

"The Coloured People and the Common Schools," *The Globe*, 3 January 1863, pages 1–2.

Source: Online database: The Globe and Mail: Canada's Heritage from 1844,
<http://heritage.theglobeandmail.com/>

Description:

In the nineteenth century, the public education system was gradually established in regions across British North America. A predominantly middle-class movement that was connected to the broader process of state formation, educational reform often reflected gendered, class-based, and racialized perceptions held by its promoters. However, even amongst members of the middle class, there was dissent and disagreement on a number of issues, including language instruction, how to deal with truancy, local versus central control, religion, the wages and "moral character" of teachers, corporal punishment, and racial and gender segregation. Historians have debated the degree to which compulsory education and common schools represented a form of social control over the working class and a means by which the social order was perpetuated; yet, regardless of one's position on such debates, it is clear that many communities and individuals in the nineteenth century sought to have their voices heard and endeavoured to influence the emerging educational system. Although there was no consensus amongst black communities across Canada on the issue of separate schools, these letters to *The Globe* express the opposition many felt on the issue of racially-segregated schools.

THE COLORED PEOPLE AND THE COMMON SCHOOLS.

(*To the Editor of the Globe.*)

Srs,—I noticed lately in the *Leader* an editorial headed, "The Colored People and the Common Schools," and I must say of all the articles that have appeared in that sheet against the colored people, it is the most despicable and malicious [*sic*]. The article commences by stating what the School Trustees of London are doing to degrade the colored people of that city, but it is only a pretext still farther to pander to the prejudices of the "mud-sills." As to the action of the London Trustees, their course is certainly most singular, for while the Americans, who were the first to establish separate schools and other institutions for colored people, are emerging from the dark ages of their prejudices, the enlightened school trustees and teachers of London are making a retrograde movement, and are relapsing into the slough of "Negrophobia." As it is in all cases where men espouse a bad cause, these trustees and teachers are obliged to descend to sophistry to make out their case. The *Leader* says: "They set out by stating that a feeling exists in the community that, from climatic reasons or other organic causes, there is repugnance in the minds of the white population to a close or intimate relation between their children and those of colored parents." Now, that there are persons in

London who are so tainted with “Negrophobia” as to object to colored children, however decent, going to the same school that they send theirs to, I have no doubt; and that these same persons instill these same feelings into their children: and that there are teachers base enough to permit their prejudices to prevent them from discharging their duties to their scholars on account of their color; but I cannot believe that the people of Canada will at the caprice of such sycophants deprive us of our educational privileges. They say also that the result of the children being educated together is not unfrequently a bandying of offensive epithets, embittered acrimonious feelings, and juvenile quarrels. In these petty disputes the parents frequently take part, complaints are made, and will continue to be made by both parties, that their children have been insulted; and by the coloured people, that theirs have been harshly treated. Well, such may be the state of things in London, but it is a little singular that in Toronto, where we have a much larger population, and are, too, I have no doubt, quite as intelligent and refined as in London, the coloured and white children go to the same schools together, and we hear of no such complaints and bickering here. The very reverse is the case. The best feelings are cultivated among the scholars themselves, and between scholars and teachers, as the following extent of a letter published in the *Globe* some time since will prove: —

“My mind has been led into the aboro reflections from the visits which I lately made to some of the common schools of this city, in the discharge of a pleasing duty. Our old and worthy former fellow-citizen, J [...] Ketchum, senior, Esq., has, in the plenitude of his philanthropic and Christian feelings, devoted in perpetuity, the whole of the annual amount arising from the sale of the premises now owned and occupied by the Bible and Tract Societies, to the benefit of the common Schools of Toronto, by furnishing books to be distributed from time to time among such of the scholars in each schools division, whose standing and character may, in the judgment of the school itself, best commend them to receive the gift. Mr. Ketchum being unable, because of the distance, to attend in person, was pleased to depute me to act for him: I found in several of the divisions, white and coloured children rested in their respective classes, and intermixed throughout the school, and when I put it to the children to nominate those from among themselves whom they deemed the most worthy, there were not less than five, out of the comparatively few coloured children present in the whole of the divisions, elected unanimously by their school mates, with the approval of their teachers. I need scarcely say, that the election pleased, and in some measure surprised me; for I was not prepared to witness elections by whites so cordially and unanimously

expressed in regard to a race against whom there has been fostered in America a prejudice grounded on ideas of inferiority and incapacity. The grace and modesty evinced by those thus selected was also quite striking.

“By this comparatively small matter, as well as otherwise, I am the more confirmed in the opinion, that in point of intellect and formation of character, the African race, under just treatment, and with facilities for improvement, are in no wise inferior to others. Should any of our neighbours doubt this, I would merely say to them, *Come and see*.

“Yours respectfully,

“JAMES RICHARDSON.

“Clover Hill, Toronto, Feb. 22, 1860.”

Numerous cases might be cited to prove, that here, in many instances, the strongest ties of friendship exist betwixt the scholars, and between the teachers and coloured scholars; and we would particularly invite the London trustees and teachers to pay our schools a visit during the examination, and at times when prizes and certificates are given, and they will see coloured children receive both amidst the plaudits of the white scholars, and the parents and friends who attend on these occasions. Then, again, say the trustees, “an effluvium arises, during the warm weather, that is disagreeable to both teachers and scholars.” Well, as to the children, they must have been trained by their parents, like the bloodhounds down South “in Dixie,” to enable them to smell their coloured schoolmates from their white ones. And as to the teachers, they must have extraordinary organs of scent to enable them to distinguish which of their scholars it is from who the “disagreeable effluvium arises,” without a personal scenting of each one separately. If they can, I, for one, would advise our city fathers to employ them to scent out the “pig nuisance” that is so much complained of in our city, for it is certainly an occupation more suited to them than common school teaching. And I would further recommend to the Teachers’ Association, to expel all such members as being unfit to associate with them. And, still further, they say, “When the coloured people are educated apart, they will not be educated for evil; they will not have some of the worst passions of the human hearts called daily into play, and thus strengthened by exercise; they will have no taunts or insults to remember; and when they enter life as men, they will be enabled to meet their white fellow citizens without a single acrimonious feeling, arising from the recollection of wrongs suffered or injuries retained.” A gentleman, now a candidate for Mayor of this city,

stated some years since, at the nomination when he was a candidate for Parliament, that while travelling in Europe he saw a man with a cage filled with all kinds of animals, both ferocious and harmless, fondling with each other in the best of friendship. He asked the man how did he manage to train them to treat each other so friendly; he replied by saying that he put them together when young, and they grew up as friends and remained so. Now, sir; I think the London trustees and teachers might learn a useful lesson from the man and his cage of animals.

Then, as to the law on the subject, it is evident that the trustees have no more right to establish separate schools for coloured people than they have to establish them for Catholics, unless they ask for them; and according to the sixty-third chapter, section 1st, of the Consolidated Statutes for Upper Canada, the request must come from twelve heads of families. It is said also, that the trustees feared that the law did not permit them to carry out their nefarious schemes, but that certain decisions will. Now, the only one that can with any colour justify them, is the case of Dennis Hill against the trustees of Dresden. It seems the separate schools for coloured people were very badly conducted, and Hill preferred to send his children to the schools other than the one for coloured people. The trustees ejected them. He brought an action against them in the Court of Queen's Bench, Chief Justice Robinson presiding; and the judge decided that, as the coloured people in that particular locality had asked for a separate school, they must send their children to it; and, consequently, the trustees had a right to exclude them from the other schools; and that the coloured people must seek redress from the Legislature. This may be law, but it is certainly not justice; for if it is, then, upon the same principle, no Roman Catholic can send his children to any of the common schools of this city, because they have asked for and obtained separate schools. But suppose, for argument's sake, that they have the power to establish these separate schools for coloured people, in consequence of the small number of coloured children, they could not erect one in every ward, and, consequently, they would have to establish one in the centre of the city, and therefore the coloured children would be obliged to travel a long distance past many common schools, however inclement the weather may be, to get to their separate school. See, then, how unjust such a course would be if it was generally adopted. The *Leader* asks how will the coloured people view the discussion of these London school trustees. Well, sir, I will tell him how we view it. We will seek redress at the hands of the Legislature, by position and otherwise, and we will never rest satisfied until it is out of the power of any set of school trustees to impose upon us separate schools against our will; and not only so, but will agitate

the subject for the purpose of getting those already established abolished. And, sir, if the intelligent coloured lady, or as the *Leader* has it, *woman*, was to exert herself to half the extent she does to beg money for school “for the especial benefit of refugees and other coloured people in Chatham,” to get the school law so altered as to secure equal school privileges, she would not need to go round the country every year begging, but would do much to elevate her race, and less to put arguments in the mouths of their enemies to reduce them and build up barriers to their advancement. For far better that the coloured children of Chatham and its locality should, for the present, submit to the government of separate schools, than that they should yield the principle, and start one themselves. Nor is it true that the coloured children in the west are excluded from the common schools, but, as aforesaid, for reasons given, they are excluded from the schools for white children. The *Leader* says, “natural causes, if no other, are opposed to the admixture in the schools of the two races; but there is, besides, an in-bred feeling of repugnance in the breast of almost every white person at the hybridism which must to some extent be the result of their commingling.” Now, sir, I must say, that if we look to the South, to the West Indies, and even to Canada, it does not appear that white people are so much opposed to hybridism after all, unless they practice one thing and believe another. It is further argued that we should not object to the action of the London trustees, because coloured people have separate churches. Well, the two cases are not at all analogous; for it would be absurd to say, because some few coloured people in the exercise of their freedom choose to establish a Methodist or a Baptist Church, that all other coloured people, whether they belong to any other denomination or not, must go to the coloured churches, and be excluded from those of the white. I say, Mr. Editor, if this principle is to be carried out, a coloured young man who headed his classes in the Upper Canada College while there, and now leads them in the Toronto University, and who never allows convocation to pass without his name being mentioned in connection with some prize or mark of distinction, must be thrust from the halls, and driven into obscurity and degradation. Likewise other coloured young men that are in the University, the Medical Schools, the Theological Seminaries and Colleges, those attending the law courts and lectures, and coloured young ladies attending the public and private seminaries, all must be turned out to have their hopes blasted, and perhaps come to destitution [*sic*]. For while it might be possible to establish Separate Schools, it would not be to establish Separate Colleges. Mr. [E]ditor, I must now conclude this already too lengthy communication, by appealing to an educated and Christian community, and ask if it is right, is it according to the principles of freedom, is it in unison with the character of Britons, that, while the coloured

people are trying to elevate themselves in the scale of humanity, after having been brutalized by the white man for so many ages, and are both in the colleges and public schools, gaining so much distinction, a few obscure men in the community should try to pick flaws in the laws, and hunt up decisions to deprive us of our school privileges; and that newspapers, which should be the palladium of freedom and good order, should stoop so low as to stir up the prejudices of the white population against the coloured! And, sir, to the coloured people I will say that, while I am quite certain the school trustees of Toronto, as well as the local superintendent, are perfectly sound on the schools as they exist relative to the coloured people, it becomes them to look well to their interest, and especially to the election of School Trustees, for their enemies are going about seeking how they may destroy their liberties. Nor need those coloured people who do not identify themselves as such, think they will escape these disabilities on that account; for they may depend upon it, that whether they hail from either West or East Indies, it is as well known here who are coloured as it is in the South where they came from, and the same rule that will exclude a child from the common schools because he is black, will exclude him because he is a mulatto or anything else but white.

I remain Sir,

Your obedient servant,

DIOGENES.

Toronto, Dec. 12, 1862.