

WITH the help of the Editor and readers of "The Outspan" I propose to make a plan for the development in South Africa of what is called "Adult Education." There is no need to be frightened by the words; I am using them in their broad human sense as they are used in America, and mean by them something enjoyable and jolly, not something dull and academic. Adult education, if it is to serve a useful purpose in this country, will have to be something that large numbers of people take up, not because they think they ought to, but because it gives them a real measure of satisfaction and pleasure.

Planning is, of course, the new fashionable word. Everyone is planning now. Let us plan our adult education. But before we make our plan it is essential that we should see clearly what it is that we want to do and have a sound knowledge of the facts: of the people, and their needs, and interests, and their circumstances.

The aim of adult education has been well expressed by Dr James E. Russell, Dean of Teachers College, Columbia University:

"The aim of adult education is to inspire grown-ups to be something more than they are now and to do their work better than they do it now; at its best it leads to constantly increasing richness of life, better appreciation of that which life offers, greater satisfaction in the use of the mind and body, and better understanding of the rights and duties of one's fellow men."

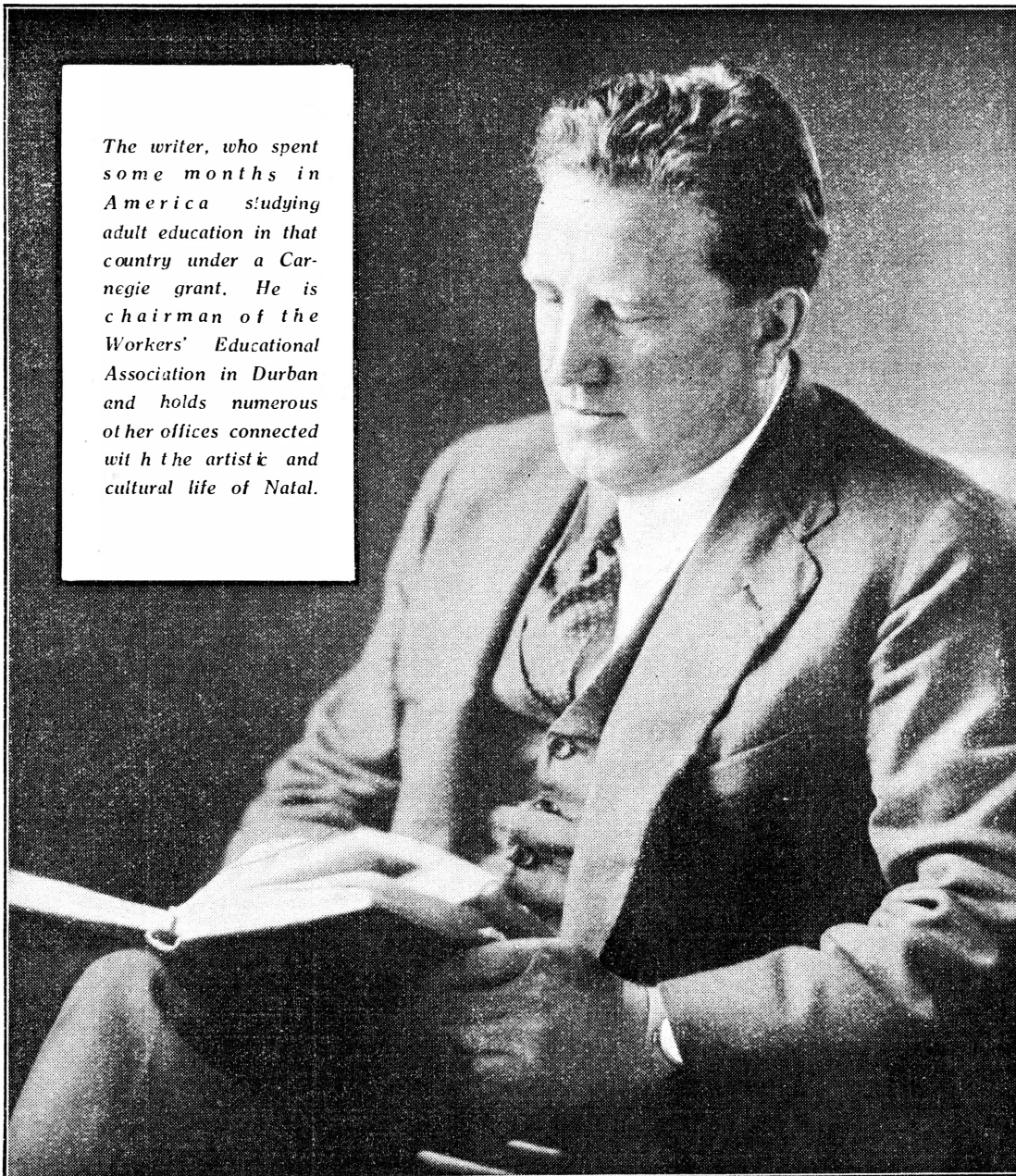
The adult educationist in South Africa has something of a reputation as a "high-brow" and a kill-joy. But adult education is the reverse of "high-brow." "High-brow" means (if it means anything at all other than a vague term of abuse) intellectual snobbery. It brings to the mind a picture of a person who, having a certain amount of knowledge, revels in the sense of superiority over his fellows that his knowledge gives him. The purpose of adult education has ever been to bring to the less fortunate the gifts that the more fortunate have received; and, behind it has been the desire of those who, by good fortune, have acquired some part of the world's great store of learning to share it freely with their fellows. The spirit of adult education is not superiority but comradeship.

We often make the mistake of thinking that education ends at school or college. We think that a scholar passes some examination or other, secures a school leaving certificate or matriculates, or takes a degree, and then "stays put." This is far from the truth. Life never does "stay put." That is the fascinating and challenging thing about it. A landscape gardener may lay out and plant the most beautiful garden, but the moment he stops work it will start going to weed.

It is much the same with ourselves. During our school days the curve of our knowledge, our skill in doing things, our ability to appreciate, our character and spiritual power is (or so at least we fondly hope) rising steadily. When we leave school or college that curve will not remain stationary, holding the same level for the rest of our lives. It will either rise or fall. It will almost certainly fluctuate, sometimes rising, sometimes falling, but it will either rise more than it falls, or fall more than it rises.

Thanks to the patient studies of Dr Edward L. Thorndike and his colleagues of the Institute

The writer, who spent some months in America studying adult education in that country under a Carnegie grant. He is chairman of the Workers' Educational Association in Durban and holds numerous other offices connected with the artistic and cultural life of Natal.



Adult Education: Towards a Plan for South Africa

By MAURICE WEBB

of Educational Research, Columbia University, we now know that the old idea that one cannot learn after twenty was only a myth, and a particularly silly myth at that. We know that we can go on learning until much later in life, and that this curve of knowledge and skill and appreciation which makes its strongest upward spring during our years at school can go on rising steadily higher and higher into full middle age and even then need decline only very slowly. Dr Thorndike's book "Adult Learning" is a great comfort to middle age.

But because that curve can rise it does not necessarily mean that it will rise.

Ideally, our elementary and secondary education should be such that when we leave school our interests are so fully awakened, our powers of appreciation so developed, our abilities to make or to do so far perfected, that we proceed along the line of that ascending curve by our own volition, pursuing our own cultivated interests and asking only that reasonable access to the necessary means, such as a library if our interests be literary, or the materials if our interests be manual.

When that ideal has been achieved the function of adult education will be to see that the materials needed are available for use. But that ideal is as yet very far from realisation and the function of adult education today is two-fold: to check as far as it can the downward fall of that curve; and, to stimulate its upward movement.

Unfortunately there are many things that tend to make that curve fall from the level achieved by the time we leave school, and one of them is a natural reaction from school itself. If school days have been unpleasant, have been full of dull routine learning, have been boring and punctuated by senseless punishment, there will be a sharp reaction from learning of any kind as soon as the days of compulsory school attendance are over. In these cases adult education should step in, should discover what interests have been at least partially awakened or are dormant and, by encouragement, make them live. The results of the unfortunate association between learning and compulsion should be overcome and genuine interest aroused. Thus this downward curve might be at least retarded and perhaps stayed altogether.

Most of us, however sink down steadily after leaving school. The extent of the fall we can judge for ourselves if we pause to consider the present nature and extent of our abilities and interests and compare them with those that we had when we left school or college. We can ask ourselves if our reading is as good now as it was then, have we as much skill in the use of tools, has our knowledge grown wider and deeper, can we appreciate things more now or less? Much is claimed for "The University of Experience." Have we gained much from it really, or do we only hide our own shortcomings behind a smoke screen of "experience"?

In recent years the depression has caused a tragic downward swoop of our curve. We do not realise fully the evil effects of unemployment.

As one day of enforced idleness follows another a man's whole being sinks. His mind loses its power to function; his hand loses its skill; anxiety undermines his spirit, until he falls swiftly downward to bitter despair or dull indifference.

It is a sad thing that this country did not have, when the depression came, an adult educational organisation ready to stay that sharp decline. If we cannot find employment for a man we should at least see that his enforced leisure has some of the uses of leisure. Anxiety we cannot, perhaps, avert. But we could see that mental ability was not lost and that skill was retained and even increased.

Then this country, more than many countries, offers another cause for a declining curve: isolation. Our remote rural areas have wrought cruel havoc with many promising lives, and the story of a career begun brilliantly in college and ended dismally in the bar of a small dorp hotel is all too common in South Africa.

Here are three downward forces, reaction from schooling, unemployment, and isolation, that adult education could check. The downward movement once arrested, adult education could first start and then accelerate an upward curve.

The curve of a graph can be an exciting thing. Just imagine this curve of continuously growing interest and knowledge and think what it means. Suppose that for most of us our interests could expand, our knowledge become wider and deeper, our skill of hand increase, our power to appreciate and understand grow greater, until well into middle age and then decline only very slowly if at all. We should have a different South Africa then. We should have a happier people,

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and a wiser citizenship, and the problems that baffle us so much and cause such anger and resentment would be no more than a stimulating challenge to our powers to solve them. . . .

The reader who has followed this article so far may well break in impatiently, saying: "Yes, yes, this is all very well. I can see what adult education might do and why it should do it. But how can it be done? Adult education has been tried in this country and it has not achieved very much."

Such an outburst would be entirely justified. I have withheld the "how" deliberately, and I admit the failure of adult education in this country in so far as it has been tried. One of South Africa's foremost educationists wrote to me recently: "I have always been interested in the question of adult education . . . but frankly I have been discouraged by the results of what has hitherto been attempted in this connection in our country."

The reason for this failure is, I believe, that we have attempted to transplant into this country a conception of adult education that is alien to it. We have tried to impose from above instead of encouraging a growth from our own soil. But we need not, because of that failure, be discouraged. In any case so very little has been attempted that the failure could not be very great.

Now as to the "how." This is where I ask for the help of every reader of "The Outspan."

Believing as I do that any plan of adult education must, if it is to succeed in its object, be rooted deep in the needs and circumstances of those people it is to serve, I ask the readers of this paper to complete the question form that will be found on this page and post it to the editor in order that a plan may be formulated that is designed to meet the needs expressed.

Even if you think that adult education is all moonshine, or feel that

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it is no use for you, or that your needs are so great that they cannot be met, fill in the form and say so.

I have some idea of the wide variety of people who read "The Outspan," and believe that a properly planned programme of adult education would have something of

value to offer to every reader.

Unfortunately the whole idea of adult education is so new to this country that people do not know that they might be served by it. It is thought vaguely that adult education means courses of dull lectures. Lectures there may be, but not

necessarily dull ones, and in any case there is much besides. Some of the most interesting work in America is done in the simple cottages of the people of the Apalachian hills, and takes many forms from teaching illiterates to read and write to staging plays. By no means all education is literary. We have all been rather too much concerned with books. Doing is more important than knowing, and a valuable field open to adult education is that of crafts and hobby pursuits.

Among the readers of this paper (who will, I hope, fill in and post the form) are young men and young women who are anxious about their future; they would like to do something in order to "get on"; there are mothers with young children who are often troubled over questions of diet or health, or bewildered by "tempers" and would like some help in their difficulties; there are men and women in the country districts who feel that they are "out of touch" and would like to be able to keep pace with a changing world; there are men and women who want to write stories or plays but do not know how to begin; there are groups of people who would like to start a music club or a dramatic society but do not know how to go about it; there are people who want to understand what this business of currencies and the gold standard means and are only bewildered by the expert economists; there are people who just want a little advice about books to read. . . .

A plan of adult education can be formulated to meet the needs of these people and many more besides. Fill in the question form and post it to the Editor of "The Outspan," to reach him, at Box 245, Bloemfontein, not later than March 11th. They will not be published, but they will be studied and classified, and in a later issue a plan of adult education will be set out that will be based upon the needs and circumstances that have been revealed.

Name

Address

Age Occupation

What school or college education did you receive?

Name any certificate or degree obtained.

Are you a member of a public library? Is it free?

What books, or periodicals, do you enjoy reading?

Do you listen-in to wireless? Get good reception?

From which station?

What items or wireless programmes do you enjoy most?

Do you belong to a literary society, women's institute, Afrikaans kultuurvereniging, music club, dramatic society, or other organisation? Give particulars and indicate what the organisation does that is of interest to you.

Have you special interests or hobbies, such as music, astronomy or gardening? Name them.

Have you adequate means to develop these interests?

Are you within reach of a university college, technical college, library and museum. Government school?

Have you been associated with adult educational activity such as the Workers' Educational Association or University Extension?

Did these organisations give you what you wanted?

Can you suggest any way in which a scheme of adult education could be of use to you?

The above questions are not intended to be exhaustive, but to indicate the kind of information required. Add a statement of your particular needs and circumstances.

Post to The Editor, "The Outspan," P.O. Box 245, Bloemfontein, to arrive not later than March 11th.