A PUBLIC SPIRIT

George H. Atkinson’s Written Legacy

Transcribed and with a foreword by Donald J. Sevetson
Our treasure lies in the beehive of our knowledge. We are perpetually on the way thither, being by nature [...] honey gatherers of the mind.

Friedrich Nietzsche

The “Bee Tree”, an iconic ivy-covered tree that stood on the Pacific University campus for many years, was already old and hollow when pioneer Tabitha Brown arrived in Oregon in 1846. Mrs. Brown started a home for orphans that would grow into Pacific University. According to the Forest Grove News-Times, the tree was “said to have housed a swarm of bees who furnished the little old lady with honey which she sold to buy provisions for her orphan children.”
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George (1819-89) and Nancy (1815-95) Atkinson arrived in Oregon from Vermont in 1848. Their first location was Oregon City. They moved in 1863 to Portland, where they lived the rest of their lives. George’s primary contributions to life in the new region state were as a Congregational missionary and as a founder and early shaper of both public and private education. I recently published his biography (*Atkinson: Pioneer Oregon Educator*, CreateSpace, 2011).

Early in that work I described the way in which research caused a change in my understanding and appreciation of him:

> When I began my study of George Atkinson I thought that his main significance was as a missionary, and that his efforts for public education were an adjunct to that role. I was well aware that the Protestant Reformation had stressed placing the Bible in the hands of the laity. I assumed that that was what motivated him to advocate education for all.

What I found was quite different. George Atkinson was a seventh generation New Englander. He believed that the church and the school are the engines that make the whole community moral and prosperous. He saw that schools had economic, social and political importance. I have concluded, as the title of this work states, that his primary importance in Oregon was in the field of education. Much of his pastoral and missionary life was a painfully difficult struggle.

I also learned that his legacy of published work was notable for its volume, as well as for the range of things he both knew about, and was able to discuss in detail. He was an articulate, influential voice in his adopted region.\(^1\)

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This publication is, from one perspective, a continuation of the biography. That work had been limited, of necessity, in the number and length of quotations from Atkinson’s longer writings. This work reproduces much of his writing fully. The material found here will illustrate the breadth of Atkinson’s interests, the depth of his knowledge, and the keenness of his intellect. Of equal, if not greater, importance, is that it offers a window into public discourse during the four decades of Atkinson’s presence in Oregon.

Many of these writings appeared in the Oregonian, Portland’s major newspaper. Two were also published in the Annual Reports of the Oregon Legislature. One is a letter sent to the secretaries of the American Home Missionary Society, which commissioned him, sent him to Oregon, and gave him financial stipends during more than twenty-five of his forty years of work in Oregon and Washington.

I am profoundly grateful to Pacific University, Forest Grove, Oregon for its interest in my “Atkinson Project.” Special mention goes to three librarians at Pacific: Marita Kunkel, University Librarian; Eva Guggemos, Archives/Special Collections and Instructional Services Librarian; and Isaac Gilman, Scholarly Communications and Publishing Services Librarian. They have generously shared their outstanding professional gifts, while remaining patient, encouraging and enthusiastic. Without them this book would never have been completed. Thank you, Boxers!

My deep gratitude goes to my wife Mary Louise, who has tolerated and even supported my long and winding journey through George Atkinson’s legacy. And we both thank Ann and David Munro of Portland, who gathered some thirty descendants of George Atkinson together one evening. That clan pronounced us honorary members of the family. We hope that this book gives them even more reasons to be proud of their ancestor.

I will admit that I still have a sense of awe over the sheer volume of Atkinson’s work. I suspect that readers will experience it as well. A look at the earlier biography will increase that awe. During his forty year residence he made eight trips to New England as well as one to Alaska, and visited countless schools and churches. More than
four hundred of his letters, some quite lengthy, are extant. He even found time, as will be seen in this work, to be one of the passengers on the first train to travel east through the Columbia Gorge on its way to Walla Walla and Dayton, Washington. He also took the time to write that event up and telegraph it to the Oregonian.

In my earlier work I cited Patricia Nelson Limerick’s image of the ‘sustainable hero’, who does the right thing some of the time. She continues: “Sustainable heroism comes only in moments and glimpses, but they are moments and glimpses in which the universe lights up.”

Welcome to the writing and the universe of George Atkinson, a “public spirit” who qualifies as a “sustainable hero.”

Donald J. Sevetson
Portland, Oregon
October 2015

Note: All of the works in the book have been copied from original or microfilmed material. In a few cases [marked by (?)] words could not be deciphered. The only changes or edits made were done for clarity. All italics are in the originals.

[ii] Sevetson, 1.
INTRODUCTION

George H. Atkinson was not yet thirty when he accepted the invitation of the American Home Missionary Society (AHMS) to travel to Oregon to serve in their newly opening missionary field there. Only an accident of fate kept Atkinson from his original plan to serve in a foreign mission in Africa. This change of plans was hugely providential for Oregon. Over the next forty years, until his death in 1889, George Atkinson served as a powerful influence in the young state. He dedicated his life not only to his work as the leader and founder of Congregational churches in Oregon and Washington, but also to a much broader array of interests. And while education was foremost among them—and he is often called the “father of public education in Oregon”—education was not, for Atkinson, a narrow enterprise. It had economic and political importance, including language, history, science, engineering, business, and moral studies.

The rich and diverse quality of Atkinson’s interests is evident in the collection of his writings, selected and transcribed by his biographer, Donald Sevetson, which comprise this book. Sevetson, himself a United Church of Christ minister (now retired), began his journey with George Atkinson over twenty years ago with a project to transcribe Atkinson’s letters. That project soon grew into a more intensive study of the man and resulted in a biography, Atkinson: Pioneer Oregon Educator, published in 2011. After that publication, Sevetson felt strongly that many of Atkinson’s original writings needed to be published in order to supplement the biography and to provide, as Sevetson writes in the foreword to this book, “a window into public discourse during the four decades of Atkinson’s presence in Oregon.” Thus, A Public Spirit: George H. Atkinson’s Written Legacy came to be.

In the eight chapters of A Public Spirit we find evidence of the broad perspective that led George Atkinson to assume public leadership in subjects as diverse and significant as railroads, prisons, public
and private schools, Native American relationships, agriculture, engineering, and commerce.

The writings include a report to the AHMS, exploring the Puget Sound region’s potential for missionaries to be employed there. Atkinson is enthusiastic: “I had thought it (the western portion of the Washington Territory) unworthy of the noble name it bears, but my conviction now is that this rising state will be among the foremost in the union and worthy of him, who was first in the hearts of his countrymen.”

Also included is Atkinson’s 1866 report to the Oregon House and Senate, reporting on his visits to seven penitentiaries, including prisons on the east coast, the Midwest, and San Quentin in California. The scope alone of those visits is impressive, given the year, as is his 27-point summary, ranging from light and ventilation to the issue of inconsistent, unjust prison sentences.

In articles written for the Oregonian in 1876, 1877, and 1878, Atkinson advocated for the completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad, which had become a controversial issue; Atkinson accused one Oregon senator of attempting to sabotage the effort. Many of these articles were later republished by the Portland Board of Trade in a booklet, “The Northwest Coast.” That publication is included in its entirety in chapter six of A Public Spirit.

Interestingly, it was not until the late 1870s that we find Atkinson turning his attention to Native American issues in a series of articles appearing in the Oregonian. His advocacy for policies of integration, while we see now as flawed, were expressed in opposition to proposed military solutions and show a deep respect for Native American lives.

Atkinson’s greatest influence was on education in Oregon. He was tireless in his efforts to formulate and administer educational programs and institutions. The documents show that he believed that universal public education was foundational for a healthy, prosperous regional community. He saw secondary and post-secondary education, both public and private, as essential to the role and the contributions of education for the wider good.
INTRODUCTION

Pacific University was the early beneficiary of George Atkinson’s commitment to education. It was he who called the meeting (in Oregon City in 1848) that established the Board of Trustees of Tualatin Academy. Atkinson served on the first Board of the Academy, and later served as a Trustee for Pacific University, until his death. His two histories of Pacific University, written in 1876 and 1888, comprise the final chapters of this book.

The subjects in this book vary and speak to the intellectual depth and civic engagement of this “public spirit.” Taken together, this collection of George Atkinson’s writings introduces us to his rich and important legacy. U.S. Commissioner of Education (1870-86) John Eaton understood the impressive capacity of George Atkinson when he wrote, “Dr. Atkinson was one of the most completely rounded men I ever knew, and I shall always be his debtor.”

Pacific University is proud of, and grateful for, the vision and dedication of George Atkinson, who so influenced Oregon’s history in the latter half of the 19th century. Likewise, Pacific University Libraries is pleased to publish A Public Spirit: George H. Atkinson’s Written Legacy as the first book offered under our new imprint Bee Tree Books. We imagine Dr. Atkinson would have found this quite fitting, as do we. Bee Tree Books takes its name from a story about Tabitha Brown, who founded the orphan school that begins Pacific University’s history. The story goes that she harvested honey from a tree on campus to support the young orphans she sought to educate. Bee Tree Books carries on this commitment of our early pioneers, George Atkinson and Tabitha Brown, to education and the sharing of knowledge.

Marita Kunkel
University Librarian
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