

THE HAND OR THE BOOK*

SIR ANDREW MACPHAIL

IN this Guild, a company of sincere and disinterested persons, who are making a brave and successful attempt to restore the handicrafts to their ancient and rightful place, I have the impression that I am standing upon the real foundations of the educational world.

For your work is something more than the attempt to preserve old arts and crafts, to make them interesting by making them profitable, to inculcate honesty in industry, and provide useful employment for spare time. It is equally an attempt to cut through and clear away the cloudy fabric that has arisen in the guise of modern education of the young. That system is built upon symbols and words, seen with the eye and heard with the ears. Your thesis is that to most persons education must come mainly by work done with the hands.

The dominant motive of the public school is the desire to escape from that work. This was the motive even in the Greek schools. The most modern of those ancient Greeks declared that education was worth a hundred pounds to a boy, for it would teach him to talk with his mouth and save him from labour with his hands. But now that we have all learned to talk, we are beginning to wonder who will do the work of the world. You are suggesting that we talkers do some of that work for ourselves, with the possibility that life would become thereby more rich and more interesting.

At a conference upon education held here in April, all were agreed that the present situation leaves much to be desired. They were equally agreed that if more money were spent, all would be right. It may well be that there is no more money to spend upon that system, especially since those who now supply the money do not send their own children, if they have any, to the schools which they are compelled to support. They are demanding precisely that form of education which it is your mission to provide, and send their children to private schools if they can afford the double expense.

It may also be that State-control of the child has already gone too far. The State has not been so successful in more obvious forms of activity that it can claim a warrant for the entire management of life. We are, I think, close to the discovery that the

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education of children cannot be divorced from the home and the church. Work with the hands in the home is the inner meaning of your doctrine.

It would be quite remarkable if, after all, you were right in the belief that education comes through the hands rather than through the mouth. The evidence is in your favour. I see signs, in this Province at least, that unmitigated book-work is coming to an end. This Province, which all are now agreed is the home of political wisdom, has made a complete experiment. Last year the attendance of enrolled pupils in the French schools was the highest in Canada. There is now a steady conversion of those schools into places where arts and crafts are taught. My surmise is, that Quebec will solve the educational problem as another equally difficult problem has been solved. And it will be solved by the method you advocate.

Children without aptitude for printed words receive no education of any kind in the public schools, and when they finish they are too old to learn a trade. Apart from the waste of time, no community is rich enough to support the child population in idleness. In another Province, a boy is compelled to remain in school until he is so mature that his father is obliged to pay for shaving the whiskers off his face.

The boy who is to practise a craft cannot begin too soon, if he is to make it a part of himself. He must begin early, when his muscular sense is easily impressed, and qualify himself not for any one work but for all work. Then he will perform all his tasks with creative joy. But when those precious years of youth are spent in schools with books, striving to develop a mind which is not there to be developed, the body is allowed to lie idle until it has become too fixed to acquire a habit of work as part of itself.

With the utmost of insistence upon the value of arts and handicraft, I do not understand you to deny that the young should also be taught to read and write, at least sufficient to decipher the titles on the screen and the legends on the comic pictures. But I have always thought that seven years attendance at school was too high a price to pay for that attainment; and in that long period the desire and capacity for work is destroyed.

The desire to escape from work is the dominant passion in human history. It is the cause of war, since the life of the soldier is more tolerable than the life of the labourer. It corrupted the mediaeval monasteries, as it corrupts the modern universities. This sloth, or dislike of work, is the seventh of the deadly sins. It is of ancient genealogy.

At a time so early that there were only two persons on the earth, the discovery was made that work was hard. This first man observed that the ground was cursed, that it brought forth thorns and thistles. To live by his labour was to live in sorrow of mind and by the sweat of his face. He could account for so desperate a situation only by the existence of an equally desperate anterior and original sin. Education was devised as the modern method of escape from work, and the method has failed. Escape is only for the few. The many fall into that abyss which lies on the other side of a trade and on this side of a profession.

The thing that is, we think, has always been. Witchcraft, juridical torture, astrology, prohibition, elections, newspapers, moving pictures, plagues in cities and pests upon plants become so vast, that people believe they have always endured or enjoyed them. They were once new; they grow, they pass. Huge as this modern education is, there are persons yet living who remember the days when it did not exist. It too will pass.

By your insistence upon the place of art in handicraft you declare that work may be transformed by the spirit in which it is done. You are striving to introduce the element of beauty, and to preserve that beauty which men in self-defence have always created out of their own minds and incorporated into the work of their hands.

I said,—the work of their hands. You have a further task—to subdue the machine, as any monster must be subdued to human needs and to the human desire for beauty. This modern chain of labour—machines for making more machines—is not endless. There are signs of the end. The machine is too expensive. It does not save labour. It demands more labour by the creation of fictitious wants. The best it can do is an imitation of hand-work, cheap, and therefore in the end expensive. Your struggle is for art and craft as against the artificial and the machine. I do not mean artificial silk alone; but even in this company, devoted to the cult of arts and handicraft, there is enough of that fabric in evidence to illustrate my theme.

The modern revolt of labour is not against work, but against the mechanism that threatens to enslave men's minds, that denies them the joy of creation, and dulls their sense of beauty. Against this threat you are opposing all your force, and you may well summon all rational persons to your aid.