

BLACKFRIARS

A GREAT ADVENTURE IN EDUCATION

“IT is difficult to foretell what will become of our exclusive boarding schools if the nation ever takes seriously the problem of providing secondary education, of one kind or another, for a substantial part of its population, and at the same time realizes how effectively, as well as expensively, in present conditions we educate the difference classes to misunderstand each other.”¹

The corporate spirit of “Churnside”² owed much to the fact that the boys were drawn from widely differing homes and were of very varied antecedents. The original terms of the foundation made provision only for successful scholarship candidates from the County elementary schools, and a few nominated scholars, but the school was early opened to fee-paying pupils whose number steadily increased. No distinction was made between any of the boys; they all wore grey suits provided by the school; their pocket-money was limited and an equal weekly allowance was made by the Governors, from which joint sum “taxes” were levied to defray the cost of those departments directly controlled by the boys; and they all shared in the household duties allotted to them—serving at table, preparing certain rooms for daily use, making their beds and cleaning their shoes, besides working on the games field and keeping sports material in good repair.

Three years after its foundation I was privileged to serve for four years on the staff of Churnside, and I can vouch for the complete absence there of class-consciousness. The only tendency towards snobbishness I could ever detect was towards an intellectual snobbishness, and that was certainly not the prerogative of members of any one grade of society.

¹ *Sane Schooling*, by J. H. Simpson. (Faber & Faber; 7/6; pp. 220-221.)

² For obvious reasons I retain the fictitious name “Churnside” for the school at which Mr. Simpson carried out the remarkable “social and educational experiment” the description of which is “the core of this book.”

Churnside was a large house built on a slope of hills and surrounded by park land of exceptional beauty. The pastel effects of the warm countryside, the grandeur of the beech avenue and the steep slope to the lake, the freshness of the bluebell wood and the tange of the "wilderness," the spacious terraces and the garden that Mrs. Simpson conjured up for us, the ancient church and the lichened stone cottages in the valley—these are among many remembrances of beauty that found a calculated place in the education of Churnside boys and, without doubt, in the education of Churnside masters!

Discipline was an essential part of the training given, and I have never met with more spontaneous courtesy from those under authority than I encountered at Churnside.³ But because discipline was readily accepted as part of an orderly, and therefore pleasanter, existence, a community spirit was possible wherein all members of the school were able to live in friendship and sympathy. It was that good-will that saved every boy, however complicated his problems might be, from becoming a "case." In exactly the same way that in a well-conducted home children's lives are directed and controlled towards their ultimate well-being, guided without favour and sometimes painfully, in a healthy, happy atmosphere with an open and growing freedom in their family relationships, boys at Churnside lived a family life that encouraged and safeguarded a wide and reasonable liberty. And it was, I believe, that good-will, so often delicate in encouragement and so firm and sane in its growth and practice, that safeguarded Churnside from the freakishness into which a Headmaster less wise, and less gifted with a healthy sense of humour, might have led it.

Because the family spirit was real and vital, the boys assumed responsibility naturally and conscientiously. The conduct of games, and expenses incidental to them, were looked upon as the responsibility of the boys; social activities to engage the energies of the boys and provide them with

³ For Mr. Simpson's views on "how to promote a sane and balanced attitude to authority" see p. 39 et seq.

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relaxation and special scope for enterprise, were arranged and paid for by the boys and were held each evening; the school shop was under their management and its profits were at their disposal; the school magazine and school societies depended more than usual upon the responsibilities of the boys; and, obviously, in so large a family there was a collective responsibility that affected many departments of everyday life outside the clearly defined regions of house-keeping, health and lessons. To discharge those obligations efficiently a special organisation was necessary: that was provided in the General Meeting.

The General Meeting was presided over by officers elected by the boys and was attended by the whole school, although extreme juniors had no vote and took no active part in its deliberations. As befitted so important an institution, it held its weekly assemblies in school hours and was empowered to convene special sessions at other times. Its rules were sufficiently elastic to have admitted me as an ordinary member for some time, and I hold in warm admiration the memory of skilful, often heated, debates, and the efficient, far-sighted treatment of the business with which the Meeting was concerned. Mistakes were made and had eventually to be corrected, but the Headmaster rarely if ever had to exercise his power to veto. Sub-committees were elected by and had to report to the General Meeting: those were the Finance, House, Games and Entertainments committees; their estimates and expenditure were subject to the closest scrutiny, and their achievements to very frank criticism. Through the control of the common purse the Meeting was able to withhold disproportionate concessions from those who might be inclined to specialize unduly in any one form of sport or entertainment. I would give much to have had so sound and practical an experience of business matters in my own school-days.

The same sense of family responsibility pervaded every sphere of school life at Churnside, and the lovely things the boys made in their workshops were made, more often than not, for the greater comfort and convenience of the school; those, together with well-chosen pictures, and flowers and

branches of leaves (often of the boys' gathering) which were nearly always and nearly everywhere to be seen, made the school in a special sense the boys' own joint home.

The word "entertainment" was a convenient term for use in the school, but is far too stiff to give to those outside it a true impression of the jolly, informal evenings to which it has reference. Nobody minded at Churnside how much noise was made so long as proper hours and certain quarters were respected; and no one minded how much mess was made so long as it was cleared up afterwards; so that uproarious evenings could be spent in the gymnasium, or the music-room could be strewn with clothes and "properties" for charades or short plays given on the indoor stage. More elaborate entertainments for the benefit of visitors at Christmas and midsummer entailed a great deal of hard work and sacrifice for the maintenance of the high standard of Churnside acting; the educational advantages of acting were manifest in the results, and the joy of giving finished performances was an abiding one.

So attractive an environment premises healthy minds in healthy bodies, and in his chapter on *Education for Health* Mr. Simpson gives us the benefit of his experience in, and his sane attitude towards, this all-important subject. It must be observed in parenthesis that the wise control of games at Churnside was probably as much responsible as the physical fitness of the boys for the notable athletic achievements to their credit.

That there must be many troublesome problems in connection with so brave a venture as Churnside stood for will be apparent, but they were approached with the same courage and faith that made the venture possible. Those and many other general problems Mr. Simpson sets forth in *Sane Schooling*. He is no iconoclast who states a difficulty merely in order to give his own solution of it. He invites his readers—parents and schoolmasters alike—to recognize and to reflect upon these problems; many of them concern him because he is an idealist, but because he is a practical man he offers wise and studied suggestions for their resolution.

Catholics will find him provocative: for example, those

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who bear in mind Father Bede Jarrett's words, ". . . we have to realize that the sonship of God is no mere metaphor, no mere name, but a deep and true fact of huge significance: 'Behold what manner of charity the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called and should be the sons of God!' (I John iii),"⁴ may find themselves at certain points in strong disagreement with Mr. Simpson's views on religious education—when, for instance, he writes, "How far at different ages and with what different kinds of boy is it wise to stress the metaphor (for all human descriptive language about the divine cannot be more than metaphorical) of the Fatherhood of God?" But they will realize that, differences of creed apart, there is much ground for agreement between them and him; and no one who reads the chapter on *Education and Sex* can doubt the real spirituality of the author. Examination devotees will find him provocative; so will conservative upholders of the *status quo* in boarding schools; so will those parents and schoolmasters who are only vaguely progressive; but for everyone interested in education, whether in day schools, preparatory schools or public schools, there is in this book stimulating food for thought. I hope it will unsettle a great many people; as it does that it will suggest various ways of remedying what is bad in our present educational system, and improving and extending what is good. *Sane Schooling* is probably the most valuable contribution to the educational literature of this century.

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⁴ *Abiding Presence of the Holy Ghost*: Bede Jarrett, O.P.