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978-1-107-62209-8 - On Education: The Future in Education and Education
for a World Adrift

Sir Richard Livingstone

Excerpt

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THE
FUTURE IN EDUCATION

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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

This book does not deal with primary, technical, university, nor, except for an isolated chapter, with secondary, education. All these, though susceptible of development and improvement, are firmly established. The great need and opportunity is in another field, of which a corner has been occupied but of which much is barely cultivated and part unexplored. The pressing problem is to give the masses of the nation some higher education, which will include that study of human ideals and achievement which we call literature, history and politics, and that study of the material universe which we call science. In some form, these are essential to the full development of all human beings, but at present the majority of the nation has no chance of studying them. How can this be altered? That, the most serious educational problem of the day, is the main subject of this book, which does not attempt to deal with details of organisation, but rather to suggest the principles to be followed.

I am convinced that secondary or post-primary education can give little help in solving the problem and that it can only be solved by adult education. Nothing is more needed than to revise our views as to the best age for 'cultural' education. If we could do that, the road would be open for one of the great educational advances of history. Ask anyone what is the right age for education, and the reply will probably be 'from 6 to 15 or 16, with an extension to 18 for more intelligent children, and to 21 or 22 for a picked few'. I do not of course question the need for elementary education to 14 or 15, the uses of secondary and university education for some, and the importance for

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all of maintaining between 14 and 18 some contact with educational influences. But, after 50 years spent in receiving or giving education, I am convinced that for the studies in question the years after 18 are a better age, and those after 30 better still.

This may seem a paradox. But everyone witnesses to its truth who says 'I wish I could have my education again'; and who, at some time of his life, has not said it? That phrase is the best argument for my view. Expanded, it would read: 'I was educated at an age when I knew so little of life that I could not really understand the meaning or use of education. Now that I have seen something of the world and of human beings, I realise what education can do for me and the real value and significance of many subjects which I studied years ago with little appetite and less understanding under the compulsion of a teacher or an examination. If I could only go back and have again the chances which I wasted, simply because I was not old enough to use them!'

In Chapter II I have given my view of the reasons why we all wish to have our education again, and I do not believe that there is any answer to the arguments there. Roughly my contention is that for full appreciation and the most fruitful study of the subjects in question—history, literature, and politics—experience of life is necessary. If so, certain conclusions follow.

First: the years of post-primary education (i.e. from 15 to 18) cannot be the best period for these studies. In particular the ordinary man of average or low intellectual ability will get little from them before the age of 18; and therefore the majority (who at present receive no education after the age of 14) can only study them satisfactorily in their adult years.

Second: without an extended system of adult education

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we cannot have an educated nation (suggestions for such a system are given in Chapters III and IV).

Third: those who receive a secondary education—graduates included—need an opportunity for resuming study methodically in later years when they have had experience of life (Chapter V).

The Postscript is unconnected with the main theme of the book and deals with a grave weakness in our secondary education, from whose effects, unless it is remedied, the nation will increasingly suffer.

The book develops ideas advanced in the Presidential Address to the Education Section of the British Association in 1934; part of Chapter II has appeared in the *Hibbert Journal* and most of Chapter V in *Public Administration*. Professor Ernest Barker and Sir Alfred Zimmern read the book in manuscript and helped me with valuable suggestions.

R. W. L.

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CHAPTER I

THE EDUCATIONAL PROBLEM

Why are we an uneducated nation and how can we become an educated one? We have compulsory education, magnificent schools, an impressive array of teachers, and an enormous educational budget. Yet most of the passengers in a railway carriage will be reading the *Daily Mirror*; and the *News of the World* has a circulation of between three and four millions. The advertisements, cheap newspapers and films of a country are the best index of what appeals to its masses. What view would posterity form of our civilisation from these manifestations of its taste and intelligence? Contrast with our cinema the drama which the whole Athenian people watched in the bright March weather millennia ago. What fraction of our masses would sit through a performance of the *Trilogy* or the *Philoctetes*?

It is not that education has been neglected. Between the Forster Education Act of 1870 and the 1891 Act the country organised elementary education. The Balfour Act of 1902 began a new era in the organisation of secondary education. In the early years of the twentieth century universities were created throughout the country. Since 1889 technical instruction has been developed thoroughly and effectively. That is a great achievement. In all these fields—university, secondary, technical, elementary—the problem has been faced and roughly solved. Improvements and developments will come; but the main lines have been well laid and are not likely to be altered. We have the tools, even if we may often use them ineffectively. In the future they may be improved and elaborated, but

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the chief improvement necessary is that we should learn more of their use and purpose, and our worst failures are due to the fact that we drift into and through education in a mechanical, automatic, unthinking way, instead of clearly defining to our own minds what we wish education to do for us and asking whether it is doing it and, if not, why not. Like religion, education quickly degenerates into a routine; then its meaning and its effects are lost. Still the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have done a great and solid work in it. So far, so good.

But all this still leaves a vast gap—I had almost said, a bottomless pit—in our national education. Some 70 per cent of the children of the nation are entirely withdrawn from any educational influence at the age of 15.¹ But education which ends at that age is not an education. It might be plausibly argued that nearly all the money spent on elementary education is wasted, because the system is, on the face of it, absurd. If you taught a child the letters of the alphabet and then stopped, you would probably consider that you had thrown time away in teaching him the ABC. Yet that is what we do in our elementary education. Elementary education is not complete in itself. It is preparatory. It prepares the pupil to go on to something else, and puts his foot on the first step of the ladder of knowledge. But in fact the vast majority go on to nothing else, they never climb higher on the ladder than the first step. How many pupils whose education ceases when they leave an elementary school maintain afterwards anything that can be called intellectual interest? How many think with any real seriousness about the problems of politics on which as electors they are expected to decide? How many

¹ In 1951–2, 178,634 boys left secondary modern and similar schools on reaching the age of fifteen to go into employment or for some other reason. Of these, 1,773 left for full-time education elsewhere.

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read books worth reading? How many read books at all?¹ What have they gained adequate to the vast sums spent on them? The chief uses of our present elementary system are to enable a minority to proceed to further education, and the rest to read the cheap press. I am not criticising our elementary schools or their teachers, or denying the necessity of elementary education for all. But unless it leads on to something else, it is as useless as a ladder which has no rungs beyond one or two at its bottom or as a railway from Oxford to London which ends at Didcot. To cease education at 15 is as unnatural as to die at 15. The one is physical death, the other intellectual death. In fact we have left the vast majority of the population without any kind of liberal education. We have provided for the minority who attend secondary school and university. We have shown the rest a glimpse of the promised land, and left them outside it. Aristotle may have gone too far when he said that the object of education was to help men to use their leisure rightly. But we have treated the majority as if they were to have no leisure, or as if it did not matter how they used what leisure they had. Art, music, science, literature were for the few. The rest were disinherited from some of the purest and highest pleasures. They might be machines or animals; men in the full sense of the word they could not be. That is the type of democracy with which we have been, and are, content.

It mattered, perhaps, less in the past. When the working-man had no leisure, why educate him to use something that he would never have? The question barely arose. But

¹ The following figures of books issued in a year per head (approximately) of the population by the urban libraries of certain counties are characteristic but not encouraging: Cornwall 3, London (Metropolitan Boroughs) 5, Glamorgan 6, Lanarkshire 5. One must, of course, allow for children under sixteen and for those who possess adequate libraries of their own, but also remember that many of these books were novels.

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to-day it is arising, and in the near future it is likely to be urgent. In 1900 most men had enough to do to earn a living. Now, with shorter hours of work they have the opportunity to be more than bread-winners. But if the leisure of the future is to be entirely devoted to the films and the dogs, civilisation will not have gained much by it. Fifty years ago leisure was no concern of any but the well-to-do, who mostly wasted it. To-day its use is becoming a problem.

What, then, would you say of a nation which believed this, and which acquiesced in the greater part of its people leaving school at the age of 15 and being thrown straight into the deep waters of life? Would not the old proverb rise to your mind, *Parturiunt montes, nascetur ridiculus mus*? For consider what a child has learnt by the age of 15. He can read and write and do arithmetic. He has made a beginning in many subjects, and received a training which enables him to use an opportunity of learning more. But of history, except in a superficial sense, he knows nothing; of the forces that affect the fortunes of the country, which as a voter he will help to determine, he knows nothing; economics, historical traditions, political theories are a closed mystery to him; he will have opened the great book of literature but he has had little time to turn its pages; of science he is even more ignorant. Most of my readers probably did not leave school at 15; many went to the university. Let them ask themselves how it would have fared with their intellectual and spiritual life if their education had ceased at 15. Would they be willing that their own children should leave school at that age? Yet that is the lot of the great majority of children in this country. And we have been singularly complacent about it. We take it calmly, because we are used to it, and human beings see nothing wrong in abuses to which they are accustomed.