

English Literature is such a wide subject, that, as in an Homeric feast, where a whole ox is served up, one is at a loss how to tackle it, and define the subject. Accepting for the nonce the established method of studying English Literature in schools, I propose to discuss how an English author can be read with most profit, how such a lesson may be made at once to convey the greatest amount of solid information, and (what is more important) to develop and stimulate a boy's faculties, and serve as a true intellectual gymnastic.

That is the main question I propose to discuss. But, before embarking on it, I would wish to moot another point, and learn from you whether you consider that English Literature has won its proper share in our school curriculum; and if not, why not; and what you consider the best way to promote the study. I will give you my own experience, promising that it lies within the somewhat limited range of public schools. I hope to hear from some present to-night, who can speak with authority, what is the practice of middle class schools in this matter. It cannot be worse than that of the public schools; and I imagine, as far as time is concerned, it must be better, though the reports of the Oxford and Cambridge Local Examination Board are hardly encouraging. (1)

I will not waste your time by insisting on the advantages of Literature, or re-opening the well-worn debate between the respective merits of a literary and scientific training.

All schoolmasters are agreed that some Literature should be taught; and, if we except a few of the old Shrewsbury type, all would allow that English Literature is worthy to take its place in the school curriculum beside that of Greece and Rome. In theory they would allow it, but how does their practice agree? From all I can gather, the youngest in this case fares the worst, and Benjamin's mess is a Barmecide feast. Some years ago, I applied to friends at all the chief public schools for statistics of the number of hours per week devoted to English teaching. I wish I could give you the results of my enquiries in a tabular form, but I found that the teaching was so irregular, and the amount of time varied so much with each form, that this is impossible. I think, however, that the answer of one of my correspondents will convey to you a fair impression of the opinion and the practice of head-masters in this respect:—"We all want to teach English, but cannot find the time. Please show us how. This is the knot of the question." I will try presently to untie (some will say, to cut) the knot; but first I would call your attention to a Public School Time-table drawn up by Sir J. Lubbock in the *Contemporary Review* of January 1876. The time-table represents, it is true, an ideal, not an actual, distribution of hours; but for that very reason it is the more valuable, as containing the views of our principal head-masters on the relative importance of subjects. Is it credible that in this table there is no heading for English Literature or English? Seeing that two at least of the schools included (Rugby and the City of London) do, as a fact, teach English, and teach it systematically, I infer that it must be included under History and Geography. But, whatever

(1) For instance, in the last Oxford report I read: "To the majority of the candidates the work of preparation had obviously been uncongenial drudgery. Many had apparently been encouraged to learn certain notes by heart, but proved unequal to the effort, and reproduced them in ludicrously mangled forms. It was clear that in many instances oral explanations either had been entirely omitted, or had been irrelevant or confusing."

may be the explanation, the fact remains the same. There is as yet no distinct recognition of English as a set subject in our public schools. And not only is our practice lamentably defective (this much, most would admit), but we are also compelled from these tables to infer that, as late as two years ago, the theory of head-masters was still behind the age; and our English reformers, Messrs. Abbott and Seeley, Meiklejohn, Skeat, Quick and Hales, have still a large field for their missionary labours.

The reason why this new subject has gained so little ground, and is still ignored in our upper schools, or taught only by fits and starts, is not far to seek. The educational *renaissance*, which we have witnessed in the last twenty years, has brought with it many new gifts, but its work is only half accomplished. Science, Modern Languages, and the Mother Tongue have been superadded to the old *quadrivium*, but little has been done to modify the old methods or economize time. Hence there has been a natural reaction; and school-masters not unjustly complain that, while the hours of teaching are shortened, the number of subjects to be taught has doubled; and that amid this multiplicity of subjects a boy's powers are frittered away, and thoroughness of knowledge and scholarly exactitude are shipwrecked. The root of the matter, as my correspondent remarked, is how to find time; and unless I can convince you that other subjects are bound to make way for English, I am free to admit that the reactionists are in the right, and that English is *de trop*. Our educators, it seems to me, move in a vicious circle; and no one class has the courage to strike out a straight path, regardless whether others follow or not. The Universities say, we must examine, and assign scholarships for the subjects taught in schools; the public schools say, we must stick to the old routine or we shall not gain scholarships, and the preparatory schools follow suit.

As English Literature, in some form or other—it may be "Tom Thumb" or "Line upon Line"—must form the first stage of a child's education, unless indeed, like Russian children, they come to learn a foreign tongue before their own, I will begin at the beginning and open fire on the preparatory schools. I was lately asking one of the best and most advanced of our preparatory masters whether he taught English. "I only wish I could," was his reply; "but without Greek and Latin verses it is impossible for a boy to take a high place at Eton or Harrow, and you don't know what it means to teach a boy, who comes to you barely knowing how to read, four or five new subjects in two or three years." So long as parents are what they are, so long as their highest ambition, no matter whether they be noblemen or roturiers, is that their child should gain a scholarship; (1) and so long as our public schools indulge in the pernicious game of brag, and try which can attract the most youthful talent by holding out scholarships for prodigies in knickerbockers,—it is hardly to be expected that preparatory schoolmasters, whose bread-and-butter depends on attracting parents, will resist the temptation of playing Sir Pandarus to the public schools. But what shall we say of the public schools? They surely are strong enough and independent enough to pursue their own line, disregarding University scholarships, and even, if need be, University class lists. Our entrance examination ought to consist mainly of English. Add Arithmetic, and the

(1) A preparatory schoolmaster said to me the other day, "I am having a letter lithographed in answer to parents enquiring whether their sons have any chance of a scholarship."