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Habit of Thought Wanted Instead of Knowledge

J. T. Hebert, M. A., LL. B., of Campbellton, the Alumni Orator—Criticizes Elective System and Also Lectures—Wants Methods Which Will Bring Out Powers of Student and Inculcate Habit of Thought.

J. T. Hebert, M. A., LL. B., now practicing law in Campbellton was the Alumni Orator at the afternoon's enaenial proceedings of the University of New Brunswick. "The College and the Nation" was his subject and he did not hesitate to attack educational methods as they have developed in the higher institutions of learning within the past decade or two and advocate changes which would tend to develop the habit and power of thought rather than the acquiring of knowledge.

Mr. Hebert is a graduate of the U. N. B. After taking his B. A., at the Provincial University in 1912 he taught in both Bathurst and Fredericton High Schools. He took his M. A. in 1915 and entered Harvard Law School being graduated LL. B. in 1919. For two years he was Acting Professor of Economics and Philosophy at the University of N. B. He went West and was Professor of Law in the University of Saskatchewan. Returning he was admitted to the New Brunswick bar and is now practicing at Campbellton.

EDUCATION CRITICIZED.

Elective System and Lectures Both Found at Fault—More Should be Brought out of Students.

The oration of Mr. Hebert was as follows:—

My subject this afternoon is "The College and the Nation"; it might also be called "Education for Citizenship." At the outset, however, the mistake must not be made that I am advocating a purely political education, although in a provincial university maintained by a democracy for the benefit of its people, the subject of government and political science should occupy an important place. But whatever vocation the graduates of such an institution may follow, they will all be citizens, and some of them will be leading citizens; and it is with citizenship in the larger sense, the function of a free citizen in a free state, and the place of the college or university in the formation of such a citizen, that I wish to deal. My topic therefore, is the public purpose of education, what the state has a right to expect from its institutions of higher education, and whether these expectations are being realized at the present time. It will accordingly be my purpose to point out what a democratic and progressive community, such as ours strives and hopes to be, requires of its members and how its seats of higher learning can help it to that end. To describe the preparation which I conceive the college should give for the varied activities of citizenship, I have found no words more adequate than those of John Milton written almost three centuries ago in his "Tractate": "I call therefore a compleat and general education that which fits a man to perform justly and magnanimously all the offices both private and publick of Peace and War."

The Small College.

It will not be considered presumptuous, I trust, for one who but yesterday was an instructor in this institution, and but the day before one of its students to request this encaenial audience to give a little honest thought to this most important subject, and he hopes not to be accused of disloyalty if he refuses to hush his hearers with the well-worn sentiments of affection so dear to the heart and lips of the elder alumnus proposing the toast to Alma Mater. It is well, no doubt, to echo Daniel Webster's "It is, sir, a small College, yet there are those who love it." It is better, surely, to strive that though it remain a small college, all should respect it.

Its Purpose.

It is generally said that the end of a college course is a liberal education, but when we ask what the meaning or use of a liberal education is, the answer is not always satisfactory. There was a time when a college head at Oxford could tell his students without shame "Gentlemen, study the Classics. For a knowledge of the Classics, gentlemen, not only enables you to look down with contempt on those who are less well educated than yourselves, but may lead to positions of considerable emolument even in this world." Today, we are hardly satisfied with such a motive, any more than we are convinced of the plain

inference intended that a knowledge of the Classics would certainly lead to positions of considerable emolument in the next world. If we who count ourselves fortunate in being college graduates ask ourselves honestly what our college course has done for us, it is possible that our answer would be as absurd as that of the Oxford Don? Let us see what the average college graduate, as represented by that typical American business man Mr. George F. Babbitt, thinks about it. You will remember that he is arguing with his son Ted, who, instead of wasting four years in college, wants to take a correspondence course in Engineering, and go off and build bridges in China; in the best Americanese, Mr. Babbitt tells us what College has done for him. "No, and I'll tell you why, my son. I've found out its a mighty nice thing to be able to say you're a B. A. Some client who doesn't know what you are and thinks you are just a plug business man, he gets to shooting off his mouth about economics and literature or foreign trade conditions, and you just ease in something like "When I was at College—of course I got my B. A. in sociology and all that junk—" Oh, it puts an awful crimp in their style! . . . You see, my dad was a pretty good old coot but he never had much style to him, and I had to work darn hard to earn my way through College. Well, its been worth it, to be able to associate with the finest gentlemen in Zenith at the Clubs and so on and I wouldn't want you to drop out of the gentleman class—the class that are just as red-blooded as the Common People, but still have power and personality. It would kind of hurt me if you did that, old man." There is great danger to fear that the Arts degree has become for many graduates just what Mr. Babbitt said: a symbol of gentility, and that apart from being such a symbol, it is thoroughly useless to its possessor and to the community.

Order, Cleanness, Prudence.

After the contemptible ideal advanced by the Oxford Don, and the useless upstartism which Mr. Babbitt thought justified his four years spent at College, is it not refreshing and heartening to return to Milton's majestic prose: "I call therefore a compleat and generous education that which fits a man to perform justly and magnanimously all the offices both private and publick of Peace and War." Is not that the true purpose of education, to develop the qualities of the human animal to fit him for membership in a civilized society, to give him those habits of discipline which will make the state strong in time of war, and those habits of decency which will serve to keep it safe in times of Peace? Certainly if we keep in view the public purpose of education, there is no other answer, than that education ought to be a preparation for the varied activities of citizenship, and what I would have you bear in mind is the place the college should occupy in that preparation. Former President Hadley has said that the three fundamental things which seem to distinguish civilization from barbarism are order, cleanliness and prudence, and that in a community governed by an absolute monarch or a religious oligarchy, they represent about all that is essential as a basis for citizenship. A free commonwealth of democracy, however, requires more than these. If it is to enjoy civil liberty, it must develop in addition habits of self-control among the great body of its members, and habits of leadership among a considerable number of them. And such habits of self-control and leadership are much harder to secure than habits of order, cleanliness and prudence, for the latter may be imposed and maintained by authority from above, but the latter arise and are sustained in each man's soul. Not only are habits of self-control and leadership more difficult to nurture, but they may be more easily abused. The liberty to do right is also the liberty to do wrong, and the only guarantee the community has against the misuse of self-control and leadership is in the vision and intelligence of its members. To quote President Hadley again, "They must have vision to see and feel what the community needs to have them see and feel, so that ideals of order and cleanliness and upbuilding which tend to carry

them forward will have a stronger and more constant appeal than the mere animal instincts which tend to carry them backward. And they must have intelligence to know how these ideals are to be compassed, so that the pursuit of their visions will lead them and their followers in the general direction in which they want to go—not backward into the wilderness, but forward into the promised land. To the habit by which vision is acquired we give the name imagination; to the habit by which intelligence is acquired we give the name of thinking."

To Train to Think.

These habits, as all history teachers, are what the free nations of the world have had to acquire gradually and painfully; these are the qualities which their individual members still have to acquire in order to fit themselves for citizenship in the free communities of modern times. Of course, many different educational agencies contribute to the difficult process of learning these habits: "for teaching habits of order and decency we have the family and the police, for teaching habits of prudence, we have private property, for teaching habits of imagination in the largest and truest sense, we have the theatre, the press and the church, and for teaching habits of thinking, we have the schools." It is obvious that the work of each of these agencies overlaps one or some of the others, but it is equally patent that the primary duty of the school, in its largest sense, is to teach the habit and train the power of thinking, to develop as high a degree as possible of mental health and intellectual strength.

Intellectual Culture.

This then is the business of the College or University, to make intellectual culture its direct scope, to employ itself in the education of the mind. In this process of education, two elements enter, first, the medium through which it is to be wrought and second the method by which it is to be achieved. Most of the old controversies have dealt only with the first of these—should the Classics or Mathematics be preferred? Was it possible to acquire culture and sweetness and light from a study of the Natural Sciences? How large a place should be assigned to the Society Sciences? These disputes leave us cold, partly because we are dealing not with a theory of which subject matter is best, but with a condition in which all of them are given a place in the curriculum; but mainly for the reason that the controversies were over the wrong things, as I hope to show later. They are instructive, nevertheless in a negative way, for they illustrate one exception of education which is still extremely prevalent. The ordinary intelligent citizen undoubtedly regards the University or College as a place for acquiring a great deal of knowledge on a great many subjects. The fond parent who sends his offspring to College has usually the same idea. Either he wants his son or daughter to study nothing that is not useful, because that is what he will need in later life, or else nothing that is useful for the reason that unless he learns it in College, he will never learn it anywhere. In either case, it is the subject matter that is important and the prospective student is regarded as a sort of reservoir into which knowledge is to be poured by different teachers in proper proportions. And even the professors have come to regard their function to be that of purveyors of information merely. It is no wonder then that the public have taken at its face value the fundamentally false maxim that Knowledge is Power, when a little thought would show that knowledge while an indispensable condition of the expansion of mind that is power, is not at all the same thing. The possession of information is a totally different thing from the power or habit of thought, and it is fallacious to assume that if you secure the former, the latter will follow as a matter of course. A memory stored with all sorts of information does not make the educated man or woman, any more than a large dictionary makes a grammar.

Knowledge Not the End.

This confusion of treating education as synonymous with instruction has had very serious consequences in America. It has resulted in much misapplied power on the part of the teachers, in much wasted expense on the part of the administrators, and most important of all, in a failure to train the students so as to fit them to perform just and magnanimously the offices of peace and war. We are coming to realize that while instruction is and always must be an important element in education, and while knowledge is and always will be of excep-

tional value to the citizens of a free state, yet the acquisition of knowledge is not the end of education; that it is simply an incident in the larger and more important process of training for the varied work of life, whether it be industrial, social or political; in a word, in the process of training for citizenship.

Not Revolutionary.

There is nothing revolutionary or particularly novel in the conception of education I am advocating. On the contrary, it is simply going back to its primary meaning, for to educate is to educate, to make something out of a man rather than to put something into him. And I hope to show you that it is the only conception of education that is worth holding and the goal at which we should aim.

Old System Good.

Half a century ago, the University of New Brunswick with four or five professors, a curriculum based for the most part on the Classics and Mathematics, and with comparatively limited resources turned out men second to none in this Dominion. To our modern eyes, the curriculum provided poor and barren fare when contrasted with the interesting mental pabulum it now offers. But with all its barrenness and poverty, this education had two great advantages which went far to balance its defects and which it would have been well to have retained. In the first place, it taught the students habits of hard mental work. Whether they were translating Greek or solving problems in higher mathematics, they were doing something for themselves and usually a something that was pretty hard. In such a school habits were formed which enabled men to do difficult things for the sake of a remote end. And in the second place, the college students of that day were compelled to regard the college course as the beginning rather than the end of their education, for the actual knowledge they attained was moderate in amount and not infrequently lacking in human interest. But it was not so much the subject matter that was important, it was the mental discipline acquired in the process. By means of it, there was placed in their hands instruments by the use of which they could teach themselves the things they needed to know. The system turned out men mentally alert and trained for the pursuit of whatever calling they might choose in the future.

Training Was Broadened.

The trouble with the old-fashioned training was that it was too narrow—it tried to teach everybody in the same way, whether the bent of the particular student was a literary one or not. It took no account of two or three other types of mind, to develop which other kinds of subject matter were necessary, and in these cases, it tended to degenerate into a treadmill. To meet the needs of this large circle of students, and at the same time that a place might be found in the curriculum for the vast accumulations of scientific knowledge, the Colleges added professional or semi-professional courses to replace the old apprenticeship system; they introduced the laboratory method so that a student might gain habits of work and thought by seeing and doing things himself instead of merely reading about them in books and they adopted the elective system, partly because there had become too many courses to be all taken and partly that the student might indulge his taste and follow his aptitudes in the work he would study. The change was inevitable and on the whole salutary, but it has had its drawbacks from which we are still suffering. The new subjects were less well organized than the old ones; there was a greater temptation offered the teacher to make them purely informational and to require little or no work from the student. They certainly developed the interest of the students and increased their knowledge, but they did not always develop habits of hard work nor the power of independent thinking. Thinking (that is, real thinking) is hard work. It requires serious discipline to form the habit and a disciplined mind to keep it up; therefore, a student is encouraged to take only those things which interest him, there is certainly danger that he will dodge the hard parts of thinking, that he "will choose the easy way to knowledge rather than

the hard road to power". It has further resulted also in the idea that taking a college course is a pleasant way to pass four years of one's youth and in a mob clamoring to be educated, whether its members are capable of benefitting from a college education or not. The financial burden becomes a very serious one for the colleges and in some cases a hopeless one, and they are forced, even the richest and largest of them, like Harvard, to limit the number of students they will admit. And it has resulted in hopelessly over-worked college staffs, so busy preparing and delivering lectures that they have themselves little time to think.

Remedy Proposed.

In short, our colleges have become places of costly instruction instead of economical education. Now, I will be asked, do I propose to remedy this condition? Certainly not by turning back the hands of the clock; but equally certainly a great deal can be accomplished by a change in our methods of education. The first defect is the prevalent attitude that a student should be permitted to take any subject or combination of subjects he may see fit, on the ground that in this way he will achieve what is euphemistically called a broad and general education; and the second is the native assumption that students will ever be made to think for themselves by the magic of a lecture system.

The Elective System.

The superstition of a broad and general education is the accidental result of the elective system. As the new sciences kept enforcing their claims to recognition in the university curriculum, it soon became impossible for any student, no matter how gifted, to attempt all the courses, and consequently he was left to pick and choose pretty much as he pleased. On the general principle of "try anything once", the average students picked out courses all over the curriculum, and the authorities made a virtue of necessity and justified the elective system by inventing the explanation that the student was thereby acquiring a broad and general education. It is true that many colleges adopted only a modified form of the elective system, and also that many who at first embraced it with all the fervour of converts, have gradually abandoned the principle of indiscriminate election and now insist on a choice of a group of subjects. Nevertheless the American and Canadian University system is still based upon the elective idea. That is: that it is really desirable for the student to acquire information about a wide variety of subjects. The innocent Freshman is accordingly required to sprawl himself over the kingdom of knowledge, to take a little science, a bit of mathematics, something in a dead tongue and somewhat in a live language. Possibly the instruction given in elementary subjects in our high schools is not sufficiently advanced in matter or manner at the present time to avoid this in the first year of the college course; but certainly after the first year, the student should not be allowed to philander among the Departments. He should not be permitted as a former colleague of mine once said "to flirt a while with public finance, then cast his languishing eyes on mediaeval history and anon dart off to caress organic chemistry." But the fetish of a broad and general education has its effect on the college also; it feverishly sets itself to establish new courses and thus establishes new temptations for the fickle-minded. Every University and especially every State University professes to teach a little of everything, until it reminds one of the little mid-western college which advertised—

(Continued on Page Three)

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