

The Improvement of Rural Schools in Canada.

BY JAS. W. ROBERTSON.

[Prefatory Note.—In writing these articles on the Improvement of Rural Schools in Canada, I hope to contribute some information, argument and suggestion to help on the movement. It is to be understood that I personally, as a citizen of Canada, and not officially as Commissioner of Agriculture and Dairying, am responsible for the opinions expressed in them. I propose to deal with the subject in five main divisions, viz., (1) Improvements in Organization, (2) Consolidation of Schools, (3) Courses of Study, (4) Plans Under the Macdonald School Funds, and (5) Some Ways in Which Improvements can be Continued and Extended.—J. W. R.]

(Third article—continued.)

Outlines of courses which have been prepared in a provisional way by the Canadian teachers in training under the Macdonald Rural Schools Fund are illustrative of what might be undertaken. Their scheme provides for eight grades; from the primary to the eighth grade, which is just below the High School entrance, or equal to Senior Form IV. in the Public Schools of Ontario. I cite only the outline of courses suggested for Grades I. and VIII.

"Grade I. Planting and caring for a small garden plot; watching the growth of plants; noting the seasonal changes in the landscape, and in plants and animals; observing the habits of common animals; examining the obvious effects of rain on soils, and on plant and animal life. Field trips and excursions."

"Grade VIII. School-garden work extended; fuller interpretation of natural phenomena; previous studies in animal life reviewed and extended; study of individual plants, particularly weeds and cultivated plants, with special reference to their adaptations in form, structure, etc., to their surroundings; simple studies in the lower forms of plant life; lessons on the food and growth of plants, and simple, physical and chemical experiments necessary to their explanation; lessons on the composition of the air and water, and their relations to plant and animal life; aspect of the heavens at different seasons."

Space will not permit me to go more extensively into detail in this matter. A bare mention of a few other subjects which might be dealt with in their proper order must suffice. I offer them only as instances of what might be taken up usefully; but I have not tried to arrange them in any graded sequence for educational purposes. Common things such as pumps, pendulums, thermometers; properties of foods, materials for clothing, for houses and furniture; ice and other crystals; sounds, noise, music; light, microscopes, telescopes, photographs, eyes.

READING.

A well-known educator has said, "One of the best possible reading lessons for beginners is reading something of which they have already thought out the meaning."

WRITING AND SPELLING.

Intelligent purpose put beneath those exercises, by the children themselves, would help them to make progress. One can readily understand how a composition exercise describing a plot of ground, the appearance of a plant, the behavior of an animal, or some other thing which had been observed and studied as part of the school course, would be far better written than one which had been produced mainly by ability to remember words or phrases, or thoughts which had been read or heard from a book. A composition regarding an excursion to the woods would not be too difficult for the youngest child who could read and write, and would give enough scope for the most advanced pupil.

The greater part of the course in geography, excepting that which is political and mathematical, might be taught as a branch of nature-study. Geography would begin with the home and the

schoolhouse; would pass out to include the roads, railroads, streams and hills of the locality; would soon take in the township; then the county, in a more general and less detailed way; then the Province; then the Dominion; then the Empire, and then the world. The training in observation, recognition, investigation and understanding, properly co-ordinated with reading, writing, figuring, and geography, would go on without the children being expected to recite the height of the Himalayas, the length of the Mississippi, the width of the Amazon, or the position of the great maelstrom off the coast of Scandinavia.



A DOMESTIC PET.

Such studies as these would lead up to and out to the study of history. The study might be taken up with the history of the locality as a starting point; or, better still, might be centered around the personality of some well-known character.

Taught in this common-sense, loveable way, reading, writing, arithmetic, and even spelling, as well as geography and history, would become a delight to the so-called dull boys and girls at school. In fact, dullness on the part of the children is too often but a symptom of an ill-arranged course of education and not of weak mental faculties in the classes.

MANUAL TRAINING.

All that has been said in regard to method and purpose in Nature Study would apply to the Manual Training and Domestic Economy divisions. In educational Manual Training the advance has been one from books to benches and tools—from the passive and receptive attitude to the active and constructive movements—as a means of mental culture. In rural schools the advance should be widened to become one from books to benches and tools; and from both to plots of ground and various objects, animate and inanimate, also as a means of mental culture.

There is a special virtue in Manual Training in so far as it has a unique power, as a school subject, of securing and sustaining interest. It puts the active, constructive expression by the pupils in place of the heretofore receptive and passive attitude which has been expected from them.

The courses in Manual Training are various. They may be in clay modelling, or in cardboard, before woodwork; then in woodwork and sewing; and, by and by, in Domestic Economy as an educational subject. The latter is not for the sake of making cooks any more than the former is for making carpenters. I am just as averse, from my standpoint, to teaching cooking in elementary schools as I am to teaching carpentry. Manual Training is for the educational processes and their effect on the mind as well as the body.

DOMESTIC ECONOMY.

From a course in sewing, properly graduated as an educational process, girls may derive quite as much mental advantage as boys obtain from a course in educational woodwork. The qualities of precision, patience and industry come from it, and it further cultivates good taste, a love of the beautiful, and also of appropriateness in dress.

Similar benefits would result from properly graded courses of study and practice in the divisions of foods, and housekeeping.

TOWARDS AGRICULTURE.

"Nature Study is not to be confounded with systematic teaching of agriculture; it is, in fact, a very different thing. It deals, however, with elementary facts and principles, on which the study of agriculture should be based, and is, therefore, in a large measure, a preparation for this study in later years."

In that sense it does for agriculture what manual training does for technical and industrial education, as applied to manufacturing occupations. It gives a wide basis of general intelligence and skill from which to specialize toward a particular industry. From the article by Dr. Fletcher, which has been referred to already, I take the following, which is just to the point in this connection:

"Not only is nature study useful in training and strengthening the mind to act for itself, but, more than any other part of the framework which supports the educational edifice, it becomes a permanent support of the completed structure. The uses of this knowledge are so manifest that nature study must take its place as the common-sense method of education; and it is at the same time the common-sense basis of the two great and most important occupations of the masses—agriculture and horticulture—these pursuits, having to deal with the care and nutrition of plants and animals, are founded on subjects all of which come within the limits of natural science, a preliminary knowledge of which is nature study."

GOOD LITERATURE.

As far as practicable, all training in observation, investigation, understanding and recording, would include lessons in reading, writing and arithmetic. The exercises written regarding what had been examined, recognized and understood, would become language lessons of a really valuable sort; lessons in growth of thought; lessons in expression of thought; lessons in arrangement of thought; lessons in clearness, brevity, and fullness; lessons in correctness and beauty of sentences.

Such studies would also lead to the love of good literature. A child trained to close observation, quick recognition and intelligent understanding of the things that lie about him, would be ready to relish and appreciate good literature. He would catch the meaning of the author, the beauty of the expression, the uplift of the sentiment, as no one could who had not behind his reading or listening as much experience or feeling, perception and imagination as the well-trained child. With nature study, a school library and a competent teacher, the entire field of necessary or desirable work could be covered. The child would be exalted into the proper place; and, perhaps, formal text-books and set examinations might be dethroned. They have usurped long enough.

CO-ORDINATION AND GRADATION.

What is needed most is the help of experienced teachers who know the true educational plan to put below such work and study by the children. The whole purpose below this newer method should be to train the faculties of the children in natural ways, and to make the objects, the exercises and the information acquired directly serviceable to that end.

The course of study should be graded—graded in such order that the children would be ready to take up each part of it with a consciousness of being equal to it. It should be systematized so



MOQUITO CREEK ROUND-UP OF HORSES, CAMP NEAR NANTON, ALTA.