Other Schools And Ours

KING, E. J.
New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963. Pp. xii + 253. $4.25.

In Other Schools and Ours, Edmund "King writes for that uncertain audience common in our times, the interested layman. His work introduces comparative education to the uninitiate. It is a lively exposition, clear, forceful, and free of unresolved difficulties. As Dr. King says, "some lines will be overdrawn here, perhaps, while others will be left indistinct." Yet what does this matter? Those "who are dissatisfied with this treatment will be able to rectify matters by more detailed researches later."

But can the overdrawn and the indistinct be left so blandly to the rectification of our further researches? This question merits consideration, for an interesting contradiction is introduced by Dr. King's technique of oversimplification.

Dr. King wishes to convey to his readers something of the multiplicity in potential approaches to education. Through essays on the educational systems of six important countries, he aims to confront the reader in short compass with a portion of the wealth of educational realities in the world. It is hoped that the perception of this richness will open the reader's mind. But by the oversimplification used to stage this confrontation, Dr. King prevents some of the liberation he seeks to cause.

This difficulty is fundamental to our educational tradition. As educators, we seek to convey truer, more complete ideas to the holders of less true, incomplete ones. In order to accomplish this, we often need to infringe on truth and forsake completeness. As Plato described it, we need to create "fictions." Owing to this necessity, our efforts may result in little increase of awareness. As Walter Lippmann might say, one stereotype is replaced by another. This is the problem in Other Schools and Ours, for the pictures Dr. King gives of his chosen countries are stereotypes par excellence— "the flags are almost certain to be flying in Denmark today."

But we should recognize, too, that the other way, that of unflinching pursuit of the whole truth, has difficulties, too. The self-defense of Socrates before his Athenian peers should warn us that the uncompromising popularizer will drink the literary hemlock of resting shamefully unread. The "hurried man" Wyndham Lewis hoped to catch does not relish reading those bent on proving that both reader and writer know most when they know they do not know.

Dr. King warns that making comparisons is difficult, for it is necessary to preserve the context of each different system of education with which he is concerned. Therefore, it is best to look at the six as they stand, isolated. This is a clear and useful caution. Perhaps one could argue that comparative education is misconceived: we really mean the description of various educations. But Dr. King does not pursue this line. He prompts comparison by casually translating populations, areas, and some techniques into terms familiar to Britons and Americans. Further, his very title insistently calls for comparison and forces the reader to make it.

The relationship of "other and our" is unavoidably comparative. By not fastening upon the text any clear pattern of other and our, Dr. King requires the reader, probably an amateur, to make those comparisons which he admits are the most difficult part of comparative education. On the relatively easy part, Dr. King adopts a very paternal attitude, but on the really difficult questions, he subscribes to complete laissez faire. The basic weakness of the book resides in this paradox. By guiding the reader through the easy part and leaving him half prepared, but believing himself wholly so, to meet alone the difficulties, Dr. King creates an illusion of competence. The average man likes it, for he can more easily think he is deciding matters for himself; but there is room to question the amount of understanding generated by such a process.

Educators could well study how much of the general liking for education and the elite criticism of education are due to our frequent tendency to help students over the easy part, leaving them only the illusion of preparation in coping with the tough going.

ROBERT MCCLINROCK
Teachers College, Columbia University