

STANDS SCOTLAND WHERE SHE DID?

Proposed Educational Reforms Provoke an Argument

A CABLE message from London the other day, hinting at radical changes in Scottish educational methods, caused a minor explosion in "The Listener" office and sent us out to gather comment from Scots in New Zealand. We summarise below, first, the cable; then the domestic argument; and finally three outside opinions.

ACCORDING to the cable message, the Advisory Council on Education in Scotland has recommended to the British Ministry of Education that Scots schoolchildren should be freed of homework and primary school-leaving examinations. The council contends that research into child psychology has shown that handwork and hobbies calling for personal initiative are more important in education than "forced knowledge of arithmetic and writing." Its report advocates the elimination of competitive examinations at the stage of transfer from primary to secondary school, and the substitution of intelligence-tests; recommends that schools "should wage a planned and unrelenting campaign against the worthless jumble of shipshod, ungrammatical, and vulgar forms of speech masquerading as Scots," and discounts the supposed "disciplinary" value of homework on the ground that "overtime for school pupils is in the end as uneconomic as it is for adult workers." Finally, it emphasises that the aim of education should be to produce happy, hard-working citizens, rather than thrifty, unimaginative plodders or feather-brained "good time" seekers.

Pro. v. Con.

SHORN of a quantity of heathery verbiage, and done into some semblance of English, here is the substance of the argument over these proposals which developed in *The Listener* office between the liberal humanist McA. and the craggy conservative McB. (neither of them being aware that there was a chiel among them takin' notes):

McA. In general I approve of the proposals, and my reasons are these: I think that Scottish education is too much influenced by mercenary considerations. The only idea is one of getting education and getting on—especially getting on. This is to be understood in a country that is all cold and barren. The Scots have to get on or get out to have a comfortable life. In other words, their country cannot support them.

McB. In general I disapprove of the proposals. Their effect is going to be a depressing of Scottish educational standards into something like conformity with those south of the Border. And I flatly reject the suggestion that Scots education is influenced by mercenary considerations. It's true that on the University level poverty has prevented the leisurely acquisition of wisdom—the

tutorial system of Oxford and Cambridge is made possible by rich endowments denied to the Scots colleges—but in learning the hard way the Scot has acquired strength of character as well as strength of mind. Nothing worthwhile is gained without some tribulation.

McA. But there is too much grind, too much mere drill; not enough liberty or liberality in the system.

McB. The fault with other systems is that there is too little grind, as you call it, too little discipline and too much licence. The trouble with a large percentage of the human race is that it is suffering from a fatty degeneration of the will.

McA. Bigotry will not cure that, and the by-products of Scots education are bigotry, dogmatism, and a rigid conception of right and wrong in matters that



"There is great earnestness in Scottish education"

cannot be narrowed down to such simple equations as that. There is great earnestness in Scottish education, but very little tolerance.

McB. It is true that there is much earnestness, and there may be too little tolerance, but a nation which, for a thousand years, has had to bend down and pull itself up by its own bootstraps can be forgiven for getting stiffnecked. Anyway, these faults derive from virtues that far outweigh them—originality of thought and independence of mind, and a traditional love of learning for its own sake.

McA. Scotland has filled the world with good technical men—engineers, doctors, accountants, and so on, but not with real philosophers. There is surely something wrong with a system that in 500 years has produced one great poet (who had hardly any education), one cantankerous prophet who had too much, and one or two philosophers not in the highest class.

McB. Hold on! You can't damn an educational system for that. Men are



poets and prophets and philosophers in spite of themselves, and certainly in spite of whatever education they may or may not have had. Offhand, I can remember only one English poet of world significance whose education was formal and orthodox. And if Milton was not a crammer I'll eat my Balmoral bonnet.

McA. Inasmuch as Milton's writing reveals his crammed erudition, the less Milton he.

McB. The plain fact of the matter, of course, is that in your 500 years Scotland's population was an eighth of England's. And show me eight English poets of Burns's stature, eight English Carlyles, 16 Sassenach Lockes and Humes (I won't drag in the Scotts and the Stevensons, the Barries or the Munroes; and you concede the leadership of the Watts, Kelvins, and Simpsons).

McA. The fact remains that their upbringing has made Scots, in general, narrow-minded rather than tolerant, doers rather than thinkers, scientists and shipbuilders rather than poets and philosophers.

McB. And what is this new upbringing going to produce? What alarms me most is the attack on the system of homework and examinations. I would like to see refuted, once and for all, that degenerate doctrine which rejects the discipline of hard work as a condition of achievement. Life is not *laissez-faire*, and education should not be. I do not suggest that children should be overburdened, but they must have mental and moral discipline imposed upon them from the outside before they can develop the inner discipline which makes not only the good citizen but the whole man. The roads which lead to the frontiers of the human spirit are too steep for weaklings. If we make life too easy for our children we play a confidence trick on them.

McA. You cannot make men by breaking children, or by boiling them in midnight oil. The Scots educational system has been graceless—that is my principal charge against it. It has produced men of great strength of character and strong moral fervour, but lacking in

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