Children, School and Society in Nineteenth-Century England

ANNE DIGBY and PETER SEARBY

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PREFACE

This book originated in an undergraduate course on nineteenth-century education and society that we taught together in Cambridge for five years. We wished to exemplify and illustrate our teaching by the use of documents, but found that the focus of existing collections was too narrowly bureaucratic and legislative; it reflected a view of education from Westminster or Whitehall rather than from the home or the schoolroom. We also felt that much modern writing for students looked at educational history in a constricted way which isolated it from intellectual developments in other historical fields. Part One – Problems and Perspectives: Schools and Schooling in the Nineteenth Century – aims to provide a social and educational context within which the documents in Part Two can be interpreted. Through drawing on recent work on the history of education some leading themes within the field have been selected for discussion, and an attempt made to place them within wider changes in nineteenth-century society.

The first four sections of Part One analyse changes in literacy and contemporary developments in institutional schooling in order to provide a general educational framework for the period. Sections 5, 6 and 7 are related more specifically to Section I of the documents, Education, Religion and Morality, while Sections 8 and 9 relate to Section II, Education, Social Class and the Economy. A linking passage on the school curriculum follows in Sections 10 and 11. Sections 12 and 13 are concerned with teachers and give the context for section III of the documents, Teachers and the Classroom. Section IV of the documents on Education and Girls is introduced by the final sections, 14 and 15 of Part One.

The documents themselves have been chosen to illuminate the assumptions and attitudes which informed schools and schooling in the nineteenth century. Each documentary section is organised round a theme and outlined in a short sectional preface. It is our hope that organising the collection in this way will provide a corrective to the common but outmoded view of educational history as a dreary sequence of institutional growth.

We have both found the experience of writing with a colleague stimulating. A. D. compiled Sections II and IV, P. S. I and III. A. D. drafted those parts of the interpretative essay dealing with the elementary school, social control and the economy, and the education of girls; P. S. drafted pages dealing with literacy, religion, State intervention and secondary schooling. We offered criticisms of each other's work and revised our own in the light of them. We jointly take responsibility for the judgements made in the book.

We should like most of all to thank colleagues and students in Cambridge for their helpful comments.

ANNE DIGBY
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Note to the Reader
A number of documents in Part Two have been reproduced facsimile from handwritten originals and for clarity each one is accompanied by a transcription in ordinary type.

CONTENTS

PART ONE

Problems and Perspectives: Schools and Schooling in the Nineteenth Century

1. EDUCATIONAL PROVISION AND THE GROWTH OF LITERACY

To measure the precise impact of educational agencies on generations long dead is one of the hardest tasks that can face the historian, since he must assess data on the ability to read, write and calculate which for the most part have not been preserved, or indeed were not often recorded. Even when available to us, such information is often cryptic and unrevealing. This is certainly true of the material exploited to show the growth of literacy in England and Wales in the last two centuries – signatures or marks in the marriage registers kept by Anglican churches from 1754 onwards, and by other bodies after 1837.

These registers are firm evidence only of spouses' capacity to sign their own names. They do not, it is obvious, show whether it was acquired in childhood or later, or at a school or through more informal means. It has even been asserted that attestation by mark rather than signature is no proof of inability to sign, since spouses frequently concealed their ability through fear of embarrassing their partner. This contention, intrinsically open to doubt, is rendered even harder to sustain by the lack of the firm marks to be expected in such cases. At least, therefore, we can be satisfied that 'marking' reflects incapacity to write. It is harder to estimate the exact degree of literacy a signature denotes. It is usually taken to show the ability to read fluently and to write laboriously: those with the skill to write easily would be fewer in number than 'signatories', at all events before the coming of efficient mass education, and those able to read only haltingly would be greater in number, perhaps by 50 per cent.[1] This scale is consistent with the findings of Victorian surveys of literacy and with the usual pattern of elementary instruction before 1840; more were taught to read than to write. Nevertheless, it is important to remember our uncertainty about the wider meaning of signature evidence. And we have no body of evidence bearing on arithmetical skills, arguably as important an educational benefit as literacy.

After 1838 the register evidence was collated by the Registrar General and published in his annual reports. They show that 66 per cent of males signed the register in 1840, and that the percentage rose

steadily thereafter, reaching 80 per cent in 1870 and 97 per cent in 1900. The signatures are of bridegrooms who had left school twelve or fifteen years previously, and so reflect the schools' performance in a delayed fashion; thus it was not until 1880 at the earliest (when the male literacy rate was 86 per cent) that signature evidence can be said to be showing the effects of the 1870 Act. Mass literacy was largely achieved by private and voluntary schools.

The rise in the percentage of signatories between 1840 and 1900 reflects the vast increase in educational provision after 1820, and is roughly equal to the rise in the five centuries before 1840. This earlier increase is singularly hard to track because before 1754 the evidence is extremely scrappy and after it is dispersed in a host of parish registers. Recently, however, the evidence from some widely different parishes has been collated and analysed.[2] Roger Schofield's work shows that fewer than 60 per cent of bridegrooms signed in 1754 and that the percentage stayed constant for the next fifty years – a remarkable plateau, which had not been suggested by the work of earlier historians. After some short-term perturbations the literacy rate rose steadily from 1805 onwards. The evidence relating to brides is rather different. Under 40 per cent signed in 1754, the percentage increasing slowly thereafter to just over 50 per cent in 1840.

It is important to have knowledge of these national trends, but of course in 1780 education was planned and administered nationally far less than in 1880, let alone today. Aggregate figures for the kingdom as a whole mask considerable variations between one area and another. The percentage of spouses 'signing' in the English counties in 1870 varied from 88 in Surrey to 60 in Staffordshire. Even county aggregates conceal heterogeneity. The signature rate in the town of Cambridge in 1866 was 87 per cent, but in the county 72 per cent. In his survey of all Bedfordshire marriages between 1754 and 1844 Roger Schofield found that in 14 parishes the male literacy rate fell by more than 10 per cent over the period, and in 24 rose by more than 10 per cent. It is difficult to relate much of this variation to underlying socio-economic differences, but some correspondences seem clear. First, market towns appear to have had a consistently good educational performance. In all such places surveyed by Schofield the literacy rate rose in the period. The more detailed evidence after 1840 suggests the same buoyancy, with market towns (for example, Ipswich and Shrewsbury) often achieving higher scores than their purely agricultural hinterlands; we see a reflection of superior educational provision and a greater proportion of

middle-class inhabitants. Secondly, towns such as Leeds that were subject to industrialisation tended to perform badly, and the impact of the Industrial Revolution was sometimes catastrophic; in Ashton-under-Lyne the percentage signing fell from 48 per cent in 1823 to 9 in 1843.[3] It is not, however, convincing to imply, as one author has recently, that the crucial determinant was the factory, which lowered educational standards achieved by the outwork system.[4] In Victorian times some of the lowest literacy figures were found in Coventry, Leicester and Nottingham, where the factory came late and where the Industrial Revolution took the form of an extension of outwork. In the industrial towns, where the literacy rate was below the national average, education suffered not because of the factory but because provision was swamped by a rapid increase in population, and because industrial labour lured children from the schoolrooms.

2. PRIVATE AND PUBLIC INITIATIVES IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLING

In spite of the economic pressures which militated against poor people finding the school pence to provide education for their children, considerable numbers of working-class parents were prepared to make the requisite financial sacrifices if the character of the available schooling was congenial to them. One perceptive study[5] points out the importance of self-financing private schools in the education of children of the poor. Lacking the regulations as to dress, appearance and attendance imposed by church schools, and without their air of charitable condescension and repressive social discipline, they were much more a part of working-class communities. They were frequently preferred by parents, although their fees were often higher. It is estimated that out of over 250,000 pupils in 1750 at least 70 per cent were in private schools – it having recently been shown that many of these were not, as had often previously been thought, 'public' charity schools.[6] Out of over 1·2 million schoolchildren in 1833 almost 60 per cent were in private schools, and in 1851 just over 30 per cent from over 2 million. The virtual demise of private elementary schooling was accomplished by the growth of increasingly subsidised (and eventually free) public education in the next half century.

The orthodox interpretation justifiably stresses the initiating and

creative role of churches and other 'public' agencies. But it is necessary to redress the balance by pointing out that the rise of public provision, at least in the early decades of the century, was in part a conscious *reaction* to private schooling. 'The poor will have education', one Anglican school committee stated, 'and if our system fails the schoolmaster of sedition and infidelity is not sleeping at his post.'[7] In the eighteenth century the churches' educational achievement sprang from individual and isolated effort; early in the nineteenth century the foundation of the voluntary societies (the National Society and the British and Foreign Schools' Society) gave some central direction and aid. The churches' inability to finance their growing educational ambitions led to government grants, at first very modest ones in 1833 but rapidly increasing in size decade by decade, and also led to the foundation in 1839 of the Education Committee of the Privy Council Office to dispense them. For this department – usually called the 'Education Department' – the power of the purse quickly came to entail the right of inspection and approval too, and elementary schools receiving government grants were surrounded by a mesh of regulation and counsel. The Education Department was the largest and most powerful of the State agencies involved with education. When the others, which were chiefly concerned with secondary schools, were amalgamated with it in 1899 so as to form the Board of Education, effectively it absorbed them.

In its first ten years the Education Department grew very rapidly; by 1849 it comprised fifty civil servants of varying duties and status, and was in fact one of the largest branches of government. Yet, with some notable exceptions, historians have omitted it from consideration in the long (and now surely moribund) debate on the origins of growth in the so-called revolution in government during the Victorian period.[8] The omission, the most bizarre example of the way historians fail to give education its appropriate significance, is all the more regrettable since the Education Department shows the inadequacy of two common interpretations of the period.[9] The first sees change and the government agencies which effected it as originating in the humanitarianism that found social evils 'intolerable'; yet simple moral indignation was much more easily aroused by the cruelties of the emigrant traffic or child labour than by ignorance, where the ethical imperatives were much less obvious. The second interpretation, which stresses the influence of Benthamism, is unconvincing where elementary education is concerned because Benthamism was only one of several motives behind the early years of government intervention.

The growth and direction of the Education Department from 1839 to 1849 owed most to its Secretary, James Kay-Shuttleworth, one of the energetic civil servants who were 'statesmen in disguise'. In the 1830s, by his work as a poor-law inspector and through the men of ideas he was in touch with, Utilitarians being prominent among them, he came to believe in the civilising power of mass education, and the need for the State to be involved in it. Mass schooling was advocated as a preventive of pauperism and crime: the 'Captain Swing of tomorrow is formed in the idle and ragged urchin of today', said Thomas Wyse MP, the educational enthusiast.[10] Earlier impulses too were important in encouraging Kay-Shuttleworth to value the school as a corrective agency. From his training in the Edinburgh Medical School, and notably from the teaching of W. P. Alison, he brought a lasting sense that much human wrongdoing has its roots in evil surroundings which could be improved. Another lasting influence was the austere piety of his Congregationalist origins, which often (in contradiction to his Edinburgh lessons) led him to hold human beings responsible for their misfortunes, and contributed to his harsh dismissal of the working-class family as vicious and improvident. It was, therefore, unfit to socialise children and so, of course, was the private school that working-class parents often preferred: this is why Kay-Shuttleworth believed that the 'public' elementary school should do it instead.[11]

Nor is it fanciful to argue that his strange and complex temperament affected his political attitudes. Contemporaries like Dickens felt uneasy in his distrustful, edgy, humourless presence. The emotional aridity of his relationship with adults encouraged him to sentimentalise children, especially in the abstract. It is hard not to see deep personal compensations in his vision of the elementary school as a substitute family, where children responded to the teacher's firm guidance with affectionate industry and disciplined liveliness – a sort of symbol of what Kay-Shuttleworth wished the adult world to become.

Before compulsive overwork and inability to delegate brought breakdown and premature retirement, Kay-Shuttleworth's creative energies laid down a pattern of government involvement which lasted till the end of the century. Invaluable financial help was given to the voluntary agencies, in return for inspection and approval by the Education Department on stringent terms. The most notable initiative was the Minutes of 1846, Kay-Shuttleworth's plan to make the school an effective paternalist instrument by replacing the haphazard medley of untrained teachers and monitors with a disciplined corps of

certificated assistants and trainees, and to pay teachers and schools for helping in the process. The price they paid was acceptance of detailed control by the Department over the choice of trainees and the curriculum they followed, and hence the sort of teachers they became. It was centralisation by stealth, accomplished by regulation not statute, and so largely inaccessible to parliamentary scrutiny. The Minutes also contained a sort of built-in multiplier for the government bureaucracy; as more pupil teachers were engaged, more assistants were certificated and more schools became eligible for grants, so the number of inspectors and clerks to monitor and process the flow of cash increased.

By the end of the century there were well over 5 million children in public elementary schools. Plainly it was a period of growth, of new policies enacted and problems overcome. Yet very rarely after Kay-Shuttleworth were new departures initiated by civil servants, until Morant's work at the beginning of this century. So the Education Department does not fit models of government growth which are derived from the patterns of regulation which civil servants built up for public health or the emigrant traffic.[12]

After 1849 the Education Department did not lead events; it responded to them, dotting the 'i's and crossing the 't's on plans drawn up elsewhere. Kay-Shuttleworth's successor, R. R. W. Lingen, regarded himself as a professional administrator merely; he maintained regularity and order in the Department's workings, but despite his trenchant private opinions deliberately eschewed offering counsel to his political masters as to the direction State involvement should take. In the 1850s the 'multiplier' effect of the grant system pushed up government spending on education by nearly £100,000 a year; by 1862 the education grant reached £840,000. When in 1860 the government decided on economy it was the politician Robert Lowe, Lingen's superior, who devised the principles of payment by results, introducing stringent examinations as a test of fitness for much of the annual grant; Lingen merely worked out the details of the 'Revised Code'.[13]

3. UNIVERSALITY AND COMPULSION IN ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

There was a similar abdication by the Department in the late 1860s in the debate that preceded the 1870 Act. It was generally agreed that some sort of increased State intervention was necessary to 'fill the gaps'

in voluntary provision and to conciliate hostile religious interests. It was a field where the civil servants might have been expected to offer authoritative advice to government. In fact the terms of the debate were essentially set by political forces, the educational pressure groups. On one side the National Education League wished to supersede denominational schools with schools controlled by elected local authorities and financed by rates. On the other the National Education Union wanted increased State subsidy for church schools. Between these partisan extremes the 1870 Bill was a compromise, essentially devised by W. E. Forster, the political head of the Education Department, with minimal aid from the officials, and then amended in detail in parliament in a welter of pressures and divisions. So the voluntary system was to remain, indeed was able to grow though shorn of some of its privileges; local authorities, the school boards, were to be created only where gaps had to be filled.[14]

An illuminating study shows how uncreative the senior officials of the Education Department were.[15] Middle-class Oxbridge graduates chosen by patronage, they felt no quickening bond of sympathy with schools for an essentially inferior class; it would not have crossed their minds to send their own children to them. The London officials tended to devote the energies spared by a very unexacting and dull bureaucratic routine to scholarship and poetry. Her Majesty's Inspectors entered schools and examined pupils daily, yet at best as gentlemen judging players, while after the Revised Code was introduced the harsh mechanical grind of examining served to distance them further from children and teachers. Each year in the 1860s two inspectors visited Tysoe village school in Warwickshire:

> two gentlemen with a deportment of high authority, with rich voices. Each would sit at a desk and children would be called in turn to one or other. The master hovered round, calling children out as they were needed. The children could see him start with vexation as a good pupil stuck at a word in the reading-book he had been using all the year . . . . The master's anxiety was deep, for his earnings depended on the children's work. One year the atmosphere of anxiety so affected the lower standards that, one after another as they were brought to the Inspector, the boys howled and the girls whimpered. It took hours to get through them.[16]

In 1870 many educationists felt that compulsion was the only way to ensure the attendance of all children, especially the poorest children,

the 'ragamuffins' and 'urchins' who provoked so much discussion. Forster himself regarded compulsion as necessary, but could not convert the Cabinet. The idea of compulsion conflicted with deeply entrenched beliefs on parental responsiblity – and with sympathy for parents who needed children's earnings and with the employers (especially farmers) who needed their labour. So the 1870 Act merely gave school boards the right to insist on attendance in their area, a right conferred on local authorities in areas without school boards by an Act of 1876. This Act originated in pressure from voluntary school managers for powers of compulsion; it was acceded to by Lord Sandon, the Conservative politician eager to benefit church education. Growing realisation by educationists that compulsion alone could guarantee attendance led them to press for action; in 1880 they made the Liberals enact legislation forcing local authorities everywhere to assume compulsion powers. Though it was possible to leave school at the age of ten in some areas (and the minimum leaving age was not raised to eleven till 1893) at least now every child had to have five years' schooling. The gradual nudging towards compulsion in the 1870s was effected by educationists and politicians; the civil servants merely transmitted messages from one side to the other.

These three groups played the same respective parts over revision of payment by results and of the fee system. The payment of fees became an issue after compulsion, and their abolition seemed increasingly to be entailed by it. It was difficult to extract fees from recalcitrant parents and some school boards gave up really trying; one estimate was that in London there was only one chance in 700 of a defaulter being prosecuted. School boards increasingly wanted fees abolished, but schools would need more help from public funds in compensation. Since this would strengthen the case for public control of the voluntary system the churches were in two minds over abolition. Salisbury tackled the question in a complicated balancing act in 1891, providing an extra grant from central government to enable fees to be ended or lowered but without reducing schools' autonomy. At least all teachers and school managers agreed in detesting the Revised Code; extensive amendments in 1871 did not satisfy them, and repeated tinkering in the next two decades left intact the central principle of payment on the results of examinations in the 'three Rs'. Radical alteration was effected by Salisbury's government in 1890, and the last vestiges of the Code were swept away by Acland, the Liberal Vice-President of the Council, from 1893 to 1895.[17]