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Cultural Value of Accountancy Studies*

By Reynold E. Blight

Courses in accountancy now occupy an important place in college and university curricula, and public accountancy is receiving its rightful recognition as a dignified profession. Thousands of young men and women are now engaged in the study of accountancy and it is worth our while to consider the cultural value of such courses.

At the very outset of our inquiry we are challenged to state whether accountancy is a vocational or a professional subject. In other words, does the student pursue the study of accountancy merely to get a means of livelihood or does he have a higher purpose, namely, to develop himself mentally so that he may be qualified to take a place in a highly-honored profession with professional traditions, standards and requirements?

If the ability to earn a living be the highest object of his quest, let him forego the time and effort necessary to the attainment of a degree or the certificate of a certified public accountant, and give himself to selling automobiles or bonds or real estate. He will find it much more lucrative and less exacting.

But the professional viewpoint necessarily includes the idea of culture. The professional man is not merely a specialist in his line: he is one who has erected the edifice of specialized knowledge upon the broad, general, educational foundation that we call culture. It is for this reason that we raise the question: Is there a cultural value in accountancy studies in themselves?

To answer the question intelligently and adequately it is essential that we should carefully define culture, then survey the scope of the profession and note what mental and moral qualities are needed to attain success therein, and then determine the extent to which training in the subjects required to endow the student with those qualifications conforms to our definition of culture.

First, what is culture? For many centuries culture was inseparable from an education in which knowledge of dead languages and the classics was predominant. At first universities existed solely to educate the clergy. Later the scope of the curriculum was expanded to include the education of the noble. Education was essentially exclusive and aristocratic, and a more or less perfunctory acquaintance with Greek and Latin and the literature of antiquity was the sign of a gentleman.

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* A paper read before a faculty meeting of Washington, D. C., school of accountancy.

Gradually the studies were broadened to include preparation for law and medicine, but even yet the classics were the foundation, end and substance of university training. As Abraham Flexner, secretary of the Carnegie foundation for the advancement of teaching, has said: "The classics were the backbone of the college curriculum; they were supplemented by the cut-and-dried philosophy then current, some mathematics and bookish science and an occasional dip into modern literature."

Culture thus was defined as an acquaintance with dead languages and a smattering of science, mathematics and polite literature. It was very exclusive, very superficial—although very showy. This ideal still prevails in certain educational circles. But the revolution in thought that has given us a new world during the past hundred years has also given us a new education and a new conception of culture. In this vibrant, practical, hurly-burly modern life Latin, Greek and dilettante classical studies as required subjects are being dethroned. For a long while the conservatives fought the change, inveighed against the unsettling tendencies of the times, and raged against the bolsheviks and iconoclasts who were destroying culture. But they waged a losing fight. Says Emerson: "Latin and Greek became stereotyped as education, as the manner of men is. But the Good Spirit never cared for colleges."

Again I quote Dr. Flexner: "The conditions under which the classics can be made the basis of a prolonged discipline simply do not exist here. We do not believe in their disciplinary efficiency or necessity; nor are we likely to be persuaded of it. Nothing tangible depends on Greek or Latin; they lead nowhere."

It is a far cry from the narrow idea of culture circumscribed by classical studies to the modern university where you can study anything from Choctaw to psychoanalysis. The university has had to yield to the demands of a democratic age that speaks in the terms of inclusiveness, liberality, popular education and progress. We have travelled far and we are going farther. "The schools," says Paulsen, "can not tear themselves loose from the general march of culture. Classical study formed originally the entire content of all higher training; in the nineteenth century, however, it necessarily declined into simply an essential element in this training. The time is coming—and the most recent ordinances indicate this point of view—when it will not even be regarded as a necessary ingredient of a liberal education." I number myself among the progressives and agree that the culture we seek is broader than dead languages and the classics.

The first definition that naturally suggests itself is the famous statement of Matthew Arnold that culture is "the acquainting ourselves with the best that has been known and said in the world and thus with the history of the human spirit." This literary interpretation of culture is not far removed from the narrower classical limitation and in this day of practical democracy we fear that such a dilettante education of our young people would minister "rather to the pomp and ostentacion of their wit then to the culture and profit of their mindes," to use the quaint phraseology of good old Sir Thomas More.

Culture should at least include the generous informing of the mind, because after all a mind well-stored of facts, thoughts, hopes and dreams is a man's most vital asset. As the Bible tells us, there is nothing so much worth while as a mind well instructed. Let us go a little further and say that not only should a mind be well stocked with facts, but the information carefully laid away should be readily available for instant use. To an accountant the simile of a filing cabinet logically presents itself. A file of facts, all duly tagged and documented and available, like an encyclopædia, at the flick of a finger or a turn of the thumb! But the simile fails. The mind is not like a filing cabinet. A mind is not measured by capacity but by temper, quality of fineness, flexibility. Culture to the mind is the temper of a Damascus blade. This elasticity, this fineness of temper comes only by training, discipline and cultivation. It takes time, effort—I had almost said, agony of soul,—but we are agreed that without it culture is vain.

Culture in this sense includes poise, balance, calm judgment and sense of proportion. Extravagance, radicalism, and prejudice are utterly foreign to the cultivated mind. At the beginning of the Christian era there flourished a wise old philosopher, by name Plutarchus, and he said: "Men derive no greater advantage from a liberal education than that it tends to soften and polish their nature, by improving their reasoning faculties and training their habits, thus producing an evenness of temper and banishing all extremes." This is the true efficiency.

We have now greatly broadened the definition of culture until we may take a final leap and say that culture should deal only in universals, should be all-inclusive, and we may accept the dictum of Emerson: "The end of life is that the man should take up the universe into himself."

The practical implications of such a sweeping definition of culture would tempt us far afield and yet that we may catch a glimpse of its significance let us glance at two or three inevitable corollaries.

The cultured man is a lover of truth. It is seen, again to refer to Emerson, our American seer, that "truth is the summit of being; justice is the application of it to affairs. All individual natures stand in a scale, according to the purity of this element in them." Amiel, that marvellous Frenchman, struck off a flashing aphorism when he cried: "Let us be true: this is the highest maxim of art and of life, the secret of eloquence and of virtue, and of all moral authority."

This religious devotion to truth, in my opinion, is the finest flower of culture. The heart and soul of all religion is dramatized in that powerful episode from the book of Esdras that rises to a thrilling climax when all the people shouted and cried: Great is truth and mighty above all things!

You see I have gradually broadened and deepened the definition of culture until it is almost indistinguishable from character—and I would have it so. Character is the very core and substance of culture. I believe with Emerson: "A man exists for culture; not for what he can accomplish, but for what can be accomplished in him." I may say, in passing, that true culture cannot be selfish and sordid. Culture that is worthy of this day must express itself in service. That word has fallen into disrepute in recent years, not because the idea is disreputable, but because it has become a kind of sentimental cant among superficial business men. And yet construed in a high, fine way, service is inseparable from culture.

There is wide clamor nowadays that culture shall be practical. This is not new; the oldest education of which we have knowledge was eminently utilitarian. Herodotus, that inveterate old gossip, speaking of education among the Persians, says: "From the age of five to that of twenty they teach their children three things alone—to manage a horse, to use the bow with dexterity and to speak truth."

And while I have spoken rather disparagingly about studies that are purely vocational, solely designed to enable persons to earn withal to buy the bread that perisheth, neverthless there is much merit in the demand that studies shall be related to active life and actual conditions, and that culture shall be not merely decorative but practical.

I have dwelt long upon the definition of culture and have canvassed its many aspects. For myself I am ready to accept all these contributions to the definition and to say that so far as I am concerned I am willing to define culture in the widest, most inclusive terms. I like the definition of James Freeman Clarke, who says: "Education, in the true sense, is not mere instruction in Latin, English, French or history. It is the unfolding of the whole human nature. It is growing up in all things to our highest possibility." Or that definition given by W. K. Brooks in his book, *Law of Heredity:* "Culture in its widest sense is, I take it, thorough acquaintance with the old and new results of intellectual activity in all departments of knowledge, so far as they conduce to welfare, to correct living and to rational conduct."

The other day I came across a vital distinction between instruction and education, while browsing through that ancient compendium of ideas, Chambers Encyclopædia. The writer said: "Education is the effort to bring out all the faculties of man in a healthy way. Instruction is the mere communicating by one person of what he knows to another. Education keeps in view the entire individuality of the person and aims at awakening all the powers of the person being educated."

Summing up, Herbert Spencer said a great word: "Taken in its indirect sense, culture means preparation for complete living. Acquisition of fitness for carrying on the business of life is primarily a duty to self, and secondarily a duty to others."

In passing let me say that I do not mean that culture of this lofty definition can be had only in the schools. Some of the most cultured gentlemen I have known had had the benefit of very little academic training. Speaking of the immortal Washington, Bancroft declares: "His culture was altogether his own work, and he was in the strictest sense a self-made man; yet from his early life he never seemed uneducated."

Now having thus comprehensively defined culture, I am willing to assert that accountancy studies, properly understood, and earnestly pursued, are well calculated to provide this splendid culture. There is a popular fallacy that an accountant should have what is known as a mathematical mind—that is, he must be expert with figures, be able to perform prodigious feats in addition and multiplication, have a deep knowledge of the esoteric meaning of profound mathematical formulas and be a prestidigitator of numbers. This is a grave error. Nowadays, calculations and computations are done by machines operated by twenty-dollar clerks. Uncanny mastery of the symbols of quantity may make a good actuary or professor of mathematics, but such expertness bears no necessary relation to public accountancy. The lightning calculator is usually found on street corners with a blackboard, making a precarious living selling books at ten cents each.

Accountancy requires a philosophical mind. It deals with principles, standards, systems, procedures and the whole philosophy of business and of life. In the narrowest sense the accountant deals with records, reports and statements, purporting to tell the story of a business, its history and present condition. He is called upon to interpret the meaning of these statements and diagnose the present health or disease in the industry. The knowledge of accounting and business law is, of course, fundamental, but it is only the beginning. It is the foundation upon which he must rear a superstructure. It is the gateway through which he passes to wide realms of other and more important knowledge.

In the preparation of his financial statements it is necessary that he be acquainted with the whole body of knowledge concerning business and trade, in all its complexities and world-circling ramifications. It will be seen that the study of accountancy embraces far more than bookkeeping and arithmetic. Before a man is qualified to discuss the balance-sheet of a great corporation, he must understand economics and the fundamental principles of trade and finance. He is no longer merely a producer of financial statements—he is a consultant and interpreter and brings to his work a comprehensive understanding of the whole range of business organization and procedure. His audits presuppose a wide acquaintance with business customs. One accountant of my acquaintance was at one time supervising audits of a bank, a manufacturing concern, an oil-producing company, a wholesale grocery, a real-estate corporation, a building-and-loan institution and a trade union.

The formulating of a cost system requires a knowledge of manufacturing processes, from the actual handling of the commodity in its raw state to the finished article, with all the intricacies of factory organization and scientific management. Municipal accounting necessitates a knowledge of civic history and reform. In fact, we are coming to realize that good government, which means honesty and efficiency, can be had only when the municipal accounts are scientifically organized. Income-tax procedure is an introduction to the history of taxation and requires an understanding of costs of government and political economy. Every item on the balance-sheet is a passage to a new world. The valuation of an advertising campaign leads one to a survey of the whole question of merchandising through the centuries. The valuation of copyrights, patents and trade names may demand a knowledge of foreign trade which again may necessitate an understanding of world-wide commercial geography.

The accountant's findings and recommendations must be put into definite form in a report and these reports require the mastery of terse, expressive English, which opens up a study of English literature. Business English can not be studied profitably apart from English literature as a whole.

Thus it will be seen that specialized professional knowledge of accountancy must rest upon a broad foundation. Otherwise it becomes top-heavy and ineffective. Culture, as defined herein, is not only concerned with facts and the statement of facts, but carries the requirement of certain mental qualities which go to make up the temper and flexibility of the mind. Here again accountancy offers the finest discipline and training for the production of this high mentality.

Mere expertness in accounting and related subjects does not make a first-rate public accountant. Unless he adds to his technical knowledge certain definite mental qualities he must forever fail of the highest professional rewards. My contention is that accountancy studies seriously and earnestly entered into tend to develop these qualities. Let us rapidly note them.

Accuracy: "Is it so?" is the eternal interrogation before the accountant. Ruthlessly he rejects the error, the plausibility, the wish and the hope—that the ungarnished truth may stand revealed. In the pursuit of facts, buried perhaps in statistics or intentionally concealed in entries, vouchers and documents, the accountant's training quickens capacities for analysis and research, thus developing concentration, pertinacity and precise logic.

Imagination: not mere fancy and reverie, but that constructive imagination that creates in the mind conditions unseen, that develops the inevitable conclusion from the given premise, that foresees results with unerring precision.

Resourcefulness: no mere rule of thumb may be followed; every problem is an original one and while principles are immutable their application is capable of infinite variation.

Rectitude: perhaps in no profession is integrity of mind and heart more imperative.

Poise, balance, self-possession; tact, reticence, vigilance; these all are indispensable to the successful accountant and inhere in the very nature of his preparatory studies.

Thus it will be seen that the student who diligently pursues his courses in accountancy, reading not only the literal words of his text-books but the finer lessons between the lines, and follows out the vital implications of the principles laid down, will find himself attaining and appropriating that splendid culture, defined herein, which is the fine flower, flavor and substance of all worth-while education.