

## IN DEFENCE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

IT is no new thing for attacks to be made upon the Public Schools, and although many of the arguments are, I believe, specious, there is a sufficient body of solid and well-considered criticism which should and must be fairly met, if schools of the older tradition are to survive; and I would like to try, in the short space available, briefly to take stock of the position and attempt to justify a system which many students of education believe to be obsolete. The angle of attack has, I think, shifted in recent times; the argument which was once very prevalent was the complaint that schools turn out all their boys to one pattern, individuality and originality being sacrificed in the process. Few people denied that the pattern was a good one, but it was felt by critics that any deviation from the set model was regarded with undue suspicion and dislike. This argument has lost some of its force to-day, because conditions have changed and public opinion in a school is far more lenient towards diversity of outlook and difference of taste; certainly it is not true now, and I much doubt if it ever was, that a boy interested in the fine arts, music or poetry is regarded as a curious or undesirable person. Possibly the very friendly relations which exist in most modern schools between master and boy may have helped in this change, if it is not presumptuous for masters to hope that they do have a humane and civilizing influence.

It is not then so much in this direction that schools have to justify their existence. They have to meet a far more damaging criticism, damaging because it originates, not with the student of education or the psychologist, but with the ordinary man in the street. One of the most common and poignant sights of the modern world is to see active men of ability and education unable to find work or in despair taking up jobs to which they are wholly unsuited. At no other time, I suppose, in the history of the civilized world has the mere struggle for existence become so hard as it is to-day. Again and again one meets the same story; public

school and varsity men are thrown on the world and find to their dismay that their long and expensive education has apparently no market value, and are forced to find work at the age of nineteen or twenty-two which can be done as well, if not better, by a boy of sixteen whose standard of education does not rise above that of the School Certificate. The trouble is due not only to the overcrowding of so many of the professions; very often a career is closed to a boy because it may mean an expensive post-school course for which there are no funds available; the Medical and Engineering careers are cases where training has necessarily to be prolonged three to five years beyond leaving school and many families are unable to meet the burden; other careers like the Civil Service, the Police, Colonial Service, or Diplomatic, are not, broadly speaking, open to candidates under twenty-one or twenty-two and many of them require a University Degree; the Law again is a hazardous career, for it will almost certainly mean a long period of waiting before a man begins to build up a practice. The result of all these obstacles is obvious; it means that a greater number of boys are looking for jobs when they leave school, whereas in more normal times many of them would be going to the Universities, Medical and Engineering Colleges; thus the congestion for immediate openings in business is very great.

It is not then surprising that parents with sons to educate should ask themselves whether, under these new and hectic conditions, the public schools are giving boys a training which will best enable them to succeed in after life and whether the expense and the time are justified by the results. Faced with the sterner facts of life and the paramount necessity of earning one's living, can one afford to make sacrifices for something which may seem of little practical value? There are widespread doubts whether our long hallowed methods are not growing out of date and no longer correspond to modern needs; that our education is only a luxury, which admittedly adds to the graces of life, but has no place in the world of to-day.

This is, I think, roughly the charge which has to be met;

and it is a serious one because it is apparently backed up by some very formidable and very hard facts. Can a satisfactory answer be given, or must one conclude that public schools have outlived their time? Well—in the first place one may urge that there is a very serious danger of the modern outlook becoming too one-sided, that we are tending to mistake one part of life for the whole; we are tempted to take a more utilitarian view of life than perhaps is justified even by the hard conditions imposed upon us by economic pressure. Fear for the future, the uncertainty of a decent living, the need of securing some immediate post instead of being able to wait for something better, tend to distort one's values, and to relegate to the background other aspects of life which are equally precious and real. Far be it from me to belittle the enormous importance of careers; it should hold the first place in the mind of every boy; but I do say this, that no career should obscure the value of mental qualities which may in themselves contribute very little to one's income. I do feel the importance of stressing this point, especially when boys have often to choose careers by necessity rather than inclination, and are absorbed into professions which are perhaps dull and lacking in human contacts; there are unfortunately many callings which, especially in their earlier stages, are uninspiring and give very limited outlet to a boy's personality, and if a boy has no mental resources of his own on which to draw, his life may become barren to the extreme. It is here that real education can provide something that nothing else can; it can bridge over the gap which exists so often between what a boy has to do and what he would like to do, and provide a philosophy of life and sources of enjoyment which can change a seemingly poor existence into a rich and useful one. There are hundreds of working men up and down the country who would bear out the truth of this, men who have been unable by their circumstances to develop their natural intelligence and who would give anything for the opportunities which a public school can provide.

This is then the first answer to the charge; that modern conditions, far from destroying the necessity for a liberal

education, actually require it more than ever, in order to maintain a sense of values which the practical difficulties of life tend to upset. There is no better way of acquiring that sense of proportion, that reserve fund of mental interests and taste for mental adventures which will last throughout life, than by making the fullest use of the education offered by a public school, and if one is lucky enough, by a University; for it is unlikely in after life that one will have the leisure or energy to do so.

It may appear from this kind of argument that the only use of education is to offer consolation to those who are not happy in their professions, but I think one may carry the argument a step further and hold that education of this kind is of very real value in the more practical walks of life. The issue is often obscured by the fact that a school or university training may not actually help one to secure a position, and may be of no apparent advantage in the earlier stages; the average work of a junior clerk in an office requires no special aptitude beyond that of tidiness, punctuality and alertness; qualities which are not of course monopolies of the public schools. But whatever career is adopted, the higher posts will be open, normally speaking, only to those who show some special talent, and it is in these later stages that a man's earlier training will begin to pull its weight; success in most branches of life must entail the gift of leadership and management of men, and it is here that the right type of public school man should come into his own; he will have learnt at school—in a smaller sphere—how to handle others; he will have known something of responsibilities and duties, and he should be able to respond to emergencies with a self-confidence and assurance which he will have acquired in his later years at school. I do not wish to imply, once more, that these qualities are only found in men who come from well-known schools; they are found in plenty of men who have had no special educational advantages and who by sheer force of personality have risen to the top; but I do maintain that no system is better adapted for bringing out and developing these latent powers of leadership. It is hardly necessary to recall the record of the Public Schools in the last

War to support this statement. In this connection I would also like to emphasize the importance of boys staying at school until they are old enough to be given responsible positions; if a boy is taken away at the age of seventeen, before he has had time to reach a prominent position in the school, he will have lost the most vital time of his school life, and be deprived of this special opportunity of developing these gifts.

It is at this stage of the argument that the Counsel for the Defence would join issue with those who maintain that all education should be strictly utilitarian, directed to one immediate and practical end. How often does one not hear the plea "Why should I learn this, that, or the other? What use is it going to be in after life?" The answer perhaps is, that very little one does learn at school is of much practical value, once all examinations are over; if one analyses for a moment the necessary educational requirements of the average man in his daily round, how extraordinarily small they are; he must read, write, and talk coherently; a little elementary arithmetic is probably useful, but what else? To most men, what real practical use is all the Science and Geography, the Advanced Mathematics, the Latin or English Literature he has studied? But what every man who means to be a success does need, are certain qualities of mind, such as the power of summing up a situation, of seizing upon the essentials of an argument, of knowing when a case is proved or not proved, the ability of expressing himself in clear language, the power of presenting an argument in terms which will best appeal to his audience, mastery of detail, accuracy of thought and a certain balance and elasticity of mind. All these are qualities which are not exactly learnt by any direct method, but which, so to speak, filter into the mind through the medium of all the various subjects which are learnt at school. Not the immediate but the ultimate value of school education is not so much the acquirement of knowledge but the discipline it gives to the mind. There is, I think, no better definition of education than this: Education is what remains when everything you have ever learnt has been forgotten. One may forget all the Latin and Greek,

or Science and Mathematics, but these things will, if really studied, have given a mental training which will be capable of being turned to any use, and of dealing far more effectively with the problems of practical life. School life can do much in this direction, but the ideal continuation of school life is the University, and therefore, other things being equal, I would urge all parents to try and send their sons to one of the Universities, provided of course that he is the type of boy who would really benefit by the three years spent there. No doubt, however, for some boys it is a waste of time; but for a naturally intelligent and interested boy there is no finer training in the world.

There is one more line of defence which I have left to the last because it is, I feel, the most important of all. It is common nowadays to write and talk about modern needs, of scrapping institutions, ideas and ideals which are alleged to have no further use. But are the essential needs of the modern world so entirely different from those of previous epochs? Undoubtedly many things are changed and schools along with other bodies must make certain adaptations; but whatever changes have taken place in the economic and social fabric, one thing remains as true to-day as it ever did; a man may be a soldier, lawyer, schoolmaster or stock-broker, but that is not the whole of him; he may devote the greater proportion of his active hours to his profession, but he is also a social being, a member of a state, and probably a father of a family. I think there is some danger that these aspects of a man's life are forgotten when education is discussed. If there is any force in the plea I have tried to put forward that a liberal education is a definite asset in a boy's career, it is much more valuable still in his social and home relations. If he leaves school with cultivated tastes and a tutored mind, he possesses something which must enrich all his relationship with other people and give him the means of using his influence to the best purpose. Catholics have a special duty in this respect, for there is a great need of Catholic educated men—men who can take their place in the world alongside of anyone; but to do this, they must have the mental equipment necessary to maintain and defend the

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principles which they themselves follow. And so in conclusion may be urged the last, and to my mind the strongest of the arguments suggested, that a public school education develops the whole personality, and not merely a part of it, and equips a boy to give the best of himself in every sphere of life.

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