

Education

Altick, Richard D. *Victorian People and Ideas: A Companion for the Modern Reader of Victorian Literature*. W.W. Norton, 1973.

Practices in the working-class schools bore distinct tinges of Benthamism. The resemblance between the typical elementary schoolroom and a factory was not fanciful; the atmosphere of drill hall--*cum*--production line was the same in both cases. The Benthamite ideal of efficiency and economy was served--disastrously--by the widespread adoption of the monitorial system. Selected older pupils, replaced after the forties by apprentice teachers, learned from the master or mistress a certain number of prepackaged facts and painful accomplishments, such as the elements of reading, writing, and ciphering, and then were delegated to communicate these, normally in grievously imperfect form, to the pupils below them. While this sort of conveyor-belt, or sweated, education unquestionably was cheap, the products were dear at the price. But culture was not really

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the goal in view. From the political economists' standpoint, which was not uncongenial with that of the religious parties, the schools would serve their purpose if they guaranteed a steady flow of productive, sober, and docile recruits into the labor force. They did not aim to create a nation of readers, concertgoers, or gallery visitors.

Few working-class children had more than two or three years of desultory schooling, and those in the lower reaches of the middle class had scarcely more. They did not miss much and in fact were spared a good deal. The buildings were inadequate, the teachers even more so; until teacher-training began on a small scale in the forties, it was a commonplace that youths and men who had failed at a series of other occupations ended up behind teacher's desks. What with the physical environment--noisy, overheated, odorous from dirty clothing and a hundred unwashed and unhealthy bodies--and the atmosphere of stern discipline and unimaginative force-feeding of the rote memory, elementary schooling was an ordeal which 'many working-class children sought, often successfully, to avoid. Going to work was far preferable to memorizing the principal towns of France in alphabetical order, the names and dates of the prophets and the kings of Judah and Israel in chronological order, and the wanderings of the Children of Israel or the bays, creeks, and harbors of Palestine and Syria in topographical order--as well as to learning the noteworthy characteristics of Benares, Amritsar, Gujarat, Bijapur, and Pondicherry, and calculating the interest of £ 535 7s. 4d. at six per cent for fifteen seconds. Going to work had the additional advantage of putting coppers in ragged pockets. Although child labor gradually came to be regulated in the towns, no laws covered the employment of country children. In 1870 Forster's Education Act empowered local authorities to make school attendance compulsory up to the age of thirteen, but the requirement was not made nationwide until 1880. Until then, nothing prevented a child's dropping out

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at any time, to find ill-paid menial work, baby-sit at home, or loaf in the streets.

The outlook for national culture was not bright when the population included hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children like Jo, the homeless street boy in *Bleak House*:

To shuffle through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes, and in utter darkness as to the meaning, of those mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops, and at the corners of streets, and on the doors, and in the windows! To see people read, and to see people write, and to see the postmen deliver letters, and not to have the least idea of all that language-- to be, to, every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb! It must be very puzzling to see the good company going to the churches on Sundays, with their books in their hands, and to think (for perhaps Jo does think, at odd times) what does it all mean, and if it means anything to anybody, how comes it that it means nothing to me?

Even if a child possessed a minimal ability to read, the unpleasant circumstances under which he acquired it, as well as the general ignorance which the brevity of his schooling made inevitable, usually meant that he would seldom exercise his gift. Or, if he did, it would be over the most undemanding reading matter the press was capable of turning out.

Few people in a position of authority, either at the local level or in the London command post, showed the slightest interest in providing a more humane education. Matthew Arnold, naturally, was one who did, but even he failed to press very hard. No encouragement was given to the exercise of the mind or the feelings. On the contrary, the textbooks and classroom exercises were designed to avoid such liberating, humanizing elements, which, it was widely agreed, were inappropriate for children destined to become factory and farm hands. The essence of pedagogy was committing "useful" and "improving" facts to memory; reading for sheer pleasure was not to be thought of. And in most schools and, after 1850, in tax-built libraries, care was

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taken that the selection of books be limited to those which had instructive value. In many such libraries, fiction was banned. Dickens never wearied of decrying this state of affairs, in which the governors of the poor set their faces against their charges' hunger for escapist reading matter, "The English are, so far as I know, the hardest-worked people on whom the sun shines. Be content if, in their wretched intervals of pleasure, they read for amusement and do no worse. They are born at the oar, and they live and die at it. Good God, what would we have of them!"

Meanwhile, the schooling of the nobility and gentry was, in the main, what it had been since Tudor times. After home instruction or attendance at a private elementary school, the boys-- their sisters, we have seen, were largely unprovided for except in finishing schools of demonstrable futility-- were sent to one or another of the nine ancient public schools (English equivalents of American preparatory schools). Headed by Eton, the largest such school and traditional cradle of the aristocracy, these institutions provided the sons of the privileged few with a form of secondary education in which the emphasis was overwhelmingly classical. Translating, parsing, imitating, and memorizing the works of Greek and Latin authors was the schoolboy's principal business, year after year. The classics were studied for their presumed disciplinary value; analyzing their grammar and rhetoric was thought to be good for the mind. Their humane content was overlooked. Not surprisingly, the normal residual effect was a head crammed with Greek and Latin tags and an ineffaceable distrust of what was called polite learning.

In the course of the era, a little science, modern history, and French or German were introduced as fringe benefits. This innovation was largely due to the reform movement initiated by Dr. Thomas Arnold at Rugby and subsequently adopted by the other public schools. The cautiously

liberalized curriculum was a step in the right direction, but other steps taken at the same time nullified whatever contribution it made toward broadening a boy's

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cultural interests. Arnold's great stress was upon character-building-- understandably, because on the eve of the Victorian period the atmosphere in most of the public schools had degenerated into an evil combination of somnolence, brutality, and anarchy (troops had had to be called in more than once to put down the boys' rebellion). In time, the main vehicle of moral training was agreed to be organized games, and during the latter half of the century the public schools were more concerned with prowess on the playing field and with shaping the morality of prospective Christian gentlemen than with brainwork. But even the character-building rationale faded into mere cant, and the cult of games became an end rather than a means, another example of the fruitless machinery which Thomas Arnold's son had deplored.

Nor would John Stuart Mill have liked the conformism enforced by the public schools' new way of life. Team sports involved regimentation, discipline; and so the public schools joined the factories and the people's elementary schools in suppressing originality, devoting themselves instead to producing a standardized product at a luxury price. A favorable specimen of the system's operation would emerge from the sixth form (senior class) as an exemplar of self-control, honesty, responsibility, self-reliance, and leadership. He might well go on to distinguish himself in Empire service or in the socially exclusive upper echelons of the British Army, but little in the education that entitled him to wear the old school tie would have made him a gentleman of wide humanistic culture.

From the public schools the sons of the Anglican rich went to Oxford or Cambridge, where they spent three years learning or not learning, whichever way they were inclined. They could take a degree without having attended a single lecture; but (to be fair about it) there were some professors who, enjoying lifelong sinecures, never bothered to deliver lectures, either. Although, notwithstanding the prevalence of sloth, these two old universities remained centers of the

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nation's intellectual life, as they had been for centuries, the undergraduate curriculum, like that of the public schools, was heavy with anachronism. The classics (at Oxford) and mathematics (at Cambridge) ruled the roost, and "modern subjects" insinuated themselves only through the pressure of public opinion, with agonizing slowness and always against the entrenched opposition of the traditionalists. During most of the Victorian era, the universities, again like the public schools, were the monopoly of the Anglican clergy. Only in 1871 did irresistible outside pressure for them to admit Dissenters to fellowships and other academic posts.

University College ("the godless institution in Gower Street"), the first component of the University of London, was opened in 1828 to care for those excluded from Oxbridge on religious and, in effect, social grounds. Its founders were chiefly Benthamites and its curriculum, accordingly, was secular, liberal, scientific, and professional. The university soon made its presence felt, but even when allowance is made for the number of middle-class students it served, the fact remains that in Victorian England higher education, wherever provided, was reserved for a tiny minority. It was from the upper and upper-middle classes, who alone had access to it-- not the obscure, rustic Judes of hopeless ambition-- that the learned professions, notably the clergy and the law, were recruited.

The great majority of the middle class, therefore, were culturally disadvantaged for more reasons than the narrow Utilitarian-Evangelical estimate of life's purposes and possibilities. Their youth normally received their secondary education, if they got any at all, at local endowed grammar (classical) schools of varying quality or privately conducted academies such as Mr. Creakle's in *David Copperfield*. Most of these, like Dr. Blimber's in *Dombey and Son*, oppressed their students with the customary classical regimen, either because the terms of their endowment (in the case of the grammar schools) required them to do so or because, like

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the clientele they served, their chief aim was to imitate their betters. But in schools more responsive to the needs (If the commercial and professional class, including the several notable institutions on the public school model founded in the mid-Victorian era, practical subjects like science, applied mathematics, and foreign languages enjoyed undisguised respectability. The classics continued to be stressed for those headed for the university, but modern subjects helped those who were going to have to make a living.

This was an undeniable gain; anything to break the stupefyingly irrelevant tyranny of disciplinary Greek and Latin and of Euclidean mathematics. If Matthew Arnold's assertion that "our middle classes are nearly the worst educated in the world" needed some qualification, at least it was unquestionable that nowhere could the son of a Victorian family, no matter how wealthy or socially favored, obtain a truly liberal education such as that proposed by Newman in *The Idea of a University* or by Mill in his great inaugural lecture at St. Andrews in 1867. Under the circumstances, it was remarkable that the genuinely cultured minority of the Victorian population was as large as it was, or had as large a middle-class representation.

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