

‘EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY’

A NEW ORDER IN ENGLISH EDUCATION, by H. C. Dent
(University of London Press, Ltd., 3/6).

THE UNIVERSITIES IN TRANSFORMATION, by Adolf Löwe
(The Christian News-Letter Books, No. 8. The Sheldon Press,
1/6).

As representative of a good deal of contemporary thinking about educational reform Mr. H. C. Dent's little book, *A New Order in English Education*, is worth some attention. Mr. Dent summarizes clearly and vigorously the main defects of the existing order—the almost complete lack of nursery schools; ‘the criminal dilapidation of the nation's most valuable asset’ that results from ending the education of the majority at fourteen and turning young boys and girls onto the labour market; the wretched buildings and excessively large classes of so many elementary schools; the atomistic teaching of subjects—‘a meaningless and congested conglomeration’—in secondary schools dominated by the requirements of the School Certificate examination; the accentuation of social differences that results from the existence of schools with special privileges open only to the children of the well-to-do; and so on. In place of the present jumble of different systems Mr. Dent would have a unified structure of national education, informed with a genuine social purpose, and designed to meet the developing needs of children and young people up to the age of twenty-one, differentiation within the system to be determined solely by aptitude. He pleads convincingly for the postponement of vocational training until a comparatively late stage of the educational process, and shows very clearly the inadequacy of merely raising the school age without a radical change in the status of the young person in the community as a whole; and he makes some excellent suggestions concerning adult education.

All this will, no doubt, receive the attention it deserves, for it is in line with a current of reforming opinion now very noticeable in all discussions of the post-war world. What is less likely to be remarked is a certain lack of concern where concern is essential if good intentions are to be matched by performance. And this, too, is symptomatic of very much that one hears about ‘education for democracy’.

‘The ideal democratic society (says Mr. Dent) may be briefly described as a self-orientated, self-governed, and self-disciplined community, which accords to every one of its members the utmost personal freedom compatible with the general interest, and is, indeed, dependent for its health, vigour, and dynamic upon their full exercise of this ordered freedom. The community as a whole, and the members as individuals, find their happiness in living

together in a willed, and willing, state of harmony on the basis of each for the good of all and all for the good of each; and their purpose in a gladly co-operative endeavour to bring about a continuous enrichment of human life and its direction towards an ever closer and deeper understanding of those enduring spiritual values upon which any free, positive, and progressive society must be established . . .

'The function of education in a democracy is the development, training, and enrichment of the human personality. The educational system is the machinery whereby this function is carried out. Since this system is for the benefit of all it should belong to all and be provided by all. Education in a democracy must be, as Dr. H. G. Stead has put it, "of the community, by the community, for the community".'

Now apart from that 'self-orientated' (which gives an odd twist to the slogan 'education of the community, by the community') there is no single statement from which one could decently dissent. But the passage as a whole—and there is much more like it—is politician's English; it deals in hypnotic abstractions which may mean much or little according as they are or are not informed with a feeling for values which will show itself, if at all, in the handling of specific questions. How to give substance to the abstractions—'enduring spiritual values', 'ample and fruitful personal lives' and so on—is the educationalist's essential task. Certainly we shall not obtain the reality merely by invoking the names.

It is therefore of special significance that those parts of Mr. Dent's book most likely to evoke approving nods are isolated generalizations (as when he remarks that 'a national system of education has two vital functions to perform: a tradition-preserving function and a growth-facilitating function'), or proposals for changes in structure and organization. Many of the latter are in themselves desirable; but essential form is determined by content, and the glimpses we have of Mr. Dent's conception of content suggest that something fundamental is lacking. In the following passage he is discussing the type of education to be offered in the senior (preferably 'multilateral') school to which all boys and girls should go from about 13 to 16—after the primary school and before any kind of vocational training:

'As the special aptitudes and interests of each child become increasingly evident, so his education should be gradually specialized, while retaining in every case a nucleus common to all. This nucleus should include physical education, practice in the use of the mother tongue, simple outlines of history, geography, and general science, and education of the emotional and aesthetic capacities through literature, art, music, and drama. It must include, too, the imparting to the child of sufficient knowledge to enable him to appreciate the fact that there is a religious inter-

pretation of life, and that upon this interpretation much that is of value in Western civilization is based'.

I said just now that Mr. Dent sometimes lapsed into politician's English: here the politician is Lib-Lab. 'The emotional and aesthetic capacities' is just a bow in the direction of 'culture', that 'literary culture of an always numerically tiny minority' of which Mr. Dent has already spoken with distaste.¹ There is no suggestion whatever that the education of the emotions, and of the intelligence, is inseparable from 'practice in the use of the mother tongue', if this means anything more than simple training in a limited kind of skill; nor is there any recognition that what we should be concerned with here is a training, appropriate to the capacities of individual adolescents, to recognize and respond to specific values—a training which begins with words and their uses and which should ultimately lead (since we are speaking of ideals) to an ability to make freely and responsibly those acts of choice on which the quality of individual living depends. Nothing can take the place of that; and 'abundant practice in the art of citizenship', which Mr. Dent recommends, may only distract. (Perhaps I should add that I myself see no incompatibility between the claims of essential human education and of specific education, at the appropriate stage, for a particular kind of job).

A further observation is prompted by a passage in Mr. Dent's chapter on the education of the adult.

'Another reform urgently needed is the incorporation as constituent colleges of the universities of the leading technical, art, and commercial colleges; or, since the country is still short of universities and would be even more so were entry broadened as I have suggested, the elevation of these institutions to university rank'.

It is 'the deplorably low status', not the quality, of these institutions that Mr. Dent is bothered about. Merely to secure their 'elevation to university rank' would only lead to that progressive debasement of standards which results, as Matthew Arnold used to remark, when you have the great name without the great thing. And in view of some developments in the modern universities of this country and America such advocacy seems superfluous.

¹The prestige of the academic curriculum . . . has led us to hold unquestioningly the pernicious theory that a "general" education must be conceived exclusively in terms of the literary culture of an always numerically tiny minority, and has infected us with a morbid dread . . . of incorporating in the curriculum of our elementary and secondary schools and our universities anything which might be thought to be even remotely connected with the degrading business of earning a living' (p. 30).

It is this lack of concern for *quality* that makes the book not merely representative but portentous. Mr. Dent tells us that 'the only possible starting-point' for educational reform is the question, 'What sort of an educational system do we require to meet the needs of a society which aims to become a full democracy?' An even prior question is, What do we mean by democracy? Dr. Gilbert Murray has recently defined one current conception:

'To it the basic principle of democracy seems to be that all men are equal, one just as good as another; one man one vote is the system; everyone votes for what he wants, and whatever the majority votes for is right. If they prefer drink, tobacco, and the dogs to education or freedom; if they put the "bitch-goddess Success" before all other goddesses; well, that is the people's will, and there it is. To protest against it is anti-democratic and high-brow and smacks of the Old School Tie'. (The *Observer*, February 21, 1943).

Mr. Dent would rightly protest that his vision of the 'century of the common man' is very different from that; but whatever his intentions his book will certainly be read with approval by those 'democratic' reformers to whom any concern for quality, and the consequent recognition of distinction, seems repulsively undemocratic. An urgent problem—one of the fundamental problems of our time—is how to combine 'the democratic ideal—full and equal opportunity for all' with that loyalty to what is genuinely superior which aristocratic societies have in the past—with more or less of truth—claimed as their justification. Without that freely given loyalty to something other than the common self of the common man civilization decays. The implications in the educational field are—or should be—obvious.

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Urgently needed changes in the structure and organization of the educational system are largely a matter for political and administrative action backed by public opinion. But it seems that any attempt to give new directions to the *content* of education as a whole must start from the universities, not merely because it is at the universities that future teachers are trained. It is therefore relevant to call attention to Dr. Löwe's *The Universities in Transformation* (1940).²

²It is regrettable that we have not been able to publish a full review of this and other books at an earlier date. So much is being written, as well as talked, about education after the war that only a very lengthy review could attempt to sort out and evaluate the different proposals. War-time difficulties have so far made this impossible, and until a more comprehensive survey can be prepared we must confine ourselves to comment on sufficiently representative work that comes the way of one or another of our contributors.—The Editors.

Believing that there is at present an irresistible trend towards social planning Dr. Löwe foresees that society will need more and more 'enlightened experts' who will form, at different levels, 'the centres of social responsibility'; the universities must train this 'democratic ruling class'. Dr. Löwe's conception of a 'new intellectual élite' is open to some serious objections, but it is clear that whatever the form of society in the future an élite of some kind there will have to be if civilization is not to lose its meaning. The democratic position is not to deny the need for an élite but to insist that it is genuinely founded on merit—not on heredity, money, or influence within a political group. The universities' rôle, in general terms, is to create a class of men and women who will be responsible for the continuity and development of civilization. More specifically (and here we need not hesitate to accept Dr. Löwe's formulation), their task

'is one of discovering a method of specialization which makes vocational study grow out of the understanding and experience of the cultural process as a whole . . . Our true concern must be with a new *cultural* education which is both to balance and to underpin vocational education'.

How far our universities are at present from fulfilling their function thus conceived Dr. Löwe makes clear. His proposals for a radical reorganization of university education (like his case concerning the modern universities) will not be entirely unfamiliar to readers of this review and, since the book is short and should be read, there is no need to summarize them in detail. They centre on the attempt to combine vocational and specialized training with essential humane education; with, that is, training in those interpretative techniques by means of which the student can obtain some insight into the pattern of his civilization as a whole and, simultaneously, with the training of the individual's powers of discrimination and judgment without which 'interpretation' is useless if not impossible. Any such attempt will necessarily involve a major break with the established ordering of the curriculum in specialized subjects and big changes in the established methods of teaching and examining. Dr. Löwe is not rosily optimistic ('It may well be necessary', he says, 'first to educate a new generation of university teachers before real headway can be made'), but he does offer some practical suggestions of how a start might be made. To those who are profoundly dissatisfied with much of the current talk about 'education for democracy'—not because they do not believe in democracy but because they believe in education—his book may be recommended as a spur to thought.

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HARDY AND CRITICISM

THOMAS HARDY (*English Men of Letters*), by Edmund Blunden (Macmillan, 7/6).

HARDY THE NOVELIST, by Lord David Cecil (Constable, 7/6).

THE SOUTHERN REVIEW, THOMAS HARDY CENTENNIAL ISSUE, Summer 1940 (75c.).

‘No, I think I shall do much better to be allusive and charming and rather subtle, you know the sort of thing, and tender. I think one ought always to *see* a book before one starts it. Well, I see this rather like a portrait by Van Dyck, with a good deal of atmosphere, you know, and a certain gravity, and with a sort of aristocratic distinction. Do you know what I mean? About eighty thousand words’.

‘He was absorbed for a moment in the ecstasy of aesthetic contemplation. In his mind’s eye he saw a book, in royal octavo, slim and light in the hand, printed with large margins on handsome paper in a type that was both clear and comely, and I think he saw a binding in smooth black cloth with a decoration in gold and gilt lettering’.

So the man of letters in Mr. Somerset Maugham’s little masterpiece, *Cakes and Ale*, explains his intention of writing a critical biography of that novelist whose works so curiously resemble those of Thomas Hardy. And now (though of course you can’t have large margins in war-time) the thing has been done, or at least one cannot avoid the suspicion that when Lord David Cecil was invited to give the Clark Lectures at Cambridge he started with very nearly that intention. No one can suppose he was impelled by a sense of urgent critical work to be done. Take a fair specimen:

‘Hardy’s books do not always end thus on a crashing major chord. He is also master of the dying fall, the Miltonic close in calm of mind, all passion spent, the fading echoing music that, when soft voices die, vibrates in the memory. *Under the Greenwood Tree* presents us with an example’.

This is the kind of prose in which much of *Hardy the Novelist* is written. I should have thought that to anyone it was obviously a style in which literary criticism cannot be conveyed; it is certainly a style which undergraduates are discouraged from using in their first term at the university to which these lectures were addressed. Yet the publisher informs us that ‘The aim of this book is—while taking advantage of the greater extent of modern knowledge—to return to the true critical path’. And besides its sub-title, ‘An Essay in Criticism’, there is an opening section explaining how all criticism is wrong which is not purely aesthetic. It is solely the critic’s func-