

## Some Thoughts on Education

By FRANCIS NEILSON

### I

WHAT IS MEANT by the term education when it is used by the controversialists in this discussion of whether it be wise or not to revive the liberal arts in our colleges? The word is scarcely ever defined, and even when an attempt is made to do so, it is so vague that I am at a loss to understand what is meant by it. Yet, book after book, article after article appears month after month, presenting aspects of this great question, and still, after reading them, I remain in the dark as to what course should be pursued to lift the shadows that have fallen upon our school system. It seems that the more money taken from the taxpayers for the purposes of school education, the less result is obtained from pupils. The statistics that have been published since this war began of the illiteracy of the men examined by the army authorities are the most discouraging I have seen. In April, 1945, a *New York Times* editorial gave the following report:

. . . When 600,000 men, the equivalent of forty Army divisions, were rejected for illiteracy and 360,000 men signed their first Selective Service registration cards by mark, [it was shown] that 56 per cent of our people have only an eighth-grade education, that 75 per cent have not completed high school. . . .

Indeed, the position today is far worse than it was seventy years ago when our system was held up to severe censure by such men as Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold. Renan said:

The sound instruction of the people is an effect of the high culture of certain classes. The countries which, like the United States, have created a considerable popular instruction without any serious higher instruction, will long have to expiate this fault by their intellectual mediocrity, their vulgarity of manners, their superficial spirit, their lack of general intelligence.<sup>1</sup>

This was considered to be a sweeping indictment of the system and a most undeserved one, for it was pointed out that the American lad was only at the beginning of a career in learning that had to be built up, which had no long tradition behind it such as that enjoyed by European countries.

<sup>1</sup> Translated from the French by Matthew Arnold in the preface to "Culture and Anarchy" (1869), New York, The Macmillan Company, 1916, p. xxii: "*Les pays qui, comme les Etats-Unis, ont créé un enseignement populaire considérable sans instruction supérieure sérieuse, expieront longtemps encore leur faute par leur médiocrité intellectuelle, leur grossièreté de mœurs, leur esprit superficiel, leur manque d'intelligence générale.*"

Most men have passed through several different stages of education. The basic system of the common school is merely preliminary to fitting a boy for a higher course. But the next step is determined very largely by the economic condition of the pupil's parents. It may be that the vast majority of youngsters, at the age of fourteen or sixteen, must enter the labor market and find a job so that they may augment the family budget.

This is a factor that is seldom taken into consideration by our instructors. They know that it exists but they seem to have forgotten the fact that in England and in this country thousands of men who have been obliged to leave school at an early age have realized, after making their own fortunes, that something should be done to supplement the opportunities for boys who wish to gain some culture. This was the reason for the establishment of night schools and special small academies which, as the years went on, offered greater and still greater means for workaday boys to study professional, technical, and artistic pursuits. In this controversy the fact is often overlooked that it was the night schools in Great Britain which made it possible for youths to pursue studies entirely different from the work done during the day to make both ends meet. To my mind there was no better system than that of the apprenticeship of boys of sixteen in the workshops, with the advantages of night schools where they were enabled to pursue the liberal arts and qualify themselves for worthy citizenship.

It is at the time when a boy leaves the common school that our system has broken down. Economic pressure, trade unionism, and the evil effects of patriarchalism in government have disrupted a method which might have been perfected. It must be obvious to anyone who has given thought to this matter that the advanced stages of education may be left to themselves, for they are concerned with an entirely different problem. The inclination of the individual becomes the determining factor at that time. If a boy desires to enter a profession (whether it be in medicine, in law, or in physics), he singles himself out as an entirely different person from the masses. During the past two generations we have seen this repeatedly in the quality of the boys who have sought scholarships which have enabled them to reach the highest rungs in the ladder of achievement.

## II

FURTHERMORE, THERE IS another point that is overlooked, and it is that of the dynamic inclination of a lad to learn for himself, wherever he can find the opportunity to master the elements of courses that will fit him for matriculation at a university. I have known scores of young men far removed from libraries and night schools, who have succeeded in educating

themselves. And, thank heavens, this is still in order and is one of the mainstays of cultural work. Looking back, I remember distinctly youths who worked at the face of the coal and on farms, who gave what would now be called their leisure to an indefatigable pursuit of knowledge. Indeed, I have heard men who have risen from the ranks say that they could do more for themselves, once they understood their own inclination, than any university could do for them. And on the other hand I have known fine scholars come down from the universities to London and battle against hunger.

Take the case of George Douglas Brown as typical of what happened years ago. Here was a Snell Scholar who was at Balliol under Jowett. Until he wrote "The House With the Green Shutters," he never earned more than two pounds a week.

How many times have we heard it said that it is the education one gets for himself that determines his happiness in life? We can argue the matter until the moonrakers land luna on the bank and still be no nearer solving this momentous problem than we are today. For inclination and application are the determining processes in the individual that make for culture.

Another unfortunate aspect of this question is the circumscribed position of our instructors. One of the keenest educationists I have known in this country told me years ago that, when he was the head of a college, he felt he knew only four years of the life of any student that passed through it. What he was, what he became was so often a mystery to the college president that he sometimes wondered whether the boy had a beginning and an end. Of course, those who excelled had their names inscribed upon the honor roll of the college, but the proportion was so small that it seemed to my friend almost a waste of energy to turn out so few to be remembered.

### III

MY OWN EXPERIENCE, which extends over sixty years, has taught me that there is scarcely a comparison to be made between the boys at school today and those I met when I was a young man. Therefore, I consider it difficult to refute the charge that the taxpayers are milched for a system that does not show worthwhile results. However, in this controversy there is overlooked a condition which did not exist here two generations ago. It is this: there were not the frivolous attractions then that are now set before our young people daily. There was no movie, no radio, no phonograph, no motor car; indeed, scarcely any of the idle amusements that wean our young people away from the hearth.

I remember the time in this country when the home was as precious to

parents and their children as the school itself. Indeed, many times I have taken part in study classes held at a house where fathers and mothers were interested in the education of their progeny. As I review the scene, I cannot understand how our educators can ignore the fact that the superficial attractions which pull the youth of today so mightily are to be counted among the most serious obstacles that face the schools and the instructors.

An old president of a western college told me that if he had to live his life again he would never permit a radio or a phonograph upon the campus. In the years that he had spent at his college, he had seen the lamentable deterioration of interest, and he blamed it chiefly upon the movie, the radio, taverns, and nightclubs.

Small wonder, then, that the controversialists cannot surmount the impediments that lie in the path of a cultural system of education. After all, the instruction received in the schools today by ninety per cent of the youngsters would scarcely have been sufficient to admit them to a college, as those institutions were constituted here fifty years ago. And I am informed that it is only because the credit system has become so easy that our colleges are packed with noodles who ought to be helping their mothers or doing the chores at the ironmonger's or the grocer's.

## IV

SOME TWENTY YEARS AGO I entertained the president of a university, the chairman of the Board of Trustees, and several of the alumni. The evening was planned so that we might discuss certain changes which the new president desired to initiate. By profession he was a physicist, and as our discussion proceeded I soon found that he was completely at a loss when we entered on the stormy waters of the necessity of restoring the liberal arts. He was a specialist and was fully convinced that specialization was to be the great function of teaching in the universities of the future. All subjects were to be departmentalized.

All but two of the other guests supported his notion. The latter were brilliant mathematicians who had won high honors at the university. But neither had been able to find a post in which he could teach what he knew. In disgust, the one became a physician and the other took a position as a statistician with a large mail-order house.

These young men I had known for many years. Their parents were unusually cultured people. Both boys were capable of conducting classes in literature and, especially, in metaphysics and philosophy. Indeed, one, during the term he was studying medicine, told me he would be willing to

throw it up if an institution of learning would offer him a position in the department of philosophy.

My association with colleges and universities for the past thirty years has been unique, because I have had the opportunity not only of meeting the trustees, the faculty, and the scholars, but I have lectured on many different subjects to the classes. This experience has been of value to me in estimating the worth of most of the volumes that I have read since this controversy of the liberal arts versus vocational training began.

In the past five or six years the books and articles on "education" have been voluminous and heterogeneous. To peruse individually everything that has recently been written on this loosely interpreted subject would be the work of a lifetime. A few months ago I received from Porter Sargent his book, "Between Two Wars, the Failure of Education, 1920-1940."<sup>2</sup> My respect for the author and the work that he is accomplishing demanded an immediate examination of his illuminating chapters. It is a review which no one who is sincerely interested in the great conflict that is going on, in and out of the schools, can afford to ignore. It sets before the reader all the essentials of the controversy, and this is done with a method and order that go far to make the work easy reading. Mr. Sargent's running commentary is always a stimulating feature, and his keen sense of values, as expressed in his criticism, heightens the interest of the abundant bibliography with its notes.

Curiously enough, at the same time, I received Sir Richard Livingstone's "Plato and Modern Education,"<sup>3</sup> which shows how wide is the gulf that separates the views of our educationists. Sir Richard Livingstone is president of Corpus Christi College, Oxford. He is at the head of the British movement that calls for a return to those fundamentals which for centuries were the basis of European culture. His earlier work, "The Future in Education"<sup>4</sup> (which I am glad to see is now circulated in this country), should be read by all those who consider the past dead beyond resurrection. A study of it will undoubtedly enlighten the modernists as to what was essential in all European schools for the development of an intelligent being.

Another recent work that attracted my interest was "The Rebirth of Liberal Education" by Fred B. Millett.<sup>5</sup> This is a thorough survey of many of our colleges and the systems to which they adhere.

Selecting these three books as examples, one can easily trace the utter

<sup>2</sup> Published by Porter Sargent, 11 Beacon Street, Boston, 1945.

<sup>3</sup> Cambridge University Press and New York, The Macmillan Company, 1944.

<sup>4</sup> Cambridge University Press, 1941.

<sup>5</sup> New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945.

mess that has been made of what was once, in my lifetime, a comprehensive method encouraging students to make worthy citizens of themselves. This, as I interpret it, is the principal aim of education. For it must be understood that education is not merely a matter of the schools; it is something one cultivates all through life. Surely the stamp of an educated man is that which impresses one with his desire, in or apart from his business, to become a cultured person. If it be not sheer pedantry to quote an eighteenth century author, I should like to mention Montesquieu's notion of education:

The first motive which ought to impel us to study is the desire to augment the excellence of our nature, and to render an intelligent being yet more intelligent.<sup>6</sup>

To one whose schooldays began in the seventies, it is strange now to note the stress that is placed upon the term education. It is so frequently used as if it were a talisman that would insure a job for a young man. It had no such significance in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Indeed, when a boy finished the common school or the commercial school, he was ready to go into the world and fend for himself and start his real education.

Where the debate is to end and when a practical proposal is to spring from the controversy, no one knows. Even those who are conscious that the men who take vocational and technical training are lacking a cultural education now find that the old system cannot be neglected after all, and many of them suggest in some vague way a return to the liberal arts as an adjunct to the present method. Dr. Dewey has said:

The problem of going ahead instead of going back is then a problem of liberalizing our technical and vocational education. . . .<sup>7</sup>

This means, I take it, that the word "liberalizing" refers to the lack of cultural pursuits. It is only necessary to hold a conversation with business people to realize that many of them know little of the history of their own country and practically nothing of the arts. This is frequently noticeable even in the trustees of institutions of learning. The case of the gentleman who asked what branch of medicine was practiced by a metaphysician is not unusual. The trustees are products of the methods which have been in vogue during the past generation. Indeed, it may be said that the practical men of affairs have co-operated with those who have made the system what it is.

The condition of the world bears evidence of the utter failure of the

<sup>6</sup> Quoted by Matthew Arnold, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> "Challenge to Liberal Thought," *Fortune*, August, 1944, p. 156.

order of education as it has been practiced in the colleges and universities. Such chaos could only be produced by disordered minds. And as neither the first World War nor this one has brought forth an outstanding person who reveals an ability to cope with the turmoil created by the politicians, we must conclude that education has done little or nothing to qualify men for meeting the stupendous problems that confront us.

Contrast the hope of the days of the last quarter of the nineteenth century with that of this, and our fate stands out as the figure of Nemesis at Sunium. Scarcely a week passes that one does not find in the serious reviews (whether published here or in Great Britain) articles upon the utter lack of moral understanding and the debasement of refining influences. What Nietzsche would say if he were here and were prompted to write another "Genealogy of Morals" can only be imagined, but the severe strictures that he penned nearly sixty years ago would seem mild and timid compared with what he would set down now.

Surely if a system of education cannot promote moral understanding in the minds of its charges, of what use can it be to posterity? If the lad who, at a college or a university, is prepared to make a living leaves it without fostering within himself the instincts of a gentleman, why should one trouble whether he makes a living or no? And why go to all this tremendous expense of teaching anybody where to find a job if the end of it be more and more wage slavery and less and less hope of domestic security? Our educators must shortly realize that they cannot have it both ways and that the censure which will fall upon them will be deserved. The day of reckoning may be put off for some time, but as surely as winter comes to strip the trees by icy blasts, the whirlwind of despair will be visited upon us.

## V

THERE IS YET one very important question to be asked that I have never seen put in this debate. It is: If the vocational and technical training of the schools is to be liberalized, where are the teachers to be found to perform the job? The specialists will not be equal to the occasion. The men now engaged in the departments of philosophy, literature, and the arts are too few and, so I am informed, the classes too scant.

But let us suppose that a miracle takes place and we find battalions of instructors ready to begin the system which served well for centuries. What will be the response from the young who have been impressed with the thought that school is the place where you learn how to make a living? Are the youths of today to be informed that true education really means hard work? Hendrik van Loon told me that his speech before the National

Education Association in New Orleans (in 1938) was deeply resented because he said we deprived the younger generation of all the trouble "and made learning as easy and pleasant and painless as going fishing."

It seems to me that with the foolproof machine, we have forgotten that education is the one thing that cannot be made foolproof. A man would have to summon high-powered courage to face the youth of today on this question and tell them that in a true system of education there would be little or no time for the movie, the radio, or the dance hall. Recreation and sport are the chief things that animate the souls of our young people. A trustee of a university told me some years ago that his own boys looked for contacts and a celebrated football team as the chief things that would recommend an institution of higher learning. I blushed the other day when I read in André Maurois' *Mémoires* his reference to an alumnus of Princeton telling the president that what was wanted was "less learning and more victories."<sup>8</sup>

And when I thought that the college of Rennes, toward the end of the eighteenth century, had 4,000 students<sup>9</sup> and no football team, I wondered what had drawn the boys there where Chateaubriand and so many of his colleagues received an education that assisted them in becoming world-renowned men. Far be it from me to object to healthy sport, but when it becomes the chief attraction of a youth in search of an education, then I think it is time to protest.

Under the old system, ample time was found for athletics, but there were then far fewer watching the game. The stadium and the bowl had not been thought of. Indeed, the college and university teams were composed strictly of amateurs in accordance with the rules of the Amateur Athletic Association.

## VI

THESE ARE JUST a few thoughts that occur to me in reading the books by the debaters of this perplexing problem. Perhaps they are scarcely worth recording so far as the generality is concerned, but some of my friends consider that it is time for someone who can view the scene from within and without to make his opinion known. Few have had to work as hard as I to make a living, and at the same time get an education. Schools did

<sup>8</sup> "C'était, pour Princeton, une mauvaise année sportive et les Alumni, mécontents, disaient au Président: 'Monsieur le Président, moins d'érudition, et plus de victoires, s'il vous plaît!'" (From Editions de La Maison Française, Inc., New York, 1942, Vol. II, p. 99.)

<sup>9</sup> "En 1761, le collège de Rennes comptait 4,000 élèves." ("Histoire de Rennes," by Ducrest et Maillot, p. 229. Quoted from Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe*, Paris, Librairie Garnier Frères, 1938, footnote pp. 108-9, q.v. for other interesting information about Rennes.)



very little for me. And perhaps that is the reason why I have always considered myself a pupil. Even now—at my age—when I think of the work that should have been done by me in middle life, I am appalled at the opportunities that I missed. When I am conscious of what I desire to know, the works unread, those to be re-read with deeper mind upon them, with a fuller sense of the realities of life, I feel that, though I have passed man's span, I need many years yet of study in my attempt to know what Matthew Arnold called culture, "the best that has been said and thought in the world."

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