

Our Public Schools.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE RED AND WHITE.

DEAR SIR :—In the Christmas number of your magazine you mentioned the desirableness of a “reasoned study” into the working of our Public Schools System in the schools themselves and in the lives of the people. This letter scarcely claims to be a study but it is sent you in the hope that, should you have nothing else in hand bearing upon that matter, it may serve as an approach to that desideratum and provoke a fuller treatment from some one equipped for the task.

I should say, at the outset, that as I have not seen the report of the Commission on Education and know nothing of its character beyond what the press gave out my point of view is not determined by anything which it may contain. This being the case it is needless to add that, should anything in this letter take the appearance of criticism of their findings—a contingency against which my estimate of the competency of the commissioners gives me some security—that will happen independently of my purpose in writing. Nor do I desire that you, Mr. Editor, should become responsible for what views I may advance. In short I prefer to be regarded as a self-constituted critic, giving credit or blame where I think they are merited, and not where I am told to apportion them.

In view of the fact that education is a thing to be effected by the educated it has always seemed to me strange that the Public Schools Act requires no qualification for membership on the Board of Education beyond what the election law specifies for a seat in the Executive Council. In the case of only two members of the board are we compelled to assume

any scholarship. But the Act makes one of these secretary and to the other it gives no preponderating voice. I do not wish to be understood as insinuating that the Board has ever fallen so low as the law permits, but I do not hesitate to say, on the other hand, that for lack of guarantees in this regard, we have suffered from unconsidered experimentation. If the source runs low what is to become of the stream? We must have leadership, in education of all things. It should not be necessary that the members of the Board hold university degrees, but we should have some guarantee that they be of broad and open mind and that they prove in themselves the results of a liberal education.

What strikes one at once as regrettable in the Public Schools is that they have not given their pupils the desire of self-education. Reading is our great means of intellectual improvement and you find few who care to read anything worth while, and of these few almost no one who traces that desire to the initiative of the common school.

In a country like our own wherein life is at a pretty dead level, and social intercourse not very inspiring, the man who does not read remains undeveloped and sinks more and more into the condition of unenlivened drudgery, and this whether he succeeds, as we say, or whether he fails. For my own part I confess to a greater interest in the man than in his affairs and I cannot regard any one as a success whose mind does not play with some freedom above the dexterity of his hands. If a young man likes to read what is worth the reading his augury is good. Without going beyond his own home he may acquire the cultural benefits of a liberal education; for it becomes a matter of pleasure to store the mind with significant facts while judgment broadens and emotion kindles to

receive the thought and the enthusiasm of our best men at their best. It is said that we owe the Illiad in its present form, to the desire of Pericles that the youth of Athens should read of heroes and become heroic. It was the inspiration of a great mind, for one takes color of the company one keeps in reading as in social intercourse.

We have been teaching reading, of course, and the Department of Education has experimented a good deal in texts. But, as the new brought no access of interest after the first stir of curiosity subsided, it is not strange that the people who financed the experiments murmured at the changes and suspected collusion between the Board and the publishers. I will not undertake to maintain that the successive readers were lacking in matter of interest, but the reading habit is not yet developed in the schools. The reason I think is, that the texts are made up of fragments of literature whereas the mind looks naturally to the total of its object. The Royal Reader had a lesson "Archery in the Olden time" which was as interesting to a boy as a fragmest well can be. But, passing over the misleading nature of the title which prepares for history rather than fiction, we observe that the effect was utterly lost because we did not know what the characters stood for. So far as sympathy was created at all, it was a sympathy founded on prejudice and not on understanding, for Hubert obediently did his best and the text left us to enjoy his discomfiture at the hands of a man whose character and purposes we did not know. At once it occurs to say: "the teacher should give the setting" Something he might do to make the selection better understood, but very little to make it better felt, and this is the important thing if we wish to create the reading habit. But the setting was already given by the author in a way that makes Ivanhoe a work of art,

which engages emotion and understanding, arouses enthusiasm to the support of ideals and draws echoes from the reaeer to the call of every form of heroism.

It can be said in favor of the book of selections that it furnishes a variety of matter and introduces to us a variety of individuals. I will not say characters, for we do not remain with any one of them long enough to acquire character knowledge. But this street acquaintance scarcely compensates for the loss of that moulding influence which cultivation of a few masters would exercise. If, on the other hand, we were to act upon the example of Pericles, and make our reading books complete works of literature, a pupil, in virtue of having passed through the common school, should have come under the influence of genial minds and should have been humanized by the relation. The resources of our literature are large enough to furnish masterpieces adapted to each grade and as several of these might be read each year, the boy who passed through the six forms would have heard and pondered the best that many good men had to tell. The adoption of this plan would involve the exercise of judicious care in selecting, and, if need be, in editing and expurgating; but it would make our school-books life companions, whose speech grew clearer to us with our widening experience; many of them would pass as heirlooms from father to son, enriched by a thousand associations; literature would take its place, as a factor in life, and, instead of "the cackle of our rustic burg" we should all hear somewhat the "murmur of the world."

Before leaving this part of the subject I wish to add that, if French is to be taught in the schools, it should begin at the same time and in the same way as the English. Nature has laid down the law of acquiring language. It is to begin with lisping monosyllables

and to proceed to comected discourse. Those who approach language from the scientific side, or perhaps I had better have said from the analytic side, never attain to the use of it, as a language, that is, a means of acquiring and communicating thought.

Any kind of barbarous French is still better French than any amount of elegant English about French

With your permission Mr. Editor I hope to take up some other aspects of this subject in the next issue of
RED AND WHITE.

