

# COEDUCATION

IN ITS HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL SETTING

L. B. PEKIN



THE HOGARTH PRESS

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LONDON, W.C.1

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*By the same Author*

PROGRESSIVE SCHOOLS: THEIR PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE.

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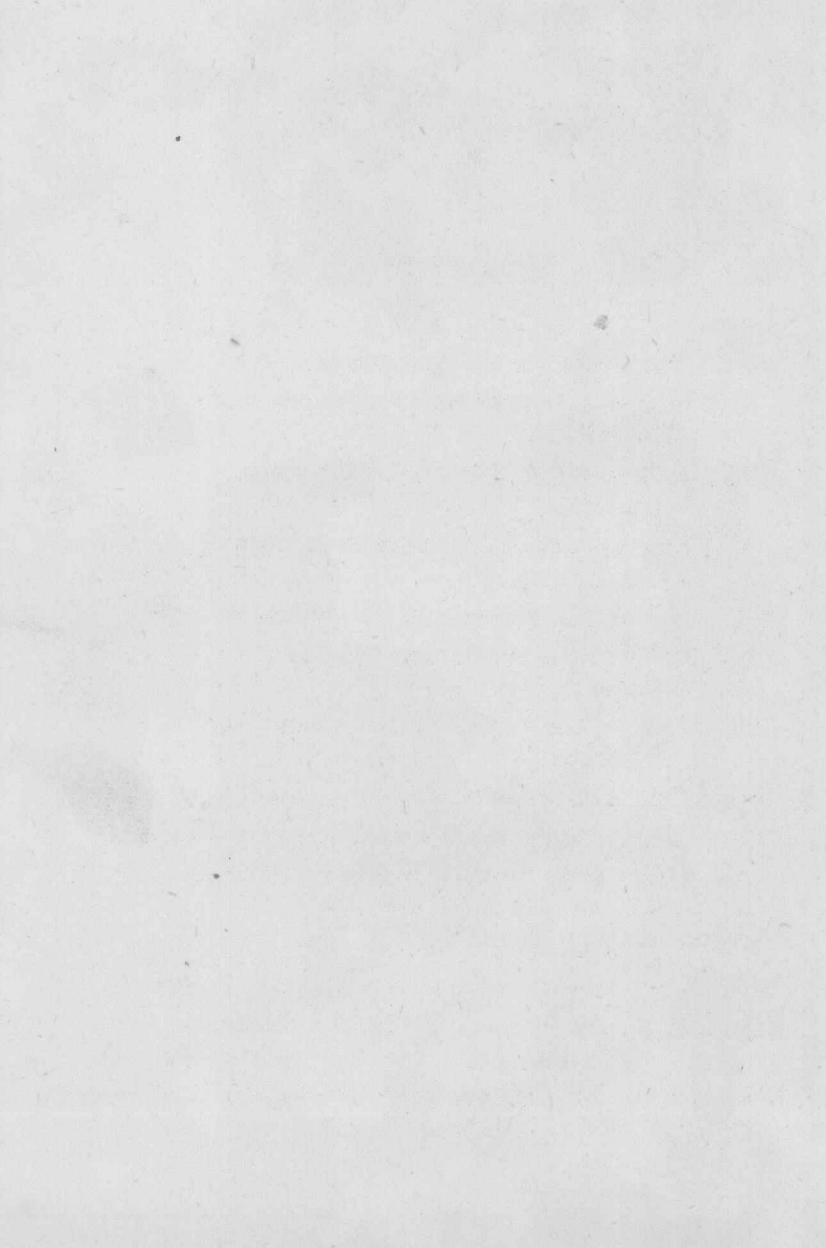
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## CHAPTER I

### THE PROBLEM OF COEDUCATION

SOME two thousand three hundred years ago Plato wrote to this effect: "Let us come to an understanding about the nature of woman; is she capable of sharing either wholly or partially in the actions of men, or not at all?"<sup>1</sup> This question, like most questions that Plato asked, is of fundamental importance, not only for education but for the whole structure of human society; and, like most of the questions he asked, it has not yet been satisfactorily answered. The striking conclusion to which every investigator of coeducation must be brought, is that on the whole mankind has not been particularly interested in Plato's question. Clearly it vitally affects educational policy: whether girls and boys are to be brought up together, or separately, is certainly not a matter of indifference, either to parents or to teachers. You have only to mention the word coeducation among any group of people, professional or lay, who may be keenly discussing the upbringing of children, to have immediate proof of this. Many of those who believe in it, do so passionately; many of those who disapprove, do so with violence. If

<sup>1</sup> *Republic*, V, 453.



education has any effect on human life at all—and there is remarkable unanimity among philosophers, prophets, saints and sages, to say nothing of less highly gifted people, that it has a profound effect—then, surely, it is a matter of some moment whether boys and girls are to have the same kind of education, and if so, whether they are to share it. Plato, still the greatest educationist that the Western world has known, wrote carefully and wisely on the subject in the *Republic* and the *Laws*; but after Plato there is what one must regard as an astonishing silence on the part of writers on education, which remains almost unbroken for the better part of twenty-two centuries, until Mary Wollstonecraft raises the point again. You may look through all the thousands of pages in the classical treatises on education since Plato's day—in Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, in Elyot's *Governour*, in the Jesuits' *Ratio Studiorum*, in Ascham's *Scholemaster*, in Milton's *Tractate on Education*, in Locke's *Thoughts concerning Education*, in Rousseau's *Émile*, in Pestalozzi's *Wie Gertrud ihre Kinder lehrt*, in Herbart's *Allgemeine Pädagogik*, in Froebel's *Menschen-erziehung* or in Herbert Spencer's *Education*—and find no serious discussion of the matter at all, if indeed the education of girls receives so much as a passing mention. Yet all these books had, in their time, a far-reaching influence upon educational policy; some of them permanently affected men's whole approach to the bringing up of children. Rousseau does, to be sure, refer to the education of girls, but it is only to remark that “a woman of

culture is the plague of her husband, her children, her family, her servants—everybody.” Like every romantic idealizer of women, Rousseau really felt for the other sex a thorough-going contempt; it comes out clearly in his portrait of Émile’s Sophy, and the sort of upbringing that is to fit her to be his bride. The solitary exception in this history of the indifference of the classical theorists to women’s education is the Moravian philosopher Comenius (Johann Komensky), whose *Didactica Magna* (1630) warmly advocated public schools for girls. Comenius was ahead of his age in many ways: among other things, he believed that it might be permissible to make learning pleasant. He preached education for all classes, rich and poor alike, and the breaking down of barriers between the classroom and the life of the world outside. But, though he intended girls to go to school, it is by no means certain that he intended them to share the school life of boys, though it remains at least a possibility.

The general literature of education is of vast extent; that concerning the coeducation of the sexes is comparatively exiguous. Some histories of education do not refer to the subject at all; in the four hundred pages of Adams’ well-known *Evolution of Educational Theory*<sup>1</sup> it receives a single mention, when the author, in speaking of the French pioneer Edmond Demolins, remarks in horrified parenthesis that “he has gone to great lengths but he has drawn the line at coeducation.” In their recently published

<sup>1</sup> John Adams: *Evolution of Educational Theory* (Macmillan), 1922.

pamphlet *Education Today—and Tomorrow* (surely a sufficiently comprehensive title) two extremely intelligent and socially sensitive ex-schoolmasters do not consider the subject worth discussing, and confine themselves to a suggestion that the proper type of school for the years between seven and eleven is “probably coeducational.”<sup>1</sup> Yet they are acutely aware of the connection between education and the politico-social structure of a society; they look forward to the establishment of a democracy in Britain on a socialist basis; and they must know that one of the first acts of the Socialist revolution in Russia was to establish coeducation throughout the entire territory of the U.S.S.R., as one of the first acts of Nazi government in Germany was to abolish it. It is doubtful whether coeducation officially exists even today as a separate topic for serious discussion; the enquirer in the British Museum’s subject index of books is met with the direction: “Coeducation: see Female Education.” But coeducation and female education are not at all the same thing. Some States have taken official and intelligent cognizance of the subject; but not our own State, though in point of fact it is in Great Britain that the most important pioneer work in coeducation has been done. In 1916 a Royal Commission considered the problem of venereal disease in this country. It might be supposed that syphilis, which has been endemic in Britain since

<sup>1</sup> W. H. Auden and T. C. Worsley: *Education Today—and Tomorrow* (Hogarth Press), 1939.

the year 1497, which affects at least ten per cent. of the whole population in large cities, and ranks third or fourth among the "killing diseases," would have some connection in the official mind with the question of education. So it had; but not with co-education. Both syphilis and gonorrhoea are contracted solely through sexual congress; sexual congress is a cardinal feature in the mutual relations of young women and men; their mutual relations are bound to be enormously influenced by the extent to which they learn to understand and respect each other during childhood and adolescence; but of the 22,296 questions asked by the Commissioners of numerous expert witnesses,<sup>1</sup> including teachers, not one referred to coeducation, whose central purpose it is to assure a right relationship between the sexes. The Commissioners claimed to consider all the causes of venereal disease and to listen to suggestions for their removal, and they rightly held that education was the primary issue; but though they were begged to tackle the subject of coeducation, they refused, pleading the too great scope of the question and the need for a speedy report.

The Board of Education might be expected to possess some facts, even if it had no theories, about coeducation; but they are extraordinarily difficult to come by. None of the nineteen statutes listed in its publications refers to the matter; the twenty-eight volumes of Special Reports on Educational Subjects,

<sup>1</sup> *Report of the Royal Commission on Venereal Diseases* (H.M. Stationery Office), 1916.

though they deal most satisfyingly with such things as the educational systems of Basutoland, Fiji and the Seychelles, have anything to say about co-education—also an educational subject not without importance. Among their 113 educational pamphlets, which include within their scope such topics as full-time schools for bakers and confectioners, and the botany garden of James Allen's Girls' School at Dulwich—whatever one may say of the Board, it cannot be held to take too narrowly blinkered a view of its advisory functions—we do not find one to consider whether boys and girls should be brought up together. Nor do the 363 reports, regulations, memoranda, circulars and schemes (embracing almost every conceivable subject from teachers' superannuation in Malta, and temperature-entropy diagrams for water-steam, to the interim report of the committee on adenoids and enlarged tonsils) give the dogged enquirer any further help. It is not suggested that our children's enlarged tonsils have not their importance: they have. But so has the whole manner of their upbringing, whether segregated or shared. Nor is it suggested that the Board is an obscurantist body: it is by no means unenlightened both in policy and aims, and may fairly be said to be well in advance of the general level of educational practice in the country. But owing to its peculiar constitutional position, there is a great deal about British education that it simply does not know. It does not know, for instance, how many private schools there are, but puts the number at

“perhaps 10,000,” containing “about 400,000 pupils of all ages”; and of these 10,000 schools, exerting between them a profound influence upon the minds of the privileged classes of this country, only 1,300 have ever been inspected, and only 600 (or less than one in fifteen) have periodical inspection.<sup>1</sup> This appears to be a serious gap in the educational system of a people that is struggling to lay the foundations of a genuine democracy; and the Board’s lack of interest in coeducation is surely another. It would not be true to suggest that they have been deliberately hostile to it; individual inspectors have often declared themselves favourably impressed by the work being done at pioneer coeducational schools, but they have not troubled to say so other than privately. There have been no official pronouncements, only the undeviating official policy: again and again the wishes of local education authorities have been overruled, when they have asked for a mixed school. Coeducation is faced with the further difficulty of the hostility of headmistresses, who find their status lowered when a man becomes principal of a mixed school. It is not, therefore, surprising to learn that the Association of Headmistresses is firmly opposed to coeducation; and since it numbers 500, representing a school population of some 150,000 girls, its influence is considerable. (Assistant mistresses, on the other hand, apparently prefer to serve under a man, and the

<sup>1</sup> *Report of the Departmental Committee on Private Schools* (H.M. Stationery Office), 1932.

Assistant Mistresses' Association has for some while been friendly disposed towards coeducation.) Public schoolmasters—both headmasters and assistant masters—and in particular the anti-feminist National Association of Schoolmasters are, as might be expected, not sympathetic; though even among these there have been some notable converts. In a single one of its important publications<sup>1</sup> the Board of Education has not been able to refrain from all mention of coeducation, though even on that occasion it did its best, and refused to admit the subject within its terms of reference, as being “not relevant.” It was, of course, supremely relevant; and in spite of themselves the Consultative Committee make, in the course of an extremely interesting report, some important statements upon the bringing up of girls and boys together, which shall be quoted later here.

Now, if all this official indifference, lack of sympathy or downright opposition on the part of official bodies were based on well-informed policy, it would be understandable enough. But it is not merely ill-informed, it is practically not informed at all. The greatest of English coeducational pioneers, J. H. Badley, wrote in 1903: “Even on the physical side there is as yet very little agreement as to the difference of treatment necessitated by differences of bodily structure; and when we come to deal with differences of mental and moral structure . . . we are still in the dark, guided mainly by prejudice and convention. For until we

<sup>1</sup> *Report on Differentiation of Curricula*, see p. 38 footnote.

have exposed both sexes to similar conditions, we cannot tell what differences are inherent and unalterable and what merely the resultants of a different upbringing.”<sup>1</sup> That is still true: almost everybody is in the dark about coeducation. The only public body that has the means—as it certainly has the duty—of finding out the facts, remains obstinately disinclined to do so; and the result is that there has never been any impartial scientific investigation on the subject. There is any amount of opinion, but precious little evidence. And yet there are more than twenty boarding schools in England alone which take boys and girls from an early age to university entrance, and many others with a narrower age range. Half of them are twenty years old, and a few have been established for more than thirty years. These schools may be doing a great service, or a great disservice, to some of the nation’s children. If the former, why are they not commended? If the latter, why are they not condemned? They do not want to work in secret: they are most anxious to have the basis of their educational beliefs carefully and rationally examined. They admit that they are working on a hypothesis that has, so far, not been completely verified—for coeducation is certainly an experiment. These schools are trying to discover where and how far differences of treatment are necessary for boys and girls at the same school, so that their conclusions may be based on actual experience, and are not *a priori*.

<sup>1</sup> From an essay in A. Woods’ *Coeducation*—see bibliography.



They are attempting to work out a common tradition for girls and boys in school life, which they believe will be of real value for the adult relationship between the sexes and of real importance for the democratic basis of society. Their problem is not a simple one: it is at least threefold. There is the biological question, the differences between the sexes in physical character and rate of development; the practical question, how far intellectual pursuits and ordinary school activities may suitably be shared; and the psychological question—clearly the most important—of the mutual influence of boys and girls.

Everybody admits the beneficial effects of co-education upon little children; it is at adolescence that the doubts begin to arise, because then children grow “so different.” No upholder of coeducation would deny the existence of this difference; in it lies the chief interest and reward of his work. But he is entitled to ask his critics to consider how far the difference is the outcome of conventional treatment. That the physical differences between the sexes are profound and far-reaching is obvious—though it is by no means obvious that they call for different, or segregated, educational treatment. Of the intellectual and psychological differences between girls and boys, most teachers are still very ignorant; a great deal more experience and investigation is necessary before any final conclusions can be formed. That boys differ from girls is as patent as that boys differ from boys, and girls from girls; but it cannot be