

# *Clonmel Model School*

---

By Michael Ahern

The introduction of the Model Schools was one of the most enlightened experiments in Irish education in the last century. This new departure was initiated when the Commissioners of Education in Ireland set up a Model Training College for teachers in Marlborough Street, Dublin in 1838. This was followed by a scheme of District Model Schools. Clonmel was among the first centres chosen and a school building was erected on the Western Road in 1849.

Further Model Schools followed and soon there were 26 such schools around the country. These schools were unique in certain respects. First, they were the first schools in either Ireland or England to be state owned and controlled. Secondly, in addition to providing a primary education they also acted as teacher training centres. Each Model School accepted four pupil teachers every six months, who spent a full year training in the school. Also, paid monitors were recruited from among the most promising pupils in local national schools.

The Clonmel Model School on the Western Road, Tudor-like in style and graced with beautiful white sandstone, is one of the most attractive landmarks in the town. Although the school is not far removed from the town centre, its location gave rise to certain misgivings at the time; the Commissioners recommended that more prudence be exercised when selecting future sites. "From its situation, fears were entertained that, owing to want of centrality, the utility of the institution would be diminished; and although in this instant such fears have proved groundless, I would respectfully urge that no exertion be spared, when erecting Model Schools hereafter, to procure sites in the most central and convenient positions."<sup>1</sup>

This Report also gives a detailed description of the school premises. "The establishment consists of School-rooms for Boys, Girls and Infants: a class-room: cap, bonnet, and wash-rooms: and the Domestic department includes parlour and bed-room for the Head Master, and dormitories, study, and refectory for eight resident assistant, or apprentice, teachers, with the usual kitchen accommodation". The Report went on to state that "It is an exclusively Literary institution, there being no agricultural or industrial department connected with it."<sup>2</sup>

Prior to the opening representatives of the Commissioners called on members of the local clergy and gentry, "stating the intended opening of the schools, and the principles on which they should be conducted, soliciting their support and co-operation in the general management of the institution."<sup>3</sup> All the clergy supported the opening of the school and pledged their co-operation. The only dissenting voice was that of the Protestant Rector, Rev. J. P. Palliser. He objected strongly to the presence of the school in the town, since he already had a school for the instruction of his parishioners.

He was referring to the Parochial School in Mary Street, which had been established in 1832 out of the endowments of the old Charter School and occupied the building vacated by the Clonmel Grammar School. The Parish Priest of SS. Peter and Paul, the Rev. M. Burke, adopted a different attitude. Although he would prefer his flock to attend the schools under his own management, he had no objection to parents who wanted to send their children to the Model School.

When it came to the question of providing religious instruction the same disharmony was evident. The two parish priests, together with the Presbyterian and Unitarian Ministers, agreed



to attend on each of the first four mornings of the week from 10 to 10.30 and from 10 to 11 on Friday morning to give religious instruction. The Rev. Palliser refused to give instruction to those pupils of his persuasion who were in attendance. However, he added, if they attended in great numbers he would feel bound to give the matter further consideration.

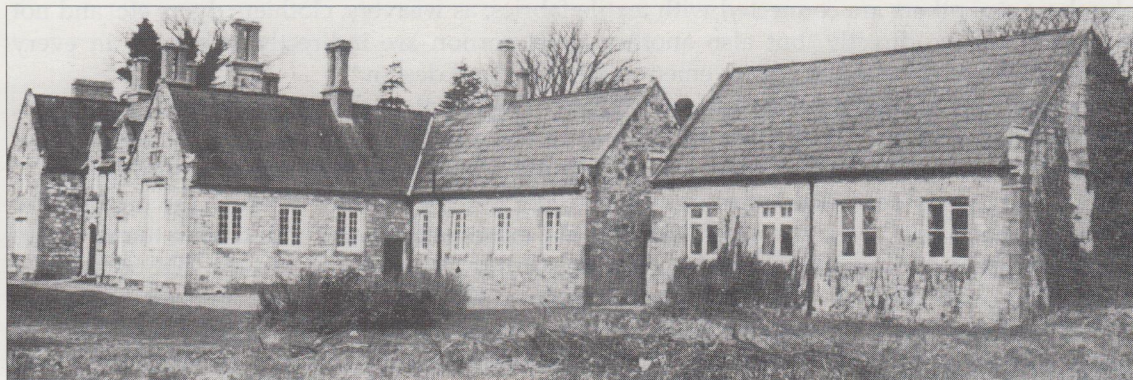
A prospectus was issued, enrolments taken and the school opened its doors on 30 July, 1849. Altogether 118 pupils were admitted, consisting of 44 boys, 34 girls and 40 infants. The school catered for a very broad age group. Although the average age was eleven, one infant was between the age of two and three, while five were over the age of seventeen.

There were three teachers, two Catholics and one Presbyterian. Four pupil teachers, three Roman Catholics and one member of the Established Church, were selected by the District Inspector and their appointment was ratified by the Commissioners. "All of them had been pupils of National Schools from their childhood, one of them had served his term of four years as paid monitor, and two had been paid assistant teachers."<sup>4</sup>

Also four girls, three Catholics and one Protestant, were selected to act as paid monitresses in the Girls' and Infants' schools. By January 1850 the full complement of pupil-teachers was reached by the appointment of four others, three of them being Roman Catholics and one of the Established Church. "One of these was a pupil of the Clonmel Model School, two were paid monitors, and one acted as assistant to his father, who is a teacher in a National School near Clonmel."<sup>5</sup>

Two months after opening, more infants were admitted than was contemplated by the Commissioners. As a result the pupil-teachers' study and dining-room were converted into classrooms during school hours. By the end of the school year, instead of the 210 as proposed by the Commissioners, there were 367 on the school rolls. "The schoolrooms for boys and for girls are entirely disproportionate to the accommodation of more than sixty pupils each, and, in the first instance, were not judiciously planned, with reference to their object."<sup>6</sup> This prompted the authorities to refuse further admissions because of the lack of accommodation, and the numbers of the waiting list equalled the number enrolled.

These enrolment figures are all the more surprising considering that in Clonmel there were upwards of "2,700 children under instruction in National and denominational Schools at the date of opening the District Model Schools."<sup>7</sup> Since this number represented a quarter of the inhabitants, it also represented almost the entire school population. The explanation given was that they were not first-time pupils but "those drawn from the public and private schools which already exist in the town."<sup>8</sup>



*Clonmel High School.*



As well as transcending the religious divisions there was a broad social mix, with churchmen, farmers, shopkeepers, politicians, labourers, servants and the professions sending their children to be educated there. "There is no social grade in the town not represented in the school, and perhaps few schools in the British Empire exhibit such a cleanliness, and the bearing of the pupils a greater absence of those differences which might be expected to arise from the social and pecuniary inequalities of the parents."<sup>9</sup>

Two years later the situation appears to have changed; it was felt "that the poorer classes are not sufficiently represented, there being on the rolls only 17 belonging to labourers."<sup>10</sup> The explanation offered was that the Clonmel Model School was a fee-paying establishment. There were three different scales in operation, a penny a week, two shillings and sixpence a quarter and five shillings a quarter. Secondly, free education was available in the town from the nuns.

The non-denominational character of the school appeared to have worked quite successfully. "Since the opening of the schools not even the slightest occurrence has arisen, on the score of religion, to mar the harmony with which teachers and pupils of the several creeds should mix with each other, and discharge their respective duties."<sup>11</sup> The inspectors were also impressed by the moral tone and conduct of the pupils, which "cannot be more clearly indicated than from the fact, that although all corporal punishment is repudiated and excluded", "expulsion for any offence was never found requisite."<sup>12</sup>

The local clergymen were fulsome in their praise of the school. In a letter addressed to Mr. James Kavanagh, Head Inspector of National Schools, the Rev. John Baldwin, Parish Priest of St. Mary's, Clonmel stated: "From the deep zeal you have manifested, and the warm interest you have taken, in the successful working of the Clonmel Model Schools since their establishment, as Catholic pastor of the parish in which they are situated, and having had an intimate connection with them since their opening, I deem it but justice to you to record – and I do with much satisfaction and pleasure – my opinion of their moral, religious, and literary efficiency."<sup>13</sup> Similar letters were sent by the Minister of Clonmel Scots church, John Dill and by the Unitarian Minister, James Orr. The rector of old St. Mary's also expressed his approval.

Apart from the three "r's", the pupils were taught algebra, geometry, history, geography, book-keeping, natural history and singing. Some of the popular tunes of the day formed part of the curriculum including *The Canadian Boat Song*, *The Last Rose of Summer*, *The Meeting of the Waters*, *The Emigrant's Farewell*, and *The Four Leaved Shamrock*. Drawing was introduced because Clonmel was seen as "the focus of great industrial action and enterprise" and since "Upwards of one fourth of the pupils are the children of mechanics, the great majority of whom are connected with constructive arts, as carpenters, engineers, millwrights, turners, masons, slaters, plumbers etc.; others are connected with textile fabrics, as weavers, clothiers dyers etc. and not only both classes directly, but also another large portion are indirectly interested in every question connected with the improvement of drawing and design."<sup>14</sup>

The girls also learned needlework and knitting. The Infants' School consisted of two classes, First and Second Book. They were introduced to the outlines of Geography, the elements of grammar, writing, tables, elementary rules of arithmetic and the rudiments of natural history.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the school was the manner in which the pupils were examined. Each year in the month of May a public examination was conducted in the school to which members of the public, in addition to the parents, were invited. On the first occasion of which they were held in 1850 there were between 300 and 400 people present, including members of the clergy, professional men, members of the Corporation and other notables. The school authorities "were obliged to appropriate the entire rooms to visitors, all the pupils being excluded except the actual class under examination."<sup>15</sup>



However nerve-racking it may have been for the unfortunate children, the public obviously took a different view. "Judging from the numbers and classes in attendance, and from the interest, amounting to positive excitement, manifested by the audience, no such exhibition had ever before been witnessed in Clonmel, and but one feeling of general eulogium appeared to pervade everyone present."<sup>16</sup> Pupils who distinguished themselves were rewarded with books or certificates.

On completing their education most of the boys went to Clonmel Grammar School or similar institutions elsewhere, became student teachers or went into business. Most of the girls were listed as having secured employment at home, an indication of the lack of employment opportunities then available. The monitors and monitresses, all of whom had been recruited from among the brightest pupils in the school, went on to become student teachers. For the newly trained teachers there were plenty of vacancies in a rapidly expanding National School system.

One of the most illustrious graduates in the early years was a Clonmel girl, Margaret Ann Carroll, who entered the school in 1849 and left in January 1852. She became a Mercy nun and went on missionary work to the United States, where she spent the next fifty years. Apart from being the author of over forty books, she made a tremendous contribution to education in her adopted country. She opened many schools to provide education for the negroes and the underprivileged. Another famous past pupil was the poet, Charles J. Boland, who wrote with great affection and humour of his native Clonmel, and was the grandfather of the poet Eavan Boland.

For the pupils, school operated from ten in the morning to three in the afternoon, but for the student teacher the day commenced at the forbidding time of half-five in the morning. Until they retired for the night at nine-thirty the student teacher's day was highly organised and strictly regulated (Appendix A). The authorities even went so far as to provide them with a recommended diet (Appendix B).

This dynamic and exciting educational experiment was soon to be caught up in a web not of its own making. when, unfortunately, they became victims of a clash between church and state. The origin of the controversy lay in the newly formed National Schools, which had been established in 1831. The creation of a state-funded and controlled system of primary education was in response to popular demand. Initially, the scheme met with general acceptance, and even Catholics, who had reason to have reservations, gave them a cautious welcome. Dr. Daniel Murray, Archbishop of Dublin, voiced the opinion of many when he said that it was the opportunity "to enjoy the blessings of education."

This harmony did not last long; soon the various religious groups, with the Presbyterians taking the initiative followed by Anglicans and Catholics, each in turn tried to shape the scheme to suit its sectarian ends. This concerted opposition effectively ended the Government's attempts to provide the country with a system of non-denominational primary education, and the future course of Irish education was set firmly on denominational lines.

The infant Model Schools were to find themselves caught in the crossfire as the Catholic hierarchy was becoming disenchanted with the denominational system of national schools. They were opposed to "the principles upon which schools are established, insomuch as they tend to throw into the hands of the State, acting through a body of Commissioners, the education of the country and the formation of masters and mistresses of the rising generation."<sup>16</sup>

In 1859 Cardinal Cullen outlined their demands – "a Catholic education on Catholic principles, with Catholic masters and the use of Catholic books."<sup>17</sup> In 1862 the Bishop of Waterford and Lismore, Dr. O'Brien, instructed the Presentation Sisters to withdraw their schools from under the National Board and in the following year, having become increasingly



alarmed at teachers being trained by laymen without any supervision by church authorities, the hierarchy imposed a ban on Catholics attending Model Schools.

When the Clonmel Model School opened 74% (274) of the pupils were Catholics. It was felt that "The number of Protestants attending is much higher from the proportion of that creed in the entire population and indicates less confidence on the part of the Catholic population."<sup>18</sup> This would appear to be an unrealistic attitude since the Catholics were already well catered for in schools run by the nuns and brothers and considering this, 274 was a substantial number. By 1870 the ban on Catholics attending Model Schools was beginning to take effect; the percentage had fallen to 45.

An incident which occurred in 1877 indicates the tensions surrounding the religious question. The headmaster, Terence Smyth, was alarmed by the conduct of two of his pupil-teachers, Edward Dwyer and Thomas Richardson, who attended services in the local Protestant and Wesleyan churches without his permission. Since both were Roman Catholics and in view of the "vehement opposition of the Roman Catholic clergy to the Model School",<sup>19</sup> he feared that their conduct might prejudice the attendance of Catholics at the school.

The decrease in the number of Catholics at the school continued. It was down to 27% in 1900, and to 11% in 1911. Overall pupil numbers showed the same dramatic decline. An enrolment of 367 in the opening year was never again equalled. By 1870 they had fallen to 148. The report for that year indicates that the authorities were very conscious of this trend when it stated that "the attendance still continues very low."<sup>20</sup> Numbers continued to decline from 136 in 1900 to 50 in 1912.

The attitude taken up by the Catholic Hierarchy sealed the fate of the Model School system. In 1867 there were 30 such schools in existence, but after that date no more were built. They suffered a further blow when the Report of the Powis Commission (1870) recommended their abolition. In 1883 State support was granted to denominational training colleges, indicating that teacher training for the most part was conducted along denominational lines. In that year St. Patrick's in Drumcondra and Carysfort in Blackrock were opened for Roman Catholics and in the following year the Kildare Street Training College became the training centre for members of the Church of Ireland. This brought the teacher-training role of the Model Schools to an end.

Model Schools still retained paid monitors, who had to complete their training by attending one of the Teacher-Training colleges for a further year. This practice continued in all national schools until the 1920s when it was abolished. In his booklet *St. Mary's Parochial School Clonmel*, P. C. Power states that the last three monitors in the Clonmel Model School were all members of the same Presbyterian family, James Henry Hunter, Martha Lucinda Hunter and Alfred Charles Hunter. With them the teacher-training role of the Clonmel Model School came to an end.

As early as 1909 the National Board of Education suggested amalgamating the Church of Ireland Parochial School with the Model School because of small numbers in both schools. This scheme floundered when the Board refused to accept Canon Leslie, the local Church of Ireland rector, as manager of the newly amalgamated school. This difficulty was eventually resolved and in 1930 the Parochial School was closed and its pupils transferred to the Model School, which now became known as St. Mary's Parochial School under the management of the local rector and has remained so.

Since the pupils of the new Parochial School have been few in number, other bodies have utilised parts of the building from time to time. These included various government departments and in 1933 the Christian Brothers in St. Mary's parish were provided with accommodation by the Dept. of Education and stayed there until their new school in Irishtown was ready for occupation in 1963. Regrettably, part of the building is at present in an almost derelict condition.



## Appendix A

### Clonmel Model School – Occupation of Time of the Pupil-Teachers

H.M.	A.M.		
		At 5 30	Rise.
5 30	to	6 0	Make up beds.
6 0	"	6 30	Wash and dress – prayer.
6 30	"	8 0	Study, or instruction under Head or Second Master.
8 15	"	8 45	Breakfast.
8 45	"	9 0	Pump water – open gates – prepare and dust school-room – make pens.
9 0	"	10 0	In charge of play-ground – teaching senior class of pupils.
10 0	"	3 15	In school, engaged teaching or in school duties.
3 15	"	3 45	Singing class.
3 45	"	4 0	Brush school-room – wash and prepare for dinner.
4 0	"	4 45	{ Dinner. Dinner on Saturday at three o'clock, and recreation after till six o'clock.
4 45	"	6 0	
6 0	"	8 0	Study, or instruction under Head or Second Master.
8 0	"	8 15	Books, &c., locked up in study-room.
8 15	"	8 45	Supper.
8 45	"	9 0	Shoes and clothes brushed – gates locked.
0 0	"	9 20	Prayer. At 20 minutes past 9 to bed.
—	"	9 30	Extinguish lights in dormitory.

Wednesdays and Saturdays the Pupil-teachers walk, accompanied by the Teachers, some miles into the country, and on those evenings, in summer, the time for recreation extends to seven o'clock.

## Appendix B

### Scale of Dietary in Clonmel Model Schools

Meal	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
BREAKFAST	{ Bread, 1 lb. Butter, 2 oz. Tea, ½ oz.	Bread, 1 lb. Milk, 1 pint	Bread, 1 lb. Milk, 1 pint	Bread, 1 lb. Milk, 1 pint	Bread, 1 lb. Milk, 1 pint	Bread, 1 lb. Milk, 1 pint	Bread, 1 lb. Milk, 1 pint
DINNER	{ Beef (boiled) lb. Soup, 1 pint Potatoes, 3 lb.	Fish Potatoes, 3 lb.	Beef (salt) boiled, 1 lb. Vegetables Potatoes, 1 lb.	Butter, 3 oz. Milk, 1 pint Potatoes, 3 lb.	Beef (roast) 1 lb. Potatoes, 3 lb.	Butter, 3 oz. Milk, 1 pint Potatoes, 3 lb.	Beef (salt) boiled, 1 lb. Vegetables Potatoes, 3 lb.
SUPPER	{ Coffee (1 oz.), 1 pt. Bread, 12 oz.	Stirabout Milk, 1 pint	Stirabout Bread, 12 oz.	Coffee (1 oz.), 1 pt. Milk, 1 pint	Stirabout Milk, 1 pint	Stirabout Milk, 1 pint	Stirabout Milk, 1 pint

## FOOTNOTES

1. to Report of Commissioners of National Education in Ireland (1849).
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. Appendix to Twentieth Report of Commissioners of National Education in Ireland (1853).
11. Appendix to Sixteenth Report of Commissioners of National Education in 1850.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*
16. *Irish Education – a Historical Survey*, by James Johnson Auchmuty (Dublin and London, 1937), p. 148.
17. *Ibid.* (p. 98).
18. Appendix to Sixteenth Report of Commissioners of National Education (1850).
19. National Archives, Material ED 9 file 704.
20. Appendices to Thirty-seventh Report of Commissioners of National Education in Ireland.