

*This is the only way to give meaning
to talk about international friendship . . .*

Making Like Friends

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THE enchantment that distance lends to the view is that of mist and can be equally dangerous. The enchanting distance is far from being wholly a geographical one but a product of all those devices we have created to keep reality out and comfort in. We think of this as an electronic age, but I wonder if the future might not regard it more as the age of the package and the plastic wrapping.

Whenever I find myself thinking about that curious abstraction, "Anglo-American relations," or even "international understanding," I am depressed by wrappings that need to be removed before the essential gift of friendship is found beneath. It is the superficiality of so much contact that does the damage. Whether this be the fleeting and misleading glimpses of a package tour or the self-inflicted wounds of our respective cinema industries or the misleading brevities of newspaper reports, the myths are strengthened.

I made my first visit to the United States in November 1965 when I attended the Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English. I am very glad everyone was so polite because I shudder now to think what errors I made in speech as a consequence of my own ignorance of an America I had read much about and seen much of in celluloid but had never *felt*. A convention, too, is far too conventionally typical an American activity for a stranger on a first visit to penetrate much beneath the expected manifestations of Americans meeting en masse.

After this, I went on a whistlestop tour, coast to coast, in which, in just under three weeks I visited Chicago, Madison, Illinois, Oregon, San Francisco, Washington, Delaware, and New York. I would not have missed this trip for the world, but only now, after two further visits, do I feel that the impressions of that tour are making any kind of effective sense. The pressures of time are indeed terrible and I feel sorry for those Americans who attempt to see all of the British Isles in a couple of weeks. They see virtually nothing (perhaps too many cathedrals and the tombs of poets!) except apparent confirmation of our celluloid image—

an image which is itself largely created by the British promoters of the tourist trade. These rapid tours are understandable—a visit to England is expensive for nearly all Americans and a visit to America impossible for most Englishmen.

Study in Depth

Yet I would make a plea for far more study *in depth*. In the autumn of 1966 I spent a whole month at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, at a seminar on the teaching of English. This is one small corner of America I now know quite well—well enough at any rate to be able to list quite easily all the things I want to do if I get another month there. I also now have some American *friends*—people I can write to and whom I have met in England subsequently and with whom conversation is no longer bedeviled by faulty generalization and mistaken expectation. The mist has gone.

My third visit to the United States was in the spring of 1967. In 1965, I had seen a number of the Curriculum Development centers of the Federal Project English and had come away with a number of impressions (to some degree confirmed at the Dartmouth Seminar) of the drive in the teaching of English toward a new academicism in revolt against the intellectual thinness of the “life-adjustment” period—a new academicism which emphasized the body of knowledge that can be subsumed under the subject heading of “English.” In 1967, I was especially interested in programs for the disadvantaged and this concern gave a completely new dimension to my impressions of American education. Not here was a concern with generative grammars or literary genres à la Northrop Frye, however beneficial these bodies of knowledge are for future executives or even teachers. Here was a concern simply for making contact, for making the whole process of education meaningful and relevant to the victims of unplanned industrialism.

Perhaps, I have made the contrast in the preceding paragraph too sharp; I am certain that all Americans and, in time, all Englishmen will benefit from the move toward a greater intellectual stringency. What I am reporting is, partly, the excitement of the work in humanities transcending subject barriers and the vitalizing human warmth of this work and partly a whole series of preconceptions deriving from current educational preoccupations in England. We are moving away from the academic in the classroom toward a greater interest in the processes of language maturation as part of the growth of the “whole child” (to use an old American educational cliché that has perhaps new force over here these days).

If you look at British school textbooks in English, you will find in this pretty conservative and depressing collection of educational tombstones an emphasis, however aridly put, upon personal writing. This reflects the growing influence of the belief that a youngster secures effective command over his own language and even mastery over the abstract and general if he starts with the particular and concrete. The child who writes poems will write better expository prose than the child who is only expected to write expository prose. Am I right in thinking that here is a difference in approach between our two countries?

I am giving, no doubt, in this paper a bad example of my own beliefs by being so personal. There is, however, no shortcut to a genuine understanding between peoples (and how well do *you* understand your next-door neighbor anyway?). Thus we must not expect too much from current programs in schools. Many American schools run courses in English literature, and I would be less than frank if I did not report to you my impression that these courses do not notably contribute to the students' imaginative appreciation of things British. Perhaps this has something to do with the almost total absence from these courses of any contemporary literature from this side of the Atlantic. And I know we buy more bad TV shows from you than you buy from us. Mind you, over here there are no courses at all in American literature with the exception of one or two rather sparsely populated ones at one or two of our smaller universities. Nor would I wish any on the British school curriculum. The course in such and such a literature is the classroom equivalent of the quick trip around Buckingham Palace, the Tower of London, Wordsworth's cottage in the Lake District, a quick look at what might be Highland cattle in the mist, etc. There is no substitute for actually reading some books; there is no substitute for spending enough time in a place or with a person for some *depth* of knowledge. We need English children reading American books (as some do, of course) and vice versa.

Hopeful Signs

Three thousand miles of ocean and the current British travel allowance do not provide much help. But I must report a number of very hopeful signs. Cooperation between teachers of English in both countries is increasing every year. The basis for this cooperation is not merely goodwill and an exchange program as it has so often been in the past but the experience among a small but growing group of teachers on both sides of the Atlantic of *working* together on matters of common professional concern.

There is now, in fact, a permanent international steering committee representing the National Council of Teachers of English, the Modern Languages Association, and the British National Association for the Teaching of English—an infant body of which I have been Secretary since its inception in 1963, and which owes a great debt of gratitude to NCTE for its early encouragement and support. The international committee is currently being expanded to include representation of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and the recently founded (Vancouver International Conference, Fall 1967) Canadian Council of Teachers of English.

I am no great lover of conferences as such—they confer, or rather too often listen to prepared papers without any proper general discussion and then evaporate in a cloud of platitudes and a false impression that the generalities actually signify understanding. When, however, there is a great deal of advance preparation, as there was for Dartmouth, with some accumulated experience of each other as *persons* as well as scholars or educationists, then there is a chance that

we can penetrate beneath the surface accord and then through the revealed differences and misunderstandings of terminology and cultural divergences to an effective and powerful working arrangement. For most participants, this happened at Dartmouth. As a consequence, I can put on record the following achievements and program of work:

1. The two Seminar books—*The Uses of English* by Herbert Muller and *Growth Through English* by John Dixon. American and English these respectively and unmistakably are, but on the same wavelength.

2. The international committee is a solid reality.

3. Next year in England there are two joint Anglo-American summer schools on the teaching of English, and American teachers of English are each year now our very welcome and stimulating guests.

4. A group of distinguished American teachers (from the front line) are joining a NATE Seminar on the problems of the disadvantaged. I know our guests well; they will not be a delegation but will share their work and experiences with us as the colleagues they are.

5. An Anglo-American investigation into the impact on English teaching of examinations now looms ahead.

6. Already, and this article is an example, we are exchanging journal material. It will not be long before such exchanges will lose their initial foreign glamour and such articles will be accepted as a normal part of our professional dialogue.

All this, for the moment, is perhaps remote from the classroom. But we are training a generation of teachers—creating a valid and, I hope, unremarked sense of familiarity in which, in any discussion, it is the opinion that matters, not the nationality of the proponent. This will make its mark upon American and British children, for they will have teachers who understand. My vision, you see, is of a school curriculum in which understanding grows insensibly, for the children share so much of the common experience of the language and its literature.

Much needs to be done; we still need to know each other a lot better. But we are moving in the right direction past the stage of party conversation, polite and meaningless, past presenting each other with entrenched attitudes, to a genuine conversation.

I am writing this article because the President-elect of ASCD is a very dear friend of mine. This is what can happen, you see. I met Muriel Crosby at a conference; subsequently she did her duty and showed me some of her work in Wilmington. Then she came to England and spent some time at my home. Last spring I stayed at her home in Wilmington. Our friendship has grown through these meetings and through letters. It has also grown because we met as *colleagues* concerned with children in schools—not just the anonymous, disembodied children of educational jargon but *our* children—the ones we have met face to face in both countries.

This is the only way to give meaning to talk about international friendship—like any real friendship it must be worked at. We must *make* like friends. ☞

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