

GEOGRAPHY IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES.

Sir,—It may, perhaps, be of service to those interested in the improvement of Public School education if I briefly state the results of the experience gained in the examinations for the prize medals offered by the Royal Geographical Society for competition among the boys of the great schools of the United Kingdom.

It will be necessary for the sake of clearness to say a few words about the nature of these prizes. One gold medal is allotted annually to the best candidate in Physical Geography, and another to the best in Political Geography. To the second best in each subject a bronze medal is awarded, and there are "honourable mentions" besides. The recent anniversary meeting of the Society was the third occasion on which the medals were bestowed, and I may add that the presence of the four lads whom the examiners had reported to have well deserved their honours, together with the remarks made on the subject by several speakers, added notably to the interest of the day. It was stated that 43 of the largest Public Schools in the United Kingdom (numbering, among them, fully 10,000 boys) had been invited to name competitors, that ten schools did so, and that the total number of candidates was 18 in Physical and 7 in Political Geography. The competition was shown to have been fully as keen as in the preceding years, and the institution of the prizes was claimed to be, on the whole, a considerable success, though regret was expressed that the oldest and most historical schools had not, as yet, entered the lists.

I must explain that the promoters of this institution were actuated by no officious desire to meddle in educational details of which they had no special knowledge. They entertained, however, an assured and painful conviction that although Geography may be taught in some of the lower forms of our Public Schools, it is not there learnt as it ought to be learnt by every young English gentleman, whatever is to be his future career in life—whether that of a legislator, or that of an officer in the Army or Navy, of a merchant, of a public servant connected with the Indian, colonial, or foreign interests of this great Empire, or merely of a private gentleman without any special vocation, but still exercising an influence over English public action.

Having said this much, I can proceed more intelligibly to the direct purpose of my letter. I have learnt, through the experiences of these three past years, that Geography can be taught in a very satisfactory manner, and that it is so taught in some few of the great Northern schools of England, elucidating and not hindering a boy's purely scholastic studies. It also appears, from the reports of our examiners, that it is very badly taught in some other schools, whose Head Masters, in certain cases, apparently ignorant of their own ignorance, have sent up boys so ill-prepared as to reflect little credit on the place of their education. I do not here speak, be it understood, of such exceptional geographical acquirements as would give a boy a chance of gaining the Society's rewards, but of that very moderate but clear knowledge which must pervade historical education on the one hand and physical education on the other, whenever either of these subjects is liberally taught. I feel justified, too, in adding that it was chiefly as an indirect encouragement to this moderate but sound knowledge that the medals were founded, for they appeared at the time to be the most promising method of giving that encouragement. What has already been effected is much, for the institution of them has been the means of discovering, educating, and attesting the natural geographical aptitudes of many youths, most of whom will be sure to adhere to their geographical interests in after-life. We may reasonably expect that some will become teachers of Geography at schools and at the Universities, some will perhaps write the much-needed geographical text-books, and the rest will further geographical science in some more or less direct manner. But, as I have already said, I am not now writing to justify the offer of these medals, nor to urge more schools to compete for them, but simply to advocate a more methodical and thorough geographical education than exists at present, except in a very few of our great schools.

What, then, are the difficulties which confront reform, and how may those difficulties be removed? I believe that it is the Universities which stop the way. What these demand the older and more famous Public Schools will teach; and, conversely, those Public Schools will not teach what the Universities do not demand. It is not only a case of supplying what is asked for, but it is also that the Public School teachers, being all of them University men, adhere to University traditions. Hence it is that even the Civil Service examinations (which include Geography) have little influence on those schools. After boys have been educated for years in them, they have to be taken away half a year before the examination comes on, and be submitted to a "crammer" to enable them to scrape through. Now, the two Universities have at this moment certain schemes under their consideration in any or all of which Geography may legitimately claim a position, and it is for the purpose of advocating those claims that I have written this letter. First, there is the plan of a Matriculation Examination, which boys must pass before they may enter either University. In that scheme let Geography be included, giving an alternative of Political or Physical Geography, and also limiting the range of each of these subjects so far as may be thought desirable. Secondly, there is a plan, promoted by the Head Masters of schools, now under discussion, of having what are called "Leaving Examinations," to be conducted by examiners sent from the Universities, with the intention that boys who pass them may be relieved from further elementary examinations. Let Geography, as explained above, be included in this examination also. If all this be done the effect on the Public Schools would be immense and salutary; the art of teaching Geography in a vivid, lively manner would become common; better text-books would be written, an intelligent interest in the world of modern times would be excited, and the dry bones of ancient history would be made to live.

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