

REVIEWS

Homer Lane: a biography. By W. David Wills. Pp. 275. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964. 40s.

After reading this book some people may find it difficult to imagine how such a man ever came to be regarded in advanced educational circles as a prophet of light, life and liberty. As Wills makes abundantly clear, there was a good deal about Lane that was distasteful: his predilection for the lime-light, his 'go-getting' qualities, his passing himself off as a psychological consultant in order to gain the confidence of gullible people whom he subsequently used for his own ends, and, above all, his ideas concerning his own divinity. Wills spares no details. His patient research over fifteen years has unearthed a mass of facts not known to Miss Bazeley when she wrote *Homer Lane and the Little Commonwealth*. Not all of them are palatable. Appendix I, for instance, makes unpleasant reading, though Wills considers the criminal charges brought against Lane unproved.

On the other hand the author never allows himself to lose sight of Lane's outstanding qualities as a reformer. There are full descriptions of his efforts on behalf of juvenile delinquents in the United States when he became increasingly sure not only that their anti-social behaviour was an expression of 'positive virtues wrongly expressed' but also that their misdeeds could be understood and even respected as evidence of these same 'positive virtues'. There is a beautifully lucid account in Chapter VIII of 'The Little Commonwealth' where Lane did such magnificent work with juvenile offenders in England. In reading about this, one begins to appreciate why his work struck his contemporaries as new and exciting, and why he commended himself so thoroughly to those who saw the benefits gained by pupils who were allowed to follow the path of freedom and develop a sense of wonder and curiosity. One can also understand why the offenders almost always felt that Lane 'was on their side'. Finally there is a report of Lane's interest in psychotherapy, his own passionate involvement in the educational implications of his psychological studies (Appendix II) and his successful experiments with individuals whom he apparently released from morbid fears and pathological inhibitions in large numbers.

A man who touched educational life at so many points demands careful analysis. David Wills has done well to describe in such detail this vivid and colourful personality whom many regarded as a dangerous charlatan and licentious adventurer, whilst others were convinced that he was the most inspiring influence in the educational world of his time. Wills's book is clear and thoughtful. He gives a full account of the development of Lane's pedagogical theories and, at the same time, handles with tact the charges of indecency brought against him. If there are some things in it that set the teeth on edge, there are others that every professional educator can ponder with profit.

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