

Books That Have Influenced Me

A SYMPOSIUM

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AS has been remarked by Robert Louis Stevenson in a charming little essay on this subject, it is scarcely possible to speak of books that have influenced one without finding oneself engaged on an auto-biographical essay of a sort. A man's outlook on the problems of life is necessarily moulded by the influences to which he has been subject, and especially by the influences brought to bear on him when at an impressionable age. The share which books have had in shaping his mental outlook and ultimately also his career in life, is, I fancy a highly variable one, and to no small extent dependent on the person's environment at home and at school in his early days. Indeed, a good home and a good school may be judged by the kind of books they put in the way of the growing young person for him to feed his mind and his emotions upon. I believe it is the exception rather than the rule for the

books which are formally taught at school and at college to exercise any profound influence on the mind of the student. The element of compulsion introduced in the prescription of books for study is usually fatal to that attitude of mind which is necessary for the full appreciation of their contents. It is the books the merits of which you have, so to say, discovered for yourself, that really influence you.

The failure to recognise this elementary fact of human psychology, namely the antithesis between choice and compulsion, is responsible for the unfruitful character of a vast amount of scholastic effort in the way of both teaching and learning. I can tell you here a story about myself or rather against myself in this connection. Forty-five years ago, a well-meaning University prescribed Robert Louis Stevenson's well-known story "Kidnapped" as an English text for the First Arts course. I do not remember the precise number of times this text was taught or lectured upon in class, or the precise number of

times I read through the book during the two years' course of study for the examination. The copy I purchased and used disappeared in due course. One evening, a couple of years ago, a copy of Stevenson's "Kidnapped" beautifully printed and bound caught my eye at a Railway bookstall. I was tempted to buy it and took it home and started reading the book before going to bed. Believe it or not, the story or rather the manner of its telling, gripped me so powerfully that I had to finish reading the whole book at a sitting before retiring for the night. I had, so to say, discovered Stevenson's magic charm of writing for myself. Since then, I have read everything that Stevenson wrote with the keenest enjoyment.

I finished my school and college career and my University examinations at the age of eighteen. In this short span of years had been compressed the study of four languages and of a great variety of diverse subjects, in several cases up to the highest University standards. A list of

all the volumes I had to study would be of terrifying length. Did these books influence me? Yes, in the narrow sense of making me tolerably familiar with subjects so diverse as Ancient Greek and Roman history, modern Indian and European History, Formal Logic, Economics, Monetary Theory and Public Finance, the later Sanskrit writers and the minor English authors, to say nothing of Physiography, Chemistry and a dozen branches of Pure and Applied Mathematics, and of Experimental and Theoretical Physics. But out of all this welter of subjects and books, can I pick out anything that helped really to mould my mental and spiritual outlook and determine my chosen path in life? Yes, I can and I shall mention three books.

A purposeful life needs an axis or hinge to which it is firmly fixed and yet around which it can freely revolve. As I see it, this axis or hinge has been, in my own case, strangely enough, not the love of science nor even the love of Nature, but a certain abstract idealism or belief in the

value of the human spirit and the virtue of human endeavour and achievement. The nearest point to which I can trace this source of idealism is my recollection of reading Edwin Arnold's great book, *The Light of Asia*. I remember being powerfully moved by the story of Siddhartha's great renunciation, of his search for truth and of his final enlightenment. This was at a time when I was young enough to be impressionable, and the reading of the book fixed firmly in my mind the idea that this capacity for renunciation in the pursuit of exalted aims is the very essence of human greatness. This is not an unfamiliar idea to us in India, but it is not easy to live up to. It has always seemed to me a surprising and regrettable fact that the profound teaching of the Buddha has not left a deeper and stronger impress on the life of our country of which he was the greatest son that ever lived.

The next of the books that I have to mention is one of the most remarkable

works of all time, namely, The Elements of Euclid. Familiarity with some parts of Euclid and a certain dislike of its formalism have dethroned this great work from the apparently unassailable position which it occupied in the esteem of the learned world for an almost incredibly long period of time. Indeed, my own early reactions to the compulsory study of Euclid were anything but favourable. The reason for this is, I think, to be found in the excessive emphasis placed on the subject as an intellectual discipline and the undue attention given to details as distinguished from its broader aspects. To put it a little differently, the student of Euclid is invited to look at the trees and to examine their branches and twigs so minutely, that he ceases even to be conscious of the existence of the wood. The real value of Geometry appears when we consider it as a whole, not as merely as the properties of straight lines, triangles and circles, but of everything else, curves, figures and solids of all kinds. Thus regarded,

Geometry makes a profound appeal both to our senses and to our intellect. Indeed, of all branches of Mathematics, it is that which links most closely what we see with the eye with what we perceive by reasoning. The ancient Greeks had a fine sense of the value of intellectual discipline, they had also a fine sense of the beautiful. They loved Geometry just because it had both these appeals. In my early years, it was a great struggle for me to learn to overcome the dislike of the formalism of Euclid and gradually to perceive the fascination and beauty of the subject. Not until many years later, however, did I fully appreciate the central position of Geometry in relation to all natural knowledge. I can illustrate this relationship by a thousand examples but will content myself with remarking that every mineral found in Nature, every crystal made by man, every leaf, flower or fruit that we see growing, every living thing from the smallest to the largest that walks on earth, flies in the air or swims in the waters or lives deep down.

on the ocean floor, speaks aloud of the fundamental role of Geometry in Nature. The pages of Euclid are like the opening bars of the music in the grand opera of Nature's great drama. So to say, they lift the veil and show to our vision a glimpse of a vast world of natural knowledge awaiting study.

Of all the great names in the world of learning that have come down to us from the remote past, that of Archimedes, by common consent, occupies the foremost place. Speaking of the modern world, the supremest figure, in my judgment is that of Hermann Von Helmholtz. In the range and depth of his knowledge, in the clearness and profundity of his scientific vision, he easily transcended all other names I could mention, even including Isaac Newton. Rightly he has been described as the intellectual Colossus of the nineteenth century. It was my great good fortune, while I was still a student at college, to have possessed a copy of an English translation of his great work on "The Sensations of Tone." As is well

known, this was one of Helmholtz's masterpieces. It treats the subject of music and musical instruments not only with profound knowledge and insight, but also with extreme clarity of language and expression. I discovered this book for myself and read it with the keenest interest and attention. It can be said without exaggeration that it profoundly influenced my intellectual outlook. For the first time, I understood from its perusal what scientific research really meant and how it could be undertaken. I also gathered from it a variety of problems for research which were later to occupy my attention and keep me busy for many years. Helmholtz had written yet another great masterpiece entitled "The Physiology of Vision." Unfortunately, this was not available to me as it had not then been translated into the English language.
