

*Prelude
to a
Leacock
Manuscript*

“Teaching the Unteachable” has a contemporary ring, but it was written about fifty years ago and was published in *The Teachers’ Magazine*, Vol. VI (June 1924), p. 13. Its reproduction in manuscript facsimile here is a fitting part of our McGill Year celebrations and, at the same time, an example of serendipity in educational research.

The McGill Journal of Education became aware of the existence of the original manuscript through Donna Ronish who is writing a thesis on the history of women’s education at McGill. Mrs. Ronish’s thesis adviser happened to know — through a brief note in a 1967 *McGill News* — that Mrs. Elizabeth Seferovitch, B.A. ’96, M.A. ’00, is the oldest living alumna of McGill. Since the aforementioned thesis adviser also happens to be the Editor of this *Journal*, the connection becomes clear — Mrs. Ronish sought an interview with Mrs. Seferovitch, Mrs. Seferovitch mentioned the manuscript, Mrs. Ronish told the Editor, *et voilà*.

Special thanks are due to Mrs. Seferovitch and to her nieces, Mrs. Hayhoe and Mrs. Gordon, for their generous cooperation. M.G.

our oldest alumna

Mrs. Elizabeth Seferovitch is the only living graduate of 1896, and was the first woman gold medallist of McGill. She acquired this Leacock manuscript when she was editor of the PAPT *Teachers’ Magazine*. The story goes that she asked Professor Leacock to contribute an article and then later requested permission to keep the manuscript. As both Mrs. Seferovitch and Professor Leacock lectured at McGill at about

the same time, they met casually but fairly often in the faculty room and recollections of Professor Leacock are among Mrs. Seferovitch's many worth-while memories of McGill.

Mrs. Seferovitch was also on the staff of the Montreal High School under three surnames, Miss Hammond, Mrs. Irwin and Mrs. Seferovitch. She is now living with her niece, Mrs. Richard Hayhoe in Toronto.

J. G. GORDON

Teaching The Unteachable

A discussion of practical education

Siemens Leach

It is hardly to be presumed that teachers are interested in education & how should any apology be necessary to readers of this magazine for introducing into its pages a discussion of such a subject.

The age in which we live is one of ever increasing education from the statistical point of view, — the millions of scholars & the billions of

dollar spent in teaching them, -
- the world never saw any-
thing like it before, nor ever
dreamed of it

But it does not follow that in
its way aspect our colossal
~~System~~ ^{machines} of education is in advance
of the humbler systems that
have preceded it. Especially is
this doubtful in regard to
nature of our studies and the
emphasis that is to be placed
on what are called practical
subjects.

In generations before our own

the process of education once it
had passed the elementary stages
had very little to do with the
routine of the world's work. It
had been designed originally to
enable people to read the
Scriptures and from that beginning
it had been expanded into a
sort of introduction to the liter-
-ature and philosophy of the
learned world. On that basis
it became a method necessary to
certain professions and to that
extent it was connected with the
art of earning a livelihood. But
its main aspect was faced

in another direction. It represented
a cultivation and adornment of the
mind rather than a means of
filling the pocket.

In our time this is changing.
We live on a practical continent
in a practical age, among a
people who do much and
think little. And our education
threatens to take its colour
from our ^{environment} ~~environment~~

Now education is a
peculiar

see - and try

Education is a peculiar process. You aim at one thing and you hit another. You set out to look for ultimate truth and you don't find it; but incidentally you have acquired a cultivated mind. You pursue studies that you think will be of use in your business. They are not. But by the time you are done with them you yourself are a better man for your business or for any other business. Therein lies the real meaning of education. It is a process that brings out of a man all the inborn capacity that is in him. The Latin poet Horace said that, but it is none the less true all the same. The truth is that if you pursue your studies with too directly practical an aim you miss the mark. The worst influence that bears on our present-day education is the exaggerated demand that it should be practical. It ought only to be practical by accident. Our education, especially in newer communities, not properly balanced with tradition, is being distorted under this influence. The demand for usefulness brings into being a host of studies that are mere frauds and pretences. The futile attempt is made to teach the unteachable. It is no use attempting to give courses on such things as personality, cheerfulness, and brotherly love. These things are valuable. But they are not education. They may sometimes be a result of it, but when reduced to the form of lectures, courses and lessons, they are a mere parody.

If I have it on excellent grounds that in a certain state university in the middle west they have appointed a professor of "Personality". In another place, — according to the press reports of the day on which I write, — three women professors ~~threw up~~ threw up their jobs

because the girls under their
charge were not allowed to study
the theory of nutrition without
being compelled to take an elem-
entary course in chemistry. No

doubt the same people would
like to teach arithmetic without
the multiplication table or
astronomy without the stars.

¶¶ is the existence of the new
fake studies which threatens the
balance of the other disciplin-
ary training

see print'

disciplinary training which is the real basis of education. Students are impatient of everything that is difficult. They want something easy, immediate and pretentious. They confuse the result with the process. If I want to produce a capacity for thought in a student I will teach him comic sections. I will not give him a course on "Concentration in Six Lessons" and especially will I refuse to give him a course called "Concentration-Applied to Business." Our schools are filled with just such courses and just such methods as that; and they are nothing else than a fraud, a sham and a lie.

Few people realize the extraordinary value, the practical value, I will say—of studies absolutely impractical in character. What a person needs most in life—in business, in art, in politics, in anything—is the capacity for sustained effort and concentrated attention. In the intellectual field there is no other asset like this. And you can get it best by devoting your studies to something making a demand on the utmost mental power that you have. That is why in any well-ordered university we lay the basis of all our work on such things as the study of the Latin language, the elements of mathematics, physics and chemistry. These are real things. Through them is the gateway to mental advancement. To ask if you need them in your business is childish. Of course you don't. You need them in your head. It is you that is being fashioned and shaped, not the business.

¶ Only a little while ago a prominent engineer speaking in Montreal before a lunch club enquired what is the use of Latin. Who needs it or uses it? And to the same effect Henry Ford ^{is said to have} told us that 'history is all bunk'. But the engineer who spoke represented, at one remove

of vol in person, a mental culture
largely built up on the disciplinary
study of the classical languages;
while Mr Ford's statement, — if he
ever made it: I make no pretence to
copy it, — probably occurs in the
course of the volume in which, with
certain external help he undertook
to write a little history about
himself.

Stephen Leacock

The Oldest Living Graduate

. . . as the years slipped past, the ties of memory began to tighten in their hold. There was time, here and there, in the struggle of life, for a fleeting glance towards the past. And lo! How soft the colours that began to lie on the pictured vision of his college days. The professoriate, once derided, how wise they seemed. It is ever their hard lot to be honoured only when they are dead; but all the greater is the honour . . .

While there is time, let us be up and doing. Before yet we are the Oldest Living Graduate, let us borrow something of the spirit that inspires him. Let us discount a note against the future with Father Time, and receive its value in the glowing coin of a present affection. While our class yet live, let us realize what a splendid group they are; and let us find the opportunity to tell the professors how much we owe to them before we write our gratitude upon their tombstones. And if our college wants our support, our help, and our enthusiasm, let us bring it forth with all the affection of the Oldest Living Graduate and with all the power and eagerness of the youngest.

STEPHEN LEACOCK, 1923

Stephen Leacock, "The Oldest Living Graduate," *College Days*, London: Bodley Head, 1923, pp. 44-6.