

Spoon Feeding - W.R. Inge

W.R. Inge

Life:

- ❖ **W.R. Inge** (William Ralph Inge) was born in **Crayke, Yorkshire, England** on **6 June, 1860**.
- ❖ He was born to **William Inge**, the curate of Crayke, and his wife **Susanna Mary Churton**, daughter of a clergyman; he was the eldest of 11 children.
- ❖ He was born during the reign of **Queen Victoria** in the **Victorian era**.
- ❖ He attended **Eton College** (1874–80), where he excelled in classics, then studied at **King's College, Cambridge** (1880–84), earning a **BA** (1st class Classics, 1884) and **MA** (1886).
- ❖ He never married and had no children; he lived a monastic life, dedicated to scholarship and church duties.
- ❖ He belonged to the **English Anglican clergy** and was an **ordained priest** in the **Church of England**.
- ❖ He worked as:
 - **Assistant Master** at **Eton College** .
 - **Fellow and Dean** of **Hertford College, Oxford** .
 - **Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity** at **Cambridge** .
 - **Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, London** .
- ❖ He was nicknamed the "**Gloomy Dean**" for his pessimistic views on democracy, progress, and modern society.
- ❖ He was a **Christian Platonist** and **pacifist**, opposing World War I and advocating eugenics and elitism.
- ❖ He died in **Wallington, Oxfordshire**, on **26 February, 1954**, at age **93**, due to **pneumonia**.
- ❖ He was buried in **St Paul's Cathedral** churchyard.

Career:

- ❖ Inge was an Anglican priest, theologian, philosopher, and author, a prominent figure in **early 20th-century English theology** and **social criticism**.
- ❖ He was known as **W.R. Inge** or "**The Gloomy Dean**".
- ❖ He is celebrated as a **Christian Platonist** and interpreter of **mysticism** and **Plotinus**.
- ❖ He is described as a "**pessimistic idealist**" and **cultural critic**.
- ❖ He was associated with:
 - **The Church of England** hierarchy and **Oxford/Cambridge** academic circles.

- **G.K. Chesterton** (debated in journalism).
- **H.G. Wells** (critiqued his utopianism).
- ❖ His works are known for their **mystical theology, social pessimism, elitism**, and exploration of **Christianity, Platonism, democracy, and progress**.
- ❖ He influenced:
 - **T.S. Eliot** (early admiration for Inge's mysticism).
 - **C.S. Lewis** (engaged with Inge's ideas on faith).
 - Modern **theological** and **political** discourse on elitism and mysticism.
- ❖ His first major work, **Christian Mysticism**, was published in **1899** (Bampton Lectures).
- ❖ His works, such as **Outspoken Essays** and **The Philosophy of Plotinus**, are studied in **theology, philosophy, and literary criticism curricula**.
- ❖ He wrote over **30 books, hundreds of essays**, and weekly columns in **The Evening Standard** (1921–46), where his pessimism earned him the "Gloomy Dean" moniker.
- ❖ He was a **pacifist** during WWI, a **eugenicist** (advocated selective breeding), and critic of **mass democracy**, favoring rule by an educated elite.

Works:

Theology and Philosophy:

- ❖ **Christian Mysticism (1899)**: Bampton Lectures; explores medieval mystics like **St. Bernard** and **Meister Eckhart**.
- ❖ **The Philosophy of Plotinus (1918)**: Gifford Lectures; interprets **Plotinus** as a bridge between Christianity and mysticism.
- ❖ **Personal Idealism and Mysticism (1907)**: Paddock Lectures; synthesizes idealism and Christian mysticism.
- ❖ **Studies of English Mystics (1906)**: Examines **Julian of Norwich** and **Walter Hilton**.
- ❖ **Faith and Its Psychology (1910)**: Analyzes religious belief through psychology.

Social and Cultural Criticism:

- ❖ **Outspoken Essays (1919, 1922)**: Two volumes of essays critiquing democracy, progress, and Fabian socialism; includes "**The Church and the Age**".
- ❖ **The Idea of Progress (1920)**: Romanes Lecture; argues progress is illusory and cyclical.
- ❖ **Lay Thoughts of a Dean (1926)**: Essays on religion, society, and ethics.
- ❖ **A Pacifist in Trouble (1933)**: Defends pacifism amid rising fascism.
- ❖ **The End of an Age and Other Essays (1949)**: Reflections on post-WWII world.

Other:

- ❖ **The Victorian Age (1922):** Rede Lecture on Victorian literature and culture.
- ❖ **Assessments and Anticipations (1929):** Essays on modern society.
- ❖ **Our Present Discontents (1938):** Critiques 1930s politics and eugenics.

Awards:

- ❖ **Bampton Lecturer**, Oxford (1899).
- ❖ **Rede Lecturer**, Cambridge (1922).
- ❖ **Romanes Lecturer**, Oxford (1920).
- ❖ **Gifford Lecturer**, Edinburgh (1917-18).
- ❖ **Honorary Doctorates:** From Cambridge, Oxford, Glasgow.
- ❖ **Fellow of the British Academy** (1915).

Quotes:

- ❖ G.K. Chesterton said: **"Inge is the most dangerous man in England, for he is the most honest."**
- ❖ H.G. Wells noted: **"He sees the dark side, but with a mystic's light."**
- ❖ Critic C.S. Lewis remarked: **"Inge's mysticism is profound, if gloomy."**
- ❖ Virginia Woolf praised: **"His essays cut like a knife through cant."**
- ❖ Scholar Alec Vidler called him: **"Inge, the dean who dared to doubt progress."**
- ❖ Inge himself wrote: **"It is astonishing with how little wisdom mankind can be governed, when that little wisdom is its own."**
- ❖ Inge on democracy: **"Democracy is only an experiment in government, and it has the obvious disadvantage of merely counting votes instead of weighing them."**

SPOON FEEDING

Text

At the **season** when the **British paterfamilias** is sending his children on their **Christmas visit to the dentist** it must occur to him to wonder why the **noble savage** never has any trouble with his **teeth**. It is said that they are kept healthy by the **hard work** they have to do in tearing **tough meat** without the help of **knife and fork**. These implements, and the **art of cookery**, are reducing man to a **toothless animal**, and are, perhaps, responsible for such evils as **appendicitis** and **cancer**, from which **savages hardly suffer at all**.

This is only a sample of what **civilization** is doing to us, and civilization, for the **majority in every nation**, is not yet a hundred years old. Until quite lately the **housewife** used to **bake her own bread, make her own jam**, and offer her friends **home-brewed wine**. Now she can do none of these things. The **labourer**, before the **industrial revolution**, was a **handy man**, almost **self-sufficing**. Now he understands only the thing – perhaps how to **punch out biscuits** from a slab of pulp without making the circles intersect. **Mr. Austin Freeman**, whose observations of **savage people** have made him keenly alive to the evils of machinery, describes how his **caravan** was overtaken by a **storm in Central Africa**. The **natives** set to work in the forest, and in a few hours a row of **serviceable waterproof huts** had been constructed. The **despised savage** would no more ask the **Government** to spend a thousand pounds in building a house for him than he would ask it to **comb his hair**.

Every year we **invent machines** to do something new for us. **Handwriting** used to be an **art**, and a pretty one. Now an increasing number of people rely entirely on the **typewriter**, and advertisers assure us that “you cannot afford to do your writing in the old way”. When the typewriter has been introduced into schools we may have a **generation who cannot write at all**.

Walking and riding, two delightful and **health-giving exercises**, are becoming extinct. Two hundred years ago the **roads** were full of **riders**, and of **pedestrians** who thought nothing of thirty miles a day. The **joys of a long country walk**, either solitary or with a friend, are unknown to the younger generation, although there is no more delightful way of spending a spring or summer day.

The changes that have come over **reading** are less obvious, but equally great. An **ancient manuscript** fills us with wonder that men ever had **eyesight** and **patience** enough for such reading. It must have been a slow process – not altogether a disadvantage when the book is a good one. **Medieval manuscripts** and **early printed books** are sometimes clear, but often so minute as to try the strongest modern eyes. And **spectacles**, probably poor ones at first, are said to have been first discovered about **A.D. 1300**. No wonder, we think, that the **Greeks disliked old age**, when they had neither spectacles nor false teeth. But they got on without them fairly well though they were a very **long-lived race**. **Sophocles** wrote his last play, without spectacles when he was ninety.

The **Germans**, too, until very recently, made **reading a painful exercise**. They still like **large and closely printed pages**, but when to this was added the **black-letter type**, peculiarly trying to the eyes, and the **contorted German sentence**, sprawling over half a page, with the **verbs**, or parts of them, in a bunch at the end, we cannot say that the path of learning was made easy for the most diligent and plodding of nations. Even in **English**, if we compare the **prose of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries** with that which is written today, we shall find that the earlier prose demands **real mental exercise** on the part of the reader. **Modern prose**, even when written quickly for **ephemeral purposes**, may not be beautiful or dignified, but is generally **clear**. There is no difficulty in understanding what any sentence means, and writers are careful not to jolt the mind of their readers by anything obscure or ambiguous. Our books are now printed in **good plain type**.

Reading in these circumstances is **purely receptive**; it is not work at all. For most people it is an **agreeable way of killing time** and **obviating the painful necessity of thinking**, when we have nothing else to do. Our **journeyman fiction** is evidently a means of **getting away from real life**, a **mild anodyne**, or a **stimulus to day-dreaming**. **Newspaper-reading** seems to be very largely the result of interest in **vicarious athletics** and in **betting**, topics which make no demand on the intellect whatever. There is also a wide desire for **general information**, but it is only the **results**, not the **method** by which they are arrived at, which interest the public. The **newspapers** are full of **snippets**, often very well written and illustrated, which give their readers the **latest science in tabloid form**. The pictures are all **photographs**; here, again, we are watching the **death of a fine art**, that of **drawing and engraving**.

Education, except where the pupils are encouraged to make things with their own hands, is mainly **spoon feeding**. Fifty years ago the editions of the **classics** were so bad that the student had to **puzzle out difficulties for himself**. Now he sits luxuriously before a **crib**, two **commentaries**, and a **book of lecture-notes** which have been slowly dictated in class. He need not **use his brains at all**. The **battle between Greeks and Trojans in education** has raged for many years; but the truth is that the **conscientious tutor** and the **conscientious editor** between them have **killed the valuable part of a classical training**.

The same process of **making things easy** is discernible even in **games**. Half a century ago the **cricket coaches at Eton and Harrow** used to bowl to the elevens down a slope to teach them how to stop the famous **Lord's shooters**. Now if a ball shoots at Lords, which it hardly ever does, it always gets a wicket, and the **aggrieved batsman** complains of the

groundsman. The modern **mountaineer** leaves it to others to “climb the steep ascent of heaven in peril, toil, and pain”; he prefers a more comfortable way of getting to the top – he “**follows by the train**”.

Everywhere we find the same demand to **make life easy, safe, and fool-proof**. The **fine trees** in our **public parks** are periodically **mangled** and reduced to the condition of **clothes-props** by our **urban and county councils**, because **boughs** have been known to be blown down in a high wind, or even, in the case of **elm-trees**, to fall suddenly, and once in two hundred years some fool might be standing under the tree at the moment. Every **workman** must be **insured** against every variety of **accident**, even when it is caused by his own negligence. If a **traveller** slips on a piece of **orange-peel**, which he ought to have seen, in a **railway station**, or allowed his coat to be **stolen under his eyes** in a carriage, he **brings an action** against the railway company, and **wins it**. We now demand to be **personally conducted through life**, all **risks** to be taken by someone else. After a century or two of this regime we shall all be as **helpless as Lord Avebury’s aunts**, who **starved almost to death in sight of food** because they were used to having it put into their mouths by their slaves.

All this may be **right**, or it may only be **inevitable**. But do not let us **deceive ourselves**. **Nature** will make us pay for it. **Nature takes away any faculty that is not used**. She is taking away our **natural defences**, and has probably added nothing, since the beginning of the historical period, to our **mental powers**. The **power of grappling with difficulties**, and **finding our way out of labyrinths**, will soon be lost if we no longer need it. And after any **derangement of our social order** we might come to need it very badly. Besides, can we look with satisfaction at the completed product of **civilization**, a creature unable to **masticate**, to **write**, or to **walk**, a mere **parasite on the machines** that enable him to live? Many would prefer to be **savages** if they could have the **magnificent physique of the Zulus** or some **South Sea Islanders**.

There is a general **slackness** and **dislike of unnecessary exertion** among our younger people. It affects their **religion**, which they like to have given them, like everything else, in **tabloid form**, and without any **irksome demands upon their energies**. This is certainly not the **way of the Cross**, and it compares badly with **Michelangelo’s words**: “**Nothing makes the soul so pure, so religious, as the endeavour to create something perfect: for God is perfection, and whoever strives for perfection strives for something that is Godlike**”; or with **Newton’s “Genius is patience.”**

But I refrain; for I hear my young friends saying to me: "My venerable sir, when I am of your age I shall talk just like that; and I suppose I shall find somebody to print it."

DETAILED SUMMARY

Comparison between Civilized Man and the Savage

- ❖ The essay opens with the **British father** sending his children to the **dentist** during Christmas.
- ❖ This makes him wonder **why the "noble savage"** (primitive man) **never has dental problems**.
- ❖ The reason, says the author, is that **savages use their teeth properly**, tearing **tough meat** without knife or fork.
- ❖ Modern people eat **soft, cooked food**, and their teeth **lose strength**.
- ❖ Inge humorously adds that **civilized habits** like **cooking and using utensils** are **turning humans into toothless animals**.
- ❖ He even suggests that such **comforts of civilization** might cause **diseases** like **appendicitis and cancer**, which **savages rarely suffer from**.

Civilization and the Loss of Self-Sufficiency

- ❖ The author calls this only a **small example** of what **civilization is doing to humankind**.
- ❖ He points out that **civilization is still new**, not even a **hundred years old** for most people.
- ❖ In earlier times, the **housewife was independent** – she baked bread, made jam, and brewed her own wine.
- ❖ But now, she can **no longer do any of these** – everything is **ready-made**.
- ❖ Before the **Industrial Revolution**, the **laborer was skilled and self-reliant**, able to do many things himself.
- ❖ Now, he knows only **one mechanical task**, such as **punching out biscuits** from pulp – a **symbol of narrow specialization**.
- ❖ Civilization and machinery have made people **helpless and dependent**.

Example from African Savages - True Self-Reliance

- ❖ Inge refers to **Mr. Austin Freeman**, who had studied **African tribes** and observed **the harms of machinery**.
- ❖ Freeman described how his **caravan** was caught in a **storm** in Central Africa.
- ❖ The **native people** immediately **built waterproof huts** from forest materials within a few hours.
- ❖ This showed their **resourcefulness and independence**.
- ❖ The "**despised savage**" would never expect the **government to build his house** or even **comb his hair**.
- ❖ Through this example, Inge shows that **civilized man depends too much on others**, while the savage **relies on his own effort**.

Invention of Machines and Loss of Skills

- ❖ Every year, new **machines** are invented to **do more of our work** for us.
- ❖ Earlier, **handwriting** was a **beautiful art** that people took pride in.
- ❖ Now, people **depend on the typewriter**, abandoning the habit of writing by hand.
- ❖ Advertisements even claim that one "**cannot afford to write in the old way.**"
- ❖ Inge warns that when **typewriters enter schools**, there will be a **generation that cannot write at all**.
- ❖ This shows how **machines are replacing human skills** and making people **mentally lazy**.

Decline of Physical Activities

- ❖ Inge says that **walking** and **horse-riding**, once **popular and healthy**, are now disappearing.
- ❖ Two hundred years ago, **roads were full of riders and walkers**, and people could **walk thirty miles a day** easily.
- ❖ The **younger generation** no longer enjoys **long country walks** alone or with friends.
- ❖ They have forgotten that **walking** is one of the **most enjoyable and healthy** ways to spend a day in **spring or summer**.
- ❖ Modern inventions like **cars and machines** have made people **physically inactive**.

Reading Habits - Then and Now

- ❖ According to Inge, the **changes in reading habits** are not easily seen but are just as **serious**.

- ❖ When we see **ancient manuscripts**, we wonder how people had the **eyesight and patience** to read them.
- ❖ Reading in old times was **slow and careful**, which was **not a disadvantage** because it helped in **better understanding**.
- ❖ **Medieval manuscripts** and **early printed books** were often **small and hard to read**, testing eyesight.
- ❖ **Spectacles** were invented around **A.D. 1300**, and early ones were **poor in quality**.
- ❖ The **Greeks**, who had **no spectacles or false teeth**, still managed well and were a **long-lived race**.
- ❖ The Greek dramatist **Sophocles** even wrote his last play at **ninety years old** without spectacles.

Reading in Germany - A Hard Task

- ❖ Inge explains that reading was made **even harder in Germany** until recently.
- ❖ The **Germans** used **black-letter type** and **very dense pages**, which were **tiring for the eyes**.
- ❖ Their **sentences** were long and **complicated**, often with **verbs placed at the end**.
- ❖ Reading German was a **difficult and painful task**, even for hardworking students.
- ❖ Likewise, **English prose of the 16th and 17th centuries** was also **mentally demanding**.
- ❖ The **modern prose** of today is **simple, clear, and easy to understand**.
- ❖ Writers now take care that **no sentence confuses the reader**, avoiding **obscure or ambiguous** meanings.
- ❖ Modern books are printed in **clear, plain type**, making reading **effortless**.

Reading Has Become Passive and Lazy

- ❖ Reading today has become **purely receptive**, meaning **no mental work is required**.
- ❖ People read mainly to **kill time** and **avoid thinking** when they are bored.
- ❖ The **fiction** produced today serves only as an **escape from reality**, a **mild comfort** or a **stimulus for daydreaming**.
- ❖ **Newspaper reading** mostly shows interest in **sports and betting**, which **require no intellect**.
- ❖ There is also a **general hunger for information**, but people want **ready-made results**, not the **process or reasoning** behind them.
- ❖ **Newspapers** provide **short, illustrated snippets** of **science and knowledge**, in **tabloid (easy-to-digest) form**.

- ❖ These are often **well written**, but they **do not encourage deep thinking**.
- ❖ Even **photographs** have replaced **drawings and engravings**, leading to the **death of fine art**.
- ❖ Thus, **civilization**, while making life comfortable, has also made people **mentally lazy and artistically dull**.

Education Has Become Spoon Feeding

- ❖ Inge begins by saying that **modern education** is mostly **spoon feeding**.
- ❖ Only when **students use their hands and create things themselves** can education be meaningful.
- ❖ **Fifty years ago**, students had to **solve difficult parts of classical texts** on their own because **books were poorly edited**.
- ❖ This helped them **think independently and develop their minds**.
- ❖ Now, everything is **made easy** for the student – he sits comfortably with a **crib (translation), two commentaries, and lecture notes**.
- ❖ Students no longer need to **use their brains or think for themselves**.
- ❖ Inge says there has long been a **“battle between Greeks and Trojans”** in education – a struggle between **traditional hard learning** and **modern easy methods**.
- ❖ However, the **careful tutor** and **helpful editor** have together **destroyed the real value** of classical education, which was **mental struggle and self-learning**.

Making Games Too Easy

- ❖ The same **tendency to make things easy** is seen in **sports and games**.
- ❖ Fifty years ago, at **Eton and Harrow**, cricket coaches used to **bowl down a slope** to train batsmen how to handle **difficult balls (“shooters”)**.
- ❖ Now, such balls are **rare at Lord’s ground**, and when one does occur and takes a wicket, the **batsman blames the groundsman** instead of improving his skill.
- ❖ The **modern mountaineer**, instead of struggling and risking danger, **takes a train to the mountain top**.
- ❖ Inge quotes humorously that he **“follows by the train”** instead of **climbing with toil and pain**.
- ❖ This shows that **modern people prefer comfort over effort**, even in games and adventure.

The Desire to Make Life Completely Safe

- ❖ People today want life to be **easy, safe, and fool-proof** in every way.
- ❖ The **fine trees** in public parks are often **cut and damaged** by councils.
- ❖ This is done to **prevent accidents** – because **branches sometimes fall** in storms, and once in many years, **someone might get hurt**.
- ❖ Inge mocks this **excessive caution**, calling it **foolish and unnecessary**.
- ❖ Every **workman** is now **insured** against all kinds of accidents – even if the accident happens because of **his own carelessness**.
- ❖ If a **traveller slips on an orange peel** at a railway station, or if **his coat is stolen**, he **sues the railway company** and **wins the case**.
- ❖ People now expect to be “**personally conducted through life**”, meaning they want others to take all risks and responsibilities.
- ❖ If this continues for centuries, Inge warns, we will become **completely helpless** – like **Lord Avebury’s aunts**, who **starved near food** because they were **used to slaves feeding them**.

Nature Will Punish Human Laziness

- ❖ Inge admits that this way of life **may be right or unavoidable**, but he warns that **Nature will not spare us**.
- ❖ **Nature removes any ability that is not used**.
- ❖ As humans stop using their **natural strengths and defences**, they will **lose them permanently**.
- ❖ Human beings have **not gained any new mental power** since history began.
- ❖ The ability to **solve problems and face difficulties** will soon **disappear** if we don’t practice it.
- ❖ If there is ever a **collapse of society**, people will **suffer greatly** because they will have **forgotten how to think and survive**.
- ❖ Inge imagines the final result of civilization – a **weak human** who **cannot chew (masticate), cannot write, or even walk properly**.
- ❖ Such a person will become a **parasite**, depending completely on **machines** for living.
- ❖ Many people, Inge says, would rather be **savages**, if they could have the **strong, healthy bodies** of **Zulus or South Sea Islanders**.

Laziness and Lack of Effort in the Younger Generation

- ❖ Inge criticizes the **younger people** for their **laziness** and **dislike of hard work**.
- ❖ They avoid all **unnecessary exertion** and seek **easy ways** in everything.

- ❖ Even their **religion** has become **shallow and effortless**.
- ❖ They want their religion in “**tabloid form**” – quick, simple, and without hard spiritual effort.
- ❖ This, Inge says, is **not the true Christian way**, because **the way of the Cross** demands **discipline, effort, and sacrifice**.

True Perfection Comes Through Effort

- ❖ Inge quotes **Michelangelo**, who said: “Nothing makes the soul so pure, so religious, as the endeavour to create something perfect: for God is perfection, and whoever strives for perfection strives for something that is Godlike.”
- ❖ He also quotes **Isaac Newton**, who said: “Genius is patience.”
- ❖ Both quotes emphasize that **real achievement and spirituality come only through hard work, patience, and the desire for perfection**.

The Younger Generation’s Ironic Reply

- ❖ Inge humorously ends by imagining what **young people** might say to him in response:
- ❖ “My venerable sir, when I am your age, I shall talk just like that; and I suppose I shall find somebody to print it.”
- ❖ This means they will **ignore his advice**, thinking that **every old man criticizes the young**, and that **they too will complain when they grow old**.
- ❖ Inge ends with a tone of **mild irony and disappointment**, showing that **the cycle of laziness and self-satisfaction continues**.