

Florence S. Boos, “The Education Act of 1870: Before and After”



Figure 1: The Royal coat of arms of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Beyond the means of subsistence, it is difficult to think of anything more important than education to the well-being and sense of self-worth of most nineteenth-century Britons. The Education Act of 1870, which acknowledged and codified for the first time a Crown responsibility for elementary schools, was a watershed in the provision of universal instruction. Even this advance had been hotly contested, and it would be another twenty years before (almost) all British children benefited from a primary school education.

This delay was caused by several factors. These included sectarian competition, official belief that the working poor should finance their own education, ideological commitment to “voluntary” arrangements and local governance, parental resistance to the loss of children’s wages, the alleged reluctance of parents to send their children to schools frequented by those of lower social station, and the determination of the Church of England and its allies to maintain Anglican dominance in school provision. Most important of all, perhaps, was the unwillingness to levy taxes for all but the most basic forms of instruction.

Before the Education Acts: English vs. European Elementary Education

Although it had become the world’s most industrialized nation, nineteenth-century England was relatively backward in providing its citizens with basic skills. In remarking on the comparative delay in British educational provision, sociologist Neil J. Smelser suggests that “education in general and primary education in particular were probably as finely and self-consciously differentiated by social class [in nineteenth-century Britain] as they have been at any other time and place. . . . This statement is especially true of the education of the working classes” (*SPSC 2*). In *The Rise of Mass Literacy: Reading and Writing in Modern Europe*, David Vincent contrasts rates of “literacy” in Europe, as derived from census reports, military registers, and the ability to sign a marriage register (although many who could sign their names could not read). He found that even by this minimal standard about 60% of English women and 40% of English men were illiterate at the beginning of the century (9-10).^[1] By 1895, when the effects of the Acts of 1870 and 1880 had affected an entire generation, however, the reported rate of literacy in Britain finally surpassed ninety percent, although as we shall see, this came with limitations.

By contrast with Great Britain, Prussia—characterized by Vincent as “the educational flagship of Europe” (13)—had mandated eight years of education since the late eighteenth century, reduced its male illiteracy rate to c. 7% by 1850 (in contrast to Britain’s estimated 36% in the same year), and was well on its way to achieving universal literacy by 1870, a fact to which some have attributed its success in the Franco-Prussian War (9, 13). By 1800, most citizens of Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, and Finland could read, and the rates of literacy in the Netherlands and much of Scandinavia continued noticeably higher than those of England throughout the nineteenth century (8). France’s rates had lagged slightly behind England’s until the “radical” Jules Ferry laws of 1881-82 introduced free, secular, and mandatory universal education to age 13—thirty-six years before Britain would achieve mandatory and free, though less often secular, education in 1918.

British middle- and upper-class education took place in private schools which—whatever their social atmosphere—provided much better instruction than that available to working-class children. Care was taken to set tuition for these private schools sufficiently high to avoid unwanted “mixing of the classes.” Prior to the Education Act of 1870, for those whose parents were unable to afford such fees, education was minimal and largely



religious. As we will see, although the children of poor and lower-middle class parents were increasingly served by a network of Sunday Schools, “voluntary” (mostly church) schools, and informal neighborhood schools with low fees (“dame” or “adventure” schools), a significant proportion of the poorest children remained unreached by this network.

The “Voluntary” Schools

As the population expanded and urbanized in the nineteenth century, philanthropists were concerned to provide schools for the poor as a means of ameliorating their plight, decreasing crime, and instilling religious principles. The chief organized means to this end were “voluntary” schools (a specialized term which did not include all private schools). In 1811, the National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Church of England was founded, followed in 1814 by the smaller British and Foreign School Society, its “nondenominational” (Dissenting) counterpart. Together these two competing organizations offered more than 90 percent of the “voluntary” school places available in this period to children below the middle-classes (Hurt 5). To cover the costs of educating children whose parents could pay only minimal fees, both societies organized their schools according to a monitorial system, by which a teacher would instruct advanced students, who in turned controlled and instructed those in the lower grades.

In 1833, the government began to offer grants to these “voluntary” or church schools. As costs rose, in 1861 parliament authorized a report on the effectiveness of these grants; and although the resulting Newcastle Commission advocated their extension, they also recommended that grants be tied to a system of standardized annual inspections, a practice implemented nine years later by the 1870 Education Act.

According to the resulting Newcastle Commission Report of 1861, only one-seventh of the population belonged to the upper and middle-classes who could reasonably be expected to pay for their children’s education. This left the remaining six-sevenths, and the Commission was divided over whether the government should assist these at all; a minority maintained that the grants had already likely harmed “the character of the nation, and the relations between class and class” and the Commission as a whole supported the view that the labor of young children was sometimes necessary:

Independence is of more importance than education; and if the wages of the child’s labour are necessary . . . it is far better that it should go to work at the earliest age at which it can bear the physical exertion rather than it should remain at school. (Hurt 36)

Nonetheless, the majority believed that something should be done for what they estimated as the 120,305 children lacking in any school instruction whatsoever (later historians have noted that this figure is considerably lower than later estimates, in part because the commission failed to examine several of the more unschooled districts, and also accepted uncritically the exaggerated claims of school officials [Hurt 4-16, 25-30]). Moreover, the Commission offered a unanimous and devastating account of primary education as then conducted:

The children do not, in fact, receive the kind of education they require. . . . We know that the un-inspected schools are in this respect far below the inspected; but even with regard to the inspected, we have seen overwhelming evidence from Her Majesty’s Inspectors, to the effect that not more than one-fourth of the children receive a good education. . . . [A] main object of the schools is defeated in respect of every child who, having attended for a considerable time, leaves without the power of reading, writing, and ciphering in an intelligent manner. (“Newcastle Commission Report” 891).

In particular, observers reported very large classes, lack of individual instruction, a high noise level and general disorder, and the use of older children to supervise younger ones (“the monitorial method”). Teaching was entirely by rote, with no attempt to convey principles of mathematics or encourage an enjoyment of reading. Also pernicious was a tendency to relegate pupils whose parents paid lower fees to segregated classes, as observed by H. M. Du Port at Holy Trinity Church in Marylebone in the early 1860’s:



I was behind the scenes as a curate-manager of large and highly esteemed schools in London, teaching in them daily; . . . the lower two-thirds fraction of the school was little better than an unorganised mass of children of all ages; of teaching properly so called they had none. (Hurt 9)

Females fared even worse than boys, as the Newcastle Commission reported: “[Girls leaving school] can scarcely read, or write, and certainly not spell, and [only] a few can cast up a simple sum. They have no knowledge of needlework, [and] cannot cut out or even mend. . . . (Hurt 36). June Purvis, author of the sole book-length study of Victorian working-class women’s education, notes that schools of the aforementioned (“National” and “British”) societies enrolled more boys than girls, and in some cases set the age entry two years later for girls than for boys (Purvis 76, 88). As suggested by the passage just quoted, girls’ curricula were heavily weighted toward needlework, and even that was often neglected. In *Hope Deferred*, Josephine Kamm reports that the managers of one local school submitted the same garment for inspection year after year, made not by pupils, as claimed, but by an old woman in the village (Kamm 59).

Less evident to us now was the fact that even these inspected schools mainly served lower-middle-class children and rejected the poor. Since “voluntary” schools could charge higher fees to the children of more prosperous workers, clerks, and others above the class of “respectable labouring men” (Hurt 12), inspectors found that they tended to fill the available places with students from such backgrounds, displacing most of the poorer children for whom the grants were originally intended. These attended—if they were fortunate—a poorly stocked “adventure” or “dame” school. Phil Garner, a rare defender of these institutions, has argued that they were at least more informal, less concerned to teach morals and “decorum” (for which read “subordination”), and more tolerant of absenteeism. In addition, a few aptly named “Ragged Schools” existed in which instructors taught the rudiments of reading to destitute children of (part of) the urban proletariat.

Yet whatever the deficiencies of such instruction, those granted access to any form of schooling were the lucky ones. Historians have been unable to determine how many British children were untouched by any of these forms of elementary instruction. One has set the estimate at one-third (Hurt 34), but an 1851 survey found that fewer than half the children of Manchester and Birmingham had benefited or were benefiting from any form of education (the Newcastle Commission had suggested that only 17% were in this condition). R. K. Webb has estimated that two-thirds to three-quarters of the working classes of early Victorian England could read, suggesting some form of schooling, but even this optimistic figure would have left a residue of 25-33% (Hurt 22). And Phil Gardner, the advocate of non-“voluntary” neighborhood schools, estimates that by 1870 these served [only] about one-quarter of the population attending school (Gardner 188).

Obviously, then, the need for more systematic educational provision of the sort advocated by the Newcastle Commission Report was apparent to all unbiased observers. Action lagged, however, until after the Representation of the People Bill of 1867 ([the Second Reform Bill](#)), which effectively enfranchised relatively prosperous workers who could already afford to educate their children. By its limits, the Reform Act thus tacitly acknowledged the existence of a shadow populace kept in ignorance as well as destitution. The specter of yet further extensions to the franchise suggested the need for educating voters, as anti-Reform Bill Liberal Party parliamentarian Robert Lowe warned his fellow members of the House of Commons in July 1867: “I believe it will be entirely necessary that you should prevail on our future masters to learn their letters” (Sylvester, *Robert Lowe* 118). (Lowe’s sentiments were sarcastic, but he did reverse his earlier opposition and supported the 1870 Act.) Moreover the 1870 Franco-Prussian War stirred anxieties that the uneducated British population would be unable to compete with potential adversaries in the event of war. Meanwhile, a National Education League had been formed to advocate for free, compulsory and secular (or at least non-denominational) education, presenting an alternative model to that offered by the “National” and “British” Societies.

The Education Acts of 1870, 1880 and Later

The Education Act of 1870, drafted by William Edward Forster (1818-86), attempted a compromise between competing views of education, with “compromise” weighted toward the Church of England and religious instruction. The Act established a minimal system of national primary education in the control of county school boards which were *permitted* to levy taxes to establish schools for children ages five through thirteen.



Establishment of “board schools” was not mandatory, however, and such schools, once in place, could also charge tuition, condone full-day labor for children over eight (not until 1918 was labor restricted to three hours a day for children up to fourteen), and until 1891, impose a surcharge for the two highest grades (Hurt 161, 188). An 1880 amendment added a mandatory attendance provision, but this still exempted children who had already reached standard IV (at about age ten), as well as older children who worked, and all children who lived more than two miles from a school, as did many rural children. Such evasions finally disappeared in 1918, when parliament abolished fees and raised the school-leaving age to fourteen.

Moreover, the 1870 Act permitted public taxes to be used to support religious schools. The cumulative voting system established for electing local school-board members favored defenders of an essentially sectarian status quo, and, once elected, members were free to brush aside any alternatives in order to favor a school of their preference. The government also offered special building grants to already existing educational bodies (that is, religious schools) who applied during a brief grace period after the Act took effect, leading to 2,000 applications by the National (Church of England) Society and 500 by Roman Catholic and non-Anglican Protestant groups. Derek Gillard reports that between 1870 and 1885, the number of Church of England schools rose from 6,382 to 11,864, and Roman Catholic schools from 350 to 892 (Ch. 3, n. pag.), setting a pattern of state-funded religious schools that would continue into the next century and beyond. Religious instruction was also to be permitted in “board schools,” although teachers could not prescribe any specific ritual or catechism (a difficult distinction to enforce).

Board-school classes themselves were large, in classrooms designed for as many as eighty students. Pay for teachers was set each year on the basis of examinations chiefly in reading, writing and arithmetic (though foreign languages, science, geography, history, and needlework were later added as supplementary options). According to Purvis, this curriculum may have led to the teaching of arithmetic to girls for the first time (93), but also ensured that writing from dictation, oral reading of short passages, and simple arithmetic would constitute most of the curriculum (cmp. “teaching to the test”). Observers noted that children were seldom encouraged to formulate judgments or relate what they learned to their own experience.

An examination of the “Standards of Education” issued by the Education Department in 1872 indicates the level of achievement required. In reading, by standard two pupils were expected to read aloud a short, simple paragraph, and by graduation after standard six, to read aloud “with fluency and expression”; apparently comprehension was not measured. Up through standard five, “writing” consisted of transcribing from dictation, and standard five students were expected to transcribe “a short ordinary paragraph in a newspaper, or other modern narrative.” Only in standard six, which many did not reach, were students asked to compose “a short theme or letter, or an easy paraphrase.” Mathematics consisted entirely of arithmetic, with an emphasis on the skills needed in a shop or bank; in standard four students learned to deal with long division and “compound rules” (that is, of compound interest), in standard five they dealt with “bills of parcels,” and in six with proportion and fractions (vulgar and decimal) (“*Revised Code*”). (No geometry, no word problems. . . .)

Despite these relatively lax standards, the failure rate was high: inspectors reported that 53% of pupils failed one of the first four grades in reading, and 57% in writing (Vincent, *Popular Culture* 90). Lessons in literature, science, or history were rare; and an inspection in 1882 found that 98% of the pupils in the system’s highest grade could neither “take up a pen to make up their own sentences” nor “read a passage from one of Shakespeare’s historical plays, or . . . a history of England” (*Popular Culture* 90). The Education Act of 1902 established a fee-based system of secondary education; but, despite this, only one in fourteen boys and one in twenty girls entered a “maintained secondary school” before the Second World War, and one in a hundred boys and one in three hundred girls made it to a university (Vincent, *Mass Literacy* 80).

What did this story of “uneven development” mean to the individuals involved? Some of the best testimonies to this may be found in the accounts of their education by working-class memoirists. Before the Education Acts, especially in more remote areas, many (especially women) had been forced to teach themselves, in some cases with the help of a barely literate mother. The former servant and self-published poet Elizabeth Campbell regretted that she had had only six weeks of schooling “at the white seam” [plain sewing], and remembered gratefully that in Sunday School she had learned to recite the Presbyterian catechism. Janet Bathgate, later a primary school teacher herself, had first taught herself to write at age 7 by tracing out the words in a letter sent to her employer and embroidering them on cloth; the fishwife Christian Watt remembered that kind teachers had permitted her to



attend school during brief periods between gutting and selling fish, even though she was older than the other pupils and unable to pay the fees; and as late as the 1890's the London servant Elizabeth Dobbs (pseudonym for Martha Grimes), born too early to benefit from the Acts, reported only two years of somewhat erratic schooling which had apparently left her unable to read or write.^[2]

Although more likely to attend school, male working-class autobiographers often complained of the low quality of their teachers. The future poet Robert Storey remembered his school in Northumberland, at which "I learned nearly all that I ever learned from a Master—namely to read badly, to write worse, and to cipher a little farther, perhaps than to the Rule of Three" (Vincent, *Bread* 97). The Scottish street-singer William Cameron recalled his four years at a school conducted by "an old decrepit man, who had tried to be a sailor, but at that employment he could not earn his bread" (100). A less neutral description was provided by Cornish tin miner and poet John Harris, whose schoolmaster had lost a leg in a mining accident:

In those days any shattered being wrecked in the mill or the mine, if he could read John Bunyan, count fifty backwards, and scribble the squire's name was considered good enough for a pedagogue. . . . I do not think John Robert's acquirements extended far beyond reading, writing and arithmetic, and I doubt if he knew what the word geography meant. (100)

Moreover any schooling was subject to the family's need for income, as pupils were forced to work for much of the year or removed from school far earlier than they would have wished. The poet John Clare had worked in the fields from earliest boyhood: "As to my schooling, I think never a year pass'd me till I was 11 or 12, but 3 months or more at the worst of times was luckily spared for my improvement" (Vincent, *Bread* 98). John Harris recalled that "At nine years of age I was taken from school and put to work in the fields, to drive the horses in the plough" (95). The servant Henry White had been taken from school for a year at age eight to care for several younger siblings, and finally, "having reached the mature age of ten years and my parents having to provide for the wants of several other little ones, I had to prepare to take my part in bearing the burden and heat of the day. It was about Harvest time, the middle of August 1832, when I commenced to toil for my daily bread" (95).

Those determined to seek wider instruction thus taught themselves, helped by the increasing supply of "useful" cheap publications (issued by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge and other publishers), but, due to long hours of labor and crowded living conditions, self-improvement often came at considerable personal sacrifice—lack of sleep, strained eyesight, denial of necessities, and isolation from social groups (such as pub conviviality). One of the more famous autodidacts, the poet Thomas Cooper, suffered a nervous breakdown in his early twenties after a particularly strenuous course of study.

For those who reached school age *after* the Acts, complaints centered more on lack of access, the pervasiveness of physical punishments, or the simplistic level of instruction. The political activist Hannah Mitchell was one of many who had suffered from the exemption of rural children from mandatory attendance. She recalled her grief when her parents were unwilling to permit her to follow her brothers to school:

[O]ne bright day in early spring . . . even [the garden's] lovely flowers failed to console me for a bitter disappointment. Standing among them weeping, I told my uncle that my sister was to start school the following week. I had expected to go with her but my mother said she needed one of us at home, and I must wait until Ellen had finished her 'schoolin.' We never spoke of education at home but only of a 'bit of schoolin.' Perhaps, indeed, it was no more than that, but to me it seemed the magic key which would admit me to the treasure-house of learning. (qtd. in Boos 153)

When at last allowed to attend school with her sister: "[M]y luck did not last. It was winter and the journey was too long and rough for girls. The school was badly heated and [w]e both fell ill, and were kept at home for the rest of the winter" (153). Mitchell's story witnesses the fact that even in the 1880s, it was possible for an ambitious woman to begin life with only six weeks of formal education.

Even into the twentieth century, schoolmasters were permitted to use corporal punishment. In her



autobiographical novel *Manchester Fourteen Miles*, Margaret Penn described her attendance at a National church school sometime around 1907-8, where the schoolmaster, "Mr. Woodville," took out his personal frustrations on his higher-standard students. After a violent family quarrel, he rushed into the classroom and

. . . caned savagely right and left for the smallest fault, and Hilda, failing to get one of her sums right, was unjustly caned on both hands and went crying back to her place, emptied of all desire for further education at St. Margaret's, and wishing passionately that she could afford to go to a proper school like Manchester High School, a hopeless, lovely dream that was always with her. (qtd. in Boos 155)

The gifted Flora Tims Thompson, a successful product of the system, remained in her National School in Oxfordshire until age 14. In her autobiographical novel, *Lark Rise to Candleford*, she assessed the inability of the rote education she had received to reach children of the lower classes:

If the children, by the time they left school, could read well enough to read the newspaper and perhaps an occasional book for amusement, and write well enough to write their own letters, they had no wish to go farther. Their interest was not in books, but in life, and especially the life that lay immediately about them. At school they worked unwillingly, upon compulsion, and the life of the schoolmistress was a hard one. (qtd. in Boos 157)

Still, even this education did reach *some*. The instruction offered the majority of Britain's children at the end of the century remained highly class-based, fitting them (it was believed) to be moral and respectful workers within a continuing class hierarchy. Raymond Williams has offered a trenchant critique of its limits from a working-class perspective:

It was only very slowly, and then only in the sphere of adult education, that the working class . . . made its contribution to the modern educational debate. This contribution—the students' choice of subject, the relation of disciplines to actual contemporary living, and the parity of general discussion with expert instruction—remains important, but made little headway in the general educational organization. Like the individual public educators, their time was not yet. (144)

But to recast a famous phrase, although the arc of education was bending slowly, during the nineteenth century it had bent considerably toward wider access. The 1870 Act—long delayed, controversial in its day, and disappointing in its details to almost all concerned parties—had been a necessary initial step toward society's provision of a basic education to all.

In 1896, for the first time in Britain, a political party (the International Socialists) included in its platform a call for a mandatory, secular education that would also be "free at all stages, open to everyone without any tests of prior attainment at any age" (Gillard ch. 3, n. pag.). The proposer was Keir Hardie, trade union organizer, leader of the International Labour Party, member of Parliament (1892-95; 1900-15), and himself a self-taught former Welsh miner first sent to work at age 7. That such ideals could be enunciated within the broad coalition of workers' groups which he represented reflected one of the more durable effects of the Acts: the increased ability of working-class and reformist-minded Britons to comprehend the social factors that structured their lives and organize toward the goal of greater economic and cultural representation.

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ENDNOTES

[1] No equivalent figures for Scotland were available until 1850, though literacy rates are assumed to be higher.

[2] For Watt, see Florence Boos, "Shards of Ordinary Life: Life Writings of the Victorian Poor," in *Erfaring og Forstaelse (Experience and Understanding)*, ed. Oystein Hide, National Department of Higher Education, Oslo, Norway, 2005, 233-57. <http://www.uiowa.edu/~boosf/CampbellWatt.pdf>. For Elizabeth Dobbs, see *The Autobiography of a Charwoman*, as chronicled by Annie Wakeman, London,: McQueen, 1900.

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