

NATURE STUDY—No. XI.

NATURE STUDY AND RURAL EDUCATION.

J. W. HOTSON, M.A., Principal, Macdonald Consolidated School,
Guelph, Ont.

Few things are of more vital importance in moulding the destiny of a nation than the system of education in its rural districts. The most progressive nations of to-day have recognized this fact, and are making strenuous efforts to raise the standard of efficiency in rural education. Canadians, perhaps, more than any others, should not be slow in recognizing the importance of this phase of education, or in availing themselves of improvement in it. The geographical position, the climate, the vast prairies of the West, make Canada's greatest industry essentially agricultural. Nearly seventy-five per cent. of her population live in the country and are educated in rural schools. The greatness, the stability, the very backbone of this nation is its rural population. More than ever before, the future of this country depends upon its public schools. Since this is true, how important it is that the education of the rising generation of this great nation should be carefully and jealously guarded! I have great faith in the rural school, in its power to mould and build up a national character; but new educational methods must be employed before we can hope for the best results.

The public school system of to-day is a product of the university. "The greatest achievement of modern education," says Payne, "is the gradation and correlation of schools whereby the ladder of learning is let down from the university to the secondary schools and from there to the schools of the people." If this be true, it is no wonder that the present system of education has failed to produce the best results in the lives of the boys and girls of the country. Our educational system tends to lead to professions rather than to the farm. City things have been taught rather than country things, and, by ignoring the farm and the farm home, our greatest industry, farming, and our best institution, the farm home, have been discredited. Our modest farm homes stand as our greatest bulwark. Guard them!

If education is a preparation for real life, and I believe it

should be, and seventy-five per cent. of our population are in the rural districts, depending directly on the soil and its products, and if we believe in the principle of "the greatest good to the greatest number," then, rural education should be a preparation, at least in some degree, for life on the farm. It should lead the child into a more sympathetic relation to his daily life "to the end that his life may be stronger and more resourceful." This does not mean that these schools should teach only the art of cultivating the soil. Rural education should be broadened not narrowed. It cannot be broadened by teaching agriculture only; boys and girls must have a knowledge of language, history, mathematics, etc. Language is a mind tool; the hoe a hand tool. Training in the use of either may be education; but, for best results, they must go together.

In order to develop the trained hand and cultivated mind, more emphasis should be laid on the method of acquiring the information than on the information itself. Mere facts, however important, are not all of education—they are of secondary consideration. How the child acquires those facts, is of vastly more consequence from a pedagogical point of view. The pupil should, as far as possible, be led to rely upon his own resources. He should be led to investigate problems for himself and thus acquire his knowledge first hand. It is the thinking man, "the reasoning and the reasonable man," that makes "the good citizen and the honest neighbor"; so it is the child that is taught to see things as they really are, and to think for himself regarding the things he sees, and is thus led to draw correct conclusions from what he sees, that makes "the reasoning and the reasonable man," "the good citizen and the honest neighbor." In training the eye to see, the ear to hear, and the mind to perceive, we have done much to aid the child in understanding the more complex things in real life. It may not be true "that only those things are useful which one finds out for himself," but no one will deny that from the ideal as well as from the economic point of view of education, those things are of most use which one finds out for himself. But the world is too wide and life too short to turn a child out by himself and expect him to come, unaided, to even a fair understanding of the mysteries of nature; yet, give him a wise and careful instructor, and he may be led to see how nature solves her problems and thus be better prepared to solve those problems of life which confront everybody, and which each individual must solve for himself.

Is all being done that can be done to improve rural educa-

tion? I fear not. It is certainly gratifying to know that the educational authorities in most of the provinces have recognized the necessity of doing something to improve it. Never before in the history of Canada have the prospects looked so bright for an honest effort on the part of the best educators to solve this problem. The solution lies, it seems to me, in the proper presentation of Nature Study, or rather that phase of Nature Study that will tend towards agriculture. This can be presented to the best advantage by establishing a school garden in connection with each school. Nature Study and the School Garden are inseparable if we wish the best results. This does not mean that technical agriculture is to be taught, far from it. Nothing would be more disastrous to the cause of rural education than to attempt to teach technical agriculture or technical science in the public school. We have agricultural colleges and high schools for that purpose. Nature Study in our public schools would interest the children in the common every-day things about them; in things they have been seeing all their lives, yet not perceiving; in the songs of birds and insects they have been hearing, yet not appreciating. They would find themselves in a new world, or rather in their old world made new, by a living, loving sympathy and interest in everything about them. Their eyes would be trained to observe, their ears to hear, and their minds to seek the truth for the truth's sake, and in seeing, in hearing, and in seeking for truth, they would be trained to draw right conclusions from what they see and hear.

During the first five or six years of a child's existence he has created for himself a little world. He has attempted to solve many knotty problems. In fact, he has been on a tour of original research, as truly as the best investigator along the line of science, and no one will deny that in many cases he has been more original. He has started out along the right line to make himself "the good citizen and the honest neighbor," and to acquire those things that go to make up a "successful life." Why not continue these experiences in the school? Why not begin to build on what he already knows, rather than thrust him, as is too frequently the case, into a new and strange world—the school—a world in which he searches in vain to find something to link with his past? Alas! he finds himself as totally amidst new surroundings as if he had been suddenly set down in a foreign land. There is nothing in the school life that he can associate with his own little world—his past experiences. He has, as it were, to start life again and create another world totally different from the first. There is little wonder that teachers find such great difficulty with their primary classes, with the beginners in this new life.

Let me make an appeal for more natural teaching in our rural schools—teaching that will look to the pleasure and comfort of the child, and also that will tend to prepare him for the life he is to live. This can be done best, as already stated, by the proper use of Nature Study and the School Garden.

If, then, the rural school is to fulfil its mission to the community, as the handmaid of agriculture, it must be a school adapted to the needs of the community. *It must be an adaptation of education to need.* Whose needs? The farmer's. To meet these he must have the advantage of the best schools; and the best schools for him are those which teach him the things that he needs to know. What does he need to know? What are his educational needs? As a man and a citizen, he needs to know just what other people do—no more, no less. He needs to know how to read, to write, to compute, etc. As an agriculturist, his needs are more special. He deals with the natural world. His enjoyment and his livelihood depend largely upon his understanding of the laws that control the world about him. He must therefore know Nature. He can know her best by becoming interested in her. When he is young is the time to engender an interest that will continue throughout life. The farmer above all others should be a thorough nature student, and one of the purposes of the public school should be to help and direct him in these studies.

One of the great aims of Nature Study is to interest the child in agricultural problems. The School Garden more than anything else will achieve this purpose. Such a garden will be indispensable in the schools of the future. Ere long it will be as much a part of the regular equipment of the school as books, blackboards, charts and apparatus are. The making of a School Garden is an epoch in the life of each school; it marks the progress of the school in pedagogical ideas. Its prime motive is not to be ornamental, but to be useful. In many parts of England and Germany it is rapidly becoming the "school"—the place where most of the instruction is given. This is the ideal method, "a school in the country, where hardihood of life can be cultivated, and where life is simple and varied; a school where masters lead a common life with the boys, working at gardening or plowing, as well as with books. In such a school, work consists of interchange of occupation—continuous but varied; some lighter, some severer, some taxing muscles and some brain. In such a school there is established a collective, corporate life, in which each member learns self-reliance, individual responsibility and constant adjustment of the relation of self to other people. The virtue that here grows up, will not be negative—constrained by external forces—but active virtue that springs from having lived in a well-organized community.



Hotson, John William. 1904. "Nature Study No. 11 - Nature Study and Rural Education." *The Ottawa naturalist* 17(12), 221-224.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/28109>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/369171>

Holding Institution

MBLWHOI Library

Sponsored by

MBLWHOI Library

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: NOT_IN_COPYRIGHT

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.