

RENDCOMB COLLEGE

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RENDCOMB COLLEGE, CIRENCESTER

“... Amongst the ancients, the greatest teacher in the widest sense was Plato. Plato's two chief ideas were that the young should be placed and brought up in beautiful surroundings, where the influence of the surroundings might steal upon them as he (Plato) said, ‘like the air from some heavenly place’; and that they should pick children without regard to their parentage or their homes and educate them for whatever occupation in life they were most fitted to fill. He thought their Founder followed broadly, perhaps consciously, but more likely unconsciously, those two great maxims. His family was one which had ever had a strong regard for others as well as for themselves..”

[An extract from the speech of the late Sir Herbert Warren, K. C. V. O., on the Rendcomb College Speech Day, June 16th, 1928.]

IF Henry Fielding had chanced to be living and writing at the present day, it is possible that the history of Tom Jones would have undergone considerable modifications.

Sufficiently human to be convincing, beset by humorous difficulties, inoffensive to a Victorian idealist, and always likeable, Fielding's hero might nowadays have delighted modern opinion by over-

coming all opponents and obstacles and securing the hand of his Sophia without the necessity either for the fact or the discovery of his being well-born. Where ancient lineage and tradition are found to unite with brains and character, and are, perhaps, revealed by the limelight on a public career, it may well be that we are too apt to make deductions confusing cause and effect; the prominence of a few such isolated examples and the strong contrast afforded by the more conspicuous human "failures" encourage the traditional view, and make plausible a still common error.

Rendcomb College was founded in the belief that the true aristocracy among men is in reality simply an aristocracy of brains and character.

That there is nothing new or original in this idea is obvious enough, since clearly it goes back to civilisation's dawn, when leadership and paramount influence depended, not merely upon physical strength and prowess in arms (since any man is weak by comparison with the larger animals, and at any rate is easily subdued by a group of his fellow men), but, as they should depend now, upon intelligence and character in support of physical strength and as the directing force behind all corporate activity. Society has gradually undergone many changes, has become artificial and, always desiring a ruler, has fairly recently in its history drifted into the dual worship of heredity and mammon, while, still more recently, it has become dissatisfied with both these authorities. It has, in fact, begun to wonder if some of the good

things which it used to assign to heredity were not more properly attributable to opportunity, and has been puzzled by observing that many of the greatest benefactors to the human race appear to owe little or nothing to wealth. Rendcomb's claim to originality, then, rests not upon an idea, but upon the fact that what was before merely a theory has been put into practice, that a fundamental belief in the power of opportunity and environment has been actually brought to the test.

It is one thing to assert that the son of an artisan or labourer may enter life with physical and mental equipment no whit inferior to the natural endowment of the child born to the highest social conditions; it is one thing to cite opportunity and the "cultural inheritance" as being the chief agents of subsequent inequalities; it is quite another thing, and I believe a new thing in actual practice, to take elementary schoolboys (with all their varying antecedents), and with them boys of "gentle" birth, and place all together, on terms of absolute equality in a boarding school. The difference is just that which exists between theory and practice, and the question "does practice justify the theory?" is precisely the question which Rendcomb College is endeavouring to answer.

For reasons into which I need not enter, I am a spectator of this educational experiment. Originally conceived upon certain definite lines, the school has, like all really living forces, proved too strongly dynamic to develop along the exact course marked out for it in the first place. As a mere spectator,

I am clearly aware of changes which would naturally be less apparent to those in daily contact with the school life, and I may accordingly indulge in a freedom of comment which would not be possible to those who are intimately associated with that life.

The school stands well up on the side of a hill at a little distance from the main road running between Cirencester and Cheltenham. The position is a naturally beautiful one. A park, containing some fine old trees, surrounds the house, and slopes down to a lake and a trout stream. No categorical description of the country is necessary. The charm of the Cotswolds is just the charm of a very choice piece of rural England. The house itself is a very large and rather aggressive pile, built of Bath stone, and was completed as a luxurious family dwelling in the year 1865. The rooms are spacious, lofty, and light, and the architect has succeeded in trapping the maximum amount of sunshine. The interior equipment has given rise to some criticism about parquet flooring and schoolboy boots!

If some of the undoubted advantages of a public school are aimed at for Rendcomb boys, the house and immediate surroundings suggest particulars in which the public school house-master's methods are certainly not followed. At Rendcomb the boys use the front door as a matter of course; the rooms in which they live and work and sleep are the best in the building. (They are not relegated to an institution-like annexe at the back of a "private side.") The plants and flowers in the garden

bloom for them, not for the exclusive benefit of a house-master and his family.

For the boys, in a word, are all the pleasant adjuncts to life which the place can provide. Inevitably the problem of utilising the income from endowment in the most advantageous manner possible has precluded the possibility of any considerable expenditure upon furniture and equipment; but in spite of a general simplicity, it is remarkable how successfully the uncompromising bareness (which many people must associate with schools) has been relieved by thought and care for details.

Pictures adorn the walls, and are to be found even in class-rooms. Inexpensive examples of some of the best modern poster work (surely a thriving and vigorous form of art expression in the present day), as well as reproductions of classical masterpieces, give colour and interest to the rooms. Flowers are to be seen in the library and on the dining-tables. Music, also, is available to the boys: good music to which they may listen, as well as the embryonic kind in which they learn and take part; and the pianos, I am glad to say, are fairly sound instruments—not the dismal apologies so often considered “quite good enough for beginners,” but which actually retard progress and thwart any possible recognition of fine quality of tone. Clearly it is felt at Rendcomb that the few simple embellishments to life, which adults seem to require as matters of course, ought most emphatically to be provided for the benefit of the young, and all the more so in

cases where the home life of the holidays is deficient in these advantages.

It is one of the objects of the headmaster (Mr. James H. Simpson), of Mrs. Simpson, and, indeed, of all the staff, to make Rendcomb not merely a school, but a home as well, and the pleasant cosiness of a sitting-room or master's study appears to be as readily accessible to the boys as their own "lockers."

To the boy who comes from a comfortable, even a beautiful, home, the dreariness and dinginess of many a boarding school is a terrible affliction; the bareness, the positive ugliness, the characteristic school odours (compounded of dust, stale cake, and damp footballs), are depressing to a degree, and their one advantage lies in a stoicism begotten of evils which must be suffered in silence.

Should it chance, however, that the home life itself is somewhat drab, colourless, and restricted, is there not the greater need that the school should give a wider, more varied outlook, and make some provision for the aesthetic side of nature, which may be none the less real and insistent in its appeal because in so many cases it is latent and ill-nourished?

Homes of luxury combined with spartan education have in the past produced results so apparently satisfactory as to disarm criticism of the *regime*; yet up to the present little organised effort appears to have been made to balance spartan homes by providing in schools an atmosphere of homeliness, simple comfort, and those very opportunities for the development and expression of taste which the homes themselves may have lacked.

It is, once again, the function of education to make such opportunities; the function, indeed, of civilisation to provide the rising generation with scope for development in every attribute and every relation of life which is useful and beautiful and a worthy contribution to human progress.

When opportunity comes to the favoured few alone, how small an advance can be anticipated.

But when every child in the land is born to a generous and goodly educational heritage, with what confidence we may then look for the yet far-off blessings of brotherhood and goodwill.

Individual efforts may do something for a relatively small number of children, and the cause of education in general may benefit a little from every piece of serious pioneer work. But the whole problem needs to be attacked on a truly big scale, such as was suggested in a recent number of the *English Review* advocating the formation of National Boarding Schools.

This great scheme would utilise some of the vacant "stately homes" and unoccupied country houses and, removing children from overcrowded urban districts, set for them a fair course in conditions at once healthy and attractive.

Probably nothing short of national machinery could put this big idea into effect: in which case it is to be hoped that national education would also gain an impetus of courage and wisdom to carry it safely beyond the dangers of stereotyped methods and "wholesale" regulations, which too often put a period to initiative, experiment, and research.

If Rendcomb should appear to some minds to be pursuing a path too idealistic to be practical, I may here remark that it has recently been inspected by the Board of Education and has been placed upon the list of efficient schools.

So much for the mere setting. The really important thing—the spirit of the school—is infinitely difficult to describe, for the reason that it is so totally different from that with which most people are familiar as to provide little common ground for comparison or contrast.

The headmaster (if he will forgive a personal allusion) moves through the school, not as a group of “subjects” personified, not as a stalking Nemesis, not as a vague, distant, critical influence, but as an intimate and personal friend to every boy, understanding and sharing the interests of each, and, above all, showing the boys how to understand themselves, their duties to themselves and to each other, as good fellow-citizens of a really beautiful democracy.

Mr. Simpson is a psychologist. In the atmosphere of frankness, free discussion, and ready sympathy which he has created, there is no place for fear, nor for anything mean, which is generally the result of fear. In a free and natural life the boys grow and develop amazingly. There is no attempt to force them all into the same mould; rather, every possible encouragement is given to enterprise and initiative. There is no tradition of real or assumed “boredom” in the attitude towards work; no shamefaced reluctance to admit interest. Work is

fascinating, vital. Excellence in some branch of it is prized at least as highly as any athletic distinction. Work and games are abundantly worthwhile. Neither is the former rewarded by prizes, nor the latter by colours. The need for such does not exist, for the stimulus is found in quite other directions. The Rendcomb boy would not understand a bribe: I think he would feel insulted by it. Thus are certain customs excluded from tradition in the making.

As regards the curriculum, an outstanding feature is the headmaster's adoption of Greek as the one ancient language for study. Compared with Latin, not only is Greek felt to be the better mental exercise, to possess the finer literature, and show perhaps the higher philological value, but its reflection of an ancient art and civilisation at their zenith, and the long vistas of its copious mythology, are found to be particularly well calculated to appeal to boys in their first fresh and eager appetite for the historical, the romantic, the beautiful.

Speaking of the boys as a whole, I think the characteristic which has struck me most forcibly is their naturalness—their utter lack of self-consciousness, and that, in spite of improvement so marked in some cases as to seem inevitably the result of calculated effort; inevitably, until one reflects that, in youth, speech and manners and point of view are modified continually and automatically by influences brought to bear upon the most plastic and sensitive thing in the world—the child mind.

Space forbids my writing in detail of the many-

sided activities of the school; of the school "meeting"—a form of limited self-government; of the physical training (to which great attention is given by the headmaster), the scouting games, theatricals, field club, magazine, and school shop (run by the boys themselves), to mention a few only of the institutions.

In conclusion, however, I should like to remark that the headmaster has secured in his staff unity of effort and the embodiment of a great ideal.

The endowment provides for some forty free-place boys, but the governing body has recently decided to open the school to a limited number of fee-paying boys as well.

It is hoped that some boys may succeed in winning scholarships at the universities, in which case the school intends to make a grant sufficient to enable them to take up such scholarships and, with all due economy, to maintain the careers of undergraduates; that in this way the benefits of higher education may be available to those who show outstanding intellectual qualifications.

If the foregoing brief remarks should prove of interest to any educationist, I feel sure that Mr. Simpson would welcome any enquiries about the school, which may be directed to him, or (by arrangement) any visit of inspection.

To my question, "Has Rendcomb's practice justified its theory?" I firmly believe that a band of happy and useful citizens, possessed of energy, wide sympathies and mutual understanding, is going shortly to supply the answer.