

RURAL SCHOOLS

- To live in the country and partake of the life of the country is in itself an education, partly because natural phenomena, experienced by the countryman at first hand, are educative, and partly because craftsmen abound everywhere practising their crafts in the open for all to see. These characteristics of the country provide two fundamentals of education: opportunity to study the relations of God with man, and the opportunity to learn through imitation (the only way that one human being learns from another) the essential crafts of life.

Observation of nature is like looking at the illustrations of a history book. It offers visible examples of life and the way life is ordered. The pictures may be wrongly interpreted—as can be seen by the origin of the word paganism—but, given true philosophy, the countryside is a constant reminder of the ultimate things of life.

As regards the second educational advantage that the country possesses, almost every activity that a child watches—and is everywhere able to watch—explains itself. No one is likely to make a mistake about the purpose and method of milking a cow; the cutting, making and carrying of hay are their own text-book; the hedger, the thatcher, the ploughman, the blacksmith, the cobbler, each teaches a lesson to the passer-by, as do the manifold processes of cultivation in the fields. Merely by his presence in the country, therefore, a child becomes acquainted with the myriad elements of an ordered existence which supplies the fundamental needs of the human race. Nor does he stop short at acquaintance only. It is rare to find a true child of the country unable to take part in the work going on around him. He will understand how to deal with animals; he will be able to stook corn, to milk, and to make butter; and he will early acquire a practical knowledge of the soil, its cultivation, and the rotation of the crops.

In big cities and their suburbs it is otherwise. Almost everything that impinges upon the senses of man comes to him through man-made—often man-mutilated—phenomena. The work that a city does and the leisure upon which its suburbs are intent are not for the most part in direct touch with nature—that is with the environment created for human beings—but are removed from it by the interposition of artificial barriers that industrialism is forever making more formidable. Finance, for example, save in its most rudimen-

tary form as a convenience in the exchange of goods, is wholly divorced from the natural forces that control men's lives. Factory work, considered in terms of life, has no meaning to the vast majority engaged in it. Trade has become drowned in the deep and powerful stream of money-obsessed combines. Amusements and relaxations are supplied ready-made without the slightest reference to local taste or surroundings. There is very little opportunity for men's creative faculties, which spring from the interaction of intelligence and nature. In the city, too, processes and results, and the relation between the two, are generally hidden. A child could hardly learn, from being an inmate of a city, what is going on there; and even if he did, the educative value to him of the lesson would be next to nothing.

Now these facts about town and country have an important bearing upon the schools situated in the one or the other. And here when I say schools I mean schools that draw their pupils from the immediate locality in which they are situated; for independent boarding schools, whose pupils come from all sorts of different places, should be considered separately. Wherever they are situated it is impossible to describe them as either urban or rural. But in dealing with the local school we are at once faced by the fact that, whereas the rural school not only starts with boys and girls who are already, according to their ages, educated and responsive to educative influence, but also enjoys the great advantage of knowing that education is continuing during the time that they are away from formal lessons, the urban school can rely upon none of those assets. The homes of its pupils possess fewer of the characteristics of the true home, however humble, for they are usually without gardens or a sense of locality; the streets or the ordered public parks to which they have access have none of the freedom and variety of fields and country lanes; the food that comes to them from the shops and the milk that is left on their doorstep discourage the art of cooking (a most educative accomplishment) and undermine health which is an invaluable aid to learning.

From this it would appear that, if we are to have local day schools, the town and not the country should be exercising the minds of educational experts. But it is not so. To the bureaucratic, town mind of a Government (and under industrialism bureaucracy and town-mindedness are the inevitable attributes of the State) the town is the exemplar, the country the problem. The gentlemen in Whitehall who direct that we should be compulsorily taught in schools of their own making have no idea what education means (why should they?), and are concerned only with the apparatus of instruction.

Teachers, transport, and material human and inorganic, can be more readily obtained and disposed of in a thickly populated area than one in which people are fewer and less organised. Therefore, the town suits the authorities and the country baffles them.

Partly to resolve these self-made difficulties the Government decided in 1941 to appoint a committee to offer its advice on post-war agricultural education, no doubt hoping thereby to kill two birds with one stone: to make good some of the egregious blunders committed by past Governments as regards the land; and at the same time to suggest a means whereby rural schools could be brought more satisfactorily into the State system. If this was their intention, the Luxmoore Report, published in April, 1943, must have proved something of a disappointment. The Committee, it is true, followed the precedent of other such bodies in emphasising the importance of systematisation, so dear to Government Departments; but at the same time deplored 'the tendency to differentiate between town and country schools and to confine the teaching in the former class to the things of the town and in the latter to the things of the country,' thus destroying governmental hopes that some special plank would be provided to bridge the gap between the subservience of the town and the recalcitrancy of the country to governmental systematisation.

The National Farmers' Union, who brought out a report on post-war food production at about the same time, went further. They even recommended that 'in all elementary schools, both rural and urban, children should have their interest aroused in country life, and that in the case of the older children visits should be paid periodically to farms to observe farming operations.' This recommendation turned the tables on the town and almost suggested that the inefficient country should become the centre of educational gravity. The National Farmers' Union are, of course, right, but their views are highly disruptive of the Government system; since once it were admitted that the town should come to learn from the country, and still worse to 'observe' those very things which every country child could observe for himself without going to school at all, the whole fabric of compulsory schooling would stand in grave danger.

But in this lies the moral of the whole discussion about rural schools. In an environment so charged with educative values that merely to live in it and take part in the life that goes on there provides a highly diverse education, a superimposed governmental system of compulsory syllabuses, unconnected with any natural or supernatural goal and usually carried out by men and women whose experience is confined to this aimless task, is altogether out of place.

The practical essentials of class-room instruction are extremely few. To read, to write, and to be conversant with the elementary rules of arithmetic cover the majority of such needs. That, of course, is not to say that a child's education should be confined to such elements, indeed the acquisition of these alone can hardly be graced with the name of education; but it is equally true that the mere multiplication of syllabus subjects imposed upon children of all kinds is also utterly alien to the development of thought and skill in them. The truth is that some children flourish more on a predominantly academic education, that is to say one in which their imitative faculties are mainly occupied with the working of the *minds* of those engaged upon mental studies; others experience a more natural development when they are imitating the actions and skill of craftsmen. But it is by no means certain, not even probable, that schools provide the best opportunities for this development: systematised State schools are incapable of doing so.

Thus we arrive at the conclusion that real education is the result, not of systems, still less of compulsory systems, least of all compulsory town systems, but of the right kind of experience, knowledge and skill wedded to inexperience and the God-given faculty of imitation. It is the result, too, of local environment (in which the home is the principal factor) fertile in opportunities for the young to imitate the skill and the mental processes of craftsmen and thinkers. Most of all is it the result of association with, and instruction in, the principles that govern our lives here, and will direct our souls eternally.

In the country there is hope that all these conditions of education may be fulfilled: in the great cities the hope becomes much fainter. In any event the State cannot fulfil them; all it can do—and ought to do—is to encourage their growth.

To-day it is to the country and to those rural schools that have succeeded to some extent in escaping from the cramping effects of bureaucratic systematisation that the Government should look if it really desires to encourage education.

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