

The New School-Boy and the Old

By AUGUSTUS BRIDLE

ALITTLE while ago a Toronto editor bewailed the fact that the school children of nowadays were a very wise lot of young folk on a lot of unessential things, but that if it came to a test of real old-fashioned spelling they were not nearly so efficient. The chief public school inspector in Canada promptly challenged the said editor to a spelling contest with any average class of third-book pupils in any of his schools. Just the other day the same inspector gave a reporter an expert opinion upon the economic reasons for the triumph of baseball and the decadence of that good old Canadian game, lacrosse. This is cited merely to show that even in newspapers education is not forgotten.

The future of Canada depends on the public school—which of course is a truism. The most serious product of the public school is the public school boy; for he expects to look after the country while the girl looks after the home—at least this is the usual way.

Now, Canada has progressed very swiftly the last twenty years; but the public school has changed quite as much. The boy who left the cross-roads school-house or the town school twenty years ago and started out to make a living, had a different mental equipment from the boy who leaves any school in Canada nowadays. He was probably a different boy.

It may be useful to study the difference. We seem to be discarding so much of the old way in business and factories and education that one of these days we shall be unable to know ourselves. There are a good many thousand men in Canada who were educated under the old regime; that is of twenty-five years ago. The men who have made the Canada of the twentieth century were brought up mostly on the three R's. There is probably not a leading business man or manufacturer or even a politician in this country who would not be plucked if he were asked to write on a High School entrance examination. There are a lot of smart, diligent chaps of our acquaintance, responsible for the activities and the salaries of a large number of other men, who would have a contract to worry through a promotion examination into the Fourth Book.

This is serious. It was wise Wordsworth who said: "The child is father of the man"; but even he could scarcely have anticipated that the day would come very soon when the knowledge of "dad" would be a vain thing beside the wisdom of the boy who has just got into a High School. Of course the fond parent chuckles to himself that by the time his boy puts in ten years round an office or a factory he will have forgotten more than he will remember.

Perhaps he intimates as much to the boy. But the lad tells him—that forgotten knowledge is a good thing.

"Good for what?" says the head of the family. "Mental discipline, dad. Aw, what's the use of remembering what you learn?"

Every little while the protest of the taxpayer becomes audible through the newspaper—complaining of the frills and fads of modern education. There has been a fine attempt to humanise the boy. We understand that the system by which we were brought up at school made us at the best but a crude lot of demi-savages. We may have had the main facts of the case; but we were woefully lacking in the finishing polite touches. Our education was not genteel. We had not studied the humanities.

THE "DILLY" KINDERGARTEN.

First of all we had never gone to a kindergarten. What hope is there for a modern boy who has not gone to one of these play workshops of the mind? No use. We never "got in right" says the son and heir—who remembers kindergarten as a "dilly" sort of place where he had a good time and was kept out of his parents' way as well as off the street, where he might have been run over by an automobile or a milk-waggon. On the baseball bleachers the lad of nowadays harks back tenderly to the child-garden where he learned to be such a poetic, benevolent young soul whose play was controlled by a mental process of somebody else. On the other hand eminent education experts tell us that the child up to a certain age is a most selfish little vagabond who not only gets all he can but is ready to fight to get it and fairly thrives upon fictions which some people call lies. All of which if followed out looks very much as if the child world untroubled by the kindergarten is some sort of picture of the world of business, wherein, according to the laws enunciated by Darwin, only the fittest survive by

putting the other fellows out of business.

Well, the kindergarten, which used to be a sanctified and colossal fad, has found a place in real education. It is probably a good thing for young ones to get in touch with the "Over-soul" in a school-room, when on their own street there is not even a dandelion patch to play in; for in this busy young land the corner lots are being built upon, and the old civic cow-pastures are gone, and the old baseball diamonds are going—so what is there left for the average boy and girl except the kindergarten and the school playground or the street? The trouble with the kindergarten system was that it idealised children so much that it made little gods of them; forgetting that there is as much of the primal old Adam if not of the devil in the average boy—or girl either—as there is in the average father and mother.

Anyway—in the name of modern education—what would Buster Brown and Mary Jane do in an average kindergarten?

THE NEW MUSIC.

But that is not the only line of cleavage between the school-boy of twenty-five years ago and the school-boy now. For instance, there is music. In our day the only chance we ever had to sing in school was on Friday afternoons when the teacher put us through our do-se-dos on "The Maple Leaf" and "Nellie Gray." We knew nothing of clefs and signatures; neither of changes of key. We just sang; as hard as the teacher would let us—because we always liked the old songs. But the boy nowadays knows his sol-fa—and it's a good thing he does if he puts it to the right use; for sol-fa is a simple musical language able to acquaint him with a lot of good things that he will never find in ordinary books, and certainly will not hear at the five-cent picture shows or the usual music comedy. The boy who is able to read music has a gift for which he ought to be thankful; because there is a big literature of good music that is no harder to learn than most of the rhythmical and semi-melodic tommyrot that he picks up by ear on the street.

If I had to choose between abolishing the kindergarten and the music from the modern curriculum—I would hang on to the music. That is something a boy never can forget. He may let slip half his geography, two-thirds of his history and all the kindergartenism except the songs and the fancy things he used to make; but the tunes he learned when a boy and a youth and a young man—he will never be able to forget. If only the Sunday School authorities and the public school singing-teachers would get together and see to it that the good things the boy and girl learns at the day school are not fuddled by some of the drooling nonsense melodies he gets at Sunday School!

HISTORY, DEAD AND LIVING.

It will be idle to point out that the modern boy has ten chances to learn history in a useful way where his father had barely the shadow of one. Who is there at the head of a Canadian family to-day that does not recall with a bad taste in his mouth the dry-as-dust lingo of dates and kings and treaties and wars that he strung together in the old school-house and called it history? Who does not know that English history as taught then was the driest thing on the programme except Canadian history, which was the dreariest dry thing that any boy ever dreamed of? The boy of to-day ought to revel in history. In this at least we have learned from the United States—how to make history pictorial and human. If only we do not try cheat the imagination by appealing too much to the eye and the mere fancy. It's a good thing once in a while to have a long, dry string of dates and such—if only you give the boy a chance to exercise his imagination on them and make them live again.

So in geography. We learned all the rivers on the east watershed of Europe and the western thereof; also those of Asia; ding-donged them off in threes so that we could never forget them—and we know them to-day when we haven't the remotest idea where most of them rise, what sort of country they run through, or what kind of people live on them. They are the fairy-tale rivers of youth: Petchora, Mezina, Dwina; Onega, Duna, Niemen; Vistula, Oder, Elbe; Rhine, Seine, Loire; Garonne, Douro, Tagus; Guadiana and Guadalquivir—and then in the geography song came the green little islands!

But the geography of nowadays is commercial and humanistic. It is supposed to mean more to the boy; to get nearer to his average utilitarian way of

thinking; so that when he picks up a modern novel—one of the blood-and-thunder kind—and sees a lot of faked-up names in, say, South America, that never were on the map and never will be, he knows precisely what places and people are meant. And it might be a safe guess that the Canadian school-boy now knows more about the Peace and the Fraser and the Mackenzie than he does about the Hoangho and the Yang-tse-Kiang; which is something. If a new railway is building he knows the country through which it runs. He understands that Canada is a country that has more geography than she has ever known what to do with, and a whole lot of history that she is only half beginning to comprehend. That also is worth while. If from modern history and geography as taught in the public schools of Canada, the Canadian boy is able to know that he belongs to one of the most inexplicable, mysterious and magnificent countries in the world, perhaps we should need to talk less about flag-loyalty and Canadian navies and military training in the schools.

MANUAL AND MILITARY TRAINING.

Then there is that modern school-boy hobby—the gun. Several Canadian boys have been over in England lately shooting for prizes at Bisley. We may be heterodox and a wee bit ancient—but we don't care a continental whether these boys won prizes at Bisley or not. We went crazy over Perry once; lost our heads—and now nobody ever thinks of Perry; not to mention other celebrities that may have got their athletic notions at the public school. We do know, however, that the awkward squads from the side-roads and bush-roads of 1812 were pretty much in evidence when the call came to the frontier; and that ten years ago the self-taught riders and marksmen of Canada were right up with the best of them in South Africa.

As to manual training—one of the most completely modern and organised innovations in the school. Many a Canadian business man of to-day got his manual training on the axe and the plough-handle; the pitchfork and the cross-cut saw. But the days of ancient epic cunning are pretty well gone, from Ontario at least—though traces of them remain in the West. If the modern boy is to have any craft of his hands at all he must learn it at school. Very good so far as it goes. It was a fad when it began; has now become a fact. But no matter how systematic and scientific the manual training of the school, the boy of nowadays will never be up in handcraft with the country boy of twenty years ago and more who had to whack things up in a hurry with just such tools as came to his hand—and maybe had to make the tools also.

BUGS, MOTHS AND BIRDS.

Nature study also stands to the credit of the twentieth century boy. He has gone out when a child to the woods and the fields to study flowers, birds and bugs. He has haunted the electric light poles in the suburbs on a summer night trying with a dragnet on a pole to ensnare the June bugs and moths. We never had such luxuries. We had wire-worms to keep from eating the seed-corn and potato bugs to kill; skunks that ate chickens and coons that husked the woodside corn; we knew the habits of the hawk and the nest of the baldheaded eagle; where to find the woodchuck in the hill and the muskrat in the creek; and besides we had to feed seven kinds of animals, drive balky horses, milk cows and wash sheep and—well, there's really no use in the modern boy trying to mystify us talking about the anatomies of beetles and the proper way to alcoholise a snake. We knew more nature in a day than he will ever know in a year. But we had no Latin or other fancy names for birds, bugs or flowers. We were not concerned over the fact that there are several score species of golden-rod. One was enough for us—and we had the wild mustard to pull and the Canada thistle to cut.

In hygiene and physiology, however, the new boy scores on the old. We never knew we had a cuspidor valve in the heart or that there was such a thing as a duodenum. We really didn't seem to need them. Neither did we know much about the laws of ventilation—though we managed to get a pretty good share of fresh air, except at night when we always kept the doors and windows tight shut. In the matter of food we had never heard of "proteids" or "farinaceous" or any food fads beyond pumpkin pie and doughnuts.

So after all there are some school advantages we used to have that the nowadays boy has not got; and some that he has we never dreamed of. Perhaps we don't quite understand the difference. But if we try to make the difference too marked we shall make a mistake. The main thing about any boy's education is to fit him for citizenship in the land of his own day.