” and to teach “habits of order [...] thrift and industry.” Education for body and soul means intellectual and practical skills, reading, writing, and arithmetic for the brain, art for the eye, music for the ear, “systematized gymnastics” to include swimming and “drill” for the body. In summer’s rest parents need offer travel and “out-door studies and industries.” Education must be continuing and continually improve how it teaches and how it accommodates its learners.

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