CHAPTER XI

OUR EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AND THE REQUIREMENTS OF COMMERCE

The Product of our Present System—Advantages of University Training when applied to Practical Trade —'Commercial Cadets'—The Pecuniary Advantages of Practical Knowledge in Commerce.

In the opening of the last chapter, referring to the growth of our national expenditure and how small is the proportion thereof utilised for the benefit of the country's trade, passing allusion was made to the large sum of £19,000,000 expended on salaries, etc., for Education, Science, and Art. This sum is constantly increasing and is only part of the much larger sum of £34,000,000 which the Imperial and local ratepayer annually contributes for educational purposes.

It is doubtful whether the results of this expenditure satisfy any educational party. They certainly do not satisfy the taxpayer, though he would probably pay twice as much quite cheerfully if he saw proportionately good results. Nor do they satisfy the educationists, who are warring among themselves as to the

best method of spending the money. Certainly the intellectual needs or ambitions of the greater number of the boys and girls taught under the existing system are not fulfilled.

Each boy and girl who leaves school becomes an adult unit of the British Empire, and we therefore have a right to take the average boy and girl—the product of our educational system—and test their value as contributors to the general efficiency of the country, confining our survey solely to the commercial needs of the nation. It is a trite saying that the verdict of the world is constantly reversing that of the schoolmaster, but it is none the less true. The education of the great majority of the boys and girls who enter commercial life, whether in workshop, factory, or counting-house, does not begin until after they have left school. Let us divide, roughly,[1] into three classes, the sources from which commerce recruits its ranks:—

1. *The 'Upper' Class.* Public school and university men, who enter the higher services of the principal Departments of State.

[1] The broad generalisation of classes which follows is still approximately correct, in spite of the democratic leaven permeating and tending towards the fusion of all classes in the community at the present time.

2. *The 'Middle' Class.* Boys from the public and private schools, who enter the higher branches of commercial and business life.
3. *The 'Lower' Class.* Boys from the elementary Council schools, who enter the various branches of employment in trade and the lower branches of commercial and business life.

Occupations concerned with art, literature, the stage, music, etc., draw their executants from all classes, irrespective of birth or education, and we can thus simplify our division of the classes directly concerned with commerce. In those pages wherein reference is made to the personnel of the suggested Ministry of Commerce, I have commented on the advantages possessed by the university-trained man who applies himself to a commercial career.

Starting four to five years behind the average man (the public school boy has acquired a thorough grounding in commerce long before the university man has left the comparatively cloistral seclusion of Oxford or Cambridge), he is nevertheless quick to overtake his handicap where he is forced to apply himself to commerce. It is for this reason that the man who has been trained in a university and also on the practical side of a

trade is about the best asset that commercial Britain could possess. The number of such men is increasing, but the proportion of men who come from the universities each year and voluntarily apply themselves to the learning of trades is very small.

Sir George Birdwood has stated that during his term at the India Office, he persistently recommended university men to turn their attention to business. He has mentioned that the best window-dresser and salesman in West London was an Eton boy. It is to the higher branches of our trade, however, that the talents of university men may best be applied.

At present, teaching and the overcrowded professions are the goals of those who do not enter one of the higher services of the State, with the result that an advertisement inserted in a daily paper for a university-trained man for a business office will produce hundreds of replies from schoolmasters who have either failed to 'make a living' or are disappointed with a life where initiative is at a discount and individuality is repressed. If a large number of graduates who leave the universities each year could be induced to apply themselves to acquiring a practical knowledge of a business

involving skilled work, a wonderful impetus would be given to the administrative departments of British trade and manufacture.

The foundation by the universities of Chairs of Commerce and Faculties of Business, dispensing degrees and diplomas for proficiency in commerce, is all so much beating the air. It is less, not more, theory that we want. One year of practical work in a cotton-mill or in a steelworks is worth five years of theoretical study to our future cotton mill owner or steelworks proprietor. I am told that it is trade unionism that stands in the way of the practical training of boys and youths leaving the elementary schools. The trade unions fear the effect which the skilled training of a large number of youths would have upon the employment of older men. Perhaps here is the reason that masters fear to introduce university-trained men into their works to learn the business.

If the trade of Great Britain is as vital to us as the Navy of Great Britain—and without any trade I fear we should not want much of a Navy—why should we not apply the same methods to training men for its higher service? The naval cadet does not leave his public school and take up a

commission in the Navy without training or preparation for his duties; but, as we have already seen, the university man on leaving college does attempt to administer the affairs of works and factories without any other practical training than he can casually pick up in the counting-house. The naval cadet passes through Osborne, thence to a training ship, thence to the lowest rung of the naval ladder; similarly, the 'commercial cadet' should pass from public school or college to be attached to the works or factories of large manufacturing and industrial firms, and thus learn the practical side of the work he proposes in later years to direct. Such steps cannot, I fear, be enforced; it can only be hoped that the solid common sense of the young 'varsity man will, sooner or later, prevail. A great future lies before the man who combines a university training with a practical training in factory and workshop.

In the second, the middle, class the position is a little different; but underlying it is the same necessity for practical training. The public and private schools of the country turn out every year clean, intelligent youngsters of from fifteen to eighteen years of age, most of whom have achieved a certain scholastic

success, usually by passing the University Senior Locals. They pour into the City by thousands each year for the purpose of taking up commercial life, which for them invariably means commencing with a junior clerkship.

Do the masters of public schools realise that the rudiments of commercial work are taught to their late pupils by the elementary Council school boy, who is a sort of senior errand boy of perhaps five years' office experience? The young public school boy is taught how to write a letter to a firm, how to press-copy a letter, what the meaning of a bill of exchange is and how to collect it, the meaning of a 'paying-in' book and how to pay money into a bank without arousing the sarcastic ire of the bank's cashier, and a hundred and one other elementary details. He is lucky if he gets an old soldier, a Commissionaire, to teach him how to do these things. More often, it falls to the lot of the small office-boy.

The first few months of the public school boy's life in the counting-house or business office is one long series of painful, humiliating experiences. In the workshops or factories it is still more unenviable, for, as stated above, the British workman is apt to regard the intrusion of a public school boy apprentice

into his domain as an insidious attack upon trade unionism.

The boy who has passed through a big public school is, however, inured to hard knocks, both moral and physical, and the benefits derivable in later life from a training in the 'shops' of a large engineering or similar firm are incalculable. The commingling of the classes thus induced would prevent a great deal of that class hatred which is fostered in the workshops and factories of the country by a certain type of agitator, so that the ultimate benefits in this aspect also would be as largely national as individual. When the men so trained come to undertake their duties as employers of labour, the advantages of their training are manifest. The working-man mechanic is quick to respond to the call for better work by an employer whom he knows to possess practical knowledge; he is equally quick to resent the hustling methods of the man who could not handle a tool in a crisis.

There is a well-worn story in the annals of Fleet Street, that in the early days of *The Times* newspaper, when the last 'forme' (*i.e.* a page of type) was going to the machines in the early hours of the morning, it slipped and was turned into 'pie,' which is

the term printers apply to type when broken up into disorder. Every available compositor was called in to assist, and Mr John Walter, the then proprietor of *The Times*, took off his coat and personally assisted in setting up the page afresh, so that the machines were able to start without much delay and *The Times* lay upon the country breakfast table at its usual hour. There is need of a revival of this kind of employer. It was the rule rather than the exception to meet with them two generations ago, but the type died out with the changes in the old apprenticeship system, which the City companies and guilds are now endeavouring to revive anew.

The steps which have been taken to encourage the learning of trades among the more educated class have not produced quite satisfactory results. The tendency has been either wittingly or unwittingly to make the teaching too theoretical. Technical 'schools' of engineering, paper-making, lithography, printing, carpentry, cotton-printing, weaving, etc., have sprung up in all parts of the country under the ægis of the County Councils. The secondary school boy often passes into these establishments for the purpose of learning a trade, but before he is permitted to take a

practical 'course' he is required to spend so many terms on the theory of the business. This means that the embryo engineer or carpenter sees drawn for his information a sketch of a cold chisel or a plane on a blackboard and is told for what purposes these tools are used; the future Caxton is told that the tool drawn on the blackboard is a 'stick' which printers use for setting up type. The tools are not handled by the youths, and unless they possess a retentive memory they would probably not recognise the actual articles when they saw them some time afterwards.

It means that the intelligent and ambitious boy is disheartened at the slowness of his progress, and his parent, realising that a great deal of valuable time is being wasted, takes the boy away from the school and finds a place for him in an office, where he commences to earn a wage from unskilled clerical labour. Whilst this wage may be a fair one for a boy, he ultimately finds that his work leads to no better-paid goal, and as he reaches manhood he is faced with the life of a poorly-paid junior clerk, earning 25s. to 30s. per week, with the prospect of an office managership with £5 per week after perhaps 20 years' service, whereas, as a skilled educated mechanic in many trades,

he would command from 50s. to 80s. per week with the prospect of attaining the rank of works manager and anything from £5 to £20 per week, or, if he possesses capital, of establishing himself as his own master, as so many hundreds of practical men have already done.

This is the story of thousands of secondary school boys who have left their school with high hopes and dauntless ambitions. To-day they are middle-aged men, probably with wives and families, and are called upon by their employers to maintain the apparent position of a man of £500 per annum on salaries less than a third of that figure. The Board of Trade is so much occupied with compiling reports on the standard of wages of labourers that few data are available to show the average salaries paid in business life. I have compiled the following table, which has been approved by a gentleman who was for many years associated with a large employment institution in the City of London.

	Age 16-21.	Age 21-35.	Age 35-50.
Banks—			
Clerks, Cashiers, Branch Managers, etc.	Per annum £60	Per annum £150	Per annum £200
Insurance Companies—			
Clerks, Superintendents, Branch Managers, etc. ..	£50	£200	£250

	Age 16-21.	Age 21-35.	Age 35-50.
Accountants—			
Clerks qualified.	Nil to £50	£200	£200–£350
Lloyds, Stock Exchange, etc. ..	£50–£100	£100–£150	£250
General Offices—			
Clerks, Office Managers, etc. ..	£25–£50	£50–£100	£100–£200

It should be understood that the foregoing figures represent the great army of employees engaged in administrative, clerical, and other work in offices, and do not include men engaged in general managerial capacities, whose annual salaries often run into four figures. Compare now the above figures with the wages earned by competent skilled mechanics. The figures which may be applied to the better-class trades are as follows :—

	Under 21	Over 21
Mechanics	Nil to £50	£50–£175
Foremen and overseers	—	£150–£250
Works managers ..	—	£250–£400

It is impossible to lay down any hard and fast rules as to the stages at which clerical labourers and manual labourers progress, but we know that the number of clerical workers who achieve highly-paid positions, such as those of managing directors and the like, is very small in proportion to the total, whereas all the best-paid positions among manual workers, such as works managers, are entirely

recruited from the ranks, because it is essential that those who hold such posts should possess full practical knowledge. Very significant also is the fact that, whereas among clerical workers it is possible for youths of fifteen to commence earning money immediately and to reach a scale of from £40 to £60 per annum within a few months of starting their career, the boy who is apprenticed to a trade only receives 'pocket money' for many years. As a result of this, parents who are in needy circumstances send their boys into the market which is most remunerative immediately rather than wait some years whilst the youth is passing through his apprenticeship.

This is the serious problem with which our educational authorities have to deal. Each year the postal and telegraph services of the State alone turn out of employment hundreds of boys who have grown too old to continue as telegraph messengers; the carrying trades also throw on to the labour market every year hundreds of van boys who have grown up from twelve to eighteen years of age without acquiring a trade or possessing any means of earning a livelihood; whilst newspapers and other employers of casual boy labour are also inevitably responsible for the

same flooding of the unemployed ranks with young men from eighteen to twenty who either enlist in the Army or Navy, or, unfortunately, go to recruit the ranks of the criminal classes.

During the Postmastership of Mr Samuel an effort has been made to deal with the problem of the boy messenger, with the result that in three years the number of boys dismissed from the Post Office at sixteen years of age has been reduced from 4400 to 443. If the evil has been so great in one branch of business, it is quite certain that, in the aggregate, the contributors to these 'blind alleys' of employment must be responsible for the dismissal from employment every year of thousands of messenger boys, van boys, errand boys, newspaper boys, etc., who have become too old for their situations.

I am not prepared to enter in detail in this book upon the drastic changes which are obviously necessary in the policy of our educationists, but it is apparent to every employer that our present system of education is not meeting the needs of the country. The attitude taken up by the employer appears to be sound. He contends that too much money has been expended on theoretical

training; that the bright and intelligent boys who have distinguished themselves among their companions in the elementary Council schools have had their studies directed towards academic knowledge that will make them shine in examinations, rather than towards mechanical knowledge; and that the money expended on the so-called 'higher education' of the elementary scholar would be more wisely expended in thoroughly grounding the boys in commercial and trade knowledge as a preparation for commercial and industrial careers.

That is the view of the great employing class of the country; and it is a view to which our educationists must sooner or later pay careful heed, if the volume of British commerce and the skill of the British workman are not to deteriorate and become inferior to those of competing nations.