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VOLUME 7.

RURAL EDUCATION IN FRANCE.

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[Introductory letter to Vol. 7 of the Series.]

To Sir G. W. KEKEWICH, K.C.B.,
Secretary of the Board of Education.

SIR,

I HAVE the honour to present to you the accompanying volume of Special Reports descriptive of the work of rural elementary schools in some of the northern and north-western parts of France, with particular reference to the nature and effects of the instruction given in subjects bearing upon agriculture.

In many parts of the world the question of country schools is one of special interest and difficulty at the present time. There is a widespread feeling that something ought to be done to bring them into closer touch with the practical needs of country life. But opinion is greatly divided as to how this could or should be done. The question is felt to be in the main a social and economic problem, not simply a school problem. The work done in the schools affects the question at issue, but no mere change in school programmes could arrest or reverse a great process of economic or social change. Perhaps I may be permitted to sum up in the following paragraphs, for the information of readers of this report (with a brevity which will, I trust, not be mistaken for dogmatism), what appear to be the conclusions of many of those best qualified to form an opinion on this intricate but urgent question.

The country school is in a position to render a great service to the nation. The country districts are the recruiting grounds for the towns. Urban communities have a direct interest in the welfare of the rural schools. The better training that is given to the boys and girls in the country schools, the better will it fare with the industries in which those boys and girls may be engaged in later life. Moreover, it is hoped that the drift into the great cities may some time be reversed, and that a current of population will pass out from the great cities into the country districts again. Electric traction, electric power, rapid means of communication, and the growing congestion of many city areas may cause a greater decentralisation of industry. In order to encourage such a movement back into purer air and more open surroundings, it is desirable that the country schools should not be allowed to drop below the intellectual level of the town schools. We have now, and have always had, many very excellent country schools which may serve as a model for imitation. What is wanted is to level up the average to a higher standard.

Education is a much greater and more difficult thing than the mere imparting of intellectual instruction. A good school

makes the children think; it makes them interested in what lies around them; it makes them ask questions; it makes them keen. It does not cram them with undigested knowledge. It trains them to think for themselves; it teaches them how to learn; it makes them want to learn; it interests them in the why and the wherefore of the common details of life; it makes them realise that the simplest questions are often the hardest questions, and that the simplest things are often the best. But a good school does not stop here. It trains the body as well as the mind, and it cares most of all for character. Its deepest and noblest work is a moral work. It makes the children not simply brighter and cleverer, but better, than they were before. It aims at producing not only self-reliance but self-control and readiness to sacrifice selfish interests to duty.

It cannot do this, however, unless it is inspired by a strong and noble tradition. All good education involves sacrifice. And the essential things in a good school are not a well-chosen timetable or skilful organisation (though both are necessary), but the personality and example of a good teacher. That is the force which makes the school. And, in order to attract the best men and women to the work of education, no pains should be spared to make the position of schoolmaster and schoolmistress as honourable and as well-found as possible. We need schools of first-rate quality and in good heart. This can only be when the teachers are the best, and when they are happy in the conditions of their work.

It is useless to turn a school into a mere labour-house. Men and citizens have to be trained, not only workmen and "hands" for employment. But the best education combines what is practical with what is ideal. It does not overlook the economic future of the pupil in attempting to safeguard his spiritual and intellectual future. The best schools teach the children to value and reverence what is near at hand and "common," as well as what is distant and rare. But no school can flourish which aims at keeping the scholars down, or back from the best at which they can aspire. It should always be remembered that in times past many of our greatest scholars and leaders were bred as lads in country schools.

A few, at all events, of the children in a country school are likely to earn their living in some calling which is not very closely connected with country life. It would be inexpedient, therefore, to omit from the course of study in such schools the elements of that education which is necessary as a foundation for success in commerce or industry. Still less reasonable would it be to model the curriculum on the assumption that every boy in a country school will be, or ought to be, an agricultural labourer. It is partly as a safeguard against any such assumption being made that the literary elements in the curriculum have tended to oust the practical elements. Most people will agree in thinking

it right that the elements of a liberal education should be given in all schools, urban and rural alike, but that, in all cases, an education need be none the less liberal for being given partly through the medium of practical studies. At the same time there is a no less general conviction that, even in the remotest village school, the desire to keep labourers "in their place" should never be allowed to encroach on the proper claims of a liberal training.

The elementary school seems not to be the place for [the technical study of agriculture in any specialised form; but the general influence of the school and the drift of its work may do much to foster, or to discourage, an interest in country life. Some generations ago it was the practice to sacrifice elementary education to the claims of industry. There followed a sharp reaction, and a too violent recoil from practical studies in the elementary schools. Happily there is now an increasing disposition to regard literary and practical studies as compatible elements in education. Perhaps the most effective of all kinds of rural education is that which combines the practical with the more literary elements, and which teaches a child to love nature and to admire skill in handicraft, while at the same time making him share in the great inheritance of moral ideals and noble literature. But such a training, though it sounds simple, is really the outcome of long study on the part of the teachers, coupled with practical skill in the selection of subjects and in the choice of methods in teaching them. Children learn to love a subject through learning from a teacher who loves it. The best country schools have always been those which are taught by teachers who love country life, who appreciate its beauty and varied interest, who themselves prefer to live in the country than in the town, and who are in every way the intellectual equals of their colleagues in the town schools. The country is the ideal place for the education of children, and the greatest efforts should be made to keep the country schools up to a high level of educational efficiency, enthusiasm, and equipment. Country teachers need special encouragement in their work and many special opportunities for keeping up their studies. They need books, pictures, opportunities of travel, opportunities for cultivated intercourse. Above all, they need to feel that the nation at large appreciates the immense importance of their task, and honours them for their patience in overcoming the difficulties which beset it. No part of the national system of education needs, or will repay, more systematic encouragement or more constant care.

In France there has been during recent years a remarkable movement for the improvement of the rural schools. A sort of missionary enthusiasm for national education through republican institutions has inspired the leaders of this reform. And it is generally acknowledged how much of the moral earnestness of the movement is due to the labours and example of Professor

F. Buisson, now Professor at the Sorbonne, but formerly Director of the Primary Branch of the Ministry of Public Instruction. In view of the practical importance of the subject, it has been felt that a short account of what has been done in France will be of interest to many English readers; and that, though direct imitation of a foreign system of education would be fruitless, even if it were practicable, there is much that is suggestive and encouraging in parts of the French experience. The political and economic conditions in the two countries are, however, so very different that in very many respects French precedents would be as unfitting to English circumstances as English methods of adjustment and compromise would be distasteful to the genius of French administration, with its dislike for half lights and its insistence on logical distinctions.

The reports which follow are from the pens of two writers who have made a long and careful study of some of the aspects of rural education, and who are well acquainted with the difference between French and English life. Mr. Medd, as an active member of the Executive of the Agricultural Education Committee, and Mr. Brereton, as Vice-President of the Jury on Primary Education at the Paris Exhibition of 1900, have had excellent opportunities of coming to close quarters with the practical problems connected with the welfare of country schools. In the course of the inquiries upon which the following reports are based, they met with the most courteous welcome on the part of the educational and other authorities in France, and received the greatest kindness and assistance from all concerned in the welfare of the schools. On behalf of the Special Inquiries Section of the Board of Education, I desire to associate myself with the writers of the reports in their expression of hearty thanks for the consideration and friendly interest with which they were received.

To each report is appended the name of its author, and it should be understood that the latter alone is responsible for the opinions therein expressed.

I have the honour to be, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

MICHAEL E. SADLER,

Director of Special Inquiries and Reports.

December, 1901.

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Rural Education in France - - - - -

By Mr. John C. Medd, M.A., Member of the Executive Committee of the Agricultural Education Committee.

For contents of earlier volumes of Special Reports, see pp. 311 *et seq.*

THE RURAL SCHOOLS OF NORTH-WEST FRANCE.

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