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## What Mann Hath Wrought

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# Book Looks At Education

Dear Editor:

Last Spring, an excellent piece of detective work on the origins of American public education was published by the Devin-Adair Company. It is a book entitled **Is Public Education Necessary?** The author is Samuel L. Blumenfeld, a private school teacher and a Research Fellow of the Institute of Humane Studies.

The title is a bit misleading. The book is not a consideration of the pros and cons of public education. Rather, it is a very readable historical essay on the men and women, the motives, and the theories behind the adoption of State-supported liberal education in Massachusetts in the 1830s.

The roots of public education go back to the Reformation. The Puritan concept of Christian self-government required a literate body of citizens to maintain a public form of worship: citizens who could consult the Scriptures for themselves. A government of laws, not men, requires universal literacy, and a common source of authority.

The growth of Unitarianism in Massachusetts during the early years of our nationhood resulted in the gradual undermining and redefining of the political and educational institutions established by the Puritan founders of the Bay State. Like Rousseau, Unitarians and other religious liberals believed that civilization corrupts human nature, rather than vice versa. And paradoxically, like Rousseau again, they believed that education — that eminent transmitter of civilization — would counteract civilization's corrupting influences. "To the Unitarian," Blumenfeld writes, "education became the road to salvation." Schools and schoolteachers have been trying to save man from himself ever since through social experimentation.

Blumenfeld carefully weaves the stories of the more important sponsors and advocates of public education during the early 1800s. They include utopian socialists

like Robert Owen of New Harmony, Indiana; Edward Everett, the first American Ph.D. and, later, a governor of Massachusetts; Victor Cousin, a French apologist for the State-supported Prussian school system; Edmund Dwight, an industrialist and philanthropist; Frances Wright, a feminist; and George Combe, a phrenologist. Every social reformer, health faddist, and religious mystic of the day seems to have recognized the potential of public education for spreading his ideas.

Horace Mann reflects the motivations of the early public education advocates as well as any persons. He was a believer in "natural religion" who became enamored of all the latest pseudo-sciences, especially phrenology. As a politician and crusader for reform, he betrayed delusions of messianic grandeur. He envisioned public schools as beautiful temples for the improvement of man. He said that the public school is "the greatest discovery ever made by man," and that it would render nine-tenths of the crimes in the penal code obsolete. He labeled his opponents, including orthodox Christians, as "bigots" and banned their material from the classrooms.

Blumenfeld's book is overwhelming in the impact of the evidence it summons for the prosecution. We must take a hard look at what Mann hath wrought.

Yours,  
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Gresham, OR

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