

Education for Rural Life

A JOINT session of Sections L (Educational Science) and M (Agriculture) was held on September 15 at the British Association meeting at Blackpool to discuss "Education for Rural Life". Papers were read by three representatives of each section.

Sir John Russell emphasized that education in rural areas must develop on lines different from that in towns. An important factor is the richer environment and greater body of natural experience open to the country child, but until recently there have been no enterprising teachers in rural areas to base their teaching on these facts. Local surroundings should be the basis of country education, and the syllabus of work done could accordingly be flexible and free. Realizing that the country child must live on and by the land, we should arrange that his education should be based directly on the life of the countryside. For this purpose, adequate land around rural schools is essential in order to provide for school gardening, playing fields and a school estate. School gardening was at one time a device to occupy the spare time of older boys; but now, in progressive areas, it has come to be the nucleus of the teaching in woodwork, drawing, composition and arithmetic: it has also attracted the interest of parents. Village surveys are being increasingly organized and have educated children in the history, geography and biology of their district. In the hands of good teachers who keep abreast of modern knowledge, education for rural life could be fuller, freer and less materialistic than the education ordinarily given in towns.

Mr. Henry Morris, director of education for Cambridgeshire, said that education for rural life must be independent of the great towns, the culture of which is largely commercialized. The solution, however, can not be found in a single village; but in groups of villages forming a region centred around a large village or small country town. Modern transport makes this easily possible. Even so, reorganization far more extensive than a Hadow reorganization of schools is required. The school buildings ought to house a senior school in the daytime and a community centre in the evening. Such a solution is provided in the village college, which focuses the social, cultural and artistic activities of the countryside in one centre, architecturally appropriate, where adults and children are freely educated. A village college can thus cater for drama, dancing, horticulture, public health and recreation and those communal activities in song and ceremony that enrich the corporate life. The planning of this college on a generous scale, with ample land and attractive buildings, requires foresight and experience. It needs considerable expenditure; but such expenditure would be socially beneficial in the highest degree, and above all, it would help us to make the fullest use of the leisure that applied science is making possible.

Prof. N. M. Comber dealt with the contribution of universities to education for rural life, and deprecated the brevity and elementary nature of the courses they provide in agriculture. Moreover, such courses emphasize practical and utilitarian matters; they should be broadened to include some study of cultural, social and recreational life of the country-

side. The nation at large should endeavour to understand the significance and importance of the countryside, and some appreciation of rural life should be inculcated in the training courses for teachers.

Mr. T. S. Dymond referred to the influences on rural education of raising the school-leaving age. While many country schools are doing good work under the Hadow scheme of reorganization, large numbers fail to educate suitably the senior children. More individual work should be expected of them, more craft work should be introduced, particularly a variety of crafts such as carpentry, metal work, simple mechanics, dairying, fruit-bottling. In short, the education must be largely vocational. For those who are leaving school, some form of part-time continued education would be of great value, even if it took the form of young farmers' groups or women's institutes. Vocational work is valuable by cultivating the ability to acquire knowledge through experience, and thus stimulating self-reliance, initiative and a desire to learn.

Mr. G. W. Pierce, speaking as a village headmaster, claimed that the village school as it exists to-day is doomed. The new rural school will serve a wide area and will hold 220-280 children, but it must be located right in the countryside—the more rural the better. 8-10 acres of land are necessary in order to allow for ample playing fields and gardens. He deprecated the tendency of local education authorities to convey country children to the nearest town to be educated with town children; it is far better for town children to receive a rural education than for rural children to receive an urban education. The quality of the teaching staff is all important: the teachers must be interested in rural life, for a rural bias is essential in all subjects of the curriculum, particularly in arithmetic, gardening, science, handwork, cooking and geography. Practical work is of the first importance and should occupy at least half of the school hours. Further, it is educationally admirable that boys and girls should become interested in plant life and bird life.

Sir Arnold Wilson claimed that education for rural life involves in practice education for husbandry in all its branches. This implies that the teaching staff must be convinced believers in rural life. Agriculture is more vital to the nation than is generally realized: statistics show that agriculture offers very varied occupations and unrivalled scope for individual talent. Moreover, it is a healthy way of living. The passive idea of education is false; enthusiasm for doing should be inculcated. Germany shows a different outlook upon husbandry in every walk of life: there agricultural workers are being suitably trained, and country life is held in honour; there is no rigid distinction between school years and working years, and diplomas are awarded after suitable practical experience combined with a variety of instruction. The future of Great Britain depends on rural life, for it is in the countryside that food is produced, fresh air is abundant and a variety of occupations and experience is present. He believes that great help would be given in the enjoyment of the privileges of country life if the best part of education were given after the age of sixteen years.