

OUR EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM.

To be thoroughly satisfied with ourselves and our doings is very seldom a proof of excellence. Those who are aiming at the highest standards are usually most conscious of their short-comings. Those who come nearest to their ideal are most sensitive to their deflections. These are probably trite and commonplace remarks, yet we doubt whether they are as much considered as they ought to be. Let us give some heed to one application of these platitudes. Undoubtedly, we Canadians are, as a rule, very well satisfied with our public educational system. Speak to a Canadian on some points of difference between "the old country" and this its energetic child, and he will answer with hesitation, with doubt; perhaps he will even confess that in some respects he is behind his European parent or brother. But turn the conversation to the subject of education, and the cloud passes away, his countenance is radiant with self complacency, for here at least there can be no difference of opinion; our educational system is of supreme excellence. So most of us believe. Are we right in so believing? Is not our education susceptible of improvement? Is it not burdened with serious faults? However unpalatable such questions may be, they should not be ignored.

Now, it is certain that there is one considerable class among us who are not perfectly satisfied with the condition of educational affairs. We mean the professors in our colleges and the masters in our public schools and high schools. The masters in our elementary and preparatory schools complain that they are *forced* to cram the children rather than educate them. In other words they are forced to prepare them for examination more than for the business of life. They say—or many of them do—that the children have to be stuffed full of a number of things which can be held together until the examination is past, and which are then forgotten as quickly as possible. It is clear, that in such cases, there is no real *education*. A certain amount of information (more or less) may be retained, but there is no real discipline of the mind.

Quite recently complaints have appeared of the amount of copying which took place at an examination of pupil teachers. Not a year ago a person acting as a teacher in a public school was dismissed from a University examination for systematic and continuous copying. What do these things mean? One thing we quite believe that they mean, namely, that the nature of the examination was such as to facilitate—perhaps even almost to necessitate—this method of answering the questions. Is our method of examination satisfactory? Are our requirements reasonable?

With respect to our method of examination, it appears to the present writer that it is susceptible of improvement. It seems to be too stiff and technical, requiring too much dependence on mere memory. In saying this, it is not forgotten that all examinations must be more or less of this character. It is impossible to do away with examinations, however unsatisfactory we may think them; and so long as they exist they will tax the memory. Can nothing be done to make them increasingly a test of real intelligence and cultivation, and not merely a means of discovering how much a candidate can cram? Would not the introduction of *viva voce*, as at least supplementary to the written examinations, be some help towards this end?

Then, again, are those who are best acquainted with the results of our teaching quite satisfied with the subjects of our examinations? Are they not too numerous, much too numerous? At least they have very greatly increased of late years. If we compare the requirements of our modern universities with those of fifty years ago, we shall be startled at the change which has taken place. The London University has been the chief offender in this respect, if offence it be. It is appalling to contemplate the list of subjects that it requires of its matriculants and graduates. And the universities of this country have been profoundly affected by this influence. And the disease spreads. When one university has put forth

a capacious list of requirements, the others dare not lag behind. Anxious parents who know very little of education judge of the quality of a university very much as a novice does of the quality of a *table d'hôte*, by the number of dishes in the bill of fare. Does this constitute education? Does it help towards education? We greatly doubt it. The actual things that a boy or a young man learns at school or at college are seldom of much use to him in after life. What is of use is the training, the mental discipline that he has gained in the course of his education. Of course, there are certain things which he has actually to learn, the orthography, etymology, and syntax of his own language, reading, writing, arithmetic, and some other things which are actually used in the business of life. But what he has chiefly to acquire, if his education is to be of any real use to him, is the habit of careful and accurate work, of exact thinking, the power of taking hold of a thing by its right end, so to speak, and of going through with it in a thoughtful, intelligent, and systematic manner. An old French writer remarks that we need few books in order to be learned, and still fewer in order to be wise. And we fancy that we may assert, in like manner, that the best educated man is not always the man who has studied most subjects.

It is not in Canada alone that the system of examination and the consequent system of cramming are being carried to injurious lengths. We hear of little children in England being stricken with brain fever in consequence of the amount of work they are required to get through for examinations. We hear of successful candidates for the Indian Civil Service being so worked out by the labors incident to preparation for their examinations that they are fit for nothing for a year or two after their election. But we are perhaps better contented with the state of things here than they are with theirs in the old country. At any rate remonstrances on this subject are not wanting in the leading English journals, but we do not remember to have seen such protest in any of our excellent educational publications in this country.

It may not unreasonably be required of the writer to mention the subjects that can be dispensed with in examinations at our schools and colleges. He admits beforehand the justice of the claim. But the answer would be too long. Moreover, it would involve a careful consideration of the various subjects of study in regard to their comparative value as means of education; there we might find ourselves at variance with popular opinion. Be that as it may, the task cannot be attempted here at present; and we venture to believe that even one who is not competent to attempt that task may yet do service to the cause of education by bringing to the notice of those who are more able than himself some of the real and pressing difficulties of our present mode of education.

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 OLD JOHN.

In the fall of '80 I went "up the line" with the paymaster on one of his monthly trips to pay the men on Section A of the Canadian Pacific Railway,—that is, from Prince Arthur's Landing, now Port Arthur, on Thunder Bay, to Eagle River. Thunder Bay is forty miles in length from the mountainous islands in the west to the long range that rolls around it in the east; and from the town you look across twenty-three miles to the Cape with the lighthouse nestling at its foot. Further than this, however, I shall make no attempt to describe the Bay, or to tell of the wild beauty of that rugged desolate land to the north of the greatest of the lakes. It is a country in which the student of geology knows no weariness in his long jaunts, his climbings and windings about the cliffs,

"Hammering and clinking, chattering stony names,
Of shale and horablende, rag and trap and tuff,
Amygdaloid and trachyte."