

A Summary of The Autobiography of Dr. THOMAS HUNTER

"I was born in Ardglass, [the year was 1831] a small seaport on the northeast coast of Ireland about twenty-five miles south of Belfast. Although now decayed, it was once a place of some repute. Several ruined castles and two others partly restored and renovated prove that it was formerly fortified. . . . Its prosperity during several centuries was owing to the fact that vessels of the largest size could enter, or depart from the harbour at any time of tide. . . .

"As a child I always turned from the land-side to the sea-side, for I loved the ocean never more than when it was enraged by a furious gale. Then its angry voice was music to my ears. Perhaps this passion for the sea I had by heredity, for my mother's people had followed it for generations, and my father was a sea captain before I was born. . . ."

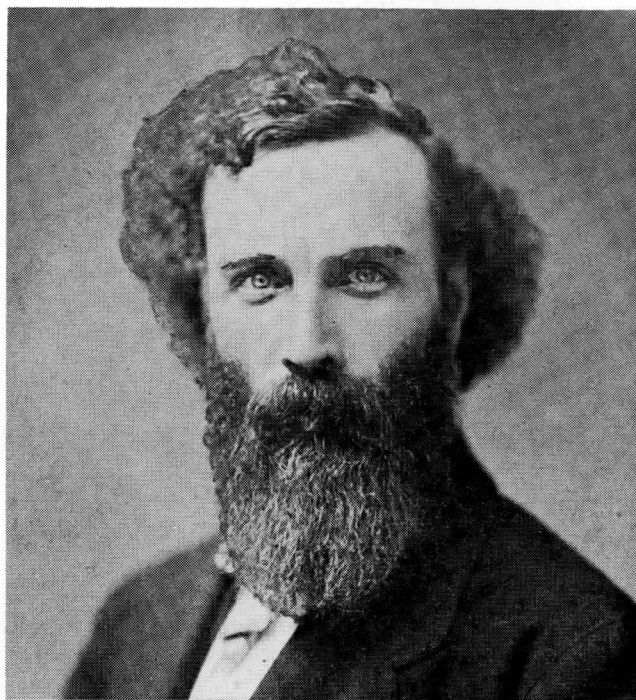
The boy lost his father when he was six, and he went to live with his grandparents, his father being frequently away at sea. His grandmother Norris taught him to read, and he was sent to school in Ardglass.

Later he went to a secondary school in Dundalk, for four years. Then, not quite sixteen, he took an examination for a scholarship to the advanced Santry Science School and won first place.

He was delighted with Santry. A small collection of books, the school "library," was there placed in his care, and he availed himself of every opportunity to read, and to practice composition to improve his style.

"At the age of seventeen, I ventured to send one of my essays to a paper called *The Family Herald*; and, to my joy and amazement, it was published. This was a glut of delight. Not only did the paper print my essay but the manager sent me a small sum of money."

The Principal of Santry offered young Hunter a teaching post in the school, when he completed the three-year course, but he preferred to be his own master, to try his own wings. He took over a country school in Callan. He was almost nineteen. There were fifty



Dr. Hunter in 1872, two years after opening of the College

boys and girls to instruct, and he was very soon successful in organizing the six grades, alternating study and recreation periods. The order was excellent, the improvement gratifying; the Superintendent was pleased. Chances for promotion were good.

"All I had to do was to suppress my republican principles and profess a loyalty I did not feel. This I could not do; so I continued to write democratic articles for the Irish national papers."

He took first prize in an examination for teachers in Episcopal schools, but he decided to leave Callan, when he learned that the articles he had been writing for the papers had disturbed various authorities.

The young republican set his sights for the United States, not the first in his family to look to these shores. His grandfather Norris, who had been sent in his youth to join a brother in Virginia, had fought on the American side in the War of 1812, before returning to Ireland.

In March of 1850 Thomas Hunter arrived in this country. His means being limited, he tried immediately to find work. Through a chance acquaintance he was given a letter of introduction to a school commissioner. Impressed by young Hunter's writings and drawings, the commissioner recommended him to the principal of Ward School No. 20, on Thirteenth Street, later the famous P.S. 35.

The principal offered the young man a part-time position as a teacher of drawing. In his account of this appointment, he said later, . . . "though I did not know

it at the time I had one qualification for teaching which is all-important — *'I had a very large amount of sympathy for children.'* ”

Addressing his first class in drawing, the new teacher said,

“Boys, I am you teacher, and I expect to be something more, — your friend. I respect your rights, and I have no doubt but you will respect mine.” He adds, “I began to love the work, because I liked the boys, and the boys liked me. . . .”

Not content to be a part-time teacher of drawing, he soon went to the principal and said, “Mr. Doane, if you will give me a class to teach every day, I will teach drawing on Saturday without additional compensation.” He took me at my word, organized a class of the lowest grade, and placed me in charge of it on the opening day of September.”

When he demonstrated, after a few months of teaching in the first grade, how well he could conduct a lesson in algebra for fifteen-year-old boys, he was immediately promoted to be first assistant in the school. He was now twenty.

Two years later he was appointed vice-principal of the evening public school at “35”; the following winter, in 1855, he was named principal. As first assistant in the day school and head of the evening school, he taught a variety of subjects, preparing the older boys for their admission to the Free Academy, — later the City College.

In 1857, at the age of twenty-six, Thomas Hunter was elected, by unanimous vote of the Board of Trustees, to the principalship of the day school. The fame of Grammar School No. 35 soon spread, under his leadership. Applications for admission poured in from all parts of the City; there were then no restrictions as to locality.

—The Civil War came, and there is a moving chapter in the *Autobiography* entitled, “The Patriotism of the Boys of No. 35.”—

In 1866 Thomas Hunter was elected Assistant Superintendent of Schools, but he decided not to accept the position. As school principal, he felt, he could best continue to influence the thousand boys in his charge to be “truthful, courageous, manly, and honorable.”

On his advice, the evening public school in “35” had been closed, for he had pointed out that desultory attendance, at night, left young boys free to wander the streets during the day. Older boys and young men, he thought, should have opportunity to take evening courses. The City’s first free evening high school was established in 1866, at “35,” and Thomas Hunter was appointed principal.

Before the climax of the *Autobiography*, the story of

the establishment of the College, there is a memorable chapter on the role that Thomas Hunter played in the abolition of corporal punishment in the New York City schools.

“For my own humble effort in showing that the largest school in the city could be properly governed without corporal punishment, I have always felt a just pride. For the purpose of aiding the good cause I wrote an article entitled *Humanity in the Schools* which was extensively copied.”

In 1858 Thomas Hunter had been invited to teach algebra and geometry to young teachers in the Saturday Normal School; he found them sadly deficient in mathematics. The Saturday School was given up, and shortly afterwards there was established a short-lived daily normal or training school for teachers. “It died a slow death in early youth. This ended normal instruction until 1864 or 1865,” when the Saturday Normal School was revived, for a brief interval.

“There was at the time, no free college into which girls would be admitted. . . . True, there were advanced classes in some of the Ward schools [grammar schools] in which girls were carried one or two years through ‘supplementary’ studies for the purpose of preparing them to become teachers.”

Nor was Thomas Hunter alone concerned over the lack of opportunity for free collegiate training for young women. It was Education Commissioner William Wood, we read, who helped to convince his colleagues on the Board of Education that a new advanced school should be established; he had been appalled by the poor teaching he had observed in visits to City classrooms. Other enlightened citizens, as well as Board members, had seen the great need.

In December of 1869 the Board of Education announced the plan to establish a Normal and High School for the education and training of female teachers. The best known figure in public education in the

The “Old” Building on Park Avenue, 1873-1936.



City, Thomas Hunter was elected president of the new institution. The new President then moved quickly; he planned to open by the February term of 1870. Temporary quarters were rented in a building at Broadway and Fourth Street, and furnishings were purchased.

By resolution of the Board of Education, professors and tutors were appointed to teach geology, botany, physiology, anatomy, mathematics, natural philosophy, astronomy, chemistry, modern languages, English, Latin, political economy, the theory and practice of teaching. Nor were drawing, musical notation, calisthenics, stenography, book-keeping, penmanship, omitted from the course of study.

For admission to the new school an examination was to be required. "A three-years' course of instruction was instituted. . . . This was the extent of the course in every normal school in the United States."

"On the fourteenth day of February, 1870, — on St. Valentine's Day of all the days in the year, — the Female Normal and High School was opened. . . . About seven hundred girls, of all grades of qualifications, presented themselves for admission. Three hundred of these came from the celebrated school in Twelfth Street, conducted by Miss Lydia F. Wadleigh, a woman of extraordinary ability, recently appointed Lady Superintendent of the new institution."

Within three months of the opening the name of the new institution was changed to Normal College, and authority was obtained for the erection of a building north of Fortieth Street. It was Commissioner Wood again who was instrumental in effecting these arrangements.

President Hunter himself drew the preliminary plans for the new building. He brooked no delay, and work on it was begun in the summer of 1871; the site chosen, Sixty-eighth Street and Fourth, later Park Avenue. "Despite many obstacles, the College occupied its new and beautiful building on the opening day in September, 1873."

Arrangements were presently made for the examination of all tutors appointed to teach in the new College. Professors appointed on the basis of credentials were on trial for a year. If they did not prove satisfactory, their work in the College was terminated.

The new College flourished. But opposition from those who continued to believe that young men and women should not be educated at public expense rose from time to time. Guarding the College from attack, fostering its growth, President Hunter steadily pursued his plan to provide a full college course for his teachers-to-be.

"Starting with a three years' course in 1870, it took nine years to raise it to four years; it took nine more to raise it to five years, and twelve years more to raise it

to a seven years' or eight years' course. Every step of the advance was made in spite of opposition; it is gratifying to know that as time went on this opposition grew less and less."

Normal College obtained collegiate ranking in 1888. The academic degree, the baccalaureate, was certified in 1908, after students had begun to complete the full college course. From the beginning President Hunter had been desirous of giving his students a liberal arts program.

"Time, observation and experience have proved that the best of all preparation for the profession of teaching is a thoroughly trained mind, developed and disciplined by struggling with the difficulties of translation, pure mathematics, and natural science. Practice teaching on a narrow basis of education is building a pyramid with its apex on the ground, a superstructure which is likely to topple over."

Opportunities for practice teaching had been provided in the College's model or elementary school and in the first free kindergarten in the United States, established under the aegis of the College. Again it was President Hunter who saw the need for directed early education.

This summary of the *Autobiography* may be concluded with this important point. In the resolutions drawn by the Board of Education as early as 1870, it had been announced that, after the organization of the new normal school, no teacher was to be appointed "to teach in any of the common schools of this City and County of New York without a certificate duly signed by the Committee on the Normal and High School." This was a landmark in the history of the proper licensing of teachers, to check casual appointment, and further testimony to Thomas Hunter's beneficent influence in public education.

The closing chapters are reminiscent. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the College, in 1895, the Associate Alumnae presented a loving cup to the Founder. New York University awarded him an LL.D. in 1896. The Thomas Hunter Association was formed in 1897, by graduates of P.S. 35. His old boys presented a loving cup, too, and a rattan "laid in a silver case, in honor of their principal's having abolished corporal punishment before it was abolished by law."

"I loved my boys, and my boys loved me." And so did his girls.

Dr. Hunter retired in 1906. In 1914, the year before his death, the name of the institution he had founded was changed by act of the State Legislature from Normal to Hunter College. He had written to the College Trustees, long before, that he believed in that "democracy which levels upward."

A.M.T.