

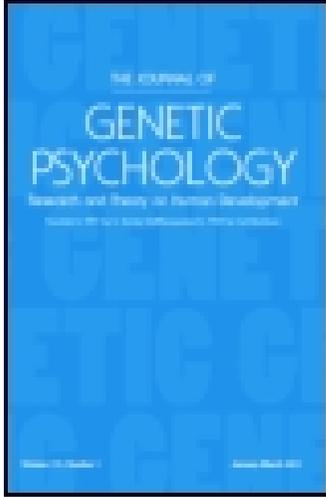
This article was downloaded by: [Purdue University]

On: 21 January 2015, At: 15:44

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



The Pedagogical Seminary

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vzps20>

Backward Boys

Alice M. Clark

Published online: 30 Aug 2012.

To cite this article: Alice M. Clark (1921) Backward Boys, The Pedagogical Seminary, 28:4, 391-394, DOI: [10.1080/08919402.1921.10534000](https://doi.org/10.1080/08919402.1921.10534000)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08919402.1921.10534000>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan,

sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

BACKWARD BOYS

By ALICE M. CLARK

If we should call the roll of dullards at school, all of these little boys would have to answer "present:"

Arthur Wellesley (Duke of Wellington)
Isaac Newton
Jonathan Swift
Robert Clive
Walter Scott
Richard Brinsley Butler Sheridan
Robert Burns
Justus von Liebig
Carolus Linnaeus
Frederick Heinrich Alexander von Humboldt
Louis Pasteur
James Watt
Robert Fulton
Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller
Heinrich Heine
Henry Ward Beecher
Jacques Rousseau
Friedrich Fröbel
James Abbott McNeill Whistler
Patrick Henry
Edgar Allan Poe
Georges Clemenceau (Premier)

This roll-call is in no sense complete, nor could it be made so even if we wished to attempt this, because of lack of sufficient data in the biographies of great men. The roll covers, we admit, a period of several centuries and could easily be matched by an equally impressive list of men of genius who are known to have been precocious children.

Today the expressions "supernormal child," "intensive training," "the upper fourth," are in the vocabulary of every progressive pedagogue. Cities and schools vie with each other in introducing efficient methods of saving the gifted children. Colleges compete in graduating students whose ages would indicate that they belong in the high or grammar school. The pedagogical psychologist is deserting the subnormal child, who for a decade has been his pet, and is turning his attention to the supernormal. He says, "We have been spending too much

time and money on defective children; we have been cultivating a desert. If you *could* educate a subnormal child a thousand years you *might* make him normal. A more profitable field is offered by the child who is above the average, a class which has been neglected, by our schools. Our educational institutions should not turn out so many mediocrites. Let us take our implements,—intelligence testing and vocational and intensive training—and let us apply them to the fertile soil, to the gifted child.”

The schools, acting on the suggestion of the psychologists, are trying schemes of rapid promotion for bright pupils, of special classes offering fuller courses, of intense training.

Yet, in our enthusiasm for saving these brilliant children, we must not forget a truth which Sully has expressed so well in his *Education of Genius*: It cannot be said that the boys who afterward proved themselves to have been the most highly gifted shone with much lustre at school or found themselves in happy harmony with their school environment.

“Our Davie’s a fine good-natured crater but uncommon wake-minded” was the opinion expressed by his own mother of the child David Hume. Indeed, David seems to have owed very little to knowledge gleaned in schools.

Richard Sheridan’s mother failed to recognize the spark of genius in her boy, for she says about him and his brother in a letter to their new school-master: “Two such impenetrable dunces I have never met with.” Sheridan was inferior to his school fellows in the “ordinary business of school,” as his biographer says.

Thackeray did not attain distinction at school; he probably would have been excluded from a class of brilliant pupils, if his school had had such a class.

“What Southey “gained of book-lore in his two years’ schooling was as little as could be”—another boy refused admission to our gifted-pupil class.

Keats in childhood was not attached to his books, his penchant was for fighting. When Darwin left school, he says, “I was considered by all my masters and by my father as a very ordinary boy, rather below the common standard in intellect. To my deep mortification my father once said to me, ‘You care for nothing but shooting, dogs, and rat-catching, and you will be a disgrace to yourself and to all your family.’”

Burke, in his youth, was “desultory and excursive”—not any fitness for intensive study is indicated by these terms.

Schiller was negligent at school and was often reproved because he was not alert.

Heine's teacher vowed that the lad had no soul for poetry.

Byron was backward in technical scholarship and low in his class, in which he seems to have had no ambition to stand high. He was at the head only when, as was the custom, the class was inverted, and the bantering master repeatedly said to him, "Now, George, man, let me see how soon you'll be at the foot."

Goldsmith's teacher, in his earliest school days, thought him the dullest boy she had ever taught. Truly Goldsmith's village school with its profound and learned master was inferior to our American school today. Yet would we, with all our intelligence tests, have recognized in the little, marked, awkward, ugly Oliver, a genius in the germ?

General Grant was not above mediocrity in his school work.

W. H. Seward was considered "too stupid to learn."

Napoleon graduated forty-second in his class; "who were the forty-one above him?" asks Swift.

Sir Humphrey Davy, who became one of the greatest of England's chemists, was an idle boy at school and got low marks. He was popular among the students, however, because he could tell such remarkable stories and because in his leisure time he experimented with gun powder, making, to the delight of his comrades, what he called thunder-crackers. If Davy's lot had led him into a chemical laboratory in one of our crowded high-schools, the chances are that the thunder-crackers would have met the fate of Mary's little lamb, and been banished from the schoolroom, for they, like the lamb, made the children laugh and play. Humphrey Davy never lost this knowledge of the way to a boy's heart, however, for in his will he left a sum of money to the grammar school in which he had been educated, with this definite condition, that the boys should have a holiday on his birthday.

Genius is not always docile in youth. Thomas Crowell was a ruffian when a lad; Thurlow, even at college, was idle and insubordinate; Murchison was mischievous and not interested in science till he was thirty-two.

Henry Fawcett, the wonderful blind postmaster of England, was not an easy child to manage. His first teacher said she had never had such a troublesome pupil. Little Henry reported one day to his mother, "Mrs. Harris says if we go on we shall kill her; and we go on and yet she does not die!" He loved fishing and sport—he would probably have gone out for track and football if he had been in one of our high-schools. It was not until fourteen that this boy began to study.

As Swift tells us, school work is analytic while life is synthetic, and the narrowness of the school enclosure prompts many a youth in the wayward age to jump fences and seek new and alluring pastures. According to school standards, many were dull or indolent, but their nature was too large or their ideals too high to be satisfied with it.

One of the most striking examples of a man of genius who was in no respect regarded as a gifted child was Linnaeus, the famous Swedish botanist. When he went to the university he carried a dubiously worded testimonium from Nils Krok, the rector of the gymnasium which he attended, to the effect that shrubs in a garden may disappoint the cares of the gardener, but if transplanted into different soil may prosper; therefore, the bearer was sent to the university, where, perchance, he might find a more propitious climate.

John Hunter, the great anatomist, was very dull and averse to study. Webster at fourteen could not rise to speak before the school. Joseph Banks, the great botanist, was idle and had no interest at thirteen. When Edison was a child he was not at all strong. For this reason he was not allowed to go to school early, and then he went for only a short time. He was usually at the foot of his class; the teacher had once spoken to the inspector of the boy as "addled." At this report the mother was indignant, for she had studied her boy closely and knew that he had mental powers beyond most children. Accordingly she removed him from the school and undertook his training herself.

Premier Clemenceau was not a good student; at the age of sixteen he knew about as much as a boy of twelve.

From these examples, scattered and meagre though they are, we know that it is not unusual for an eminent man to be considered dull in his boyhood. If, in our American schools, today we form special classes to help the brilliant child conserve his time, we shall, of course, fail to include in them many future men of genius. For in spite of the progress we have made in pedagogy we have no infallible method for detecting the difference between precocity that means genius and precocity that is superficial and short-lived, nor for recognizing genius in a child that is backward and immature.

Now and then in the future, as in the past, some little traveler, misunderstood or undeveloped, branded by the schools a dullard, unappreciated perhaps by his own mother, will pass by our educational guide-posts (maybe because he can't read them), and take his own way, often a devious path, which will lead him, guided by instinct, to his mountain-peak at last.