



Pestalozzi International

To nurture and develop



Glimpses of Pestalozzi

Bringing to life the humanity and vision
of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi.

Introduction

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Introduction to "Glimpses of Pestalozzi"

Glimpses of Pestalozzi is a collection of personal reflections, biographical excerpts, and character sketches that bring to life the complex humanity and profound moral vision of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. Compiled from accounts by former pupils, historians, biographers, and admirers, the document a range of impressions that together form an intimate portrait.

Pestalozzi emerges as a man of contradictions: dishevelled in appearance yet radiant in spirit; intellectually restless yet deeply principled; naïve and impractical yet influential at the highest political levels. His emotional intensity, self-sacrificing benevolence, and unwavering belief in the power of education to uplift humanity are expressed with warmth, reverence, and sometimes gentle humour.

These glimpses reveal a man who inspired devotion in those around him - children and statesmen alike - not by authority or wealth, but by love, humility, and hope.

Descriptions by de Guimps, former pupil of Yverdon and biographer of Pestalozzi

1. 'It is important to have complete knowledge of a man who throughout a long life, sacrificed himself for what was, perhaps, the most fertile idea of modern times – the regeneration of nations by elementary education; a man who, passionately loving the people in spite of their ignorance and vices, sought to teach and raise them even before they had made themselves feared*; a man who, in his ardent desire to help humanity, became, in turn, theologian, lawyer, agriculturalist, manufacturer, author, journalist, and schoolmaster; a man who, amid flattery from kings and people, never swerved a moment from his course; a man, finally, whose bold and original genius was, to the very last, combined with the openness, simplicity, and absolute trust of a child.' (From de Guimps)

Descriptions by Vulliemin, former pupil of Yverdon and later a famous historian

1. 'Pestalozzi had a stocky, medium-sized body, more skinny than strong. At first glance he had an extremely ugly face... full of small-pox scars and full of wrinkles... As soon as he started to talk, his whole face was full of life and expression, and the grey ugly eyes were full of spirit, love, and gentleness. His hair was very bristly and unruly, his clothes were neglected. He never wore a scarf or a bow, which was fashionable at that time, except if a high visitor was expected, then he would throw it away as soon as he [the visitor] turned his back. A large brown coat without shape or pockets protected him against the weather. His stockings were usually hanging over his shoes and a heavy cap covered his head.' (From Downs)

2. 'Imagine, children, a very ugly man whose hair stood on end, whose face was deeply pitted with small-pox and covered with red blotches, with a ragged, untrimmed beard, without a necktie, with trousers... hanging in folds over stockings that were down over his clumsy shoes. Add to this an unsteady, jerky walk, eyes which sometimes opened wide and blazed with fire, and sometimes were half closed as if given up to inner observation. Think, too, of features which now expressed deep sadness and now the most benign happiness, and of a voice whose utterance was sometimes slow and sometimes quick, sometimes soft and melodious, and sometimes thunderously loud. This is a picture of him whom we called Father Pestalozzi.'

'Him we loved; we all loved him, for he loved us all. Occasionally we did not see him for a time, and we were quite sad, so heartily did we love him; when he appeared again we could not take our eyes away from him.' (From Green (1))

Description by Ritter, who visited Yverdon and who later became a famous geographer

'What Ritter saw at Yverdon filled him with admiration and respect. He felt that he was in the presence of an exceptional nature, of a great-souled self-sacrificing man, who was entirely possessed by a stimulating and original idea, and in whom childlike simplicity and humility mingled with unbounded confidence in the greatness of the task he had set himself to do. Transported thus into a world that was new to him, Ritter could not but feel its elevating and ennobling influence.' (From de Guimps)

Pestalozzi's own description of himself

"When I read his books", [Pestalozzi]... writes of himself, "I think he is almost a Brother Claus" [Niclaus von der Flüe, a Swiss monk of the fifteenth century for whom Pestalozzi had a great admiration]. "When I see him with my eyes I feel he is a poor devil; and when I hear people talk of him I believe he is trying to empty the sea with a spoon." More than once he quotes Lavater, his old friend, now dead, who knew only too well his carelessness but also his abilities. "I would not trust him to look after my henhouse," he had said; "but if I were king I would make him my first counsellor." (From Silber)

Descriptions by Silber, biographer of Pestalozzi

1. Pestalozzi 'has been described as a Christian as well as a humanist, as a representative of the Enlightenment and as a mystic, as a liberal, a socialist, a conservative, and a revolutionary, as an educationalist, a social reformer, or a political philosopher.' (From Silber)

2. 'A remarkable characteristic of Pestalozzi was his ability to divine the inner needs of people, though he was usually blind to the externals of behaviour. A countless number of anecdotes have been told about his charity. When a child ran to him he would lift it up and kiss it. He would shake hands with a notorious criminal who frequently escaped from jail whenever he met him on his way to a closer confinement, give him a thaler [a coin] and say a few comforting words. ("If you had been taken care of when you were a child," he used to add, "you would not now be where you are".) When he met a beggar on the road he would give him all he had. Once, when his pockets were empty, he took off his silver buckles and arrived in town in shoes tied with straw. Another time, he rushed into the house of a friend and asked for the thalers he needed to hand to a woman giving birth to a child in a barn.' (From Silber)

3. 'Pestalozzi's most outstanding feature was his utter devotion to the well-being of men. He believed in the divine spark in every human being, but in himself it shone with a brighter than usual light. His goodness and benevolence rose to the highest form of Christian charity. The more was demanded of him, the more he was able to give and the happier he became. His self-denial was by ordinary standards excessive, yet to him it was the natural expression of an irresistible urge. He surrendered himself completely and never expected gratitude. Even his enemies had to admit that he was utterly disinterested.' (From Silber)

4. 'In 1818 in a small town in French Switzerland a man was standing in front of an assembly and making a speech. He was on the one hand looking back over his long and varied life, on the other looking forward towards the future of mankind.

The man was, of course, Pestalozzi, the occasion his 72nd birthday. If we had crept in at the back of this assembly, what would have been our reactions to the man giving the speech? At first, undoubtedly, we would have been almost unpleasantly surprised. For the man whose name at least was known throughout Europe, the man who in the 1770s had corresponded with the future Emperor of Austria, the man who in 1802 had gone to Paris to negotiate with Napoleon, who in 1814 had been embraced by the Tsar of Russia and been given an audience by the King of Prussia, this man was anything but prepossessing. His face was lined with smallpox scars and covered with freckles, his clothes hung about him rather than fitted him. And when he walked, one of his friends tells us, one was afraid he would trip up over his own feet. It would have been tempting for us to think, "What an odd fellow", shrug our shoulders and walk off.

'It is, however, all too easy to be misled by superficial outward appearances, and if we had paused a moment to listen to the speech, or if we had moved forward and looked more closely at the speaker's face, it would no longer have been possible for us to leave. Few people who met Pestalozzi remained unmoved by his words and facial expressions. There was, for instance, the little girl who lived in Brugg where Pestalozzi had retired at the end of his life. Someone had told her how original he was. "Shortly afterwards," she tells us, "I saw him standing in the entrance to the school. I hurried and tried to slip past him. But when I came close to him he looked at me so intently and lovingly that I shall never forget the moment as long as I live. His eyes shone and seemed to illuminate the dark corridor. He appeared to me to be an angel." It was not only children who found themselves irresistibly attracted by this extraordinary man. A German teacher who met him in 1811 described him as an old man who with a glance, by the magical sound of his voice, captured every heart, won everyone over to his cause. He seemed to be human love in person.' (From Pestalozzi Children's Village Trust Information Pack 1999, based on Silber)

Letter describing Pestalozzi, from Dr. Charles Mayo who was a follower of Pestalozzi and helped spread his ideas in England

Letters from Yverdon by a Clergyman of the Church of England [Dr. Charles Mayo]

Letter No. 28

Yverdon, Jan. 12th 1821

To I. L. A. Esq.,

My dear Friend,

Pestalozzi completes this day his 76th year. His grey hair, his care-worn countenance, his hollow eye and bent figure, proclaim that many days, and those days of trouble, have passed over his head. His heart, however, seems still young; the same warm and active benevolence, the same unconquerable hope, the same undoubting confidence, the same generous self-abandonment animate him now, that have led to the many sacrifices and have supported him under the many difficulties and trials of his eventful life.

In a thousand little traits of character which unconsciously escape him, I read the confirmation of his history. It is an affecting sight when the venerable object of the admiration of Emperors and Princes appears in the midst of his adopted children. Rich and poor, natives and foreigners, share alike his paternal caress and regard him with the same fearless attachment.

From the sacrifice of time, property and health for the benefit of a people who knew not how to value his merit, to the picking up of a child's plaything for the soothing of an infant's sorrow, Pestalozzi is ever prompt to obey the call of humanity and kindness. The sentiment of love reigns so powerfully in his heart that acts of the highest benevolence, of the most condescending good nature seem to require no effort, but appear the spontaneous manifestations of one over-ruling principle. I must tell you an anecdote, which simple as it is, shews [shows] at once the warmth and weakness which characterize his benevolence.

He was going to visit some friends at Berne, furnished with as much money as he was likely, under the circumstances, to want.

According to his usual practice, he falls into conversation with the first peasant to whom he has the opportunity of speaking.

He enquires into his means of subsistence, the number of his children, the wants and distresses of his family and so forth.

Becoming interested in the man's little story, Pestalozzi gives him the larger portion of the money which he has about him.

A similar case soon afterwards presents itself and the second recontre [meeting] drains his pockets of the last Kreutzer [coin]. He had nearly reached Berne when a wretched-looking mendicant [beggar] comes up to him soliciting relief. Again he fumbles in his pockets; but it is now in vain – what is to be done? He remembers that his buckles are of silver; he hastily takes them from his shoes, thrusts them into the beggar's hand and drives off.

Though regarded in Germany as the most extraordinary luminary and the profoundest practical philosopher of the age, though honoured with the most flattering testimonies of esteem and approbation by courts and universities, Pestalozzi is the most modest and unassuming of men. To all who take an interest in his method of education he addresses himself in the most touching expressions of gratitude, as if they conferred the greatest obligation by examining into the truth of his opinions and the utility of his plans. Never shall I forget my first introduction to him. He had been long expecting me, and his lively imagination had anticipated in different manners the probable result of our connexion.

Will he like me? Do you think I shall suit him? Were questions he was perpetually putting to our common friend. I had no sooner arrived than he hurried to meet me, and though I understood not the words he uttered, yet the tone of kindness, the affectionate pressure of the hand, the expression of benignity which lit up his countenance, all assured me I was welcome. Twenty times he rose from his seat, paced with quick but shuffling steps across the room, then, as if suddenly recollecting himself, hastened to place himself near me, to press once more both my hands in his and to mutter some unintelligible expressions of goodwill.

In one of the first conversations we had together, he told me how delighted he was that the English began to pay attention to his system, remarking that that union of exalted sentiments with practical good sense which characterizes the nation, renders it the most competent to appreciate and execute his plans.

"Examine my method," continued he with his noble candour, "adopt what you find good and reject what you cannot approve."

"We are doing something here towards the execution of my principles of education, but what we do is still very imperfect; it is in England that my views will be eventually realised."

You cannot conceive the interest which Pestalozzi awakens or the influence he insensibly ['unconsciously'] acquires. All the little barriers behind which reserve or suspicion teach us to entrench ourselves, fall before the child-like simplicity, the unaffected humility and the feminine tenderness of his heart. Self-interest is shamed into silence, while we listen to the aspirations of his boundless benevolence, and if one spark of generous feeling glows in the bosom, the elevated enthusiasm of his character must blow it into a flame. The powers of his original mind serve to maintain the interest which his character first excites. In conversation, however, he is most frequently a listener. Towards those with whom he lives in perfect intimacy he sometimes indulges in a playful but forcible raillery, careful meanwhile to avoid giving the slightest pain or uneasiness.

He is peculiarly successful in portraying some great character by two or three masterly strokes; in marking either in retrospect, or by anticipation, the influence of political events on national character or national prosperity; in characterizing the different methods of education in vogue, or in tracing the difference between his views and those of certain philosophers with which they have been confounded. There is nothing studied about him. Often as I have heard him enter on the subject of his system for the information of strangers, I do not recollect him to have taken it up twice from the same point of view. When we have conversed on these subjects, I have sometimes thought his ideas wild and his views impracticable. The faint and misty but still beautiful light which emanated from his mind I have regarded with a feeling of melancholy delight, for it seemed to indicate that the sun of his genius had set. Still I have been unable to dismiss from my mind his loose and ill-digested hints. After frequent reconsiderations of them they have appeared more clear and more feasible and I have subsequently traced their influence on the opinions I have adopted or on the plans of instruction which I have pursued.

Pestalozzi once known is never forgotten. I have talked with men who have not seen him for years or whom the current of events has separated from all intercourse with him. His honoured image lives as fresh in their memory as if their communication had never been suspended or broken. Anecdotes illustrating his benevolence are current in their families and their children anticipate the delight of one day receiving the parental caress of good father Pestalozzi. Many of my own countrymen who have enjoyed the privilege of his society will I am sure carry the remembrance of him to their graves. For myself – his unwearied kindness, his affectionate solicitude for my health and comfort, the numberless testimonies of his esteem and regard which I daily receive, are engraven on my heart in characters which can never be effaced.

It will ever be a source of proud satisfaction to me that Pestalozzi has honoured me with the title of friend, and should I attain myself to a good old age, my decline will be cheered with the remembrance that I have contributed, as he himself declares, to shed a happy serenity over this evening of his days. (From Silber)

Sources

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