Nock on Education

By M. S. NORRELL

THE FINAL END and aim of education, according to Albert Jay Nock, is "the ability to see things as they are." Reared in the scholarship of the classical curriculum — as was his esteemed Thomas Jefferson — Nock was vocal on the elective system, the end product of this country's so-called educational revolution, which had its inception around the turn of the century. Believing that education in its nature is selective, he shunned the gimmicky aspects of the new scheme.

Nock's own theory of education in the United States was patterned after Mr. Jefferson's mercilessly selective plan of public education for the State of Virginia: "Every child in the State should be taugnt reading, writing and common arithmetic; the old-fashioned primary school course in the three R's. Each year, the best pupil in each primary school should be sent to the grammar schools, of which there were to be twenty, conveniently located in various parts of the State; they were to be kept there one or two years, and then dismissed, except 'the best genius of the whole,' who should be continued there for the full term of six years. 'By this means,' wrote Mr. Jefferson, 'twenty of the best geniuses shall be raked from the rubbish annually.' I venture to call your attention to these rather forceful words, as showing how far this great believer in equality was from anything like acceptance of our official assumption that everybody is educable. But this is not all. At the end of six years, the best ten out of the twenty should be sent to William and Mary College, and the rest turned adrift. Mr. Jefferson's plan appears selective with a vengeance in our eyes, accustomed as they are to the spectacle of immense hordes of inert and ineducable persons slipping effortlessly through our secondary schools, colleges, universities, on ways that seem greased for their especial benefit. Of the twenty best geniuses annually raked from the rubbish of a whole State, only fifty per cent were destined to reach the undergraduate college!"

Nock made a careful distinction between education and training: "Very few people are educable. The great majority remain . . . in respect of mind and spirit structurally immature; therefore no amount of exposure to the force of any kind of instruction or example can ever determine in them the views of life or establish in them the demands on life, that are characteristic of maturity. . . . They can, however, be trained; anybody can be trained. Practically any kind of mentality is capable of making some kind of response to some kind of training."

A. J. N. was an advocate of education in The Great Tradition, which "inculcated habits of orderly, profound, disinterested thought." In this tradition, the student proceeded through the primary and secondary schools to the undergraduate college, the university and, finally, the technical school. "The intention was, moreover . . . that the character of this progress through the schools and the undergraduate college, right up to the doors of the university or technical school, should be purely disciplinary. The curricula . . . [of all] should be fixed, invariable, the same for all participants. There should be no elective studies . . . Hence there was no overlapping or reduplication of function anywhere along the line."

The theory of education so eloquently championed by Nock is based on a body of knowledge rooted in antiquity and worked over by scholars across the centuries. The educable young of each generation achieve their maturity by initiation into this accumulated wisdom. This is Liberal learning; this is the idea of a university.