



Lord Russell

Photo by David Seymour—Magnum

# University Education and Modern Conditions\*

By BERTRAND RUSSELL

**E**DUCATION is a vast and complex subject involving many problems of great difficulty. I propose, in what follows, to deal with only one of these problems, namely, the adaptation of university education to modern conditions.

Universities are an institution of considerable antiquity. They developed during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries out of cathedral schools where scholastic theologians learned the art of dialectic. But, in fact, the aims which inspired universities go back to ancient times.

One may say that Plato's Academy was the first university. Plato's Academy had certain well-marked objectives. It aimed at producing the sort of people who would be suitable to become Guardians in his ideal Republic. The education which Plato designed was not in his day what would now be called "cultural." A "cultural" education consists mainly in the learning of Greek and Latin. But the Greeks had no need to learn Greek and no occasion to learn Latin. What Plato mainly wished his Academy to teach was, first, mathematics and astronomy, and, then, philosophy. The philosophy was to have a scientific inspiration with a tincture of Orphic mysticism.

Something of this sort, in various modified forms, persisted in the West until the Fall of Rome. After some centuries, it was taken up by the Arabs and, from them, largely through the Jews, transmitted back to the West. In the West it still retained much of Plato's original political purpose, since it aimed at producing an educated elite with a more or less complete monopoly of political power. This aim persisted, virtually unchanged, until the latter half of the nineteenth century. From that time onwards, the aim has become increasingly modified by the intrusion of two new elements: democracy and science. The intrusion of democracy into academic practice and theory is much more

profound than that of science, and much more difficult to combine with anything like the aims of Plato's Academy.

Until it was seen that political democracy had become inevitable, universal education, which is now taken for granted in all civilized countries, was vehemently opposed, on grounds which were broadly aristocratic. There had been ever since ancient times a very sharp line between the educated and the uneducated. The educated had had a severe training and had learnt much, while the uneducated could not read or write. The educated, who had a monopoly of political power, dreaded the extension of schools to the "lower classes." The President of the Royal Society, in the year 1807, considered that it would be disastrous if working men could read, since he feared that they would spend their time reading Tom Paine. When my grandfather established an elementary school in his parish, well-to-do neighbors were outraged, saying that he had destroyed the hitherto aristocratic character of our neighborhood. It was political democracy—at least, in England—that brought a change of opinion in this matter. Disraeli, after securing the vote for urban working men, favoured compulsory education with the phrase, "We must educate our masters." Education came to seem the right of all who desired it. But it was not easy to see how this right was to be extended to university education; nor, if it were, how universities could continue to perform their ancient functions.

The reasons which have induced civilized countries to adopt universal education are various. There were enthusiasts for enlightenment who saw no limits to the good that could be done by instruction. Many of these were very influential in the early advocacy of compulsory education. Then there were practical

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men who realized that a modern State and modern processes of production and distribution cannot easily be managed if a large proportion of the population cannot read. A third group were those who advocated education as a democratic right. There was a fourth group, more silent and less open, which saw the possibilities of education from the point of view of official propaganda. The importance of education in this regard was very great. In the eighteenth century, most wars were unpopular; but, since men have been able to read the newspapers, almost all wars have been popular. This is only one instance of the hold on public opinion which Authority has acquired through education.

Although universities were not directly concerned in these educational processes, they have been profoundly affected by them in ways which are, broadly speaking, inevitable, but which are, in part, very disturbing to those who wish to preserve what was good in older ideals.

It is difficult to speak in advocacy of older ideals without using language that has a somewhat old-fashioned flavour. There is a distinction, which formerly received general recognition, between skill and wisdom. The growing complexities of technique have tended to blur this distinction, at any rate in certain regions.

There are kinds of skill which are not specially respected although they are difficult to acquire. A contortionist, I am told, has to begin training in early childhood, and, when proficient, he possesses a very rare and difficult skill. But it is not felt that this skill is socially useful, and it is, therefore, not taught in schools or universities. A great many skills, however, indeed a rapidly increasing number, are very vital elements in the wealth and power of a nation. Most of these skills are new and do not command the respect of ancient tradition. Some of them may be considered to minister to wisdom, but a great many certainly do not.

But what, you will ask, do you mean by "wisdom"? I am not prepared with a neat definition. But I will do my best to convey what I think the word is capable of meaning. It is a word concerned partly with knowledge and partly with feeling. It should denote a certain intimate union of knowledge with apprehension of human destiny and the purposes of life. It requires a certain breadth of vision, which is hardly possible without considerable knowledge. But it demands, also, a breadth of feeling, a certain kind of universality of sympathy.

I think that higher education should do what is possible towards promoting not only knowledge, but wisdom. I do not think that this is easy; and I do not think that the aim should be too conscious, for, if it is, it becomes stereotyped and priggish. It should be something existing almost unconsciously in the teacher and conveyed almost unintentionally to the pupil. I agree with Plato in thinking this the greatest thing that education can do. Unfortunately, it is one of the things most threatened by the intrusion of crude democratic shibboleths into our universities.

The fanatic of democracy is apt to say that all men are equal. There is a sense in which this is true, but it is not a sense which much concerns the educator. What can be meant truly by the phrase "All men are equal" is that in certain respects they have equal rights and should have an equal share of basic political power. Murder is a crime whoever the victim may be, and everybody should be protected against it by the law and the police. Any set of men or women which has no share in political power is pretty certain to suffer injustices of an indefensible sort. All men should be equal before the law. It is such principles which constitute what is valid in democracy.

But this should not mean that we cannot recognize differing degrees of skill or merit in different individuals. Every teacher

knows that some pupils are quick to learn and others are slow. Every teacher knows that some boys and girls are eager to acquire knowledge, while others have to be forced into the minimum demanded by Authority. When a group of young people are all taught together in one class, regardless of their greater or less ability, the pace has to be too quick for the stupid and too slow for the clever. The amount of teaching that a young person needs depends to an enormous extent upon his ability and his tastes. A stupid child will only pay attention to what has to be learnt while the teacher is there to insist upon the subject-matter of the lesson. A really clever young person, on the contrary, needs opportunity and occasional guidance when he finds some difficulty momentarily insuperable. The practice of teaching clever and stupid pupils together is extremely unfortunate, especially as regards the ablest of them. Infinite boredom settles upon these outstanding pupils while matters that they have long ago understood are being explained to those who are backward.

This evil is greater the greater the age of the student. By the time that an able young man is at a university, what he needs is occasional advice (not orders) as to what to read, and an instructor who has time and sympathy to listen to his difficulties. The kind of instructor that I have in mind should be thoroughly competent in the subject in which the student is specializing, but he should still be young enough to remember the difficulties that are apt to be obstacles to the learner, and not yet so ossified as to be unable to discuss without dogmatism. Discussion is a very essential part in the education of the best students and requires an absence of authority if it is to be free and fruitful. I am thinking not only of discussion with teachers but of discussion among the students themselves. For such discussion, there should be leisure. And, indeed, leisure during student years is

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## About the Author

*Acclaimed and controversial Bertrand Russell, 3rd Earl Russell, holds indisputable title to being the most eminent English philosopher of the 20th century. His countless essays and more than 45 books have not only shaped modern philosophy but also earned him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1950, at which time he was characterized as a "champion of humanity and freedom of thought."*

*Lord Russell's interest and influence have encompassed a wide range of subjects—history, social theory, science, mathematics, logic, epistemology, religion, education. He has never hesitated to espouse the unpopular or the unconventional if he considered it the way of truth. Jailed for his pacifism during World War I, Lord Russell again drew fire in 1926 when his theories in *On Education* were considered too advanced—but many have since found favor.*

*In addition to teaching in English universities, he taught in the United States from 1938 to 1944 at the University of Chicago, U.C.L.A. and the Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pa. An appointment at the College of the City of New York was revoked as a result of a controversy over his views of sex and marriage. He has maintained an office at Trinity College, Cambridge, England, since accepting a fellowship there in 1944.*

of the highest importance. When I was an undergraduate, I made a vow that, when in due course I became a lecturer, I would not think that lectures do any good as a method of instruction, but only as an occasional stimulus. So far as the abler students are concerned, I still take this view. Lectures as a means of instruction are traditional in universities and were no doubt useful before the invention of printing, but since that time they have been out of date as regards the abler kind of students.

It is, I am profoundly convinced, a mistake to object on democratic grounds to the separation of abler from less able pupils in teaching. In matters that the public considers important no one dreams of such an application of supposed democracy. Everybody is willing to admit that some athletes are better than others and that movie stars deserve more honour than ordinary mortals. That is because they have a kind of skill which is much admired even by those who do not possess it. But intellectual ability, so far from being admired by stupid boys, is positively and actively despised; and even among grown-ups, the term "egg-head" is not expressive of respect. It has been one of the humiliations of the military authorities of our time that the man who nowadays brings success in war is no longer a gentleman of commanding aspect, sitting upright upon a prancing horse, but a wretched scientist whom every military-minded boy would have bullied throughout his youth. However, it is not for special skill in slaughter that I would wish to see the "egg-head" respected.

The needs of the modern world have brought a conflict, which I think could be avoided, between scientific subjects and those that are called "cultural." The latter represent tradition and still have, in my country, a certain snobbish pre-eminence. Cultural ignorance, beyond a point, is despised. Scientific ignorance, however complete, is not. I do not think, myself, that the division between cultural and scientific education should be nearly as definite as it has tended to become. I think that every scientific student should have some knowledge of history and literature, and that every cultural student should have some

acquaintance with the basic ideas of science. Some people will say that there is not time, during the university curriculum, to achieve this. But I think that opinion arises partly from unwillingness to adapt teaching to those who are not going to penetrate very far into the subject in question. More specifically, whatever cultural education is offered to scientific students should not involve a knowledge of Latin or Greek. And I think that whatever of science is offered to those who are not going to specialize in any scientific subject should deal partly with scientific history and partly with general aspects of scientific method. I think it is a good thing to invite occasional lectures from eminent men to be addressed to the general body of students and not only to those who specialize in the subject concerned.

There are some things which I think it ought to be possible, though at present it is not, to take for granted in all who are engaged in university teaching. Such men or women must, of course, be proficient in some special skill. But, in addition to this, there is a general outlook which it is their duty to put before those whom they are instructing. They should exemplify the value of intellect and of the search for knowledge. They should make it clear that what at any time passes for knowledge may, in fact, be erroneous. They should include an undogmatic temper, a temper of continual search and not of comfortable certainty. They should try to create an awareness of the world as a whole, and not only of what is near in space and time. Through the recognition of the likelihood of error, they should make clear the importance of tolerance. They should remind the student that those whom posterity honours have very often been unpopular in their own day and that, on this ground, social courage is a virtue of supreme importance. Above all, every educator who is engaged in an attempt to make the best of the students to whom he speaks must regard himself as the servant of the truth and not of this or that political or sectarian interest. Truth is a shining goddess, always veiled, always distant, never wholly approachable, but worthy of all the devotion of which the human spirit is capable.

## SWIMMING'S SUPER SALESMAN

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Rosemary Mann Dawson, women's swim coach at Michigan University, runs the girls' camp.

Matt Mann is proud of the fact that his daughter was recently given the authority to field a varsity swimming team for women at Michigan, the first in collegiate competition. Fighting the prejudice against competitive swimming for women is one of Mann's favorite "causes." He points to his 11-year-old granddaughter, who recently swam the outdoor mile in 28 minutes, as an

example of his claim that girls need never take a back seat to boys in swimming competition.

Part of Mann's job at Oklahoma is encouraging swimming among the state's younger athletes. He contends that the shortage of collegiate swimmers in this area goes back to the fact that Oklahoma youngsters simply don't learn to swim.

"You can take a boy who's never played football in his life, and if he has the physical assets you can work with him a year and teach him how to play football," Mann theorizes. "But you've got to start a swimmer when he's 10 or 12 years old." Convincing the people of the state to build high school and community swimming pools and to teach their children to swim is part of Mann's mission.

Sooner facilities are described by Mann as "a nice pool but a barn to house it." However, he is enthusiastic over the possibility that the University may acquire the abandoned south Navy base and its excellent in-

door pool. At present the men's pool is located in a frame building back of the Field House with a seating capacity of 300 to 400. Most of the meets pack the building to overflowing.

When Matt Mann refers to "his boys," he means exactly that. Seldom if ever does he lose track of any of them. He considers them worthwhile human beings and doesn't recognize a failure in the bunch. And he has a clear conscience about persuading promising swimmers to come to Oklahoma—in fact, he sincerely believes he is doing them a favor.

"When I was at Michigan, all we heard about Oklahoma was football," he recalls. "But when I got down here, I found that Oklahoma was a good school where these boys can get a good education. That's what's important.

"I was a Michigan man for 30 years, and I didn't think that I could ever be anything else," Mann will tell you emphatically. "But I'm an Oklahoma man now."