

“The Superstition of School”

--G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936)

- 1 It is an error to suppose that advancing years bring retrogressing opinions. In other words, it is not true that men growing old must be growing reactionary. Some of the difficulties of recent times have been due to the obstinate optimism of the old revolutionary. Magnificent old men like [Russian revolutionary Peter] Kropotkin and [poet Walt] Whitman and William Morris went to their graves expecting Utopia if they did not expect Heaven. But the falsehood, like so many falsehoods, is a false version of a half-truth. The truth, or half-truth, is not that men must learn by experience to be reactionaries; but that they must learn by experience to expect reactions. And when I say reactions I mean reactions; I must apologize, in the world of current culture, for using the word in its correct sense.
- 2 If a boy fires off a gun, whether at a fox, a landlord or a reigning sovereign, he will be rebuked according to the relative value of these objects. But if he fires off a gun for the first time it is very likely that he will not expect the recoil, or know what a heavy knock it can give him. He may go blazing away through life at these and similar objects in the landscape; but he will be less and less surprised by the recoil; that is, by the reaction. He may even dissuade his little sister of six from firing off one of the heavy rifles designed for the destruction of elephants; and will thus have the appearance of being himself a reactionary. Very much the same principle applies to firing off the big guns of revolution. It is not a man's ideals that change; it is not his Utopia that is altered; the cynic who says, "You will forget all that moonshine of idealism when you are older," says the exact opposite of the truth. The doubts that come with age are not about the ideal, but about the real. And one of the things that are undoubtedly real is reaction: that is, the practical probability of some reversal of direction, and of our partially succeeding in doing the opposite of what we mean to do. What experience does teach us is this: that there is something in the make-up and mechanism of mankind, whereby the result of action upon it is often unexpected, and almost always more complicated than we expect.
- 3 These are the snags of sociology; and one of them is concerned with Education. If you ask me whether I think the populace, especially the poor, should be recognized as citizens who can rule the state, I answer in a voice of thunder, "Yes." If you ask me whether I think they ought to have education, in the sense of a wide culture and familiarity with the classics of history, I again answer, "Yes." But there is, in the achievement of this purpose, a sort of snag or recoil that can only be discovered by experience and does not appear in print at all. It is not allowed for on paper, even so much as is the recoil of a gun. Yet it is at this moment an exceedingly practical part of practical politics; and, while it has been a political problem for a very long time past, it is a little more marked (if I may stain these serene and impartial pages with so political a suggestion) under recent conditions that have brought so

many highly respectable Socialists and widely respected Trade Union officials to the front.

4 The snag in it is this: that the self-educated think far too much of education. I might add that the half-educated always think everything of education. That is not a fact that appears on the surface of the social plan or ideal; it is the sort of thing that can only be discovered by experience. When I said that I wanted the popular feeling to find political expression, I meant the actual and autochthonous popular feeling as it can be found in third-class carriages and bean-feasts and bank-holiday crowds; and especially, of course (for the earnest social seeker after truth), in public-houses. I thought, and I still think, that these people are right on a vast number of things on which the fashionable leaders are wrong. The snag is that when one of these people begins to "improve himself" it is exactly at that moment that I begin to doubt whether it is an improvement. He seems to me to collect with remarkable rapidity a number of superstitions, of which the most blind and benighted is what may be called the Superstition of School. He regards School, not as a normal social institution to be fitted in to other social institutions, like Home and Church and State; but as some sort of entirely supernormal and miraculous moral factory, in which perfect men and women are made by magic. To this idolatry of School he is ready to sacrifice Home and History and Humanity, with all its instincts and possibilities, at a moment's notice. To this idol he will make any sacrifice, especially human sacrifice. And at the back of the mind, especially of the best men of this sort, there is almost always one of two variants of the same concentrated conception: either "If I had not been to School I should not be the great man I am now," or else "If I had been to school I should be even greater than I am." Let none say that I am scoffing at uneducated people; it is not their uneducation but their education that I scoff at. Let none mistake this for a sneer at the half-educated; what I dislike is the educated half. But I dislike it, not because I dislike education, but because, given the modern philosophy or absence of philosophy, education is turned against itself, destroying that very sense of variety and proportion which it is the object of education to give.

5 No man who worships education has got the best out of education; no man who sacrifices everything to education is even educated. I need not mention here the many recent examples of this monomania, rapidly turning into mad persecution, such as the ludicrous persecution of the families who live on barges. What is wrong is a neglect of principle; and the principle is that without a gentle contempt for education, no gentleman's education is complete.

6 I use the casual phrase casually; for I do not concern myself with the gentleman but with the citizen. Nevertheless, there is this historic half-truth in the case for aristocracy; that it is sometimes a little easier for the aristocrat, at his best, to have this last touch of culture which is a superiority to culture. Nevertheless, the truth of which I speak has nothing to do with any special culture of any special class. It has belonged to any number of peasants, especially when they were poets; it is this which

gives a sort of natural distinction to Robert Burns and the peasant poets of Scotland. The power which produces it more effectively than any blood or breed is religion; for religion may be defined as that which puts the first things first. Robert Burns was justifiably impatient with the religion he inherited from Scottish Calvinism; but he owed something to his inheritance. His instinctive consideration of men as men came from an ancestry which still cared more for religion than education. The moment men begin to care more for education than for religion they begin to care more for ambition than for education. It is no longer a world in which the souls of all are equal before heaven, but a world in which the mind of each is bent on achieving unequal advantage over the other. There begins to be a mere vanity in being educated whether it be self-educated or merely state-educated. Education ought to be a searchlight given to a man to explore everything, but very specially the things most distant from himself. Education tends to be a spotlight; which is centered entirely on himself. Some improvement may be made by turning equally vivid and perhaps vulgar spotlights upon a large number of other people as well. But the only final cure is to turn off the limelight and let him realize the stars.