

## THE GRAMMAR SCHOOLS

*THE BOYS' GRAMMAR SCHOOL : To-day and To-morrow, by H. Davies (Methuen, 6/-).*

From their inception the grammar schools have offered to the sons of both the poor and the well-to-do an education leading to the professions and the universities. This field was limited during the public schools boom at the close of the nineteenth century, when the rich found in the new and revived boarding schools an outlet for conspicuous consumption and a means of getting rid of their children for two-thirds of the year. After 1902 when secondary education became a public responsibility a few of the old grammar schools became 'public' schools. But the majority continued to provide an education for those who could not afford or did not wish to go to the boarding schools, and to their ranks were added many new grammar schools founded and maintained by local education authorities and often called county schools. In the years between the European wars many of the secondary schools maintained or supported by public funds began successfully to compete with (and in some cases to ape) the public schools. The gap between these latter and independent schools on the one hand and the maintained schools on the other began to narrow, and there was some interchange of staff; parents who did not like boarding schools and others who saw that the day school could often offer a course that academically at least was as good as that available in boarding schools sent their sons to the local secondary school.

The quality then of the maintained and aided grammar school was steadily improving. (This review will not deal with those secondary schools which receive direct grants from the Ministry of Education; it is concerned in the main with the 1,300 or so grammar schools supported entirely or very largely by public money). The State provided much of the cost and through the Board of Education's inspectorate saw to it that value for money was given. The better local education authorities gave their schools a wide range of freedom, and this accounts for a good deal of such success as the schools have had. The system proved that State-supported enterprises need not necessarily be dull or mediocre. There were enough of them to provide for the great majority of children capable of profiting from the specifically academic education that it is the grammar school's job to give. They were far from perfect—as Mr. Davies shows—but given freedom from examination and from other restrictions they might have developed well. I suggest that a proper line of development for the best of them would have been to qualify for a direct grant from the Ministry—not necessarily under the arrangements at present applicable to direct grant.

Mr. Davies deals with the grammar schools only since 1902 and it still remains for someone to survey their history and to assess their contribution to education. Mr. Davies is concerned to

discuss the existing position and to make suggestions for improvement. He cites Sir Richard Livingstone's question: Why are we an uneducated nation? and points to the familiar evidence from films, press, B.B.C. and politics. He asks whether there is any reason to believe that the ten of fifteen per cent. of children who attend grammar schools are in the light of this evidence any better than the children who leave school at fourteen; and he concludes that most grammar school products are lamentably deficient in the power to create new tastes and interests. One of the aims therefore of his book is 'to try to find out why, in spite of the expenditure of so much public money, our grammar schools are failing in their most important function'.

He is candid about the schools' shortcomings. In an ironical chapter 'How a grammar school works' Mr. Davies describes one of those institutions (how far typical it is difficult to say) which are in effect cramming shops for the production of successful candidates for school certificate and higher school certificate. Mathematics and science dominate the time-table; geography is seriously undervalued; 'Physical training is given the minimum amount of time: Music and Art are regarded as of little importance. The whole time-table is calculated to produce the best possible results in the School Certificate examination. No parent can complain that his son is compelled to waste his time in unprofitable studies of an aesthetic nature'. After criticism of other features, the chapter ends with the observation that 'A year in the sixth form has helped to turn many an ignorant and loutish schoolboy into a young man with at least the glimmerings of a cultured outlook and some perception of the duties of democratic citizenship'. In other chapters the school certificate examination is condemned as the greatest single hindrance to the work of the grammar schools—for reasons which will not be summarized here as they are no doubt familiar to readers of *Scrutiny*—and the conclusion is reached that 'The schools produce far too many sixth form boys who have been so over-pressed that their personalities and interests have had little time to expand, with the result that they make ineffective leaders and lack general culture. We have all met boys who are good scientists, mathematicians or linguists, but who are, and remain, fundamentally uneducated'.

This is the position of the grammar schools to-day—over-weighted by examinations, their true aim distorted by over-emphasis on the sciences. The aim of education, says Mr. Davies, is 'the development of the potentialities of the human personality, as far as it is possible at the stage which the individual has reached'. Later he quotes the Spens Report on methods of teaching best fitted to produce 'a generation of young men and women sensitive to beauty and to moral values and trained to concentrate their attention, to think consecutively and readily, to express ideas exactly and coherently and to exercise due caution in accepting evidence and drawing conclusions'. All this is of course in rather general terms; and despite a chapter on curriculum and teaching

methods, it is not quite clear what is the special contribution of the grammar school to the attaining of these ends. In condemning the outworn school certificate examination, Mr. Davies comes near to throwing out the baby with the bath water:

'The widespread belief in a "liberal education" and the pathetic fallacy that an orthodox school certificate curriculum somehow supplies it are largely responsible for this educational uniformity. Useless knowledge has become, in some mysterious way, superior to useful knowledge, and headmasters are very shy of anything which savours of vocational training'.

Mr. Davies does not elaborate his implied approval of vocational training. The trouble about the latter is that nowadays purely technical training just isn't education at all—though it's not necessarily incompatible with education. So far as vocational training given in apprenticeship or technical college is concerned—take any dozen boys who have spent a couple of years acquiring a trade, and compare them with any dozen boys of the same age who have spent the time at school, and the difference will be plain. So far as I know no one has tried to work out methods of making technical training into something educational. Of course in the past technical training was in some cases inseparable from true education. We have all read our *Wheelwright's Shop* these days, and it is hardly necessary to point out how the acquisition of skill in this trade embodied a development of the whole person—a training of the senses, the imparting of standards of workmanship and the ability to judge men as well as timber. Education cannot now be 'automatic' as it used to be.

The function of a grammar school is to provide an academic—that is, a cultural—as opposed to vocational—training. Under the Education Act it should fulfil this purpose more exclusively and more efficiently than before; now that we are promised technical and modern secondary schools, the grammar school can get on with its original job. Merely manipulative scientists are ten-a-penny to-day; as writers in these pages have so often insisted we need more and more humane education, developing the free, unspecialized intelligence, that can 'place' and use the thousand and one complicating specialisms and sciences. The scientific bias that is common in the grammar school curriculum squeezes out education; a stronger course in the English subjects is needed, including (besides what comes under the formal heading) geography linked with history, which in turn should be integrated with music and the study of architecture—all leading to an understanding of the present and making available to the child his cultural heritage. (What proportion of children in —shire for instance have ever heard 'The Seeds of Love'?). At the most practical level even the production of technicians, narrowly trained, may be futile; a particular skill may be outdated in a year or two, and the demand we are told is for mobility and adaptability. A lively conception of a liberal education is required, not uniform and standardized

for all types of school, but fertilizing in diverse ways the activities of all schools. Without some such vitamin content, scholastic pabulum is jejune. And impractical—for a liberal education is necessary to enable the student to get the best out of his vocational training; the complaint of Professor Ryle (writing on 'The Future of Medical Education' in the *British Medical Journal*) is all too familiar:

'With a growing tendency to embark at too early an age upon specialized work for the First M.B., the general education of the student has assumed too low a level. Good literary standards, general knowledge, knowledge of languages, and interest in problems outside his own necessary sciences, do not, with rare exceptions, characterize the equipment of the medical student. This is evident in his written work and examination papers, and often enough in his conversation, his reluctance or inability to share the literary, artistic, or socio-political enthusiasms of others in his generation, and often in his intellectual standards subsequent to qualification'.

Several factors militate against the provision of education. In the grammar schools, a curriculum that is a hotch-potch, and the excessively high standard demanded for entrance scholarships to the universities. In all schools, the pressure of a commercial environment—the lucrative distractions offered by Saturday morning cinema clubs, advertising and professional sport. This is of course where good boarding schools score tremendously; they provide a milieu which is educative quite apart from whatever may go on in school periods. They relieve children from the insistent attack upon their minds and pockets. Very few day schools can offer as satisfactory an upbringing as that available in the best boarding schools. Mr. Davies doesn't agree:

'The boarding school suffers from one serious disadvantage to-day. At a time when educational thinkers are concerned to link more closely the training given at school with the outside world, so that the pupil shall feel its reality and its relevance to his own life, boarding schools, except for unusual cases, seem out of place. It can hardly be denied that the boarding school cuts off its pupils from contact with the world, and encloses them in an artificial atmosphere—indeed to some this is their great virtue'.

Argument on this particular point is perhaps futile, but it must be asserted (if any generalization is possible) that the product of the boarding school is at least as aware of his social responsibilities as his fellows in the day schools, and often much better equipped to fulfil them. However the chapter from which the quotation above is taken is not one of Mr. Davies' best informed sections.

Much more acceptable is his contention that 'every effort must be made to raise the standards in staff and staffing ratios in the grammar schools until they equal those in the public schools'. Many

independent schools are better than many state schools because they are independent and because they spend more money. One wants the state school to have the freedom and resources of the institutions which private enterprise has produced. Unfortunately since the grammar schools were 'pearlharboured' by the Act it is unlikely that they will be able to maintain even their present modest level. Before the Act, those concerned with the grammar schools expected at the worst that they would have to mark time until the new secondary schools were levelled up in staff, buildings and equipment. They did not expect what has actually happened—a levelling down which provides evidence for Professor Hayek to say 'I told you so'. The means to this levelling-down were indicated in a review of Mr. Newsom's *Willingly to School* in these pages six months ago—a review incidentally which was charged with being alarmist by a non-teaching reader, to whom it must now be evident that the direction of the wind is unchanged and its force increased. The implications of the regulations whereby the Act is operated are clearer than ever. The Ministry has applied to the grammar schools a set of restrictions, many of them designed to cope with conditions which exist only in some primary schools, which hamper the development of secondary schools along lines of educational advance. Patently they are the outcome, not of recommendation by inspectors that they are desirable on educational grounds, but of political and trade union pressure. Imposed by the coalition government, they would have been removed by any new government which was alive to the needs of education; they have been damned by responsible opinion everywhere and by informed M.P.s of all parties. But the Ministry does not budge. One can only conclude that its obstinacy is due not to the advice of the permanent officials but to political enthusiasm for equality of conditions as between all types of secondary school. Since it would have taken years—if it were ever seriously intended—to level up the new secondary schools, and since something must be done to satisfy the demands of the teachers' union, the easier path of levelling-down has been taken.

The Act won support all round because it promised among other things some urgent reforms such as a reduction in the size of classes and improvements in the primary schools, and the raising of the school leaving age—to prevent the half-baking of children and ejecting them on to the labour market with the inevitable consequence of stunting the child's growth, spiritual, moral and physical. For these two aims, not in themselves necessarily productive of education, but vital preliminaries to education, teachers were needed in quantity. The coalition government, one supposes, had to produce some constructive move, and could agree only on education; hence the Act, a good Act if it can be operated. But after the event it looks now as if it may have been an error. The most pressing reforms could have been secured, and perhaps more effectively, by a less pretentious measure. As it is, they are in jeopardy. Real agreement and co-operation could have been

attained between various sections of teachers. As it is, the Act which was supposed to unify the profession has split it for years to come. The staffs of the schools which are the subject of this review should now have been refitting to concentrate on their own tasks; as it is they are troubled not only by genuine grievances but by the fear that their schools will cease to be educational agents and will become instead pipe lines for the state's social services. Instead of being ready for needed changes they are suspicious of any move because they have seen how an innocent-seeming act can be used to further evident political aims.

It is very easy for those most affected by the Act to lose a sense of proportion. But on the most dispassionate possible view one cannot escape the conclusion that the attack on the grammar schools—unless it is called off—will set back education everywhere. Is it too late to ask the Minister to reconsider?

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## SYMBOLISM AND APOCALYPSE

*HÖLDERLIN'S SYMBOLISM: An Essay, by E. L. Stahl*  
(B. H. Blackwell, Oxford, 3/-).

This very useful little book should be of interest to the general reader of poetry as well as to the student of Hölderlin. Mr. Stahl's account of Hölderlin's developing use of the symbol is applicable to other poets in other languages, and the extracts he gives from Hölderlin's theoretical writings on the nature of poetry are of the illuminating kind we often receive from practitioners of genius.

Mr. Stahl says very truly 'the critic . . . is faced with the task of discovering the appropriate method of displaying the qualities of Hölderlin's poetry. The usual methods do not seem adequate to this end . . .' It is a more difficult proposition than one might think: Hölderlin's mature poetry is peculiarly individual, unmistakably his, but when the critic comes to analyse it, he finds himself feebly referring to syntactical characteristics, the significance of Zeus, Ether, Light, the idea of alternating day and night, of the absence and presence of the gods. So Mr. Stahl chooses this way out: 'If we note his symbols, trace their development, and explain their terms of reference, we shall enter the world of his thought without diverting attention from his poetry', since he is fully aware of the essential fact that 'what matters is Hölderlin's poetic thought, not his thought as such'. Actually Hölderlin allows comparatively little rope to the kind of commentator whose only concern is 'the thought behind the poetry': there is a certain tautness, solidness, compactness about his beliefs which saves him from the Roman Holiday of exegesis to which Rilke has so frequently been offered up, and his 'poetic thought' can be described in terms of 'thought as such' rather more adequately than is generally the case. But of course it is his 'poetic thought' that matters, because it is as a poet that Hölderlin matters, not as a philosopher. And since