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## Report From Britain, 10 April 1950

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REPORT FROM BRITAIN  
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Aberdeen, Scotland  
April 10, 1950

At the corner of Bridge and Union streets an enterprising news-butcher charts the latest headlines on a blackboard in an attempt to rustle up the customers. I was amazed the other day to see "EMINENT PROFESSOR DIES" take precedence over such choice items as a child murderer and the slaying of British troops in Malaya. I have discovered, too, that a generation ago few protested the whimsical practice of all pedestrians stepping aside on the narrow sidewalks of Old Aberdeen when a professor hove into view.

Now I'm not one to suggest that the strange awe and reverence in which professors are held over here is a good or a bad thing. I'm just reporting a fact, but as sure as taxes it's going to be rough when I return to my normal deflated existence at home. Perhaps I should add that in Britain there is usually only one professor in an academic department, the rest of the teaching staff being mere hired hands, such as lecturers and readers.

These Scotsmen make earnest teachers and, for the most part, hard-working, adult scholars. Last term, all students in my American Revolution class had completed the text before our first meeting -- which put them one up on me. It may be that their country's natural poverty causes them to put a premium on education; in any case they have always regarded learning as having a decided practical value. And, as managers of many kinds of enterprises, they have emigrated to the corners of the earth.

They are extremely reticent about making curriculum changes or reversing educational methods which sufficed several generations ago. In the University of Aberdeen, for instance, you find no course in sociology, journalism, home economics, or bait-casting. Economics is still called political economy and Celtic, Arabic, and Syriac are listed. Greek or Latin is required for a degree in liberal arts, which is not an A. B. but an "ordinary M. A." American history is not taught (we propose to remove that from the category of "current events"), though the student may acquire a dab here and there in his study of the British Empire.

In Girls' High, Betty is learning her reading by sound and syllables instead of by means of the more progressive sight method. Her extra-curricular activities (band practice, glee club, etc.) are few, though there is strong emphasis on "sports," -- but not the American commercialized variety. Again, secondary schools teach no American history as such.

Students I have encountered, both in high school and college, express themselves on paper and on their feet more fluently than their American counterparts. Such skilful speech and writing come from greater stress being placed here on expression (Billy, at ten years, has been engaging in class debates) and because the schools go in for fewer distracting frills than ours do. Every speech is followed by a "vote of thanks" and maybe a question period which indulges all comers in a chance to exercise their vocal chords at length. Even college students write out their essays in longhand, for possession of a typewriter is as rare as a steak in London.

There is an overwhelming emphasis here on the importance of examinations. Degree exams on all subjects must be hurdled at the end of three or four years of college, to the relative insignificance of course credits. Even in high school the pupils compete mightily for the many scholarships available. Students have a tendency to try to master material they will require on examinations rather than to pursue knowledge for its own sake or for its interest to themselves.

Recently we attended a medical graduation in an inspiring 17th century chapel. The ceremony was so impressive, what with beautiful stained glass windows, imposing academic regalia, and dignified organ music, that we hardly dared to breathe. Then, all of a sudden, in the midst of the "capping" of the successful candidates, there exploded the noisiest conglomeration of cat-calls, cow bells, whistles, popping of paper bags, and singing that I have ever heard inside a public hall. This nonsense, perpetrated by the undergrad medical students, continued through the remainder of the program and is, I discovered later, a normal part of any graduation or formal chapel exercise. It may inject life into an otherwise melancholy performance, but I can hardly conceive of its taking place in Fulton Chapel at the University of Mississippi. Scots aren't quite the staid characters they are sometimes represented to be.

With all the respect and adulation the Scots shower on their professors and teachers, they most assuredly share one sad custom with us: educational stipends are kept at a minimum, and, consequently, thousands of Scots who have preferred bread to glory have left the teaching profession for better paying jobs.