

TRAINING FOR AND THROUGH THE SEA

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by

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Mr. Chairman,

There are two questions over which the responsible men in our great sea services ought to ponder:

The first, which is the proper training for boys wishing to join the Merchant or the Royal Navy.

The second, how can we inspire the best with a desire to go to sea?

I cannot attempt to give an adequate answer to these questions but I can offer some critical remarks which, I hope, will be constructive.

Our nautical establishments are doing a purposeful and thorough job in transmitting the necessary technical knowledge. Merchant Service officers who have sat their second mate certificate and have previously been to one of these nautical schools will gratefully testify that in their boyhood they had been well grounded. That is indeed important but it is not enough. What are our training establishments doing to fortify a young seaman against the temptations which will assail him? What interests do they develop so as to enable him to make a healthy use of his leisure? We believe that a boy going to sea should not receive an education purely or even mainly technical. To know the history of the British Commonwealth of Nations, to speak a foreign language with ease, to have knowledge of animals and plants sufficient to become an interested observer, perhaps an explorer, when visiting strange lands—all this adds strength to a young seaman's service both as an officer and a citizen. Healthy interests will protect him in foreign ports.

In our instructions we need less emphasis on the purely vocational side. What about the character training? The nautical schools, modeled on the Public School system, impart two invaluable qualities:

- a) A stern sense of duty, strengthened by the daily demands of an exacting routine;
- b) A remarkable sense of brotherhood. The young cadets are welded together by experiences that will never fade out of their memory, and will remain with them as a life-long source of strength. They have much fun in common; they have stuck together in considerable adversities; they have mastered tasks which men would have been proud to tackle.

But a great opportunity for character training has been missed; Cadets do not receive sufficient training under sail. It is only fair to add that H.M.S. Conway makes all her cadets go through a month's course at the Outward Bound School in Aberdovey.

I do believe the boys going to sea should, at the age of 15 and 16, experience a training under sail which is continuous. They should be put in charge of dipping lug cutters, winter and summer, and learn how to take them across the 20 or so miles of open bay or firth; they should in addition, twice a year, go on deep sea expeditions in a sailing ship under the command of an experienced officer, but manned mainly by boys. I hope to see the day when there is, at the disposal of all nautical schools, a square-rigged ship going every year on outward-bound cruises lasting three months; the ship to be manned by picked crews, each school sending their best team of seaman-boys.

During the war, a leading ship owner told me that in an open lifeboat he would prefer to have a sail-trained octogenarian in charge rather than a young man who had only experienced a mechanical sea-training.

George Trevelyan, the wisest interpreter of the British character, has said, "Nothing can train a man of action like a sailing ship." He adds, "Without the instinct of adventure in young men, any civilization, however enlightened, any State, however well ordered, must wilt and wither."

The scientific and technical progress which we have witnessed in our life-time has been immense. But it has been accompanied by deterioration in human worth. Something indefinable has been lost. I can only hint at it.

Compare the old free stone mason to the young builder in concrete. Imagine the old medical practitioner like Sir James Afflick, who had eyes in his fingers, and then think of the modern medical scientist, who relies wholly on X-ray, chemical and physiological tests; look at the sail-trained bosun, and put beside him the ship official and ship technician of today. It is not only that the modern type is inferior in humanity, he is professionally inferior for the very absence of that sixth sense, which distinguishes the true craftsman, the true healer, the true seaman. We are born with that sixth sense but it will not develop unless it is kept alive through practice during

boyhood. The craftsman's care, the healer's touch, the sailor's watchful eye, they cannot be taught or learned in manhood, while it is not beyond even an old man to acquire the mechanical efficiency demanded by his profession.

Training under sail has been abolished at the apprenticeship or midshipmen stage. This was a momentous decision to make for the greatest sea-faring nation. It is not for a layman to say whether we have taken the wrong turn. Anyway it is too late to retrace our steps. *But there is no excuse if we go on withholding the benefits of sail-training from boys of 14, 15, 16 before they join the R.N. or the M.N.* May the boy who wants to make the sea his career, taste experiences which have fashioned the destiny of these island people. May he, before technical training engulfs him, build up the seaman's virtues, vigilance, endurance, victorious patience, coolness in danger, resource and decision, concern for your brother, faith in the power of man, humility before God.

Gentlemen, I am sure there are many skeptics—and there may be some even in this room—who feel a strong doubt as to how it is possible to build continuous sail-training into the time-table of a public school. I invite all skeptics to come to Morayshire and look at the demonstration which began modestly in 1934, grew, before the war, to include sailing expeditions to Norway and round Cape Wrath, was interrupted from 1940-1945, and renewed in strength after the “Prince Louis” came home from Aberdovey last year.

I now come to the second question which I know is causing you a great deal of concern: How can we inspire the best among the young with the desire to go to sea?

If you went round the families of Scotland you would find many an imaginative child of 9 or 10 listening to tales and adventure, or to songs of the sea, or looking at pictures recalling incidents from the lives of our great seamen—and you would see in their eyes a secret longing: one day too I will sail the sea.

If you look at these same children again after six years, what a transformation! It is true you could still find some who want to go to sea, not always for the right reason (“I want to get rid of school,” “I hate an office life”) but in the great majority the imagination has withered, the spirit of adventure has died. What has happened in these 10 years? Our educational system has tamed them. To quote William Butler Yeats, “The stir has gone out of them.”

I remember so well when I was an undergraduate at Oxford I often went to see the Magdalen deer walking about listless and content without any ambition to jump the surrounding fences—to me these tame deer were a sorry sight; but a psychologist might well have called them “socially well adjusted.”

I bring two accusations against our taming system. It fails to equip the average boy with a willing body. The gifted athlete is splendidly trained in our schools; the physical dunce; the sensitive and hesitant child are neglected in their physical education. Fearlessness is often due to lack of imagination. The imaginative boy has made fears and hesitations; spare him yet harden him till

he builds up a muscular and nervous system which will carry his sensitiveness. You will find that he then acquires the power “to overcome” courage is not fearlessness but the power to overcome fear. “He that overcometh eats of the tree of life.”

On the strength of my 27 years’ experience I do not hesitate to say: You can turn every normal boy into an athlete good enough to draw self-respect and self-confidence from his performances. You can do so on one condition that you interrupt the sedentary habits of the morning by a training of at least 45 minutes, in which a boy’s resilience, his powers of acceleration and co-ordination, his stamina are carefully exercised. The clumsy or timid boy soon will be fascinated by his unexpected progress; the ambition will grip him to train himself into a jumper, runner and thrower capable of achieving certain standards. As a result, the spirit of adventure will be revived in those who had already resigned themselves to their physical inadequacy, and given up the dreams of their childhood.

My second accusation against our system of education is this: it fails to introduce activities into a boy’s life likely to make him discover his powers as a man of action.

At the beginning of this war we experienced a remarkable change in the young. Every ounce of their human strength was claimed; the light of enterprise and daring was lit in their faces, and some of these young soldiers confessed to me that they felt a great release from their former existence, “which hardly could be called life.”

I refuse to arrange a world war in every generation to rescue the young from a depressing peace. Let us rather plan their life at school so that they can discover and test their hidden powers. Education has no nobler tasks than to provide “the moral equivalent to war,” as L.P. Jacks has told us 25 years ago. That this task can be fulfilled nobody will doubt who has seen the triumph of mastery in a boy’s face when he is conquering adversities on a sailing or mountaineering expedition. The present Headmaster of Eton has called such victories “conquests without the humiliation of the conquered.” I have often shown the Gordonstoun (or Salem) Final Report form to teachers at Secondary Schools. These are the headlines: *Espirit de Corps*. Sense of Justice. Ability to state facts precisely. Ability to follow out what he believes to be the right course in the face of discomforts, hardships, dangers, mockery, boredom, skepticism, impulses of the moment; ability to plan; imagination; ability to organize, shown in the disposition of work and in the direction of young boys. Ability to deal with the unexpected. Degree of mental concentration, where the task in question interests him, where it does not. Conscientiousness, in everyday affairs, in tasks with which he is specially entrusted. Manners; manual dexterity; standard reached in school subjects; practical work; art work; physical exercises; fighting spirit; endurance; reaction time.

Invariably I am told with a shrug of the shoulders: How can we recognize these traits of character within the curriculum laid down for our schools. My reply is: you cannot; unless you revolutionize your timetable to contain activities which reveal, test and train character and in which you and your colleagues take an active part.

I recommend that training under sail or training in mountain craft be recognized as character building activities good for the future worker, soldier, clerk, scholar, business man, lawyer or doctor. I may mention here that formerly the famous Banking House of Wallenberg demanded that their future partners were trained at sea.

Inland schools should combine to have a training home on the hills or at the sea, in which short courses are held, modeled on the example of the Outward Bound Sea School. I also plead that more schools are planted near the sea.

A National Trust tenderly watches over castles and churches of the past. There is no more sacred treasure of a nation than the human nature of its citizens. We are not protecting this treasure against decay.

It is our educational system that is failing in this duty of protection, wasting the unique opportunities with which this island is blessed.

Ingratitude against men is bad.

Ingratitude against providence is worse.

“Pray to the Gods to intermit the plague that needs much light on this ingratitude.”

Training for all through the sea or the mountains. That is my plea. I make it in the interests of the nation so that the 23rd Psalm be enacted for the young: “He restoreth our soul.” But may I say to the Honourable Master Mariners’ Company, that you gentlemen, have a special reason to support this plea. Many a boy who has never dreamt of a sea career will feel when on a sailing expedition: “my fate cries out.” And he will decide to join the Royal Navy or the Merchant Service.

If we make the young of this country sea-minded we have widened your recruiting basis. But you can do a great deal to help us enlist the best. Counteract the lure at present transmitted by our educational system—tempting the gifted sons of fishermen away from a sea career.

In the fishing villages round the Moray Firth, a boy will learn French if he shows promise, he will be taught Navigation if he is stupid. A boy of “parts” in Scotland is ambitious and wants to improve his station in life. He is easily enticed to climb the academic ladder, till he lands in an office thereby wasting his wonderful heritage.

I admire the boys in the Midlands who hear the call of the sea without ever having seen it. I had quite a lot to do with them. They certainly have the “guts of endeavour” and a great gift for loyal comradeship, but as a type they cannot compare with our fishermen sons from the North whose fathers and mothers have taught them by their example to regard truth, helpfulness and steadfastness as necessities of daily life. I know we can attract the best of them to a sea career if nautical schools throw their doors wide open—Shipping lines, Trusts and Local Authorities

combining to pay their fees—and if their parents are assured that their boys will enter the Merchant Service as apprentices straight from school.

May I say in conclusion: I hope it will never be easy to enter the Merchant Service. “*Character first, intelligence second, knowledge third.*” This was the list of priorities which the late Adjutant General Sir Ronald Adam gave to the Officer Selection Board, at a time when he needed the best.

He who demands much from the young commands their willing service.