

**THE GRAVES OF ACADEME**, by Richard Mitchell. Little, Brown. 256 pp., \$10.95.

## Who's teaching the teachers?

SAMUEL L. BLUMENFELD

**I**F YOU WANT TO DISCOVER, IN a concise, learned, and delightful way, why the American system of public education is rotten to the core, you'll have to read Richard Mitchell's *The Graves of Academe*. Mitchell does in one fell swoop what many of us have been trying to do in a dozen scattered shots: explain convincingly why our schools are in the mess they are. He succeeds because he himself comes from the source of the pestilence—the teachers colleges. Thus he can state with first-hand knowledge what the rest of us have only been able to infer: that American teacher education is at the heart of the problem.

Richard Mitchell comes to his subject with some very special credentials. He is a professor of English at Glassboro State College, the New Jersey campus where a once famous but forgettable summit meeting between Lyndon Johnson and Aleksei Kosygin took place. He is also the writer and publisher of the *Underground Grammarian*, a kind of samizdat publication that reaches the outside world from Gulag Academics, giving us a harrowing look into what is going on in the insulated domain of teacher training. As a dissident, Mitchell displays all of the characteristics we have come to associate with that condition; he writes with indignation, sarcasm, wit, humor, despair, and the sense of being trapped among the enemy.

Originally, he created the *Underground Grammarian* in 1976 as a vehicle for exposing and ridiculing "examples of jargon, faulty syntax, redundancy, needless neologism, and any other kind of outrage against English" of which the educationists were guilty. Pretty soon he was paying special heed to the productions of the American

SAMUEL L. BLUMENFELD is the author of several books on education, including the recent *Is Public Education Necessary?* published by Dutton-Adair.

teacher trainer, whose use of a befogging, tangled, ungrammatical jargon, he concluded, was calculated to hinder the work of the mind rather than facilitate it. Moreover, that convoluted jargon had become the official language of the entire educational profession.

Going beyond that discovery, Mitchell uses some of his essays in this book like numbered dots in the comics, to outline "the great invisible hulk of the beast, the brooding monstrosity of American educationism, the immense, mindless brute that by now troubles the waters of all, all that is done in our land in the supposed cause of 'education.'"

The task of education in a free society, asserts Mitchell, is to cultivate what Jefferson called the "informed discretion" of the people so that they can exercise their freedom and control their government wisely. "Any fool can see, eventually," writes Mitchell, "the danger to freedom in a self-confessed military dictatorship, but it takes informed discretion to see the same danger in bland bureaucracies made up entirely of decent people who are just doing their jobs."

But American education has nothing to do with informed discretion. The educational bureaucracy has been taken over by the half-blind and the half-witted, and they are in the process of creating a nation of ignorant, ill-informed, and indiscriminating citizens easily manipulated "by the recitation of popular slogans and the appeal to self-interest, however spurious."

**M**ITCHELL CONTENDS THAT two influences were most instrumental in leading our educationists down the road to ruin. One was Wundtian, behavioral psychology, in which teaching and learning are viewed in terms of psychological stimuli and responses. Its integration into our educational system was the beginning of a process of dehumanization in which the mind was left out of the learning process. The second was the adoption in 1913 by the National Education Association's Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education of a set of seven cardinal principles that rejected elitist, undemocratic notions of education in favor of something called "preparation for effective living."

The result of all of this has been a downgrading of intellectual discipline (the cognitive domain, the teachable

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subjects, the independent mind) in favor of socialization (the affective domain, the unteachable pseudo-subjects, the collectivized mind). The commission—or Gang of Twenty-Seven, as Mitchell calls them—"made concrete and formal the anti-intellectual dogmatism that characterizes our schools today."

If the half-blind and the half-witted are now running the educational bureaucracy, then it is in their interest to turn out sightless and witless citizens convinced that they are educated, for then you can make them "collaborators in your disposition of their liberty and property. That is the institutionally assigned task . . . of American public education." Thus what seems to us to be a failure is in the eyes of the bureaucrats a resounding success.

Meanwhile, our teacher trainers have developed a very large vested interest in failure. "Barely literate children may be suffering and facing whole lives of deprivation," writes Mitchell, "but consultants and remediationists and professors of reading education and tax-supported researchers and the editors and publishers of workbooks and handsome packets of materials are doing very well indeed and looking for ever better days to come."

The most entertaining parts of the book are where Mitchell mercilessly takes apart some of the pronouncements of the educationists. These alone are worth the price of admission. He takes on sex education, values clarification, holism, "humanisticism," and some other choice aberrations of the profession. He does a job long overdue. He is outraged that our cultural and intellectual leaders permit such perversion of language to permeate the entire teacher-training profession. But then he observes that our intellectuals "have trained themselves to imagine that the dull business of public education has nothing to do with their high endeavors"—like chasing each other through the pages of the *New York Review*

of Books. So they have turned the whole thing over to the mediocrities.

Under the circumstances, who can blame Mel and Norma Gabler, the Texans who publish their much-consulted moral evaluations of American textbooks? Or any other layman for taking on the educational establishment? Who else would bother? At least the fundamentalists have the stomach for it.

**WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?**  
H. L. Mencken once suggested that we hang all the professors and burn down the schools. Not very practical, says Mitchell.

Then what about a voucher system? Mitchell has reservations: "It does assume, contrary to evidence, that the ordinary American parent knows what an education is and prizes it, and it will provide lucrative opportunities for even more fools and charlatans than the schools now harbor." I disagree. Private schools are rarely started by fools or charlatans. They are usually started by dedicated parents, disaffected public-school teachers, or educational entrepreneurs, few of whom would tolerate for very long the nonsense promulgated by the government teacher-trainers.

Mitchell is also wrong when he contends that "a free society is impossible without a free, public, universal system of education." He overlooks the fact that for this country's first fifty years no such system existed or was even necessary, and literacy was far higher then than it is today. The irony is that the public-school movement billed itself as a "crusade against ignorance." Now we would settle for minimum competence, if we could get it.

But these are minor points in a book that should be read for its devastating look into our most important and best hidden cultural institution. As Mitchell puts it, quite bluntly: "School is America. If you want to predict the future of our land, go to school and look around." God help us all.