The Virginia Lectures on Education

By BERNARD IDDINGS BELL

IN 1931 Albert Jay Nock delivered the Page-Barbour Lectures at the University of Virginia, on "The Theory of Education in America."

Albert was not pleased with this book. He said it was verbose and repetitious in style, which it is, and thin in substance, which it is not. Inadequate though he deemed the Lectures, he was hurt because, as he put it, "No one but the Jesuits took them seriously or said a kind word about them." They did not fall as dead from the press, however, as Albert thought. The one edition sold few copies, it is true; but one rarely finds today, after fifteen years, an educational theorist of repute who has not read *The Theory of Education in America* or who speaks of it with other than respect. Those who have copies hang on to them tenaciously; almost never does one appear in a second-hand book shop.

When Albert was asked by President E. A. Alderman to do the Page-Barbours, and while they were being written, he was Professor of Politics at St. Stephen's, his own Alma Mater of forty years before, which had lately become a constituent college of Columbia University. Albert, as far as I know for the only time in his career, was trying his hand at formal teaching.

To his associates he was something of an enigma, chiefly because he tried actually to realize theories of teaching to which most of them gave only a reluctant lip-service. To me, his Dean and friend, his being there was sheer delight. He puzzled most of his students. What was one to make of a professor who spent a month with them delving into the nature of man's perpetual misbehavior before he so much as mentioned a constitution or permitted the examination of any State as an observable, functioning fact? The few with first-rate brains were in enraptured attendance upon him in class and out, often to his serious inconvenience; but the many thought him eccentric to the point of near-madness.

THE teaching experience was unpleasant for Albert. He was never a man to suffer fools gladly unless he could at will remove himself from their company. He could not do this at Annandale; it is possible nowhere in an institution of organized study. Albert held most of his pupils in a piteous contempt which his habitual urbanity only accentuated. Why, he kept asking me, had undergraduates so grossly deteriorated in quality of mind since his own student days? I ventured to suggest that he was being romantic about the past; nothing had changed. But something had changed; both of us knew it, he more vividly than I. Others knew it too. Flexner and Learned and Gauss and Giddings and Thorndike and Faunce were bemoaning it; even Nicholas Murray Butler in his less Columbian moments was disturbed about it. Here was Albert, trying to teach the Philosophy of Government to pupils who, though carefully selected for entrance and products of the better American schools, had been so miseducated that their native intelligence was inhibited from functioning. Most of them had not learned even the rudiments of accurate observation, careful statement or logical reasoning; they could not read, write or figger. If these young gentlemen were the

cream, what thin stuff must be the skimmed milk. The American experiment in democratic education somehow seemed to have failed. Why? Albert welcomed the Virginia invitation as a chance to think this problem through, not so much for the possible edification of his hearers as for his own benefit; and as he went on working at the lectures he discovered, somewhat to his consternation, that he was no longer a liberal, no longer (at least in the usual American sense) a democrat.

He found that he did not believe any more that the common man is competent, or by education can be made competent, to share in direction of government. The right to rule, he was now sure, belonged only to the few, ,drawn from all classes of Society, who were born intelligent.

How much he had ever at heart been a liberal is doubtful; but for many years he had assumed that he was one. He had found it not impossible to drift with the prevailing tide, to accept without examination the humanistic complacency common among the *fin de siecle* intelligentsia and their twentieth-century imitators. He had pursued his essentially aristocratic interests, unaware that only a very few of his radical young friends had, or in the nature of things could have, the least idea of what he talked about with disarming charm or wrote about in matchless seventeenth-century prose. They had insisted, these superficial radicals, these semi-Marxian clever boys, that he was one of them; and he, supposing them to be as himself, had failed to see that he was traveling with an uncongenial company. They had completely overlooked the real nature of man, fallen man, foolish man; and so had Albert. Well, that was over and done with. It was while he wrote these lectures that he realized and was ready to admit the limitations of the mob. At this point he ceased to be angry with pedagogs for not reforming Tom, Dick and Harry, for not educating the ineducable. It is this change in attitude, visible on every page of the Lectures, which makes them significant.

THE first thesis of the lectures is that current American education can not be effectively reformed. A discussion of the problem "brings us face to face with a good many serious disappointments; it calls for the re-examination and criticism of a good many matters which seemed comfortably settled, and which we would rather leave undisturbed; it cannot lead to any so-called practical solution, as far as I can see, which will at all answer to the general faith in machinery as an effective substitute for thought. . . . The only large reforms indicated are such as must be put down at once as quite impractical on general grounds. . . . Diagnosis, even when it reveals the case as hopeless, affords at least the melancholy satisfaction of knowing just where one stands."

The trouble with American education, says Albert, is not with its practice but with its theory, a theory which disregards certain facts about human beings. Its primary mistake is to suppose that men are equal in potential brains and taste; its second error is to assume that the common man is competent to arrive at freedom merely by exercise of the franchise; its third fallacy lies in supposing that by teaching everyone to be literate you *ipso facto* make everyone competent to exchange and improve ideas.

The theory thus analyzed, Albert examines the three postulates and proceeds, most politely, to make hay of them. To the usual American way of looking at things, he says, "the thought that there are practicable ranges of intellectual and spiritual experience, achievement and enjoyment, which by nature are open to some and not to all" creates impatient scorn. "As the popular idea of Equality postulates that in the realm of spirit everybody is able to enjoy everything that anybody can enjoy, so the popular idea of Democracy poctulates that there shall be nothing worth enjoying for anybody to enjoy that everybody may not enjoy; and a contrary view is at once exposed to all the evils of a dogged, unintelligent, invincibly suspicious resentment." It follows that in a Democracy like ours an educational system must reflect this resentment. It must aim at no ideals above those of the average man; it must regulate itself by the lowest common denominator of intelligence, taste, and character in the society which it represents; and "bad money drives out good money." Caliban not only remains Caliban; Caliban prevents Prospero.

As for the idea of inevitable uplift of intelligence by increasing literacy, Albert asks his hearers "to look at our large literate population, to remark its intellectual interests, the general furniture of its mind, as these are revealed by what it reads; by the colossal, the unconscionable, volume of garbage annually shot upon the public from the presses of the country, largely in the form of newspapers and periodicals."

This false theory, Albert insists, has corrupted American education at every level. The university is no longer an association of scholars but is become "a loose and sprawling association of pedagogs" who cram facts and processes, mostly predigested, into the minds of those who suppose that thereby they are being given a share in liberal learning. The undergraduate college now resembles "a modern drug-store, which dispenses almost everything except drugs." In secondary schools dilution of learning has followed a persistent attempt to pump information, of questionable vocational value, into minds left so unformed that they can digest nothing.

There is nothing new in all this; it had even then been said by others, said better. The original element in Albert's analysis comes toward the end, when instead of berating our "educational experts and administrators" for abandoning the attempt to educate and substituting for it fact-stuffing and training in vocational processes, he congratulates them for their common sense. They have, he says, done the right and necessary thing!

WE set up an educational system, he points out, "load it to the gunwales with ineducable persons, proceed to train them in brick-laying, dish-washing, retail shoe-merchandising, or what not," and then come along captious critics to complain that there should be expected at least "a poor pennyworth of bread thrown in with this intolerable deal of sack." To fault our schools, colleges, universities for not educating the ined-

ucable, is unreasonable. The only legitimate question to ask is "whether the persons trained turn out to be good bricklayers, shoe-salesmen, dish-washers." If they do, American education is entitled to a clean bill. All that can properly be considered objectionable is that these practical training shops, from kindergarten to the Ph.D., should go on *pretending that they impart an education, develop intelligence and discrimination.* That is to take in money on false pretences. But America is right not to try to educate the mob, content to make its citizens better hewers of wood and more competent drawers of water. About all we can hope for is that somehow, somewhere, there will remain or emerge a few places competent "to salvage the educable person, seineing him out of the general ruck and making something out of him," places which are "not hamstrung by any insane pseudo-egalitarian and pseudo-democratic notions about education, which import into their practice no such irrelevant nonsense as those notions entail." The value of educable persons is great, they are precious and to be cultivated; but they are very, very few in number.

Education in any real sense for the masses? Absurd. Our "educators" have rightly abandoned all hope of interesting America as a whole in things of the mind and the spirit. This is a Democracy; it can have no part in the Great Tradition. "I see no reason why our American society should not go on repeating the experience of other societies, having gone as far as it has down the road of that experience, and find that when it at last realizes the need of transforming itself, it has no longer the power to do so." Why, then, should our institutions of alleged learning attempt the impossible? The mob is in the saddle; the "educators" are its loyal and efficient servants. Be it so; only let there be those, who like Socrates will be hounded down as corrupters of youth, who will say to the educable few, "Save yourselves from this untoward generation"; as for the ineducable many, they must stew in their democratic juice.