

INTELLIGENCE

Myths and Measures

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WITH an IQ (Intelligence Quotient) between 250 and 300, William James Sidis was a genius. Born of Jewish-Russian immigrants in New York on 1 April 1898, an 18-month old could already read *The New York Times*. At the age of eight, he was fluent in French, German, Russian, Turkish, Armenian, and Latin, besides his mother tongue language, English. At the age of nine, he created a new language called "Vendergood", which was certified by linguists to be complete, correct, and fascinating. Little wonder that the child prodigy would have lost his precious childhood; instead, at the age of nine, he was accepted into Harvard University. At the age of twelve, he gave his first lecture about the fourth dimension to the scientific community, an event covered extensively by the press. His parents, a famous Russian psychologist and one of the first female medical doctors of that time, wanted only to raise a genius. They did. Boris Sidis, his father, used hypnosis on the young boy to hone his son's mental abilities from an early age. Sidis was called "the most intelligent man in the world". He, indeed, was a linguistic genius.

Only four years later, at the age of 16, he got tired of his fame, felt he had had enough and began what he called his "pilgrimage to the abyss." He rebelled against everything, was jailed and released for protesting and recruiting people for the communist movement, and imprisoned again for two years. After his release, he changed his name and embarked on a nomadic life, moving from job to job, occasionally publishing using pseudonyms on various subjects. All the while, though, he was being pursued by a heartless and ruthless press who never stopped maligning him: "The child genius who never amounted to anything now cries as he works as a stock boy", "the most intelligent man in the world has a miserable life", "the math and linguistic genius has burnt out", "William J Sidis is tired of thinking". A person who wanted to "live the perfect life is through seclusion", was never let