

WHAT SHALL WE TEACH?

I.

FOR dispirited educationists an excellent tonic is Mr. George Sampson's *English for the English* (C.U.P., cheap edition, 2/6d.). Its subject is the education of children up to the age of fifteen ; but its importance is that much of it has a wider application, because the author has a clear conception of education in its bearing on problems of contemporary civilization. The book may be commended to anyone who has doubts about that relationship ; it is likely to fertilize discussion and energize effort. Many oppressive fallacies are exploded—amongst others, the vested interest of the classics, 'subject' teaching, vocational training, the plot-and-character approach to literature, essay-writing on Lamb-lines, and so on—but it is not a mere field-day of iconoclasm. His particular, practical recommendations may provoke dissent : the energy and intelligence that produced them are wholly admirable. National life would be the richer for more teachers of such quality, and to gropers in the educational underworld light such as this is an occasion for enthusiasm. Some quotations will serve to introduce tentative suggestions for work with immediately pre-certificate forms.

To start with an acceptable enough generalization, the end of education is 'to develop the mind and soul of the children,' and especially to ensure emotional development. As we all know, as soon as he leaves school, everything is against a boy's becoming adult, even more than it was at school. At the top level the aim is to develop, in those potentially equipped, a mind critical, self-reliant and armed with standards of judgment, not imposed but attained through the exercise of trained discrimination ; much work at a university level must be attempted, because it is unlikely that they will chance on further education after school. Here, according to Mr. Sampson's convincing argument, English is of supreme

importance as the key-subject. What he says of elementary school-children applies to everyone :

English is thus not merely something for them to learn, but the condition of their learning everything else. All their immediate and future intellectual progress, all their developing emotional powers, all their social and industrial existence must be built, if they are to be built successfully and enduringly, upon the foundation of language communicated and communicable (p. 27).

English is not really a subject at all. It is a condition of existence rather than a subject of instruction (p. 25).

It is for English people the whole means of expression, the attainment of which makes them articulate and intelligible human beings, able to inherit the past, to possess the present and to confront the future. It is English in this sense that we must teach our children all day long, at all stages of their school life . . . not information, but the control and application of their own natural forces, so that they may learn gradually how to use and command the methods, tools, and processes of intellectual life for themselves (p. 11).

Of this English there are two requirements. First, the provision of a defence against environment (' It is the purpose of education, not to prepare children *for* their occupations, but to prepare children *against* their occupations '), and second, the development of reading capacity. It is a superficial view which regards the former as ' destructive,' ' negative,' and the latter as positive: the mind aware of its cultural surroundings will be more adequate to literature, and thus more fit for existence. So that for junior work I should attempt something on the lines of *Culture and Environment*. Though more specialized books from that angle need devising by the appropriate experts, to deal for example with what to do about the cinema, and with recommendations for the training of musical taste, by practical criticism of dance tunes with good music perhaps.

The writer of this note once heard two boys deriding the twelve-year-old car of another boy's parent. One needn't attach too much importance to this, but it's an indication of what has to be combatted, and suggests that hardly any age is too early for

exciting a consciousness of the power age, its abnormality, and the emergent problems, mass-production and 'under-consumption,' the effects on living, why cars are made to wear out quickly, the active and passive use of leisure, urban helplessness, technological tenuousness, and so on. This can be done in several 'subjects,' which taught in this way can be given a much needed coherence and significance; a common angle of approach would save much of the energy dissipated in switching inconsequently from subject to subject, meaningless in isolation. Of work at fifteen and below a correspondent says 'it is a mistake to try what one might call theoretical culture before they have acquired some actual culture . . . the school's job is to make them acquire it before they are sixteen or seventeen by encouraging the right environment, reading and use of leisure rather than by actual teaching and explanation. A boy will never grasp why you condemn certain abuses until he has learnt some absolute values (or begun to learn them) . . . the greatest impoverishment that a mechanical life has brought is the lack of personal knowledge from the earliest childhood, of nature and the countryside.' Towards the acquisition of such standards help may be found in the works of W. Wilkinson (Bles, 3/6d.), Adrian Bell (Cobden-Sanderson, 3/6d.), Constantin-Weyer's *Forest Wild* (Routledge, 7/6d.), *Erewhon* (Dent, 2/-), Cobbett's *Rural Rides* (Dent, 3/6d.), some of Hardy's novels, the first story in E. M. Forster's *The Eternal Moment* (Arnold) compared perhaps with *Huckleberry Finn* (Chatto, 3/6d.), etc. Additions could probably be made to this short list of books calculated to prompt a sceptical attitude towards mechanical progress and material standards of living, by exposing them to contrast with rural civilization, and in other ways. The publications connected with the C.P.R.E. and the D.I.A. (6 Queen Square, Bloomsbury, W.C.1) are helpful for this purpose: junior artists might for instance redesign their local garages, and learn something of town-planning, so that when they become city fathers they may have some civic sense. Perhaps it is too much to hope that the Board of Education may some day regularly promote the work of the C.P.R.E. in schools, by introducing elementary sociology. With a start on such lines, the products of elementary education especially would be less perfectly adapted for exploitation.

II.

Outworn loyalties absorbed from parents, education, and the environment generally have to be displaced—nationalism, false patriotism, and so on. Displacement alone incurs the charge of cynicism ; and inherited sanctions, *e.g.* religious, may be made to help—any bias towards health should be given direction. Patriotism, not sufficiently distinguished from jingoism by the enlightened, can be diverted into irrigant channels ; by enquiring, for example, which is the true patriot, Lord Lloyd, President of the Navy League, propagandizing for armament and its vested interest, or the person who fights for his village, town or country against the suburbanizing gangrene by supporting the C.P.R.E. A lazy can be turned into an active patriotism ; it should not be left for canalization by Lord Beaverbrook and the brewing cohort.

Especially in history, if forcible feeding for next year's certifying does not prevail, there are opportunities for inspecting many current fallacies—competition, business efficiency, work for work's sake, the assumption that the manual labourer is a dangerous animal to be starved into non-striking submission, economy and spending ramps, the penal system and so on. In history-cum-geography, the study of various cultures (Chinese, Mexican, Corean) is a pursuit which doesn't need 'making interesting,' and the topic of war seems to be a fascinating one. Perhaps it is superfluous to commend *The Secret International* (U.D.C., 6d.) or its offspring *The Bloody Traffic*, the Chemical Warfare chapter from *What will be the Character of a New War ?* (Gollancz, 5/-), which the publisher reprinted and distributed free (it would be a service to continue it for sale as a pamphlet), some of Sir Norman Angell's books, and to revive curiosity, the *Daily Express* book of war photographs. There seem to be a few interesting junior history books of the quality of those produced by Batsfords, Van Loon's work (Harrap) and D. H. Lawrence's *Movements in European History* (Oxford).

So much of what goes on within the educational machine being waste, it is imperative to utilize the slightest chances. Even Latin (perhaps through Classical History) might be made a cultural subject, if someone will show how. Again, a certain amount of time is spent in practising the *précis* required for examinations.

This is usually taught with collections of unprofitable historical passages, to which an obvious alternative is a tendentious selection of quotations from such books as Angell's *Press and the Organisation of Society*, the works of R. H. Tawney, Ponsonby's *Falsehood in Wartime*, Dr. Trotter's book on the herd, and those mentioned in preceding paragraphs. Here a start could be made on elementary literary criticism by showing how *Times* leaders and political speeches reduce to nothing when stripped of evasions and dead metaphor, in what way a Lamb essay is a heavily trimmed trifle, and by distinguishing between legitimate explication and smoke-screens.

This would at least involve close attention to words ; and all work requiring this will help to develop reading capacity. The simplest kind of practical criticism (e.g. the differentiation between weak and effective descriptions, etc., and criticism by pupils of each others' efforts to imitate a given style) can be introduced at 10-13 years. At this and the next stage there are exciting textbooks to be written—one for instance beginning by discovering the difference between an economical and a flabby treatment of similar points, and the ways in which politicians of opposed parties will deal with the same set of facts, and attaining some simple discussion of the emotive as opposed to the logical, or referential, use of words. There would be plenty of varied exercises with a detective interest. By the certifiable stage, criticism of the ending of *David Copperfield* in appropriate terms is within the reach of intelligent pupils. (There are some instructive specimens of corrupt prose in *A Strong Hand at the Helm*, Gollancz, 2/6d.). Probably not much poetry should be read, but that depends on the sort of pupil you have at the moment. Not unsubtle analysis of poetry (e.g. Blake's *Tyger*) can be profitable at as early as 10-11, and in this connection a correspondent suggests :

1. Detailed work on a poem is better than hasty readings of several, so long as it doesn't become tedious.

2. Inferior verse *can* be useful. But

The more *good* verse that is made familiar at that age the better—even if they only assimilate 10 per cent. of the total content. The problem is, is there enough good verse that can be used for such purposes?

From the peace or war issue mentioned above, may branch an interest in 'war poetry,' with opportunities at the 15-16 stage or earlier of desentimentalizing and introducing a new kind of poetry, by contrasting Owen's poems (Chatto, 3/6d.) with the posturing of Brooke (Benn, 6d.—cf. 'If I should die . . . ' with part of *Strange Meeting*) leading higher up in the school to the subtler comparison of Owen with the mere horror-reaction of Sassoon (Benn, 6d.). To compare Section IV, 'These fought in any case,' of Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (Faber, 3/6d.) with Binyon's *For the Fallen* (*Poems of To-day*) is too easy game for a sixth form. Where possible it is desirable to employ sheets of unsigned poems ; these can be duplicated at very cheap rates for thirty or more copies, which after use, should be carefully collected to avoid infringement of copyright. The training desiderated here should not lay any fresh burden upon learners ; it aims not at imposing a fresh apparatus, but at encouraging intelligence to develop where it exists. School time-tables need not more subjects but an improved apparatus to assimilate what they offer. Very likely it is mere prejudice which accounts for the observation that the proportion of intelligent curiosity, which seems just to preponderate in a first form, is reversed by the time the sixth form is reached.

III.

Various objections are by now audible. 'Ah,' it will be said, 'aren't you putting Ideas into the children's heads?' Or, 'Education other than that based upon free enquiry is undesirable.' In practice, you must put a good many ideas into their heads ; even if discredited by the best theories of education, it is necessitated and justified by the urgent shortage of time. In an ordinary school, all the time a literary education is striving to sharpen percipience and to provide standards, it is fighting a running engagement against the environment. Slight indoctrination may be incident, but so far from trying to produce a 'type' or to disseminate propaganda, one wants to provide the potentially intelligent with the equipment necessary for criticizing amongst other things their education. Again in practice one need not have much fear of type-moulding : forcible feeding defeats its own ends.

'You're wrong-headed ; what you need is a sound psychological basis' is another form of objection. One may agree that schools might well have a psychiatrist attached, for a good deal of misery might thus be obviated in boarding schools. The maladjustments caused by monasticism for instance seem to be radical and often permanent, and one comes across badly twisted cases (frequently caused by a bad home environment) where straightening must be preliminary to all else. But when psychology is put into practice, it cannot stand alone ; it cannot answer the query 'What kind of person do you consider desirable?' By any standards of psychology that one hears of, a person may be psychologically healthy, and yet be coarse and insensitive, according to the scale of values acquired through literature. Possibly also the emotional education to be had from the intelligent study of English might prevent minor disorders from reaching the psychiatrist.

Political workers may inquire 'What bearing has this educational preoccupation upon the really urgent problems of the day?' Or, if one asserts that a serious political platform will include proposals for education, 'Why do you not advocate the inculcation of some positive economic programme?' The argument comes, from those more concerned with political machinery than the ends to be worked for: 'The Walpole "culture" we all deplore is the product of the economic environment ; to enjoy a better you must do away with the environment.' That is truth, but only half-truth, and thus fatally disabling, because it stops short of what should be a central problem of politics, and falsifies the issues. In civilizations which have given a measure of satisfaction, the nutrition for, and the incitement to, life were provided by the culture which was rooted in and integral with the means of obtaining material livelihood. This state is unlikely to be duplicated in any conceivable future for the west, and if there is to be a culture, it must be independent of whatever economy is in operation, and its continuity be preserved by conscious effort. Once lost it is not likely to be recovered.

Education should be directed towards producing a consciousness of this situation. To quote from the leaflet outlining the policy of *Scrutiny* in education:¹ 'The political strength of the

¹To be obtained from the Editors.

movement is that it makes an entirely fresh approach to the essential problems of politics—an approach that circumvents old obstacles and impasses, because it goes behind and beneath the inveterate preconceptions and prejudices.’ To those who demand uncritical allegiance to one or another party formula, one can only offer the assurance that the education proposed would enable the young to diagnose contemporary civilization and mobilize some impetus to cure it. Again, to some this may appear flippant or solemn, and they will not be reassured if I say that this diagnosis will recognize some left-wing politicians to be as clearly symptoms of a decaying civilization as Sir Oswald Mosley or the Salvation Army, with whom indeed they have much in common—the easy escape, the simple solution, the conviction of self-righteousness. People educated in this way would not be easily knocked off their balance by emotive surges in undefined directions, but they would be more deeply revolutionary than many propagandists for the economic revolution which is urgently desirable, in that they would have a more radical insight into the ills of megapolitan civilization. Political enthusiasts of the simpler kind assure us that this or that must be done at once. Those who lack their virile confidence may fear that if one of the revolutionary programmes offered us were effected, we should be (culturally) in a worse because more ineluctable plight. This is not to disparage disinterested effort in the political sphere, or to deny its necessity. Obviously the more people seriously interested in politics the better. What we need to establish is a criterion of seriousness.

DENYS THOMPSON.

FLEET STREET AND PIERIAN ROSES¹

Conduct, on the other hand, the soul
‘ Which the highest cultures have nourished ’
To Fleet Street where
Dr. Johnson flourished ;

Beside this throughfare
The sale of half-hose has
Long since superseded the cultivation
Of Pierian roses.

‘ The excuse for setting down one’s life—the only excuse—is that one should give a picture of one’s time,’ Ford Madox Ford wrote in the introduction to his reminiscences, *Return to Yesterday*, published three years ago. It covers the first half of the period (from the Nineties to the present) that is reflected from another angle in Bernard Falk’s *He Laughed in Fleet Street* which, long ago in its fifth impression, has been described as ‘ the success of the autumn publishing season.’ The former attracted little notice when it appeared, which is an excuse for calling attention to it now, since its value, already considerable, is more than doubled by this collocation. Together these books present a sufficiently complete picture of the time preceding ours—1890 to 1914—and without much overlapping ; they reflect two slices, the upper and under, of that world, and it is an instructive exercise to compare the differences that result from living in the world of letters and living below it in the world of journalism.

¹*Bernard Falk : He Laughed in Fleet Street (1933).*
Ford Madox Ford : Return to Yesterday (1931).