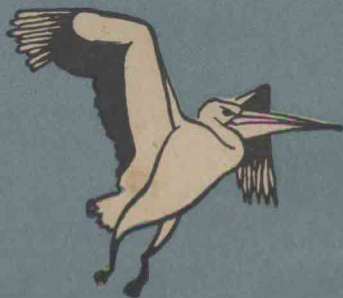


**PELICAN  
BOOKS**

**EDUCATION IN  
ENGLAND**

**W. KENNETH  
RICHMOND**



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# EDUCATION IN ENGLAND

## PROMISE AND COMPROMISE

THE English system of education " ?—there is none. At least it is very tempting to say so, even though the denial means parodying the well-known remark of such a knave as Robert Lowe. If there is one, then its name must be Legion. A service which embraces institutions so divergent as the Universities, Public Schools and public schools, the W.E.A., the B.B.C., Sandhurst, Borstal, factory, church-hall and cinema (selecting at random), can scarcely claim to be called systematic; nor can one which is controlled by a host of authorities, governmental, ecclesiastical, corporate or private. A system, surely, implies some measure of coherence: either the coherence of a growing organism or the coherence of a predetermined plan. Education in England knows little as yet of the latter variety. As for the former, we must acknowledge that the main developments in our culture derive their strength from the past, though we find it increasingly difficult to justify them on the grounds of natural evolution alone.

The structure of this so-called system is highly complicated, like the jumbled lay-out of some ancient city—and maybe no mean city at that—of which the architecture belongs to many styles and periods. A curiously rambling affair. It has its mediaeval quarter, its stately homes and its jerry-built streets. It has its expensive hostelries, in the upper rooms of which the chosen may meet in secret: and it has its common lodgings where the sons of Everyman may creep in free of charge. True, there are passages connecting the various sections, but the ways between are intricate and the chances of finding them few. Besides, there are barricades up and many locked doors. The shops are far from being all under the same management.



In other words, English education is the sum-total of a gradual accretion, the result of a thousand and one different interests and enterprises. Any approach to an understanding of its composite personality must necessarily be historical. At its best its character has the saving grace of an infinite variety, but a variety more remarkable for its inequalities than its diversities: and it has at all times a distinctive quality, an Englishness, which, if it remains undefined, is none the less cherishable. At its worst it is a house divided against itself, a Babel tower of warring classes, with everyone in it striving to hoist himself higher on the shoulders of those beneath, none aiming at the general good. It carries the marks of old, unhappy, far-off things, the scars of religious battles, the heavy brand of industry and the rifts of sectional differences.

Today this country is committed to the fateful task of reorganizing this quasi-system, of establishing it on a common basis. The extent to which it is successful in doing so will, more so than any other factor, determine its whole destiny. Victory for us brings, not ease, but temporary reprieve from dangers which threatened so nearly to engulf us, an opportunity to set ourselves to rights and start afresh. What we have earned is no more than a breathing space, time to take new bearings. It is all the more necessary, therefore, that there should be a general recognition of the ways in which the complexities and anomalies of the existing provisions have been brought about. Milton described education as "one of the greatest and noblest designs that can be thought on and for want thereof this nation perishes": words which possess a more than usual significance at a time like this. Now, when the need and opportunity are greatest, we need to decide, once and for all; first, what education *is*, what it can and must *do*: second, how much of the old education needs to be retained and how much could better be scrapped: how much of it is living tradition and how much merely the dead-wood of convention?

There are signs that a considerable body of thinking people is alive to the scope and urgency of these problems, though it may be doubted whether there is as yet an adequate

appreciation of their mighty importance. Inert thinking, lack of awareness, social prejudice and other failures of public interest have, in the past, been a main cause in impeding progress in education. As often as not, the reason for this has been that the study of education (like finance or higher mathematics) was regarded as a subject so weird and wonderful, so crowded with difficulties, that most people gave it up in despair. But in a very real sense it is everybody's business, particularly at a moment such as this when we are moving (or ought to be) towards a new ordering of society. The 1944 Education Act is a cultural charter, not final, and one which will need considerable extension and amendment, but unless it is translated into reality as the considered will of the millions, much if not most of it is liable to become a dead-letter. Until it is backed by a widespread enthusiasm for education and an understanding of its historical determinants and principles, reform will continue to be in abeyance: the City of God for which we look so wistfully will remain only a mirage. To some degree the enthusiasm exists already, but enthusiasm is not enough. If we are to decide rightly what the "reasonable pattern of adjustment" is to be, and if we are to avoid having it thrust upon us by the authoritarians, we need to be more than *interested* in educational affairs. The bewilderments with which they are attended should not deter the layman from a thoroughgoing attempt to understand their underlying causes. Too often they do. Even when he does not turn away in dismay—and the bulk of educational literature is neither helpful nor entertaining to the common reader—he seizes too often on some tangential view or he is left discouraged, asking, "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow out of this stony rubbish?" Most books on education are intended for a professional clique: teachers and students of one sort or another, who frequently think that anyway they know all that they need to know about it: they rarely reach a wider audience. This was unfortunate in the recent past. Nowadays it may be nothing short of tragic.

We may as well admit at once that it *is* difficult to see English education as a whole and to have any but distorted views about it, but the effort to clarify our ideas and to

form some just assessment of its values must be made, however troublesome. And it must be made on a grand scale. Democracy can become effective only where the people's intelligence is equally trained and used. Without the active participation of informed opinion the chances of educational advance, and with it our prospects as a people, will be seriously jeopardized.

This little book is dedicated accordingly to the task of furthering that opinion. Though not amounting to a history, it offers a conspectus of the past: its method being one of reference back to old achievements. It tells a story—in places a sorry tale—of educational progress in this country and the forces which have been ranged behind and against it.<sup>1</sup> Rightly or wrongly, it represents an analysis of the outstanding trends in English culture and how these have evolved. And throughout its meandering argument it has at the back of its mind one question: “How far will these traditions meet the present case?” Circumstances alter cases: and whatever may be said of governments, it is NOT true that every nation receives automatically the sort of education it deserves. In a kaleidoscopic age, in which we are faced with the need for accommodating ourselves to swivelling ideas and events, it is incumbent upon everyone to think out for himself what lies ahead and what lines of development are worthiest of being followed. The problem confronting us in education is not, as many think, one of reconstruction, but of reorientation. We cannot revert to the pre-1939 mentality, however much we may wish to do so. Drastic changes have been forced upon us: we must find out, and speedily, how much of the old world is to be restored and how much we need to devise for the new. A historical approach may not be of great assistance in this latter respect, but it will give us some advice on how *not* to proceed and some indication of what are the permanent, peculiar features of the English tradition.

What education is: what it can and must do. . . .

<sup>1</sup> It has nothing to say about education in Scotland or Wales, not because the English problem is in any way preponderant (though it is undeniably more difficult), but because the writer does not consider himself qualified to speak of them. Theirs is a different, in many ways a pleasanter story.

In this quest for basic principles nothing can be taken for granted. We can no longer rely on vague hunches and off-hand conceptions. Sir Fred Clarke reminds us that one of the main hindrances to the national life has been the prevalence of the assumption that anything which can be called education is always good in itself. "Behind this is an idea of education as a kind of standard commodity; the sort of thing you 'get' (as you get your rations in war-time) and much the same for all alike. And as you 'get' your rations from shops specialized for the purpose, so you 'get' your education from that kind of shop that we call school."<sup>1</sup> It is precisely this narrow, unquestioning and complacent view that must most energetically be combated.

You who buy or borrow this book—what is *your* concept of education? This abstract word comes readily to the pen and will recur with an all-too-monotonous frequency in the course of these pages. Like the word "love", its meaning varies enormously according to time and place. In its highest sense its significance cannot be excelled: but for most of us it means only a humdrum routine—something to do with book-learning. Our evaluation of it depends very largely on our social position, the work we do and the private experience we had of it years ago as children: or it is conditioned for us by what we have read about it. Generally speaking, it is perfectly true that "much of our thought about education—its purpose, scope, content, techniques and methods—is still mediaeval, or at best nineteenth-century".<sup>2</sup> This is more or less inevitable, for, as we have already hinted, the main strata in English education have been moulded in different periods: the Universities, and, to some degree, the Public Schools in mediaevalism, the Grammar Schools in Renaissance humanism and the Elementary Schools in nineteenth-century industrialism. But the species of education which they produced, appropriate as they were in their own days, are now in many ways out-moded. To take one's standards from those of yesteryears, to be comfortably conservative, is a habit dear to the Englishman's heart: at times a dangerous habit. In educa-

<sup>1</sup> *The Study of Education in England.*

<sup>2</sup> H. C. Dent: *Education in Transition*, p. xii.

tional, as in natural history, species which flourish in one era may become redundant in another. It is quite possible for us to waste time, money and energy on an education which was excellent once but which has outlived its usefulness: indeed, unless we become far more critical it is highly probable that this is precisely what we shall do in the near future. Therefore, while it is necessary that any ideas we may have about it should be qualified by a knowledge of what has already taken place, we should not allow them to be limited by that knowledge. In its popular sense, education is a modern phenomenon, a development, largely, of the last century. From a biological viewpoint it is as old as the race itself. Just as there was religion long before there was a church, so there was teaching before the first school. And it is to education in this original, more fundamental sense that we may have to return for real guidance and inspiration.

If we are frank, we will admit that most people nowadays regard education more as a means to self-advancement than anything else, as a kind of competition. It is a ladder up which we hurriedly scramble, believing that those who scale it most nimbly will receive the highest rewards. It is desired, not because it helps us to lead the good life, but because it may help us to gain a good job. Those who are economically secure do not need to join in this feverish fray: they covet it, rather, as an ornament. It is, so they say, "classy". To the man-in-the-street the best-educated person is revered as he whose knowledge of some particular subject (the more recondite the better) is prodigious, one who is "an authority", Bacon's full man. There are, then, two distinct concepts: education for status and education as scholarship. Neither of the two is the one we seek.

It is true that, in its early days, education was commonly thought of more or less as a mental process. To teach the three R's and remove the stigma of illiteracy was the limit of the charity school's ambition. In its poverty-stricken first phase popular education was very much the same for all alike—what there was of it. The pedagogue's function was to fill heads that were empty. Dickens' Mr. Choakumchild was no more than typical. "He and some one hun-

dred and forty other schoolmasters had been lately turned out at the same place, in the same factory, on the same principles, like so many pianoforte legs. He had been put through an immense variety of paces and had answered "volumes of head-breaking questions" . . . doses of which he proceeded, with grim efficiency, to administer to his class, "that inclined plane of little vessels . . . arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim".<sup>1</sup> As his creator shrewdly observed, "If he had learnt a little less, how infinitely better he might have taught much more". In one form or another this primitive faith that the essential business of education is the transference of a quantum of knowledge, useful or otherwise, still persists. How often do we measure the success of a boy's schooling by the number of Credits and Distinctions which he obtains in the School Certificate Examination? How often do we hear great men proudly confessing that they were always "bottom in their class"? in itself a suggestion that the usual judgment is mistaken; and how often do we find those who have had brilliant academic careers coming to abject ends? The research student (double "First", Ph.D.) whose massive brain is matched only by the puniness of his general character, is a pitiful example. In a world which places a premium on intellectual attainments this fetish is perhaps understandable, but the standard of values which makes it possible is none the less deplorable, ignoring as it does the psychological oneness of the nascent personality.

Fortunately the purely cerebral concept was never allowed to hold its sway unchallenged. Always the old English notion of *mens sana in corpore sano* acted as a wholesome corrective: though it is as well to remember that not until the present century has organized physical training been introduced as a regular feature of the curriculum. Before that the child's health and physique were left to look after themselves, his parents' concern and no one else's.

It was some time before education felt its way to a third and higher stage. Penury and oppression prevented the nation's elementary-school teachers from doing anything

<sup>1</sup> *Hard Times*.

better than ram into the children a minimum of ready-made information, supplemented by an occasional drill lesson, reminiscent of Van Gogh's "Ronde des Prisonniers". For emotional developments, aesthetic expression and free activity there was little or no outlet. As to the spiritual side, a great deal might be pretended, but without much justification. Of "Scripture" there was often a good deal, of religion none at all: only the enforced virtues of deference and obedience. Until a few years ago the vast majority of English children were treated as though they had brains and bodies and nothing else. The self-centring Public Schools, being more at liberty to follow their own lights, had always laid a main emphasis on character-formation, though the methods they adopted to this end were largely prohibitive, their ideal of character narrow and limited. Individualism in all walks of life has been in the ascendant ever since the Reformation: but it is only since the early 1900's, thanks chiefly to experience gained in Nursery and Infant Schools, that there has been anything like unanimous recognition of the truth that education, if it is to be worthy of the name, must concern itself with everything that affects the learner's personal welfare: that if it stops short at mental-physical development its influence cannot be more than partial, unsatisfactory. The increase in juvenile maladjustments, deficiencies and delinquencies of one sort or another, led to the creation of the so-called special services (approved schools, institutions for sub-normal and abnormal cases, schools for children suffering from hereditary afflictions): and these, taken in conjunction with the discoveries of the "New" psychology, helped to spread the conception of an education which involved each and all of the life-processes. The cry was raised for a new teaching, one which would harness all the instinctive and emotional forces in the child. The learner was to be regarded as a body-mind-soul, and treated as such. He was to be left free to discover his own private aptitudes and special abilities. His first-hand experiences and spontaneous interests were to be the matrix out of which a new curriculum was to be evolved. Education was to be the means whereby each individual was to realize to the full his own potentialities. In theory. In

practice it showed itself as an attitude of greater respect, amounting at times to reverence, for the child *qua* child. In the school's work the keynote was activity, with the first stress shifting a little from the passive receptivity of the Choakumchild era. In its every aspect, education was to act as the great integrating force, building up the growing personality in its three dimensions through the various stages of immaturity until it reached its consummation in perfect manhood. Such the theory. It is summed up in Sir Percy Nunn's unexceptionable dictum: "Individuality is the key position of all. If this position is lost all is lost."

Until 1939 it appeared to most of us that this must be the last word in educational theory and practice. If one hundred per cent individuality could be guaranteed for every pupil, what more could possibly be desired? A great deal, unfortunately. In the first place, circumstances rendered the ideal impracticable. School and Society had come to exist in worlds which were either apart or positively antagonistic: the work of the one was negated by the other. At 14 the school-leaver was suddenly uprooted from his sheltered existence and flung into an unprincipled world which had small use for the ideals so long and so painstakingly instilled into him. In the struggle to earn a living he quickly forgot the greater part of what he had been taught. School-life and later-life had little in common. In the second place, individualism was not, in itself, a sufficient answer to the twentieth-century dis-ease. It was all very well disclaiming the effete and beggarly philosophy of education as a universal commodity, the same for everybody: but to adopt one which regarded it as a specific was no remedy at all. The single ant cannot function away from the heap: nor can the human personality realize itself alone. Forty million souls do not constitute a nation.

Even if we agree that the individuality is, in some respects, sacred, some attempt must be made to organize it in relation with other individualities. The great weakness of modern society is not so much that it is troubled with class-divisions and petty feuds as that it has become so fearfully atomistic. There is something daunting in its very amorphousness: swollen to such a size, so intangible and chaotic as to be



quite beyond the individual's comprehension. It was different in the old days, when the village or parish supplied a homely environment wherein one could live familiarly, in sympathy with one's neighbours. Apart from superficial contact with his own coterie, twentieth-century man tends to be lost in the great city: he is left to pursue only his own self-motive to its bitter end. Urban life, with its great collectives, its mania for technics, has become the breeding ground for apathy, for cynicism and disillusion; culture and religion are debased to the levels of utilitarianism and bodily comfort . . . or so it seemed in the England of the pre-war decades. Civilization was "an old bitch, gone in the teeth". To this, the third phase, September 3rd, 1939, applied the fitting inevitable closure.

The war-years brought more than ruin: they witnessed the final discrediting of several fake cultures and the rise of a fourth, immenser concept of education: a concept so vast in scope that its dimensions are as yet barely discernible. It is best defined in a single memorable phrase: "Education is social philosophy in action".<sup>1</sup> Veneration for the individual self remains, though somewhat tempered by a necessary restraint, but the emphasis is now not so entirely upon the One as upon the Group. There is a desire to bring the school into closer relationship with the community life than it has yet been; nor is the school any longer to be the sole agency to concern itself with cultural affairs. Henceforward the centre of gravity in education will not be found so exclusively in the 5-14 age range: school life will be no more than a preamble to what the 1944 Act informs us is to be "a continuous process". Morally speaking, no adult will have the right to say that he has done with this process at any time. Education is to be the cohesive influence, covering every aspect of life from birth to death, by which whole men and women may be nurtured as members of a whole society.

If hopes so vague as these are to be realized, it is necessary that the blind forces of tradition be supplemented by clear-sighted planning. We are being carried rapidly out of an

<sup>1</sup> G. Vickers: *Educating a Free Society* (Christian News Letter, January 31st, 1941).