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The Position of Classics in South Africa

Marie V. Williams

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ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTIONS

THE POSITION OF CLASSICS IN SOUTH AFRICA.

It may be of some interest for those who have been passing through the struggle for the retention of compulsory Greek in the older universities of England to know how the case for the classical languages stands in a newer country like South Africa. The fierce contest within the senate-house at Cambridge, resulting happily in a postponement, at least, of the evil day, has had its counterpart here, the only difference being that the question has been brought to a speedier issue and that the hosts of the Philistines have been practically too numerous to admit of resistance.

The educational system in a colony must always be determined largely by its peculiar environment, and consequently as long as the dwellers in the neighbourhood of the Cape were mainly a pastoral, and therefore a scattered, community, a university course borrowed from the older universities and relying chiefly upon books and a minimum of up-to-date appliances was found to be very suitable. The earliest course for the Arts Degree in 1873 was therefore to a great extent literary, a reflexion of the similar degree at London, and after the fashion of the older institution a pass in Latin and Greek was demanded of every student that wished to take a degree at the university. But since that time education has spread far beyond its original boundaries; large towns have

sprung up in the interior of the country, and the development of the mining industry, the growth of colonial industries and commerce, and latterly the promotion of scientific farming, have largely changed the conditions of life, and the university scheme has willy-nilly been forced to change too. With the institution of a separate degree in science in 1883 came the abolition of compulsory Greek for those taking a graduate course at the university. This first concession has resulted, after a transition period of long grief and pain, during which instructors were forced to instil Greek into candidates who took it up at the last possible moment, in the abolition of compulsory Greek even for the Literary B.A., that is, a student may take a so-called 'mixed' degree, and substitute a science in place of Greek.

But the hand of the destroyer has gone deeper still. In Great Britain very few even of the ardent reformers wish to uproot *Latin* from the school and university curriculum. Here, however, it has now become possible for certain students to get a university degree without the remotest suspicion of Latin. This has been accomplished by the substitution of an examination with 'practical' alternatives to Latin in place of the ordinary Matriculation for any student who wishes to take a degree in Mining Engineering. Simultaneously Latin has been made an

optional subject for everyone in the Intermediate B.A., so that Latin now is in a fair way to lose all interest except for the student who has from the outset been marked out for a literary career.

This dénouement calls forth two questions, the answer to which may prove interesting. The first is for the educationalists: 'How far is such a policy justifiable even in the light of compelling circumstances?' The second concerns the few who make the classics their special care: 'What steps should be taken by the teachers of Latin (and of Greek where such exist) to enable their subject to hold its own and not degenerate into a mere accomplishment?'

In support of the action of the reformers certain peculiarities in the present educational environment have often been adduced. The ordinary schools of the country, many of which are High Schools taking pupils as far as Matriculation, provide a curious mixture of primary and secondary education, *i.e.*, at a certain point the secondary courses necessitated by the lower university examinations are grafted on to the primary stock, and many a pupil who in Europe would merely complete a primary course of instruction has here been compelled, hitherto, to assimilate the elements of the higher subjects at the end of his school-life, only to discard them immediately. Pupils who are destined for the ordinary walks of life, who are to be artisans, tradesmen, clerks, farmers or farmers' assistants, have no more need of Latin here than in any country, and a school-leaving examination with 'practical' alternatives for Latin could not reasonably be rejected for such as these.

The real solution of this problem is, of course, the establishment of two different classes of schools to provide primary and secondary education separately. But supposing that to be for the present beyond the range of practical politics, and even granting that a number of the pupils of our schools could gain little by the study of Latin and would have no need of it in after life, yet there will almost certainly be some who, through the loop-hole of the 'practical' alternatives, will escape a training in Latin, and who may yet reach a status far different from

that of the occupations enumerated. How many, for instance, of our farmers are obliged by the force of circumstances to take up important positions in later life, being elected for Parliament and having a direct control over the affairs of the country! Moreover, there is no sphere of labour in South Africa that cries out for workers more than that of teaching, because, in the continual progress of education, new schools are forever being opened in more remote districts, and the demand for teachers is a steady one. Consequently many who never intended to teach, when they are disappointed in their original aims, try to qualify for this profession. It is cases like these, I think, which the reformers have not sufficiently considered; it is here that the new scheme will be at a disadvantage. Few things could be worse for a country than that a large number of its teachers should be utterly devoid of culture; and for the sake of such as these no subject, least of all Latin, with its power of stimulating thought, should be inconsequently dropped. And in South Africa there is a special reason why some training in a precise language like Latin would benefit any whose duty it is to aim at accuracy of thought and expression. The large majority of the population speak two vernaculars, Cape Dutch and English, and with many the former is the mother-tongue, and the latter has to be learned as an additional language. Cape Dutch, as everyone knows, is a dialect which is seen at its best in humorous tales and comic verse, a forcible instrument of expression in the domestic circle, but nothing more. A child endeavouring to gain a thorough, logical mastery of English would find the other vernacular no help whatever either in the way of mental or linguistic training, whereas Latin, by forcing him first to think clearly, would lead him to express himself accurately, both in Latin, and, through translation, in English itself. Neither English nor Cape Dutch has any merit in compelling precision of thought, hence Latin is, in this case of supreme value, seeing that neither French nor German is studied to any great extent, and they are of little use in the ordinary life of the country. If it be objected that the teaching of Latin in the past has not

conducted to greater intellectual thoroughness or to a better grasp of English the fault lies with the low standard of work that has hitherto been demanded and often with inefficient teaching. In cases where Latin has always been taught with thoroughness, it has been felt that greater accuracy not only in the use of English, but in every department of the curriculum, has been the result.

The upshot of the whole matter is this. If this concession to the 'practical' people is but the thin edge of the wedge, and if they mean in a few years' time to leave Latin to the option of *every* candidate for a degree, irrespective of any special bent, the position of the classics could hardly be worse, for a commercial and agricultural country primarily needs what is 'useful,' and a utilitarian population inevitably prizes that which is in the greatest demand. If the 'practical' alternatives to Latin were once encouraged in the schools, the latter subject would be reduced to the position now held by Greek, and in most cases be shelved because it would not 'pay' to have a teacher for it, and wherever the schools fail to provide the teacher the subject must inevitably go to the wall when the population is as scattered as it is here.

If, on the other hand, the concession has been made not as a preliminary to a complete remodelling of the educational curriculum, but merely to suit the convenience of a particular section of the community, there is every reason to hope that the position of the classics may be improved rather than otherwise by the change. The teacher will at least be freed from the drudgery of drumming the elements of Latin into pupils whose brains were in no wise intended for it, and the college lecturer similarly will be relieved of the incubus of hopelessly 'scientific' candidates in the Intermediate, whose struggles with the more advanced work are painful to all concerned. Being well rid of unsatisfactory pupils, the teacher will be able to prosecute his work with greater interest and profit than has hitherto been possible; and in the interim, at any rate, until the extent of the reform policy has become really apparent, his best plan will be to establish the value of his subject firmly by making it as attractive as possible, by economising the time that is

spent on it, and by working for such a revision of the university requirements that a more satisfactory standard of knowledge and more efficient teaching will be ensured.

I believe that the first two ends could both be served if a more extensive use were made of the 'Direct Method' advocated so strongly in the pages of the *Classical Review*. Sometimes, however, classes here are too large to admit of any approximation to the conversational method, which can be employed comfortably only with classes of twenty-five and under. Moreover, the tyranny of the 'Set-books' at present prevents teachers from dividing their time as they would like. I have, however, made use of the oral method whenever possible with the most satisfactory results. The beginners' class in Greek, it seems to me, can hardly be worked well in any other way, seeing that the whole ground-work has often to be covered in a year. As a matter of fact, one pupil of mine, after about five months' work of two lessons a week with the 'Direct Method,' gained a thorough grounding in Greek accidence and simple syntax, together with a great deal of intellectual pleasure, so that all the evil accompaniments of 'cram' were avoided.

The teaching of the classics, however, cannot be put upon an entirely satisfactory basis until the examinations, which to the commercially-minded youth represent the goal of study, are designed to further and not to thwart the chief aim of classical study. That aim, as all will agree, is to be able to read and appreciate, to some extent, the best portions of classical literature. As long as more or less disconnected pieces of different authors are prescribed for rigorously detailed handling, the pupil is bound to give undue attention to one or two works without gaining any conception of the extent and value of the whole field. Therefore if some scheme could be introduced whereby more extensive reading could be done, even if some things, owing to pressure of time, had to be done, as at Birmingham University, by means of translations, the classical course would be productive of far greater interest and lead to more general culture than at present.

There are many things to encourage the classical teacher out here. The utilitarian views of the elders are not innate in the mind of the child, so that, where the teaching is interesting, there is often an enthusiasm for classical subjects; teachers do not find that these subjects are disliked any more than in England. Then, instead of the 'intellectual apathy' of the English public school boy, which has been deplored in recent articles, there exists great keenness to 'pass examinations,' an emotion in itself ignoble, but, provided the examinations were improved, capable of being utilised by the teacher to further really desirable ends. For the classics, being a literary and historical inheritance which belongs to all people of European origin, should claim the allegiance of both

the races of South Africa. The stirring memory of what our predecessors achieved at one of the highest stages of past history should prove an inspiration to a people who are about to enter upon a new and important era of progress, who are even now blending varied characteristics into one consistent whole. Grave problems are awaiting them, for the right solution of which is required not merely a knowledge of external conditions, but a spiritual insight into the character and history of the human race. The present is surely not the time to *discourage* the study of that literature which above all others broadens the sympathies and enriches the minds of men.

MARIE V. WILLIAMS.

A NOTE ON THE TEACHING OF THE PASSIVE VOICE.

AMONG those who wish to introduce reforms into the teaching of elementary classics there is considerable difference of opinion about the most suitable time to begin the passive voice. Many reformers are convinced that it presents peculiar difficulties, and some would postpone it until the second year, or even later. It seems to the present writer that, as the ultimate decision must depend upon the experience of teachers, an account of his own method of procedure may prove of some service, even though it may be neither the best possible, nor even nearly the best.

Of course, the school conditions must be taken into account. Much depends upon the age of the learner, his capacity for languages, and the amount of time he can bestow upon Latin. In the present case the boys begin Latin at about the age of twelve, after at least one year of French, and spend one period (three-quarters of an hour) on Latin every day.

It is found not only possible but advantageous to begin the passive voice towards the end of the first year, very soon after the active of the indicative mood has been thoroughly mastered. The passive of the

subjunctive is introduced in the second year, soon after (or even along with) the learning of the active of that mood. The method employed is as follows.

It is pointed out that the tenses formed from the present stem have in the passive the endings *-r, -ris, -tur, -mur, -mini, -ntur*. The passive of *all* these tenses is then learnt, especial care being given to the places where the stem-vowel changes (*regis, regeris; audit, auditur*). The imperative, participle and infinitive are simply learnt by heart. The passives of perfect tenses are mastered in a few minutes. Then follows a series of exercises, worked both orally and in writing, in which the active is changed into the passive and *vice-versa*. Thus:

Caesar Gallos vincit, Galli a Caesare vincuntur;
Puerum monuimus, Puer a nobis monitus est,

and so on.

These exercises are continued for about a week, and then the class returns to the general work of the text-book. But several times in each lesson opportunities occur of revising the knowledge recently acquired, until, after perhaps a fortnight, few mistakes are made in changing from one voice to another. It is now time to strengthen the work already