



Books on the Schools

Tales of a Teacher, by Beatrice Stephens Nathan. *Henry Regnery*. 302 pp. \$4.

The Public Schools in Crisis. Some Critical Essays, edited by Mortimer Smith. *Henry Regnery*. 164 pp. \$2.75.

THE IMPORTANT controversy in American education today is between those who continue to believe that the cultivation of intelligence, moral as well as intellectual, should be the first function of our schools, and those who believe that education's purpose is to adjust the individual to the group. "Education should prepare our youth for living effectively in a democratic society," say the professional educationists, who are in happy ignorance of, or maintain a shrewd silence on, the crucial divergence of conviction over what constitutes "preparation," and over what "living effectively" means. Courses in "life-adjustment"—teeth-brushing, pie-baking, and fly-fishing—do not, in the opinion of many, provide satisfactory preparation for effective living. The West was not settled, says Arthur Bestor, by men and women who had taken courses in "how to be a pioneer."

"Th' first thing we larn th' future Mark Hannas iv our naytion," complained Mr. Dooley, "is waltzin,' singin,' and cuttin' pitchers out iv a book."

When asked for his own notion of a course of study for young people, Dooley replied, "I don't care what ye larn thim, Hinnissy, so long as 'tis onpleasant to thim."

Some thirty years after this conversation was recorded, Nicholas Murray Butler wrote that "for a generation past there has been waged, in the name of progress, a relentless and more or less successful war upon the foundations of knowledge, . . .

the present-day mocking appeal to an infant that he give expression to himself represents the abdication of education." About the same time (1928) Committee G of the American Association of University Professors reported that "if the views of some men are to prevail the intellectual life of the country is doomed; everybody except the sheer idiot is to go to college and pursue chiefly sociology, nature study, child study, and community service—and we shall have a society unique only in its mediocrity, ignorance, and vulgarity."

The crisis in public school education, which is effectively summarized and analyzed in the essays gathered together here by Mortimer Smith, is, then, not a new crisis. The present widespread concern may doubtless be attributed in great part, as Mr. Smith suggests, "to the urgency of sheer mechanical problems caused by spiraling population and the attendant problems of shortages of buildings and teaching personnel." It will be good and fruitful only if it does not obscure the fact that there is something fundamentally wrong with American education, having nothing whatsoever to do with shortages of teachers and school rooms. Long ago someone pointed out that too often our American solution to the problem of lost aims is the redoubling of blind efforts.

In an account of her thirty years of loving labor in the American public school system, Beatrice Nathan presents ample and convincing evidence that good education is not necessarily related to large, elaborately equipped school rooms and an abundance of well-adjusted teachers, though these, indeed, she does not scorn. She proves, it seems to me, that there is no possible substitute for the humane, humble, self-disciplined teacher who knows *what* he is teaching, and has found out, probably without any assistance from professional educationists and their ubiquitous courses in methodology, *how* to teach.

After thirty years of experience, Mrs. Nathan is convinced that, "There is nothing wrong with the public schools which a

corps of able, dedicated teachers could not cure, if given the opportunity." But here, of course, is the rub. To recruit and to support the able, dedicated teacher and to provide the opportunity for him to do his work properly is the enormous task which now faces those who are concerned about the future of public education. That intellectual values and disciplines are not wholly abandoned in our schools is primarily due to the presence still of an encouraging number of skilled teachers, such as Beatrice Nathan, whose ideas about education were not imbibed at our colleges of education, and who, to put it mildly, are not supported by the hierarchy of educationists to whose music they are obliged to dance. But this saving remnant is diminishing in size and influence.

This whole problem is much older than John Dewey, I am sure; but Dewey, as Irving Babbitt pointed out, has probably had more influence on education than any other recent American. Dewey believed that "the child is born with a natural desire to give out, to do, to serve." Upon the foundation of this conviction he erected an elaborate and carefully reasoned superstructure of educational aims. (See David Holden's essay, "John Dewey and His Aims of Education" in Smith's collection.) Much of Dewey's educational philosophy is sensible and good. Had it been balanced by the sound dictum, supported by centuries of Christian and classical wisdom, that the child is born also with a natural desire to *hold in*, *not* to do, *not* to serve, the effects would have been immensely beneficial, for Dewey was in many ways a wise man and in all cases a well-intentioned one. He would have profited much had he been able to agree with a brilliant educator of his time who observed that "water flowing down hill has a weak instinct for the path of least resistance, compared with that of a boy picking his way through an education." It may well have been the memory of his own daisy-picking boyhood that inspired Mr. Dooley's, "I don't care what ye larn thim so long as 'tis unpleasant to thim." It isn't

necessary to go all the way with Dooley today, when most educational unpleasantness is reserved for parents and teachers, to acknowledge that a dose of his stiff, unsweetened medicine prescribed sixty years ago might have genuine therapeutic value now.

Our children today get along with their group admirably well, occupy their spare time with healthy-minded activities, and at the same time display a disturbing lack of familiarity with ideas in general, American history, the multiplication tables, and an adequate vocabulary. That their praiseworthy health of mind, their quick-witted adaptability, and their resourcefulness in the face of what little leisure their organized activities permit, must be purchased inevitably at the expense of their intellects is a common supposition; but it simply is not true. We must agree hopefully with Beatrice Nathan that, "The great American public will not forever submit to any dogma that is based upon mediocrity in the classroom. They will see to it—sometime, somehow—that universal public education, the foundation of our liberties, is so re-enforced that the structure built upon it may stand up prouder, firmer and stronger than ever."

Reviewed by WILLIAM MCCANN

L'Opium des intellectuels, by Raymond Aron. Paris: Calmen-Lévy.

M. Aron is well known for his studies in the philosophy of history and his works dealing with problems of practical politics; he contributes articles on political questions to *Figaro* and other reviews. Several of these essays were collected in a slender volume, *Polémiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955); they constitute an intensive criticism of views current in France today, especially those characteristic of the "Left." M. Aron had planned to write a preface to this collection; out of this preface, however, grew the present *L'Opium*.

The title is derived from the well-known