

EXPERIMENT IN CO-OPERATIVE EDUCATION

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IN a little book entitled *Shakespeare and the Ordinary Man*, published by the Ryerson Press of Toronto, the author, Dr. George H. Murphy of Halifax, remarks on page 38:

A good many years ago, in a small Cape Breton mining town, a few persons of professional standing conceived the idea of establishing a Shakespeare class. . . . The class was a splendid success. . . .

And in the foreword to the book Sir Joseph Chisholm, Chief Justice of Nova Scotia, makes the statement:

This Ordinary Man can be found also in that remarkable group mentioned by Dr. Murphy and of whom he was one of the first members.

The reference, in both cases, is to the so-called "Literary Class" which was organized in the town of Dominion, Cape Breton, in the year 1908. The suggestion has been made that a short account of its early history should be placed on record in the pages of the DALHOUSIE REVIEW.

It was in the fall of the year above-mentioned that a small number of men and women, ranging in age from 25 to 40 years, conceived the idea of forming in their town an Association for the purpose of reading and discussing good literature. A committee was appointed to consider the best means of accomplishing this purpose, and to report on the matter as early as possible.

As chairman of that committee, I was delegated to seek an interview with Mr. H. P. Duchemin, K.C., of Sydney, who for a year or two previously had conducted a Literary Class in that city, and to obtain his views on the advisability of organizing such a class in the town of Dominion. Having arranged by telephone for a meeting with him, without, however, revealing its purpose, I duly presented myself and lost no time in assuring him that I had not come to consult him in his legal capacity, but rather to ascertain the character of the work that had been undertaken by his Literary Class in Sydney. At the mention of literature his hitherto apparent professional

frigidity forsook him, to be replaced by an illuminating glow of countenance betokening much pleasure. For a whole hour the interview continued, and it finally resulted in Mr. Duchemin assuming the direction of our contemplated class.

This early association with Mr. Duchemin was an exceedingly fortunate matter for us, as the knowledge and experience of an enthusiast was, and always is, needed in the early stages of such work in order to give the proper start, and to inculcate the true spirit that finds expression in ever-extending boundaries. Many of our members had been, heretofore, wide readers of general literature; but with the exception of one or two, their acquaintance with, and conception of, the masterpieces of English Literature was rather vague and superficial, and practically useless as sources of mental delight. At the very outset, then, we were very fortunate, I repeat, to have come under the inspiring influence of a man who had had a distinguished college course at Dalhousie University, and whose attachment to the study of literature was well recognized in the Maritime Provinces.

Our first class numbered 16, made up of 3 clergymen, 2 doctors, the mayor of the town, a prominent Labor leader, 2 elocutionists, a versifier, 6 school teachers—7 men and 9 women. Additional members joined each year, until the enrolment soon reached over 30. We met at 8.30 every Thursday evening from November 1 to April 30, and closed the regular session at 10.30 p.m. While he was with us, Mr. Duchemin occupied the chair, gave a short summary of what we were to study during the evening, then called on us in rotation to read 10 or 20 lines of the play or poem, pausing after each reading to afford an opportunity for asking questions, making comments, and receiving his explanation and interpretation of difficult or obscure passages. At first, he himself read the "purple patches"; but later he rather encouraged special propensities in that respect shown by one or two members of the class.

Our first study was the Shakespearean Comedy, *As You Like It*. A better selection could not have been made. The "heavenly Rosalind" will ever be adored by many members, still surviving, who cherish fond recollections of episodes in their own Forest of Arden; while the whimsical sayings of the "melancholy Jacques" caused many ruminations in the minds of our embryo philosophers. Mr. Duchemin's reading of the parts assigned to Touchstone, the most genial and polished of all clowns, was truly delightful, and furnished amusement that will not be forgotten.

Our next study was *Henry IV*, Part I, and then for the first time many of us met that prince of humorists, Falstaff. Again in dealing with him Mr. Duchemin was at his best: books would be closed and all eyes fixed on the reader as, in true dramatic style, he described the virtues and vices of this wonderful character. Well does the present writer recall the inability of members to restrain themselves from bursts of laughter while under the spell of a Duchemin rendering of Falstaffian expressions.

Next followed *Macbeth*, and its completion terminated our first year's work. Considerable study was given this drama; and as it was our first introduction to tragedy, the study made a profound impression on us. At the close of the term, towards the last of April, original papers dealing with some of the leading characters portrayed were prepared and read by selected members, and afterwards refreshments were served.

The second year was occupied in reading Tennyson: first, *The Princess*, and then *In Memoriam*. The former was a source of great pleasure, especially to the lady members. No other poet, save Shakespeare himself, has pictured female types of such loveliness, purity and dignity. His devotion to women is not the lip-service of Moore and of Byron; it is a real service, and a reverence such as that of a Galahad moving on a lofty plane of thought and feeling. All of these features were fully presented and duly impressed by our director, whose familiarity with the literary output of the great English poet of the Victorian era is quite remarkable. With the majority of the class he believed, however, that if women were ever to play such freaks as were exhibited in this poem, the burlesque and the tragic might go hand-in-hand.

With *In Memoriam* we struck a very serious vein of thought. I may say that Mr. Duchemin was rather dubious as to the wisdom of taking up this study with the class; he feared that the abstruseness of the ideation might dampen the ardor that had so evidently developed up to this time; and had it not been for the persistence of one or two of the members, he would gladly have postponed Tennyson's greatest production until a more convenient season. But speedily his fears were dissipated as, night after night, the actual reading would be delayed by endless enquiries and by well-considered discussions bearing on the subject-matter of the study. With much regret the usual closing hour—10.30 p.m.—“closed the book” for the evening; but after Mr. Duchemin's departure at that

time for his home in Sydney, 10 miles distant, the members often remained around and continued the "talk" for an hour or more afterwards.

In our third year we again took up Tennyson in *The Idylls of the King*. Arthur and his knights of the Round Table furnished mental pabulum for every Thursday evening during that winter, while supplementary reading along the same lines claimed our individual attention during other evenings of the week. It would be interesting to know now how often these charming poems have been read and re-read since by members of our student group whose first acquaintance with them was made in that class! Arthur and Guinevere, Lancelot and Elaine, Gowain and Gallahad—shall we ever forget them!

At the end of the third term the pressure of private and public business compelled Mr. Duchemin to sever, with much reluctance, his connection with the class; but his inspiration remained with us and invisibly, but none the less potently, projected the class along the paths he had plotted out at the commencement. At his suggestion we dropped poetry, for that season, and peeped into philosophy as presented by Carlyle. Our Merlin, having placed us in the Carlylean barge, metaphorically gave us one grave look and groaned "from the great Deep to the great Deep they go." Nobly, though tremulously, we took up *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, and read the book through from cover to cover (thanks, for assistance, to Webster's Unabridged Dictionary and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*), using Dr. Macmechan's edition as our text. The class met as in previous years every Thursday night, under the nominal leadership of a President who, however, did not necessarily feel that the success of the meetings depended on any particular merit that in him resided. He was regarded rather as the focal point where the Ray of Incidence became the Ray of Reflection. In other words, questions were asked, opinions submitted, and decisions requested which, while addressed to him, were respectively asked, submitted, and requested of the class as a whole. In short, every member was equally responsible with every other member to do his or her utmost in cutting through any Gordian knot that might present itself while the literary skein was being unwound. This observance ensured the continuance of the enthusiasm and the cultivation of the good feeling that pervaded the class from the beginning. At the close of this year (1911-12) a symposium on the subject, "What I have learned from Carlyle's *Heroes*", occupied an hour. These

papers were well prepared, presenting original ideas expressed in forceful and elegant language.

On the first of November, 1912, we assembled in the Town Hall and thus entered on our fifth year. In the usual way and with our old-time zest we read and studied three of Shakespeare's heavy tragedies, namely, *Othello*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Hamlet*, using the Rolfe Edition as the text. At the conclusion of each play, five-to-ten minute papers on the leading characters were read and afterwards commented on by the whole class. A vast improvement in the preparation of these essays was now very apparent, when compared with those presented in the first years. This may be accounted for in three ways: first, some of the members had, in the meantime, provided themselves with commentaries on the plays studied, and had thus procured a deeper insight into the particular play under consideration; secondly, the free and easy discussion that took place night after night, as scene by scene was analyzed, gave every member a better grasp of the main features of the drama than otherwise would have been likely; and thirdly, the good-natured competition, fostered and developed in this social and literary club or society during the preceding five years, was bound to make its influence felt. To these may be added a fourth factor in the way of increasing personal interest, independent thinking, and much originality, namely, the refusal of some members to study printed commentaries, preferring to receive their Shakespearean "milk", pure and unadulterated, as it came from the original source and not liable to any intermediate contamination. Be that as it may, we had a most profitable as well as enjoyable winter, and our literary work was wound up with the regular banquet to which was invited the usual quota of guests.

And then came the final year of this special class—(that of 1908-1914) during which we read critically line by line, and examined closely precept by precept, the tragedies of *Hamlet* and *Cymbeline* and the comedy *Twelfth Night*. The opening exercises and the educative procedure during the term were similar to those of other terms; but the closing exercises assumed the form of an elaborate staging of scenes from *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *As You Like It*. The meeting was open to the public, and the largest hall in the town was filled to capacity. This performance will long live in the remembrance of more than one of the amateur actors.

At the close of this intensive course of study, extending over a period of six years, the "Literary Class" of the town

of Dominion which, by now, had reached a membership of 35, decided to discontinue for a while. I am informed, however, that it has been resuscitated under the leadership of a member of the original class and is again a "going concern", specializing in the study of Shakespeare. And what better literary study can be pursued by such an organization? The beauty and sublimity of the thought that, passage after passage, strikes like a flash from the vaulty firmament on high; the skill of the consummate artist in the expression of this thought; and the harmonious manner in which the whole dramatic plot is worked out and brought to a satisfactory termination are all bound to rivet the attention, to excite the admiration, and to stimulate the mental faculties of the merest tyro in the study of English Literature. The same observation applies, but with even greater intensity, in the case of the profound Shakespearean student.