

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 man 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 Doriand'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 ma-

chinery 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



William W. Ellsworth

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published which are more widely read today than are the current 'best sellers.' The leading novelists were Dickens, Thackeray, Hawthorne, George Eliot, Charles Kingsley, Trollope, Charles Reade, Charlotte Brontë, George Meredith, and Mrs. Stowe. Are there many like them writing today?"

Mr. Ellsworth took from his desk a long strip of paper bearing a list of names. "Here," he said, "are the results of an experiment I made in an effort to establish the connection between college education and authorship. On this sheet is a list of the leading American authors of the nineteenth century, a list made from Brander Matthews's 'Brief Chronology.' I have put in capitals the names of the thirty writers who did not go to college.

"You will see that some of the collegians did not graduate, and many others were graduated very young. This list surely proves that the authors who produced some of our most original literature did not get their inspiration from college halls. In fact, at no time in their lives could many of these men have passed an examination for admission to the freshman class of the humblest of American colleges. Surely this is true of Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, James Whitcomb Riley, and Frank Stockton.

"Consider the mortification of William Shakespeare if he knocked today at the gates of Cambridge or Oxford! Would the world have had 'Leaves of Grass' if Whitman had been trained to accept the standards of Harvard University? If Mark Twain had been graduated from Yale, would he, could he, have written 'The Innocents Abroad' and thrown stones at all the idols set up by George William Curtis and Irenæus Prime? No, Mark Twain acquired what training he had in a printing office and a pilothouse and a mining camp. And, having in his soul the divine gift of authorship, he practiced writing until he could tell the world something to which it was worth while to listen. And he never was influenced in the slightest degree by the writings of Mr. Addison.

"And think of those other printers, Bret Harte, Walt Whitman, Bayard Taylor, Joel Chandler Harris, and William Dean Howells. And there were journalists, too, 'budding' journalists who really bloomed—William Gilmore Simms, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, John Burroughs, Edmund Clarence Stedman, (who spent two years at Yale,) Frank Stockton, (at first an engraver,) Henry Cuyler Bunner, John G. Nicolay, and James Whitcomb Riley, who began with a course in sign painting.

"The first American writer to be taken seriously in England was Washington Irving. And 'he did not like to study and had no inclination to go to college.' What could William Cullen Bryant, a poet at 10, get from two years of a required course of mathematics, ancient languages, logic, and natural philosophy? Mental training, perhaps, some culture—but few tools. Cooper had the advantage of a midshipman's life."

"But what about the New England group? They were college graduates, were they not?"

"The members of the New England group which dominated American literature for thirty years were, most of them, college men," said Mr. Ellsworth. "But it must be remembered that the

Leading American Authors, 1800-1900

This list was prepared by Mr. W. W. Ellsworth from Professor Brander 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.
Bryant	At ten published translations from the Latin poets, at thirteen wrote and published "The Embargo." Left college at fifteen. Wrote "Thanatopsis" at eighteen and nineteen.
IRVING	One of his biographers calls him "a saunterer and a dreamer." Did not like to study and had no inclination to go to college.
JOSEPH RODMAN DRAKE.....	Studied medicine.
FITZ-GREENE HALLECK.....	
Cooper	Three years at Yale, then a midshipman.
Daniel Webster.....	
Edgar Allan Poe.....	Expelled from the University of Virginia.
WHITTIER	District school and six months at Haverhill Academy.
Sparks	
Kennedy	
Longfellow	Graduated at eighteen.
Bancroft	Entered Harvard at twelve. Graduated with second honors at seventeen.
SIMMS	Journalism, law. First book (poems) at twenty-one.
Emerson	Graduated at eighteen.
Holmes	Graduated at twenty.
Hawthorne	Graduated at eighteen.
Prescott	
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.
Parkman	
Thoreau	
Donald G. Mitchell.....	Graduated at nineteen.
MRS. STOWE.....	
GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS.....	Was tutored. At eighteen went to Brook Farm for two years.
WHITMAN	Carpenter, farmer and printer.
Motley	Graduated at nineteen.
MARK TWAIN.....	Apprenticed to a printer at thirteen; a pilot at sixteen.
Sidney Lanier.....	
MISS ALCOTT.....	
ALDRICH	Experience as a journalist.
BRET HARTE.....	Composer.
BAYARD TAYLOR.....	Composer.
BURROUGHS	Teacher and journalist.
EGGLESTON	Self-educated. Methodist preacher at nineteen.
HOWELLS	Printer.
Stedman	Two years at college. Did not graduate. Journalist.
HENRY JAMES.....	No college. Harvard law school.
CABLE	Newspaper contributor.
STOCKTON	Engraver and journalist.
JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS.....	Printer.
F. Marion Crawford.....	
Thomas R. Lounsbury.....	
J. WHITCOMB RILEY.....	Sign painter and journalist.
H. C. BUNNER.....	Journalist.
HELEN HUNT JACKSON.....	
MRS. BURNETT.....	
MARY E. WILKINS.....	
Theodore Roosevelt.....	
Captain Mahan.....	
JOHN G. NICOLAY.....	
John Hay.....	
HAMLIN GARLAND.....	Farmer and teacher.
HENRY B. FULLER.....	
H. C. Lodge.....	
Charles W. Eliot.....	Graduated at nineteen.
SETON THOMPSON.....	

college gave them only the mental training and culture that it gave Bryant. In those days there were no 'literary courses.'

"If we make out a list of popular English writers of today, we find that the number of college graduates is slightly larger than that of the writers who did not go to college. But H. G. Wells took honors at a college of science and Robert Hichens went to a college of music. Thomas Hardy got his education at evening classes in King's College, London.

"Some of the writers who had no college training are Arnold Bennett, Gilbert K. Chesterton, William Black, Rider Haggard, John Masefield, George Moore, Eden Phillpotts, and Israel Zangwill. Kipling went to the United Services Col-

lege. George Bernard Shaw was a poor scholar and left school at the age of fifteen to enter a real estate office.

"H. G. Wells, in the chapter called 'The New Education' in his recently published book 'What Is Coming?' suggests that the old methods of education at Oxford and Cambridge should be swept away. The dons and the younger professors, he says, have gone with the undergraduates to fight in the trenches. At Cambridge, where there were formerly 4,000 students, there are now only 400. Therefore, Mr. Wells believes, the time has come for the introduction of Hindustani and Russian upon at least an equal footing with Greek.

"A list of modern American writers shows that most of the men are college

bred but very few of the women. Mrs. Wharton, Miss Sedgwick, Mrs. Deland, Mrs. Atherton, Mrs. Burnett, Alice 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 literary work 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 the student who seeks to follow 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 three thousand teachers of literature 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. 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 isn't the slightest 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 new writers on his list. But if the new writers send us manuscripts which in our judgment are not worth publishing, of course we must reject them. I am not a pessimist, but I cannot help feeling that the art 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 boy 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 set a boy on fire as 'Treasure Island' 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 in doing this we kill originality in the few hundred or the few score who might some day write something that would be worth while."