

EDUCATION 60 YEARS AGO

THE greatest infant room virtue 60 years ago was keeping still and refraining from using your mother tongue, says F. L. Combs in the first of seven recorded talks on *The Schools of Sixty Years Ago*. There were shocking offences, such as passing notes or copying, and there were minor offences like prodding a neighbour or purloining a pencil; but good children worked diligently and with a faultless neatness, and when their work was done sat up rigid with their hands behind them.

In these talks Mr. Combs, an educationist and a former teacher, tells amusingly about the odd things that used to happen at school when he was a boy. Those were the good old, bad old days of education when in standard one, for instance, children were never read to or told stories, life being too busy with spelling and arithmetic. Even reading was severely mechanical, and one inspector, not unsuspecting of parroting,

had "treacherously taken to hearing examinees read backwards." There were distractions, of course, like the Russian who had been imprisoned by the Czar in Siberia and carried around a pair of manacles to exhibit on his lecture tours of the schools.

With many amusing or philosophical asides of this nature, Mr. Combs takes listeners through the classes as they existed 60 years ago. At the standard three or four stage, when the real life of youngsters is lived mostly out of sight in timber yards, on beaches, in lonely lanes, or at the back of vacant premises, the daily grind continued, and by the time standard five was reached they were considered mature enough really to bend the scholastic oar. Seven hours a week of fractions and simple interest was not thought too much, nor was two hours of homework a night. Reading began to have a literary flavour, and some of those standard five and six readers were distinctly superior to the journals of 30 years later. It was also an iron law that

"nowhere on no account" must the sexes intermix. The girls, pinafores and pigtailed, sat on one side of the room and the boys on the other, and passing notes was a crime almost as dire as truancy.

In the standard six days he knew best there were periodical rumpuses, Mr. Combs says in his last talk. The master, an able man, would not be mocked, but as there were some boys as big as himself who chose to mock him, "then it was him or them for it, and more than one left school for good through a quickly opened window." A teacher was judged on the number of scholarships he won, and subtle means were adopted to induce a proportion of the possible failures to leave. Compound interest, mensuration, true and banker's discount, and stocks and shares had to be learnt, and there was a bonus system for the percentage of passes. The

year was barely half-way through before the chosen candidates were receiving extra tuition, and as December drew near pretty girls turned grave and careworn and forgot their feminine charms to become fact-gathering machines and containers of fact.

And what about the rest of standard six? They had "passed and left months before, by a beneficent provision of mother nature shedding week by week all knowledge of genders and voices, of profit-sharing and the causes of climate, of fumaroles and the Rye House Plot . . ." But something remained. It was such New Zealanders, ex-standard four or standard six, who made history at Gallipoli or El Alamein. Was it the result of their schooling? Mr. Combs asks. Or was it the outcome of their being five-meal meat-fed men, called upon and able to turn hand and brain to anything the time and place required?

The Schools of Sixty Years Ago will start from 2YA on Monday, January 9.



F. L. COMBS

"More than one left school for good through a quickly-opened window"

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Wellington air that tends to change the natural being into one with acquired graces. Otherwise how could I have sat near a patch of bush on a Saturday morning listening to a tui whistling the first phrase of *Blues in The Night*?

Three of an Odd Kind

I SAW three things that tickled my stranger's palate; one, a stove in a cupboard. The idea was that you cooked there, so help me. Then at the foot of a pine tree in a bush clearing half-way up a local mountain, I saw a mid-Victorian boot scraper; a singular iron object, the business blade and brushes supported by two very ugly iron swans. Probably used by urbanised opossums. And lastly a young man riding in the open dicky seat of a vintage car, fair-haired, whistling, innocent as a cherub, sliding in and out the jacket of an automatic pistol.

—G. leF. Y.



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