

# SAMUEL SMILES ON EDUCATION

James Stanfield

If you have previously found inspiration in the work of Samuel Smiles, best portrayed in his 1859 bestseller *Self Help*, then you may be surprised to find that in 1851 Smiles argued that the voluntary principle in education had been tried and failed, and warned that there was a possibility of ‘straining the principle too far, and applying it to purposes which it is altogether unfitted to effect’. Smiles questioned ‘how tender consciences can regard masses of people perishing in utter ignorance, while the means are within reach of letting light in upon them, and raising them out of the mire of degradation in which they now lie enthralled’, and believed that they could no longer ‘avoid the conclusion that a public provision must be made for education, such as has already been made in all other civilised countries’.

Smiles set out his position on education in a letter to Edward Baines Esq., in December 1851,<sup>1</sup> in which he voiced his support for the National Public School Association (NPSA) plan to increase government aid to existing schools and to build new schools ‘in all places where a school is wanted, and to throw them open freely to children of all classes’. The letter was written in response to a public lecture delivered by Edward Baines, the leader of the Leeds-based voluntary movement, in which he dismissed the plan of the NPSA as despotic and a violation of liberty which would interfere with free competition and free trade in education. Smiles disagreed and was convinced that the plan of the NPSA did not propose that the government should educate children, ‘but that the people themselves should do so by means of school masters, appointed by the representatives, and selected by the ratepayers. The schools would be established by their own voluntary votes; and if the schools were not what they ought to be, then the ratepayers would have it in their own power to make them so’. Smiles also believed that, ‘as the teachers in the proposed public schools would be appointed by the school committees chosen by the ratepayers, there is every reason to believe that they would select men of good character for the office’. Such sentiments were shared by another champion of the NPSA plan, Richard Cobden, who wrote to Smiles congratulating him on his attack on Baines:

‘His [Baines] sound and acute intellect is evidently under the influence of monomania upon the education question. It is only this that can account for the

fallacious way in which he persists in arguing against a centralised government scheme, when everybody but himself knows that what we all want is a parochial or municipal plan, which he is doing his utmost to prevent us from obtaining.’<sup>2</sup>

Edward Baines, however, held a much more sceptical view of government intervention. In a letter to Lord Russell, he warned that ‘when governments offer their arm, it is like the arm of a creditor or a constable, not so easily shaken off: there is a handcuff at the end of it’. Baines also expressed a remarkable awareness of an important, but relatively unknown, consequence of government intervention, that of crowding out:

‘The Secular plan virtually destroys freedom of education. It does so not by directly and positively prohibiting any other schools than its own – we have not got quite as far as that yet – but by creating a vast system of schools, to which all will be compelled to pay, and which must have the practical effect of destroying most other schools for the children of the poor . . . When a poor man has payed [*sic*] his school rate, he will certainly not pay a second time for his child schooling. All the children will therefore be withdrawn from the pay-schools, and sent to the so called free schools.’<sup>3</sup>

In the foreword to the Institute of Economic Affairs’ 1996 edition of Samuel Smiles’s *Self Help*, Lord Harris of High Cross argues, ‘If only the early Fabians had heeded Smiles rather than Marx!’ Not so in education. Instead the early Fabians should have heeded Edward Baines and his fellow champions of self-help in education including Richard Hamilton, Joseph Sturge, Samuel Morley, Andrew Reed, Henry Richard, Edward Miall and, of course, Herbert Spencer. To the best of my knowledge Herbert Spencer’s article on National Education (found in *Social Statistics*, 1850) was last reprinted in the UK in 1903 by the Society for the Liberation of Education from State Control. It deserves to be reprinted again.

1. S. Smiles (1852) *National Education – Is the Voluntary Principle Adequate to our National Exigencies?*, Imprint, Manchester: A. Ireland & Co., Printers, 1852).
2. S. Smiles (1905) *The Autobiography of Samuel Smiles*, London: John Murray.
3. E. Baines (1851) *The Two Manchester Plans of Education Examined*, London: Congregational Board of Education.

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