

## Book Reviews

### **The Child, the Parent, and the State.**

James Bryant Conant. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1959. 211 pp. \$3.50.

James Bryant Conant holds a unique position in American education. He is the only contemporary American of international renown as a scientist, university president, and statesman who has chosen, over the years, to devote a major portion of his energies to the improvement of education at the pre-university level. Other scientists and scholars have expressed surprise at this diversion of his energies and doubt that a study of the American high-school provides the best use of the talents of a man of Conant's stature. But these doubters reveal an ignorance of history and a failure to recognize what is most important in determining the course of America's future. Conant's choice would not have seemed strange or irrelevant to such men as Jefferson and Franklin, for they also accepted it as a responsibility of statesmen and men-of-affairs to think long and deeply about the problems of educating free men and to make vigorous recommendations for improving the people's schools. When the history of 20th-century America is written, it may well be that Conant's contribution to secondary education will be given equal place with his contributions to other fields.

Already his influence is enormous. All across the land school boards, citizens' committees, and groups of teachers and educational leaders are discussing the Conant report, *The American High School Today*, which appeared last winter, and in many schools his recommendations are being put into practice this fall.

This, in itself, is an interesting commentary on the state of American education. It seems clear that the American people have grown weary of the endless debate over the schools, the sharply critical attacks, and the querulous replies that the critics are unfair or don't know what they are talking about. The

people know that something is wrong; now they want to be told what to do about it, but they do not trust either the educators or their critics to tell them. They do trust Conant, a man of unquestioned integrity, enormous prestige, and considerable educational experience, who has no axes to grind.

In *The Child, the Parent, and the State*, which may be considered a supplement to the report that became a best-seller last spring, he repeats his pleas for the elimination of small high-schools, for better guidance, for four years of foreign language for those who take any at all, and for ability-grouping with special programs for the academically talented within the framework of the comprehensive high-school. But the present book goes more deeply into the problems of secondary education both here and abroad and examines these problems in their historical perspective.

Conant's account of the revolutionary transformation of the American high-school between 1905 and 1930 is informed and perceptive. He gives attention to the social forces that caused the change, as well as to some of the individuals who played a part in fostering it. He discusses the secondary schools of England, Prussia, France, and Russia, the governmental framework within which the schools in these countries operate, and the effect of these schools on the national character. Khrushchev's "Memorandum on school reorganization" (September, 1958) and the Soviet "Law on school organization" are included in the appendixes.

Although he does not underestimate European education, Conant sees in the public comprehensive high-school a distinctly American institution, uniquely suited to our needs and purposes, and he concludes that it would be unwise, and probably impossible, for us to adopt any European pattern. Adoption of such a pattern would require drastic changes in the laws that govern employment of juveniles and the age of leaving school, the establishment of a national examination system for select-

ing students for the various secondary schools, and the abolishment of the liberal arts college, which is not found in Europe, where students go directly from secondary school to the university. "Anyone who wishes to take on seriously a reform movement to bring about any one of the changes I have listed is welcome to the job. To my mind he wouldn't get to first base, nor should he."

In discussing European education, Conant draws upon his own extensive experience abroad. In discussing American schools, he speaks from the background of personal visits to more than 50 high-schools in all parts of the country and the reports of his able staff on many others.

Conant relies heavily upon these observations and defends the empirical approach, while expressing a distrust of the deductive method of thinking about educational problems. "When someone writes or says that what we need today in the United States is to decide first what we mean by the word 'education,' a sense of distasteful weariness overtakes me. I feel as though I were starting to see a badly scratched film of a poor movie for the second or third time. In such a mood, I am ready to define education as what goes on in the schools and colleges, and I am more inclined to examine the past and present practices of teachers than to attempt to deduce pedagogical precepts from a set of premises."

This operational definition of education will delight many educators, but in it lies a danger. It is quite true that it is risky for the scholar in his ivory tower to try to deduce educational principles and recommend practices without going out to observe schools and children. But it is equally dangerous for the practical man to draw conclusions on the basis of observations alone, without first doing some hard thinking about the nature of the good life, the aims and purposes of education, and the proper limitations of the school's responsibility.

If he were innocent of basic principles and deductive logic, a man might observe schools for many years and still conclude that cheer-leading is just as important as mathematics. Conant makes no such mistake, of course, because he is a wise man who has done some hard thinking about education. But a lesser educator, using the procedures Conant seems to recommend, might come to some very dangerous and misleading conclusions and justify them on the basis of his own long experience

and extensive observations. This has frequently happened in the past.

The basic question raised in this book, and the one that provides the title, is whether the ultimate responsibility for education should rest with the state, the parent, or the child. Traditionally, in our society, the parent has been responsible, although the state has long required him to send his child to some kind of a school. But during the first half of this century, with the coming of the elective system and the increased permissiveness of parents, more and more responsibility has been placed on the student to choose his own path. The result has been that many able students chose the easy subjects in high school and some dropped out of school before their talents had been fully developed.

"World War II," says Conant, "provided the first shock to citizens and to educators who started from the premise of the independence of each child if not of each parent. What was accomplished or not accomplished in school or college obviously did have a great deal to do with winning the war in the shortest time and with the minimum expenditure of lives. There was, for the time being at least, an overriding state interest. . . ."

The launching of the sputnik and the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles by the Russians aroused fresh public interest in the quality of our education, and it now seems obvious to many Americans that our national survival, as well as social progress, requires that talented students be educated to the upper limits of their abilities. In the secondary school Conant proposes a rigorous academic program for these students, but who is to require that they take it? His conclusion is that such a program should be made available, but that "There is no way in a free country by which organized society can *require* bright students to study hard. . . . A climate of opinion must be created which brings forth in each young person a strong desire to do his or her best in school. Then the school must, in turn, provide the challenging courses and provide a variety so that not only the academically talented but all pupils will feel their studies are worthwhile."

Such a climate of opinion might seem to require a deemphasis on non-intellectual and recreational activities in the school. Gresham's Law works in education as well as in economics, and one way to keep students out of soft

courses and time-wasting activities is to not make them available. But Conant proposes no such deemphasis. He wants an even greater variety of offerings to meet the total range of abilities and interests, and a still greater variety of vocational courses. He counts on improved guidance programs to keep talented students out of the soft courses and the inappropriate vocational courses.

None of Conant's proposals are very revolutionary, nor, apparently, are they intended to be. His program for the talented 15 percent is not greatly different from that long recommended for admission to the more selective colleges, except that Conant proposes four years of mathematics and four years of a single foreign language. He gives little special attention to the large number of students who fall below the upper 15 percent, but who, nevertheless, will go to college. This is a serious omission for already well over 30 percent of high-school graduates go on to college, and the percentage rises each year. It seems unwise to encourage, or even to allow these students, many of whom will enter teaching or other professions, to take easy courses or vocational courses in high school. Conant's proposed required program for the less talented 85 percent is similar to that now required in many high schools: four years of English, three or four of social studies (including two of history), one of mathematics, and one of science, with the remainder of the time to be filled in with electives, including vocational courses. His emphasis on ability-grouping is sound, but this, too, is now found in many schools, and the practice is spreading.

While Conant calls for "immediate action to improve the high school," he believes that "The road to better schools might be considered merely a widening, straightening, and improvement of the present rather overgrown and winding lane along which most children wander." This will give comfort to many who have defended the present system, or lack of system, for it suggests that nothing really basic is wrong and that all necessary improvements can be made without a change in the present pattern of education.

The question must be asked whether Conant's proposals really get to the heart of the problem of educational quality. He is right in saying that we cannot adopt any European system, that we must work within the framework of our own form of democracy and must

provide for the full range of individual differences. But some of us who have struggled with these problems for many years are convinced that merely "widening, straightening, and improving," is not enough: we are convinced that the time has come for a more thorough overhaul that will include the junior as well as the senior high-school, provide for better articulation of secondary education with that which comes before and after, and prepare bright students for college a year or two earlier.

The changes that are needed, and in all probability soon will come, will go far beyond the Conant proposals and will include improvements in the teaching-learning process, as well as changes in school organization. They will include a reallocation of space, time, and personnel in the schools, the introduction of team-teaching, more and better instruction by television, and the use of teaching machines where appropriate, so that the teacher's time can be used more effectively. These changes will provide better education for the rural child without requiring him to spend many futile hours each day on a school bus.

New and better kinds of teachers will be necessary, and these will be developed through improved approaches to teacher-education, including the Master of Arts in Teaching program which Conant himself introduced when he was president of Harvard.

If this vision of the future becomes reality, Conant's proposals for the improvement of the American high-school will, by 1970, seem modest indeed. But *The Child, the Parent, and the State* will long be read as a wise and scholarly analysis of the problems of secondary education in a democracy.

PAUL WOODRING

*Ford Foundation,  
New York, New York*

**Tree Maintenance.** P. P. Pirone, Oxford University Press, New York, ed. 3, 1959. xviii + 483 pp. Illus. \$10.

P. P. Pirone is well qualified to present tree maintenance in a comprehensive manner. He has a background as a scientific investigator in plant pathology, and he has also maintained close contact with professional arborists. First published in 1941 as *Maintenance of Shade and Ornamental Trees*, this third revised edition is an excellent reference for the