

19th Century literary non-fiction

Source B

This is an extract from a lecture given by a Scottish doctor to what is now the Royal Society of Edinburgh, so his audience would have been professional male audience. The lectures concern how to educate young women in a way which protects their healthy development.

Female Education from a Medical Point of View

If I had a school to construct on ideal principles, I should have it placed on the north side of a large space of ground. I should have it one storey only, and every class-room lofty, and with roof-lights to let in as much as possible of our scanty Scotch sunlight. I should have the walls of the class-rooms painted in light, cheerful, tasteful colours, to produce a cheering effect on
5 the minds of the pupils. I should have a big, open fireplaces to cheer and to ventilate the rooms. I should have, as an essential adjunct*, a great room, where gymnastics, romping*, dancing, and play should all have full scope, when the weather did not admit of the girls going out.

[...]

10 There is one most unaccountable want in very many girls' schools in our cities. If boys need play, fresh air, games, muscular development, I have no hesitation in saying that girls need them all to the extent applicable to their constitution and strength still more. [...] You cannot starve a girl's life of these things without doing her harm, any more than you can with impunity* keep her on a short allowance of food. A girls' school without a playground, a gymnasium, or public park near, I look on as a garden without sunshine, or a boat with one
15 oar. It is deficient and one-sided; it is a machine for production without sufficient provision for the renovation of wear and tear. Mind can't grow except by growth of brain; brain can't grow but through good food, fresh air, work, and rest, in proper proportion. The blood will not renew itself properly in youth but by brisk circulation, and this can only be got by exercise in the fresh air. The muscles won't grow and harden but by having plenty of good blood and
20 exercise. The fat, that most essential concomitant of female adolescence, won't form in the proper way, except the blood is rich. Fat is to the body what fun is to the mind, an indication of spare power that is boiling over and available for future use. I don't mean an excessive amount of fat; I mean that amount that gives roundness, plumpness, and beauty. This little estimated substance is, with form, the great source of female beauty.

[...]

25 You have a splendidly educated girl according to the modern standard, with a physique that seems very fairly developed, just showing by certain subtle indications that the mental portion of the brain has been made too dominant. You have this girl prostrated in what seems the most mysterious way by hysteria*, in one of its hundred forms. You can't actually say what is wrong, but you know that if she had been brought up in the country, with
30 moderate schooling, and four or five hours a-day in the open air, there would not have

occurred anything of the kind. It may result from idleness just as it does from over-brain work, the one being as much contrary to the laws of nature as the other. It is an illustration of the fact that you may have effects produced by wrong methods of education that are not to be detected till they break out in actual disease. If the seeds of disease or the conditions that
35 tend to it are laid by any system of training, it is nearly as bad as actual visible disease. sometimes it is said about the girls in a school, “Just look at them, are they not fairly healthy for town girls who are working hard?” But one of the dangers is that we may not be able to see the beginnings of evil, and only by sad experience afterwards find that they were there.

[...]

Now, if the education process for the female is to be just on the lines of that for the male, if
40 the mould into which the brain of each is to fit is to be the same type – and there is no question of emasculating the male type – then, undoubtedly in the result, we must expect to find a change in the female type of mind. Very many competent observers say that this is actually very apparent in some of the school-girls of the present day. The unceasing grind at book-knowledge, from thirteen to twenty, has actually warped the woman’s nature, and
45 stunted some of her most characteristic qualities. She is, no doubt, cultured, but then she is unsympathetic; learned, but not self-denying. The nameless graces and charms of manner have not been evoked as much as they might have been. Softness is deficient. It takes much to alter the female type of mind, but a few generations of masculine education will go far to make some change. If the main aims and ambitions of many women are other than to be
50 loved, admired, helped, and helpful, to be good wives and mothers with quiverfuls* of children, to be self-sacrificing, and to be the centres of home life, then those women will have undergone a change from the present feminine type of mind.

Glossary

- * adjunct – a thing added to something else as an extra
- * romping – playing roughly and energetically
- * impunity – going unpunished, or freedom from consequences
- * hysteria – an old-fashioned term for a psychological illness, usually diagnosed in women
- * quiverfuls – a quiver is the container which holds an archer’s arrows. The writer’s image is drawn from the Bible

This extract is from Thomas Smith Clouston’s *Female Education from a Medical Point of View: Being Two Lectures Delivered at the Philosophical Institution, Edinburgh, November 1882*

and the full text can be found online at <https://archive.org/details/b21900358/page/n1>

This resource is brought to you by the Diseases of Modern Life project at the University of Oxford, which is supported by the [European Research Council](#) under the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP/2007-2013) under Grant Agreement Number 340121.