

# **ON THE ART OF READING**

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**SIR ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH**

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OF READING**



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By

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## PREFACE

THE following twelve lectures have this much in common with a previous twelve published in 1916 under the title *On the Art of Writing*—they form no compact treatise but present their central idea as I was compelled at the time to enforce it, amid the dust of skirmishing with opponents and with practical difficulties.

They cover—and to some extent, by reflection, chronicle—a period during which a few friends, who had an idea and believed in it, were fighting to establish the present English Tripos at Cambridge. In the end we carried our proposals without a vote: but the opposition was stiff for a while; and I feared, on starting to read over these pages for the press, that they might be too occasional and disputatious. I am happy to think that, on the whole, they are not; and that the reader, though he may wonder at its discursiveness, will find the argument pretty free from polemic. Any one who has inherited a library of 17th century theology will agree with me that, of all dust, the ashes of dead controversies afford the driest.

And after all, and though it be well worth while to strive that the study of English (of our own literature, and of the art of using our own language, in speech or in writing, to the best purpose) shall take an hon-

ourable place among the schools of a great university, that the other fair sisters of learning shall

Ope for thee their queenly circle . . . .

it is not in our universities that the general redemption of English will be won; nor need a mistake here or there, at Oxford or Cambridge or London, prove fatal. We make our discoveries through our mistakes: we watch one another's success: and where there is freedom to experiment there is hope to improve. A youth who can command means to enter a university can usually command some range in choosing which university it shall be. If Cambridge cannot supply what he wants, or if our standard of training be low in comparison with that of Oxford, or of London, or of Manchester, the pressure of neglect will soon recall us to our senses.

*The real battle for English lies in our Elementary Schools, and in the training of our Elementary Teachers.*

It is there that the foundations of a sound national teaching in English will have to be laid, as it is there that a wrong trend will lead to incurable issues. For the poor child has no choice of schools, and the elementary teacher, whatever his individual gifts, will work under a yoke imposed upon him by Whitehall. I devoutly trust that Whitehall will make the yoke easy and adaptable while insisting that the chariot must be drawn.

I foresee, then, these lectures condemned as the utterances of a man who, occupying a chair, has contrived to fall betwixt two stools. My thoughts have too

often strayed from my audience in a university theatre away to remote rural class-rooms where the hungry sheep look up and are not fed; to piteous groups of urchins standing at attention and chanting *The Wreck of the Hesperus* in unison. Yet to these, being tied to the place and the occasion, I have brought no real help.

A man has to perform his task as it comes. But I must say this in conclusion. Could I wipe these lectures out and re-write them in hope to benefit my countrymen in general, I should begin and end upon the text to be found in the twelfth and last—that a liberal education is not an appendage to be purchased by a few: that Humanism is, rather, a *quality* which can, and should, condition all our teaching; which can, and should, be impressed as a character upon it all, from a poor child's first lesson in reading up to a tutor's last word to his pupil on the eve of a Tripos.

ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH.

July 7, 1920.