Many Writers Not Helped by College Training

W. W. Ellsworth, Veteran Publisher, Says That Our Educational Institutions Turn Out Critics, Not Creative Artists

By Joyce Kilmer.

What effect has the American college had upon American literature? Not exactly what one might expect, according to a man whose thirty-seven years in the publishing business give his opinions considerable authority. Mr. William W. Ellsworth, who has recently retired from the presidency of the Century Company, believes that the tendency of college education is to make the young men of literary inclinations a critic rather than a creative artist. Mr. Ellsworth called my attention to the indisputable fact that the spread of higher education has been accompanied by a decrease in the number of authors of genuine importance.

I did not find Mr. Ellsworth ready to discuss his long association with books and authors. "To talk about the possibilities of the future," he said, "surely is preferable to giving you my recollections of thirty-seven years spent in publishing. I should like to feel that these years are only preparation. And when one realizes that according to Dorland's 'The Age of Mental Virility' thirty-five per cent. of the good work done by men in the world has been done between the ages of sixty and seventy, one can take off one's coat at sixty with some satisfaction. President Eliot has never given much thought to recollections of his years at Harvard; what interests him is the present and the future."

"I checked off a list of authors the other day, and I found that I had known a round hundred of them. Some time I may write about them, but just at present I have been thinking about the authors of the future, rather than the authors of the past."

"Well," I asked, "what about the authors of the future and the authors of the present? Have we now in America more and better authors than we had twenty or thirty years ago?"

"No," said Mr. Ellsworth, "I do not think that any one conversant with the situation can say that we have as many writers of real significance today as we had twenty or thirty years ago. And it is this that makes me doubtful as to the value to literature of our enormous machinery for higher education—it is this that puzzles and rather depresses me when I think of the connection between college education and authorship."

"I wonder if the kind of education young men and young women are getting in our colleges today tends to make writers of them—or, at least, good writers. I have seen a number of young people who seem to possess a certain amount of creative literary ability when they were in school turning into critics after their college course. When they were graduated from college they were familiar with the writings of Addison and Browning, but they were utterly unable to express an original thought."

"I was reminded of this recently when I read in an address by the Dean of a great university the caustic sentence that 'the great defect in American college education is that it does not set the mass of students intellectually on fire.' Quite so! And sometimes it puts out what little literary fire the student brings with him to college."

"Why is this?" I asked. "Why does a college education put out this intellectual fire?"

"Well," said Mr. Ellsworth, "one trouble is that authorship is likely to be a matter of chance. The young man who goes in for technical training knows just what he wants, and gets it. And more and more young men are seeking assured professions for which they can get definite technical training."

"I read recently that in 1870 there were eighteen engineering schools in this country, with 107 graduates. In 1910 there were 118 such schools, with 4,700 graduates, and the number is estimated to have grown since then to nearly 7,000."

"There are schools of journalism, but there are no schools of authorship. And probably there never will be schools of authorship. The student of the art of authorship takes the courses that come nearest to his idea of what he ought to know. And 'the event is in the hands of God.'"

"What is the result," Mr. Ellsworth continued, "of our attempts to learn to write? You asked me if creative literary artists were increasing or decreasing in numbers. In the middle of the last century there were books being
Leading American Authors, 1800-1900

This list was prepared by Mr. W. W. Ellsworth from Professor Brasier Matthews’s “Brief Chronology” in his “Introduction to American Literature.” The names of authors who did not attend college are printed in capitals, and some details of the education of the other authors are given. From Professor Matthews’s list Mr. Ellsworth has omitted Lincoln, Grant, and Sherman, since they cannot accurately be called literary men.

Noah Webster, Yale. Studied law. School teacher.

Yale. Studied law. School teacher.

Bryant

At ten published translations from the Latin poets, at thirty, published a collection of “The Embargo.” Left college at fifteen. "Wrote "Thanatopsis" at eighteen and nineteen."

JOSEPH RODMAN DRAKE

FITZ-GREENE HALLECK

Nathan, three years at Yale, then a midshipman.

Daniel Webster

Expelled from the University of Virginia.

WHITTIER

District school and six months at Haverhill Academy.

Sparks.

Longfellow

Graduated at eighteen.

Bancroft

Entered Harvard at twelve. Graduated with second honors at seventeen.

SMART

Journalism. First book of (poems) at twenty-one.

Emerson

Graduated at eighteen.

Holmes

Graduated at twenty-four.

Hawthorne

Graduated at eighteen.

R. H. Dana, Jr.

Made his voyage described in "Two Years Before the Mast" in an interval of college education.

Lowell

Graduated at nineteen.

HERMAN MELVILLE

Went to sea at eighteen.

WHIPPLE

Commenced contributing to periodicals at fourteen. Journalist.

Parke

Donald C. Mitchell

Graduated at nineteen.

MRS. STOWE

GEORGE WILMINGTON CURTIS

Was toasted. At eighteen went to Brook Farm for two years.

WHITMAN

Mather

Appointed to a printer at thirteen; a pilot at sixteen.

Sidney Lanier

MINN ALCOTT

Experienced a journalist. Carpenter, farmer, and printer.

AT DWICH

BRENT HART

R. WARD TAYLOR

BURROUGHS

EGO ESTON

Printers.

Sedman

Two years at college. Did not graduate. Journalist.

HENRY JAMES

No college. Harvard law school.

CARLE

Engraver and journalist.

STOCKTON

F. Marion Crawford

THOMAS R. LOOMIS

J. W. SLICKER

Sign painter and journalist.

H. C. BUNNER

HELEN HUNT JACKSON

MRS. BURNETT

MARY E. WILKINS

Theodore Roosevelt

Captain Mabon

J. G. NICOLAY

John Hay

HAMLIN GARLAND

Farmer and teacher.

HENRY B. FULLER

H. C. LEE.

Charles W. Eliot

GRADUATED AT TEN.

SETON THOMPSON

bored but very few of the women. Mrs. Wharton, Miss Sedgwick, Mrs. Delano, Mrs. Averell, Mrs. Brown, Ellen Glasgow, Agnes Repplier, and other leading writers of the day never went to college. This is especially significant because in our country women are doing so many things. Fully as good as that of the men. I wonder if that can be said of any other country?

"The more one studies these lists the more the college or non-college classification seems to grow about as important as classifying the writers according to the color of their eyes. The men and women succeed who have it in them to succeed, and one is at a loss to prescribe a course of study for one to who is not in the footsteps of the great authors. Whitman and Poe stand high in literature, (wherever they may stand in the Hall of Fame,) but one would hardly advise the student to copy their lives.

"Sign painting worked with Riley, but it has not yet been established as a good substitute for a college course. If the art of writing could be taught, more of the thousands of English professors in America would have 'caught on.' But, as it is, one’s ten fingers will suffice to number all the writers among them who have put forth any noteworthy creative literature.

"Fifteen years ago I made a count of 1,000 book manuscripts received in our office, and I found that 25 in the 1,000 were accepted, and 975 were declined. Out of the twenty-five accepted, eleven were by authors who had written before and fourteen were bolts from the blue.

"Now, a count of one thousand book manuscripts received up to Jan. 1, 1916, shows that forty-one were accepted. And how many of these, do you suppose, were by new writers? Not one!

"Now, that is discouraging. There lies the slighest prejudice against the new writer in any publishing house, notwithstanding that popular opinion is to the contrary—indeed, the new writer is welcomed with open arms. Every publisher wants writers, but not in his house. But if the new writers send us manuscripts which in our judgment are not worthy of publication, of course we must reject them. I am no ardent and ardent, but I cannot help feeling that the hope of authorship is not growing in America as it should, and that the colleges are apparently doing nothing to help this growth.

"Perhaps the school-reader is to blame, to a certain extent—it is a scrappy sort of a thing, not likely to give the student any real appreciation of literature. A 15-year-old at home on a rainy afternoon does not pick out a poem by Browning, half a story by Stevenson, and a chapter of Macaulay. He gets a real book and buries himself in it. And the plot is what holds him. If the style is good, that ‘comes off’ like whitewash as he goes along.

"Have extracts from any writers ever not ready for line by line improvement? or ‘Afloat in the Forest’ have done? For the college students, perhaps, we try to do too much. We give thousands of them a smattering of carefully selected English literature and expect this to kill originality in the few hundred or the few score who might some day write something that would be worth while.”