Scots Speak Their Minds

(continued from previous page)

flexibility and liberality of mind. It is all to the good that some of this rigour is going to be relaxed.

(At th's point both paused to regain their breath, and we folded our notebook and silently stole away to do some more orthodox interviewing.)

Confused Reporting?

"IN the first place," said Charles Cameron, a former member of the New Education Fellowship in Scotland now resident in New Zealand, "it looks like a piece of confused reporting. The Br tish Ministry of Education has nothing to do with education in Scotland. which is administered by the Scottish Education Department, an autonomous and independent body under the Secretary of State for Scotland."

Discussing homework, Mr. Cameron said that children's d fficulties arose more at the secondary school stage, where there was often insufficient co-ordination between teachers in regulating the amount of home preparation set From the parents' point of view, homework presented two problems. In the first place, a large number of children in Scots urban areas were inadequate'y housed at home—there was no peace and quietness in which to study, and this could be as much an irritant as the content of the homework itself. Secondly, homework tended to come between the child and its parents, and prevent them finding and sharing common social interests. Such shared experience was most important in the earlier stages of the ch ld's life.

"Not all homework, of course, is boring and futile," he went on, "some can be vastly interesting. The project method in education—whether the project is one requiring general reading or the search ng for information—is usually successful, and children are quite happy to do that kind of study at home. But many ch ldren whose homes are cramped or crowded wou'd be helped by access to study rooms at school or by better study facilities at public libraries." The cutting out of homework in the *primary* school was all to the good, and it did not mean that the ch ld who was interested in his studies would not pursue these interests after school hours.

The Council's recommendation that examinations be eliminated at the stage of transfer from primary to secondary school simply meant that c'asswork, along w th the measure of an intelligence test, was recognised as better than an examination for assessing over-all capacity at the age of 11.

"Orthodox Scots will condemn the dropping of homework as molly-coddling," Mr. Cameron added, "but the majority of parents won't object so long as they feel that their children are not being retarded thereby. And, naturally, success will depend on the extent to which local education author ties—and headmasters—can be persuaded that dropping homework won't mean lowering educational standards. It must be remembered, however, that the school is not only a place of instruction It is a community where children should learn to live in the social sense."

Case for Homework

"I STAND strongly for homework; and it 's something you will not get without direction from the school. And, anyway, homework in Scotland is already rationed and pretty well under control," said Mrs. Ian Gordon, a graduate of Edinburgh University, and a former teacher of English in Ayrshire schools, in an interview. "There's nothing revolutionary about the recommendations of the Advisory Council. It is simply recommending methods which foremost educationists in Scotland have been using for some time."

It was qu te wrong to believe that all children needed the same time to learn. Possibly, to the brilliant child, homework might not be necessary; yet the slow child might have assimilated only half a lesson at school. He would be handicapped further by not having homework, and so slow down the whole pace of the class. And quite often, said Mrs. Gordon, the qu ck mind did not necessarily retain all it learned. Rates of assimilation differed vastly, and it was fallacious to call the quick child clever, and the slow child stupid. Many of the great scientists were slow learners, mak ng quite sure that they understood

"Men of great strength of character and moral fervour"

one subject utterly and retained its meaning before passing on to the next.

"But are not the distractions in a modern home likely to handicap a child's concentration?" we asked.

"I don't think so, if the child is allowed to work in good surroundings. The home offers opportunities for concentration which no schoolroom could give—if the radio's off!"

A child would not do homework if not compelled, said Mrs. Gordon. Like taking his food, a certain amount of compulsion was necessary. "In Scotland we d vided homework into two types—practice and preparatory. Practice was for the slower child and preparatory work was to allow the quicker pupil to break fresh ground as a training towards independent thought."

"What about the move to cancel examinations?"

"It's 10 years since I taught in a Scottish school, but there, on entering, all children were put through an intelligence test. That, combined with attainments in school examinations, was the guide to the subsequent grading of the pupil. I taught in several academies in Ayrshire and, as far as I know, all the better schools in Scotland have been us ng intelligence tests for the transfer from primary to secondary schools for a good many years. Good marks, plus the tests, give the child the right of entry to the higher forms."

But the trend to relax examinations was just an evasion of something else. And that tendency was seen to-day from the primary school to the university. Human beings could not be equated; equality and standardisat on often became confused.

We asked Mrs. Gordon what she thought of the reference in the council's report to "vulgar forms of speech masquerading as Scots."

"Scottish children," she said, "have no difficulty in speaking good English. Their own language does not hurt it. Where I taught and lived, some of the ch.ldren certainly used different words from the others, but it was by no means debased English. Where the dialect exists side by side with good English, it should certainly not be discouraged."

Brain and Fingers

DR. ELIZABETH BRYSON told us that she agreed in part w th the recommendations, holding that education cannot be forced into a child; he would not concentrate unless definitely interested. Also it must never be forgotten that brain and hand go together: to educate the hand is to educate the brain.

In regard to homework and its proposed abol tion, Dr. Bryson said that if homework was a burden—if parents had to be called in to help—there was something wrong with the teaching or with the child. "Personally," she said, "I think it would be all to the good to cut out compulsory homework. School life should not be a grim battle, with unw lling children and over-anxious parents combining to waste precious hours over homework." On the other hand a child living an active healthy life and enjoying the stimulus of new mental interests could hardly be deterred from doing homework and certainly should not be discouraged. No amount of will ng concentration could hurt a child; and mental effort was as necessary for mental growth as bodily exercises were for physical growth.

Recommended intelligence tests, she went on, are interesting and could give valuable help to a teacher in assessing a chi'd's fitness for school advancement. But they should be used as an indicat on only of the child's present stage of development and no child should be labelled success or failure as the result of intelligence or competitive tests. Some children do poorly in primary school and develop surprisingly later on.

"With the recommendation that all competitive exam nations at the stage of transfer from primary to secondary schoo! should be abolished, I am heartily in agreement," said Dr. Bryson, "but a competitive spirit within the school—the friendly rivalry of keen ch ldren endeavouring to excel each other and to exceed their own previous best efforts —that is not only valuable, but probably indispensabie in a good educational system."

On the subject of spoken English, Dr. Bryson had firm opinions. A little Doric, she sa'd, was an enrichment of English language. To say that a war against ungrammatical and vulgar forms of speech would lead to the disappearance of Scots dialect betrayed a lack of understanding. Scottish schools had always taught good grammatical English. The educated Scots child spoke good English with a Scots accent; he could also speak Scots dialect when he wanted to. For this reason the educated Scot often spoke more correct English than the Englishman. "D.dn't Robbie Burns write poetry in Scots dialect?" said Dr. Bryson, "and who could write more beautiful English when he chose to write in English?"