

What Shall We Do With The Shrunken Freshman?

By Arthur L. Phelps

(From a radio broadcast carried over the CBC on January 16)

I'm going to anatomize that exasperating commodity, the end-product of our elementary and high school systems of education. The products of our schools are developed or marred human beings. As those human beings are, so the country is. Every now and then we in the universities stop to ask, as the community as a whole is moved to ask: just what sort of material are the schools really turning out? The universities tend to think it is a shrunken product. What do you people—you businessmen and school boards and industrial employers—think? Is it your finding that an undisciplined irresponsibility is the outstanding characteristic of the products of our present-day schools?

Education Misconceived

That at least is a familiar finding. To it is often added as excuse the statement that in an era when progressive education misconceived has been substituted for education, the dictatorship of modern advertising for individual responsibility and human decency, the funnies for taste and good manners—in such an era we get in our young people just what we should expect.

So the indictment.

Let us look at it in some detail. Take what is called English Composition as a test basis.

Illiterate Frosh

Last autumn a news report stated that a test for basic proficiency in composition given to senior matriculation students by one of our universities showed that only 35% met reasonable standards. Last autumn, in my own university, we gave a pretty thorough-going test to our incoming freshmen. It was a test in spelling, in vocabulary, in grammar, in reading comprehension. We wanted to excuse as many students as possible from a course in elementary composition, a subject which we think should be thoroughly handled in the public schools. On the basis of our test we could excuse less than 5% out of some 900 students.

Mortimer Snerds

At the moment, adequate training seems lacking in the high school graduate. A member of the staff in one of our universities reports: "I have been among the matriculation examiners and in my opinion no student with a mark even between fifty and sixty in English is fit for a university." A colleague of mine, having marked some hundreds of test papers from a freshman class, said: "I think only 30% of these people have any place in a university." Another

comment was very succinct: "They seem all Mortimer Snerds."

Devil's Advocate

Now, I have been reporting an indictment rather than accepting it. In times past I have tended to be devil's advocate for the freshmen. Two years ago when I was doing some first year work I gave, as a first getting-acquainted assignment, the topic, "My Adventures Among the English Texts." The essays . . . which came in delighted me. Some of them were exceedingly well written. Among the others, which exhibited errors in spelling, faulty sentence structure or none, and most of the possible mistakes in the mechanics of writing, there were, nevertheless, qualities of verve, imagination, humour and insight, as well as fascinating ingenuity in achieving an essay based on the minimum of contact with the texts. I really liked that freshman class. But, on the whole, it must be admitted its members had been badly trained in elementary fundamentals or had failed to profit by good training offered them. Something was wrong.

System Broken Down?

This year, the situation across the country seems so bad that universities are asking: has the system of training in the elementary and secondary schools really broken down? Are we now beginning to reap the results of some 10 years of accumulated misadventure in the schools? Are we faced with an educational crisis? And I am not talking only of elementary English. My colleagues in mathematics seem equally disturbed. As one of them said, "If they knew only plain old fashioned arithmetic."

Now I don't believe that, temperamentally, I am a Cassandra. In a bad situation I like to look for something less than bad.

Untrained Teachers

Yet I pick up the report of the Canadian Educational Association issued in December 1948 and called "The Status of the Teaching Profession" and I read these statistics (things may be better now; I should like to be so persuaded): "Seventeen per cent of Canada's teachers have had some university education; 27 per cent have grade 12 education; 30 percent graduated from grade 11; 15 per cent have

grade 10 standing or less." (No data available from Catholic Quebec). That means that over 50 per cent of our teachers have less than grade 12 standing. This for teaching, the basic, most important and responsible of the professions. . .

Bedeveled by Women

Does this mean that the teaching profession in Canada is a depressed incompetent profession? Women have bedeviled it of course, not because they are women—human for human they are probably better than the men—but because they have, as far as the profession goes, been transient labor or scab labor. And further, they are so nice—actually, so irresponsible—that they hesitate to go on strike for conditions which would favor continuity and stability, and tend not to stick if they do. I know it may seem crude and dreadful to suggest that Associations of Teachers be organized units of action ready to fight for their own dignity and their own prestige. But in a society which despises the teaching profession as the sissy retreat of the second rate male and the pre-marital hitching post of the expectant female, where else lies remedy? The Canadian public is inert and complacent where education is concerned. The dollars it spends on education relative to its importance is proof of that. Be assured of this: our Canadian society will discount its teachers until the teachers cease to discount themselves. It will pay them less than it pays its garbage collectors and its janitors (honorable, responsible callings also) just so long as the teachers continue to prefer it that way. At present the teaching profession in Canada is a depressed profession. (If you teachers are angry when I talk this way, I say, don't sputter; what are you going to do about it?)

No Prestige

In an ideal society the teacher would have prestige no matter what his pay relative to advertising men and bond salesmen and lawyers and doctors and miners and plumbers. But in a dollar conditioned society like ours the poorly paid profession is the profession without prestige. Without prestige, a profession tends to attract the misfits and the incompetent. Having attracted the misfits and the incompetent, it then loses prestige for real reasons rather than for dollar reasons. This is what is called, in a phrase I think I have sometimes heard, a vicious circle.

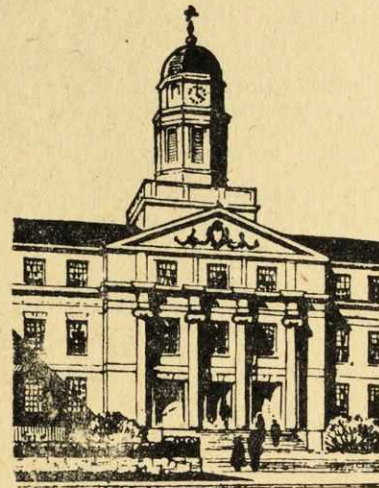
Under-Staffed

Now perhaps I am sharpening the issue to a wrong focus. But if

Broadcasting Schedule—

CONTINUED FROM PAGE ONE

- 8:00—Music (Levy)
- 8:15—Bing Sings (Hatton)
- 8:30—Strange Wills (Mercer)
- 9:00—News (Levy)
- 9:05—Excerpts from Pinafore
- 9:25—Debate
- 9:45—Campus Interviews (Preston, Pigot and J. Smith)
- 10:00—News (M. Smith)
- 10:15—Astrida Gaigala
- 10:30—Dal Musical Show
- 11:00—Sandman Serenade (J. Smith)
- 11:55—Sports (Pigot)
- 12:00—News (J. Smith)
- 12:05—Sandman Serenade (J. Smith)
- 1:00—News and Sign Off (Pigot)



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