

THE SILENT SOCIAL REVOLUTION

AN ACCOUNT OF
THE EXPANSION OF PUBLIC EDUCATION
IN ENGLAND AND WALES
1895-1935

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PREFACE

'If all the nonsense', remarked the Rev. Dr. Opimian in Thomas Love Peacock's *Gryll Grange*, 'If all the nonsense which has been talked on all other subjects were thrown into one scale, and all that has been talked on the subject of education alone were thrown into the other, I think the latter would preponderate.'

The author who would add to the already weighty pile of works upon Education therefore incurs a heavy responsibility—a responsibility which becomes all the heavier if he happens to share the Rev. Doctor's views.

In extenuation I can only offer two pleas. The first is that it is my first offence; the second, that this book began as an expensive opportunity for repentance in that, owing to the war, I had omitted that rather necessary preliminary to a lifetime of educational administration, the taking of my University degree. To these pleas the critic might, and probably will, reply that as a member for fourteen years of a service which, on Mr. Baldwin's authority, is 'as silent in public as it is garrulous in private', I could hardly have made an earlier incursion into print; and secondly that I should never have allowed what began as a rather belated attempt to obtain a degree to develop into a book. I had, however, felt for some years that a need existed for some brief, and if possible readable, account of the steps which this country has taken to build up a public system of education since the first generation to receive compulsory education was disciplined by 'payment by results'. With a few—too few—brilliant exceptions, the existing literature of public education is, as anyone who has to read it knows, voluminous, well intentioned, accurate and cautious. But even in those cases where it is not intentionally soporific, owing to the fear of provoking religious

controversy, it has often seemed to me to be duller than the intrinsic interest of the subject warrants. I wondered if by reading widely enough and yet keeping, the while, a firm check on a sense of humour which my elders and betters at the Board of Education used, I believe, to stigmatise as flip-pant, I could contrive to bring the blue books to life. For blue books are particularly prone to use their statistics not as a living record of social progress but (to quote a deservedly immortal phrase of Andrew Lang) 'as a drunken man uses lamp-posts—for support rather than for illumination'.

I find that under the standing orders of the Local Education Authority which I serve I am required to state that any views I have expressed are entirely my own and do not in any way commit my employers. That this is the case will, I think, be obvious to anyone who reads what I have written. I have in fact been at some pains to eliminate any direct mention of that Local Education Authority except where absolutely necessary. I would, however, like to acknowledge my very deep sense of gratitude to Mr. E. M. Rich, the Education Officer to the London County Council, and to Mr. H. E. M. Icely, Reader in Education at the University of Oxford, for the encouragement I received from them to persevere with an attempt to do two full days' work in one for more than a year; to Miss Shuckburgh, the Librarian at the Board of Education, for much advice as to the books I must read; to Mr. H. Ward who, actuated by that charming friendliness which exists between former members of the administrative staff of the Board and former members of the Inspectorate; hastened to send me a number of notes for the early chapters of a similar book which he had once contemplated himself. Lastly, to Mr. Brentnall, lately headmaster of Lancaster Road Senior Boys' School, London, for his account of the life of a teacher working under the system of 'payment by results'.

I am told that dedications, even in one's first book, are out of fashion. But even if it cannot have a page to itself I cannot refrain from inserting mine. For to write this book at all it was necessary for me to live the life of a hermit, travelling

daily between Oxford and London for a year and devoting every minute of my private time to it. What sacrifice this entailed for my family only they know. And if I were allowed a dedication it would be to my wife, without whose loyalty this book could never have been written and to one who, had he lived, would have entered school this year.

NOTE TO IMPRESSION OF 1947

THIS book describes the silent social revolution brought about by the expansion of public education in England and Wales between 1895 (the first year in which a school place was available for every child entitled to one) and 1935. During these years the fact that from being a largely self-educated people the inhabitants of England and Wales were gradually becoming a school-taught people was probably one of the biggest factors at work making for the sociological changes which we are witnessing to-day. In due course it may become possible to write a complementary volume to trace the further progress of the revolution in the light of the forces liberated by Mr. Butler's Education Act of 1944, but in the meantime it seems a mistake to attempt to revise the book to cover the war years and the vast but as yet incalculable changes which the Act of 1944 may have produced by, say, 1960. Readers are accordingly asked to remember that references to 'to-day' and 'the present time' refer strictly to the period which preceded the war.

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PART I

Towards the System of Public
Education

CHAPTER I

THE ERA OF 'PAYMENT BY RESULTS'

The State concerns itself with the supply of elementary schools.—The Education Acts of 1870, 1876, 1891 and 1893 conscript a huge army of infants and juniors.—Their 'militia' training.—The small 'professional army' in the Grammar Schools.—The reluctance of the State to concern itself with secondary education.—The untimely fate of the Endowed Schools Commission.—Progress between 1870 and 1895 in building elementary schools.—The singular educational device employed 'Payment by Results'.—Its origin.—A description of its working.—Its demerits as an educational instrument.—Its one achievement, the disciplining of a far from civilised child population.—The system abandoned 1895.

FOR just over a century successive British Governments have been engaged in an endeavour to extend a modicum of schooling to the whole mass of the child population of England and Wales.

A coiner of epigrams—unfamiliar with the chequered history of public education—might indeed be tempted to remark that they have been endeavouring to purchase an educated democracy on the instalment plan; that for the first forty years of that century (1833–1870) they paid the premiums to men of goodwill wherever they might be found who showed themselves ready to undertake the building and maintenance of voluntary schools; but that in 1870 when voluntary initiative had failed to provide a school place for more than one child in two in London or one in three to five elsewhere, the State itself had to enter the field and pay larger instalments in the form of Education Acts. For

an Education Act is in a very real sense an instalment in the education of a whole people.

First Mr. Forster's Act of 1870—in its ultimate social results one of the greatest measures which has ever received parliamentary endorsement—established once and for all the State's concern with school 'supply'. Next Lord Sandon's Act of 1876 prohibited the employment during school hours of children under ten years of age who lived within two miles of a school, thus virtually introducing the first comprehensive measure of compulsion. A third Act passed in 1891 abolished the payment of fees in all schools charging less than 10s. a year, extended the prohibition to all schools to be opened in the future and took power to modify fees in those schools charging more than 10s.

Finally, the Elementary Education School Attendance Act of 1893 passed by Mr. Gladstone's short-lived fourth ministry raised to eleven years (from 1st January, 1894) the age at which a child might obtain total or partial exemption from the obligation to attend school.

To appreciate just how much had been achieved by these first four instalments it is necessary to take stock of the extent of educational provision in England and Wales at the end of the nineteenth century. The year 1895 suggests itself as a suitable point for this stocktaking for a variety of reasons which it will be the purpose of this and the succeeding chapters to trace. Moreover, an attempt to present a fairly complete picture of the state of public education in 1895 will render it possible, by contrast, to illustrate the remarkable expansion which has taken place in the intervening forty years.

In the first place it should be noted that the four Acts had, as it were, placed the State in a position of responsibility to a huge conscripted army of quite young children. This army to be precise numbered 5,235,887 in 1895, 4 million of its units being under ten years of age.

It is difficult to get back to what may be described as the greatest common measure in the public attitude towards

education at any given period. Probably, however, it is not far short of the truth to say that, during the 25 years which preceded 1895, it must have appeared a sufficient task to teach mastery of the mechanical tools of education, the 3 R's, to this conscripted army of children up to their 10th or 11th year. As Mr. H. G. Wells remarks in his *Experiment in Autobiography*—'The Education Act of 1870 was not an Act for common universal education, it was an Act to educate the lower classes for employment on lower class lines, and with specially trained, inferior teachers who had no university quality.'

In other words the primary concern of the State in discharging the new responsibilities it had undertaken must be to afford to this army of children a militia training directed to the acquisition of quite general powers such as the arts of speech, reading and writing and the fundamental ideas of magnitude and number. A militia, it was recognised, must be supplemented by a small professional army; and this must have received post primary education. Was the task of providing this post primary education also regarded as the concern of the State? Might it not quite safely be left to the Ancient Grammar Schools? Advanced thinkers such as Matthew Arnold had for years urged that it could not. An authoritative but politically inconvenient Royal Commission, the Schools Inquiry Commission of 1867, had been of the same mind. But the Endowed Schools Commission, the executive body created to give effect to the Royal Commission's findings, had come to an untimely end. It had in fact been too successful in its efforts to rescue the Endowed Schools. It had displayed such energy in its handling of moribund or misapplied endowments that it had become unpopular with a section of the Tories. These, on Disraeli's accession to power in 1874, secured the dismissal of Lord Lyttelton and Mr. Roby, two of the paid commissioners, and the submergence of the functions of the Commission in those of the Charity Commission, a Government Department which could be trusted to repress its

enthusiasm. The lot of inconveniently earnest executive bodies during the reign of the Great Queen was never an easy one. Twenty years earlier Edwin Chadwick's Public Health Commissioners had suffered a like fate. 'Master John Bull', as *The Times* put it, had preferred to 'take his chance of cholera' to being 'scrubbed and rubbed and small tooth-combed till the tears ran into his eyes and his teeth chattered and his fists clenched themselves with anger and pain.' Perhaps we ought not to smile too readily at the Victorians. For in our own generation we have witnessed that singular act of Imperial Statesmanship which destroyed the Empire Marketing Board, not, be it noted, because it had failed but because it was becoming too successful.

The peculiar genius of the British people for large scale and more or less spontaneous organisation, the product, as some believe, of the fusion in their make-up of Norman administrative ability, Celtic imagination, Nordic 'practicality' and Roman respect for law, had by 1895, as we shall see, made a success, up to a point, of the vast task which the four Acts had imposed. Here an interesting parallel occurs, for in the years between 1914 and 1918 this country had to raise, house, clothe, feed, equip, munition and train an army of 8 million men and put it into the field to meet the finest continental army ever assembled. In the years which followed 1870 the country had had to encompass a similar, though a more enduring, piece of organisation. In each case the continent was many years ahead of this country. But the founders of our public educational system, so far from being able to enjoy the unlimited financial backing which assembled and sustained the armies between 1914 and 1918, were constantly expected to produce 'results' in an atmosphere of parsimony which made their attainment chimerical.

Thus between 1870 and 1895 the School Boards provided new school accommodation for 2,211,299 scholars for £29,468,477 and the voluntary schools seats for 1,475,000

(between 1870 and 1891) for £7,000,000.¹ The School Board for London built, at a cost of £6 a head for sites and £12 a head for buildings, three-storey erections of such permanence and utilitarian ugliness that generations of local administrators have lived to regret that they did not spend the £12 on the site and the £6 on less regrettably indestructible buildings. Their record, considered as a piece of organisation, was however a most remarkable one, for between 1872 and 1880 they built 197 schools, 1881 and 1890, 151 schools, 1891 and 1902, 90 schools. Moreover, while these schools were being built, against a roll increasing by 8,000 a year, they were often able to organise temporary schools in mission halls, chapels, and even under railway arches.

That the edifice which was erected was in certain respects a makeshift one, and that the militia training was more thorough in its disciplinary than its lasting educational qualities, is perhaps in the circumstances hardly a matter for wonder. The real matter for astonishment is that, in the light of the resources applied to it, it was erected at all!

The 'educational' means employed was a singular one, without parallel—until the recent educational 'reforms' in Russia²—in continental or American practice, the system of 'payment by results'. By 1895 this system stood condemned—and rightly so—by most contemporary as by nearly all subsequent educational thought. Thus to the modern student of educational method it is now of little more than cautionary interest as the negation of everything for which true education should stand. To those concerned to trace the successive factors which have made for the growth of the English educational system, it is, however, deserving of closer study. For our modern educational system can be said to have been grounded upon it, and when it was relaxed, teachers' thoughts were directed from the static present to the dynamic future. To understand some of the most important features of

¹*R.E.D.*; 1894, p. xxv.

²*Times*, 6th November, 1935, 'Soviet School Reform'.

English education, and the rapidity of its development since 1895, the genesis, main outlines and lasting influence—both good and bad—of this singular educational device must therefore be grasped.

The origin of the system does not, as some historians have too readily assumed, appear to have been entirely due to the blind demand of mid-Victorian parliamentary thought for a visible demonstration of value received for money expended. This demand no doubt played a substantial part. It was Matthew Arnold's contention that the Newcastle Commission (1858) had to have a point; that they thought they had found one in the neglect of a body of backward children in favour of the brighter scholars; that a commercially minded Parliament had fixed upon this point to demand a ledger account of educational progress; but that the pre-1862 system had never had a fair trial because the teachers were not properly trained at the time.¹

On the other hand this opinion was not altogether shared either by his contemporaries or by subsequent Inspectors. As one of his contemporaries told the Cross Commission:

"The teaching and influence of the national school of that era (i.e. the era before the establishment of 'Payment by Results') was quite partial and eclectic. The *people* were not being educated; those of the people who were actuated by parental ambition for their children's education secured a really good education for them; the mass of the children of the struggling poor remained (sometimes in spite of being at school, generally from the fact of not attending school) quite uneducated."

This view was echoed by another of Her Majesty's Inspectors, Mr. Du Port, writing, in 1895, 'from a very large experience of the life of the schools as observed by me at visits of inspection without notice. Our schools,' he said, 'have learned one lesson from the old annual examination. The radical defect of the pre-Revised Code days has been

¹C.C.R., 5687-5819.

cured. Every child, however backward, young, or dull, has had its full share of conscientious attention.'¹

It is probably nearer the truth to say that the originators of the system were aiming at the removal of a political danger and the establishment of a tidier administrative system than at the creation of a balance sheet in which progress could be recorded. In other words Robert Lowe and his advisers were impelled first by irritation and secondly by alarm. They were irritated because the increasing centralisation of the educational system was daily creating fresh routine work in Whitehall, and fresh pressure by the Treasury to decentralise—backed no doubt by resistance to all demands for additional staff. They were alarmed because they felt themselves to be living on a volcano, and that at any time the Englishman's innate distrust of an educational system liable to capture and control by a political party might call them to face an awkward situation in the House. For this was not by any means an imaginary danger in 1862. Kay Shuttleworth who had controlled the destinies of the Education Department up to 1849 does not seem to have displayed any fondness for decentralisation. In fact there is some evidence for the view that he had believed that education could be controlled from Whitehall. 'I understood your Lordship's Government to determine in 1839', he had written some years previously, 'to assert the claims of the civil power to control the education of the Country.'

Certainly this view as to the politico-administrative origin of the scheme is supported by authority no less respectable than that of Lord Lingen who succeeded Kay Shuttleworth in 1849, and was actually serving as Secretary to the Education Department when the system was instituted. His evidence to the Cross Commission on the point is remarkable. While at first stating the orthodox view that the Newcastle Commission had considered that they were justified in stating that the great bulk of the children were quitting school with no

¹C.C.R., 5822; R.E.D., 1895.

real knowledge of the elementary subjects of instruction, he later changed his ground. 'Mr. Lowe in 1862 dwelt in his speech upon the consideration that the proportions which the grant was taking threw far too much power into the hands of the Government of the day. . . . I think that at the time the particular consideration he had in view was this; the grants were not made as they are now, exclusively to the treasurers of the schools but very largely to individuals. For instance all the pupil teachers were directly paid in their own names by Post Office orders (despatched from Whitehall). The schoolmasters in the same way were paid their grants of augmentation. Mr. Lowe very strongly felt that as this vast number of persons increased it became a serious public consideration to put some check upon that system. Taking the recommendations of the (Newcastle) report seriatim, the first in importance was felt to be to get rid of the direct personal claims of the teachers upon the State and for that purpose it was necessary to pass to some different system of payment such as the payment by results. But that process led to such storms that I think by the year 1864 the Government having in the main carried its point had had about enough of it, and was glad to rest.'¹ A reference to Mr. Lowe's speech (13th February, 1862) confirms this view, although Mr. Lowe inverted the argument, representing that the teachers would capture the political parties if they continued to be paid by Whitehall.

May it not be that Lord Lingen's memory grew clearer as his examination proceeded and that Robert Lowe's primary intention was in fact to secure a measure of decentralisation? With other difficulties pressing upon him he would no doubt be glad to enlist the support of members who saw in his proposals the means to satisfy their demand for some such annual stocktaking as their business experience and habits of thought could appreciate.

¹C.C.R., 56,209; 56,276; 56,284. H. Vol. CLXV (Third Series), cols. 199 and 210-213.