

CHANGING PATTERN OF EXAMINATION

Mr. N.C. Dexter, An Assistant Secretary of the Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations, was invited to address the society's 1973 Summer School on "The changing pattern of examinations in Classics". In the earlier part of his lecture, he discussed the role of the examination system and asserted that any teacher producing year by year a string of disastrously poor examination results had only himself to blame. Turning specifically to classical studies, he considered the position of Latin and Greek in the schools today and concluded that less and less time was now available for these studies and that pupils were showing a growing preference for other studies.

We have printed, as far as possible, a verbatim report of the latter part of this lecture, although for reasons of space we cannot include some of the longer references to individual question papers.

Mr. Dexter made it clear that he was speaking in a purely personal capacity and that his colleagues at Oxford would disagree with some of his views.

At the same time, and growing directly out of an effort to face this sort of crisis, there have been some quite radical changes in the methodology of teaching the classics, with organisations such as your own ARLT, LACT, and JACT in the van — though whether the delivery van or the break-down van I am not quite certain. For I have not, as some of you may know, always been in agreement with your philosphies, believing as I do that the propoganda for the newer methods of teaching has been over-shrill, and that some teachers have assumed that new ideas must necessarily replace old ideas, instead of implementing and complementing them. Some in short have climbed onto the bandwagon before they have climbed onto the shoulders of their forebears in order to see exactly whither the bandwagon is taking them. Indeed I am far from happy about the direction in which, as a result of many pressures, some syllabuses and question papers are going.

Let us therefore turn our attention to particular changes in syllabuses and question papers, and consider both the philosophy behind them and their practical outworkings.

First, we must consider the view that pupils should start reading Latin (and Greek, I suppose) from the word go; that fast reading should be the order of the day, with minor inaccuracies ignored. Such a method is, as you know, enshrined in the Schools Classics Project, for which doubtless a good many of you are preparing your pupils, but for which, I must confess immediately, I should not prepare mine. I shall be honest and say that I have not taught one pupil taking the Course, and my opinions are therefore second-hand. Yet I was invited, as I think were representatives of all the Boards, to some of the early discussions at Cambridge, and I have spoken frequently to teachers at Oxford schools who have entered or are entering pupils for the Course. I

find a fair measure of agreement amongst them: that its great merit lies in the attractive and vigorous reading material, which appears to hold the interests of children more strongly than most, if not all, of the traditional material. This is obviously a huge plus mark. Its greatest weakness is that it does not give the learner very much in the way of grammatical and syntactical knowledge so necessary, as I see it, for the understanding of languages so highly inflected and so complex as Latin and Greek. I am suggesting, in short, that the languages are difficult and that they demand, on the technical level, a pretty rigorous discipline. There may be other weaknesses in the Course. It may in some cases fail to diagnose a potentially good classical scholar and may sometimes mislead the teacher into thinking a boy is good when really he is not.

In addition, it is my opinion that success in SCP at O level is no guarantee of a firm basis upon which an able pupil can build his A-level studies. But, as I have said, these reflections are not based on personal experience and, though a priori they seem to me points of some substance, the proof of the pudding must be in the standard of work submitted by candidates for the public examinations. What evidence do we find? I received from SUBJ (who administers the course) a copy of their latest report — admittedly on the Autumn (not Summer) 1972 examination. I quote:

"Even the better candidates made *vehicula* singular, *agebantur* active, *te matremque* the subject of *vult*. But these were recognisable errors. . . The versions of a quarter of the candidates were so bad as to be unmarkable, while others produced an occasional correct phrase amongst a farrago of nonsense."

This does seem, does it not, a far cry from the Director's original prognostications. Again, I quote:

"You open the book, you give the pupils some of the words, then you say, 'read' and he does. It sounds like a conjuring trick, but it is not. The pupil is already familiar with patterns in sentences. You need not analyse them. You just recognise them."

This would suggest, at the very least, that we should not assume that the project is a panacea for what are seen as the faults of the traditional methods of teaching Latin. It appears to me that the mistake has been one of substitution of methods, rather than implementation of old methods with new; and that the aims of the course — certainly at the beginning when a Tacitus unseen was envisaged at O level — are perhaps a bit unrealistic. Instead of fast reading (I must confess that I never could, nor can now, read either Greek or Latin with any great speed) should we not try for slightly quicker reading? We must not assume in 1973 either that we have all the answers now or that all of the old answers were wrong. Let us remind ourselves of one of the observations made in the first century A.D. by possibly the greatest teacher Rome produced. I refer to Quintilian, and I quote from Book I of his *Institutio Oratoria*, Ch. IV:

"Boys should begin by learning to decline nouns and conjugate verbs: otherwise they will never be able to understand the next subject of study. This

