

LIBERTY AND EDUCATION

I AM all for education, but not at the expense of freedom and family life. When the House of Commons decrees that no child is to live with its father and mother on board a canal boat, it strikes a blow against marriage, and the family, and liberty, which is almost worthy of Moscow. Nor would such a measure be suggested, but for the insufficiency of our educational experts, whose indolence suggests to them that it is an easier job to destroy a home than to make a special kind of school to support a special kind of family. The modern legislator is never so happy as when he is interfering with domestic peace, or hindering a man at his work; and the Government Aunties all know, far better than mere mothers, how children should be fed, clothed and taught. I have no doubt that there are men in the Education Department, like Edward Holmes, the late chief inspector of education, who if given a free hand to-morrow, could devise an excellent scheme for providing the canal boat children with all the education they want, and saving them from many weary hours of scholastic slavery in an unwholesome atmosphere. To do this would necessitate tearing up a lot of futile regulations and obtaining a sum of money from a niggardly Treasury. Not so much, of course, as the Exchequer would spend on a useless airship, or some pictures of bananas to please Empire advertisers, but merely a few thousands for such sanitary buildings and sensible teachers as the scheme would need. No scheme has yet been thought out, because Bureaucracy does not think until it is compelled to do so. It is so much easier to order people about and make them do your job for you. I suppose, for instance, that it has not occurred to the Education Department that youngsters of the well-to-do classes are, in increasing numbers,

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attending open air schools. Efficient open air floating schools would perhaps be suitable, not only for barge children but for some of their neighbours on shore, who lived within reach of the schools. Again, if this method is objected to, a children's school with weekly boarders, teachers, and a matron might solve the problem. If a public department, with the Treasury behind it, cannot provide elementary education for canal boat children, without dragging them into the slums and breaking up their chance of family life, the sooner it is scrapped the better.

The exasperating feature of the whole business is, that the education, when you get it, is a poor thing at the best, and at the worst is quite unprofitable; because, as Holmes explained, it is all based on mechanical obedience and knows nothing of the gospel of self-realisation. Capturing children and shutting them up in schoolrooms is not education, and book learning is not the only form of knowledge. Many of our school children come out into the world with a smattering of ill-digested information in their heads, their fingers all thumbs, a superior contempt for brick-laying, carpentering, cooking and sewing, and are often obsessed by a vain belief that they are worth a salary with a pension attached. Sixty years ago it used to be thought that if everyone could read and write, and cipher a little, it would be a far far better world than it was. But, what has reading led to? A vast amount of literary tosh has to be written to supply the taste of the multitude. No doubt reading enables the man in the street to master the football results, the betting news, the fights, and the varied merits of patent medicines. That will not be necessary soon; for in a few years, loud speakers at every corner will shout at people anything it is important they should know. Then, when reading has no longer any money value, a practical education authority will cease to

teach it. The writing of a state educated child is poor and his, or her, spelling worse. But what matter? Writing is nearly as dead a business as illuminating. Everyone types, or shouts into dictaphones, which before long will print the matter properly spelt. Arithmetic is of small value to the average citizen. He has little or nothing to add up, the subtraction is done for him by the tax gatherer, and if he multiplies his capital it is taken away and divided among his fellow citizens. So that when you have mastered these mathematical evolutions you have small opportunity of using them in the world of to-day.

It is really a detrimental thing to give people education without teaching them what to do with it, and giving them an opportunity of exercising the faculties you have helped them to develop. Many years ago Lord Morley of Blackburn, a real educational enthusiast, speaking of education in India, said: 'Those who make education what it is are responsible for a great deal of what has happened since.' And it is quite true of our own country. The cheap literary parrot-house culture of the elementary schools and the neglect of vocational training, have given children a dull, irksome time of it, and spoiled their chances of becoming good craftsmen. If you come to think of it, unless you are encouraged to active use of your hands and brains during the first fifteen years of your life you are obviously handicapped when you turn out to compete in the race. This is particularly true of the arts and crafts and occupations. Ellen Terry in her *Life* says: 'It is argued now that stage life is bad for a young child, and children are not allowed by law to go on the stage until they are ten years old—quite a mature age in my young days—I cannot discuss the whole question here, and must content myself with saying that during my three years at the Princess's I was a very strong, happy and healthy child.'

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Now-a-days an inspector would have carried the divine Ellen away from her home that a pupil teacher with a cockney accent might have improved her recitation. And before we break up homes and turn little children into the huge classes of our over-crowded, under-staffed schools, let us put our educational business in a little better order, talk less glibly of the advantages of education and realise some of its manifest disadvantages. And if the Education Department cannot make schools for children living in boats, it should hand the job and the money to finance it, to those who are capable of doing it.

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