

SIXTEEN

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Two years ago I wrote an article for the Doon School Magazine with the title Fourteen. Perhaps a sequel to this is now due.

At fourteen, a boy should have constructed a framework of competence in language, in mathematical ability, and in social behaviour. After that age he is, as it were, filling in a design on to the framework. In short he is learning to exercise taste. Taste distinguishes the man who reads a book because the reading supplies his mind with a food that it requires from the man who reads a book because he has to, or because it pays him to read it, or because it is fashionable to read it. Taste distinguishes the man who buys pictures or decorates his rooms in order to provide a setting which fits in with his thoughts and his ideals from the man who invests in works of art in order to impress his friends. Taste distinguishes the man who entertains people in order that the mingling and interchange of ideas may bear fruit in new thoughts and new glimpses of human nature from the man who entertains in order that he may be on the visiting list of the great. Taste distinguishes the man who plays games because of a delight in coordinated physical effort and grace of movement from the man who plays games in order to win colours or cups or to see his name in print in the newspaper. Taste distinguishes the man who feels that he must serve his fellow men in order that the pattern of human organisation may be freed from the injustices and inhumanities that cause pain to a sensitive mind from the man who performs social service as a duty that will win him credit.

A boy of sixteen should have begun to achieve a standard of taste in all these sides of life. How have you boys who were born in 1924 developed your taste?

There is another way of looking at life in a boarding school...there are many critics of public schools on the grounds that they mould boys into

a standard pattern. How far is this true and how far is it good? Boys come from homes with many sharp distinguishing characteristics. The happiness of one boy coming straight from home may depend on his affection for some white mice; of another on freedom to take his own time dressing in the morning; of another on doing sums on rough bits of paper instead of in a standardized style; of another in not eating cabbage or not drinking milk; of another in holding his hockey stick with the wrong hand on top; of another in a jealous attention to his collection of marbles. When these boys come to school, they find that all these personal characteristics are likely to fail to stand up against the incessant ringing of bells, criticism of masters, and apparent impatience and lack of sympathy of the mass of other boys. In short they become part of the ingredients of a pudding, or, to take an example more familiar to us at the Doon School, part of the mixture in a heap of compost. The whole of school life seems to be designed to subordinate individuality to the well-being of the whole community, and by fourteen they may not be very happy at school unless they are well settled in the middle of the mixture. But that is not the end of the story of the compost. After the mixture is complete, some of it will serve to stimulate the growth of a fine grass lawn; some will increase the fruit on the *lichi* trees; some will go to the flower beds, and help the blossom of a great variety of flowers; and some will be of even more practical effect on the radishes or the carrots.

If the School is a good one, the products of it will serve to provide a leaven and a stimulus to a wide variety of human activity. The essential characteristics of the material will be preserved and the non-essential things will be pruned away. The non-essential things, outside the School, might develop into fads and habits that would only produce cranks and eccentrics unadjusted to social life.

By sixteen, a boy should have decided what he means to do with his life; just as the compost is devoted to the production of many different flowers and fruits, so the boys in a school should at sixteen be starting on the different work and interests to which they mean to devote their life. The compost stage is completed at the School Certificate. There still remain two years of preparation, but the preparation is now of a specialized type. The School will still provide the means for this. Not only in the work but also in all the other activities, brains and brawn must be devoted to the development and expression of the personality that is to live in and serve the world for fifty more years. In the years that immediately follow sixteen, you will find opportunities to learn the way in which your character may affect your fellows. You may have responsibility as a prefect or as captain of a team. In this you will find that it is not physical strength or even mental ingenuity that is of primary import-

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ance, but rather your personal example and character. Even without special responsibility, your nature and your attitude to life will have influence—much deeper than you ever suspect—on those with whom you live; and it is taste which governs your attitude to life.

In school your experiments in taste take place in guarded surroundings; a mistake can always be put right; and the experience that you gain should provide you, by the time that you are eighteen, with the confidence and judgment that is necessary for an effective career in the unsheltered world outside.