

# NATURE

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## EDUCATIONAL RECONSTRUCTION

### GENERAL REVIEW

IN NATURE of July 31 we published an article bearing the above title, and arising immediately out of the White Paper which had been presented to Parliament by the President of the Board of Education. The article was in the main expository and explanatory, further comment being expressly reserved for a later date. On the present occasion we give a general account of the situation as seen after some months of discussion in the country, and in following issues we hope to discuss special aspects of the comprehensive contents of the White Paper.

For a comparable effort to deal with education on a national scale, we have to go back to the year 1870, when W. E. Forster took the lead in the passing of the first Elementary Education Act. His declared object was to complete the existing voluntary system and to "fill up the gaps". His Bill was well received, but second thoughts on the part of his own political associates proved disastrous. As one turns over the pages of Hansard, one marvels at the melancholy tale of denominational jealousies and suspicions, and even though the lapse of seven decades has softened asperities, one is impressed with the wisdom of Mr. Butler's patient and cautious method of approach. The stern warning was repeated in 1902, when Balfour's measure established rate-aid for voluntary schools and along with it the dual system of control—opposed with all the bitterness of 1870, and still, as the White Paper shows, the chief stumbling-block in the path of the reformer. The other outstanding measure, that of 1918, conceived in a very different atmosphere, and at first supported with enthusiasm, remains to this day in great part a dead letter, as regards its socially significant provisions, namely, those relating to youth and to nursery schools. No wonder that, with this premonitory instance plain to be seen, the "exceeding lack of speed" in the proposals of the White Paper should have alarmed many of the firmest friends of education. They quite agree with the White Paper that laws cannot do everything, that laws "cannot build better human beings", and that "it is not the machinery of education so much as its content that will count in the future"; but they remember also that the law's delays can do an infinite deal of harm. There is little doubt that we shall hear more of this when the Education Bill comes before Parliament.

From the broadly national point of view taken in this article, the most far-reaching statement in the White Paper appears unobtrusively and almost incidentally in paragraph 27: "The key-note of the new system will be that the child is the centre of education and that, so far as is humanly possible, all children shall receive the type of education for which they are best adapted". The child the centre of education! Of course no originality is claimed for this declaration. That the child is the true and only centre of education has for centuries been the merest commonplace in the best educational thought. Nor



can it be claimed that it now appears for the first time in an official document, for it was the key-note also of Morant's famous introduction to the Code of 1904. Through his instrumentality, the child, not the official nor the tax-payer, nor even the teacher, was for the first time envisaged as the central figure in the educational scene, for whom, and for whom alone, that scene exists. The late Sir John Adams used to say that you had to hammer away for at least fifty years to secure a reform before anyone even began to listen; and was it not the late Lord Balfour who said that democracy must be led, not driven, but that it takes a lot of leading? When, however, democracy has made up its mind, the thing is done, and done far better than as the result of an autocratic decree. Let us hope that on this point our democracy has at last made up its mind.

Most of what follows will be in the nature of corollaries to this basic proposition. Large classes, for example, are condemned on the fundamental ground that they are bad for the child. "No teacher, however competent, can see to the development of an individual child's innate potentialities, or foster in it a healthy development of mind, body and character, if she has to deal single-handed with a class of 50 small children. This is not education but mass production" (par. 16). Large classes are always and necessarily bad for the child, though not obviously so for the teacher. For there is a type of teacher who can quite as easily manage fifty children as a dozen, and may indeed be happier with the fifty. But though he may please a superficially observant inspector or other visitor, he is not a good type of teacher, for the simple reason that he is satisfied with mass production. Large classes make it impossible for *any* teacher to meet the needs of the individual child—and that settles the matter.

The formula seven-to-eleven as the period to be spent in the junior school may commend itself to a person who surveys the educational scene from an office window. But it is in reality nothing but an administrative convenience. No scientific student of child nature, and indeed no close observer whatever, could approve of such a denial of the fact of individuality. Furthermore, the institution of an examination test at the age of ten or eleven has had disastrous effects upon the aims and methods of the junior school, especially where competition for admission to secondary schools has been keen. Again, the White Paper takes the child's point of view, not that of the administrative machine—and the competitive examination goes. So also does the absurd assumption that any child's future development can by any imaginable means be safely foretold at the age of ten or eleven.

We have not observed that the proposed abolition of the examination at or before the age of eleven has called forth any lamentations. That is not quite true of the Norwood Committee's recommendation that the purely external examination for the school certificate should, "in the interest of the individual child and of the increased freedom and responsibility of the teaching profession", be gradually modified out of existence. Nothing could in point of fairness

be better than the Committee's statement of the *pros* and *cons*, but its verdict is emphatic. Much of the opposition seems to have come from the men teachers, who are commendably anxious for the reputation of the certificate. The arguments employed are strongly reminiscent of the controversy which led to the present position in the University of London. Those arguments have in them a flavour of the nineteenth century, when the external examiner held universal sway, from the lowest to the highest of educational institutions. Let it be noted that the Committee's recommendation is in perfect accord with the White Paper. It is based upon "the interest of the individual child". The addition "and the increased freedom and responsibility of the teaching profession" is at bottom only another way of saying the same thing.

Coming now to the inevitable "religious difficulty", we note that in some quarters disappointment is expressed that the dual system of control is to be allowed to survive. For ourselves, we strongly suspect that if the matter could be left to the teachers and parents there would soon be an end of the difficulty. But we recognize that the whole history of our educational past is against that solution, and we can no more get away from that past than a man can get away from his own shadow. We are therefore left to admire the tact and patience with which Mr. Butler has handled his thorniest problem, and to express the hope that the intransigents, both of the Left and of the Right, may on this occasion sing small—again for the sake of the children of England. We observe also that many teachers are not so sure of the agreed syllabus being a sovereign remedy as the White Paper appears to assume. They reasonably point to the Board of Education's practice of issuing *suggestions* on the teaching of various subjects, a practice which is highly valued by the teachers, and they say that if an agreed syllabus is put forward as a suggestion rather than a mandate it would also be welcome. We are inclined to think that that is precisely the way in which an agreed syllabus will be viewed and utilized by a thoughtful teacher, who will reserve to himself a certain liberty of interpretation. The teacher may, we think, safely accept the agreed syllabus as representing at any rate "the next step".

The new system, the child-centred system, of which the White Paper speaks, falls into three stages—primary, secondary, and further education. To begin at the beginning, the nursery-school movement is excellent so far as it now goes. It is the outcome of the wisdom and enthusiasm of such persons as the McMillan sisters. The quality is there, but as to the quantity, nearly everything remains to be done, and there is no social problem more urgent. The proper aims of the primary school are well set forth in the Paper, but we are faced with the fact that even in places where re-organization has been arranged, the primaries are too often housed in buildings that make those aims impossible to realize. As for the secondary stage, the grammar schools, of course, we have with us, with their good record of achievement during the



past twenty years, predominantly on academic lines. That those lines now need radical revision is strongly urged by critics who are by no means lacking in respect for tradition. They value the Norwood Report for its enunciation of principles, but contend that those principles are not carried to their logical conclusion in the recommendations as to curricula. Preparation for post-war citizenship calls, as we have said, for radical revision, but the Norwood Report tacitly asserts that the old bottles are safe containers of the new wine. This will never do. As for the modern schools, the White Paper waxes almost lyrical in describing their possibilities, and it is well to have the ideal set forth in an official document which has secured general approval. But the drab reality is that in respect of buildings, equipment, staff and 'amenities' nearly everything remains to be done.

We recite these examples, to which others may be added in subsequent articles, not indeed as a counsel of despair, but rather as an explanation of the deep concern expressed by educationists at the "excessive lack of speed" which the White Paper seems to view with complacency. Seeing that, for example, the intended raising of the leaving age and the progressive reduction of large classes depend upon the supply and training of teachers, the Board should take immediate steps, whatever the findings of the McNair Committee may turn out to be. The postponement of the reform of the dual system is held by experienced administrators to be quite unjustified by the facts. The omission of adult education from the first four-year plan is held to be unnecessary, seeing that much of it does not involve great outlay upon buildings and equipment. Finally, the case for forging straight ahead in the provision of nursery schools is, having regard to their social value both now and hereafter, quite unanswerable.

There are other problems arising out of the Paper which are not so urgent, but which are scarcely likely to be forgotten in parliamentary debates on the Bill. The reference to "public schools and other analogous schools" (paragraph 8) is one of them. In any discussion of the English public schools it is hard to disentangle reason and sentiment. However, two facts stand out clearly: (1) they have no counterparts in any other democratic country, and (2) though they are so few among so many, yet about three out of four of all the high offices of State and Church are filled by their products. Defenders of the public schools aver that if the schools produce leaders it is because of their intrinsic merits and nothing else. At this point the arguments begin to sway to and fro. If it be said that the basis of public school education is Christian, proof is demanded that the public school product is more markedly Christian than the county school product. If the defender of the public school says that it is independent of any other authority, he is asked whether standing aloof from the national system is really claimed as a merit. If he says that the headmaster has the power of what the Americans call 'hiring and firing', he is asked whether that is the kind of authority which should be vested in any one person. If he asserts that the

child belongs to the parents and not to the State, and that parents have the right, by payment of fees, to choice and voice in their children's education, he is asked whether the parents who cannot pay fees thereby resign their rights to the State. And so the arguments succeed one another in a sort of ding-dong iteration. Probably the intelligent man-in-the-street, now that the full light of day is being cast on the situation, will find it hard to believe that the arguments produced are sufficient to explain the facts with which we started. Let us always remember, too, that most of the men and many of the women who will have to decide such issues are now scattered all over the world, and that post-war England may make short work of some of our hitherto accepted and uncriticized traditions.

Such are some of our second thoughts on the White Paper. The parliamentary discussion of its contents was interesting, appreciative and, on the whole, only mildly critical. When the Education Bill appears, the second thoughts of our legislators will resound through the land. It is to be hoped that both in its passage through Parliament, and in its subsequent translation into administrative action, it will fare better than its predecessors of 1870, 1902, and 1918.

## MICE AND MEN

### Voles, Mice and Lemmings

Problems in Population Dynamics. By Charles Elton. Pp. vii+496. (Oxford: Clarendon Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1942.) 30s. net.

IN his preface, Dr. Elton tells us that: "The materials of this book have been assembled slowly for sixteen years. . . . The first part is a panorama of vole and mouse plagues in those countries for which records are available. The second part describes the vole and mouse fluctuations that occur in Great Britain and Scandinavia, and the methods developed at Oxford for the study of population dynamics in the field and laboratory. The third and fourth parts contain the history of similar fluctuations in Northern Labrador and Ungava that have an important influence upon the fur trade and the life of the natives." It may be said at once that the book is a great magazine of facts, a witness to the vast amount of useful work that has already been accomplished by Dr. Elton and his colleagues in the Bureau of Animal Population at Oxford, and it is enlivened by many a bright flash from the author. Nevertheless, it is not an easy book to review. The first two parts are excellent. But the reviewer feels, after reading them with great attention, that Parts 3 and 4 want pulling together; it would be worth while coaxing Dr. Elton later on, when he has forgotten the details and the archives of the Hudson's Bay Company and the Moravian missions, to write a little essay on this part of his subject.

Part 1, "Vole and Mouse Plagues", contains six chapters, of which the first, entitled "Ancient History and a Prophecy", is very fine. It opens with an account of Gérard's description of field-mouse plagues in Alsace during the six hundred years between 1271 and 1861 and directs attention to the