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Clonmel Charter School

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Although Catholic resistance had been crushed at the Boyne, the Protestant victors felt far from secure. They were acutely aware that they were vastly outnumbered by a Catholic population who, given the opportunity, might rebel and reclaim any lands which had been taken from them. In an attempt to consolidate their position, the New Protestant ascendancy introduced the Penal Laws.

One of these laws provided that Catholics were forbidden to have schools of their own or to send their children abroad to be educated. Against this background of repression one of the most iniquitous and disgraceful experiments in Irish education took place, namely, the establishment of the Charter Schools.

In 1733 the English-born Archbishop of Dublin, Hugh Boulter, and other members of the Protestant ascendancy received a royal charter and set up The Incorporated Society for the Promotion of Protestant Schools in Ireland. Their aim was to provide schools where the children of poor Roman Catholics would be brought up in the Protestant faith and so "multiply obedient and peaceable subjects to the King, and render the Protestants of Ireland safe in their Lives and Possessions."¹

To achieve this, a network of boarding schools, the so-called Charter schools, were set up throughout the country. The Society received considerable financial backing from many sources including the King, the parliament and the Anglican bishops of England. It was presided over by the Lord Lieutenant and administered by a committee of 15 based in Dublin. Each school was to be managed by a voluntary local committee, or more accurately they were "ill-managed by committees of languid, educationally inexpert amateurs".²

The rules envisaged that initially there would be a school in each of the four provinces, and that these would serve as models for others. In 1734 the first Charter School was opened in Castledermot, financed by the Earl of Kildare. By 1760 there were 44 such schools in the country. The total number of institutions founded by the society during its existence was 61.

The numbers attending these schools varied from 1,500 to 2,000 children. Some of the schools were for boys, some for girls and some were mixed. Clonmel fell into the latter category, for in 1752 it was described as having 20 boys and 20 girls.

In general schools were built with the support of a patron, who also endowed them with land. The opening of the Clonmel Charter School in 1748 was due very much to the efforts of local landowner, John Bagwell. Situated in Silver Spring on the eastern approaches to the town, this imposing building with its slated facade still retains much of its original character.

With the help of local subscriptions, it was built at a cost of £907, and to maintain it Sir George Moore made it a grant of 24 acres and two roods. In 1759 Mr. John Dawson bequeathed an estate valued at £82 per annum and also left £500 to purchase additional land.

Its imposing appearance hid the congested conditions within, which were a source of constant criticism. It was considered too small for its full complement of 50 pupils. It comprised two dormitories, a school-room and a work-room. Provision was also made for the master and his family and for the servants, and a special room was set aside for meetings.

Various enticements were used to persuade Catholic parents to part with their children, including offers to pay hearth tax and gifts of food. To a deprived and starving peasantry such offers were tempting. Those parents who succumbed saw their children sent to schools far from the home. In 1788 "thirteen miserable objects" were sent to Clonmel from Castlebar;³ 30 years later most of the





Clonmel Charter School.

boys in the Clonmel school came from Dublin.⁴ This policy of transplanted was clearly designed to break the influence of the home and facilitate the process of proselytisation.

Despite these inducements, sufficient numbers were not attracted to the schools, so other

schemes were tried to ensure a constant supply of children. Nursery schools were set up. Orphanages were combed. Beggars and vagrants were rounded up and taken compulsorily to the schools, where their parents were denied access to them.

Such coercive methods were scarcely a recipe for success. Constant reports of escapes and rescue attempts tell their own story. Although intended as boarding schools, declining numbers forced them to take in Protestant children and day pupils. This was the case in the Clonmel school, where Protestant children were in attendance as early as 1801.⁵

Apart from religious instruction, English reading with some writing and arithmetic were taught. This was confined to only two hours each day; the rest was to be spent in vocational training. The boys engaged in farmwork and the girls were employed in dairying and domestic work, knitting and spinning.

Each school, according to the society's records, was issued with a sundial and an hour-glass to regulate the children's work. According to Corneille's report in 1808, "The Master has 24 spinning wheels, but at present employs but two, the boys being, when not at school, occupied in weeding the crops on the farm, and working in a large garden of an acre, for which purpose they had small spades adapted to their age and strength."⁶

At an appropriate age they were apprenticed to Protestant employers at the society's expense. As a further incentive a premium of £5 was given to those who completed their apprenticeship and married a Protestant. Attractive though this scheme may have been, the Clonmel school was not always fortunate with its apprentices. A report stated that, out of 34 apprentices sent out, 16 were very satisfactory but seven others had run away from their masters! There was no information on the remainder, since they no longer resided in the neighbourhood.⁷

The salary of the master of the school was a pittance, a mere £5 per annum in the 1730s. This was supplemented by a clothing and diet allowance. They were generally allowed to rent a portion of the school lands for their own use. The opportunities for exploitation in such a system were all too obvious. It was common in Clonmel and elsewhere for the children to be overworked, since the masters were more interested in making a profit from their labours than in attending to their educational needs.

It is hardly surprising that the quality of the masters in these schools left a lot to be desired. One commentator writing in 1806 describes them as "Men of vulgar habits, coarse manners, often ignorant in the extreme of everything but the common rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic, exhibiting nothing in conduct or example that could raise the minds of the children."⁸

It was inevitable also that the Charter School system should prove controversial. Although there are frequent references in the records of the Society concerning abuses about the operation of the schools, they did little more than exhort the local committees to take a greater interest in the affairs

of the schools and, in particular, the welfare of the children. Unfortunately, the local committees showed little inclination to involve themselves in the day-to-day affairs of the schools. Finally, in the face of growing complaints the Irish Parliament set up a committee in 1788 to investigate the affairs of the schools.

This investigation was conducted by the Quaker reformer John Howard, who visited the schools in 1777 and early in the following year. "The state of most of the schools which I visited was so deplorable as to disgrace Protestantism, and to encourage Popery rather than the contrary," he commented. He went on to talk about the "large number of such sickly, naked and half starved children" he saw in them.⁹

Howard made two inspections of the Clonmel School and, like others of its kind, found it to be inefficient and corrupt and the boys in its care neglected and exploited. On his first visit in 1782 he found that "children are neither well clothed, well fed, nor well taught; were sickly pale, and such miserable objects that they were a disgrace to all society."¹⁰

Five years later he observed a certain improvement, but added: "if the boys be not clothed before Christmas they must be naked."¹¹ In comparing children of a similar age attending hedge schools, he found the latter to be more advanced, as well as being cleaner and more wholesome.

As a result of these criticisms a Committee of Inquiry was set up by the Dublin Parliament. They asked the Inspector General of Prisons, Sir Jeremiah Fitzpatrick, to make a report on the schools. He painted an equally dismal picture. In Clonmel he found that "there were nineteen boys in the school, everyone of whom was barefooted and ragged. There was no appearance of education except that a few of the children could read a little; their bed and bed clothes were exceedingly filthy, and there was scarcely a sheet on any of the beds."¹² In contrast, "the master's and mistress's and the committee rooms were comfortable and well furnished."¹³

In spite of all these admitted faults, the schools continued to receive financial support from the government, while the Catholic clergy continued to express their opposition. In 1796 Dr. Hussy, the Catholic bishop of Waterford, instructed the priests of his diocese to refuse the sacraments to parents who sent their children to these schools.

The 1770s saw the first relaxation in the penal code; but a worsening political situation in the next decade halted further reform. Agrarian discontent, directed against tithe and rent, and enthusiastic support for the spirit of the French Revolution, pushed the Government towards repression rather than concession.

In 1808 the Commissioners of the Board of Education ordered an investigation of the Charter schools. The Commissioners included the Archbishops of Armagh and Dublin and other Protestant notables among its members. Their enquiries were carried out on their behalf by John Corneille, Secretary to the Board of Education, who was accompanied by two clergymen. He submitted a very favourable report on the Clonmel School.

He stated: "I saw the children of this school at the Church of Clonmel at a visitation sermon; they were dressed in dark brown jackets and waistcoats with yellow facings and white trousers, and made a good appearance; five who had excellent voices accompanied the organ. When I reached the school, the boys were taking off their Sunday clothes, and putting on the extra suit of the Society; which the master made the common suit, and which was in very good order; their shoes and stockings were excellent."

"Dinner was soon served in the schoolroom, which is also used as a dining hall, there being no other; the boys had portions of veal and corned pork, and there was not any fixed allowance of potatoes at the side of each trencher, but large heaps of smoking potatoes were piled down the centre of the table, and each boy helped himself as he wanted; grace was said before, after dinner and the usual hymn sung. There were 46 boys, all healthy and cheerful looking children etc."¹⁴

It is difficult to reconcile this idyllic scene with previous reports, especially when one considers

that Charter schools had by this time become discredited institutions. Perhaps they may have been deceived by the master or found it to their advantage to paint a favourable picture.

This was the view taken by a subsequent report by the Commissioners of Education in 1825, which added that Corneille and his colleagues "had been misled by the kindness of their own dispositions." It should also be borne in mind that the report was prepared for a body dominated by representatives of the Protestant hierarchy, which had a vested interest in the promotion of these schools.

Clonmel may not have been the worst of them, but on the evidence available neither could it be regarded as the exception. If final proof were needed, one cannot ignore the findings of the Rev. Elias Thackeray, who inspected the school in 1818. Thackeray was one of the visitors appointed by the Society in 1816 to carry out inspections of the schools.

His investigation was a thorough one, lasting four days unlike that of his predecessor, Mr. Corneille, who scarcely spent three hours in the place. Furthermore, as a representative of the Incorporated Society he would have been most anxious to protect the society's interests. This lends more weight to his observations.

The Rev. Thackeray felt that the children were very ignorant of the scriptures. Neither did they get their proper allowance of clothing, and the rule that they were entitled to clean linen twice a week "though generally, is not invariably complied with".¹⁵ He added: "we feel confident, however, the master does not deviate from rule with a view to his own advantage."¹⁶

However, he felt compelled to censure the usher. He was a man who was described as being of "little intellect" and who had "frequently been very insolent to the master, and on one occasion took off his coat, challenging him to fight in front of the boys."¹⁷ Thackeray felt he was totally unsuited for his position.

Above all, what highlighted the unsatisfactory state of the school was the demoralised state of the committee. When the Rev. Thackeray summoned a meeting of that body only four attended. He reported that "the rest had ceased to visit" because of "some disappointments they considered themselves to have met, in their endeavour to promote the welfare of the establishment."¹⁸

Education in the Charter schools was disastrous. Unsuitable texts, incompetent masters and children who had been uprooted from their homes at an early age and incarcerated unwillingly could hardly produce an atmosphere conducive to learning. To add to their misfortunes, the children found themselves exploited by masters who themselves were forced by circumstances to supplement their meagre income.

It did not require any great ingenuity to subvert the food and diet allowance provided by the society for the children, or to generate extra income from their labours on the school farm. In these schools the children were overworked, under-fed, ill-clothed and badly educated. In short, the system was a failure.

Although the Society made repeated efforts to put its house in order, the system was too corrupt to be remedied. From time to time they laid down strict rules concerning diet and clothing, and circulated their wishes to all the schools. Efforts were made to protect the children from sadistic masters; there are several examples of masters being dismissed for ill treating those in their care.

In the evidence for the Government report of 1825, we get a final glimpse into the Clonmel school. The master was a cripple and immobile, and the children were at the hands of a sadistic usher, who used a horsewhip to punish the children until "the blood ran down upon the flags".¹⁹ We hear of one child who had his ear almost pulled off; another was so badly beaten that he had his ribs broken.

The fate of the Charter schools was sealed with the damning report of the Commissioners of Irish Education Enquiry of 1825. Apart from condemning numerous instances of mismanagement and abuse which prevail in these establishments, it went on to say:

"It appears to us, that the main objection arises from the mistaken principles on which they are founded. A system of education which separates children from their kindred and which turns



them out into life when just arrived at maturity, without friends or relations, and without that practical experience which children under ordinary circumstances insensibly acquire, by witnessing the realities of life around them, does not appear likely to obtain the benefits from these establishments.”²⁰

In conclusion, they felt that the defects “inherent in its plans and constitution” made it impossible to reform the Charter School system, and furthermore they recommended the withdrawal of government aid.²¹ The Government decided to act, and from 1827 financial support was gradually withdrawn and the Society instructed to make every effort to reduce the number of children in its care. After the closure of the Charter schools the society continued in existence merely to promote the education of Protestant children.

In 1824 the Clonmel School had faced the inevitable and closed its doors. When it was inspected that year, it had only two children and no books except a few fragments of testaments. Its endowments were transferred to the new Protestant Parochial School in Mary Street. The following year Charles Bianconi leased the old school building and renamed it Silver Spring. It was said that because of the regulations governing the Charter School the saying of Mass was forbidden under its roof; but the wily Italian circumvented this by having the roof replaced!

The primary aim of the Charter schools was political, not philanthropic. Supported by a powerful establishment and considerable public funding, they set out to convert the children of poor Papists to Protestantism. The fact that they failed was due not alone to Catholic opposition but to the corruption of the system. They were few to mourn such schools. One commentator, in describing Archbishop Boulter’s grand design, said it was “a Taj Mahal built on the quicksand.”²²

FOOTNOTES

1. A Brief Review of the Rise and Progress of the Incorporated Society in Dublin, for promoting English Protestant Schools in Ireland (Dublin, 1748), p.9.
2. R. B. McDowell: *Ireland on the eve of the Famine* (Dublin, 1976), p. 55.
3. Steven: *Inquiry into the Abuses of the Charter Schools*, (London, 1818), p.66.
4. Corneille’s Report is in the Third Report from Commissioners of the Board of Education, Ireland, 1808, Appendix 8, p.87.
5. *Ibid*, Appendix 1, p.27.
6. Corneille, op. cit. pp. 86-87.
7. First Report from Commissioners of Irish Education Inquiry, 1825, Appendix 32, p.71.
8. Observations on the present state of Charter Schools in Ireland by W. Disney (Halliday Pamphlets) (R.I.A., 1806), p.11.
9. Parliamentary Report, 1788, Howard’s evidence.
10. *Ibid*.
11. Howard J., *Lazarettos in Europe* (London, 1791).
12. Parliamentary Report 1788, Sir J. Fitzpatrick’s report.
13. *Ibid*.
14. Rules for the Government of the Protestant Charter Schools and Nurseries of Ireland (Dublin, 1806), p.35.
15. First Report from Commissioners of Irish Education Enquiry 1815, Appendix 15, p.51.
16. *Ibid*.
17. *Ibid*.
18. *Ibid*.
19. Report of the Commissioners of Irish Education Enquiry, 1825.
20. *Ibid*.
21. *Ibid*.
22. Donald H. Akenson: *The Irish Education Experiment* (Dublin, 1970), p.33.

