

LEARNING UNDER DIFFICULTIES

E. W. NICHOLS

THE present article is concerned with the discussion of some of the principal obstacles to the successful pursuit of scholarship in the universities of Canada and the United States. It is further limited to the consideration of such obstacles as are inherent in these institutions in their present environment and under their present system, and will avoid reference to those due to active malevolence or the conscious manipulating of an institution to corrupt ends in support of some party or theory. The assumption will be that the universities are operated with a receptive attitude toward truth, and that there is no interference with the teaching staff on the ground of opinions. Nor do I here assert that scholarship is the only or the most necessary concern of the university; this may be athletics, or philanthropy, or commercial success, or social distinction. Indeed I should be inclined to subscribe to the well known definition of the chief end of man as the best all-inclusive statement of a university's final object. But the question as to how this end is best subserved would still remain. At present the object is merely to consider what are the obstacles to the pursuit of scholarship, without asserting for scholarship any paramount claim to respect.

We have, it appears, no proper equivalent for the German *Wissenschaft*; but scholarship may be not inadequately defined as science plus appreciation. One does not wish to quibble about terms; but it is desirable to point out that scholarship in the humanities—literature, history, philosophy, all that deals with man, his nature and actions—must rest on a basis of training as rigorous as that required for the study of chemistry or physics. Science—organized knowledge and the appropriate method of dealing with it—becomes scholarship in any man whose subject is to him not a dead body of classified facts and resultant theories, but a living and organic part of his mind that influences all his thoughts and acts. To organized knowledge and precise method he adds appreciation of values. Science organizes and proves; scholarship discriminates and selects. It is worth while to make this attempt at definition,

because the public tends to regard the study of history and literature as merely a matter of reading books, interesting or otherwise, and to confuse the study of science with the invention and manufacture of machines.

Before discussing obstacles to learning under the present régime it might be well to call to mind the fact that under a different régime there have been obstacles, usually of a different sort, but not necessarily fewer. Trinity College under Bentley should have seemed an ideal home for scholarship; but the account of Bentley's war with the Fellows is a record of petty squabbles that would be hard to match in a modern university. The obstacles that will be discussed in this article are five; poverty, democracy, co-education, administration, and athletics. "Fads" might be mentioned as a sixth, but the discussion of fads would take us too far into the realms of pedagogical speculation.

The poverty that cramps the student in any institution may be a poverty due to lack of funds, or a poverty due to display in buildings and externals. I allude, of course, to poverty in the institution itself; his personal poverty is not necessarily a great obstacle to the student, provided he has access to the necessary books and apparatus. Any university needs large funds wisely applied. For lack of such funds so applied the pursuit of truth is hampered and impeded. A man cannot know what has been and is being done in his field unless he can consult a well stored library and the recent periodicals dealing with his subject. This is the negative evil of poverty, the lack of opportunity. Only in some of the larger universities are there adequate library facilities in any wide field. It is possible to make bricks without straw if one is a genius; but the normal scholar—so called—who does his share of the spadework in his subject, is no genius, and his activities are often sadly hindered by the lack of adequate apparatus. Nor should it be inferred that this is a plea for mean or shabby buildings; learning must be housed with dignity, but may be smothered by ostentation. It is merely a question of relative values; whatever things are held most worthy, let them be considered first.

The positive evils of poverty result from the perpetual necessity of appealing to the public for funds. The public who are at all interested in the university will respond with good nature. But the interest of the public in a university is rather in all the other activities than in scholarship. People are enthusiastic over beautiful buildings; they grow sentimental over the graduating class; they witness a college football game with a mixture of reverent devotion and bacchanalian clamour; they endure without undue complaint

a well written essay or a well spoken address; they are not sorry that scholarship should be connected with the university, and will pay it homage of lip-service; but it commands little of their earnest sympathy. A university dependent on the public for support and more support will almost certainly, though perhaps insensibly, be modified to meet popular demands. Any public of reasonable size at any time and in any place is likely to regard itself as the highest product and noblest result of the secular process; its wisdom and virtue are superior to the wisdom and virtue of all other nations and times. Scholarship is in its essence critical and without prejudice; it may and frequently does conflict with prevailing fashions of life and thought. This natural propensity to conflict, together with impatience and indifference toward what one does not understand, perhaps sufficiently accounts for the small interest of the public in scholarship.*

It would be dangerous to assert broadly that democracy is inimical to learning. In this respect as in many others democracy is a very unsatisfactory thing, but it is not clear that there has ever been discovered a form of human association that is more satisfactory. At present, if one may quote an oft quoted but ever significant bit of Horace—it is rather the *civium ardor prava iubentium* than the *malis instans tyranni* against which scholarship must guard. The dangers to scholarship are of a sort that might be expected, due to the incapacity of the public to appreciate excellence or to comprehend problems and aims in matters of the mind, and to the mistaken notion that, since one man is as good as another, there is some invidious privilege in allowing to one an education which another with all the opportunity in the world could never reach by reason of a deficiency in brain. If stupidity cannot keep pace with ability, we can at least by our educational system put impediments in the way of ability to prevent it from outstripping stupidity. Thus much of the time of most teachers is spent in trying to stimulate the stupid and in neglecting the able.

There is no need of discussing phenomena such as the recent one against evolution, echoes of which have reached us from some parts of the United States. Such outbursts are perhaps not more flagrant violations of intellectual liberty than others that have been perpetrated by patrons; but the normal and natural pressure of the public upon the university tends to lower standards of admission, to make the methods and material of the earlier university years of a high-school character, and to condemn the college professor to spend a vast amount of his time and labour over matters that

*One of the best safeguards for any university is a large body of loyal and enlightened alumni in regular communication with their *alma mater*.

should have been attended to elsewhere and could have been quite as well if not better done by a preparatory teacher. It is no answer to say that in some instances entrance requirements have been much raised. For the amount of available knowledge, or what is regarded as knowledge, is much greater than it was even half a century ago.

The universities are strongly influenced by two forces—the desire of incompetent students to wear a degree, and the combination of obscurantism and faddism operating in the schools. It may be hard to see why so many people who are quite without taste for study should resort to college. One *bona fide* case which came under my observation was that of a young fellow of good sense, small intellect, and some disinclination for work, who was being tutored for his examinations at Yale. He was asked why he did not choose some kind of work for which he was, in Mr. Housman's phrase, less obviously unfitted. He said that most of the fellows in his set went somewhere to college; that a degree from one of the great universities was useful socially and would help him to obtain a good business connection in New York; that college was a great place for sport, and that study, though it was unpleasant, did the head no particular harm. For all he knew, he said, it might have some intellectual value. It would appear that he gave a comprehensive summary of the reasons that impel young people with no taste for study toward the university degree. Students of ability and earnestness, who merely lack preparation, are in a different class and can be dealt with, though at some expense in time and money, by the university. They are, of course, usually those who have had inadequate facilities for schooling.

The university and its problems can hardly be discussed without discussing the school, and the school can hardly be discussed in less than a volume. The university professor regards preparation for the university as an important function of the school. By the public at large this function is considered to be the training of citizens. Here is an ambiguous duty; for the nature of the training of the citizen will depend upon the sort of citizen that it is desired to train; and that, in turn, depends upon your philosophy of life. There may be one ideal school for producing cannon fodder, another to produce wage slaves, a third to train technical experts, a fourth to instil that comprehensive ignorance of literature, history, and science that is the goal of education after the Flexnerian pattern. No one of these schools would go far toward producing scholars. The public has, as usual, no very clear mind as to what it wants, but it wants to save its money. An Oxford man, who had grown gray in secondary school teaching, once said in a public address:

"The British public *hates* education." He spoke in a moment of vexation; but his words are merely a hyperbolic statement of a very obvious fact, that education is one of the last things for which the average citizen feels any concern. Perhaps people usually drift into teaching in our public schools; certainly the man or woman who adopts the work seriously as a permanent vocation need not bear comparison as to zeal and devotion with any missionary. The teacher is indeed a missionary to the public, and must—unless a person of great force—be subdued to the conventional in all things, or be for ever annoyed by the environment. In Canada, and probably in large sections of the United States, the teacher is usually a girl, regarded as a sort of combination nursemaid for the smaller children and policeman for the larger; a scapegoat upon whom the sins of fifty or sixty youngsters are visited and from whom their souls shall be required; who must be thoroughly trained, up to date, and skilled in fads, willing to work for the wages of cheap labour, and satisfied to serve under whatever group of ward politicians the whim or indifference of the public may at any time happen to select. In any raid on the public treasury teachers are the last to benefit; in any effort, real or comouflaged, toward retrenchment, they are the first to suffer. The existence of education at all, under the obstacles continually thrown in its way, is a perpetual miracle and a tribute to the idealism of a section of our citizens. Civic incompetence must have its victims; and who are we that we should remove those placed ready to our hand?

Yet the democratic idea of education has great value which must not be minimized. "As a further manifestation of the gratitude entertained by the people of Holland and Leland for the heroism of the citizens (of Leyden), it was resolved that an academy or university should be forthwith established within their walls." Thus Morley speaks of the foundation of the University of Leyden. And at Leyden not long afterward lived and flourished the greatest scholar in the field of the humanities that the western world has ever known—Joseph Justus Scaliger. The long succession of able men who have come from the Scottish universities attest the value of the democratic system at its best, the system that offers "the implements to him who can handle them" as Carlyle renders Napoleon. The problem of a university in a democratic country is one of selection, to get those students who can be educated and to educate them; or at least to offer them suitable opportunities to educate themselves, to turn their eyes toward the light, remove the obstacles, and get out of their way. "But then if I am right" says Socrates in

Jowett's translation of the *Republic*, "certain professors of education must be wrong when they say that they can put a knowledge into the soul which was not there before, like sight into blind eyes. They undoubtedly say this, he replied. Whereas, our argument shows that the power and capacity of learning exists in the soul already; and that just as the eye was unable to turn from darkness to light without the whole body, so too the instrument of knowledge can only by the movement of the whole soul be turned from the world of becoming into that of being, and learn by degrees to endure the sight of being, and of the brightest and best of being, or in other words, of the good." The eye that has the capacity for such vision is not too frequently found, but it may occur in the head of one in any walk of life. That is the justification, from the point of view of scholarship, of the democratic attitude toward education. Not democracy, but the abuse of democracy, is to be avoided.

The same thing is true of co-education. Most men are being educated by some woman most of the time; whether or not the process is reciprocal, I leave to the consideration of more experienced minds. It is interesting to remember that Bentley, our greatest British classicist, had his first lessons in Latin from his mother. It is true that it would be as barbarous as it is fortunately impossible to refuse to women all the education that they want and will work for; but it is true also that the interests of scholarship might be better served than by the present co-educational system, which is a makeshift due to poverty. The presence of a large number of young people of both sexes in an institution of learning leads to the placing of much emphasis upon the social aspect of life; and unless it is checked, the tendency toward social entertainment may go so far that a university will resemble rather a well regulated and decorous place of amusement than a shrine of learning where students scorn delights and live laborious days. It may be that the former is more desirable; it should be noted that the two are not the same.

There is another question relating to co-education that might be raised, but can scarcely with our present data be settled. I shall state the matter categorically after premising "Thus it seems." For all the business of what one might call the conservative element in scholarship, women are well fitted. They can learn and retain as well as men. Literature, history, science, as known or believed, established and operative more or less in the daily life of the community, are to them an object of interest. The conservative side of scholarship has more importance than many of us are at present disposed to ascribe to it, and bulks larger in some fields than in others. Gildersleeve speaks somewhere of the value of that

useless scholarship that performs its effective work by training generation after generation of students. And Prof. Gilbert Murray, in his inaugural address at Oxford, speaking of course of his own subject, says "Yet, on the whole, the main work of a Greek scholar is not to make discoveries or to devise new methods, but merely to master as best he can, and to re-order according to the powers of his own understanding, a vast mass of thought and feeling and knowledge already existing, implicit or explicit, in the minds or the published works of his teachers."

It does not appear that women are so well fitted to engage in the radical activities of scholarship—all those activities that are summed up generally as research. And research is the cutting edge of scholarship in operation. Without it, learning is a blunt tool. It may at times in its manifestations be unlovely, grotesque, the glorifying of pedants. But it is necessary. Someone must do it. And it requires disinterested intellectual activity, the pursuit of truth for its own sake. This is an activity uncongenial to most men and to nearly all women, whose notions of truth have usually a pragmatic cast. The problems of research appear recondite, its results of little value and of transient certainty. Yet, to change the figure, it is the undying fire of scholarship which makes the whole inert mass of matter, acquired knowledge, glow with warmth and interest. It is by no means necessary that all scholars should be research specialists; but it is necessary that they should know what such specialists are doing—testing or increasing our inherited stock of knowledge so that it may best serve the intellectual needs of each successive generation.

A fair idea of the attitude of women toward that side of learning can hardly be gained from their achievements in technical scholarship, respectable as some of these are. It is open to anyone to object that their entrance into such fields has been so recent that they have had no opportunity of showing what they can do. But in one field, that of music, there has apparently never been any prejudice against the training of women. The late Professor Ladd of Yale somewhere called attention to this fact, and to the further fact that not many names of women are found in the lists of prominent composers.

One cannot now predict how the whole problem of co-education will be settled. It will certainly not be settled by shutting out any properly qualified human being, male or female, from the study of any subject. In this respect one can agree heartily with Miss Jane Harrison in her interpretation of Terence's *Homo sum: humani nihil a me alienum puto*, wherein she emphasized the real

meaning of "homo," "a human being," and claimed a share in all the privileges of our common humanity. As far as our universities are concerned, their part of the problem will probably be solved, when they have money enough, by the erection of separate colleges and maintaining of separate classes for men and women, at least for all undergraduate work.

Much ink has been spilled over the question of college athletics. A notice recently appeared in some of the magazines, purporting to be copied from the bulletin of a western American university, in which the public is informed that instruction is given in cheer-leading in some course that counts towards a degree. This phenomenon is merely another evidence of the democratic attitude towards education. If one person may attain to a B. A. or other degree, so must another; and if he cannot "climb Parnassus by dint o' Greek," or physics or history, some easier method must be provided.

The truth about athletics seems fairly obvious. Some adequate provision for physical exercise must be made in any educational curriculum. In general, games furnish a very satisfactory form of exercise for most people. Into games an element of competition, friendly or other, always enters. In intercollegiate games the honour of *alma mater* soon seems to be involved. The opposing team from the rival college must be beaten, or we are disgraced, suffer in fact a diminution of personality. Hence follow the evils of competitive athletics, competitive athletics being by no means wholly evil.

There is something to be said for the college spirit developed by college athletics. It is real while it lasts, but it is superficial and evanescent. A man who esteems his college chiefly for her athletics is hardly likely to know whether she should be esteemed on other grounds or not. The practice which prevails in some places, whereby all other activities are disorganized during the autumn merely that a small proportion of students may distinguish themselves in a few games, is of dubious value to an educational institution, and of no value at all to scholarship. Let us all take exercise; let us all, if we can, play games; but let us play games for fun, and not as an act of devotion.

The last obstacle to which reference has been made is that of administrative (and teaching) routine. Not long since a scholar of world-wide reputation was heard lamenting over a pupil of his who had got a good position, as academic positions go. This pupil had become a professor in a respectable university. But his old teacher insisted that he would be smothered in routine and would

be unable to carry on any scholarly work. Administrative work hinders the practice of uniform and labour-saving devices, and the love of a smoothly running machine. And the life of scholarship is an absorbing and exacting life. Meeting classes is pleasant; correcting exercises is not necessarily unpleasant. Committee work has to be done. Much time is consumed; yet it is not time, so much as energy, that is lacking when the college day is over and one would plunge into real work. A scholar should be continually studying, not merely reading over his favourite books, or setting up apparatus for students, but pushing into new fields. Otherwise he grows stale. It is not so much published work that is necessary, though that is good, and someone must do it. It is the type of mind that may be developed where there is "shelter to grow ripe, leisure to be wise," and capacity to make use of these advantages. This problem, so far as it can be solved, must be solved by specialization of function. No system can or should dismiss the scholar altogether from central parts of the machinery. For at any time a decision may need to be made in a matter apparently of mere routine or technical detail, which requires the vision of the whole educational aim and purpose and the effect upon it of any proposed change.

If all the external difficulties in the way of scholarship in a university were removed, the scholar must still consider and cope with those that are internal and peculiar to himself, which no institution and no organization can remove for him. He must avoid materialism, the absorption with things; he must avoid vanity, the desire to seem an important figure in his world; I say to "seem", and not to "be," for if he can be of real importance he should be. He must avoid sentimentality, the habit of believing not what one knows to be true but what one likes to think. It is difficult to give up one's own theories and to part with one's cherished illusions. It is easy to assume that the rest of the world shares our own admiration for our brilliant parts. It requires resolution to see ourselves as men who must seriously and sternly give up the fascinating quest for larger incomes, greater comfort, higher position. These things may come; but they must come unsought if we are to do the work that as representatives, each in his sphere of scholarship, we are called on to do. Few may be troubled by all three of these spiritual maladies; which of us is exempt from them all? Here and there, one, perhaps. But with most of us the tares of our little world too often choke the scholar's zeal. It is hard to learn the lesson that the reward of good work may be suffering. Steadfast adherence to unpopular truth, for instance, is a virtue, or

there is none; what is its usual outcome? And when a man puts truth in the second place, as a convenient commodity rather than a fundamental necessity, he tampers with his intellectual honour, and is on the broad road to ruin. For the scholar, above all men, must adhere to truth at all costs, or all the values of his universe will vanish.

Some years ago a scientist, I think a geologist, formulated a three-fold rule for his fellows. It was the rule of poverty, loneliness, and hard work. The scholar will work hard, because on no other terms can scholarship be acquired or retained. He will be lonely, because he will be cut off from most of his fellows by his own chief interests. He will be poor, because, like Agassiz, he cannot afford to make money. One admires the ideal, but finds it after all perhaps not more difficult than what most people must achieve who try seriously to perform some real work amid the chaotic muddle of this world.

And the rewards are great. In the first place, and most obviously, the university pays a scholar for doing what, if he were able, he would willingly pay to do. Then, if he feels toward his work as he should, the very material in which he works is to him a thing of delight that he contemplates with joy and intimate pride. There is the stimulating life of the mind to be lived; there are pleasant contacts with all manner of colleagues and students to refresh and invigorate him. And there is the growing sense, not of solving any final riddle, but of seeing further and more clearly into the mystery and beauty of the universe, and comprehending more fully that strange paradox, humanity. There is no antidote for increasing years; but interest and joy in the things of the mind may increase along with them.