

Register

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COMPETITIVE EXAMINATIONS INJURIOUS TO MIND AND BODY.

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"Orandum est ut sit mens sana in corpore sano."

The mind is frequently compared to a storehouse. Parents and teachers act on this principle, and almost say to the youth under their charge—"You must work hard and store away in your mind so many packages of Latin and Greek, mathematics, modern languages, and other forms of learning." In certain minds some of these compartments for special mental articles are very capacious, whilst in others they are exceedingly minute. Yet examiners, parents, and teachers for the most part apply to all the same severe rules, and insist that each of these youthful storehouses should be uniformly crammed with the same bulky packages, whether there is sufficient room or not. This forcing plan resembles that material pressure where 20 cubic feet are frequently compressed into 10 cubic feet. As regards the youthful brain we do not assert that this is impossible under the terrific force of some mental Brahma press. The mischief lies in the youthful mind forming its own press and storehouse combined, causing both brain and muscle to break down and collapse under the undue and unnatural strain that have been put upon them.

Again, if the juvenile brain were a combination of cells as in the beehive, uniform hexagonal spaces of equal capacity, then you might expect that each human mind, built upon the same plan, might reasonably fill these cells with the honey of science and literature, and in case of failure you would be justified in punishing with disgrace or otherwise any one who had not collected the same stock of learning as his neighbours.

The public, generally, has not a clear idea of what brainwork means. They fancy that a boy has merely to hold a book before him, look at it, and imbibe so much knowledge mechanically, as a sponge absorbs so much water. Just as you cannot run an engine or obtain any other form of energy without fuel along with wear and tear, so you cannot employ the brain without considerable waste of blood and tissue. Is it not, therefore, cruel to drive the juvenile brain-engine at high pressure before the brain and body have been completed by having arrived at maturity? The origin of the mischief lies in the Adelaide University curriculum being so oppressive, a fact we will endeavour to establish further on in our next paper. The teachers in the Adelaide schools are helpless in the matter, and are obliged in most instances to work their scholars at high pressure in order to pass the University examinations. Parents and children get excited and are eager to gain the same distinction as their friends, brothers, cousins, and aunts have achieved, and under this unnatural stimulus the pupils are worked

and are themselves willing to work beyond their physical and mental strength. This terrible scramble for tinsel honour, for bubble reputation at any cost between pupil and pupil, school and school, College and College, reminds us of the steamboat races formerly customary on the Mississippi. The captain, crew, and passengers of one steamer get excited on the approach of the opposition boat, and firmly resolve to beat their opponent at any hazard. "More oil under the boiler; put a fifty-six on the safety-valve," cries the captain; "we must win—death or victory." Both steamers now strain their energies to the utmost, causing terrible damage to the machinery, and the winning boat, amid the exulting hurrahs of victory, suddenly explodes, sending to a well-merited and self-inflicted destruction both passengers and crew ambitious of a little glory. The moral of this is: Parents and pupils, you may buy your whistle of glory too dear. By whip, spur, and training fine you may win cups, Derbies, and other forms of racing glory; but do not forget in doing all this you exhaust your young horses prematurely. You don't hear much of racehorses after three years of such treatment. So, also, you may use up those vigorous, restless colts called boys by training them too fine, by using the spur to exertion in the way of school prizes and University honours and scholarships, which may be purchased too dearly be an exhausted brain and an enfeebled constitution. We can all now perfectly understand that true saying—"What becomes in after life of your school and prodigies?"

Parents and teachers foolishly fancy that all is going on happily and well as regards the youthful students under their charge when they have not been obliged to call in the doctor. There never was a greater fallacy, as physiologists tell us that the brain is the longest tissue in showing decay, and it is also the longest in recovering. When the doctor has to be called in there is danger ahead, and the injury done is probably beyond recovery. The disordered powers of the brain in the early stage are so slight and transient as not only to escape the notice of the individual, but even of the physician himself. A feeling of fatigue, a small degree of numbness in some of the limbs, restlessness, irritability, defective hearing and loss of memory, inability to concentrate the attention, a condition of sleepiness or of want of sleep, a sudden halting in conversation, are all so many indications that mental disease has commenced its work.

Here we must enter our protest against the too frequent practice of overloading and worrying the youthful mind with the thousand and one dates and facts and other useless lumber in history and geography—the very dry bones of education, only to be forgotten a month after the examination is over.

We shall now bring forward certain weighty authorities in literature and science in support of our view that competitive examinations are injurious to the wellbeing of mind and body.

Professor Fowler, of Oxford, says:—"Examinations prevent the pupil from following

his natural bent, or induce a mechanical style of reading which is injurious to the highest intellectual development. And though at first sight it might appear as if the examination system would at all events promote thoroughness, it has unfortunately the opposite effect of encouraging superficiality. It does not pay to pursue a subject beyond a certain point. General views and minute facts admit of being crammed. Examiners after all being but fallible men, the show of knowledge is often mistaken for the reality. Style often counts for more than matter, cleverness for more than depth, a vague acquaintance with many subjects for more than a scientific knowledge of one. The Universities ought to be confined to genuine students, who come for no other object than the pursuit of some branch of literature or science. Schools ought to be places where knowledge is assimilated. Many subjects cannot well be assimilated. At present a young man is fettered by the inexorable requirements of an examination.

“The new system of awarding scholarships at school by competitive examination is disadvantageous in the way of putting an undue strain on the mental faculties of boys at too early an age. This can hardly fail to repress the spontaneity and freshness which if not developed in early years will seldom be developed at all, and prematurely and most unduly to stimulate the feelings of ambition and emulation.”

Professor Sayce, of Oxford, denounces in strong terms the evils arising from over-study. “Take the senior wranglers of the last twenty years, and the number of those whose names have since been heard of will be found astonishingly small. The brain and the energies which have been exhausted by examination in youth cannot produce much for the world at large in later days. It is not from Oxford and Cambridge that the great thinkers and writers of the present generation have come. Indeed, we can hardly conceive of their turning out men like Mill or Herbert Spencer or Buckle or Tylor. The works that issue from the University presses are few and far between, and perhaps the character of them makes us little regret that they should be so. Originality, bold speculation, unremunerative study are antithetic to all the qualities fostered by an examination. I have not alluded to the injurious effects of an examination constantly hanging over a man at the most critical period of his life, and leaving him with shattered nerves and enfeebled frame for future literary work. Few who have not experienced it can realize the physical misery occasioned to a nervously organized nature by an impending and still more by a present examination. ‘I shall never get well,’ said an undergraduate to me, ‘as long as I have an examination before me,’ and the result proved that he was right. ‘I cannot get the examination out of my thoughts,’ said another; ‘as soon as I settle down to read anything I fancy I ought to be grinding away at my Latin grammar.’ As is the examinee so is the examiner, and a mind only accustomed to such work becomes in time as mechanical and trivial as the work itself.

“Men, *i.e.*, students, try for honours for three reasons—interest in their work, desire of reputation, or else a mercenary one. Men do not follow their own bent. Men get demoralized. They do not look at it for itself, but look to its pecuniary rewards. At

present the Chinese theory is in full possession of the public mind, and it is imagined that a high class means corresponding abilities and information; and so it does if we understand abilities and information for examination purposes only.

"Universities are degenerating into examining machines. In the place of the calm pursuit of knowledge and the encouragement of original research we have the hot competition of slaving undergraduates, who are taught that learning is of no value, except so far as it brings profit to themselves."

Herbert Spencer, speaking of undue pressure so common at schools, says:—"On old and young the pressure of modern life puts a still increasing strain. In all businesses and professions intense competition taxes the energies and abilities of every adult, and to fit the young to hold their places under this excessive competition they are subject to severer discipline than heretofore. The damage is thus doubled. Fathers, who find themselves run hard by their multiplying competitors, and while labouring under this disadvantage have to maintain a more expensive style of living, are all the year round obliged to work early and late, taking little exercise and short holidays. The constitutions shaken by this over-application they bequeath to their children, who, predisposed to break down under ordinary strains on their energies, are required to go through a curriculum much more extended than that prescribed for the unenfeebled children of past generations.

"The disastrous consequences are everywhere visible. Go where you will, and before long there come under your notice cases of youths of either sex more or less injured by undue study. Here to recover from a state of debility thus produced a year's rustication has been found necessary. There you find a chronic congestion of the brain, that has already lasted many months, or threatens to last much longer. Now you hear of a fever that resulted from over-excitement in some way brought on at school. The young bear neither so much hardship nor so much physical exertion nor so much mental exertion as the full grown."

Professor Huxley, an old examiner of a quarter of a century, is a good authority on the subject before us. "Examination," says he, "is like fire—is a good servant, but a bad master; and there seems to me to be some danger of its becoming our master. I by no means stand alone in this opinion. Experienced friends of mine do not hesitate to say that students whose career they watch appear to them to become deteriorated by the constant effort to pass this or that examination, just as we hear of men's brains becoming affected by the daily necessity of catching a train. They work to pass, not to know, and outraged science takes her revenge. They do pass and they don't know. I have passed sundry examinations in my time—not without credit—and I confess I am ashamed to think how very little real knowledge underlay the torrent of stuff which I was able to pour out on paper."

Anent examiners Huxley says:—"Beginners always set too difficult questions, partly because they are afraid of being suspected of ignorance if they set easy ones, and partly not understanding their business. A practical examiner will seek for information with respect to the mental vigour and training of candidates from the way in which they deal

with questions easy enough to let reason, memory, and method have free play."

In support of our position we shall now give a few extracts from a remarkable address to the English Social Science Conference by that ripe scholar and scientist, T. Clifford Allbutt, M.A., M.D., F.R.S.:

"We contend that the education now attained so painfully is too often illusory at best, and at worst may inflict permanent damage upon our own children, and upon our children's children, and this without value meanwhile received. We declare that education means not brain-forcing nor even brain repletion only, but the word, both literally and practically, should signify the orderly expansion of all the faculties, corporal and mental.

"In schools an unhealthy forcing is carried on, and promising young people are injured by a system of pressure for examination. Pale cheeks are caused by blood going to feed the brain, and night studies produce seething brains that do not rest even in sleep.

"The examination system is growing and invading us more and more every year, and threatens to become the Upas-tree of modern education. The wealthier classes of England having their children at the public schools refuse to submit their children to the higher competitive examinations as injurious to health. If something cannot be found to replace the system and so limit its encroachments, my second-sight of the education of the future is a ghastly one. From cradle to grave poor humanity is incessantly examined. Examinations, as we have them, find out and force certain kinds of pupils—those of quick and receptive minds. But they positively discourage the more original and the less bookish boys and girls, who certainly may ultimately be at least as useful citizens, and in the services of their country probably more useful than the rest.

"Even on those who are selected the influence is very harmful. While securing a height of attainments and favouring in the pupil the selection of materials, it forms on the one hand a mechanical uniformity of mental mould, and it positively forbids the self-feeding of the mind. The mind is not to be fattened like an ox; it is to thrive like a colt and to gain activity, endurance, and size by the search for food as well as by the injection of it.

"In our scheme of education we should be mindful to give the means of it to all, and full play to individual gifts, not promoting a dull uniformity, nor pinching back the buds of mental growth; nor forgetting, as great men often appear in unpromising times, so great gifts in the individual are often long in showing themselves. The early dunce often ripens into the later genius. Our duty is not to harass or exhaust the brain prematurely by anxious culture, by stimulant, or systematic forcing. Few men can look back upon their earlier companionships without seeing with a feeling akin to surprise how the race has not always been to the swift nor the battle to those who were strong.

"The mischief done daily by calling upon the unripe brain for productive work, for original composition, for competitive examinations, for teaching, and even for preaching, is calamitous, and the evil is increasing. Cram secures the immediate production of brain results rather than the growth of the brain itself; and it must be thrusting itself upon the vision of all but the moon-struck

that young men who are prizewinners at ages even of 18 or 20 years have too often spent their brains before the natural yielding time. Too often the star of his gear is quenched ere his course be well begun; and if his life be not thenceforth a failure it may fall far short of its early promise, and the brain, which might have been year by year more flexible, more potent, and more enterprising, is warped, stiffened, and stunted.

“Competitive examinations seem to have every evil in them and no goodness, except the incidental merit of displacing jobbery. The High Wranglers of Cambridge are never heard of again is a common-place saying, and is true so far as this—that only those of great physique and endurance recover the premature exhaustion of the tripos. A tripos, or class-list with two classes, within which the candidates were arranged alphabetically, might furnish the requisite stimulus to industry without unduly straining the student's powers or too exclusively occupying his attention.

“I believe there is no single agency comparable to competitive examinations for straining and exhausting the nervous system. Perhaps no one of my hearers will fail to call to mind some poor victim, boy or girl, who was done for by the mocking triumph or desperate rebuff of a public competitive examination.

“Tremendous efforts are made, with no adequate increase in mental growth, but with ill consequences to life and nervous vigour, which are conspicuous enough in a large minority, and which are no less baneful to the majority, because they are more latent. The great increase of nervous affections in young people is, I believe, due in part to the effects of the examinations their fathers underwent in their youth, and when, as is now coming about, both parents are to go through the fire, the results may be frightful.

“It would be better almost to return to a state of barbarism, for barbarism has a future before it, an exhausted people has none.”

Dr. Tuke in his work “On Insanity in Ancient and Modern Life” refers to a leading London newspaper commenting severely on the injury done by modern examinations on the occasion of the suicide of a University College student from this cause:—“It is said to be the ninth in the metropolis during the present year (1878). The paper maintains that it behoves the authorities of the University of London to beware how they drive poor students to seek a place where examiners cease to trouble and the weary student is at rest. At present, what with the multiplicity of subjects, the constant alterations in books, and the amending changes in examinations, it is no wonder if the poor fellows are sometimes in distraction.

“It has been sometimes said that we shall never get rid of railway accidents till a bishop is killed; and it suggests the question, how many students must commit suicide before the authorities introduce a more humane and rational system of examinations?”

“Mental strain in modern life is not only in some cases a cause of insanity, but it frequently induces general exhaustion, or disease of the heart, or some other organ than the brain. The number of subjects in

which proficiency is expected is a point on which reform is urgently needed.

“Too many hours’ daily study and the knowledge of an approaching examination when the system is developing and requiring an abundance of good air and exercise easily accounts for pale and worn looks, frequent headaches, disturbed sleep, nightmare, and nervous fears. When the career of such students does not end in graduating in a lunatic asylum they lose for years, possibly always, the elasticity and buoyancy of spirits essential to robust mental health. A strong constitution may thus be sacrificed to supposed educational necessities. Shortsight will in many instances be the outward symbol of the mischief done to the inner man. The exaggerated development of one portion of the system at the expense of another is the natural result.”

Extract from a letter to the author of a victim to overpressure at one of the Collegiate Schools of Adelaide:—“I forward you the following particulars concerning my own and my sister’s college life. During the time I was at college the amount of work to be got ready at home in the evening was so great that, as I wished to do it thoroughly and perfectly, the usual time for my retiring to bed was from half-past 1 to 2 o’clock in the morning. I went to bed, therefore, at the time I stated, only to fall into a troubled sleep, for my brain was working all the time, going over Greek and Latin verbs, roots, &c., in my sleep. I again rose at 4.30 to get the work finished, for I was never able to get it done before going to bed. From 4.30 then till 8 o’clock I worked on, snatched a hurried breakfast, and arrived just in time at college. Well, Sir, this continued for a considerable time, and I found myself getting pale and weak, with no inclination to take any exercise whatever, a bad appetite, bad digestion; in fact, completely out of sorts, and therefore in order to recruit my health and strength I had to give it up. *Sed hoc hactenus.* I now come to the case of my sister, who was studying at — College, which is in some respects a parallel to mine. Her studies compelled her to remain up till 12 o’clock at night, and also necessitated her being up early in the morning, and the worry and the anxiety of getting her work done proved too much for her health, and she was forced to abstain from sitting up late studying, and compelled to take a sufficient amount of sleep.”

A talented young lady thus wittily describes the troubles of her schoolmates preparing for examination:—

One has a headache, one a cold,
One has her neck in flannel roll’d;
Ask the complaint, and you are told
Next week’s examination.

One frets and scolds and laughs and cries,
Another hopes, despairs, and sighs;
Ask but the cause, and each replies
Next week’s examination.

One bans her books, then grasps them tight,
And studies morning, noon, and night,
As though she took some strange delight
In these examinations.

The books are marked, defaced, and thumbed,
The brain with midnight tasks benumbed,
Still all on that account is summed,
Next week’s examination.

If in the vast competition now going on a choice must be made between health and University distinction, we would exclaim,

perish all academic honours rather than
the physical and mental vigour of our Aus-
tralian youth.

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Registered April 14th 1885

RECOGNITION OF ADELAIDE UNIVERSITY.—
Our Melbourne correspondent telegraphs
that the Melbourne University Council
decided on Monday to recognise each year
of the course for the B.A. degree of the
Adelaide University, and also the degree of
Bachelor and Master of Arts of the same
University.