The Workers' Educational Association of Great Britain

by

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THE significance of the Workers' Educational Association lies in the fact that it has succeeded in bringing about united action by the universities of England and the organisations of working men and women. It has fused the influence of these institutions into one strong and vital force for the development of education among working men and women throughout the country. In so doing it has helped to create a new attitude towards education on the part of the community at large. The new attitude revealed itself most clearly in the sudden demand for increased educational facilities towards the end of the period of the recent war. This demand is, however, in danger of falling short of its promised fulfilment by reason of the stringent financial condition of the country, but in any case the Association has demonstrated most clearly that, if there is to be reform and advance in the schools for children and adolescents, there must be a keen, understanding, adult population exerting its influence.

The spirit and perception of a man or woman who is pursuing education deliberately for himself, or herself, are altogether different from those of one who is merely talking about it as an idea. The great success of the Association lies in the fact that it has developed large numbers of people who are working in the true spirit of scholarship. With this introductory statement it will be well to turn to the origin of the Association and the ideas which led to its establishment.

ORIGINS OF THE ASSOCIATION

The working men and women who stood most conspicuously for education had been found ever since the middle of last century in the Co-operative movement. With prophetic insight the pioneers of the Rochdale Co-operative movement provided for a grant for education out of their realised trading surplus before the amount of the dividend upon purchases was determined. There probably existed in their minds some memory of the Mechanics' Institute movement, but as no direct connection can be traced the conception of the idea must be attributed to that

instinctive desire of men and women for knowledge, not in the narrow sense, but for education conceived as the development of both body and mind. A great amount of effort, expressing itself in classes and lectures, is found throughout the Co-operative movement, whether in the North or South of England. This activity was stimulated and given direction by the great teachers and scholars who were chosen to speak at the annual Co-operative congresses. In this way Professor Stuart, who founded University Extension, Sir Arthur Dyke Acland, who first introduced citizenship into the education code of the country, and Arnold Toynbee, the brilliant Balliol tutor, did signal service to the cause of education. The address of the last of these at Oxford in 1881 was of outstanding importance. From that time Co-operative education had an organised and definite policy; the friendship with the universities was cemented and sealed.

Eight years before this Professor Stuart, responding to the requests made by working men, particularly the Trades Council of Nottingham, and by the North of England Council for promoting the Higher Education of Women, had induced the University of Cambridge to found the University Extension movement. The early lecturers went out with a sense of mission, and found in the co-operative societies a base prepared and fit for their action. Professor Stuart himself devised the actual form of the Extension lectures as the result of ideas based on the obvious needs of the working men of Rochdale, successors of the Pioneers already mentioned. The operation of University Extension revealed many working-men scholars. They were not admitted to the universities in the normal way, but many of them attended the summer meetings, and on these occasions their enthusiasm became white-hot. Among the most notable of these men was Robert Halstead, until lately the secretary of the Co-operative Productive Federation. Year by year he organised parties of Co-operative students at Oxford and Cambridge, and for this he deserves to be remembered as a pioneer.

The spirit of the Association was already there when, in 1903, the material expression of it was proposed. The articles which founded the Workers' Educational Association—or "an Association to Promote the Higher Education of Working Men", as it was then called (1)—pointed out the desire of working men and women to express themselves, and made it quite clear that this expression could only be secured through the development of education; further, that the education of working men by working men would prove to be narrow and circumscribed, but that, if working men within the trade union and Co-operative movements joined hands with scholars, not only would the thought and power of ordinary people be developed, but scholarship would receive a new infusion of spiritual and intellectual force. It was made quite clear that labour divorced from scholarship would be handicapped and hindered, but that scholarship divorced from

(1) Cf. *University Extension Journal*, Jan., Mar., Apr., May 1903.

labour would become artificial and turn in upon itself. It was an expression of the root idea that all the right activities of a people have a direct influence upon intellectual and spiritual growth. Suggestions had been made previous to this to unite the Co-operative educational movement and the universities, but success was achieved in 1903 because trade unionists were included. A small committee consisting entirely of trade unionists and Co-operators undertook the work prior to the first public meeting held in Oxford on 22 August 1903.

At once the proposals of the Association struck the public imagination and secured the definite support of the national trade union and Co-operative bodies. It may be well to repeat here the first actual statement of the Association consequent upon its formation.

> Its immediate work will be :
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> (1) to make an exhaustive enquiry into the state of working-class education in England, the results of which will be published from time to time, and will form a basis of future action ;
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> (2) to develop, strengthen, and extend the influence of existing agencies, i. e. Co-operative classes, working men's clubs, local lectures, reading circles, Polytechnics, University Extension courses, etc. ;
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> (3) to endeavour by means of an improved continuation school system, as well as by tutorial classes and pioneer lectures, organised by the Association, to educate working men to such a point as will enable them to take full advantage of the systematised teaching provided in a University Extension centre or college, which it is intended to place in every town and district ;
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> (4) to provide special educational facilities for working men such as railwaymen who are prevented by the ordinary conditions of their employment from taking advantage of existing systems.

At this time the objective of the promoters of the Association was altogether vague. This was the chief criticism passed upon it, but, if any attempt had been made to be definite, no real results would have ensued. It was better to bring scholars and working people together regularly and see what resulted from this than to attempt to predict the results beforehand. No one knew what was going to happen to the Association.

During the first year very little work was accomplished, but at the beginning of the second year, largely owing to the enthusiasm of a working printer at Reading, the pioneer local branch of the Association was established. Its constitution was drafted by representatives of the local co-operative society and trade unions and the Principal of University College, Reading, and proved to be an invention of an important and permanent character. It was open to any educational or working-class organisation in the town to affiliate to the branch and to have a representative upon the local council. This at once united the efforts of the town and made it possible to proceed to educational work of a deliberate character. After this branches spread rapidly and, appropriately enough, with most effect in the town of Rochdale, which created an organisation consisting of over one hundred affiliated bodies. The wealth of educational effort which

sprang up at this time was quite remarkable, and indeed has never been exceeded in the whole history of the Association.

In the annual report for 1907 records of 47 branches were presented, but the income of the Association at that time had risen to only £294. The work was accomplished as the result not of financial aid but of generous effort on the part of working men and women up and down the country and the entirely generous attitude of scholars. This fourth annual report records 43 conferences in various parts of the country ; an enquiry into the education of working women ; five courses of lectures in the University of Birmingham ; perhaps the most remarkable series of lectures ever given in London on the history of Westminster Abbey, in the Abbey itself ; and enquiries into the attendance at evening schools, work in connection with public libraries, the development of curricula for working people, and, lastly, into the history of working-class education (2). There can be no doubt that the activity of the Association in its early years was widespread and full of promise. It was then that the foundations of the Association were laid and the superstructure planned, and in its main principles the Association has not changed since.

Constitution of the Association

An examination of the constitution of the Association may perhaps be appropriate at this stage. Originally it was quite loose. It allowed simply for individual membership, an executive committee, local committees, an advisory council, and an annual meeting. In the year 1907, acting on the instructions of the annual meeting of 1906, a revised constitution was drawn up providing for the creation of district authorities as well as local branches. Subject to certain necessary conditions the districts were declared to be autonomous. This point is worthy of note, because it largely determined the development of the Association in later years. It was possible for members to join the central body, or the district authority, or the local branch, or all three. The annual meeting provided the means of ultimate control. This constitution operated until 1915, when a new one was framed which in a practically unaltered condition governs the Association today. Individual membership of the national body was abolished. The annual meeting was also abolished, and the government of the Association was placed in the hands of a central council representative of the different districts and affiliated national bodies. It was felt strongly, however, that the powerful influence exercised by the annual meeting must not be allowed to lapse, for at this gathering year by year people from all over the country attended to hear inspiring educational messages from leading scholars and workers, and intense enthusiasm was aroused. Accordingly the revised constitution

(2) See A. E. Dobbs : *Education and Social Movements, 1700-1850.* London, Longmans Green, 1919. 10s. 6d. This embodies the results of the enquiry.

provided for an annual convention which, although possessing no legislative powers, would provide a platform for the discussion of questions of national importance. During the war conventions were not held, but during the last few years they have shown signs of becoming as effective as the old annual meetings.

Thus the Association is open, and has always been open, to every person and to every institution interested in the development of the education of working people. It has never been in any sense a "class" movement, but it was recognised from the outset that it could only succeed in its work if the bulk of its membership was drawn from working men and women. It was democratic in conception, and it was always in the minds of those who were responsible for its development that, if the proportion of working men and women in the Association fell below that in the community—estimated roughly at 75 per cent.—the Association would not only become vitiated, but scholars would cease to take an interest in it, because the new note that it struck was as a movement of working men and women reaching out for scholarship. It had no other attractive power. Its pioneers always asserted that every normal man or woman was ready to seek knowledge and anxious for development. The experts smiled at this belief, but it made the work of the Association possible. It was found that a class could be formed from any ordinary audience of working men and women, whether in town or country.

Tutorial Classes

It will, perhaps, be noticed that in the original aim of the Association the term 'tutorial classes' was inserted. The creation of such classes in connection with the universities is the achievement which, more than anything else, has justified the educational reputation of the Association. The general effect of the movement was produced by its advocacy of the 'highway' of education as superseding the 'ladder' of education. The origin of the university tutorial classes is simple. University Extension lectures were organised at Rochdale with great effect, working men forming the greater part of the audience ; but these working men felt that they had no opportunity of studying a subject thoroughly. This problem was brought before the notice of the central Workers' Educational Association, which suggested that, if they could get 30 students who would pledge themselves to study for a period of years and to write regular essays, the Association would endeavour to secure them a teacher, appointed by a university, who would satisfy their needs. The Rochdale men, pioneers once again, adopted the suggestion, and as a result the first tutorial class was formed there, to be followed immediately by the formation of a class at Longton in the Potteries.

The idea of a university tutorial class is that the course, lasting normally for three years, shall be on the level of that obtaining in the subject in a university, but that the tutor shall be in a very

real sense the servant of the class. No class of adults studying non-vocational subjects can persist unless the individuality of the students is recognised. This leads to the recognition of the principle of full and free discussion, and the elimination of many of the methods prevailing in classes for children or adolescents, or even at the universities. In an adult class there must be no such thing as competition, but rather full co-operation, in which every member is happy to say what he thinks or knows about the subject or to ask what questions he wishes.

At first it seemed to some that this method would produce results of a low average and perhaps of a chaotic nature, but a little experience proved that the intellectual standard was raised to a surprisingly high level. In fact, the Board of Education, when making regulations for the classes, found no difficulty in stipulating that a class must aim at attaining the standard of a university class in honours in the subject studied. It is to the lasting credit of English educationalists that the idea of the tutorial class was welcomed and received in every quarter. The Board of Education set itself to do everything in its power to help the movement and, instead of attempting to make the class fit the regulations, made the regulations fit the classes. The local education authorities, except in instances of now recognised narrowness, were ready to make grants and to assist in other ways. The older universities of Oxford and Cambridge showed once again that they were not out of touch with the aspirations of a new epoch. The credit of adopting the system first belongs to Oxford, but that was mere accident. The active assistance of the Vice-Chancellor of the time (Sir Herbert Warren), the then Dean of Christ Church, and the present Master of Balliol, coupled with the enthusiasm of the representatives of the Trades Union Congress, the Co-operative Union, and others, made possible that high conception of the work which is embodied in the report on *Oxford and Working Class Education* (3).

No sooner had the university tutorial class movement been established than the provincial universities adopted the idea, and set up joint committees on the principle suggested in the Oxford report, namely, that the administration of the classes should be placed in the hands of university committees consisting, so far as at least half the membership was concerned, of representatives of working men and women nominated by the Workers' Educational Association. Today every university in England and Wales has such a joint committee, and the work of these committees is co-ordinated by a Central Joint Advisory Committee.

The internal affairs of the classes are in the hands of the students themselves who, in addition, have the right of approving the appointment of their tutor. At the express wish of the students themselves no certificates or diplomas are given at the

(3) *Oxford and Working Class Education : A Report of a Joint Committee of University and Working-Class Representatives on the Relation of the University to the Higher Education of Working People.* Oxford, Clarendon Press. 1909. 1s. (Out of print.)

close of the three years' work. No examinations are held. Generally speaking the majority of students are between 35 and 45 years of age, although some are much older. One student at least reached the age of 75.

After a special inquiry by the Board of Education into the work of the classes the Inspectors reported as follows (4):

> No one could attend these classes without being struck by the zeal and earnestness of the students, their happy relations with the lecturer, the general atmosphere of comradeship and good feeling in the classes, and the strong appreciation by the students of the benefit which they are deriving from the work. These impressions are not derived from any single class or type of classes. They are common to the diverse and widely scattered centres which we have visited, and they indicate the possibility of a very wide extension of teaching of this type. The experiment of the Association has, in fact, revealed the existence of a very widespread demand for serious teaching of the best and most thorough kind on matters standing in an intelligible relation to the life interests of the workmen. It has shown that the root questions of social history and theory may be examined by competent teachers leading a class of workmen-students in a spirit at which no reasonable man will cavil.
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> The classes are establishing in a number of great industrial towns centres of genuinely educated thought on social and industrial problems. What they teach is no mere exotic of culture, but is intimately related to the life and work of the students. Its effects are, therefore, likely to be permanent, and to spread from the actual members of the class to those who come in contact with them.

As to the sentiments of the students themselves, the following opinion of a mine surface worker and labour organiser is typical :

> I certainly regarded the universities with great suspicion at the first, and this was only eliminated by personal experience and contact with people in the universities, until I am now convinced that anything reactionary about adult educational institutions belongs mainly to tradition and can be borne down by sheer weight of a demand for a democratic educational system, as soon as such a demand is made with sufficient strength.

The first tutorial class summer school was held at Oxford in 1910 as the result of a suggestion made by the present Master of Balliol, who felt that students in tutorial classes ought to have an opportunity of going up to Oxford to consult specialists in their subjects of study and to receive individual tuition. This first school lasted for two months, and was attended by 87 students, who went into residence for varying periods. During the summer of 1921 residential summer schools were held at Oxford, Cambridge, Bangor, Bristol, Reading, Repton, and Saltburn-on-Sea, in addition to a non-residential school in London. The charges to students are kept as low as possible, and usually consist of a registration fee of a nominal amount, e.g. 2s. 6d., and the cost of board and lodging. It is impossible to estimate accurately the influence of these schools upon the movement as a whole, but it is no exaggeration to say that in and through them

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(4) BOARD OF EDUCATION : *Special Report on certain Tutorial Classes in connection with the Workers' Educational Association ;* Inspectors J. W. HEADLAM and Prof. L. T. HOBHOUSE. Special Reports No. 2. 10 pp. London, H. M. Stationery Office. 1910.

is engendered much of that enthusiasm for education which makes the winter class work so successful.

The movement has now spread to all the British Dominions, particularly to Australia and New Zealand, where there are over 112 classes. The tutorial class method has also been adopted in the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, and other countries. It appears to be the one great creation of English adult educational effort which has attracted the attention and elicited the admiration of those who have observed it from abroad. It is difficult to estimate the effect of these tutorial classes upon the mind of England as a whole, and it would not be wise to attempt to do so. Those who are competent to make estimates do so in varying terms, some extreme and some moderate. But the fact that many thousands of working men and women have had the benefit of the best opportunities of study which can be given them in leisure hours for periods of three years or more is significant enough in itself. As for the universities, the rise of the movement has meant a readjustment of their economic, social, and political studies. The teaching of economics is a different thing in the universities today from that which was common in 1907. Many tutors of the classes have been called upon to occupy professorial chairs, and many professors have led tutorial classes in addition to their intra-mural university work.

Other Forms of Educational Work

In any estimate of the value of educational work there is a danger of making unnecessary comparisons between efforts which are different in nature. The most valuable form of education is that which is adapted most certainly to the needs and potentialities of the individuals with which it is concerned. If any attempt were made by the Workers' Educational Association to induce all its members to undertake work of a specific kind because it was more highly appreciated by the world in general, the result could only be disastrous. So it is that for one person a tutorial class is best, while for another even so apparently insignificant a thing as visiting a picture gallery or taking part in an educational ramble on a Saturday afternoon may be most helpful. The range of the Association's work is wide and based upon the principle of "to each member according to his (or her) need". Thus, in addition to university tutorial classes running for three years, there are courses of study running for one year, in many of which work is done on as high a level as in university tutorial classes. There are also lecture courses and isolated lectures.

An interesting illustration of general educational activity is the rambles which are made from the town of Swindon on each Saturday afternoon during the summer, when places of historical interest are visited, and their significance explained by such well-known men as Dr. Forrest Browne (late Bishop of Bristol), Viscount Haldane, and others. Even in the early days of the Association, when courses were arranged in Westminster Abbey

or the House of Lords on Saturday afternoons, the number of applications for tickets from working men and women was three times as great as the number of seats available. These lectures demonstrated very clearly, among other things, the non-party character of the Association. The chairmen of the lectures were leaders in the three great parties in the House of Commons at the time—Conservative, Liberal, and Labour.

Present Scope of the Work of the Association

The report for the year 1920-21 shows that the Association consisted of 316 branches (5) organised in 13 districts. The total individual membership was 24,229, while the bodies affiliated to branches, districts, and centres numbered 2,895.

During the winter of 1921-1922 there were 336 tutorial classes in England and Wales, while during the session 1920-1921 there were 299 classes with 7,297 students. Of these 6 classes were taking advanced courses ; 49 were in their third year, 111 in their second year, and 133 in their first year. Nearly 200 earned the full Board of Education grant of £45 per class. The number of tutors engaged in the work was 191. Of these four took five classes, ten took four, and sixteen took three classes each.

The subjects of study in the classes were as follows :

	Number of classes
Economics, industrial and social history	145
Literature (English, Welsh, French, Greek, Irish, and American)	55
Psychology and philosophy	30
Music	12
Political science	12
Biology and natural history	9
Local and central government	7
Sociology	6
Modern European history and history of political freedom	5
Studies in social science	5
Economic geography	4
Anthropology	3
History of Western civilisation	2
Ethics	1
Problems of reconstruction	1
Jewish history	1
History of British Commonwealth	1

The occupations of the students during the same session may be classified as follows :

Teachers	1,112
Clerks, secretaries, typists, and telegraphists	1,017
Colliery workers, miners, and checkweighmen	714
Housewives, domestics, etc.	568
Engineers, mechanics, fitters, etc.	534
Metal, machine, and tool workers	411
Railway servants	207
Shopkeepers and assistants	198
Textile workers	197
Professional workers	191

(5) In England, Wales, and Scotland. At present there is only one branch in Ireland.

Foremen, managers, and overlookers	168
Carpenters and woodworkers	160
Food workers, farmers, etc	146
Builders, bricklayers, and stone workers	131
Tailors, cutters, dressmakers, and milliners	128
Civil servants	122
Insurance agents, travellers, and commercial occupations	117
Printers, engravers, bookbinders, and photographers	96
Labourers	64
Warehousemen	62
Miscellaneous factory workers	56
Boot and shoe trades and leather workers	55
Blacksmiths	48
Draughtsmen and designers	47
Municipal employees	44
Postmen, tramwaymen, and policemen	41
Potters	31
Electricians	30
Miscellaneous and unclassified	602

During the year, in addition to university tutorial classes, there were held 463 one-year classes, a large number of study circles, over 800 public lectures, and 69 educational conferences. Other activities included social gatherings, dramatic groups, and week-end schools.

The Association, to be estimated properly, must be regarded not as the wing or section of any existing movement, but as the creation of the working men and women of England in co-operation with scholars. It has, and can have, no ulterior motive. It stands for the realisation of the best in human personality by ordinary men and women engaged in manual and other labour. The Association has recently given its assent to the creation of a Workers' Educational Trade Union Committee, which has inspired proposals for the development of education among trade unionists. These have been approved by the Trades Union Congress, and a committee is now at work. It is too early yet to say what the result of the creation of this committee will be. Everyone concerned with it will doubtless recognise that anything which tends to exclude persons of goodwill, such as the Workers' Educational Association has drawn together, from the work of creating new educational opportunities will be an irreparable loss. No educational movement is justified in bowing to any passing theory, however specious. It must stand for its ultimate ideal and the ultimate good. It must refuse nothing that can minister to its ideal. It must be sensitive to all movements of the mind and spirit which are worth while, and must raise itself by its own purity and strength so that nothing of a lesser or different order can control it. If education can be kept in this way clear and pure, the welfare of the people is ultimately secure. If, on the other hand, it is directed or restricted by any party or any section of the people, however excellent in itself, then the old troubles will repeat themselves and it will not make easier the task of those who would build Jerusalem "in England's green and pleasant land".