

Book Reviews

C. Turney, Editor.
PIONEERS OF AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION. Vol. 3.
STUDIES OF THE DEVELOPMENT
OF EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA, 1900-1950.
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By some strange coincidence, I have recently encountered a number of people who have sneered at the biographical approach to history. These critics have seemed to imply that biography is an inferior form of historiography, much lower on the methodological hierarchy than whatever approach they happened to favour or practice. Some even claimed that biography necessarily lacks socio-intellectual context and that it fails to deal adequately with issues and trends. I disagree on all counts. In refutation of these complaints and in defence of the biographical approach to the history of education, I am pleased to bring to the attention of **M.J.E.** readers **Pioneers of Australian Education**, the third volume in a series examining the development of Australian education. The previous books dealt with the 19th century, this one considers the first half of the 20th. Through this work I have gained not only information about people whose names were both known and unknown to me, but also fresh insights into an educational system with which I was very familiar. In addition, I found here some important ideas about Australian society and its values.

I must confess that the development of Australian education was a topic that seemed excruciatingly dull and grey when presented to me long ago and far way in Sydney. This was partly because it was faceless. But by using the biographical approach, the volume under review has livened the subject to a satisfying degree, helping me realize that the highly centralized system of public education in which I grew up was not quite as impersonal as it seemed, that somewhere there was a brain and a heart.

This book focusses on the backgrounds, ideas and careers of fifteen significant individuals; it examines their failures as well as their successes, their intransigence as well as their

innovativeness, their intellectual weaknesses as well as their intelligence. These unlikely heroes are professional educators all. They are government bureaucrats, principals of teachers' colleges, professors of education, heads of independent schools, Montessori enthusiasts, the director of a national research agency, and a scholar/writer. The list, which includes only three women, contains some people who were prominent during their lifetimes and have remained well-known and some who were rescued from obscurity. All deserve their place in the educational record though, much to the credit of the editor and the nine other contributors, **Pioneers of Australian Education** is not merely a collection of high praises. Thus, several of the subjects emerge from these pages with the lustre of their reputations just a little dimmer.

Australian education in the first half of the 20th century could to a large extent be characterized as "hand me down," as following the lead from abroad or, as I.L. Kandel of Teachers College, Columbia University is reported to have put it in 1937, "Australian education was accustomed to follow the safe orthodoxies of Europe and America, thirty years behind" (p.133). Though Australian Confederation was achieved in 1901, a palpable residue of colonialism remained and the soul-searching quest for national identity that is so pervasive in Canadian culture does not seem to have emerged with force in Australia until after World War II. Nevertheless, the early part of the era was marked by serious efforts to reform education to make pragmatic adaptations of foreign ideas to the Australian scene, and to devise some distinctively Australian solutions, (such as correspondence and radio courses), to particular Australian problems, (such as vast distances and the isolation of children).

Paradoxically, it was during this period, while three of the Directors of Education discussed in this book (Frank Tate of Victoria, William T. McCoy of Tasmania, and Stephen H. Smith of New South Wales) helped develop monolithic, uniform state school systems, that there was widespread interest in the ideas and practices of the New Education. Old approaches such as payment by results, the use of pupil-teachers, the dominance of examinations, authoritarian inspectors and the primacy of subject matter were all being seriously challenged by the theories of Froebel, Herbart, Dewey, Kilpatrick, and Montessori. While conformity, discipline and submissiveness may have remained virtues entrenched in social custom, independence and creativity were encouraged by educational experimenters. In particular, the Dalton Plan which was devised by Helen Parkhurst of Dalton, Massachusetts, seems to have been very popular in the 1920s and '30s. It was basically a large-scale, non-structured project method which was designed to break down subject barriers by focussing on broad themes and was intended to foster children's responsibility for their own learning through the employment of learning contracts. The Dalton Plan is mentioned in virtually

every essay in this book.

However, individuals who attempted to introduce innovations such as the Dalton Plan - for example, George S. Browne of Melbourne Teachers' College and the University of Melbourne and Ewan N. McQueen of PLC Croydon - found that the forces of convention remained powerful, that Australian society was a strange mixture of populism and elitism, that it was very difficult to make lasting changes. Indeed, the most successful and enduring innovations were made in the infant schools, through the work of converts to the Montessori method such as Martha M. Simpson and Lillian de Lissa, and in the private girls' schools, through the imagination and effort of women like Dorothy Ross. Private schools, because they had a major responsibility for secondary schooling until well into the period, played a very important role in Australian education. Perhaps it was because society as a whole still expected girls to fulfil their traditional roles as home-makers and not to undertake careers or assume positions of leadership that there did not seem to be great risk involved in experimentation at some girls' schools; but the private establishments for boys, which were modelled on the English public schools, generally maintained a conservative approach to study, a competitive approach to sport and an elitist spirit. Two headmasters presented in **Pioneers of Australian Education**, Leonard Robson of Sydney Church of England Grammar School ("Shore") and J.R. Darling of Geelong Grammar, typify this position. They were impressive and well-respected educators but perhaps the most engaging of all the people portrayed here is Christopher R. McRae, Professor of Education and later Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sydney. He was a brilliant scholar and a convincing, sensitive teacher (I remember him clearly) so that a remark he once made seems apt in his own case when he gave up his chair to become an administrator. He said, "It always seems a pity when an outstanding teacher is diverted into administration, but it is not easy to find a bad teacher with the other necessary qualifications" (p. 161).

While there is inevitably some variation in the quality of the writing in this volume, all eight chapters are clearly presented, giving balanced views of personal and professional developments of their subjects against relevant social and ideological backgrounds. Some may be a trifle stolid and touches of humour are rare, but it is more than nostalgia that made all the essays interesting to this reader. No matter what the critics say, I remain convinced that the humanizing of education through the biographical approach to its history is an eminently worthwhile enterprise and one that has been successfully carried through here.

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