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HIST2530 Building the literate nation: the historical debate

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Introduction

To modern sensibilities it seems almost a truism that a nation cannot be considered truly civilised if it is not also literate. The modern press abounds with horror stories of the number of children leaving school unable to read and a national campaign was launched in recent years to tackle the problems of functional illiteracy in adults. Yet in the mid-eighteenth century the case for educating the 'lower orders' was not without controversy and it took a further century and a half for Parliament to consider it important enough to remove responsibility for the education of poor and working- class children from the parishes and place it under the purview of national government. A clear indication of the growing importance placed upon reading as a necessary skill during the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is the emphasis laid upon teaching children to read as a means of achieving social change.

Project outline

- literacy levels and the reading public
- the 18th and 19th-century arguments for and against teaching poor children
- developing attitudes towards governmental intervention
- attitudes amongst poor parents towards schooling their children

Background

Popular Literacy

The beginnings of *'popular literacy'* in England can be traced to the Reformation, as the protestant emphasis on The Word changed literacy from the province of educated specialists to a more generalised and necessary skill for the ordinary 'Godfearing' man. As Keith Wrightson puts it:

'In 1580 illiteracy was a characteristic of the vast majority of the common people of England. By 1680 it was a special characteristic of the poor.' [1]

This burgeoning of popular culture, through the Reformation, opened up new possibilities and *'cultural horisons'* for the common man, but in doing so, it further delineated the more affluent common people from the very poorest, widening the *'fissure'* between those who were economically able to access The Word and those who remained wholly reliant on oral culture. This division would form much of the basis for the debate on the education of the poor in the late 17th and early 18th century, as the perceived moral laxity of the poorest communities became linked in the minds of many reformers with their illiteracy and lack of familiarity with Christian teaching. It would be the protestant communions who would drive the issue forward, utilising their unique ability to gain entry into their congregations' lives to *'improve'* the moral fortitude of the poorest members through charitable education programmes.[2]

Literacy Rates

Because reading leaves no permanent imprint, there is no way for the historian to be categorically sure whether an individual was or was not able to read. The accepted test for literacy is that of the ability to sign one's name. Because reading was generally taught before writing it is generally accepted that someone who could write could also be assumed to have acquired skill in reading. This is of course something of a blunt tool as it necessarily misses out those who can read but not write. This would presumably have a greater impact upon figures for female literacy than for male literacy: it is clear from a cursory glance at many charity school provisions that whilst writing was considered an appropriate skill for boys to learn, many educationalists prescribed only reading for their female charges.[3]

In his 1961 study of parish registers in East Yorkshire, W. P. Baker was able to ascertain that

- around 33% of grooms and 66% of brides in the 1750s were illiterate, that is to say, a third of grooms and two-thirds of brides marked the register with a cross rather than signing their names.
- rates declined for men in the 1840s and the records indicate that illiteracy by this measure had been more or less eliminated by 1900.
- there was a more gradual decline in illiteracy rates for women from the 1780s
- male and female rates reached parity by the 1870s

Building on this work the 1973 Schofield study attempted to build a national picture, drawing on a sample of 274 parishes. In this study the rates of male illiteracy remained at approximately 40% through the late 17th century and declined from about 1810 until it reached approximately 33% by the time the Register General first began to collect figures in 1839. Female illiteracy rates in the 1750s were approximately 60%, remained more or less static until 1800 after which they reduced, reaching approximately 50% by 1840.[4]

Because reading was seen as a primarily passive skill and one which could be taught by more or less anyone who could themselves read, many children in the eighteenth and ninteenth century could read by the age of seven or eight. Writing, however, was seen as a vocational and primarily male skill usually taught by male tutors who also taught arithmetic and often other basic business or trade skills: throughout the 18th and much of the 19th centuries, very few children had learned to write by the age of seven or eight. Beyond that age access to education fell sharply for children of working parents as this was the age widely seen as the point at which a child's labour may be considered valuable enough to utilise. In 19th Century England, approximately 33% more children were able to read than to write. [5]

The changing debate

The 18th Century

Whilst the 17th Century had seen the beginnings of popular literacy, driven by the Protestant emphasis on direct access to bible teachings, the 18th century saw the beginnings of a public debate on the merits of extending that education to the poorest members of society. Proponents of charity schools delivered sermons and published pamphlets, setting forth the argument and driving forward programmes of learning. Their central arguments rested on assumptions that:

- increased familiarity with Christian teachings would improve the moral health of the poor
- it was important to reach children *before* immorality and rough manners became ingrained
- it was the Christian duty of those who were able, to extend their charity to those who were in ignorance and poverty
- such schooling could only assist in fostering self-discipline and an acceptance of their place in society
- only through education could the tendency towards criminality amongst the poor be countered.

The argument for charitable education was led primarily by Christian reformers. One such reformer, was William Hendley, whose *defense of the charity-schools* (http://0-galenet.galegroup.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/servlet/ECCO?dd=0&locID=leedsuni&d1=1212801000&srchtp&c=274&SU=All&d2=1&docNum=CW3306695427&b0=charity+and+school*&h2=1&vrsn=1.0&b1=KE&d6=1&ste=10&dc=tiPG&stp=Author&d4=0.33&n=10&d5=d6%7C) , published in 1725 offered a direct counter argument to the most famous of the charity schools' detractors, Bernard Mandeville.[6]

Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (http://0-galenet.galegroup.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/servlet/ECCO?dd=0&locID=leedsuni&d1=0934400400&srchtp=b&c=15&SU=All&d2=1&docNum=CW3315226068&b0=%22The+fable+of+the+bees%22&h2=1&vrsn=1.0&b1=KE&d6=1&ste=10&dc=tiPG&stp=DocTitle&d4=0.33&n=10&d5=d6%7C) presents the most comprehensive argument against charity-schools and the growing sense amongst the benevolent reformers, that the education of the poor was both necessary and desirable for a happy society.[7] Initially published as a pamphlet in 1714 under the title *The Grumbling Hive or Knaves Turn'd Honest* and republished in several editions across the next 75 years. The inclusion, in the 1725 edition of *An Essay on Charity and Charity Schools* (http://0-galenet.galegroup.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/servlet/ECCO?dd=0&locID=leedsuni&d1=0934400400&srchtp=b&c=15&SU=All&df=f&d2=302&docNum=CW3315226369&b0=%22The+fable+of+the+bees%22&h2=1&vrsn=1.0&b1=KE&d6=302&d3=302&ste=10&stp=DocTitle&d4=0.33&n=10&d5=d6%7C) , is of course immensely helpful for the historian attempting to identify the nature of the opposition to charitable education programmes. For Mandeville, the charity schools, far from offering a solution to the perceived moral and economic malaise of the working poor, instead exacerbate the situation for society whilst offering no real solution to the individual.

- charity schools were less impactful on the morals and behaviour of poor children than the example set by their parents and would therefore not reduce criminality or idleness: *'Reprobate Parents that take Ill Courses and are regardless to their Children, won't have mannerly civilized Offspring tho' they went to a Charity-School til they were Married.'*[8]

- working people should only learn that which is necessary to fulfil their working lives and educating poor children beyond that level would reduce their willingness to accept their place in the economy and lead to disatisfaction with their lot: *'The Welfare and Felicity…of every State and Kingdom, require that the Knowledge of the Working Poor should be confin'd within the Verge of their Occupations, …The more a Shepherd,… or any other Peasant knows of the World, and the things that are Foreign to his Labour,…the less fit he'll be to go through the Fatigues and Hardships of it with Chearfulness and Content.'*[9]

- overall the damage done by charity schools outweighed the intended good: *Charity-Schools, and every thing else that promotes Idleness, and keeps the Poor from Working are more Accessory to the growth of Villany, than the want of Reading and Writing, or even the grossest Ignorance and Stupidity.'*[10]

What is perhaps as intriguing as his rationale against such projects, is the picture he paints of popular concensus on the issue. What comes through clearly in Mandeville's essay is the apparently maverick nature of his views. As he himself puts it, to argue against the reformers' ideal of clean, well-clothed children, learning to read and following their master into Church is to be viewed by society as:

- *'An Uncharitable, Hardhearted and Inhuman, if not a Wicked, Prophane and Atheistical Wretch.'*[11]

The popularity of the reformist view appeared such that:

- *'the whole Kingdom both great and small are so Unanimously Fond of it.'*[12]

The longevity of the debate, however, suggests that his views were perhaps less unpopular than he would have it.

Alongside the religious imperatives, the arguments for educating the poor also rested on economic imperatives. The importance placed on schooling for child inmates of the workhouse system is second only to the importance placed on their productivity, as can be seen in the [rules and provisions (http://0-galenet.galegroup.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/servlet/ECCO?dd=0&locID=leedsuni&d1=0726901400&srchtp=b&c=8&SU=All&df=f&d2=12&s1=read&docNum=CW3305006841&b0=charity+schools&h2=1&vrsn=1.0&s2=1&b1=KE&d6=12&d3=12&ste=10&d4=0.33&stp=Author&n=10&d5=d6%7C)] of the workhouse in St Giles, Cripplegate.[13] Partly this was in order to furnish said children with a better set of tools with which to enter the workforce, but it was also in part to ensure that at no point would they be left idle. It is this insistence upon filling every minute of the child's day with work along with the obviously doctrinal nature of their schooling which has led some marxist historians to view these developments with a great deal of cynicism. Much as the Factory Schools of the 19th century have been viewed as a conduit through which to indoctrinate a future workforce, the early charity-schools have likewise been viewed in a rather negative light. In reality, though many of the criticisms of historians such as E. P. Thompson are valid, such considerations should not detract from an appreciation of the 'direction of travel'. Though such indoctrination may seem to us callous and calculated, and despite the additional pressure which such institutions often put onto their already overworked charges, in the context of the 18th century this was the cutting edge of England's social conscience and without it the foundations upon which later developments were based could not have existed.[14]

The 19th century

Fed by the growing public debate on the social effects of illiteracy and the unprecented social change wrought by urbanisation and industrialisation, the argument over the relative merits of mass literacy in some ways represented a continuation of the 18th century debate.

of the 18th century debate.

- Opponents feared the power of the printed word to foster revolutionary zeal amongst the masses.

- Proponents argued, that reading would lead to learning the Bible and texts deemed appropriate by their teachers and guides, fostering respect and loyalty.[15]

What differentiated the debate in the 19th century from that of the 18th century was both the tone and the scale. Whereas the 18th century debate was primarily conducted locally, the 19th century saw the issue enter into the 'national consciousness'. Modern notions of 'literacy' stem primarily from the concerns of the 19th century with 'illiteracy'. It was during this period that data began to be collected on literacy by social commentators and educationalists and used to measure standards of educational achievement.[16]

Whereas in the 18th century the primary debate on educating the poor and labouring classes centred on the advisability of doing so, across the 19th century the debate began to shift to one of state intervention:

- to what extent should the state involve itself in such matters?

- to what extent was it advisable and/or desirable that the state provide what was essentially a commodity?

- Perhaps most importantly, in terms of the journey towards mass literacy becoming a 'national goal'the mid-19th century saw a growing fear in Britain that the skills of its people were failing to keep up with their rivals, both military and economic. [17]

The 19th century saw developments in the nature of the state which would affect immigration, health, pollution, education and the civil service amongst other things. Owing much to Bentham's Constitutional Code of 1830, the Victorian State began to take a more defined and confident role in attempting to level the playing field and 'free' the lower classes to achieve on their merits.[18] That this was partly inspired by a general horror at the perceived moral and economic malaise of the labouring classes, might be so, but with it came a burgeoning sense of responsibility which was more national in character than the post-feudal, local paternalism of the eighteenth century.

- 1806: Parliament passes a Bill (http://0-parlipapers.chadwyck.co.uk.wam.leeds.ac.uk/fullrec/fullrec.do?id=1806-001196%7C) for the establishment of Parochial schools throughout the country. Important to note that it was the job of the Parish or relevant charity to enact this legislation. [19]

- 1816: A Select Committee enquires into the education of London's poor. The beginings of the drive to quantify the 'problem'[20]

- 1833: Voluntary education societies able to bid for modest government grants: the 1834 Account of sums granted (http://0-parlipapers.chadwyck.co.uk.wam.leeds.ac.uk/fullrec/fullrec.do?id=1834-015113%7C) show that these were initially small to the point of tokenism [21]

- 1834: Act requiring Poor Law Unions to provide schooling to child inmates of Workhouses [22]

- 1837: A Select Committee enquires into the Education of the poor of England and Wales. The problem is quantified at a national level.[23]

- 1870: Parliament passes a Bill (http://0-gateway.proquest.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk:80/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:hcpp&rft_dat=xri:hcpp:rec:1870-045833%7C) for the provision of public, elementary education in England and Wales. The creation of education districts and schoolboards as administrative units and facillitating the establishment of Elementary Schools in districts with insufficient school provision. [24]

- 1880: Schooling becomes compulsory for 5-10 year olds: School Boards and other district authorities now required to make bye-laws compelling attendance [25]

Though the legislation rarely had teeth and the allocation of grants to Parish schools often compounded inequalities rather than tackling them, we can see the government of the 19th century beginning to see education as an area in which it should be involved. By 1870, education was becoming a government priority and whilst enforcement of the 1880 legislation was unenthusiastic and ineffective, it represented the first serious step towards a state education system.[26]

The Role of Religion

It would be impossible to look at this topic without at least glancing at the role of religion in the early days of popular education. Throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries, religion was the driving force behind provision of education for the poor.

- 1811: formation of *The National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church in England and Wales*
- 1814: *British and Foreign School Society* supports undenominational religious teaching for non-conformists and dissenters

- early 1830s: the Sunday School movement which included tuition in reading and writing reaches its height, with over a million children and young people attending Sunday school.[27]

Less inspiring perhaps, is the role the religious lobbies played in creating obstacles to early governmental attempts to engage with the education of the working-class. A consensus had formed that education should contain a religious and moral 'core': difficulties arose, however, in arguments over where government funding might appropriately go, thereby slowing the rate at which government funding entered into the education system and leading to most of the early grant funding being concentrated into areas where provision already existed. [28]

Parental Response

Throughout the period studied, voluntary opportunities to educate their children were greeted with enthusiasm by many working-class parents.[29] When asked by the 1816 Select Committee, about his observations whilst surveying a district of St Giles, with a view to establishing a charity school, Thomas Leary told the committee:

- *'there was hardly a person we went to … that did not endeavour to contribute something, sixpence or a shilling, and they were very anxious that a school should take place.'* [30]

One of the advantages of charity schools and in particular the Sunday schools, was the level of flexibility and in areas where such flexibility was not available through formal schooling, parents often made use of more informal educational opportunities for their children, such as 'dame schools' or other ad hoc forms of basic tuition. Unlike some of the stricter regimes, such informal and limited approaches to education enabled children to attend intermittently as and when the cycle of seasonal, or need-driven employment allowed.

Less popular, by far, were the 19th century innovations in compulsion. Though pressure to provide basic levels of education for their children, came in part from the working-classes themselves, the added component of compulsion was seen as tyrannical, forcing parents into paying school fees and hampering the family's ability to respond to economic needs.[31]

This hostility is interesting when taken in the context of a growing sense of class consciousness both on the part of the working class, and also on the part of the governing class. Much of the interventionist legislation of the 19th Century had a distinct 'class tendency' and the interventions in education were very much in that mould. To a large extent the debate on education took place within a wider class dialectic and it is in the parental response that this is most clearly shown. [32]

Conclusions

The nature of the debate on educating the poor in many ways follows a similar path to other debates regarding 'the public good'. The greatest change in tone can be seen as the 'long eighteenth century' gives way to the Victorian age. In this

changing debate we can see the last remnants of a post-feudal mentalite giving way to 'modern' conceptions of government responsibility. The views of writers such as Mandeville, that knowledge is a dangerous thing to put in the hands of the lower orders, battling against the benevolent drive towards enlightening and morally improving the poor owe as much to feudal concepts of place, as they do to the marketised sensibilities of the eighteenth century. As with the arguments for better healthcare provision and the need for regulations against unhealthy building and sanitation practices, the 19th century saw both a burgeoning desire for greater state responsibility and intervention and a growing sense of self-confidence within that state, in its right and ability to intervene.[33] The debate on education in the 19th century, was no longer centred on the advisability of teaching the poor, or the christian, moral imperatives of the same, but rather the level of intervention which was desirable and achievable in order to ensure maximum access to a basic level of education. Literacy, rather than being the key to Christian morality was being accepted as a necessary, basic skill for life.

The influence of Benthamite utilitarianism in the middle decades of the 19th century softened the government's laissez-faire approach to social and economic issues allowing them to 'square the circle' on the question of state intervention, through a belief that such intervention was acceptable if it was designed to reinforce and strengthen individual freedoms, by placing 'all citizens in an initial condition of equality.' [34] Though distinct class identities existed, the desire for a 'level playing field' was part and parcel of a new acceptance of class mobility, at least in the most theoretical sense. In the education debate of the 19th century we can see the very early signs of social change which would begin to take shape across the century which followed. Taken in context, the change in the debate between the 18th and 19th centuries, can be seen to represent the abandonment of earlier, medieval concepts of an immutable place in society and the start of an adoption of more modern concepts of fluidity within society. Though the benevolence of the 18th century was an important step towards building the literate nation, it was the growth of the Victorian concept of state responsibility which laid the firmest foundations for modern literacy levels.

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