

THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF ENGLAND

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WHEN Professor Stewart asked me to write an article for this special number, I agreed readily, being pleased and flattered to renew relations with the DALHOUSIE REVIEW. If he had named a subject, I should be writing now with more confidence. The old examinee habit lingers on in its victims: it is for the examiner to pose questions, if he must, and for the examinee, if he can, to answer. Professor Stewart having ignored the principle of the division of labour in the matter of this article, I give my thoughts the rein, and I find myself borne towards a certain trite subject. Not long since, I took part in a public debate, much against my wish, on the theme, "That the Public Schools have lost the confidence of the nation." Not that I thought the Public Schools could not be defended, or was unwilling to defend them; on the contrary. But the theme seemed to me discouraging to a degree. The issue, however, proved very different. It was so different that the theme may interest Canadians, as it did that night the Torquay audience.

If English people are invited to discuss a matter, it is their instinct to believe that there is something wrong with it. For if not, why discuss it? Indeed, why mention it? Let those whose doubt this consider the technique of the big popular newspapers of England: and the press of other countries may be still more to the point. The most "popular" of the English dailies thrive in an atmosphere of specific sensationalism. They minister to alarmism in the public mind, never so happy—or so profitable—as when they can suggest defect or decay or impending disaster in something old, established, treasured, trusted, or all-important in the national make-up. The English enjoy these speculative alarms. If the alarm passes off, as by far the most do, if there is a happy ending; the English love that too, and live happy until another alarm develops. From needless alarm to happy ending is Romance. The progression obeys a fitful periodicity. The English like a burst of emotion at the turn of the week: and it is the function of the Sunday newspapers, purveyors of the strongest forms of news, to supply it.

Alarmism has certain recurrent forms, and misgivings about the Public Schools is one of them. A large proportion of English people would confess, on questioning, to vague dissatisfaction

or definite doubt about them. And most of them would do so in the sure hope of reassurance. The scepticism of the English, for the most part, goes no deeper: their disbelief is a disguised wish to have their beliefs, so to speak, massaged. Some critics of the Public Schools say that they are not what they were. The retort to this is easy: "they never were." The answer, too, is easy: "and a very good thing they aren't". The Public Schools, in fact, are improving, both in themselves and in their repute. It would be strange if it were not so, for all forms of education whatsoever in England may justly be said to be improving. Let those who doubt it consider the huge rise of public and private expenditure on every form of education. What costs so much, and so much more than before, must have the benefit of the doubt. It must pass for good.

At the present time the ideas and the methods of the Public Schools are spreading steadily throughout English education. They may fairly be said to be the specifically English contribution to the world's fund of educational *motifs*. Contrary to the old set of the tide, the English ideas now influence Scottish education. They influence Germany still more. The new educational ideas in Germany,—the Germans think them new,—the ideas that are illustrated, for instance, in the *Adolf Hitler Schulen* are in large part borrowed from England. Since the Great War the Germans have informed themselves comprehensively on English education, and especially on those phases of it that have had little or no counterpart among themselves. Since 1918 there have been plenty of German spies in England: but they have been in the schools, and welcome. And it is not only Germany.

The Englishman, desiring soul-massage, may feel dubious sometimes about the Public Schools, but the outside world is inquisitive and envious. The English have had for many generations an unrivalled system—if system it can be called—of manly and citizenly education and culture in the old Public Schools and the two old Universities. Scholars, scientists, artists these schools may turn out, if Nature helps, but citizens they must. In any other country this education would inspire a whole army of theorists and expositors. But all this the English have hardly yet begun to describe or philosophize. Some nations harp on their own strong points. Here is one that takes them for granted and talks, if it must talk, of something else. There is an old rhyme:

I count him wise and right well taught
Who can bear a horn and blow it not.

This sort of wisdom may be claimed for the English in respect of the Public Schools. Many a foreigner thinks that the English critics of these schools don't know how well their bread is buttered.

But repute is not proof. Let me try to get to grips with the Public Schools. But with which of them? For they differ widely. In the House of Commons, where I spent five years, I made the discovery that the Liberal Party, my party, included indeed some Liberals, but also many Conservatives and Socialists. And two other disconcerting discoveries followed: that the other two parties also consisted of Liberals, Conservatives and Socialists. Of the Public Schools, similarly, some are advanced, some are not at all advanced, and some take a middle course. There are Public Schools for all tastes. No one need dislike a system which somewhere, almost certainly, offers what would suit him exactly.

But I must try to come to grips with what the Public Schools have in common. Their *point de depart* is a paradox. They whisk boys out of their homes, and put them, day and night, in the hands of strangers, mostly men, and in the exclusive company and at the mercy of their own kind. What other boys are, or can be, every mother knows. It is an all-round wrench for the affections, a cold plunge for the young victims, a severe reflexion on the homes.

Let us face the facts. The family is the root and key of everything. But of what shape is it, of what shape is it more and more nowadays? An only son, perhaps, a doting mother, a hesitating father: too much female influence, too little discipline, and no young environment. Children grow up best—the older generation still knows for gospel what will soon seem a fantasy from the past—in close company with plenty of other children. This the children of to-day can seldom do at home.

The presumption is in favour of sending boys away, for a time at least, if the parents know of a good school and can afford it. Most boys gain by exchanging their homes for the influence and the discipline of school for some years. But certainly not all boys. Many would thrive better by living at home and attending school as day-boys. But their parents send them off, because there is no good and convenient day-school, or because they don't judge so, or for some other reason, true or mistaken, or for snobbish motives. I deprecate this snobbery. Most or all Public Schools harbour boys who by idiosyncrasies of nature and intelligence would be much happier

in their homes. Not that unhappiness is decisive against the school: it may be a sign that the school is doing for a boy what his home could not do, what is better done thus in adolescence than left undone for life. But there is everywhere a residue that in the main would have its best chance at home—if only the parents could be trusted to decide. The just residue, and others by thousands and tens of thousands, have this comfort, that the day-schools are far more and far better than in the past, and that they too seek after the *imponderabilia* which give the Public Schools their peculiar quality and their prestige.

But what in fact do the Public Schools give? First, a good lay-out of buildings and equipment, an impressive scene, enriched in the outstanding and most characteristic cases by the associations of age and historical events and persons. A long tradition of ordered ways and famous names tells on every inmate. The boy is but one in this company of the living and the dead: among them he may find his hero and exemplar, and he will always find his match, or more. The school humbles the perceptive boy, but stimulates him too, and steadies him.

Second, the school offers a framework of rules and customs, some obvious, some recondite, some of them incrustations of little value or none. Inside the framework there is safety and happiness: outside, there is neither. The system, if transgressed, reacts in various ways and through various agents, from the head-master down. The scheme of equilibria requires in a boy a two-edged sense, and, if he has it, trains it to good purpose: a sense of self and a sense of other, a sense of rights and of duties, of social pattern and cohesion. The prime demands of the social life are frankness, courage and fair play; and next, manners and style. The indeterminate, the wistful, the passive and the negative are at a discount. In this thronging life at close quarters the cues are unmistakable,—to keep smiling, to be courteous, to be active, to keep one's own counsel, to put up with things and people, to let the outer skin thicken, to wear one's heart anywhere but on one's sleeve. Premature, unnatural, and even cruel some of these desiderata may seem for tender years. Public School education is not without some hardness and hardship.

Third, the school offers instruction and scholastic standards in extreme variety. The teaching methods range from adaptations of the Dalton Method to mediaeval formality, from "free" work as practised in "advanced" schools to the deadliest dictation. The scholastic standards are not very obtrusive in the

early years, but are severe and striking at the top of the school. In the Public Schools the principle "To him that hath shall be given and from him that hath not. . . ." still rules. The ordinary boy, not a scholar nor scientist nor artist, does not take himself too seriously, nor is he taken too seriously on the strict scholastic side: his time will come: the atmosphere of vigorous and happy action and of *camaraderie* in which he lives promises him as much. But outstanding ability wins encouragement, and devoted and adroit help. The best teaching in the world, probably, is to be found in the English Public Schools: and alongside it, according to some critics, the worst too. The worst, however, is so well diffused in the civilized world that it would be a miracle if the Public Schools were immune. But whatever the technical shortcomings of some ranges of the instruction, the compensatory merits of the Public Schools weigh heavily. Compensation is a key-note, for the all-round life of the school is built on the diversity of tastes and powers in any and every boy. Study awakens one boy's force and wit; society, another's; creative art another's, and games and physical feats another's. Education consists in discovering and energizing the forms of imagination that are the keys of initiative. Few boys have the mathematical imagination, a few the scientific, some have the artistic, some the literary, some the muscular with its intuitions of what the body can do, and how, and almost all have stirrings of the social imagination. In multifarious activities bias and talent are found out, and boys' natures are built up. Excellence is honoured in whatever kind it shows itself. Brilliance is recognised, even if with regrets that brilliant boys are not as others are.

The most important cue of Public School education in one sense is the cue "to belong." The root lies deep: what is bred in the bone will out, in one shape or another. All men belong, before they become their own,—if their own they ever become. They belonged, all of them, once on a time to their mothers. The lesson of belonging, of being a member, of sharing in a sort of movement, a collective heave and thrust, of sharing in the manifestations of an organism is all-important. The Public Schools are the scene, so to speak, of the play-life of citizenship and patriotism: the instinct of attachment works with spontaneous force, though not without crudity and narrowness. The lesson of belonging reaches forward to moral and religious matters of vital import. If these implications are not accepted and worked out in the concrete, if their force is not made to tell heavily in the life of the school, consider what risks arise and what consequences are likely.

For a Public School is liable to certain evils. It tends to develop class-feeling, it gravitates towards the assertions of privilege, it slides easily into an unhealthy intensity of self-consciousness. Every organisation that gives its members a strong and satisfying sense of belonging runs the risks of sophistication in its egoism. Principle can be undermined, hearts can be hardened, and minds can be blinded. Good hard belonging can silence conscience. In the name and in the interest of the group to which they belong, men and women frequently do what they would shrink from as individuals. Belonging hallows selfishness. The more intimate, the more disciplined, the more forceful an organisation is, the more it needs the religious influences, lest it conceive itself as an end in itself, to its own and the general harm.

What is the alternative to the religious tradition of the Public Schools? Sectionalism, class-interest, selfishness unreconciled and unsubordinated,—in a word, the extravagances of organized egoism. The extravagant nationalism that pervades and distracts Europe may be traced, in a measure, to the wide prevalence of secularist education. "To be as one, is to be as God" is good totalitarian doctrine.

The essence of the Public School system is that inside a certain framework, some elements of which are fairly obvious while others, rather elusive, demand some refinement of perceptions and a certain quickness of response, a boy may live happily, finding friends and encouragement, obliged to many activities, inured to many contacts, keyed up to male ways and a masculine outlook, taught this and that in the ordinary routine of teaching, helped forward in special lines of study, if he has any, watched in his health, trained in habits of exercise, expected and helped to stand in all things on his own feet, given a friendly and courteous atmosphere and expected to help in sustaining it, made to feel himself a member of a greater life that existed before him, and will exist after him, made to feel greatness and goodness in his school and in people, and made to feel too that the hand of God is in it all, that neither his school nor himself is an end but only servant and disciple and means, made to feel, in short, that the ultimate challenge and scrutiny of his school and himself come from God's side.

It is a noble ideal. It is the almost inevitable ideal, given good boys, good masters, freedom to plan, and the wherewithal.

Is this ideal holding its own in the Public Schools? Is it leading opinion outside them? To these main questions I

answer "Yes, on the whole". Not that the ideals have a smooth path. The good men to run the system are not too numerous. The temper of the age is hesitating and sceptical, a reactionary age between the idealism of the Victorian era and the next coming age of idealism. Neither are the homes favourable, being weak in discipline and in intellectual and moral conviction, and addicted besides to comfort and insistent on pleasures. Ages are likely to have the schools they deserve. Ages make the schools more than the schools make the ages. If the schools make any age, it is the next, when the boys of to-day will be in their forties and fifties, established and influential citizens.

The Public Schools have inherited a great tradition of fine spirit and high effort, and more immediately from the Victorian age, the afterglow of which still lingers on them. They feel the impact of contemporary influences that clash signally with their traditional virtues. But they seem to me to have yielded very little ground.