



German students circa 1890—"guzzling beer, smoking, howling, and gaming all night."

—Culver.

FOREIGN STUDY—PERILS AND POSSIBILITIES

ON THE EVILS OF A FOREIGN EDUCATION

By HENRY STEELE COMMAGER,
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“WHY SEND an American youth to Europe for education?” asked Thomas Jefferson in a famous letter to his friend John Banister, Jr., in 1785. “Let us view the disadvantages. . . . To enumerate them all would require a volume. I will select a few. If he goes to England he learns drinking, horse-racing, and boxing. These are the peculiarities of English education.

“The following circumstances are common to education in that and other countries of Europe. He acquires a fondness for European luxury and dissipation and a contempt for the simplicity of his own country; he is fascinated with the privileges of the European aristocrats, and sees with abhorrence the lovely equality which the poor enjoys with the rich in his own country. He contracts a partiality for aristocracy or monarchy, he forms foreign friendships which will

never be useful to him, and loses the season of life for forming in his own country those friendships which of all others are the most faithful and permanent; he is led by the strongest of human passions into a spirit for female intrigue, destructive of his own and others’ happiness. . . . and learns to consider fidelity to the marriage bed as an ungentlemanly practice and inconsistent with happiness. . . . He returns to his own country a foreigner, unacquainted with the practices of domestic economy necessary to preserve him from ruin. . . . It appears to me then that an American coming to Europe for education loses in his knowledge, in his morals, in his habits, and in his happiness.”

Alas, the reckless practice of sending American boys abroad for their education persisted and, after the Civil War, grew to alarming proportions. In 1873 the Reverend Birdsay Grant Northrop, secretary of the Connecticut State Board of Education, felt compelled to launch a crusade against this spreading evil. Northrop was not familiar with Mr. Jef-

erson’s letter, but he said pretty much what Jefferson had said almost a hundred years earlier, and, eager for support and applause, he sent his diatribe “Should American Youth be Educated Abroad?” to scholars and educators throughout the country. Replies poured in by the score, and later that year the triumphant Northrop put together a selection of them in a booklet which he called simply *Education Abroad*. Professor Stewart Fraser of George Peabody College for Teachers has had the happy idea of rescuing this piece of Americana from undeserved oblivion [Stewart Fraser, ed., *The Evils of a Foreign Education, or Birdsay Northrop on Education Abroad*, 1873. International Center, George Peabody College for Teachers, Nashville, Tennessee, 1966].

Neither Northrop’s original essay nor the replies which it inspired are of the slightest value as serious discussions of the merits of the question to which they are addressed; on the contrary, they express the effervescence of an emotional binge. But as an expression of the Vic-

torian mind in America they are documents of the first order. If they tell us nothing about education abroad, they tell us much about education at home. And few books of comparable size in our literature reveal as much about the prejudices, vanities, fears, and obsessions of intelligent Americans of the postwar generation as does this potpourri of academic patriotism.

Here is a formidable throng of educational statesmen: university presidents like Eliot of Harvard, Porter of Yale, McCosh of Princeton, Angell of Michigan, Barnard of Columbia, Folwell of Minnesota, Stearns of Amherst, and Mark Hopkins of Williams, all eager to testify; here, too, a gaggle of state superintendents of schools pushing their way among their betters to the witness box. Their testimony is eloquent but worthless: a mishmash of clichés, shibboleths, and prejudice expressed in a mixture of rhetoric and jargon. What they had to say about sending American "boys"—age ten to twenty—abroad for an education can be summed up in a single word: Don't. The reasons they gave for this advice added little to those which Jefferson had dredged up a century earlier, except for the addition of complacency, which Jefferson lacked. The arguments are repetitive, and we can summarize them briefly:

First, there was really nothing to be gained by sending a boy abroad—for the most part that seemed to mean Germany—for an education; American schools were almost as good academically as European and for all other purposes they were incomparably better. Second, sending American boys abroad during the formative years of their lives would inevitably give them false and pernicious notions about government, religion, class, and society, and thus make them unfit for practical success in America. Third, and most insistent, to send American boys abroad was to expose them to moral temptations which were sure to corrupt them, but which they would just as surely escape if they stayed at home. Dr. Northrop—he managed to spread these so thin that they made no less than twenty-two arguments—summed it all

up. Foreign education, he wrote, means "the loss of a more practical training," inculcates the duty of "homage to king and emperor," encourages a pernicious cosmopolitanism, and forfeits those "national sentiments, traditions, and loyalties" essential to true Americanism. As for morals, Northrop pointed out, "it is not in France alone that a moral malaria pervades the atmosphere"; alas, everywhere in the Old World "a voluptuous refinement veils the grossest immorality and a thin veneering covers the foulest corruption." Finally, American education is cheaper.

THE official and presidential chorus echoed these charges with monotonous sycophancy. The superintendent of schools of Georgia, who had cheerfully passed most of his life in a slave society, argued that no American boy should be permitted to go abroad until his "moral principles" were strong enough to resist the dangerous influences of the Old World. The superintendent of schools of Minnesota declared that the function of American schools was "to stamp loyalty on the hearts of our youth, and to teach that it is a glory to be an upright and intelligent citizen of the United States"; how could these ends be achieved by a foreign education? The Ohio superintendent deplored the "refinement and glamour of European immorality," and the Wisconsin superintendent, who seemingly confused Germany with Turkey or India, asserted that only in America was it possible to find "natural, wholesome, and Christian education."

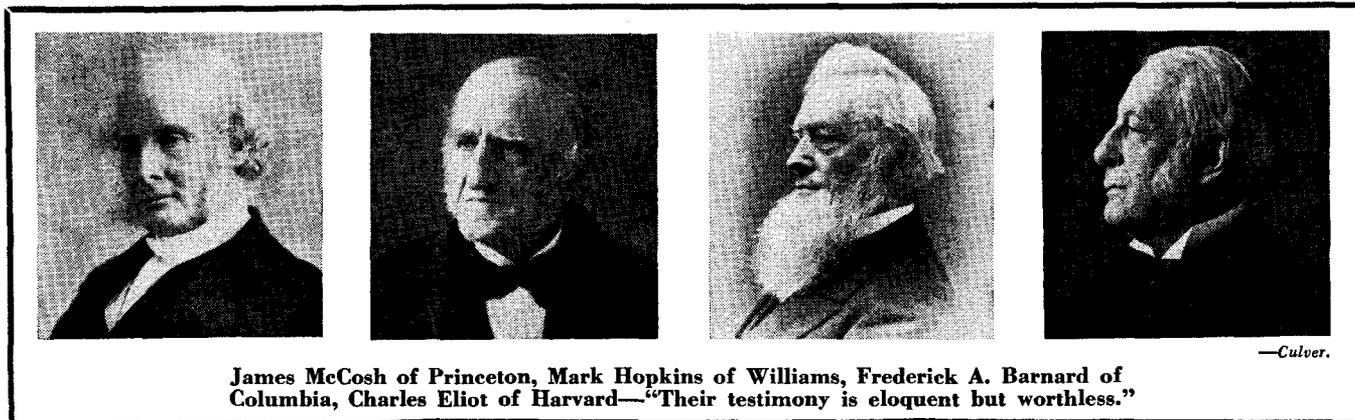
Nor was it only public officials who indulged in this kind of silliness. The president of Middlebury College was sure that foreign influences constituted "a foolish and hurtful taint," and his opposite number at Burlington went so far as to argue that only boys who stayed in America would be exposed to the benign influence of religion. As for girls, he added fatuously, they didn't really count, and if they succumbed to the lure of mere "accomplishments" such as French, music, or art, why, "let them get a French husband and stay in Europe." The president of Trinity College was

alarmed because young men who studied abroad came home "disposed to criticize and compare"; this meant that their "patriotism is somewhat dulled." Professor William S. Tyler of Amherst College agreed that young men who went abroad returned "un-Americanized if not unchristianized," and one W. C. Fowler, otherwise unidentified, was fearful that foreign-trained boys might grow up to be "citizens of the world," which was the worst thing that could happen to them. He was supported in this view by no other than the great Eliot of Harvard—he had studied in Germany—who asserted roundly that "persons described as cosmopolitan are, as a rule, an unhappy, useless, and sterile breed."

Not surprisingly, newspaper editors echoed these fears and played on these prejudices. Thus a Utica editor asserted that the habit of study abroad was "anti-American and dangerous," tending to "subvert free institutions," while a St. Louis journalist, unconsciously invoking Thomas Jefferson, assured his delighted readers that a university education abroad was nothing but "guzzling beer, smoking, howling, and gaming all night," and soared to the ultimate of moral chauvinism with the conclusion that "the Fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the equality of men before the law were distinctive American ideas" which might be forfeited and lost by residence abroad.

"Track almost any German professor or author upon almost any subject," wrote the journalist, J. P. Thompson, "and you are pretty likely to catch him in some illogical deduction, some groundless assumption, some substitution of theory for fact." That is a succinct description of the arguments of almost all those who contributed to this symposium. Their method was rigidly deductive: No hint of evidence was permitted to ruffle the surface of their generalizations, nor are any conclusions subjected to even the most elementary of tests. Thus it did not, apparently, occur to any of these commentators who were so sure that a European education corrupted its victims, to wonder how it happened that

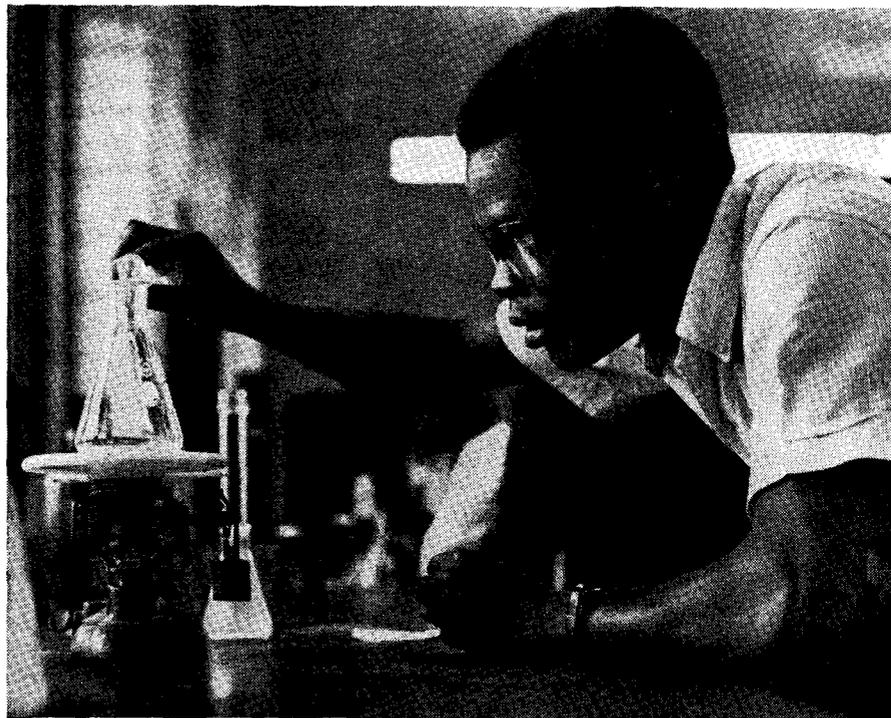
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James McCosh of Princeton, Mark Hopkins of Williams, Frederick A. Barnard of Columbia, Charles Eliot of Harvard—"Their testimony is eloquent but worthless."

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“AID ME IN THE EDUCATION SPHERE”



“Careful selection and placement of the foreign student is paramount to his success in the American university.”

By RICHARD W. MOLL, *executive director of the African Scholarship Program of American Universities.*

THE UNITED STATES has been offering university admission and scholarships to sub-Sahara Africans for more than fifty years, and has educated such notables as Hastings Banda, the President of Malawi; Kwame Nkrumah, the ousted President of Ghana, and Nnamdi Azikiwe, the respected ex-President of Nigeria. Although the 7,500 Africans represent less than 10 per cent of the foreign students currently in America, their number here has steadily increased as the United States Government, the university community, church welfare groups, and well-meaning individuals have responded to their dramatic plea for higher education.

The colonial powers did relatively little to develop indigenous universities in Africa, but planted early seeds of the European system of higher education “for the few.” Extremely rigid admissions requirements in the few countries which had a respectable university at the time of independence eliminated many African students who, by America’s educational philosophy, could contribute significantly to the strength and viability of a rapidly changing society. As America increased aid to Africa during the colorful succession of nations gaining independence, Benjamin Franklin’s wisdom seemed basic: “If a man empties his purse into his head, no man

can take it away from him. An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest.”

With more and more being spent on the young Africans at our local colleges (as we simultaneously help finance the development of indigenous African universities), such painful memories as Nkrumah’s disdain for the land in which he was educated has prompted the questions: How do they like it here? Do they return home as friends? Do they feel our social, economic, and political customs should be copied in Africa? More pointedly—is America’s national interest being served by this investment?

A quick glance at the never-ending flow of “blue letters” from young Africans to American college admissions offices leads one to believe that the offer of higher education would in itself assure the undying loyalty of the student to his benefactor. Excerpts from letters received at Harvard:

We do not want to remain stranded high and dry while the river of advancement runs ahead and our more active friends pass out of sight. America, with its many philanthropic organizations, has chosen to liberate both the politically independent and dependent countries of Africa from the shackles of ignorance and the lack of skill. Our few existing universities consciously or unconsciously maintain the traditional ideas of reserving higher education for those regarded as the intellectual elite. . . . Continue to help Africa through education, and she will ask nothing more.

And:

About four miles overlooking lak victoria is situated our crazy hut, thatched of grass but without furniture due to intense poverty. We have neither domesticated animal nor cash crop that can wealth us, so as to aid me in the education sphere. May I add that I have got no elder brother to support me and my father is lame. So this incident combined with chronical poverty imposes upon me an overcoming barrier which goads me tremendously to weep to you for the first help. I look forward with high morale and hope for a favorable and considerable reply at your earliest possible convenient. I am ripe.

In our enthusiasm to help, we have invited them over. They eagerly accept. But it is only natural that these students have given little more than passing thought, in their ambitious search for university admission and scholarship, to the foreign climate in which they will receive their American education. Once here, the comfort factor cannot be overlooked, despite its secondary role to the classroom work at hand. Since the majority of African students do not study on campuses where a large number of their countrymen can be found, they are immediately thrown into strange company. And the American personality seems different, very different. No amount of well organized orientation (and there is a great deal of it in America, administered quite naturally by persons sympathetic to the foreign student cause) is able to brace them for this