

ROBERT GROSSETESTE: THE ROLE OF
EDUCATION IN THE REFORM OF
THIRTEENTH CENTURY
ENGLISH SOCIETY

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The thirteenth century was a period of centralization and reform in the Church, spearheaded by Pope Innocent III and the Lateran Council of 1215. This movement together with the rise of the universities led, among other things, to the encouragement of a new type of bishop—the scholar-bishop, a man who made a name for himself in the schools, and, as a result of his educational achievements, was called to an episcopal office.

The life of a good bishop was regarded as crowning both the contemplative and the active life. On the one hand, it was a life of prayer, fasting, meditation, and study; on the other, it was a life of visiting, reforming, and preaching. "He should be as the 'Pastor,' guiding and feeding and watching over his flock night and day, and prepared to suffer for it."¹ It was necessary, therefore, that the bishop must be not only devout and inspiring, but also well versed in theology and the workings of the dioceses and courts.

Hence there was in England a steady promotion of Oxford men, of whom an outstanding example is Grosseteste. Pantin tells us that of the seventy-eight bishops who ruled between 1215 and 1272, forty were *magistri* or university graduates, and of these, "thirty were men whose academic experience had been a factor in their promotion and careers."² The following table includes information about archbishops and bishops whose names the writer has found associated with Grosseteste's and/or with the increasing promotion of Oxford men, plus the names of contemporary bishops of Carlisle and Rochester. The table reveals: first, the large percentage of promotions of the reforming scholar-bishop type; second, the dearth of information concerning the bishops of lesser dioceses such as Carlisle and Rochester (indicating that they did not receive the service of well-educated or prominent men); third, the vastness of Grosseteste's influence; and fourth, some influences upon Grosseteste himself.

NAME	UNIVERSITY TRAINING	OFFICE HELD	DATES	SIMILARITIES TO, OR CONTACTS WITH, GROSSETESTE
Stephen Langton	M.A. and D.Th., Paris	Archbishop of Canterbury	1206-1228	Like Grosseteste, he acquired a reputation for learning and holiness. He helped to set the standard of achievement by issuing constitutions which probably influenced Grosseteste's. In the political field, Grosseteste applied Langton's policy.
Edmund Rich (of Abingdon)	B.Th., Paris; D.Th., Oxford. Lectured in arts and later in theology.	Archbishop of Canterbury	1233-1240	Some say that Grosseteste was his pupil, but there is no proof of this.
Boniface of Savoy		Archbishop of Canterbury	1241-1270	Grosseteste welcomed him in 1244, and begged him to prevail on the king to end a vacancy of the see of Winchester arising from the resistance of the chapter to the nomination of another of the king's uncles. Boniface complied. He returned to be enthroned at Canterbury in 1249. His main object was to amass money, and for this purpose he copied Grosseteste in instituting a vigorous visitation of his diocese. What Grosseteste undertook to restore discipline, Boniface pursued to impose fines. He realized his unfitness for the post of archbishop and was counselled by Grosseteste.

NAME	UNIVERSITY TRAINING	OFFICE HELD	DATES	SIMILARITIES TO, OR CONTACTS WITH, GROSSETESTE
Robert Kilwardby	M.A., Paris; regent 1237-45; M.A., Oxford; B.Th., 1250; D.Th., 1254.	Archbishop of Canterbury	1272-1278	Kilwardby was another typical scholar-bishop. He was the author of many works on grammar, philosophy, and theology.
John Pecham	Studied arts at Paris, then Oxford; M.Th., Paris, 1269; D.Th., Oxford.	Archbishop of Canterbury	1279-1292	Like Grosseteste, he lectured to the Franciscans, campaigned against clerical abuses, and, in general pursued a reforming policy.
Robert Winchelsey	M.A., Paris; D.Th., Oxford, 1288.	Archbishop of Canterbury	1294-1313	Like Grosseteste, he opposed clerical taxation.
Walter Mauclerc	Studied at Oxford	Bishop of Carlisle	1223-1246	
Silvester Everdon	?	Bishop of Carlisle	1246-1254	
Richard Poore	?	Bishop of Chichester Bishop of Salisbury Bishop of Durham	1215-1217 1217-1228 1228-1237	Richard Poore was a man of ability and learning. Grosseteste may have been an archdeacon under him.
Richard Wych	Studied at Oxford; M.A., Paris; D.Cn.L., Oxford, 1235; studied theology at Orleans.	Bishop of Chichester	1244-1253	
Stephen Bersted	Gibbs and Lang state that he studied at Oxford; however, he is not in the <i>Oxford</i> Biographical Register.	Bishop of Chichester	1262-1287	

Hugh Pateshull		Bishop of Coventry	1239-1241	Grosseteste wrote to him concerning the abuse of dispensations, saying that they should be granted only with the increase of faith and charity in mind.
Roger Wesenhem	M.A., 1223; D.Th., Oxford.	Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield.	1245-1256	As dean, he represented the chapter of Lincoln at the Roman Curia in their dispute with Grosseteste over his visitatorial rights, and, owing to his close friendship with Grosseteste, was reproached by the chapter for inadequate defence of its case. He became Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield by papal provision on the recommendation of Grosseteste following the referral of a disputed election to the pope. As bishop, he followed the example of Grosseteste in enlisting the services of scholars, and in his articles of visitation issued in 1252. He also compiled <i>Instituta</i> for the guidance of his parochial clergy in their pastoral care.
Nicolas Farnham	Lectured on medicine, Bologna; Mag., Paris; incepted in theology, Oxford.	Bishop of Durham	1241-1249	He was a friend of Grosseteste who recommended his promotion to Durham and overcame his reluctance to accept election.
Ralph Maidstone	D.Th., Oxford	Bishop of Hereford	1234-1239	
Hugh of Wells	?	Bishop of Lincoln	1209-1235	His great work was the ordination of vicarages in those parishes the tithes of which had been appropriated to monastic bodies; this work was continued by Grosseteste. Grosseteste,

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Richard Gravesend	Mag., Oxford, 1244	Bishop of Lincoln	1280-1303	as archdeacon of Lincoln, conducted a visitation for him at Dunstable in 1233. He was among the first to recognize the commanding genius of Grosseteste, and was one of his earliest patrons. Grosseteste greatly admired him.
Henry of Sandwich	M.A., Oxford, 1238; D.Th., Oxford, 1256.	Bishop of London	1262-1273	Like Grosseteste, he was a supporter of Simon de Montfort.
William Ralegh	?	Bishop of Norwich Bishop of Winchester	1239-1243 1234-1250	He was reputed to be skilled in the laws of the realm.
John Gervals	M.A., Oxford, 1234; studied at Paris, 1251.	Bishop of Winchester	1262-1268	In 1238 he was appointed one of the three arbitrators in the dispute between Grosseteste and his chapter. In 1244, with Grosseteste, he made a strong protest against the king's treatment of William Ralegh. In 1252, he stood by Grosseteste in resisting the papal demand of a tenth for the king. Like Grosseteste, he was a vigorous administrator of his diocese.
Richard Wenden	?	Bishop of Rochester	1235-1250	
Sewal of Bovill	D.Th., Oxford, 1244	Archbishop of York	1256-1258	

Robert Grosseteste, a man of the humblest origins, was able, through his academic work and reforming zeal, to achieve one of the highest ecclesiastical positions. When he was elevated to the See of Lincoln in 1235, he must have been one of the most thoroughly equipped people for the office at that time. He had not only vast knowledge acquired at the universities of Paris and Oxford during the formative pontificate of Innocent III, and experience in organizing and directing studies at the University of Oxford as master, first chancellor, and first lector to the Franciscans, but also practical experience in the affairs of the diocese he was to rule, acquired as archdeacon under Hugh of Wells. Nor did he forsake his studies after becoming bishop. His scholarly life and his episcopal life were not separate entities but were interwoven; for he believed in the necessity of combining culture with missionary work, in reforming education to bring about reform of the clergy, and, through it, social reform. It is therefore interesting to examine his work in the schools, and then to see how he sought to apply his doctrines to the practical problems of his episcopal career.

Grosseteste's contributions to university education are fivefold: first, his work in organizing the University of Oxford and later in securing rights for its chancellor, influencing its constitution, and taking measures for its general well-being; second, his strengthening the Franciscans' connection with the university to promote the revival of learning and also the revival of religion; third, his systematization of the studies of the university curriculum; fourth, his contributions to literature; and fifth, his efforts to promote the revival of Greek and Hebrew studies and his achievements in the work of translation. His influence on the organization of Oxford University must date from its earliest times, for he was a master as early as 1189,³ and became its first chancellor about 1214. His concern for its welfare continued unabated after his elevation to the See of Lincoln.

In 1238 he defended its liberties and allayed the differences that had arisen in consequence of the attack upon Cardinal Otho at Osney. . . . In 1244 . . . a royal charter was procured, doubtless through Grosseteste's efforts, by which the Jews of Oxford were forbidden to take more than twopence in the pound per week as interest from the scholars, and a definite jurisdiction was granted to the Chancellor in all actions concerning debts, rents, and prices, transactions relating to horses, clothing, and provisions, and all other "contracts of movables in which one party was a clerk."⁴

It conferred upon the Chancellor "a civil jurisdiction in addition to the spiritual jurisdiction which he already possessed by virtue

of the ordinary ecclesiastical law as the Bishop's representative.'⁵ Grosseteste also instituted the loan chests, the nearest approach to scholarships in the thirteenth century.⁶

Probably Grosseteste's most important activities at the University of Oxford were his work with the Franciscans. He endeavored to concentrate their energies on the evangelizing work assigned to them by their founder, while at the same time utilizing their services for the revival of both learning and religion. His action

. . . brought the university into touch with a great spiritual and moral influence which was calculated and qualified to appeal to the people as a whole, whilst at the same time it imparted to the friars a culture to which they would not otherwise have attained. Every friar who passed from the Franciscan school at Oxford to do his duty in the world in accordance with his calling, would thus carry with him, and be able to convey to others, some of the learning he had acquired, or at any rate its spirit; and, in turn, every friar who came to the University would help to raise the tone of the studies, and to direct them to the worthiest purposes.⁷

To achieve this end, Grosseteste frequently intervened to secure such relaxation of the rules of the Order as would enable individuals to obtain books and other means of study. The tradition of learning which Grosseteste established there made the Oxford house "the training ground for teachers throughout the English province, attracted students from abroad, and provided teachers for continental friaries."⁸

The third important sphere of activity was the studies and methods of the university. Early in his career he set down his views on the nature and role of the liberal arts.⁹ Since people err due to ignorance, the affections, and the feebleness of the flesh and imperfections of the body, the seven liberal arts are necessary to help cleanse human operation from error and lead it on to perfection.¹⁰ Grammar teaches people to understand rightly and to express what is understood correctly in order to convey it to others. Logic teaches them to judge what is understood and to discuss it in accordance with the operations of reason. Rhetoric sets their affections in motion. Music is a universal art directing all knowledge, dealing as it does not only with sounds, gestures, instruments, things celestial and non-celestial, but also with the four elements and the inner structure of all things composed of those elements, since upon them depends the harmony of the world. Arithmetic and geometry teach people "to divide what is united or unite what

is separated, or order or place or extract figures.”¹¹ Astronomy teaches them the movements of the stars, enabling them to discern the place of the world and the space of time, and helping them to perform successfully various tasks associated with such occupations as agriculture and medicine. These studies are the attendants on natural philosophy and on ethics.

Later, Grosseteste developed an absorbing interest in mathematics as the dialectical instrument for the development of philosophy. As a result, what had formerly been a search for God in things became the first systematic experimental investigation of things. Thus he both gave a stimulus to the study of natural science for an understanding of the Scriptures, and contributed to the study of science itself.

Whereas in all other departments of thought and learning Grosseteste represented a progressive force, in theology he represented mainly a conservative one. Indications are that he was loyal to the methods used previously at Paris where, by Grosseteste's time, speculative theology and a desire to synthesize theology with the new philosophy had replaced the older “Biblical” theology. Following the old Paris tradition, theology and canon law were taught with direct reference to ecclesiastical problems. The duties of the master of theology were to teach, to hold disputations, and to preach. Thus the potential priest or bishop would attend lectures at which the master would expound the meaning of the Scriptures, explaining textual difficulties, raising questions and problems of contemporary interest (doctrinal, moral, and practical), and providing material for sermons. In 1246, Grosseteste obtained from Innocent IV a bull to prevent any of the scholars at Oxford from teaching in any faculty unless they had been examined as they would be at Paris and approved by the Bishop or his deputies. In the same year, he wrote a letter to the Regent Master of Theology at Oxford urging a good foundation of Scriptural knowledge. He stated that this knowledge was best inculcated during the morning hours and that the regular lectures at this time should be taken from the Old or New Testament. All other branches of knowledge should be subordinated to Biblical study. His indignation was aroused by those who studied medicine, civil and canon law, and other sciences for personal gain; these studies should be pursued for the effective discharge of pastoral duties. He was concerned about the need for and lack of good preachers and was convinced

that it was impossible to have good preachers unless they were well-versed in Biblical studies.

Closely allied to his emphasis on the study of the Bible was Grosseteste's interest in the languages in which the Bible was written—Greek and Hebrew. He translated into Latin from Greek many works, of which the most important were *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, a treatise ascribed to Dionysius the Areopagite, and *Nicomachean Ethics*. However, the main importance of his work as a pioneer in the study of Greek lies in the impulse he gave to the efforts of others, rather than the results he achieved himself. As Bishop of Lincoln, he invited Greeks to England and arranged for Greek manuscripts to be brought from Athens, Constantinople, and elsewhere. He also promoted the study of Hebrew. Through his work in this field, he "opened new horizons to theology, ethics and sociology, and inaugurated a new era in the study of moral philosophy."¹²

A fifth contribution to the world of scholarship was Grosseteste's literary works. In theology he was one of the most prolific writers of the Middle Ages. Bibliographers mention the titles of between two and three hundred of his sermons, more than sixty of his longer treatises, and a collection of one hundred forty-seven *Dicta*, or short discourses on particular points of Christian doctrine and Scriptural interpretation.¹³ In philosophy he wrote no single comprehensive work. Among his longer philosophical works are the *Hexaameron* and the commentary on *Posterior Analytics*. His shorter philosophical writings include *On the One Form of All Things*, *On Intelligences*, *On the Order of Emanation of Effects from God*, and *On Free Will*. In the sciences, he wrote treatises on a wide range of topics such as optics, mathematics, cosmology, and astronomy. They include *On Color*, *On Lines, Angles and Figures*, *On the Sphere*, *On the Movements of Heavenly Bodies*, *On the Rainbow*, and *On Comets*.

Robert Grosseteste hoped to secure, through his educational work, a peaceful reform in the Church and thence in politics and society at large. The keynote of all his activities was his fundamental idea that the supreme end was the cure of souls and that only the best brains and energy available were good enough for this job. With this overpowering sense of the obligations of the pastoral charge, he entered with fearless determination upon a

course of action calculated to raise the educational and moral level of the clergy.

One of his first acts was to obtain the help of able and learned men: John of St. Giles, Geoffrey of Clive, Thomas Wallensis, and a number of canons for administrative work; the Dominicans and Franciscans for pastoral work. This was a practice he continued throughout his life.

Grosseteste's Rolls show that during his episcopate clergy instituted to parochial care with the title "Magister" prefixed to their names, indicating that they were graduates, represent between thirteen and fourteen percent of the whole number instituted.¹⁴

He rejected nominees to benefices who were illiterate or immoral. Often he enabled rejected candidates to procure a proper education, either by giving them a contribution, or, as in the case of Robert de Melkeley, rector of Clothall, and the Archdeacon of Buckingham, by obtaining papal provision for them to receive the proceeds of their livings while they attended the school of the theological faculty. Thus, he accomplished three things: he attracted to the ranks of the clergy a better class of men; he promoted the increase of their knowledge with the object of increasing their efficiency; and he imparted to them a sense of dedication and of the nobility of their calling.

Second, he issued, between 1238 and 1243, constitutions which were designed to raise the standards of the clergy in their preaching and teaching as well as in their moral conduct. Brief and practical,

... they began with what every priest should know—the ten commandments, the seven deadly sins, the seven sacraments, the creed—and go on to remind him, in simple detail, of his duties, how he should behave and what he should not do. He should allow no woman, whose presence might cause suspicion of evil, to live in his house, nor frequent taverns, nor engage in merchandise, nor act as bailiff, nor make profit of the goods entrusted to him, nor attend plays, nor game with dice, nor carry arms. The cemetery should be closed, no markets or games or lawsuits should be allowed in holy places, clandestine marriages should be forbidden, no layman, except perhaps the patron, should be with the clerks in the chancel during the service.¹⁵

Third, following a letter addressed to all his archdeacons pointing out the various abuses and how they could be rectified, Grosseteste embarked on a personal and thorough visitation of his diocese.

His

. . . object was to include within the scope of his visitation both the monastic houses and the parochial clergy, to reform their defects and raise their tone, and to secure the unity and harmony, as well as the efficiency, of the whole of the religious work performed within the diocese.¹⁶

His procedure was as follows: the clergy were summoned by deaneries, and the people were summoned, too, to hear the word of God and to bring their children to be confirmed. The Bishop preached to the clergy, and some friars preached to the people and heard confessions. After this, inquiries were made about the administration of the parishes, and necessary corrective measures were taken.

Fourth, for the edification of his clergy he wrote a manual of pastoral care entitled *The Temple of God*¹⁷ and another work entitled *The Art of Preaching*.¹⁸

Fifth, Grosseteste was one of the few men who saw clearly and disinterestedly the fact that the Church was the exploited, not the exploiter, of society, and he took measures to remedy the situation. The "Caesarian prelates," whom people like Wyclif denounced, were not religious men who had seized secular power, but rather secular administrators who, for the convenience of the government, disguised themselves as religious men.¹⁹ Since this exploitation reduced the efficiency of pastoral care by making it a thing of secondary importance, Grosseteste attempted to withdraw ecclesiastics from secular office, and to close ecclesiastical courts to all secular interference. This brings us to his political views.

In Grosseteste's theory of the relations between the Church and the State, the fundamental doctrine is the superiority of spiritual power over temporal power. This doctrine follows from his conviction of the primacy of the pastoral office and the salvation of souls, and from his belief in a centralized and hierarchical universe. He believed

. . . that the two swords, spiritual and material, both belong to the Church, the temporal to be wielded by the hand and ministry of the temporal princes, but at the nod and disposition of the princes of the Church. Whatever authority temporal princes have from God, they receive it through the Church.²⁰

We find many instances of his application of this doctrine to practical affairs. In 1236 he fought against the barons and judges to maintain the common law of the Church against the common law

of England regarding the legitimation by subsequent marriage of children born out of wedlock. In 1237 he urged the legate Otto to induce the king to stop his courts from encroaching on the business of the ecclesiastical courts.²¹ Such trespassing upon the rights of the Church Grosseteste considered equivalent to spiritual sabotage or spiritual murder, since the Church's jurisdiction was concerned with eternal interests. And in 1240 and 1253, he opposed the taxation of the Church for the purposes of the king.

There is some indication that Grosseteste and Simon de Montfort were joint leaders of a constitutional party which aimed toward political and religious reform going hand in hand. However, there is little evidence to go on, and Grosseteste's death prevented any plans they may have had from achieving fruition.

In the social and economic spheres attempts were made by the Bishop to spread sound notions respecting the management of landed estates and of domestic households. He had Walter of Henley's *Treatise on Husbandry* translated from French to English, and wrote letters of advice to such people as the Countess of Winchester.

Did Grosseteste succeed in his efforts to reform English society? Certainly his influence was wide and lasting, though not equally strong in all fields. He was in a good position to exercise a remarkable influence on the intellectual life of the thirteenth century, first as an undergraduate at the University of Oxford, and later as Chancellor of the University and lecturer to the Franciscans. In the latter position particularly, his attempt to combine the revival of learning with the revival of religion was justified by its results. The subsequent history of the Franciscan school at Oxford and the influence which the Order exercised in England as compared with other countries attests to his success.

Nowhere has the Franciscan Order done so much as in England for the advancement and dissemination of knowledge, nowhere has it furnished so long a list of distinguished names, and nowhere has it presented so clean a record of useful work. With few exceptions every really great man of learning belonging to the Order came from these islands. It was from the very school at which Grosseteste was first lecturer, and at which Adam Marsh, his most intimate friend, subsequently read that produced Richard of Coventry, Roger Bacon, John Wallensis, Thomas Dockyng, Thomas of Bungay, Archbishop Peccham, Richard Middleton, Duns Scotus, Ockham, and Burley,²²

who, in turn, exerted their influence upon society. The Oxford school received foreign students and sent out professors to Lyons, Paris, and Cologne. Ireland, Denmark, France, and Germany all made repeated requests for English friars. And the credit for this influence of the English school must be accorded to Grosseteste more than to any other man.

His writing was extensive, versatile, and significant in the history of thought. Few books can be found in the two centuries that followed his time which do not contain some quotations from his works. His literary contributions fall into two categories: his commentaries on Aristotle and the Bible, and other original treatises; and his translations from the Greek. These latter, in particular, gave impetus to intellectual progress by the opening up of an access to new modes of thought and sources of information. He may thus be regarded as a forerunner of the Renaissance.

Grosseteste set the standard of achievement, not only in erudition, but also in the performance of pastoral duties. His example was infectious, and

. . . even in the years directly following his death, his example was quoted by such churchmen as Mathew Paris and Adam Marsh as one most desirable for a bishop to follow. To his contemporaries, as to us, he appeared the "type" of the good bishop.²³

In his efforts to reform the Church from within, by unflinching fearlessness in the performance of his episcopal office, by removal of existing abuses, and by constant appeals to the Scriptures as the paramount authority in matters of faith, he has been considered pioneer and precursor of the movement which led to the Reformation.²⁴ His views profoundly affected such religious leaders as John Wyclif and John Hus.

Since the ruling class of thirteenth-century England was a small and intimate body, the personal relations of a man like Grosseteste could play an important part in the relations of Church and State. He sought to apply to new conditions

. . . the policy associated with the name of Stephen Langton, endeavored to combine into one effort the struggle of the clergy for the liberties of the Church with the struggle of the laity for the liberties of the nation, imbued Simon de Montfort with principles of "truth and justice" . . . and at the same time, by his effort to reconcile him with his sovereign and by the whole tenor of his actions, showed

that, had he lived a few years longer, his influence would have been directed to the task of achieving by peaceful means the constitutional advance brought about by those who, taking the sword, perished by the sword.²⁵

Having assessed Robert Grosseteste's ideas and influences, the writer cannot but conclude that, although with his flaming intensity he raised the issues of the day to loftier heights than others could reach, he definitely achieved (in part posthumously) some of the reforms to which he aspired.

NOTES

1. Marion Gibbs and Jane Lane, *Bishops and Reform 1215-1272*, Oxford University Press, 1934, 1.
2. W. A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century*, (Cambridge University Press, 1955), 10.
3. Josiah C. Russell, "Phases of Grosseteste's Intellectual Life," *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 40 (1950), 93.
4. Francis S. Stevenson, *Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln* (London, 1899), 234-5.
5. Francis S. Stevenson, *ibid.*, 235.
6. *Ibid.*, 237.
7. *Ibid.*, 73-4.
8. A. C. Crombie, *Robert Grosseteste and the Origins of Experimental Science*, (Oxford, 1953), 135.
9. *De Artibus Liberalibus* may have been his earliest work.
10. D. A. Callus, "Robert Grosseteste as Scholar," *Robert Grosseteste, Scholar and Bishop* (Oxford, 1955), 16ff.
11. D. A. Callus, *ibid.*, 17.
12. D. A. Callus, *ibid.*, 38.
13. Francis S. Stevenson, *op. cit.*, 31-2.
14. James Herbert Srawley, "Grosseteste's Administration of the Diocese of Lincoln," in D. A. Callus, *op. cit.*, 169-170.
15. Sir Maurice Wosicke, *The Thirteenth Century 1216-1307*, (Oxford, 1953), 452.
16. Francis S. Stevenson, *op. cit.*, 130.
17. For description see W. A. Pantin, *op. cit.*, 193, 227-8.
18. For description see James Herbert Srawley, *op. cit.*, 170.
19. W. A. Pantin, *op. cit.*, 44.
20. W. A. Pantin, "Grosseteste's Relations with the Papacy and the Crown," in D. A. Callus, *op. cit.*, 197.
21. See W. A. Pantin, *op. cit.*, 200 for specific grievances.
22. Francis S. Stevenson, *op. cit.*, 75.
23. Marion Gibbs and Jane Lang, *op. cit.*, 41.
24. Francis S. Stevenson, *op. cit.*, 336.
25. Francis S. Stevenson, *op. cit.*, 337.