

School Text-Books

The inevitable annual furore over the dearth or inadequate supply of text-books at the beginning of the school session which opened in January has begun. Children have started their career in new classes with lists of books which they must have but which will take another couple of months to be available in sufficient quantities, and in the meantime they must make do as best they can with what they can borrow from their predecessors in the same forms or resign themselves to the situation with such equanimity as they can command.

Each year the same story is repeated, the same grievances voiced, the same assurances about the future given, and as the months lapse, the same lethargy overtakes text-book boards and publishers. The publishers for their part complain that it's not their fault: they are given hardly three months by the text-book boards to find writers and get their work printed, and both processes are necessarily time-consuming. If books hastily written invariably betray the hallmarks of hurried composition and preparation, they tend to have their shortcomings reinforced by the hurry which characterises their printing.

We have said more than once that these happenings are easily preventable. There is no reason why the text-book board should change its prescriptions every year and keep parents, children and book-suppliers on tenter-hooks. Each text-book once prescribed could be given a run of a minimum of three years, and simultaneously the prescriptions for the next period could be announced, so as to give all concerned time to improve the quality of books. The board could then rigorously enforce a higher standard in the selection of those it would adopt and summarily reject sub-standard publications badly printed and illustrated, full of factual and grammatical errors.

It is difficult to understand why, in spite of the mess that is created every year without fail, this farcical ritual of prescribing new books should be allowed to be repeated. We have emphasised again and again that an improvement in the quality of education is impossible to bring about or even to initiate, unless the quality of the books we place in the hands of our children shows an improvement. Do what we might with the structure of education, the organisation of school time-tables, the ultimate test of a system of education is represented by the kind and quality of books we require our children to read. But those in authority appear to think that regular changes of text books, no matter how hurriedly produced, are a more effective way of improving the quality of education than well-produced books. The depth and extent of dissatisfaction over inadequacy in the supply of books aggravated by falling standards in their quality and production is little appreciated.

We are persuaded that the matter calls for a thorough impartial enquiry in which the views of the publishers ought to be taken into account. We hold no brief for publishers but we do think that their faults, which cumulatively amount to a failure to market error-free books are largely attributable to the unreasonable demand made on them, that of producing within a matter of ten to twelve weeks, books well-written and well-printed. Text-book writing calls for much greater care than the writing of detective fiction or thrillers. For each such book is read by hundreds of young impressionable readers who absorb its contents with all their mental powers concentrated on it, swallow whatever mistakes it contains, and allow it to determine their outlook on the world. By the time they grow up and reach an age at which they could possibly have an understanding of what is wrong with it, they will have lost the faculty of distinguishing between right and wrong because of the heavy dose of erroneous data or grammar which they have assimilated. And year by year this terrible drama is being enacted with the whole administration apparatus looking complacently on. It is time this complacency ended and we began to show a more realistic appreciation of the issues involved.