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AN IDEAL IN EDUCATION

By P. H. PEARSE

THE words and phrases of a language are always to some extent revelations of the mind of the race that has moulded the language. How often does an Irish vocable light up as with a lantern some immemorial Irish attitude, some whole phase of Irish thought! Thus, the words which the old Irish employed when they spoke of education show that they had gripped the very heart of that problem. To the old Irish the teacher was *aite*, "fosterer," the pupil was *dalta*, "foster-child," the system was *aiteachas*, "fosterage"; words which we still retain as *oide*, *dalta*, *oideachas*.

And is it not the precise aim of education to "foster"? Not to inform, to indoctrinate, to conduct through a course of studies (though these be the dictionary meanings of the word), but, first and last, to "foster" the elements of character native to a soul, to help to bring these to their full perfection rather than to implant exotic excellences.

Fosterage implies a foster-father or foster-mother—a person—as its centre and inspiration rather than a code of rules. Modern education systems are elaborate pieces of machinery devised by highly-salaried officials for the purpose of turning out citizens according to certain approved patterns. The modern school is a state-controlled institution designed to produce workers for the state, and is in the same category with a dockyard or any other state-controlled institution which produces articles necessary to the progress, well-being, and defence of the state. We speak of the "efficiency," the "cheapness," and the "up-to-dateness" of an education system just as we speak of the "efficiency," the "cheapness," and the "up-to-dateness" of a system of manufacturing coal-gas. We shall soon reach a stage when we shall speak of the "efficiency," the "cheapness," and the "up-to-dateness" of our systems of soul-saving. We shall

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hear it said "Salvation is very cheap in England," or "The Germans are wonderfully efficient in prayer," or "Gee, it takes a New York parson to hustle ginks into heaven."

Now, education is as much concerned with souls as religion is. Religion is a Way of Life, and education is a preparation of the soul to live its life here and hereafter: to live it nobly and fully. And as we cannot think of religion without a Person as its centre, as we cannot think of a church without its Teacher, so we cannot think of a school without its Master. A school, in fact, according to the conception of our wise ancestors, was less a place than a person: a teacher with a little group of pupils clustering round him. Its place might be poor, nay, it might have no local habitation at all, it might be peripatetic: where the master went the disciples followed. One may think of Our Lord and His friends as a sort of school: was He not the Master, and were not they His disciples? That gracious conception was not only the conception of the old Gael, Pagan and Christian, but it was the conception of Europe all through the Middle Ages. Philosophy was not crammed out of text-books, but was learned at the knee of some great philosopher; art was learned in the studio of some master-artist, a craft in the workshop of some master-craftsman. Always it was the personality of the master that made the school, never the state that built it of brick and mortar, drew up a code of rules to govern it, and sent hirelings into it to carry out its decrees.

I do not know how far it is possible to revive the old ideal of fosterer and foster-child. I know it were very desirable. One sees too clearly that the modern system, under which the teacher tends more and more to become a mere civil servant, is making for the degradation of education, and will end in irreligion and anarchy. The modern child is coming to regard his teacher as an official paid by the state to render him certain services; services which it is in his interest to avail of, since by doing so he will increase his earning capacity later on; but services the rendering and acceptance of which no more imply a sacred relationship than do the rendering and acceptance of the services of a dentist or a chiropodist. There

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is thus coming about a complete reversal of the relative positions of master and disciple, a tendency which is increased by every statute that is placed on the statute book, by every rule that is added to the education code of modern countries.

Against this trend I would oppose the ideal of those who shaped the Gaelic polity nearly two thousand years ago. It is not merely that the old Irish had a good education system: they had the best and noblest that has ever been known among men. There has never been any human institution more adequate to its purpose than that which, in Pagan times, produced Cuchulainn and the Boy-Corps of Eamhain Macha and, in Christian times, produced Enda and the companions of his solitude in Aran. The old Irish system, Pagan and Christian, possessed in pre-eminent degree the thing most needful in education: an adequate inspiration. Colmcille suggested what that inspiration was when he said, "If I die it shall be from the excess of the love that I bear the Gael." A love and a service so excessive as to annihilate all thought of self, a recognition that *one must give all*, must be willing always to make the ultimate sacrifice—this is the inspiration alike of the story of Cuchulainn and of the story of Colmcille, the inspiration that made the one a hero and the other a saint.