Is Spelling Reform, Ten Years Old, a Success?

Professor Brander Matthews Finds That The Public Has Had a Change of Heart and Is No Longer Contemptuously Hostile

The New York Times

Published: August 27, 1916

T

It was on August 27, 1906, exactly ten years ago today, that President Roosevelt, in his message to Congress, recommended to the Public Printer directing him thereafter to use the broader orthography, on the authority of the American English Spelling Association, which had been formed at the request of the President, and to which he recommended a few weeks earlier the names of some of the most prominent men of letters of the world and it served to focus attention upon the cautious condition of our spelling.

The characteristic courageous act of the Association was to awaken the subject and the subject and the public were convinced that when a concern which was needed to ameliorate the orthography of our noble tongue. Of course, our surprise, however natural it may have been, was unreasonable. The attack on President Roosevelt was a great achievement, but our Spelling Board was not only violent, it might be said to be inevitable. Many estimable persons were outraged by the suggestion that the spelling of English, which they had considered so essential to their youth, was not better than it should be, and they were the very people who were defending the action of the Association, who were expressing their unreasonable surprise.

Even if the Simplified Spelling Board has not been given its full due credit for the amelioration of our orthography, it is evident that the Association had the support of many distinguished men. In 1875 the American English Spelling Association, made up of prominent men who had the foremost linguistic societies of the country, formally pronounced its desire for an improvement in our unsatisfactory orthography; and as a result of its action, the movement to simplify our orthography was started in 1876. In England the Philological Society, the University of Cambridge, and the Royal Philological Association, also took up the question; and in 1883 these two bodies of experts in language, one in Great Britain and one in the United States, joined in proposing a new orthography which would make spelling a simple and easy task. Unfortunately, these two movements of 1875 and 1883 were not given their proper importance, although the latter was at first directed by men of the highest attainments in the Latin and the Greek languages. The movement, however, persisted and a committee was appointed to correct some of the worst abuses of spelling in the English language. It was also decided that some of the words should be simplified, and that the new orthography should be adopted in all schools, colleges, and universities.

The result of this movement was that in 1906 the Simplified Spelling Board was formed, consisting of ten men who had been active in the movement. One of the main reasons for this action was the desire to do something practical, and the board was not satisfied with the results that had been obtained in the past. It was decided that the system of spelling should be made as simple as possible, and that the board should be the judge of what was necessary. The board was also satisfied that the simplified spelling should be adopted in all schools, colleges, and universities, and that it should be taught in all grades. In this way, it was believed, the spelling of English could be improved, and that the public would be satisfied with the changes that had been made.

It was a little difficult that many grown men and women could be persuaded to adopt the new spelling system, even if they were in hearty sympathy with the movement, willing to change their ways of writing. The public was not entirely convinced, and the board was determined to do their utmost to make the people see the advantages of simplified spelling. In order to do this, the board had to convince the people that the new spelling was the best way of spelling.

In the first place, it was necessary to inform the people that the new spelling was a simplification of the old spelling, and that it had been adopted to make spelling easier and more uniform. The board had also to show the public that the new spelling was not only easier but also more accurate. In order to do this, the board had to publish a number of pamphlets and articles, and to give talks and lectures on the subject.

As a result of the activity of the de-