

REFLECTIONS

EVENTS AND PERSONALITIES FROM RECENT HISTORY

John Davis highlights the 'Hackney Phalanx' aim to make National Religion the foundation of National Education



National Society school at Axmouth

It is late September 1811 and a small group of High Church Anglican clergymen and philanthropists hold a series of meetings in East London. They are known as the 'Hackney Phalanx' and among them are Anglican priests Joshua Watson and Henry Norris and the lawyer and writer John Bowles.

Two major concerns formed the crux of their discussions. Firstly, they had an overwhelming philanthropic desire to provide some form of basic education for the working class children of newly industrialised Britain. Secondly, they looked anxiously at the empty pews in many Anglican churches and pondered on how they could make working class families become regular worshippers in the established state church.

Within weeks a solution was found. Establish a nationwide network of schools to teach working

class children the basic skills of reading, writing and numeracy but make it so immersed in religious doctrine that the young scholars would also be converted into lifelong adherents of the Established Church.

Within the month, the group officially formed The National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church in England and Wales. The over-riding aim of the organisation was that 'the National Religion should be made the foundation of National Education.'

Expansion was prodigious. Six to seven thousand National Schools were built by the early 1830s educating some half a million children. A further resurgence came at the end of that decade with the National Society now boasting some 17,000 schools containing almost a million children. With no State aid, a General Fund was established to pay for the building

of schools. By 1861, The National Society had spent some £700,000 on school provision.

The most important role in local initiatives was usually played by parish priests who were instrumental in establishing schools, financing them, operating them and sustaining them in times of difficulty.

The schools built were modest in size catering, particularly in rural parishes, for about 100 children. They were usually built on church land within a stone's throw of the Parish Church and recognisable by the use of the same local building materials and the ecclesiastical Gothic shape of the windows. In many villages especially, they have long been replaced with more recent school buildings but the original structures are still in use as community centres and village halls or have been converted into private houses.

Teaching in National Society schools was to be characterised by three over-arching features—a highly restricted curriculum, an accent on moral and spiritual training and an all-pervading religious atmosphere in everything taught. The chief reading book was to be the Bible. The alphabet was introduced through flash cards but verses were often used to assist with recognition. “A stands for Angel, who praises the Lord; B stands for Bible that teaches God’s word.” From this, pupils would progress to reading short extracts from the Bible. Writing, practised on sand trays and slates, consisted of writing religious texts and verses. Arithmetic or ciphering fared little better. One problem stated: “There were twelve apostles, twelve patriarchs and four evangelists; multiply the patriarchs and the apostles together and divide by the evangelists.” If history was taught it involved a list of the Old Testament kings while in geography pupils studied maps of the Holy Land or the travels of St. Paul. Music was devoted to hymns, psalms and chants.

The parish priest and members of his family did much of the teaching. Instruction was delivered through a system of monitors. An older, literate child, the monitor, would be taught the essential elements of a lesson and they would pass it on to groups of younger pupils. It was highly mechanical and allowed little room for questioning, explanation and understanding.

In 1851 there came a unique opportunity to assess how successful the work of the National Society had been. The usual decennial population census would be held but there would also be a full survey throughout England and Wales of educational provision and, for the only time ever, a review of church worship. A barrister, Horace Mann, was tasked with collating these surveys.

While there were to be anomalies and accusations of

unfair reporting, the figures collected are now accepted as a reliable record of the situation. Mann was able to show considerable growth in educational provision compared to the surveys carried out in 1818 and 1833. Day school pupils had increased by 218 per cent. Large numbers of young children, especially in urban areas, were receiving no day schooling though while others were only in attendance for short periods of time usually in what he termed ‘the infant period’. The National Society had provided just over 80 per cent of the public day schools educating some 76 per cent of the total number of pupils

Was the National Society’s primary purpose—that of providing education for salvation—realised then or was it merely a chimera?

When it came to worship the figures were much less encouraging. On census day (Sunday March 30th), Mann reckoned that 30 per cent of the population were not able to attend church (namely infants, the sick and infirm plus essential workers). This left a possible twelve and a half million persons able to worship at least once. Of these some five and a quarter million had decided to stay away. This represented an attendance rate overall of about 60 per cent. The general trend illustrated that as the size of a centre of population increased, attendance at worship declined.

Was the National Society’s primary purpose—that of providing education for salvation—realised then or was it merely a chimera? Mann’s belief was that the working class treated education as utilitarian. They were anxious to acquire skills—the ability to read, write and carry out simple calculations—but were reluctant to waste time and money on aspects they did not consider essential. Many, it was clear, certainly did not relate school-time experience to regular worship in the Anglican Church.

As unobtainable as their goal may have been, the National Society, much to its credit, was responsible for greatly improving literacy rates among the working class, keeping the cause of elementary education at the centre of public attention and providing a workable system of schools on which the State could later build.

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