

Half-Truths for 30,000,000

The making of history is the unmaking of our text books. Cedric Fowler, who contributed to a recent issue of NEW OUTLOOK "The Crisis of the Ph.D.," reports upon an inquiry into the myriad of half-truths taught today as facts in schools.

MODERN education has progressed far beyond the three *R*'s that our grandfathers studied. New subjects have been introduced that were not dreamed of in a simpler social system. History, civics, economics, science, politics, are all included in the modern curriculum, subjects which but for a single, glaring fault in their implementing should make for a broad introduction into the problems of life and labor that our school children will meet on graduation. We are trying to make citizens of the contemporary world rather than to turn out pupils who can do no more than read glibly, figure rapidly and enjoy a hastily scraped acquaintance with the classics and the more easily memorized dates of history. Children in school today are expected to know how their nation was formed, what social and economic forces go to make a people, how their own country takes its place in the stream of world movement. Science has taken an increasingly broader place in primary and secondary education. Economics has been brought down from the higher mystery level to the public school, and high school students (if they are interested) can recognize an economic trend when they see it—which is more than their elders could do at the same age. Education, after centuries of quiet muddling with the simplest outlines of knowledge, has widened its scope to include almost the whole of human activity.

This development has been a matter of the past twenty to thirty years. The youth of the gay 90's knew nothing about civics, and presumably cared less—his teacher never bothered him with the subject. History, beyond a standard glorification of our patriotic forefathers, was a closed book.



Geography meant capitals and states, the more prominent capes and islands, rivers, and a dreary list of "principal products." The ideal of educating the child to take a real place in adult life was not recognized. The old habit of learning isolated, and largely useless, facts by rote was still the limit of the standard educational method.

Few felt any lack in the school curriculum. Sub-

The Half-Truths in Our Schools

jects considered now in every elementary and secondary school were not felt to be important. Social and economic trends were things for the cloistered theorizing of high-brows and professional social prophets, not for the classroom. America was the land of golden opportunity, and all a good citizen needed for a successful life was thrift, industry, shrewdness and a little luck. Even vocational training was almost unknown—the graduate acquired that in the school of experience outside the academic walls. He learned about life by living, with the scantiest minimum of preparation before. School pupils were children, and when they left school they were expected to become adults, with no attempt to graduate the step. It was a simpler world they entered on, and the introduction to it was elementary in time, effort and intellectual quality.

Life has become more complex for young Americans since the time of their fathers and grandfathers, and educational method has become more complex and more comprehensive with it. Schools today possess a technique for imparting a generous understanding of the modern social scene. "Dalton plan," "project method" and the "educational forum scheme" have penetrated, in however modified a form, to all but the most backward school systems. Educational leaders have developed the technical apparatus for teaching a knowledge of modern society in its full complexity and variety. The work of Dewey, Thorndike and a score of other authorities has liberated the school-room from its stuffy atmosphere, has made it possible for it to become an ante-room to adult life.



In the light of the foregoing brief summary of this praiseworthy achievement in creating a system of education adapted to the needs of modern times, it is surprising to discover that *what is taught* today is out of date, out-moded and in many instances at complete variance, not only with the facts of adult life, but even with the facts of the life being lived by the pupil. The printed lesson which is put into the hands of our 30,000,000 students is in so many cases simply not what is currently accepted as essential truth that much of the large investment which has been made in our educational establishment is seriously jeopardized.

American teachers rely more on the use of texts than their colleagues elsewhere in the world.

The nation spends \$50,000,000 on new works and new editions, nearly two per cent of the total educational cost. Publishers produce some 65,000,000 annually, an amount that offers two new copies per year to every child in our educational system. It is definitely a profit making enterprise, even in the field of free textbooks, and a best seller in this class will keep the royalties and the profits rolling in for years. New texts are launched mainly on speculation, for no central control or even objective survey of the field exists. Many hundreds of ventures fall by the wayside—the mortality is at least as high as in the production of novels. Publishers have complained that the field is chaotic, over-produced and frequently over-sold, but profits can be conjured from chaos and so far no attempt has been made at regulation.



But more serious than manufacturing chaos is the fact that, barring a few brilliant exceptions, our textbooks are out of date. They have not kept pace with the advance in method that has taken American education, in the matter of technique, to a leading place in the school systems of the world. Not only are our textbooks backward, they

The Half-Truths in Our Schools

are in many examples misrepresentative of the subjects they are designed to teach. The teacher required to instruct in the social, political and economic aspects of modern life is forced to rely on books that give him little assistance and often positive hindrance. The split between progressive curricula and inadequate texts often nullifies his efforts to teach an understanding of the modern world. And the result is apparent—our children are learning from their schoolbooks a social history and a social philosophy that is no longer valid.

Textbooks in economics are especially lagging. The philosophy and often the information of an era long past is dominant. For most textbook authors the progress of political science has apparently stopped with Adam Smith. America is still the land of *laissez-faire* and boundless opportunity that our forefathers knew. Unemployment, where it is mentioned, is considered a passing phase best cured by time, patience and perhaps the placing of the unemployed on the land. There is no widely used elementary text, either in economics or history, that considers the problem of business cycles as having a vital bearing upon the growth and development of our country. Even books revised or first published in 1932 and 1933 ignore or minimize the present Depression. One popular example gives it eight lines, and then finds immediate consolation in a footnote (of sixteen lines) on the world's largest office building and the visit of King Prajadhipok for an operation on his eyes—both American triumphs that far outweigh the setbacks of the present crisis! To the pupil whose father has been unemployed a year or more, this refusal to admit the fact of depression must appear strange, and if the child is sensitive, even callous. His teacher has no official guidance in attempting an explanation, either to outline present conditions, or to give some grasp of the necessary historical background. Whatever the child learns about the economic crisis must be gathered outside his school.



Labor problems have been neglected in all but the most progressive texts, and where they are treated in a realistic and thorough manner frequently lay the author open to the fearsome charge of radicalism. Nothing excites a patriotic society quite so readily. Middle-aged gentlemen who specialize in the word of mouth protection of their country are particularly zealous in this form of national defense. The result has been an almost complete textbook timidity on the subject of labor history. The growth and

organization of the unions is ignored. Labor problems that have led to important changes in law or government policy are omitted, or passed over so rapidly and sketchily that the student has no help in forming an understanding of the issues involved. Books devoted to the makers of America for the most part exclude labor leaders, even the most prominent and socially respectable. Labor problems



today are headline news, yet there is nothing in the history texts to give them meaning. Any approach to a real understanding depends solely on the knowledge, frankness and

The Half-Truths in Our Schools

interest of the individual teacher.

The present economic crisis has greatly increased interest in the problem of poor relief. Thousands of city children come from homes the sole support of which is the municipal relief system. Many thousands have been receiving help from their teachers, in the form of school lunches, clothing and even carfare for the desperately poor. But civics textbooks still in wide use make no mention of this problem in their chapters on city and county government. Relief of distress has been a major city issue for the past two years, surely time enough for the most conservative textbook writer to insert some comment in his latest revised edition. Federal participation in relief has been given slightly more attention, but here again the texts have failed to treat the question as fully as its importance demands. In the happy view of school civics writers, unemployment apparently looks after itself. Children from homes where depression has struck hard know better, but the knowledge does not come from their schoolbooks.

Vocational guidance, perhaps one of the greatest needs of our educational system today, is not mentioned in economics or civics textbooks. As far as school systems are concerned, the young citizen still finds his place in the world as luck and accident direct. No text in the social subjects has been thoughtful or honest enough to give serious consideration to the problem of finding the suitable job. This neglect is all the more astonishing in view of the attention that has been given to the question outside the textbook curriculum. The vocational guidance movement has become one of the most significant factors in modern social work. Bureaus have been set up in all the important cities. Most often these bureaus are connected with the public school systems, but so far their work has not affected the contents of the textbooks used in schools.

Textbook authors are apparently not aware of the necessity for any control, or counsel, in the selection of a job. School biographies of national heroes, especially those concerned with heroes of commerce and industry, emphasize merely individual characteristics. They tell our children that leaders are made solely by their personal merits, their bravery, industrious habits, cunning, luck. No attention is paid to the social forces that created the man, that placed him in his position and arranged events along lines which made it possible for him to become a leader. The constant implication is that any child, given similar virtues (which he can easily acquire if he will try hard enough) and similar chances, which are again generalized to include every child, can do the same. Everyone knows this is not true. It was never wholly true even in that ancient era most favorable to individual enterprise. The social system has changed so radically that even the most conservative mind has recognized the falsity of such an idea. Educational method has furnished the means to cope with the new condition, but our schoolbook authors have neglected their opportunity. Life seemingly moves too fast for them—which is a pity, in view of their influence on our children.

Nor do the civics texts give any adequate hint on what is happening to the scope and function of government today. The Constitution is described as an inviolable document whose perfection admits no need or possibility of change. Checks and balances, according to our schoolbook experts, keep our government eternally remote from the possibilities and dangers of single rule. The President is eternally a mere executive, with no real power over the formation or initiation of laws. Any picture of government as a growing organism, constantly subject to change in response to

The Half-Truths in Our Schools

popular demand and new philosophies of the state, is missing. Increasing state control of industry, state participation in business, the approaching liquidation of local control in matters of social interest, are generally ignored. Civics texts are formal and rigid. Their definitions are dry and hard, and the student can find little basis for an understanding of the newer concepts of government.

The government's new function as mediator between labor and capital is overlooked. A text issued within the past few months makes no mention of the government's recognition of the right to collective bargaining. Surely this step, a distinct break from the philosophy of the past, is important enough to warrant comment. The Administration's industrial program is more prominent than any Federal program since the war, but the textbooks on government have done nothing to prepare the student's mind for the new developments. And at the present rate of textbook progress, the NRA will be laid away in its grave before our educators decide to consider it.

History texts are far behind the accepted opinions on world events, notably on problems of the war. Almost without exception, the belief in the exclusive guilt of Germany and her allies is still taught, even in texts written long after the publication of state documents has branded this theory as a myth. Very few give any indication that Europe in 1914 was an armed camp, each side merely waiting for the spark to set them off. The propaganda tone is kept up in the manner of a Liberty Loan four minute speaker. As far as school historians are concerned, the wounds of 1914 to 1918 should be kept open—surely a dangerous attitude in the present critical situation, when war seems again on the horizon. And they all solemnly repeat the ancient slogan of a war to end wars, to save the world for democracy; as though armaments and dictatorship had been banished forever by the victory of the Allies in 1918.

School histories throughout tend to emphasize military achievements rather than the achievements of peace. Histories of the 19th century give long, detailed analyses of the battles of the Civil War, for example, to the exclusion of careful accounts of the social, industrial and economic growth of the United States as a whole. Perhaps war, battles and the lives of leading generals make more fascinating reading, but a thorough investigation of the social forces that have created the present world would be of more value to the student who will eventually take his place in it. The world he meets on graduation will not be filled with the romance and glory of military combat. It will be a place where economic forces and industrial technique are dominant. Our history texts are not preparing the child for such a world.

History texts also tend to slight the 20th century, although America's most startling development has taken place largely since 1900. One text, perhaps the most advanced in its field, gives two hundred pages of a seven hundred total to an account of the last three decades. The remaining five hundred are devoted to problems and episodes of the previous century, many of which are closed chapters in our history. The older texts invariably contrive to give the impression that the 19th century somehow was better than the present, that the people were happier, purer and led more wholesome lives. A pietistic, and often misleading, attitude is allowed to prevail on national questions of the past. A background of illusion is frequently built up for the interpretation of present issues. It is not a healthy basis for an understanding of modern life.

The Half-Truths in Our Schools

The treatment of foreign relations is among the least adequate in the history field. Our non-recognition of Russia is attributed to an inherent, American hatred of dictatorship, although we have not hesitated to recognize Fascist Italy and Hitlerite Germany. Trade advantage is not considered as a motive in our diplomacy. The impression given is one of constant altruism in our relations to South and Central America, although the past two years have seen the government's public disavowal of the policy of Caribbean intervention. No clue is given to the present Administration's attitude to Cuba, although there has plainly been a great change from our previous stand. Although the United States is not a member of the League of Nations, it coöperates in many scores of its activities. History textbooks, beyond an account of Wilson's attempt to bring us into membership, do not deal with the League in any comprehensive way.

The lag between textbook interpretation and the facts of life carries over into health and hygiene. Here the field has been left to moralists and puritans of the first water. Any serious attempt to teach an understanding of sex is lacking. The attitude to alcohol is the most markedly prejudiced. Lurid cuts show the evils of the most moderate use of drink, with the blackened and knobby liver of the drinker contrasted with the clean and shining organ of the total abstainer. Tobacco is almost as strongly condemned, one popular text making the astounding statement: "Any boy who smokes can never hope to succeed in *any* line of endeavor." Another states, as a proven fact, that all insanity, crime and poverty are largely accounted for by the use of alcohol, either by the immediate victim or by one of his ancestors. An older example still in wide use warns against tight lacing, high buttoned shoes and trailing skirts for young women—two fashions that must have gone from the memory of all but veteran teachers, to say nothing of the students. The Prohibition Amendment is universally praised, with all the pious hopes for prosperity and the end of crime that were held in 1919. A class in current events that finds Prohibition condemned in every newspaper and by sweeping votes in the Repeal movement must clash considerably with a class in hygiene.

Arithmetic texts, which one might expect to be immune from criticism, are not designed for the modern world. Problems in money are stated in terms of a vanished era, chiefly concerned with bank interest, mortgage profits, dividend rates and similar adjuncts of an ancient prosperity. The imaginary heroes of the arithmetic problems invariably save from one half to one third of their income—which is a direct defiance of the Buy Now program. Their hours of work are a flagrant violation of the most conservative industrial code. Children of 1933 are asked to "play" at investing \$10,000 in stocks and bonds, which pay interest at the rate of six, seven and even eight per cent! An arithmetic investment, it appears, never passes its dividend. One nationally used textbook goes so far as to give financial advice to the prospective bondholder, remarking that a city bond is the safest form of investment.

The philosophy of the elementary speller is even more quaint. Word and sentence examples preach a doctrine in the outworn tone of Poor Richard. "Some temptations come to the industrious, all temptations come to the idle" is a statement that puts unemployment in the category of sin. "If you want to succeed, save" is a doctrine that is rapidly becoming anti-social, but our spellers repeat it *ad nauseam*. "There is always room at the top" is surely an exploded notion, but children are required solemnly to

The Half-Truths in Our Schools

copy it from teacher's dictation. Unremitting toil and self denial are the basic notes. Recreation, our latest national need, is frowned upon. The child who is incautious enough to take his speller's message seriously will find himself lamentably out of place in the modern world.

This general textbook inadequacy puts a severe handicap on the efforts of the most alert and progressive teacher. School children are like their elders; they tend to accept the printed word as gospel truth. Vocal explanation does not carry a tithe of the printed authority. And when the word of mouth teaching runs contrary to the facts set out in black and white, the division becomes critical. The validity of the teacher's message depends upon individual, unpredictable qualities. The authority of the text is fixed, an established quality that does not alter to meet changed conditions. Faith is greater in the printed word, and our teachers are forced to rely for the major part of their teaching on a textbook basis that is out of date. However well intentioned, they cannot keep pace with the modern world, for their educational materials hold them back. The result is an educational system that fails to equip its graduates for life as they will find it lived.

The advent of better textbooks is certain to be slow. Educational budgets are decreasing, and hard pressed school boards naturally decide to carry on with older equipment rather than sacrifice a more immediate need. The publishing business is first among the depressed industries, and is not capable of offering encouragement to textbook improvement. Funds for research to establish new textbook needs and purposes are lacking, as well as central educational authority to ensure the adoption of new and improved material. Textbook purchasing at present depends as much on the talents of some publisher's salesman as on the merits of the book. Educational experts are seldom called in on the purchase of supplies—perhaps because they are known to favor the most expensive article. And politics has been known to creep into the ordering of schoolbooks. A realistic account of political machines, for example, that named names and repeated specific history, would have some difficulty in passing a politically appointed school board.

But the most serious charge lies against the authors of the school texts themselves. They have refused to meet the student's right to a just and comprehensive understanding of the world he will be required to live in. Perhaps it is because we are indifferent to the need for acquainting our youth with the world we have made for them. European educational systems have recognized this need. New concepts of state and society have hastened to instruct youth in a changing philosophy, to prepare them for the altered conditions they will have to meet. America has done little to organize its school children through the materials of education to meet the demands of present and future society. Conservatism and timidity have been allowed to triumph in a most strategic corner of our educational plan. In view of the new orientation of our social system now going forward, the defect is critical. Our school children are worthy of franker and more realistic treatment than they have received from the authors of their textbooks. And it is not likely that they will thank us when they grow up to find a world as remote from their schoolbooks as the world of 1929 is from 1933.

