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· REVIEWS ·

Reading Books for Enjoyment

By FRANCIS NEILSON

STUDYING ENGLISH with the idea of reading books that might improve the mind or give spiritual enjoyment to the student is of long lineage. Eleven centuries have passed since King Alfred set to work in Wessex to translate the pastorals of Gregory the Great into the English tongue. The desire that seized him to pursue paths which led to knowledge and to share it with his companions and their children was the spur that drove him to accomplishments in literature which equal, if not surpass, any that came after him: "I cannot find anything better in man than that he know, and nothing worse than that he be ignorant."[1] This serves to remind us that a king who was busy every day with the administration of his kingdom surrounded by enemies found time to do something for the enlightenment of his fellows.

The Indictment of Modern Education

TODAY WE ARE TOLD by many of our instructors that education, so far as it touches the many, is in a parlous state and that we are spending immense sums upon schools that are turning out a high percentage of pupils who fail to show they have derived much benefit from the courses.

What has happened, and who is to blame for this state of affairs? Are the teachers responsible for it, or are the pupils nowadays not interested in the elements of ordinary education? In recent years informative books have come from the pens of men of high standing in scholastic circles, lamenting the grave changes that have taken place in the curricula of the schools and also in the attitude of our youth toward the pursuit of knowledge. Both here and in England men directly concerned with the fate of the institutions devoted to the instruction of the young have attempted to diagnose the problem and suggest remedies. In nearly every case of criticism that I have read, two charges are made regarding the falling off of interest in education generally. These are: (1) serious defects in the home life of the people generally; and (2) the lack of help for the young

[1] This passage is found in Alfred's translation of the "Soliloquies" of St. Augustine. H. L. Hargrove (in Yale Studies, XXII, 1904) has translated the "OE Version of St. Augustine's Soliloquies," p. 56, l. 13. Also quoted in R. H. Hodgkin, "A History of the Anglo-Saxons" (2 vols), Vol. II, p. 680.

at the hearthside today. It seems that when education was hard to find, the desire for it was great, but now that it is offered on a silver platter provided by the State, few show the inclination to accept it.

But for the person who desires to place a value upon the education given to the young it is not necessary to go to the lay critics. All he has to do is to follow the reports that are published from time to time in the newspapers about the meetings and conferences of societies directly concerned in the business of the schools. In these he will find sufficient evidence to enable him to judge the worth of the billions expended upon molding the minds of our future citizens.

It was a shock to most of us during the war when the statistics were published of the illiteracy of the recruits taken into the services. No matter from what source criticism of the system emanates, it is so serious that one would think the taxpayer might make a protest and demand a change in it. Oddly enough, the taxpayer seems to be silent. In 1945, according to figures issued by the United States Office of Education, it cost us slightly more than 2½ billion dollars to educate 19½ million pupils through high school. It seems that a lot of money has been spent with insignificant results.

Considering the great expectations of the sanguine progenitors of the scheme called "the enlightenment of the common people," we cannot say that success has attended the efforts of those who have devoted themselves to its purpose. Indeed, if we would push our inquiry of the worth of the system beyond school days, we would find in almost every channel of activity apart from the skilled professions evidence of the sad story of the failure of education, in the general sense of the term, to do what it set out to do.

A railway station bookstall is a good place to make a survey if one wishes to know what people read, for what they read is an indication of what they think. The papers and magazines spread before the observer unblushingly reveal the taste of the crowd. The movie is another source of information in this respect, and it speaks volubly of the class of entertainment desired by the millions.

The Conduct of Students

OCCASIONALLY ONE READS REPORTS of the conduct of the young people in the schools. In recent months we have learned that teachers in certain districts have no influence over the pupils. One wretched creature complained that the antics of the boys were intolerable but she could not afford

to resign her position, for it meant losing her daily bread. Another case was reported in which boys stole guns and fired shots at the windows of a teacher's house because they feared she would not give them passing marks. By this action they hoped to intimidate her. In both cases the matter seemed to get no further than the initial report of the occurrences.

There have been so many cases of recalcitrant children adopting the methods of desperadoes that it is quite unnecessary to pursue this subject further. The fact that teachers and parents can shut their eyes to these proceedings and make no general protest must indicate that the public is quite indifferent to what is taking place.

The reports of the Federal Bureau of Investigation concerning the delinquencies of our youth are common property. But I see scarcely any comments from educators about the appalling condition of affairs. Perhaps it has reached a stage when nothing can be done to mend it. Yet, the government asks for more money to be spent upon education. Indeed, this was given as one of the special reasons for calling Congress to vote huge sums for this purpose.

Educating the Intellectually Dull

Is IT TAKEN INTO CONSIDERATION by our rulers that we are attempting to educate millions of feeble-minded pupils who may not have the physical or mental capacity to earn their daily bread? Years ago a medical educational authority attached to a London municipal council startled the taxpayers by giving figures which showed that something like 15 per cent of the children going to school in congested areas would not reach the age of thirty. About a year ago a few of our leading men interested in education were deeply concerned about a survey of British conditions made by Sir Cyril Burt. According to this, in fifty years the number of British students of scholarship ability will be approximately half and the number of feeble-minded almost double. An article in *The New York Times* of July 6, 1947 states that Mr. Guy Burch, who heads the Population Reference Bureau in Washington, D. C., finds that Sir Cyril Burt's survey holds good for the United States. Further, he comments that virtually one-third of us are no better intellectually than dull or backward:

> As a voting participant in helping to solve the many intricate problems of our complex civilization a dull and backward individual is almost as helpless as an idiot. In fact, he may be more dangerous to democratic institutions because he is easily commanded by demagogues and dictators.

Here Mr. Burch puts the gravity of the matter in a nut-shell, and I might say that this is in direct line with the conclusions reached by Ortega

in his revealing work, "The Revolt of the Masses." Our greatest danger lies in the ignorance of the millions of the wretched who breed more quickly than any other section of society.

But how is it with the teachers? Of late there have been several tests applied in various States as to the qualifications of those who instruct the young. One was made in Colorado in October, 1947. An Associated Press dispatch to *The New York Times* told us that teachers there averaged a failing grade of 67 on a test in American Hitory. About a hundred teachers were chosen at random from some 6,000 by the Colorado Education Association convention. The report says: "Mistakes were made that would make a lad sitting under a dunce cap burst with pride at his own knowledge."

A startling report was issued by the School and College Conference on English. In *The New York Times* of February 22, 1948 we read:

> The vast majority of high school graduates not only cannot think logically but are so badly prepared in reading, writing and speaking the English language that there is danger to democracy in this country. These conclusions [were] drawn from a four-year study of 300,000 Army and Navy students trained during the war at 112 colleges. . . .

At this conference Professor Albert R. Thayer of Bowdoin College said "on the basis of this study the preparation of students in English is falling so short that it is jeopardizing their own education and development and the processes of democratic society itself."

Such is the grave state of affairs the educationists themselves have discovered in the system. Probably they have reached an impasse. In some respects this may be the truth of the matter and the reason why the number of those who are turning their attention to adult education increases year by year. Something drastic will certainly have to be done if the best of this civilization is to survive. If we can do nothing to instruct the children, we might be able to give their fathers an education they did not gain at school.

Advocates of Adult Education

ONE OF THE LEADERS of vast experience who advocates this program is Sir Richard Livingstone, the President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford. In his little book, "The Future in Education,"[2] he tells the story of the adult school experiment in Denmark. It is one of the most remarkable movements in existence. Chancellor Hutchins in this country is taking

[2] Cambridge University Press, 1941.

the same steps as Sir Richard toward bringing education to those who were defrauded of cultural knowledge in their schooldays. The remarkable success of the Danish system should inspire those in this country who are conscious of having missed that education in their youth for which they hunger in later life.

A hundred years ago a clergyman, named Grundtvig, and a working cobbler, called Kold, founded these schools in Denmark. Quoting from a work, "Education for Life," by N. Davies, Sir Richard Livingstone gives some extraordinary passages uttered by Kold, which seem to us in this country not only optimistic but rather extravagant. For example,

> The period of boyhood is not the right school-time. Whoever is to profit by learning must first have lived a while and paid heed to life in himself and in others, for so only does he get into a position to understand books that describe life.
>
> Experience proves that the same amount of information, which it takes the half-grown youth—dozing on the school forms—three to five years to learn, can be acquired by adults, who are keen on learning *and who have done practical work,* in the space of three to five months.[3]

But is this so extraordinary as it appears at first sight? I do not think so, for I now remember meeting many agricultural laborers who taught themselves after they reached manhood and became lay preachers of ability. I have seen in the cottages of such men collections of books no enlightened person would disdain. When asked how they "took to book reading," the reply often enough would be: "Oh, I was inclined that way and wanted to know how to read the Bible."

Johnson said: "A man ought to read just as inclination leads him; for what he reads as a task will do him little good."

Primarily it is a question of inclination. When the desire surges up in one to study a matter, acquire knowledge of a subject, half the battle is won. It is only in rare cases that very young people experience this thrill of inclination.

In my life I have known civil servants, lawyers, actors, and singers to accomplish the most difficult tasks in a few days. How is it to be explained that some men and women, when inclination spurs them, can surmount difficulties that seem impossible in the ordinary course of things?

A lawyer once came to me with a brief that had suddenly been thrust upon him. The case was one of a cabman who had murdered his wife.

[3] Quoted by Livingstone, *op. cit.*, pp. 48–9.

He asked my advice about the defense he should offer in the court. After reading the story of the tragedy, I saw it was a case of sexual epilepsy. I gave my friend Krafft-Ebing's "Psycopathia Sexualis," a book at whose title he would have scoffed at any other time. However, he took it, and in forty-eight hours had read the work, drawn up his line of defense, and succeeded against a powerful prosecution in saving the man from the gallows. He proved to the satisfaction of the court that, when the crime was committed, the murderer was suffering an attack of epilepsy.

In a case of emergency, I have known actors to take a long part which in ordinary circumstances would occupy the mind for at least three or four weeks and become letter-perfect in three or four days. It is inclination that is the motive force which is essential, and without it the attempt to educate a youth is not only a thankless job for the teacher, but it is a criminal waste of the taxpayers' money.

Reading and the "Scientific Method"

SOMETHING IS RADICALLY WRONG with the schools and the students. When I read articles on the Great Books course written by some of our professors, I do not wonder at the state of the system of education. Here is a sample of the modern method of going to work to read a masterpiece:

> The values to be derived from the formal teaching of great books are no different from the general values of education. The very nature of the material does entail a certain amount of restriction however: one cannot teach people to be scientists, for example, without laboratory facilities and actual practice. But the general pattern of thinking can be taught and the book under consideration can be treated as so much empirical material from which generalizations are made and to which they apply. The chief problem of teaching great books becomes, therefore, *the problem of teaching and using the general procedures of science in the classroom itself. This probably implies certain preliminary training, but it includes, in its very procedure, teaching how to read, because scientific inquiry with a book as its object is itself the way to read the book.* The first step in inquiry, and so one of the elements to be taught, is formulating questions which lead to important discoveries and explanations. Inquiry into the content of any book should be conducted by different levels of questions and hypotheses.[4] (Italics mine)

Is it any wonder that the teaching of English has failed to such an extent that the School and College Conference, referred to above, reported that "the reading ability of most graduates was superficial. Inaccurate reading of the most elementary material was found."[5]

[4] "Great Books as Education," by Ralph Gilbert Ross, *The New Leader*, May 8, 1948, p. 4.

[5] *New York Times*, February 22, 1948.

If Dr. Ralph Gilbert Ross is correct in the method he sets forth for reading a book, then I must start all over again because I never use the scientific method. I would never dream of entering a laboratory. Nor does anyone else take up a book with such preposterous notions. Books are read for instruction and enjoyment. Who would apply the method of Dr. Ross to the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey?" And what benefit would be derived by the reader if it were possible for him to do so? Surely if there is one thing that would restrict his enjoyment at the outset, it would be the matter of determining "different levels of questions and hypotheses." When I read Virgil I do not remember that I was bothered with scientific inquiries about the contents. What scientific inquiry can be made about the "Georgics?" But did anybody ever hear of a great poet setting to work with such ideas in his mind?.

Dr. Ross severely criticizes the Chicago method of conducting a Great Books course, so an announcement in *The New York Times* of Aug. 29, 1948, tells us. There it is reported that Dr. Ross states:

> The Chicago Plan is essentially a dialectical and intellectual examination of the student's mind. Our program requires comprehensive training in scientific procedures *even before the books are studied.* Therefore, when the students are ready to analyze the selected volumes, they can do so through the process of scientific inquiry. (Italics mine)

The inference from this is that all those since Gutenberg's time who have read books for the sheer enjoyment of their contents could not possibly have understood what they were doing. And, yet, some of the world's greatest scholars utterly unconscious of such a thing as the "scientific approach" have written hundreds of works about the joy they felt and the spiritual enrichment they received in the pursuit of knowledge.

Much of my life has been devoted to reading to audiences of working men and lecturing to literary and debating societies, composed chiefly of people busy enough earning their daily bread. During the years when I was engaged in this work there were several small libraries published which were popular with the intelligent working classes. Lubbock's Hundred Books was well known and was in great demand. Morley's Universal Library was another that engaged the interest of people who desired to use good literature for the improvement of their minds. I have in my hands the last volume published in Morley's Universal Library. It is "A Miscellany," and it begins with "Philobiblon" by Richard de Bury. When I think of the enjoyment I experienced when I read this volume, I wonder who would be interested in it now. A treatise on the love of books,

written by a man who was Lord Chancellor of England and the Bishop of Durham in the fourteenth century, is altogether out of date, and I venture to believe has no interest whatever for those who take English in an institution of learning.

What has happened? Tastes have completely changed. And, yet, working class members of literary societies asked me to read passages from it and give them some particulars about the life of Richard de Bury.

It amuses me now to see the advertisement in the volume, which announces a new edition. It says: "The reissue will be in twenty-one monthly volumes, which will reproduce the sixty-three volumes of the library grouped and arranged in historical order." The first one to be Homer's "Iliad" with the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles!

Henry Morley was professor of English literature at University College, London. What extraordinary students must have attended his classes! And how they succeeded in becoming interested in their beloved teacher is difficult to understand because Henry Morley applied no scientific method in introducing a masterpiece to his students. Nor did George Saintsbury. And, yet, accomplished men, in their student days, sat under their tutelage.

In his article Dr. Ross has something to say about Hamlet. But can none of the questions he raises be dealt with until the student has read the play—as a psychoanalyst? For the multitude "the play's the thing" and if a scientific inquiry about Hamlet's character had been necessary before it was produced, the play would not have had a second performance. The people who go to see the drama and who read novels that have received the hallmark of worthiness never dream of any of these newfangled notions about approaching a book in the spirit of scientific inquiry. Imagine a reader of Dickens or Thackeray or George Eliot "using the general procedures of science!"

I may be dull but for the life of me I cannot understand how a better introduction to great works can be given to the reader than that set down by the author himself. What professor of literature can improve upon the first three pages of the "Iliad?" Surely Thucydides told us in a comparatively short space what to expect in his "History" and so did Polybius. I could mention a score of books that are down for consideration in the Great Books course which announce at the very beginning all that is necessary to spur the inclination of the reader and woo him to read on with whatever enjoyment he can derive from the work.

There seems nothing for it but to institute adult classes and let the

system of teaching the young peter out before it is held in derision. I do not know where the teachers will come from who will take in hand the mighty task of impressing those who have passed through the schools during the past thirty or forty years with the importance of pursuing courses in literature. Yet, they must be found, if any advance toward spiritual redemption is to be made.

Forty years ago reading courses were popular in this country; well-known authors not only lectured on their books, but often enough read papers on literature in general to people who were interested. It is a pity the gadgets of light recreation, like the radio and the movie, have supplanted that excellent custom. It might be brought back through the work done with adult classes. The need is urgent. There is no time to be lost if the stigma of being dull or backward intellectually is to be obliterated from the reports of our educationists.

New York

Financing Old Age

Financing Old Age. By Henry W. Steinhaus. New York: National Industrial Conference Board, 1948.

The number of persons 65 years of age and over may reach 18 million by 1960, or almost 8 million above today's aged population, according to Dr. Steinhaus the author, a member of the research staff of the Equitable Life Assurance Society, estimates that by 1960 "there would be one aged person for every five persons of productive years. Today the ratio is about one to eight; at the turn of the century it was as low as one to thirteen."

"The forecast, as of 1960, of aged and productive workers, is governed mainly by considerations of mortality. The generations involved are in existence today and the number living in 1960 will depend, except for immigration, upon United States mortality rates. Mortality statistics clearly indicate that each generation appears to have a markedly lower mortality than its predecessor. Notable medical developments during the last decade have produced an acceleration of this trend which may bring about the existence of 18 million persons sixty-five years of age and over by 1960."

There are now roughly 10 million persons sixty-five years of age and over, it is noted. Of these, about 27 per cent are self-supporting because of gainful employment; another 20 per cent are retired on investments or pensions; about 25 per cent are dependent upon public authorities, chiefly