

REPORT OF THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE P.N.E.U.

Held at WESTMINSTER SCHOOL, LONDON, S.W.

(by kind permission of the Rev. H. Costley-White, D.D.),

On Tuesday, July 1st, 1930.

THE Meeting opened with the formal business of the Ordinary General Meeting, followed by a meeting of the Council. Dr. Costley-White, Chairman of the Executive Committee, presided. The Hon. Pamela Mitford and Mr. Wathen, Head Master of the Hall School, Hampstead, were elected members of the Executive Committee. Mrs. Franklin spoke to the Annual Report and moved its adoption by members. This was carried. At 3.15 p.m. the Marchioness of Aberdeen and Temair (joint-President of the P.N.E.U., with the Marquis of Aberdeen), took Dr. Costley-White's place and introduced the chief speaker of the afternoon, Mrs. Mary Hamilton, M.P. She spoke on:—

WHAT I OWE TO THE CLASSICS.

I should like to begin by saying what a very great pleasure it is to me to be here at this meeting, to have had the opportunity of learning through the Annual Report something of the progress that the Society is making, and to congratulate you, not only upon that, although I recognise that progress as a real thing and a very worth while thing, but upon something more than that. At present, and indeed for many years, we

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have talked an enormous amount about education. One of the things we are most of us clear about is that if we can give children more education, that is a good thing. But how very rare is it to have any fundamental discussion as to what education is, or any clarity of mind as to the principles that should guide it.

On that it is perfectly plain that your Society has a contribution to make even larger than the one it has already made, and your Report shows that the opportunity and the ideas coincide, and you are going to be able to go ahead and give us what we all very greatly need.

I should like, before plunging into my particular subject, to say, if I may without impertinence, how much I congratulate the P.N.E.U. also on having "We Twa" as their presiding genius. That is a sign among other things that you approach education in the right spirit. I mean not with that dry, doctrinaire approach which so often makes discussion about education simply distressfully dull. We all think it is a most important subject, and yet nearly always when anybody gets up to make a speech on education or write an article or a book, you cannot read the thing or listen to it. Now everybody knows, where Lord and Lady Aberdeen are concerned in a thing, dullness will be a very long way off.

I am in very general accord with all your ideas so far as I understand them, but I am afraid in what I want to say to you about the classics, I may seem to some of you in some parts rather reactionary. I have certain quite definitely reactionary views about education, using reaction in the literal sense of the word. I do definitely want to go back in one respect—back to discipline and doing what you don't much like. If I may, I shall speak quite personally for a moment, on this, since the part of my own education which was worth most to me, has been worth most to me, is still and is likely to go on being so, is the time that, very unwillingly, I

devoted to the study of Latin and Greek—to “classics” in the perfectly strict Oxford and Cambridge sense.

I did not want to do classics at all. I wanted, in the first place, not to go either to Cambridge or to Oxford, but to remain in Germany, where I was sent for a year, because I had taken a Newnham scholarship, but had to wait a year before taking it up. I enjoyed the year in Germany inordinately, and I wanted immensely to be allowed to stay and to study
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philosophy. At the ripe age of seventeen one is very apt to think “how charming is divine philosophy,” without much equipment for it. But my father was a philosopher, and he therefore said, quite firmly, “Nonsense. At seventeen you do not know the first thing about philosophy. You are not equipped to begin its study. You must allow me to insist on your laying a rather more substantial foundation, providing yourself with a rather more definitely equipped mind, before you turn to that study at all.”

I had such a marked propensity against mathematics that the possibility of studying that exact science was definitely excluded—unless, of course, on the lines on which it was taken up by a fellow-student of mine at Newnham, who said, with what I felt was a touch of arrogance, “I am doing mathematics because it is my worst subject.” There are degrees of badness in mathematics which make that impossible, and I presented that degree of badness!

Mathematics therefore being excluded, my father insisted that I should do classics, as being the next best, perhaps even better, form of general mental training. I was very unwilling, partly because I had made up my own mind otherwise, and partly because I was not at this stage at all “good at” classics. I cared greatly for the substance of a large number of Greek and Latin authors, but my tutors speedily discovered that I knew nothing of their syntactical form and that accurate composition was not in me. So my two years of classical study were for the major part of the time a very severe grind. I had quite definitely to be set down to do a kind of work for which I was disinclined, and which I found exceedingly tiring and disagreeable.

At the time I did not appreciate that at all, but I appreciate it profoundly now, and I am going to take the opportunity of that illustration to recommend classical study as illustrating a specific and to my mind essential element in any educational system. It has other advantages which are what I want really to talk about, but on the threshold I want to express the very strongest belief in the value, almost the necessity, of having in the education of the young mind some considerable degree of the disciplinary element.

I am utterly against what is called the play-way in education. (Applause.) I think it is good for one when young to be compelled to study with rigorous exactitude, quite against one's
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own then inclination, some definite subject, in which perhaps one does not at the time feel any particular interest. If the subject can be such as does possess intrinsic interest, as, of course, either classics or mathematics, or indeed any other subject properly taught, does, and classics and mathematics possess in supreme degree, so much the better. But even apart from that, the element of unwilling discipline of the mind, of the attention, and of the will, seems to me of enormous value.

After all, one does not want to make a child's time at school wilfully disagreeable, but that it should in some degree correspond with the form of activity which is going to be worth

while afterwards, and that, at a period when one can learn more easily, when one is more adaptable and can take a certain shape with much less discomfort to one's self than one can later, it does seem to me of almost indescribable utility: that one should then be set down to work which contains quite a representative amount of drudgery in it. Who does not agree that, however interesting, worth while and various life after school or college proves to be, there is bound to be a great deal of drudgery in it? More important than that, surely, is it to recognise, as early as possible, that the most interesting things, the most agreeable things, have got to be approached through drudgery: can only be apprehended after drudgery: that, before one is in a position to comprehend and therefore to enjoy perhaps the most valuable experiences of life, certainly the most valuable intellectually, one has got to go through some rather treadmill form of preparation, only so is one equipped to appreciate them, to have them, in the full sense.

Do not take me to imply that I personally was so thoroughly drilled by my period of attempting to write Latin and Greek prose and translate Greek and Latin authors accurately, that I achieved a disciplined mind. Very far from it. But I did realise of what elements a disciplined mind consists. I did glean some notion of how to set to work at any given subject; how much slow observation and collection of material, that did not seem relevant, had to be gone through before one was in a position either to form a judgment or to claim that one was able to appreciate. That knowledge that one's first reaction to anything new is worth nothing at all, that one has to go through a certain period of slow and unproductive grind before one has got the elements of a judgment on any topic whatever,—to know that seems to me a thing [p 495]

which no one who has spent any considerable time in studying Greek and Latin authors can fail to achieve. The degree of achievement will be according to mental type and capacity, but the work that has to be gone through before any of us can claim to have an opinion or to know, is a lesson, I think, which simple and yet vital, as it is, is almost irresistibly conveyed to even the second-class student of classical art and classical literature. I think that is of enormous, incalculable value.

There is more in it than that, I think, much more. Here I am, of course, a hundred per cent. reactionary. I should like compulsory Greek retained, at any rate at Oxford and Cambridge. Partly for the grounds that I have already mentioned. Partly because Latin and Greek represent more fully perhaps than any other subjects conceivable in a school or University curriculum those elements of what we call casually "useless" learning. Greek and Latin certainly have no direct utility to the subsequent economic concerns of daily life. Another kind of utility I think they have in very high degree, but the thing that distinguishes them is that they are not related in any way to bread and butter, to the business of getting on, or being a success, or being anything economically useful at all. I think it is very important that some Universities at any rate, not necessarily all but some, should make, as it were, a declaration of the eternal value in a scheme of genuine education of studies which have another claim, a claim totally different from any claim of economic utility; and from that point of view it seems to me that there is no group of possible subjects for study which can compare with the classics. They are certainly now almost entirely useless. Many, many years have passed since either language is quoted in the House of Commons, except very, very rarely with a sort of apology, and then only those wretchedly commonplace tags which really ought not to be allowed to be quoted at all by anybody. As part of the available language they have passed away from the House of

Commons, and in that sense I am afraid the House of Commons registers the decline in that form of culture which is general.

When a little time ago we were occupying some Parliamentary time in paying tributes to the late Lord Balfour, it passed through one's mind, as one listened to those tributes, that in that sense he was almost the last of a generation. It is true that Mr. Baldwin could refer to him as a fellow-graduate

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of Cambridge, and could, had he wished, have spoken words about him which would have brought the whole of the classical flavour back into the atmosphere in which it is now so unfamiliar, but that element in public life as a distinct and distinguishable thing is passing out very rapidly in that recognisable form. That our institutions should generally be approaching a stage in which the form of culture which is most definitely useful only in a spiritual, in an educational sense, should be allowed to be dropped, I think is a very great pity.

A pity—but the loss registered cannot be permanent. The classics do not only represent a discipline of first-rate quality—what is far more important is that they enshrine certain elements of indestructible beauty. To that, nothing that we do in our time with regard to their study, compulsory or otherwise, can make very much permanent difference.

I am now coming back to the element in my own debt of gratitude, which I feel most keenly, and which is, of course, the authentic reason why I want to make the values that there are enshrined in classical literature accessible to the largest possible number of people. I think that there are reasons for wishing that students should have contact with the classics which have nothing to do with any moral qualities of a disciplinary character, and are quite independent of the question whether they are useful or not. They have qualities which would not be tarnished by their being exceedingly useful.

I feel sometimes that the most difficult problem which we in our generation are up against is to construct for ourselves, for the people we are trying to help, above all for the children who are growing up, any sort of stable, definite standard of values which is independent of circumstances, which is not at the mercy of economic chance, which is solid and which will stand.

When I try to work my brain on that, I come back for myself to a recognition in such a possible standard of two elements, both of which are very strikingly illustrated for me through what I have retained from my own classical studies.

It seems to me that the element of beauty remains a characteristic of any standard of values that the human mind can possibly frame. We may use different adjectives to characterise that element of beauty, but when we find it anywhere, and it is established, we know we are in contact

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with something which has a value which is not relative but absolute.

It seems to me that in the works of the great classical writers, above all, of course, of the Greek poets, but also to my personal sense at any rate in Virgil, Tacitus, and some poems of Catullus, you find a kind of beauty which establishes for your mind almost more definitely than any other work of art can do the feeling that there is such a thing as the beautiful, that there is such a thing as an absolutely loyal, disinterested, candid approach to fact which can express itself through an instrument of such righteousness, purity and integrity, that the result has got a

quality which gives you a special kind of pleasure every time you come back to it and every time you in reflection realise that such a thing exists. That gives content and precision to the substance of the old discussion that used to rage as to what was the difference between classical and romantic art.

The only short statement of that difference that I ever heard that seemed to me to get near it, was that romantic art was life seen through the glass of mortality, whereas classical art is life experience seen through the glass of eternity. Certainly the sense you get from the classics of a beauty that is quite independent of space, time, changes in taste, changes of place, changes in fashion, is a thing which I personally at any rate only get elsewhere from certain works of sculpture and certain passages in music.

That re-assurance given one by classical poetry, and at times by classical prose, that there is such a thing as a beauty about which there is no discussion, which cannot be removed by anybody's not seeing it, which is an absolute, is one, I think, of the most comforting and helpful things that one could have deposited in one's mind, and one of the things which, if it can be given to one as an element of education, is of enormous, lasting and also in degree of creative value.

There is also this—and this is where I come in, of course, with that other side of my general views and questionings about life which make me by definite choice concerned with politics, a Socialist, and a member of the Labour Party. I am not going to take this as an opportunity for propaganda, but I would like to suggest that there is a connection—I do not mean only in the case of me or members of my party—but there is a connection between politics and what one believes about all

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the other serious questions, which in so far as it is there ought to lift politics out of that contempt into which it is sometimes allowed to fall.

A very, very large proportion of the people in politics, although being English they are not fond of talking about it, really are there because in some way which they might not be able to explain, they felt a connection between that activity and the things they most believe in.

The thing I most believe in is that there are in the world elements of absolute value. Classical literature is to me perhaps the most definite representative of the kind of value I am talking about. Further, our whole problem as a community is to get those elements, whose value we know, into the lives of, not a small handful of people, but of the largest possible number of people.

If you are trying to get your world right, and thinking of the possibilities in that direction purely in terms of material things, you are always involved in the most dreadful difficulties, because unfortunately with material things people want definitely more than is good for them, more than they can enjoy, and their having those things is apt to get into the way of other people. So that you get the absurd position in which some people have too few things, and are therefore subject to things because they see the possessions of others and envy them. Other people have too many things and cannot get their minds out from under them, are as much crushed by surfeit as are the others by dearth. So long as one thinks in terms of possession one is involved in very great difficulties; perhaps, if one had to plan a world exclusively in those terms, insoluble difficulties. But so soon as one begins to analyse what for one's self represent the elements in life and experience of the kind that one cannot do without, that in no

circumstances could one be divided from, I think it will be the experience of nearly everybody that, in the last analysis, the things that are left, that one cannot do without, are immaterial. They are the affection of certain people, belief in their loyalty and truthfulness; power to see the sky with all its light and its clouds, which cannot be taken away; the pleasure one can get out of music, poetry, reading. And the thrilling thought about those things is that what Shelley said about love is absolutely true of them—to divide is not to take away. Giving it to other people, sharing it in the widest possible measure does not diminish one's own pleasure; [p 499]

any, it increases it. I did once know an individual who, possessing some very beautiful pictures, said, when showing them to me, "The glorious thing is that nobody else can see these pictures." But I think that is a very uncommon point of view. I do not think most people feel like that about beautiful things of this kind.

But any difficulty that might come in with pictures does not come in with music or literature. My having read the *Agammemnon*, and having got pleasure out of it, is not made less but far greater if I can think of a large number of people also reading it. And one can have the assurance, when getting that enjoyment, that there is no element at all of exploitation or of sacrifice in it; that this is a pleasure that can be shared out, that can be multiplied and divided and spread, with no loss to you; quite the contrary. It does not involve any upheavals in its dissemination except that sort of mental and emotional change which is perhaps more terrific in its revolutionary effects than any material shift could possibly be.

That kind of value the study of the classics represents in as pure a form as one could possibly find. Moreover, the approach to that enjoyment has got elements of a congruous pleasure in it; the feeling one gets when one learns to see a use of language so restrained, so accurate, so economical, as one finds both in Latin and Greek; secret as it were, and therefore the more wonderful when you begin to get inside the secret; has a delight enhanced by the very slowness with which one has to approach it. I confess that the slowness in my case nowadays is very marked indeed. There are certain books which I read when I was at college so thoroughly that I retain a complete familiarity with them, but when I go outside the works I really studied intensively then and try to read anything new, which I have not read before, it takes me an enormous time. Yet even that, in the sort of life we all live to-day, has a kind of pleasure of its own. One generally reads masses of stuff exceedingly rapidly. I have learnt to be a very rapid reader: perhaps because trying to do a certain amount of writing myself, I have a sort of uncomfortable respect for other people's writing, which compels me to read books I am reviewing from A to Z, since I always have the feeling, "This might be my book which somebody is throwing into the waste paper basket, perhaps quite deservedly, at the end of the third chapter." But one gets a sort of nausea of that fast reading, and it is a [p 500]

positive relief to take down a volume of Aeschylus or Lucretius, and calling back such memories as one retains of the days when one "did" it at school or college, to make it out again quite slowly, viewing it, appreciating, as one comes gradually out of bafflement, how beautifully the thing is pieced together and how extraordinarily the effect comes out at one through that very slowness, looming like the dark light in a Rembrandt, which you do not see at all at first. I am certain that no crossword puzzle retains the elements of sheer amusement that one can get out

of a piece of translation from Latin or Greek if one's hand is as out and one's habits with the grammar as rusty as mine!

So that I owe still a great deal of perfectly simple personal pleasure to the fact that many years ago I was very wisely compelled to take up a line of study, to which I was attracted in a sort of idle way but had no desire to work at. I was forced to work at it exceedingly hard. The habit of work was good, but much more valuable was the thing reached through a habit of work. Above and beyond that element of discipline is the deposit in the mind of a sure knowledge that there does exist in that not very extensive chapter of the world's literature something, about whose beauty, about whose independent value, one is perfectly certain. In its turn, that independent value serves as a sort of criterion or measuring rod for other kinds of values in our common life. One sees to some extent what they are, and also to some extent what they are not. To have the assurance that there are such elements, quite independent, as it were, of all the economic factors concerned; that one has definitely a knowledge of elements in life capable of being generalised, which would give to common experience something of value and something of lasting value, something that is not altered by circumstances, that is independent of one's station in life or one's age, that goes on and is not diminished by handling—that I think is an element for which I personally shall continue to be always grateful. Therefore I feel, when an opportunity occurs of testifying what one owes, one ought to do it. So, if, at times, the word "classics" suggests a dull, remote, impersonal and indifferent set of people or of books, I do yet believe that there is not anyone, even among those who have shared my own repugnance at the time to the study of Latin grammar, my detestation for Greek prose, who does not realise that their study means the possession

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of an almost magical stone, which when rubbed gives out something of the glow which belongs to those elements in life and education which are permanent.

Therefore, I am grateful to the P.N.E.U. and to you, ladies and gentlemen, for having given me the opportunity of attempting, in this unprepared and irregular fashion, to communicate to you my own feeling about one potential element in a general education which has to me been of inexhaustible value, and is, I think, of value to us all in so far as it represents the kind of thing which we can aim at in our education and aim at in our social reconstruction.

LADY STANLEY (President of the Ceylon Branch of the P.N.E.U.), moved a vote of thanks to Mrs. Hamilton. She said:—

"It is a great pleasure to me to have this opportunity of listening to Mrs. Hamilton, and of expressing to her our very warm thanks and our appreciation of her most inspiring speech. To a perfectly ordinary person like myself, whose education did not include more than an alarmed glance at the classics, the subject might have sounded a little forbidding, but it has proved to be of absorbing interest, and Mrs. Hamilton has made her experiences real and vital to us all. I for one owe her a deep debt of gratitude, and I hope I may express to her our very warm thanks. I suppose we cannot be sufficiently grateful to the P.N.E.U. for giving us the opportunity of listening to addresses such as we have just heard, and there is no doubt that through it many mothers are being educated along with their children. I have heard this view expressed both in Africa and in Ceylon. In more than one case of which I personally know, the P.N.E.U. opens out an exciting vista full of possibilities.

“In Ceylon public interest in P.N.E.U. has begun to deepen. It has helped a good many parents on plantations and outstations, and there is a growing tendency for young mothers at any rate to dabble in P.N.E.U. methods when they first begin to teach their children. We certainly need to be more knowledgeable before it can be said that we deal efficiently with our educational problems. I think many of the difficulties from the European mother’s point of view could be easily solved, and I am hoping that the P.N.E.U. may help us by [p 502]

getting lectures for people who are going abroad in Practical Hygiene, History and Politics as well as in social conditions. It is a wider mental outlook that is needed. These girls so often arrive with the most incredible ideas about what they call ‘the native.’ We don’t use the word in Ceylon—and their presence in a house is often an embarrassment rather than a help.

“The real interest lies in the possibilities of introducing P.N.E.U. methods into Ceylonese schools. For some reason the small Cingalese or Tamil child begins his career as a deliciously bright and receptive person, unshy, forthcoming; but through, I imagine, some defect in the educational system, he often is dull and unenterprising at twelve or fourteen. He has no concentration and simply passes his exams through a kind of parrot-like facility, fatal to real understanding. Women, too, are not taught to develop their own mentality and strength of character, and so early home training lacks discipline, and the small child begins his school life handicapped.

“There is an excellent Training College in Colombo, and perhaps just the right student may one day be found to go there and lay the foundations for P.N.E.U. teaching in the schools. These are dreams which may or may not come true, but the interest in P.N.E.U. methods is already there, and it may safely be said it has come to stay.

“It is most kind of everybody to have listened to me, but my interest in the work must be my excuse, and it is indeed a wonderful thing that these principles of education, which lie at the foundation of national character, should have spread to such strange far corners of the world.

“Before I sit down I should like again to say how much I for one enjoyed Mrs. Hamilton’s speech this afternoon, and to propose a very hearty vote of thanks to her on behalf of all of us who have had the pleasure of listening to her.”

MRS. ESSLEMONT, Principal of Overstone School, seconded the vote of thanks, which was carried with acclamation.

About one hundred and fifty people attended the meeting.