



# Educationalist on a Tight-rope

A. J. Carter reviews *Government of Education* by W. O. Lester Smith  
(Pelican Original, 3s. 6d.)

**THE GAY COVER** of this book belies the nature of its contents. The trouble is that the author is so well experienced in the administration of education that his horizons seem to be limited to the way things work, and not to extend to the broader problems of education as a whole. The result is a pedestrian catalogue of facts — some, like the history of education in Greece and Rome, of more interest than others — but a complete absence of originality and a striking reluctance on the part of the author to declare his own opinions on anything except minor matters. It is as if his brief was to write a textbook in which everything must be safe, and, above all, non-controversial.

For the budding education officer this approach may be useful but it is too anaemic to appeal to the general public. What are we to make of a book about the organisation of education that scarcely even mentions the two most hotly debated questions of the day, the future of 11-plus and the change to comprehensive schools? Both these subjects are no doubt getting more than their fair share of educational headlines, but that is no reason why in this book they should be almost ignored. Mr. Lester Smith should have devoted space to fairly weighing up the pros and cons and then, preferably, giving his own ideas. There are, admittedly, many problems on which one defers judgement because the arguments appear to be evenly balanced or inconclusive, but the way in which these arguments are reported can itself form a statement of view — a kind of positive neutrality.

As it is, the main points of discussion that are covered in this book are stated not with positive neutrality but with oscillation. The increased powers of the Minister of Education and the relationship of education to politics are tackled like tight-ropes to be crossed: as soon as the author leans towards one side he throws his weight across to the other to try to correct his balance. Thus wobbling violently from side to side he just manages to reach the end without falling into the abyss of commitment.

One point on which there does appear to be tentative acceptance is the statement in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights that "Everyone has the right to education." In so far as this means that in a state system of education every child should receive an equal opportunity to develop his abilities, the remark is unexceptionable. The dull and the brilliant should be treated alike in that respect, and it is not justifiable to concentrate the best teaching on the cleverest children in order to produce an elite. It is, however, wrong to consider education as a right in the same sense as the rights to life, liberty, and

the products of labour. Education is a service, like many others, and if there were free choice it would be merely foolish, not wicked, for a parent to deny his child education, as it would be to deny him the benefit of good meals, sensible clothes, or room to play. We do not have a right even to food, clothing and shelter except as we are able to obtain them, and the same is true of education. The right is the freedom to engage in production and trade so that we can supply these wants.

The goal of full equality of educational opportunity can never be realised, as the author concedes, for schools do not have the monopoly of education. The children of wealthy, cultured parents are always likely to have advantages over their playmates from poorer homes, and as long as family life is cherished as the foundation of society, equality is impossible. This being so, the biggest question of all about the government of education — far outside Mr. Lester Smith's orbit — is whether a compulsory state system, whose main virtue presumably lies in its attempt to establish equal opportunity, is preferable to a system of free parental choice. The answer to this question could be dependent, among other factors, on the general level of prosperity.

The increasing part the parental attitudes can play in the education of children at school is given some emphasis by the author, and this is to be welcomed. Schools are too often thought of as isolated from the communities that they serve.

*Government of Education* is certainly a learned book. The author knows what he is talking about, and, as he makes very obvious, is exceptionally well read. He quotes far too much and opines far too little; in consequence, the book, though competently written, is passionless. On a subject of considerable public interest, it stimulates its readers not one jot.

## Recommended Reading

**TWO NEW BOOKLETS** by Joseph S. Thompson, President of the International Union for Land Value Taxation and Free Trade, have just been received.

The first, entitled *A Basic Income*, is the opening address given by Mr. Thompson at the International Union's international conference in New York last autumn.

The second booklet, called *Colloquial Colloquies*, is a collection of twelve articles each in the form of a witty and compelling dialogue on taxation.