

THE VIRGINIA TEACHER

Volume XVI

JANUARY, 1935

No. 1

REGIONALISM IN COLLEGE ENGLISH COURSES

EDUCATIONAL leaders often talk of *what* to teach and *how* to teach it. It is strange that they rarely consider *whom* they are teaching and *where*. Apparently they assume that they can discover some perfect and all-American type of education which can be administered everywhere in the United States, regardless of whether the environment is urban or rural, Southern, Northern, or Western. There is a growing inclination to neglect the cultural variations that are indigenous to America, and to accept as universally proper the cultural patterns that are peculiar to metropolitan areas, especially to the metropolitan East.

This tendency is at cross-purposes with the view, now growing in favor in many quarters, that the American nation is not to be defined apart from the American regions of the East, Middle West, South, Southwest, and Far West, which constitute, within the national culture, a group of separate regional cultures.

The theory of regionalism holds that the strength and richness of the national culture depends in large measure upon a high degree of regional autonomy in cultural matters, if not in political. No one wishes to reawaken sectional quarrels. At the same time, the historic peculiarities of the various regions deserves to be understood and conserved.

Regionalism, however, has been all but ignored in modern educational theory and practice. In the English curricula of colleges and universities, this is illustrated in

Summary of an address before the College Section of the National Council of Teachers of English at the annual convention of the Council in the Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D. C., December 1.

the handling of freshman composition courses. In many institutions, these are being transformed into informal orientation courses. The freshman is taught to write through the presentation of lively contemporary material which will help him to get his bearings in the modern world. Instead of the old-fashioned prose models chosen from the great worthies of English and American literature, the freshman is now provided with a book of models selected from current magazines and best-selling books, intended to present the opinions and attitudes of contemporary America.

An examination of such books reveals that they orient the freshman in only one direction; they turn his face obediently toward New York City. Of the life and thought of the South and West, the books rarely give a hint. The freshman from the mountains, the plantations, the prairies will meet in them none of his own people, but only Stuart Chase, Henry Pratt Fairchild, Lewis Mumford, Walter Lippmann—only the professional exhorters and skyscraper prophets of the one American city that takes the least trouble to understand regional America. The proportion of Eastern contributions in these texts is startlingly high; one brand-new text contains 28 Eastern and only three non-Eastern contributors. But more important than any figures is the principle of exclusiveness that governs the selection of material, regardless of the authorship; and the failure of the editors to realize that such material may as quickly detach the student and set him adrift as "orient" him. If freshman texts are to be real orientation texts, they should include other points of view than the metropolitan.

I can visualize two kinds of texts that would be a real improvement over the current pattern of prose selections. One, a general text, would simply attempt to bal-

ance metropolitan views by the addition of selections chosen to illustrate types of regional culture and points of view. The other text, which would be entirely regional and would supplement rather than replace a more general book, would be intended for the students of a certain region only. It could draw from writers old and new that represent the regional traditions; but if an entirely contemporary text should be desired, nowhere in the United States would there be a paucity of material.

Since the personnel of departments of English now includes, more than ever before, creative writers and critics as well as scholars, there is a tendency for English departments to be the nucleus of literary groups who publish magazines and books and thus become the spokesmen of a definite region. Behind such expressions of the regional trend in English departments lies the more general tendency of colleges and universities to adapt themselves anew to their regional environment. Their sociologists, economists, historians, scientists, and engineers are being called on to play an active part in the community to which they belong. The colleges are becoming true cultural centers, regional but not narrow and parochial, that occupy a healthy relation to their adjacent region and see in it their laboratory, their audience, their judge.

No more ought they to be, as they sometimes have been, "missionary" institutions engaged in the transmission of a distant, external culture to a servile hinterland. We have had enough of such one-way traffic in ideas; we need a two-way system, by which ideas not only come in from afar but go out afar. That is the regional conception of a good American system of education.

DONALD DAVIDSON

If you intend to go to work, there is no better place than right where you are; if you do not intend to go to work, you cannot get along anywhere.—ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

CALIFORNIA'S DEFENSE OF KINDERGARTENS

Under the leadership of Dr. Elmer H. Stafelbach, director of research of the California Teachers Association, a presentation of the case for kindergarten education in that state has just been published in the January issue of the association's official publication, *The Sierra Educational News*.

THE kindergarten movement had its real beginning in the United States in Boston, in the work of Miss Elizabeth Peabody—who was the sister-in-law of both Nathaniel Hawthorne and Horace Mann—in 1860; was introduced into California in 1876 but not recognized as a part of the program of public education until 1893; grew rapidly in California after 1913 (1900-129 public kindergartens, 4410 pupils; 1910—208 kindergartens, 6515 pupils; 1931—1894 kindergartens, 78,573 pupils); has there depended on local elementary school district taxes for its support, receiving no money from either state or county; cost during 1930-31 a total of \$4,642,663 in California, or \$108 per pupil in average daily attendance.

Just at present the California kindergarten seems in greater danger than either the elementary school or the high school. It has already been abolished in many California communities. In other communities its activities have been curtailed. A change in the state law raising the minimum age limit of kindergarten children from 4½ to 5 years has reduced attendance by thousands. The fact that kindergartens are entirely dependent upon local district support, without either state or county financial aid, leaves this part of the public program of education in an exposed position.

The chief source of danger to kindergarten education, however, lies in the fact that its vital importance in our great program of producing citizens is not generally recognized or appreciated. The present need is to clear up doubts and mistaken ideas about kindergarten education in the public mind.