REVIEW OF BOOKS

Herbert J. Muller's "USES OF ENGLISH"

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In the January issue of the Minnesota English Journal, Angela Drometer reviewed John Dixon's Growth Through English, the first publication to come from the 1966 Dartmouth Seminar. In his preface Herbert Muller explains this second volume:

> This book is a report on the proceedings of the seminar, designed for the general reader. (John Dixon of England has written a report addressed to the professional community.) Inasmuch as the discussions ranged all over a large subject and produced dozens of papers on different topics, my account is highly selective. I have skimmed over some problems that interest chiefly specialists. But I owe some further explanation to the general reader, too.

Before we consider these explanations, let us concede that some of us may be drawn to the book because it is written by the author of The Uses of the Past: Profiles of Former Society (New York; Oxford, 1952; available since 1957 in a Galaxy paperback). A professor of English who can write as a philosopher and historian and can use his realistic analysis of past civilizations to shed light on our own obviously has a special claim on our attention. Professor Muller's preface continues:

> One reason I was asked to write this book was an odd qualification. I knew little about the teaching of English in the elementary and secondary schools, which was the primary concern of the seminar, and had taken only a casual interest in it. It was thought that I would therefore be uncommitted, unprejudiced. I soon lost this possible virtue, however, as I found the discussions uncommonly stimulating and realized more fully the importance of the issues at stake. Although I have reported in the guise of a detached observer, I should emphasize that all these issues are highly debatable (a gentle way of saying "controversial" - a word frightening to some Americans) and that I am not in fact

uncommitted or free from bias. Naturally I have tried to do justice to the different opinions expressed, but I have not tried to write a wholly impersonal report. While obliged in any case to select and interpret what seemed to me the most important questions raised at the seminar, I have felt free to add some commentary. Often I deliberately introduce the first person to make clear that I am expressing my own opinion, but also to remind the reader that it is an opinion and therefore debatable.

Many working teachers, secondary and college, may be discouraged by the first chapter entitled "What Is English?" This is a question which no one can answer, but it is a question that must be raised in beginning such a fundamental inquiry as this, in a book written for "the general reader." If the Dartmouth Seminar's findings and Mr. Muller's observations seem overly obvious to some of us, it is because we have thought long and seriously about the problem and have already arrived at the same conclusions.

Many of us will still have this feeling through the next two chapters, "Democracy in the Classroom" and "The Development of the Child." Sometimes the seminar's findings and Muller's comments are little more than common sense or, more properly, the concensus of concerned and open-minded and experienced teachers of English. Even so, it is not a bad thing to have your findings and opinions supported and reinforced.

Beginning with chapter four, however, the book will certainly interest most of us and may be especially valuable just now. "Good English" explores the role of linguistics in the English program. The next chapter, "The Uses of Literature," discusses approaches and strategies in the teaching of the subject. Both chapters are lucid, fair, and well-balanced; if they solve no problems and do not help us out of our dilemmas, they sort out much information and misinformation, prejudice and propaganda. Here and later Muller (and the Dartmouth Seminar) serve us well by airing these problems candidly.

A first impression of this book is that it takes in too much territory. I should add at once that the Dartmouth Seminar gave much attention to elementary education, perhaps too much in Muller's opinion. What can be said about writing that applies to the early primary grades and also to the last high school years? Surprisingly, this wide-ranging look at English sheds

much light on the really basic problems. Thus,

> In the first place, children need an audience other than the teacher. They write most easily when they write for the class, are entertained and stimulated by one another's fancies. English teachers forget that with older children an audience is no less important. . . Too often they assign the youngsters literary topics for which there can hardly be a live audience except the teacher himself. . . They weaken children's confidence by stressing their errors, stifle their interest by making correctness the main end.

A little later in the same chapter ("Writing and Talking") Muller pays his respects to the inconclusiveness of research findings on methods of teaching composition and makes one of his "guesses" (which are invariably shrewd and sometimes wise):

> The clearest agreement was again that the study of traditional grammar had a negligible effect on the improvement of writing, or even a harmful one, since it takes up time that might have been spent practicing writing. Little study has been made of the effects of all the correcting and grading on which teachers spend so much of their time. My guess is that students might improve more if they were split up into groups and simply practiced writing for and on one another, now and then bringing to the teacher what they considered their best efforts; but I suppose no experiment could conclusively prove this.

The book often contrasts the way English is taught in Great Britain and the United States. At first the completely different points of view taken by British and American teachers seemed likely to lead to nothing but quibbling about aims and philosophies. Midway in the book, however, it becomes apparent that much light is shed on the whole problem of how to teach English by contrasting the opposing British and American strategies.

British participants in the Dartmouth Seminar kept insisting on the importance of "the personal and the inner life" of the child and resisted emphasis on "a body of knowledge or mere techniques," according to Muller. They objected to any systematic teaching of language before the students were fifteen or sixteen, and liked the stimulus of creative writing better than the American training in exposition. The full impact

of this English emphasis comes out in Muller's chapter on "Creativity and Drama." Although the British teachers admitted that creativity was "not actually the core of their curriculum," one of them, David Holbrook, insisted that it should be the "basis of our approach to English teaching as an art." Arriving finally at the use of drama as a teaching device, Muller seems as fully convinced as the Amherst English chairman whom he quotes:

> Benjamin DeMott, the most enthusiastic of the American converts, emphasized that drama brought the stuff of life into the English classroom - the life of feeling, in all the variousness that textbooks reduce to academic order. Students may learn the first principle of good writing: "What we truly have in good writing is a moment-to-moment embodiment of the breathing contradictoriness of the living mind: we are given vouchers of variousness."

This chapter, like some others, ends with a look at the practical difficulties:

> Few English teachers in America have been trained to teach such dramatic activities; many might feel as uneasy as the older students if asked to start improvising. The seminar therefore recommended that a team of American teachers be given the opportunity to tour British secondary schools that have a strong program in drama. Assuming that American schools do get interested in experimenting with a similar program (as I would hope), another problem arises. Dramatic activities cannot be carried on in the conventional classroom with its rows of desks. They require space, moveable funiture, rostrums, ideally equipment for making a tape or a book, "publishing" the work done. A large-scale program in drama would require the overhauling of both our schools and the curriculum, at some expense - maybe as much as a fleet of bombers costs. As always the question is: Are school boards, superintendents, lawmakers, taxpayers and parents willing to support such a program?

There is matter in The Uses of English - including questions raised and topics scarcely more than mentioned - to occupy all of us for years. "Myth," for instance, is a much larger, more complex subject than the literary uses of mythology and fable. I hope all

teachers, from kindergarten through graduate school, who have been drawn into this tempting realm will read the last part of Muller's eighth chapter.

The same can be said about the "Mass Media," covered in the first part of the same chapter. Once again this report does not attempt to give us the answers, but clears the air and identifies the issues. Muller notes, gratefully, I think, that "most participants (in the Dartmouth Seminar) chose not to treat the mass media as simply the enemy. Some pointed out that mere diatribes did little good; a frontal attack was poor strategy, since they were certainly here to stay." But the English teacher could help students to be less passive in choices, could help them "to develop more discriminating tastes in a source of entertainment they were sure to feed on anyway."

Long before we come to the chapter on the mass media we have become aware of Muller's concern about modern society's pressures toward conformity. He makes no concessions to the American commercial establishment, nor does he minimize the pressures that make for "trashiness" or mediocrity. He is always aware of the larger issues, and he frequently cites the impact of our industrialized, urbanized, computerized civilization on the teaching of English.

At times Muller plays the editor or recorder as he credits ideas and specific suggestions to seminar participants, to Benjamin DeMott of Amherst (Professor DeMott will speak at the MCTE Spring Convention on April 20th) or Barbara Hardy of London, to Albert Kitzhaber of Oregon or Frank Whitehead of Sheffield; and eventually we come to identify many divergent and stimulating viewpoints that contributed to the Dartmouth Seminar. But Muller's role is much more than this. As he discusses the various aspects of The Uses of English in his ten chapters, he frequently adds observations of his own, invokes Suzanne Langer or David Riesman, Nancy Mitford or Marshall McLuhan.

In his preface to John Dixon's book Albert Marckwardt of Princeton noted that the last day of the Dartmouth Seminar "produced a rare burst of unanimity." Dixon's book, says Marckwardt, presents and interprets "eleven points of agreement" to "the English-teaching profession" in Great Britain and the United States. Herbert Muller characteristically presents the divergent views aired at Dartmouth and often simply says that no conclusions were arrived at. To me this seems more reassuring than the unanimity on the final day.

Muller cites topics or areas that should have been explored and were not, and he has the confidence to report others very briefly. Even when "subscribing to the consensus" on some issues he faithfully records "tiresome complications" or "practical difficulties" that he feels must be faced. So honest, positive, and broad-gauged a study of the English predicament deserves to be read widely. Long before I finished it I began to plot strategy: how to con or cajole my fellow teachers into reading it.

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Rebecca Caudill's "DID YOU CARRY THE FLAG TODAY, CHARLEY?" REVIEWED BY TOM WALTON

Ely Elementary School

Each year I attempt to find a few new books to add to my list of material to be read orally to my fifth graders. Last year our librarian recommended Rebecca Caudill's Did You Carry the Flag Today, Charley? (Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1966) as one of the books I might like to add. It met with so much approval from my ten-year olds that I took it along with me to use for a demonstration class in Children's Literature at U.M.D. during the summer. Though the age spread in the demonstration class increased to encompass nine to thirteen-year olds, the book was received with as great, or greater, enthusiasm.

In discussing this book with my two groups of children and the adults who observed the demonstration class, I found several reasons that made the book a wise choice for oral reading by the teacher and as a topic for discussion. Charley Cornett is a character who leaves no doubt as to his verisimilitude. He is five; his world is in a constant, humorous disharmony with that of his peers and the adults who are guiding his development. Either because of their own nearness to his age and problems or because of their contact with children of his age, both the children and adults could understand the problems toward which his curiosity could lead him. Charley is a person with whom it is easy to identify.

There are many ways to fit Charley and his story into areas of study if there is a need to correlate the book with subject matter. "Little School" is Appalachia's answer to the Headstart programs that receive comment in local papers. Mountain living blends into many areas