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Clonmel's Pay Schools – “urban hedge schools”

By Michael Ahern

At the beginning of the eighteenth century the small Protestant colony, feeling itself threatened by a potentially hostile Catholic majority, introduced the repressive system known as the Penal Laws. Under this legislation Catholics could not teach, set up school or send their children abroad to be educated. From a report of James Castell, Mayor of Clonmel in 1731, it is clear that a close eye was kept on the activities of those attempting to circumvent these statutes: “There is but one Private Papish Schoolmaster, as I can finde in the said Towne, whose name is Cornelius Lynch and goes from house to house to instruct Papish children”.¹

Catholics who wished to have their children educated refused to send them to the existing Protestant schools, which had become “so identified with proselytism that every fresh scheme appeared only to arouse the dislike and suspicion of the Irish people and of their spiritual leaders”.² In spite of the threat of transportation and even death they were prepared to take great risks to provide education for their children. Those who could afford it sent them abroad to the Irish colleges, while at home an extensive system of hedge schools sprang up.

These were conducted in barns, houses or even in the open air where circumstances permitted. A series of Relief Acts enacted towards the end of the century meant that Catholic schools could now operate openly. In the absence of a national system of education a network of privately run pay schools, sometimes referred to as urban hedge schools, emerged in every town. These schools were so called because instruction was given in return for a small fee. They were conducted by private individuals for their own profits and at their own risk.

It is impossible to give a comprehensive picture of the activities of such schools since their existence was the result of private initiative and, in many cases, their history was of short duration, with the teacher moving from place to place as profits dictated. The primary sources are Government reports, advertisements in local newspapers and entries in the commercial directories of the period.

The first detailed picture of their activities was supplied by the Government Report of 1826.³ Official returns were made of the schools in every parish in Ireland, based on the average attendance of the last three months of 1824. The report contains two sets of figures, one returned by the Catholic clergy and the other by Protestant clergy. There were 11,823 schools of all descriptions in Ireland at that time, 9,352 of which were classified as pay schools and catering for 394,732 or 70% of those attending school. This reflected the position which obtained in Clonmel where 36 of its 42 schools could be classified as pay schools. They catered for approximately 758 boys and 456 girls or 62% of the town's school-going population.

The Report also provides a whole range of details concerning the operation of these pay schools. It shows the location of each school in the town and supplies the name, religion and income of the teacher. In addition, we are given a description of the school room, including the dimensions and the rent paid, if any. In one column the two sets of figures provided by clergymen of both denominations are set side by side. These indicate the number of pupils in attendance, giving their sex and religious denomination. No information on curriculum content is supplied other than indicating whether or not the scriptures were read.

The 36 Clonmel pay schools were scattered widely throughout the town, though Mary Street

with its spacious Georgian houses seems to have been a favourite location, having no less than ten of them. A further eight were to be found in adjoining streets. These were attended by the children of the more affluent families, whereas the poorer classes were faced with the prospect of "a garret", "an old thatched cabin" or "a miserable apartment", an environment hardly conducive to learning. Some of these schools were quite sizeable establishments, such as one run by Mr. and Mrs. Downing in Mary Street which was capable of accommodating 120, whereas in the same street Margaret Kendrick had a mere seven pupils.

The report indicates that 25 schools had Catholic teachers, while the remainder were staffed by 5 Protestants, 3 Presbyterians, 3 Quakers and 1 Dissenter. About half the schools provided an estimate of the teacher's annual income, while a similar number give the weekly or quarterly charges. This information is not forthcoming for the remaining three. The income varied considerably; the Downings in Mary Street earned about £240 per annum, while Francis Carew of Albert Street had an annual income of about £12. Fees ranged from 2p. per week to 1 guinea per quarter. It is not possible to give precise figures for the number of pupils in attendance, since both sets of returns do not correspond in all cases. Neither are they complete, with no information forthcoming for 13 of the Protestant and 9 of the Catholic returns.

The 1835 Report⁴ provides a further insight into the operation of the town's pay schools. Of the 25 listed, 18 were pay schools, 5 being a combination of day and boarding schools. It also shows that they were attended by 525 boys and 218 girls, a decrease of 39% in nine years. The Report also indicates whether the average attendance had been increasing, stationary or diminishing for the previous five years. It also emphasises the ephemeral nature of such institutions, with five of them having been established in the previous three years. Finally, it outlines the curriculum provided by each school.

On the basis of the information supplied by these two government reports, in addition to advertisements placed in the local press and entries in the commercial directories of the period, it is possible to distinguish three types of pay schools. A number could be said to be in the direct tradition of the hedge schools of the eighteenth century. These catered for small groups of pupils, taught in poor surroundings for a few pence per week and had a curriculum which rarely extended beyond providing the rudiments of education.

Another group were, more often than not, a combination of day and boarding schools. In 1788 Clonmel had two such schools, both run by Quakers. One was under the direction of Thomas Chaytor in Barrack Street and the other under Eliza Godwin in Meeting House Lane.⁵ By 1818 there were five such schools in operation,⁶ increasing to eight in 1842, the highest number recorded.⁷ Located in the more select areas of the town,



Anne Street, Clonmel – one of the streets in which pay schools were located. – Photograph copyright M. Ahern.

in addition to the “three rs” they provided needlework, drawing, book-keeping and various accomplishments.

The third type of pay school was the self-styled academy which provided a classical and mercantile education. According to Dowling, “The curriculum in the ‘academy’ was practically the same as that of the better class of Hedge School. What difference there was, was one of opportunities, of environment, and perhaps of results arising from the regular attendance of pupils”.⁸ They “prided themselves on their practicality, which aimed at preparing their pupils for business life”.⁹ They also conducted public examinations, the results of which were published in the local papers. In both the boarding schools and academies, board and tuition varied from 25 to 30 guineas per annum. In 1818 the town had two academies,¹⁰ increasing to seven in 1824.¹¹

There was keen competition between the various boarding schools and academies and many pursued a vigorous advertising campaign to attract pupils. D M’Sweeney and Son, proprietors of the Classical, English and Mercantile Academy in Mary Street, expressed the “hope that their mode of instruction and unremitting attention to the speedy, radical and satisfactory improvement of their pupils” would “always entitle them to the patronage of a liberal and enlightened public”,¹² while the Misses Luther were “determined not to relax in the least exertions for the improvement of their pupils”, and confidently hoped that the public would encourage them, “by a continuance of that favour they hitherto so flatteringly received”.¹³

J.K. M’Crea, Master of the Classical and Commercial School, felt “it would be needless to renumerate the Advantages the young gentlemen derive from the well digested Plans and Mode of Tuition adapted by the Master – it would be merely telling the Public what they know already; suffice to say, that his attention – to the Advancement of his Pupils is unremitting: nor can any consideration induce him to leave his school one Moment during the time of business”.¹⁴ Mr. Bresnan, proprietor of the Gordon Street Academy, was confident that the performance of his pupils at public examinations “would not only give general satisfaction, but draw forth the admiration of an enlightened audience”.¹⁵ Many proprietors were also at pains to state that special attention would be given to the morals of their pupils and that their premises were large, airy and commodious.

The policy of proprietors of the Clonmel Academy would scarcely win acceptance with the teachers of today when they stated that “maturely considering how injurious Vacations are in the progressive Advancement of Youth, by instilling the Habits of Idleness, and creating an Aversion to their Studies [they] have determined to allow no Vacation”.¹⁶ One lady, Mrs. William Foley, advertising the benefits of her establishment in Shearman’s 1839 Directory said that “She obliges her pupils to correspond with her one day in each week on Literary and Historical Subjects. After the morality of the pupils Mrs. F. next attends to their manner, about which (most attractive point in a female) she is so anxious that her pupils never leave her; they are her constant companions with or without company; they surround her and form her first care, which constant association cannot fail in producing that ease and elegance of manner which to be truly attractive must be naturally and unceasingly practised”. However, not all these schools were capable of maintaining this degree of Victorian gentility.

In the absence of any controlling body to lay down standards, the quality of education varied enormously. The official attitude was that “These schools cannot be considered as being under any particular superintendence. They arise from time to time, as circumstances create a demand for them; and are frequently undertaken by persons ill qualified to discharge the duties of schoolmasters”.¹⁷ Dowling was of a similar opinion when he wrote: “Pay Schools provided an education of variable quality. Some teachers were highly skilled, others knew little more than their students”.¹⁸

Commenting on the calibre of the teachers another had this to say: "Prior to the coming of the national schools in 1831, a career of school teacher was open to all those who chose to call themselves teachers as such. This included learned scholars, ex-seminarians, plus a miscellaneous collection of widows, spinsters and men physically incapable of heavier work. Some were obviously well educated, others were probably only semi-literate".¹⁹

However, a number of these teachers were sufficiently crude to produce textbooks of one kind or another. Mr. Bresnan, the proprietor of Gordon Street Academy, published a Grammar of General Geography, while J.L. M'Crea, who operated a Classical and Commercial School in Richmond Place, claimed sales of 160,000 for a spelling book he had published.

Another of their shortcomings was their instability. They sprang up like mushrooms, only to disappear again just as quickly. Of the 36 such schools recorded in Clonmel in 1835 only 3 of them were in existence nine years earlier. If they failed to provide a living for the proprietor he was forced out of business or went elsewhere. Their popularity declined with the introduction of the National School system from 1831 onwards and the increased involvement of religious orders in education. Teachers sought posts under the new system which offered them a regular salary, small though it might be, while for the poorer sections of the population the lack of fees proved equally attractive. While Shearman's Directory of 1839 lists fifteen pay schools in the town, Slater's Directory of 1856 records only two, and subsequent directories indicate that that figure did not exceed three.

In summing up their role in Irish education it has been said that "though the hedge schools or pay schools constitute a striking manifestation of popular endeavour and private enterprise in education, they had undoubted limitations. There must have been many parents who could not have afforded even the small fee charged, and the standards of the schools were, of course, fixed by the masters, whose customers, the parents, were scarcely qualified to judge the value of the education provided".²⁰ In spite of these limitations they provided a tremendous service at a time when the State did not consider that it was obliged to provide education for the masses.

FOOTNOTES

1. W. Burke, *History of Clonmel* (Waterford, 1907), p. 148.
2. G. Balfour, *The Educational System of Great Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 1903), p. 78.
3. BPP, Appendix to the Second Report from the Commissioner of Irish Education Inquiry, pp. 1116 to 1121.
4. BPP, Commission of Public Instruction 1835, pp. 22c to 23c.
5. *The Directory of Richard Lucas*, 1788.
6. *Commercial Directory*, 1919.
7. *Triennial Directory*, 1840, pp. 41 and 42.
8. P. Dowling, *Hedge Schools in Ireland* (London, 1935), p. 109.
9. T. W. Moody & W. E. Vaughan eds., *New History of Ireland*, vol. iv 1691-1800 (Oxford, 1986), p. 691.
10. *Commercial Directory*, 1818.
11. *Pigot's Directory*, 1924.
12. *Clonmel Advertiser*, 2 Jan. 1812.
13. *Ibid.*, 11 Aug. 1821.
14. *Ibid.*, 15 Feb. 1819.
15. *Ibid.*, 7 July 1821.
16. *Ibid.*, 3 May 1815.
17. BPP, Appendix to the Second Report of the Commissioners of Irish Education Inquiry 1816-27 (12) xii (Parochial Abstracts), p. 18.
18. Dowling, *op. cit.* p. 113.
19. M. E. Daly, *Social and Economic History of Ireland since 1800* (Dublin, 1981), p. 110.
20. Moody & Vaughan, *op. cit.*, 692.

