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Education and the Enjoyment of Life

Has popular taste improved?

A comparison with a generation ago. (First published in Gateway, Feb 1917)

The head of a great shipbuilding concern said the other day that the object of education was not merely to teach men how to earn a living, but how to live. This is very far from being a new idea; though as the declared opinion of a 'captain of industry,' it is distinctly novel – so novel, indeed, that the smaller sort of journalist turns it over as if it had never been heard before. It is a long time since Ruskin wrote 'Industry without art is brutality.' The Romans had a saying, 'Vita sine literis mors est' (Life without literature is death.) The French Academy was founded in the seventeenth century by Cardinal Richelieu 'To keep the fine quality of the French spirit unimpaired.' (maintenere la delicatessen de l'esprit francais.) Bacon said, still earlier, that 'studies are for delight, for ornament, for ability'; and he also said: 'Reading maketh a full man, converse a ready man, and writing an exact man.' So that the doctrine that education is not intended merely or chiefly to make chemists, technicians, foreign correspondents, and 'smart' typists, but to enable people to make the most of life, is a very fairly old doctrine, even if we do not cite the declaration in the Shorter Catachism as to 'man's chief end.' As to the interpretation of this last there would appear to be some doubt. One man defined it as 'To Glorify God and enjoy him(self) for ever.' Another said man's chief end was to get ends to meet – an anxious-minded view with which one has much less sympathy than with the other rather epicurean reading.

But what signs are there that the place of studies as a necessary equipment for civilised life is at all adequately realised? Exceedingly little. Today I have seen two catalogues of books which seem to have special significance here. The one is a long and closely-printed catalogue of an old-established Edinburgh bookseller, whose customers would mostly be professional men and well-to-do people generally. There are not a score of novels in its 28 double-columned pages of small print, and those that figure there are first editions of classics. This is typical of the proportion of fiction in such catalogues, of which I regularly see a number. The other catalogues I have seen today is the list of additions to a library supposed to be popular. The library is assumed to be an auxiliary of a society whose business is professedly educative. The proportion of fiction to general literature is six to one, and the general

‘literature’ is of the lightest. The experience of the ordinary bookseller dealing in new books is that fiction, and the lightest of fiction at that, makes up by far and away the major part of his trade.

Much has been made of the success of certain popular series, such as the Everyman Library; but booksellers have pointed out that if Everyman is selling, it only means that other series are neglected in its favour. One bookseller has reminded us that there is nothing today to be compared, in value, interest, and real novelty, with the International Science Series of twenty to thirty years ago. All the volumes in that series were copyright books by the most distinguished authors then living, and they were published at prices from three to five times the price of the Everyman volumes, the latter being non-copyright books, from which the authors, mostly dead, derive no benefit, besides being old books from which latter-day science, theories, speculations, and current thought generally are excluded. In any popular series fiction holds by much the larger place. The buyers and readers of such books are doing nothing for literature, and in the trifling prices they pay for their mental fare they give no proof of any literature worth mentioning. To give ninepence for a fat novel that will keep the whole household reading, one member after another, for months, is a mere war economy of the most obvious kind. And the fashion of the sixpennies and sevenpennies (now raised to ninepence) had set in long before the outbreak of Armageddon.

It is true that more single-volume books are issued at long prices than ever before; but that is the worst sign of all. When one could buy a substantial new book by Herbert Spencer, Tyndall, Darwin, or Bain, for five shillings, it was a sign that a liberal education as to numbers had been printed; but when a book of three or four hundred pages is priced at sixteen shillings it means that the publisher expects a limited sale and has to take his expenses out of a much increased price. There will probably be less for the author than there would have been out of the lower priced book.

Does all this matter? Will doubtless be asked. It matters just all the world. It means that we are falling under suspicion of becoming a nation of light-minded ignoramuses, living butterfly lives in which we desire nothing more than to be vacuously amused, to pass the time with tosh that we forget as soon as read, for the excellent reason that there is nothing in it to remember worth the snuff of a candle.

In the really great periods of history the nations that were doing things generally had a literary output in accordance with their achievements in other fields. The Golden Age of Greece, the era of the great naval victory of Salamis and the great military victory of Marathon, in which a mighty despotism was beaten by a small free State, was the age of Aeschylus and Aristophanes, the former commemorating the triumph of freedom by writing the drama of ‘The Persians’ with its magnificent choruses. The spacious and fruitful days of Elizabeth, that saw the formidable power of Spain broken in the Netherlands and on the seas, was the age of Shakespeare and a galaxy of other writers who are still read. The ‘days of good Queen Anne’ not only witnessed

a succession of brilliant victories over the armies of despotic France, but it was a period of copious and classical output in literature. The long Victorian era, most glorious of all in achievement of every kind, was never without a host of poets, orators, historians, critics, playwrights, and novelists who created real characters, who never wrote without a genuinely useful social purpose, and who are still alive in their most immortal part, their writings.

The person who does not read history does not *know* history, and there is no way of having sound views of present facts and tendencies or of gauging future probabilities without a knowledge of the past. Everything that exists or takes place has antecedents. The present war, for instance, is merely a fresh outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war after an interval of forty years, during which time France has never ceased to talk of the revanche and to make much of her army as the means of securing it. The alliance with Russia was made, not for defence but for offence. So soon as Karl Marx heard that Germany was to annex Alsace-Lorraine he had declared that France would form an alliance with Russia. And the forecast was speedily fulfilled.

I recollect hearing an English Tory inveighing against Home Rule as being unheard of, impossible, unworkable, and absurd; and when it was pointed out that Ireland had a Parliament for centuries, and that at the time her last Parliament was taken from her the population was double its figure at the time he was speaking, he collapsed like a house of cards, murmuring that he 'didn't know that.'

No; but his ignorant vote would help to keep the desired and desirable change back in this as in other matters where all that is needed is a little liberalising knowledge.

Economics, political science and philosophy, poetry, criticism, biography are all necessary ,not only to the performance of our civic duties, but to anything like adequate intelligent enjoyment of life. Let anyone listen to the talk of an average casual collection of workmen or middle-class men, and what a mass of prejudice, half-baked opinion, and timid shying off from first principles and essential fact it will be found to be! Listen, for example, to a discussion on women's suffrage, and what sort of 'arguments' will be oftenest heard. Those in favour will have much to say of how women pay rates and taxes and manage businesses, and therefore they owught to have votes. Those against will doubtless rest content with nothing beyond jeers, cheap chaff, or the mere statement that they are not in favour; there is always a kind of honest man who thinks the mere statement of his hostility is enough.

None of the disputants seems to think of appealing to facts, to the experience of how Votes for Women has worked. In every branch of local politics women have long had the vote, and have almost uniformly misused it in the most flagitious way. In some of our colonies women have all the franchises, and nobody can say anything more than that they have increased the labour and expense of elections.

Women councillors initiate nothing. Woman is not an initiator. She does not even initiate her own hats. William Morris, a married man and a good cook, declared that no woman ever invented a new dish or failed to spoil an old one. Women have no pockets, and are constantly losing their handbags. They wear frocks that button up the back, and they need someone else to truss and untruss them.

The case against Votes for Women might be allowed to rest upon the one physiological fact that the female animal, including women, converts the energy she stores to a different purpose from that to which a man devotes it. The energy which goes in man to the nourishment of brain and biceps, in woman goes largely to the nourishment of the generative and lacteal organs, whether she wishes it or not. The man-like woman who writes powerful books (like 'George Eliot') or who becomes a soldier (like Christian Davies) is an unsexed woman. Her female functions are starved in the interests of her masculinity.

Tell this to the average suffragist, male or female, and there will not only be not reply, but you will probably be assured that they never heard of this aspect of the case.

The fact is, the state of political intelligence is such that there are far too many uninformed voters in the country already; and so far from its being desirable to increase the number, a good case could be made of disfranchising many men, except that you can't take a bone from a dog. The franchise in the hands of the ignorant or unreasoning is like a revolver in the hands of a child – a deadly weapon – and it was never meant to be that. To give women the vote because they have worked at munitions and conducted tramcars is an utterly irrelevant plea. Women's most valuable and dangerous service to the State is not and always has been the bearing and rearing of children. If services rendered gave a claim, that would be the strongest claim presentable on her behalf. But the franchise is given for the good of the state, and there is no reason to believe that Votes for Women would be anything but a reactionary evil of the most dangerous kind, as the results of municipal elections have abundantly proved.

To return from our overgrown illustration to the male thesis, I have no hesitation in saying that, be the causes what they may, the popular taste in literature is not only much lower than it was forty years ago, but it may be almost said to be non-existent. The grounds of this serious statement are so numerous that only a very few of them can be even mentioned here.

Books that used to be read as a matter of eager delight, and that are still so read by those who know good literature, are now used in the schools as lesson-books, not at all to the satisfaction of the pupil. Forty years ago boys of the poorest class bougth and read the plays of Shakespeare in penny pamphlets, printed in small type. Now Shakespeare is much less read and much less played. The Waverley novels were issued in threepenny editions by the enterprising Dicks, and were bought and read by poor boys who raided their scanty pocket-money for them as a treat. So great was the

demand for the better class of fiction 35 to 40 years ago that journals were produced consisting almost exclusively of standard novels run as serials. The authors represented included Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Lytton, Fielding, Smollet and Antony Trollope. The same class of literature has not become lessons! Imagine a youngster treating 'Ivanhoe,' 'Old Mortality' or 'Kenilworth' as a task to be conned and to be examined in! Forty years ago we read these books for pleasure after our home lessons were done, or, indeed, often and often before they were begun.

A secondary school teacher was complaining the other night that he could not get his class to take the least interest in the exploits of Hannibal, even in war time; whereas forty years ago we read about the Punic wars as a matter of keen pleasure, finding money for 'The Wars of the Carthaginians' with small encouragement from our seniors.

Thackeray tells of how, passing through a poor quarter of London, longer ago than forty years, a seamstress's child recognised him and cried 'There goes Becky Sharpe!' Many of the tales of both Dickens and Thackeray appeared in fortnightly numbers, and into many a humble household they went as a matter of course. Some of us were familiar from infancy with these novels in the blue and the green covers in which they appeared in their serial form. The home which did not contain a set of the Waverley novels, the poems of Burns, 'The Pilgrim's Progress,' Pollok's 'Course of Time,' and Milton's 'Paradise Lost,' was poor indeed. The Sketch and the Mirror are a very wretched exchange for these books and for the widely circulated periodicals issued by the house of Chambers in those days.

The modern writers who might most appropriately be compared, in point of merit and status, with Dickens and Thackeray, would be H.G.Wells, G.B.Shaw, Arnold Bennet, and G.K.Chesterton. Could one fancy the child of a poor seamstress recognising any of these as they passed down a modern mean street?

One knows households, whose head owns a motor car and has a bank balance of four or five figures, in which there are no books of general literature except such as have been got by the young people for school use. And ordinarily (I mean except in war time) we have to wait until these people, by God alone knows what process, make up what they are pleased to call their minds that something shall be done now which ought quite obviously to have been done fifty years ago. Our cities and the people in them might be made beautiful, the lease of life might be greatly extended, work might be made a pleasure, the man with the muck rake might be a gentleman t not too dainty for daily use, the wealth of the country might be increased at least tenfold, if – and what virtue in an if! – if prejudice could be dissipated by the dissipation of ignorance. But ignorance is hugged like a garment, and the heart of the reformer is broken and his unselfish life wasted by the neglect and the defeat, again and again, of proposals that would, in practice, beneficently transform the whole face of society. The man who knows what has been successfully done, and would enlarge the sum of human good, may well have the feeling of one who is kept out of a great estate by the

mere dog-in-the-manger obstinacy of others who do not even want the estate for themselves.

A people which does not read cannot reason. A people which does not read has no mental furniture; and the mind does not work in vacuo – it must have something to work with and upon. We reason by analogies, and the analogies of the non-reader must be few and curtailed.

The amazing thing is the lack of a worthy curiosity. It seems only natural to want to know exactly what took place at a time of historic crisis; how exactly the thing happened, who were the actors, how an institution, say, like the ancient and powerful monarchy of the Bourbons at last toppled and fell. When you recommend Dickens's 'Tale of Two Cities', and give an outline of the story, the hearer will say, 'Oh, I have seen it at the pictures.' It is something that one would imagine their curiosity would be aroused to know the whole story, say, as it is narrated by Thomas Carlyle in his graphic and witty history of the French Revolution. One result of the war has been to lead me to browse in the ten volumes of Carlyle's 'History of Frederick the Great' in order to find out how the Prussians came to be so infatuated with their precious Hohenzollerns. This is the natural thing to do.

The way in which everybody fell away from the last of the Jameses, and how the English Revolution was compassed by the king's flight at last, is an intensely interesting story, with many memorable touches as it is told by Macaulay; and one simply cannot understand how any adult English-speaking person is not curious to know the full particulars of an event so interesting in itself and so momentous in its consequences.

But there is no widespread curiosity about this epoch or about anything of the kind. We have left behind us for the time serious study and inquiry. A characteristic so human, so nobly human, as intellectual curiosity, must recur again to the nation; but there are no present signs of it.

There are many improvements in taste – in furniture, clothes, domestic architecture, the production of books, the arrangement of newspapers, the services in church. But the taste in literature, music and the drama has steadily deteriorated; English is still the Cinderella of popular education; and rag-time, and the cinema, and the musical comedy oust the better class of music and the best class of play from most theatres.

Will education become more narrowly 'utilitaritan' as a result of the war? Shall we beat the Germans in the field only to copy their ideas and methods in education and business? There is vast need for improvement certainly; but surely not in the direction of imitating the training that has produced the Hun, a slave to his taskmasters and a monster of aggressive cruelty to all against whom his wolfish ferocity is directed.

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