

# Autobiography of a Professional Educator (unfinished)

## Episode One

### Cyril Burt and my part in his downfall

#### *The arrival of the letter*

**From our back kitchen was one step down to the outhouse. I was on the bottom step and my mother on the top one having just brought the post through the house. I could see the brown official envelope in her hand. I knew that in it was the result of the test of my 'general intelligence' (called 11-Plus) but I prayed and offered deals to what I had been taught was God so that instead of the letter inside telling my mother that I was a failure it would be magically turned into something that would make her happy. My prayers and offered deals were unsuccessful and rejected, as I was about to be labelled and treated.**

That was in 1953 and I shudder to think how many eleven year olds, before and since, have had similar experiences that have stayed with them throughout their lives. Designing school systems to run like that and apply labels sucks the humanity from education.

Below is the frontispiece to Burt's book on 'backward children'. When the picture was taken the school leaving age was fourteen. I wonder if the boy knew that his photograph was going to be used to illustrate backwardness or if his parents gave permission.

Briefly, Burt was part of the widespread eugenics movement that sought to improve the quality of racial specimens. His research work as a psychologist provided much of the justification for the educational selection of children at the age of eleven. Another prominent member of the eugenics movement was Marie Stopes who remains famous for the work she did to encourage family planning. Her motive was, however, to reduce the number of poor specimens being born. She did not approve of her son marrying a woman who needed to wear glasses: racially inferior!

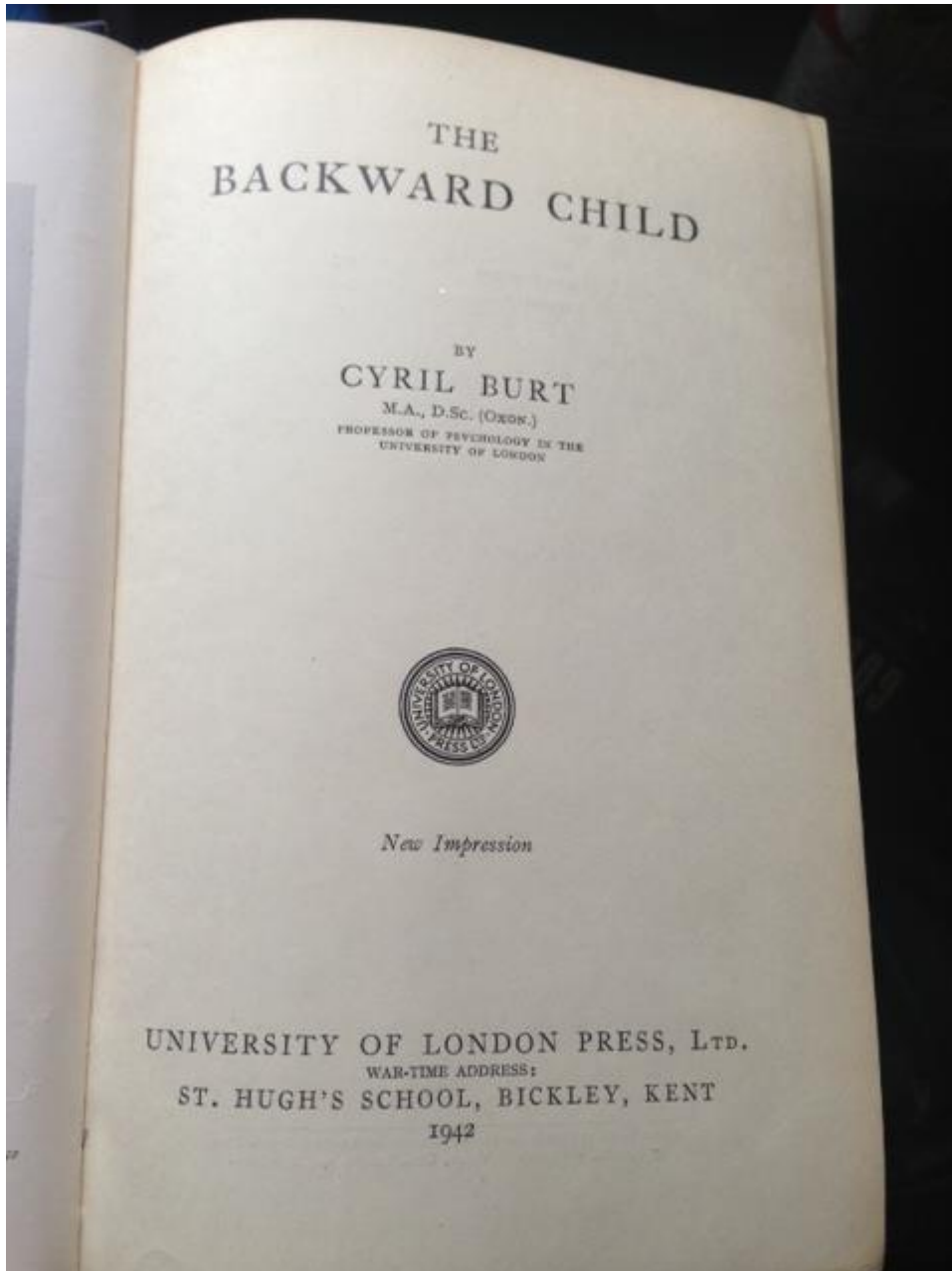
We can be sure that the boy pictured here was intended to illustrate what could go wrong if the eugenicists were ignored and also to support the belief that providing for the education of such children to the same extent as what were taken to be good racial specimens was a waste of resources.

If you are looking for a reason to justify greed and privilege eugenics is a handy notion. The rich are rich and the poor are poor, the privileged are privileged and the unprivileged are unprivileged because nature has determined that this should be so. Education was (is?) intended to play its

part by separating the 'top' twenty percent capable of benefiting from a well resourced school system from the 'bottom' eighty percent who at the age of eleven were (are?) deemed too ignorant to require more than a basic education; always leaving to one side the six or seven percent in private UK education whose social privilege was such that they required no testing.



Below is the facing page revealing the date of publication to be the same as that of the Beveridge Report. We have almost sanctified Beveridge but like so many influential people of his generation he too was a believer in eugenics.



Perhaps I ought to be comforted by remembering that as a member of staff of the University of Liverpool I walked the same streets as Cyril Burt when in 1908 he was appointed to be an assistant lecturer in the Faculty of Science.

**Cliff Jones**

***More to follow***