

The sacrifice of education / by Sir Joseph Fayrer.

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Fayrer, Joseph, Sir, 1824-1907.

Publication/Creation

[Place of publication not identified] : [publisher not identified], [1889.]

Persistent URL

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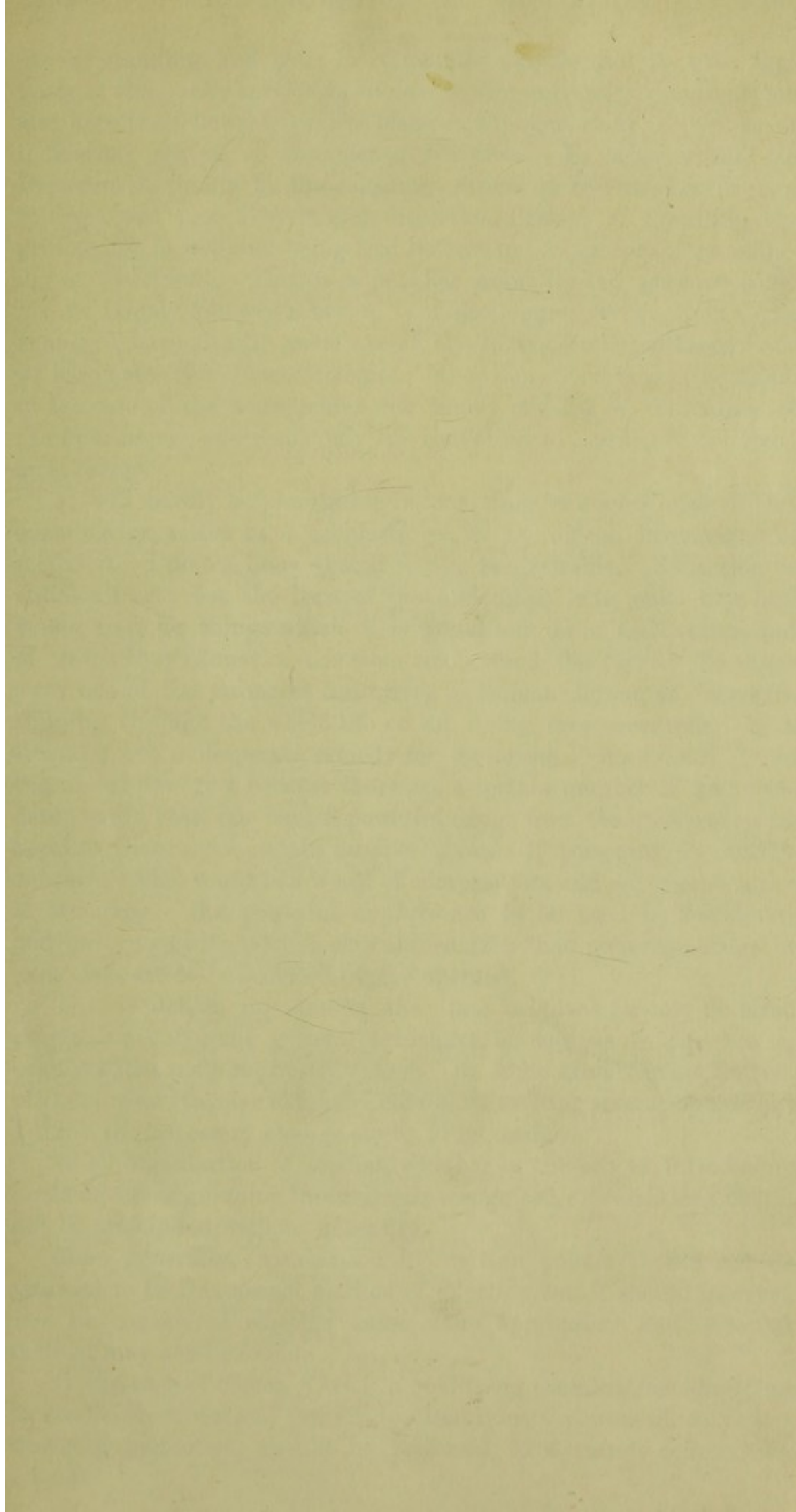
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III.

BY SIR JOSEPH FAYRER.

I WILL endeavour to reply as briefly as I can to your request that I should state the opinion I have formed in respect of the system of competitive examination which now exists in this country, whether as regards its relation to and effects on education generally, or in the selection of candidates for various offices and appointments in the public services.

As regards the education of children and young persons, in elementary schools of all grades, in more advanced schools, colleges and Universities, I can claim no right, beyond such as appertains to all who are interested in education in its true sense, to offer any opinion, though I may at once say that having carefully considered the subject, I have long been impressed with the belief that examinations are too frequent and too severe, that they have a tendency to divert attention from the true aim of education by developing an artificial memory, rather than by gradually strengthening the

rational faculties and moulding the intellectual powers into the form which will render them most fitted for the duties and emergencies of life; that moreover they tend to interfere with sound teaching, by imposing on the teacher the necessity of following some method other than that he might have deemed most appropriate, because he is aware that he could not thus ensure the best chance, not of advancing the intellectual growth of his pupil, but of successfully passing him through a certain examination.

Further, I believe that the continual mental strain to which children and young persons are exposed has an injurious effect on health; for it is impossible to overwork the nervous system whilst the frame is still growing, without prejudice to one or the other, if not both, and there is good reason for believing that mental overstrain and cerebral irritation are not unfrequent results of the system of pressure which now obtains in some schools: my own experience, indeed, furnishes me with evidence that it is so. That the education and training of childhood and youth in these days is in advance of, and an improvement on, that of the past, in many and perhaps most, respects, cannot be doubted; but that it is defective in the direction above referred to I believe is equally certain; and I am glad to think that the time may be at hand when some healthful modification of it will take place.

As regards the education and examination of young men, experience of more than a quarter of a century, during the greater part of which time I have been teacher or examiner, and for the last eight years have taken part in the competitive examinations for the Navy, Army, and Indian Medical Services, has given me an opportunity of forming an opinion on the question as it relates to these departments of the public service, and has also enabled me to arrive at the conclusion that, though examination carefully conducted is indispensable, the inordinate practice and imposition of it is deleterious, demanding, as it does, incessant mental labour, and so preoccupying the attention and burdening the memory as to leave little time for real thought, digestion, or assimilation of the subject-matter on which real culture and knowledge of the work to be accomplished depend, whilst practical work is, as a matter of course, narrowed to the most contracted limits, and the vast jumble of information, which has been arranged in a certain form, sufficient to satisfy the examiner, is thankfully laid aside or forgotten as soon as the ordeal is past.

I think too much is expected. It is impossible that in four, five, or even six years the enormous amount of knowledge required by the medical graduate of the present day can be assimilated, or that he can really work up to that which it is supposed to represent. I venture to think that longer study of certain subjects, less cramming, and fewer examinations might advantageously be substituted for the system which now prevails. As for the examinations which are

meant to test fitness for the degree or qualification, whatever it may be, I think they also might be less severe, and directed to ascertain, *not* the candidate's ignorance of recondite or obscure points in science, but whether he be possessed of sufficient knowledge of the fundamental facts and theories upon which the science is based, to justify the examiners in pronouncing him to have the amount of information which is really sufficient to entitle him to receive the certificate.

Let any one read some of the papers now set in almost any qualifying examination, whether it be in medicine or other faculty or branch of science, and ask himself how many passed masters in the subject, nay, even how many examiners themselves, could answer the questions?

Whilst examinations to test progress, conducted by the teachers themselves, for the purpose of marking certain stages of the curriculum accomplished, or of finally attesting the fitness for a degree or certificate—such being well ordered and directed to ascertain what the candidate does, rather than what he does not, know—are useful and should be preserved, others of a more exacting character might cease, or be greatly modified.

It would seem that these rigid examinations, whilst they test the temporary possession by the candidate of a vast accumulation of facts or figures, give no assurance of gradual and progressive training and development of the senses and the higher faculties, and but very little of practical knowledge or aptitude for the application of some small part of that which he has acquired by rote.

I do not gather from what I have read in this Review that it is desired to abolish competition, but rather to remodel it, to make it what it sets itself forth to be—a mode of procuring the best. Could competition do this, then, with all its disadvantages, whatever they may be, I see neither how it could, nor why it should be, set aside.

Did the present method of education, with its attendant cramming, its overburdening of the memory, its overstraining of the brain-power, and its frequent and severe examinations, certainly supply the public services which depend on it with the best, then it must continue, despite the evils attributed to it; but it is just here that the question arises. Is it fair to assume that the relative general excellence of young men may be ascertained by testing them only in certain subjects? Does it follow that, because a man knows or remembers more Greek, Sanscrit, mathematics, anatomy, physiology, or chemistry than others—all alike be it observed, possessing more than qualifying knowledge in each subject—he is better than those who may perhaps excel him in numerous qualities which are untested but are quite as essential in forming an efficient public servant? Such, however, is the view implied in the present competitive system of examination,

and so it happens that men are stamped as the best who certainly would not justify such a conclusion were they submitted to a more general ordeal.

Competitive examination, no doubt, secures the man who knows most of some subjects; but until it test mental, moral, social, and physical, as well as intellectual qualities—even if it can do that—it cannot be admitted that it is what it professes to be, a provider of the best.

It is said that no better mode of providing public servants exists, and that it is better than the old system of patronage with all its abuses. It may be so, but there are many who think otherwise, and who believe that selection, after a *thoroughly qualifying test* has been passed, would be better, and who also think that some method of selection might be found which should obviate the possibility of jobbery or abuse of patronage. In any case there is room for improvement in the present system, and if the movement which has been initiated by this Review effect this, it will be of national service.

