

THE EDUCATIONAL HORIZON

PRESENTING NEWS AND VIEWS OF INTEREST TO TEACHERS AND ALL OTHERS SEEKING IMPROVEMENT IN EDUCATION

THE THANKLESS PROFESSION

(By HUGH MacLENNAN)

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The most exploited, neglected and underprivileged class in Canada are not people the comfortable classes never see. They are not sharecroppers, migrant fruit pickers, sweat-shop girls or fishermen in outports. They are the nation's schoolteachers.

For years our newspapers have filled with pleas from the teachers for some kind of concrete help, and just as persistently we have refused to listen. Most of us don't even know that our whole system of public education is in danger of collapse. We close our eyes to this reality because in North America we refuse to accept the idea of tragedy—the kind of wrongdoing which is inevitable as a result of the character of essentially good people and of the situations in which they find themselves. Whenever a tragic situation shows its face, we instinctively turn our backs.

Last spring in Montreal the lay teachers in the Catholic schools were driven to a despair which sent them out on strike to face the wrath of the Duplessis government. In hundreds of communities all over the country, schools have been closed down because teachers cannot be found to work in them. Ontario, by no means the most backward of provinces, admits a shortage of at least a thousand teachers for the coming year, and authorities see no hope of the situation improving. Yet, when the Catholic teachers went on strike in Montreal, I heard a prominent citizen bemoaning the fact that the strike might well mean an increase in taxes, and I heard a wealthy friend console him with the sputtering rejoinder: "Mark my words, they'll come to heel in twenty-four hours. If they had any guts, they wouldn't have become teachers in the first place."

When I say that the plight of teachers in Canada today is a tragic one, I mean tragic in the way a playwright or a psychologist would mean it. I mean that the wrong we do our teachers, and the wrong they permit themselves to suffer, springs from the psychological relationship between ourselves and them. It results largely from the promptings of our subconscious resentments, combined with the excessive pride with which teachers cover up their own defencelessness. If we were rational about our attitude towards the teaching profession, the plight of our teachers would not be on our conscience, and something sensible would have been done long ago to remedy the disgraceful situation now existing in Canadian schools.

Meanwhile, the majority of those teachers who remain in the profession are finding it increasingly difficult to live. Hundreds of them have had to find mental jobs outside their regular work in order to balance their budget against rising costs. In one Ontario city there is a school principal who washes pans in a bakery on Saturdays, and no one knows how many more such jobs are held by men and women who do not tell anyone what they are forced to do during their earned hours of rest. A few enlightened cities and one or two small towns have faced the realities and have raised the teachers' salaries drastically, but in the country as a whole the problem is consistently ignored. As a result, our system of popular education is in danger of disintegration. A few more years of apathy and hypocrisy may ruin it irrevocably, and that does not mean ruin for teachers; it means ruin for a whole society.

None of us can blame ignorance as an excuse for our refusal to act. The essential facts of the situation are all available. Some of them have been disclosed by a report of the Canadian Education Association, published in December 1948, a survey—entitled *The Status of the Teaching Profession*—which covers all the provinces except Quebec and Newfoundland. Let me give a few of them here.

At the present time, nearly 16 per cent of Canada's teachers receive less than \$1,000 a year.

Only 5 per cent of the teachers—these figures are for teachers in public schools; they do not touch on high schools—are paid \$1,000 and over a year.

In 1946-47, when the average Canadian wage scale was about 50 per cent above the 1939 level, the salaries of teachers—already well below the norm earned by all male workers over ten years of age—had shown an average increase of only 36 per cent. Nor was this relatively paltry increase unique or in accordance with merit and training. In city schools it was only 1 per cent, and generally the least increase went to those teach-

ers with superior training. Holders of post-graduate degrees were increased on the provincial median by only 6 per cent, and the median of provincial salaries to holders of any kind of a university degree was \$1,668 a year.

It is difficult for any of us to grasp the true significance of those figures. What they mean is this: the teachers of Canada, economically speaking, have sunk to the bottom of the population. In general they are paid less than unskilled workers in industry. In some communities their wages are lower than those of semi-literate odd-job men. In the words of the report, "salaries are such that, in general, an ambitious man commits his family to a life of general poverty if he embraces teaching as a life work."

Worse than the mere fact of hardship—worse because it corrodes the spirit—is the necessity, which compels the poverty of teachers to be "genteel." It is the coldest, most bitter, most humiliating kind of poverty known to man. The teacher not only pays far more for his original training than an industrial worker; he must also—because of the nature of his work—associate with "genteel" people, live in a "genteel" neighborhood and dress in a "genteel" fashion. He would lose his job if he tried to save on his budget by going to class in overalls. If he has children, his life becomes a threadbare war of survival, filled with petty humiliations which gnaw at his self-confidence, because association with his intellectual equals means that he must associate with men far better off than himself. He is condemned for life to the humiliation of never being able to return in kind the hospitality of his friends.

A common belief held by the public is that teachers are recompensed for their low incomes by a greater degree of security than the business man or the industrial worker enjoys. In many countries this is the case, but it is not true in most parts of Canada. At the present time, minimum pensions in three provinces are only \$240, \$360 and \$365 a year, while maximum pensions are no more than 60 per cent to 65 per cent of the pension which had previously constituted an annual salary. In some provinces teachers have so little security of tenure that yearly contracts are still in use. In many communities, especially in small towns and villages, it is assumed that teachers will undertake a great variety of extra work for nothing, such as teaching in Sunday schools, supervising sports dramatics and clubs for the young. It is also the practice of many small towns to exact from the teachers a standard of behavior more puritanical than that demanded from anyone else. There are places where a male teacher would be fired if it were known that he drank a glass of beer, and a female teacher would be run out of the profession if she smoked cigarettes at a bridge party.

These are only a portion of the facts which underline the insecurity, the humiliations, and the economic hardship which teachers in Canada must endure. There are many other aspects of the problem. Is our educational system democratic? Do all of our children have an equal chance?

At the present moment in Canada a child who grows up in a few of our larger cities—and not all of them by any means—has a chance of attending a fairly good school. One who grows up in a village or a small town practically never has such a chance, while in many districts there are simply no schools at all. It is idle, therefore, to pretend that we are a truly democratic nation when there is no equality of opportunity in our schools.

Take another aspect of the problem. Are our teachers, on the whole, competent to teach the young of a nation with great future responsibilities? Considering how deeply we are in debt to the teachers of Canada and how little we have done to discharge that debt, it seems a gratuitous insult to accuse the profession as a whole of incompetence. Yet such a charge must be made, not against the good teachers, certainly not against individuals, but against ourselves for permitting a situation to develop in which low standards are inevitable.

We would regard it as unthinkable to permit a man to practice medicine unless he was qualified to do so, and the minimum qualification we require of a doctor is that he possess a degree from a reputable medical school. But no

such inhibition prevents us from letting untrained people into the teaching profession. At the present time only 15 per cent of our entire teaching personnel in the public schools of Canada have completed as much as three to four years of university training, while approximately 60 per cent have never been to college at all.

We are an efficient country in most respects. Our industrialists spare no expense to guarantee that the mechanical equipment of their factories is supervised and managed with the maximum of expert skill. Yet we have no hesitation in turning over the education of our children to unqualified persons, many of whom enter teaching only as a stop-gap while waiting for something better to turn up. It is a truism that a good teacher can so inspire a child that the whole course of the child's life is changed. It is also a truism that a bad teacher can infect his pupils with a hatred of learning, can stifle their imaginations and give them such faulty habits of work that they will never have a chance of gaining even material success.

For this whole situation—for the shortage of teaching personnel, for the hardship of the teachers themselves, for low standards within the profession—there is a single concrete remedy. We must care enough to pay enough. A simple sum of arithmetic shows clearly that until we consent to pay our teachers, on the average, at least three times what we pay them now we will never have a satisfactory system of public education in Canada.

This statement seems unreasonable, recollect certain key facts reported by the Canadian Education Association. Both laymen and experienced teachers agree that the main reason why standards within the profession are low is that most of the teachers are insufficiently educated. These two groups also agree, in the main, that all teachers should have college degrees. And yet at the present moment the average salary we pay a college graduate teaching in Canada is only \$1,668 a year! How many college graduates can be expected to choose teaching as a lifework at that price?

Suppose we multiply that sum by three and get a salary of approximately \$4,500. Assuming that the average age of a teacher lies somewhere between thirty-five and forty, a salary of \$4,500 is—in comparison with salary scales in business and other professions—the bare minimum with which we can expect an able college graduate to be satisfied as he enters middle life with a growing family. To be approached as a standard in a few Canadian cities, but those cities contain only a portion of our teaching population, and those cities also add their high salaries to the absurd lows of other towns to give us the average of \$1,668.

It is my conviction that if the Canadian public would use this figure as a touchstone—\$4,500 as the minimum wage for an experienced

teacher with a college degree by the time he reaches mid-career, with the prospect of still further raises as the teacher becomes head of a department or undertakes more administrative work—the whole problem of popular education in Canada would solve itself within ten years.

At the present moment there are thousands of able young men and women who would like to take up teaching, but they cannot bring themselves to enter a profession which condemns them to poverty, humiliation and low standards. Able people who want to teach are not in search of wealth. They are not looking for an easy job. They are not, as one man called them in a letter to the investigators of the Education Association, "the more mediocre men, those who lack confidence in themselves, (who) are afraid to compete for life best rewards." Those who choose to enter the teaching profession are, almost universally people who are fond of children, who believe themselves able to do the work well and are convinced that the teaching of young children is one of the most important professions in the world. But they are also individuals with full lives of their own to lead; if they were not they would be less valuable as teachers. While prepared to sacrifice much, they are not prepared to sacrifice everything. They want to be able to buy books, to travel within reason, to undertake further study, to play a full part in social and community life and to raise a family with some degree of security and well-being.

Many such persons enter the teaching profession today, but in Canada most of them leave it after a few years service has convinced them that Stephen Leacock made an understatement when he called teaching "the most thankless and underpaid profession in the world." Conclusions to be drawn from such facts are inescapable. To entice good people to enter the profession, and furthermore to keep them there, we must spend at least three times as much on teacher's salaries as we do today. If we wanted to, we could.

It is at this point that the tragedy of the teacher's situation in relation to society as a whole most clearly reveals itself. Teachers, as a group, are unpopular. If anyone doubts this statement, I recommend that he study carefully, with an ear for overtones, some of the answers to questionnaires submitted by the Education Association to representative members of the general public. Though probably none of those who made the answers knew it, the reason for the unpopularity of teachers lies deep in our subconscious.

Three groups of human beings combine to form any educational system: the children, the teachers and the parents. On the surface, all three groups appear to work in harmony toward a common goal. Under the surface lie natural antipathies so profound that few of us are aware of them. Furthermore, in any relationship of three,

one must inevitably be esteemed less in the eyes of the other two, and so in this relationship of three it is against the teacher that these human antipathies are concentrated.

Most children desire to be taught. As they grow into adolescence, ambition is born, and combining with fear of what may happen to them

if they grow up in total ignorance, spurs them on. But under this conscious level their nature rebels, to greater or less degree according to the individual concerned, against the forced restraint of learning difficult subjects. Regardless of what some modern theorists claim, Plato was right when he remarked that there is no royal road to geo-

metry. Mathematics, the basic structure of language, even carpentry and cooking cannot be mastered without hard work and discipline, and it is a pernicious falsehood for any teacher to tell either pupil or parents that they can be. In spite of a child's desire to be taught, it is unnatural for him to

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